Chapter 1

Introduction: Empirical Adequacy, Theory, Anthropology

Rigor and Approximation in Anthropology

Rigorous Approximation . . .

This expression is not as paradoxical as it may appear. What it highlights is a combination/conjunction rather than a simple contradiction. In fact, this book is entirely devoted to the following argument: On the one hand, an anthropological or sociological text must be rigorous (or otherwise abandon its scientific claims). On the other hand, it belongs to the realm of approximation as the statements it makes can claim only to be plausible; they can never claim to be “the truth.” One may assert that one feature of the necessary scientific rigor of anthropology is that it is inevitably approximative while also maintaining that the approximations produced derive their meaning from the absolute need to be rigorous “nevertheless.”

This inevitable approximation, a few properties of which will be examined below, makes the anthropological text all the more susceptible to interpretative biases and ideological excesses. But there is no reason to condone such biases and excesses or to abandon the quest for rigor, despite the challenges involved. Consequently, this work will also attempt to present various facets of this quest. To parody Gramsci’s saying, we must combine the pessimism of inevitable approximation with the optimism of the quest for scientific rigor.

All science, social sciences included, entails the quest for rigor. In empirically grounded social science research, rigor is situated at two levels. There is, on the one hand, the rigor of argumentation (we have
to be convincing), which includes the *rigor of logic* (contradictory statements are not allowed) and the *rigor of theory* (statements are made in the framework of scholarly debate). But there is, in addition, a need for *empirical rigor*. This concerns the relation between mastering the skills of interpretation and the empirical underpinning that links theories to their “reference reality.” The latter is the tiny “fragment” of social space and social time with which the researcher engages, and which he has set out to understand and explain. This necessary combination of logical rigor and empirical rigor exists in any social science based on fieldwork.²

Of course, this does not imply acceptance of the classic positivist conception of an essential reality external to individuals and towering above cognizant subjects. Clearly, phenomenology, in particular, has abundantly stressed that knowledge of the world is always mediated by the knowledge and position of a subject, and that, in the final analysis, access to reality hinges on consciousness and experience. But the project of understanding the world that characterizes the social sciences cannot be content with such an observation. While the world (or its “fragments”) is, strictly speaking, unknowable and ultimately fuzzy or uncertain and philosophically unapproachable as an external reality, social science is nevertheless grounded on the bet that “despite everything” the world can in fact be the object of a certain type of shared and communicable rational knowledge. In other words, all researchers assume *in practice* that there exists a “reference reality” operating beyond our consciousness and individual experiences, although this is impossible to prove *in theory*. Social science is therefore based on what is sometimes called “the realist hypothesis,”³ according to which other people’s reality (or the part of it that the researcher studies, what I call the “reference reality”) must be held to exist per se, irrespective of the subjectivity of the person speaking about it. In this sense, it may become the object of shareable intelligibilities and is subject to scientific debates. These concern, inter alia, the *empirical adequacy* of statements, i.e., the *fit between the reference reality, taken as a research object, and the interpretations and theories the researcher proposes* concerning this reality.

The realist hypothesis, advancing the existence of a reference reality that is relatively and partially knowable through field inquiry, should not be confused with the realist illusion. The latter believes in a direct, objective access to the reference reality, forgetting that it is a social construction. The realist illusion is an offshoot of classic positivism.⁴ Although this illusion held sway for a long time and still sometimes prevails, it seems clear that the constructivist posture, positing “the