

How South East Asians Argue

**Exploring Cultural Differences in Styles
of Reasoning and Rhetoric**

Keynote Address

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(Slide)

Why should we bother with argument? Are there not far more urgent topics to explore? Ignoring how people – here South East Asians – argue is, I suggest, simple-minded, nostalgic, and dated. It presupposes our current objects of study to be adequate, necessary and sufficient for most intellectual purposes. When starting out, you assume your subject matter is stable, coherent and systematic enough to enable reasoned inquiry, be it collective representations, society, culture, texts or whatever. As research proceeds, the limits inevitably become apparent.¹ After a time, the entire edifice creaks and groans under the weight of its own discoveries, which is, I contend, where we are now with many of the disciplines studying South East Asia.

It does not follow that studying how people argue is the answer. So what am I proposing? It is practice as a more nuanced object of inquiry. That is hardly novel. Anthropologists have played with the idea of practice, as have philosophers like Wittgenstein and C.S. Peirce, from whom we get the term ‘pragmatism’. Here the Cultural Studies concept of articulation becomes relevant. What we have assumed were solid facts are, on closer inspection, practices of connecting different elements that could be – and often are – linked in different ways under different circumstances. Hegemony is when you get the majority of people to accept your particular articulation. Interestingly, post-structuralists such as Foucault or Deleuze explicitly embraced pragmatism. Arguing as a practice is my theme. I draw my examples from Bali, because it is the only society about which I know enough to comment.

This talk is organized as follows. I start with popular arguments against argument, then the theoretical arguments for it. If there is nothing wrong with existing approaches, why mess with them? Even a cursory examination shows existing disciplinary theory to be riddled with incoherencies – fine perhaps for training students, but questionable for cutting-edge research. I propose instead a more fine-tuned approach centred on practice, of which arguing is a prime example. To show how argument is relevant, I review well known examples from Bali which show how even eminent scholars come a cropper over argument. Finally, I review culturally distinctive ways that argument works in Bali. Meanwhile I invite you to think how the arguments might apply to your own topics and regions of expertise.

Arguments against argument

First, let me dispose of an obvious argument against argument: ‘we simply don’t need it’. What we see is what there is. There is culture, politics, economics, agriculture, history, texts and so forth. So we have values and beliefs, political parties and policies, markets, development projects, documents detailing the past, literature. What’s the problem? Almost everything. The trap is accepting articulations as facts. Such representations are the currency of common sense in which politicians, civil servants and business people trade. As Gramsci remarked: **(Slide)**. To mistake common sense for good sense is naïve and complicit in hegemonizing. You become part of the problem, not the solution.

¹ Examples abound. One is the dismissal of Functionalism and Structural-Functionalism by American Symbolic Interactionism. Another is Lévi-Strauss’s use of structure to cope with the inadequacies of Functionalism; then Bourdieu’s recourse to *habitus* to address the deficiencies of structure, followed by the more radical critique by the so-called ‘post-structuralists’.

There are better arguments for dismissing argument. Is it not just the friction to which even the best-oiled social machines are prone? Assuming so enshrines a metaphor of argument as a malfunction to be corrected. Alternatively, in Foucault's words, are we not just dealing with the trivia 'which are said in the ordinary course of days and exchanges, and which vanish as soon as they have been pronounced' (1981: 56-7)? The problem is that this dismisses the transient, ignorable everyday in favour of the important overarching structures of society and polity. A more general marginalization of argument takes one of two forms. One is commonsense or realist. We do not need theoretical discussion. It is redundant. The other applies Kuhn's *The structure of scientific revolutions* to the humanities. It assumes we are in a period of 'normal science', when paradigmatic assumptions do not need questioning. That misses the point of Kuhn's title. In place of the capitalist metaphor of knowledge accumulating inexorably, Kuhn argued that periodically thought undergoes revolutions.

There is a yawning gulf between everyday academic practice and the debates between heavyweight thinkers. To avoid being trendy or abstruse, I take well known arguments that have been around for at least some fifty years. For example, Habermas treated argument as constitutive of the public sphere (Slide), which, significantly, Charles Taylor rephrased as practices. When conservatives like Habermas and Taylor concur with more radical thinkers like Foucault, it is time for die-hards to duck for cover. The context of my earlier quote from Foucault reads (Slide). Social institutions are not given, but the outcome of a formidable apparatus of procedures and practices. You could, like Habermas, still maintain that the everyday is transient and irrelevant. What matter are the grand structures of society and polity. Such a stance is problematic. As the philosopher behind Cultural Studies, Ernesto Laclau, remarked: (Slide). The gap between commonsense and good sense is startling.

What's wrong with how things are?

We rarely ask: 'What is knowledge for'?'² Is its goal predictive as in applied sciences? Is it interventionist as in medicine? Does it aim to change populations as in development studies; or control them as in policy-making? Habermas distinguished three purposes of knowledge (1978). First was a technical interest in predicting and controlling the environment. Second was a practical interest in interpreting society and culture better to understand them and ourselves. Finally there was an emancipatory interest, which aims to be reflexively critical of the limits of knowledge. As South East Asianists, our interests are mostly cultural-hermeneutic, although to South East Asians they may well also be emancipatory. I wish however to consider specifically how the critical may be consequential. In evaluating existing approaches I am not dismissing them as useless. Evidently, they work well for many purposes. here are other ways of thinking about South East Asia that may further our understanding.

² Scholars often trace the classic European stance on knowledge for its own sake back to Aristotle: 'All men by nature desire to know' (Aristotle 1912: 1). A.E. Housman offered a forceful rebuttal of instrumental approaches to knowledge.

The popular view... is that the aim of acquiring knowledge is to equip one's self for the business of life; that accordingly the knowledge most to be sought after is the knowledge which equips one best; and that this knowledge is Science... [However] the true and the really valuable knowledge is that which is properly and distinctively human; the knowledge of the best which has been said and thought in the world, - the literature which contains the history of the spirit of man. The simple truth [was] asserted by Aristotle: 'all men possess by nature a craving for knowledge' (A.E. Housman *Introductory Lecture* University College London 1982: 1, 3, 6).

The saying goes: ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. But what is ‘it’? How do we know if it is broken? Who said so? (Slide) The disciplines studying the region rarely adopt an explicit theoretical framework. Scholars tend instead to draw on existing disciplinary debates. So when they say they have no need of theory, they mean that they treat existing arguments as adequate, often without inquiring too closely what these presuppose. Unwittingly, they are making my argument about argument for me. On this account, disciplines are assemblages of debates and ways of doing things.

What holds such working muddles together is usually a belief that such scholarly practice is empirical. That sounds great until you ask which brand of empiricism – Vaiśeṣika, Aristotelian, Baconian, Lockean, Humean, Logical Positivist? As Hume pointed out, we cannot verify abstractions through experience like causation, continuity or existence. This argument famously woke Kant from his dogmatic slumbers to conclude that to make sense of experience we rely on *a priori* judgements such as necessity, possibility, totality and unity. Durkheim’s retort to Kant just makes things worse: such judgements are social. If that is so, disciplinary integrity is effectively hegemonic social practice. But how do such *recherché* ideas work in practice? Let us consider three disciplines: Anthropology, History and Literature.

Anthropology, as James Clifford noted, is a ‘totalizing science’ (1988: 24). Ethnographers realized that it took many years to research societies in any detail and the results were too complicated to allow easy generalization. They needed a quick fix. So, quietly, method determined theory, be it British Social Structure and Function or American Culture (Slide). The appearance of scientific precision rests upon a rhetorical device – in other words, a hidden persuasive argument. Presupposing culture to be a totality impacts on more than Anthropology, because the postulated unity and coherence of some system like culture underpins almost all study of South East Asian peoples. Otherwise, what are we referring to when we speak of the Javanese, Thai or whoever? There is however another sense of culture. It is simply ‘how we do things around here’. The latter avoids presuming totality and highlights that someone is articulating the account itself. I use culture in this sense. Anthropology is only possible by wobbling unwittingly between these two antithetical senses.

History is interesting. Most historical analyses are longitudinal: they study institutions over time. Prior events are the necessary condition of subsequent events – which presupposes continuity. To appreciate the issue, try answering the question: ‘Will Singapore be the same country in a hundred years?’ Of what kind is historical analysis? Is it causal, rational, interpretive or what? Distancing himself from such intellectual confusion, Foucault tried out an archaeological approach, by studying the conditions of emergence of different assemblages of practices. In *Madness and civilization* he examined the changes in European ideas of reason and its antithesis, madness. Dissatisfied, he later moved to a genealogical method. That involved examining the daily practices of power/knowledge like surveilling and disciplining which underpin the institutions that historians study.

Turning to literature, the concept of ‘text’, which English-speakers have borrowed from the French, is well-theorized. Unfortunately such leading French proponents as Barthes, Derrida and Ricoeur disagreed over what they mean by text. This is not obvious in English because text is often reified: that is treated as an object with properties, in this instance of unity, continuity and totality (Slide). A work should not be confused with textuality, which is a field of possibility instantiated through practices. Against the formalist account of the text as basic,

unchanging and knowable, treating the text as a productive activity includes how it is received and used. Analyzing text without readers or audiences is like cooking in a pan without a bottom.

Attempts to treat mass media products as texts highlight the problem. Take television. Which is the text? Is it the original treatment; how the programme panned out when filmed; how it was after editing; what was broadcast? Or is it how it was received, engaged with and acted upon by audiences? We like to think the text is the broadcast version: the so-called ‘preferred reading’ (Hall 1980: 134). But what if viewers have different understandings – as they invariably do? Appeal to text is not intellectual chic, just nostalgia for uncomplicated realism.

Failing to appreciate text as a relationship or assemblage puts the cart before the horse. Academics read – therefore they imagine the object must be text-like, no matter if it is primarily visible or audible. So we reduce complex creations to text through metaphors like ‘film language’, ‘what paintings say’, instead of considering textualizing as a transformative practice. As the art historian Ernst Gombrich argued, we learn to see and impose sense (Slide). That sense experience is culturally inflected undermines empiricist trust in the senses. There are grave difficulties in trying to express the visible in words – in other words ‘the articulable’.³ Consider this clip from Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (Video). As the master of montage, Eisenstein was explicit that its efficacy lay in non-linguistic and non-rational means (Slide). What has this to do with persuasive argument? No less an adversary than Goebbels remarked that it was ‘a marvellous film without equal in the cinema... anyone who had no firm political conviction could become a Bolshevik after seeing the film’.

For training students, regarding disciplines as stable bodies of theory and methods is a useful starting point. It is not though a good account of how disciplinary knowledge actually works. Foucault put the point forcefully (Slide). We have moved here to a different metaphor of society – as dialogic. According to this approach, developed by two relatively neglected Russians, Bakhtin and Vološinov, systems and structures are obsolete hindrances to thinking. We only need to analyze practices of speaking (utterances), thinking and acting in particular situations. The rest are articulations – monologues – by those in power. On this account, disciplinary knowledge is not a steady state, but an endless struggle.

On practice

When embarking on inquiry, you make working assumptions– such as culture being coherent and a totality. Once the problems become evident – which they always do – fetishizing those assumptions is counterproductive. I think we are reaching the limits of what assuming system can tell us. Perhaps it is time to investigate the practices through which structures emerge and are articulated. An analogy is the relationship between conventional chemical experiments and sub-atomic processes which make them possible. As Deleuze put it, underlying institutions is the molecular, ‘pure ceaseless becoming’ (1986: 10).⁴ What then are the articulatory practices by which something comes to be declared ‘normal’, ‘cultural’ or whatever? How should we cope with the gap between the cultural ideal and actual, for instance

³ Deleuze commented thoughtfully on Foucault’s changing usage of discourse (the articulable) and its complicated relationship with the visible (1988: 47-69).

⁴ For example, anthropologists study social institutions as ‘standardized modes of co-activity’ (Nadel 1951: 108).

in the preferred Balinese marriage to Father's Brother's Daughter (real or classificatory), which occurred in less than 2% of cases? Practice rarely fits cultural ideals.

What does an analysis of practice involve? There are two possibilities. Practice supplements structure to explain the latter's repeated failure (the approach adopted by Bourdieu 1977, 1990). Alternatively you can rethink structure *as* practice. Structure and totalities do not exist naturally but are attempts to tame 'pure ceaseless becoming'. This is not obvious because there are articulatory practices busily claiming the reality of order, system and structure. That is what we have politicians and the mass media for.

What do I understand by 'practice'? It is a way of extrapolating an object of study from the maze of actions going on.⁵ My formal definition is (Slide). To avoid making the concept so broad as to be meaningless, I restrict practice to recognized – or recognizable – activities through which agents attempt to do something. Examples range from articulating television news bulletins to the interminable speeches of President Suharto to how academic departments run. Articulatory practices often have purposes quite different from the publicly stated ones. The notional 'objectivity' of television news reasserts the worldview of the hegemonic class (Slide). Suharto's speeches seemed less about informing anyone than about demonstrating power over a captive audience. With no more ado, let's turn to argument.

Arguing as disagreeing

Many senses of 'argument' are inextricable from, and peculiar to, European thinking. The English word is not even readily translatable into other European languages. Relying on so Eurocentric a concept hardly seems an auspicious way to research South East Asian usage. We should remember though that the entire epistemology underlying academic disciplines is European. It helps however to recognize that double discursivity is inevitable when researching South East Asia. By that I mean we should keep strictly separate – and not confuse – our analytical discourse with those of our subjects of study.⁶

In English, arguing broadly suggests either disagreeing or else discussing and reasoning (Slide). Mentioning the term 'argument' to many Asians invites responses like: 'We Asians do

⁵ The distinction between an event and an action is not clear-cut. What may be an event to one person may be an action to another. For example, we might treat an attack of malaria as an event, whereas someone else might attribute it to purposive action, such as witchcraft or sorcery. More subtly, malaria might be due to the failure of someone to take reasonable steps to keep the mosquito population down and so on.

⁶ *Prima facie*, it would be possible to argue (*sic*) that the debates about argument are singularly English. So they are inapplicable or irrelevant to other parts of the world. To adopt this line of reasoning would be an egregious mistake. First, it commits you to talking only in terms of a society's explicit categories and terminology. As these are a matter of struggle and contention between different social groups and interests, you risk embracing – and confining yourself – to received hegemonic accounts. Second, any cross-cultural analysis or commentary becomes impossible. As the idea and practices of analysis in its customary sense are themselves European, it would follow that you cannot apply them elsewhere. That would spell the effective end of all inquiry. Third, are you suggesting that peoples in other societies do not engage in styles of reasoning, discussion, deliberation, debate or disagreement? That would be a world of zombies, incapable of thinking, but only reacting. If it happens that European, and indeed English language, analytical usage is particularly highly developed, then it may offer an effective means of critical inquiry, provided that we recognize the inescapability of double discursivity. In other words, any analysis should give equivalent weight to – and keep separate – indigenous ideas, styles and practices of reasoning and discussion. For example, there is a rich vocabulary to do with practices of arguing in its many forms in Indonesian and in Balinese (see Hobart 2015: 28-31). Interestingly, there are significant differences as to which kinds of practices are more elaborated in the two languages. Perhaps because of the inclusion of Dutch-derived terms, broadly Indonesian tends to be more developed for terms to do with reasoning and argumentation by contrast to a Balinese stress on discussing, debating and disagreeing.

not argue’, ‘Asian values stress harmony’ and so on. The first is nonsensical and counter-factual if it implies Asians do not reason. The second is a popular stereotype. Both need addressing.

Think carefully before choosing the first option. It commits the inhabitants of an entire continent either to lacking rationality or to rigid culturally distinctive forms. The claim has a deeply racist, and still largely unmentionable, ancestry. European colonists in the nineteenth-century reported strange – therefore deficient – uses of logic among ‘primitive peoples’. Lévy-Bruhl theorized the issue in *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*. The translation gives the game away: *The mental functions of inferior societies*. Put crudely: non-Europeans or non-Westerners lack the capacity for, or habit of, fully logical argument. No matter how cogent the counter-arguments, the stereotype still lingers. Talk of the rich symbolism, beliefs and rituals of South East Asian societies is predicated on the assumption that they have not – yet – learned or adopted true reason. (In private many Western academics still talk about the difficulties that, say, South East Asian students have with laying out the argumentation expected for a PhD thesis.) Oddly the answer to this insidious inferential racism is simple. If we accept that criteria of rationality are cultural, the problem vanishes.⁷

More insidiously, stereotyping – and self-stereotyping – is widespread and naturalized. Naïve versions include Asian values: as if you could sum up 60% of the world’s population under a single description. So doing neatly, and deliberately, ignores differences of class, ethnicity, gender, religion, generation and so on.

Let us turn to popular characterizations of Indonesians (Slide). These representations are remarkable for just how much they leave out. How does Sukarno’s compelling oratory fit? What about the massacres in 1965-66 that claimed some million lives? Or is killing people fine, so long as you do not argue with them? (Slide) What about famously direct and argumentative people like the Batak, Rotinese – or even on close inspection East Javanese or North Balinese? Proponents of such stereotypes have presumably spent little time in markets or with women outside formal settings. A Central Javanese aristocratic ideal becomes a synecdoche for the whole archipelago. So what is going on? Ethnic ideals hide the articulatory role of class and power. Appearing polite and publicly avoiding the show of emotion are indices of deference and subservience to authority. It is no coincidence that the more hierarchical the society, the greater the power to demand conformity in public. What goes on behind the scenes is more complicated.

We are dealing, I suggest, with social imaginaries. May I remind you of Taylor’s definition: ‘the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society’ (2004: 2)? By definition Imaginaries are selective and, being ideal, are often counter-factual, but myths of great efficacy because of the way that they address people so that they recognize themselves as particular kinds of cultural subjects (Slide).⁸ Little wonder people cling so fiercely to stereotypes despite their deceptiveness. These days the mass media is crucial to interpellating people in contemporary societies, which is why governments

⁷ Conversely it allows us to question the hegemony that Westerners have exercised, ultimately through their dogs of war: analytical philosophers. This claim is not as bold as might seem. As virtually no two philosophers agree as to what constitutes rationality, the onus is on them to demonstrate a coherent position with which we can engage. Until such time, we can reasonably (*sic*) argue for the cultural nature of judgements of reason.

⁸ Althusser’s notion of interpellation explains what lies behind appeal to ‘identity’. You learn to recognize yourself in particular ways that are driven by ideology.

and plutocrats strive to ensure its control. (The reach of hegemony is so effective, for instance in inventing tradition, that people come firmly to believe and identify themselves through such Imaginaries, [Slide](#).)

Arguing as argumentation, reasoning, discussing

What do I mean here by ‘argue’ and ‘argument’? In everyday English the words include reasoning, deducing, inducing, abducting, inferring, discussing, deliberating, debating, expatiating, narrating, persuading, even reflecting privately. Every time we talk things over, chat, muse on what to do, listen to radio or TV or even gossip, we are arguing in some form. Kinds range from political speeches and negotiations, legal deliberation or the myriad forms of decision-making to how history is narrated, how we tell stories, theatre, film, television, everyday work, recreational and family discussion. Quite apart from that, we are semi- ceaselessly bombarded with argument through the mass and social media, even if we fail to appreciate it as such. In fact, it is far harder to find occasions when we are *not* engaged in argument in some form than when we are. If people spend so much of their time arguing, why is it not a major topic of study?

Unfortunately, anything to do with argument comes wrapped up in a European hegemony. Although there are non-European philosophies, European standards dominate academic thinking. Others’ practice is judged by how far it follows or deviates from an ideal traceable back notionally to Aristotle over two thousand years ago. Few philosophers consider other traditions even worth discussing. However, formal accounts of reason have little to do with the great variety of socially recognized styles of arguing.

What are culturally ideal, acceptable, disapproved or prohibited ways of speaking, acting and judging others? What kind of criteria do people use to understand one another in different contexts? Why should we omit non-discursive forms like art, dance and music? As we saw, images can be highly persuasive. But how culturally specific are such claims? And what kinds of argument are recognized in any society?

There are differences between formal reflection on reasoning, developed in South Asia and the Arab world, and informal conventions of judging what people say. What happens when they overlap? Many South East Asian societies have both local cultural styles and great philosophical traditions from Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Buddhism, Christianity or Islam. It would be convenient if the élite and literati practised a great tradition and common folk a little tradition. Certainly in Bali it does not pan out that way. To my surprise, retrospectively I discovered that the more reflective Balinese villagers would use classical Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika reasoning in daily conversation. Imposing blanket categories is not going to work. A more fine-tuned approach such as ethnography is required.

Two obvious problems arise. First, how do we address the double discursivity involved in inquiring into argument? Presumably we need analytical frameworks that are sensitive to local styles. Second, what kinds of argumentation are we investigating? One important genre is too extensive to discuss here, namely narration in historical or literary works as read or performed. Just how complex matters are in the Malay world alone emerges from, say, Errington on parataxis in *hikayat* (1979); Sweeney on orality and literacy (1987); or Becker’s exploration of space, time and causation in Javanese shadow theatre (1979). Here I confine myself to styles of reasoning broadly conceived. Now an argument can be logically correct, but counterfactual

(Slide).⁹ So, as a simple starting point, it is helpful to distinguish styles of reasoning from the presuppositions that are invoked.

The literature on Asian communication and rhetoric tends to confine itself to reasoning in ancient India and China (Oliver 1971; Kennedy 1998). No one, as far as I know, has addressed indigenous criteria of argument in detail. What, if anything, can we usefully adapt from the classical Greek sources, which distinguish logic, dialectic and rhetoric? (Slide) The study of religious or theological discourse invites us to consider the modes of logic deployed. An analysis of legal or deliberative institutions with decision-making frequently utilizes dialectic.¹⁰ Social life – and so what mostly concerns us in South East Asia – widely involves rhetoric. Every time you encourage, exhort, try to influence or persuade others, you are using some equivalent of rhetorical techniques. These vary from employing reason or invoking imagination to appealing to emotion. Styles of rhetoric vary greatly in, say, Indonesia from Sukarno's oratory to *perintah alus*, the refined command (Slide).

What, you might ask, has this to do with rhetoric if we understand it as high-flown or bombastic oratory? What count as effective modes of engaging and persuading people is clearly cultural. An interesting further distinction is between three modes of persuasion. (Slide) They are: *ethos*, how trustworthy the speaker is; *logos*, the logical reasoning used; and *pathos*, the emotional effect created by a speaker or text upon spectators or readers. As the Javanese example above suggests, refinement and self-command are a crucial part of the *ethos* of trustworthiness. Redefined to fit local practice, such distinctions may prove helpful.

Some cultural misunderstandings

Sceptics might say that I am taking an epistemological sledgehammer to crack a peanut. Surprisingly though, even illustrious scholars can fail to appreciate cultural styles of argument, be they reasoning or presuppositions. First is an elementary error of applying Western, here American, criteria of judgement to others. In *The Balinese village*, Hildred Geertz wrote about Balinese *banjar*, that is village assemblies, which is where most major community decisions are taken (Slide). A cursory inspection might seem to bear her out. But her interpretation is misleading. Just because you do not shout or flatly contradict someone in public meetings, it does not follow people are not arguing, nor that decisions are reached with 'unanimous agreement'. Having studied *banjar* assemblies as a member over two years, I learned how arguments are framed and answered, how disagreement is phrased and, when losing, how to withdraw to fight another day. Different factions make their cases through skilled orators who are adept in culturally approved styles of reasoning (*logos*) and who know how to motivate and move audiences (*pathos*). Far from being Quaker-like, the decisions of *banjar* meetings can – literally – be matters of life or death.

⁹ The former quote is from Jowett's Letters. The latter is an interesting glimpse into the deep conservatism that prevailed at Oxford and Cambridge. Unlike the Germans or Scots

the English were not only uninterested in research. They actually had contempt for it. The *locus classicus* is the report of Logan Pearsall Smith (1865-1946), who at Balliol in 1888 inadvertently let slip to Benjamin Jowett the word "research." " 'Research,' the Master exclaimed. 'Research!' he said. 'A mere excuse for idleness; it has never achieved and never will achieve any results of the slightest value.' (Smith, L.P. 1938: 169).

¹⁰ Briefly logic is about reasoning through deducing conclusions from premises. Dialectic is a deliberative, interactive practice where someone tries to convince someone else through deliberation based on reason. You will note that 'reason' remains rather vague. And classical sources were rather unclear about the status of inductive argument, which is so central to empiricism.

Clifford Geertz's description of Bali as a Theatre State is a wonderful image (1980; [Slide](#)). Sadly it bears precious little relationship to reality. How do you establish how much power a ruler has, short of going to war? Great ceremonies were the acid test: could you persuade your lords and subjects to turn up? Quite often not. Successfully pulling off a major spectacle was an exercise in *pathos*. As argument it was most convincing. Geertz was being either naïve, disingenuous or Eurocentric. Spectacular rites did not happen by themselves, but required planning, decision-making, negotiation and persuasion. Every step in royal strategy involved reflection, innumerable discussions and meetings before taking action (See Wiener 1995). To reach his interpretation, Geertz ignored – or did not know – that, even by prevailing standards, Balinese were remarkably bellicose. Besides running much of the slave trade from Eastern Indonesia for centuries, the nine states within Bali were at war with one another and outsiders for much of the time. Few rhetorical devices though are as effective – and deceptive – as a good metaphor. The theatre state is one. Geertz used a modern Western bourgeois idea of theatre, which is entirely alien to Balinese understandings. Theatre in Balinese has quite different functions. Geertz orientalized Bali by failing to recognize the role of argument in Balinese politics and by imposing a metaphor that entailed quite different presuppositions from those Balinese worked with.

Another famous (or, rather, infamous) case is Margaret Mead's analysis of the cultural implications of child-rearing practices (Bateson & Mead 1942). These she saw as key to Balinese psychodynamics and obsession with ritual, why they went into trance and why they avoided climax at all costs (which is where Geertz got the idea from in the first place). Inferring from photographs of mothers with children, Mead drew generalizations about how culture shaped Balinese personality. Alternately stimulating then ignoring a child was axiomatic to understanding how Balinese were systematically denied emotional response ([Slide](#)). Mead looked upon Balinese as laboratory specimens whose behaviour was to be documented scientifically. ([Slide](#))

Fifty years later an American and a Balinese psychiatrist reviewed Mead's findings (Jensen & Suryani 1992: 66-71). They spoke to the mother concerned, who explained that, as she was expecting a second child, she was training the elder that he could no longer have her undivided attention. It had never occurred to Mead that her human specimens might reason about what they were doing. So why ask them? In refusing to treat Balinese as capable of reflexive argument, Mead imposed an 'explanation', unsupported by her own visual evidence. It is not coincidence that some of the most famous anthropological truths arose from their authors' failure to engage with or bother to find out about how their subjects argue.

Understanding cultural styles of argument

Much argument in Bali daily life is verbal, however politely phrased, between protagonists. *Banjar* assembly meetings are good examples. However it would take too much time to explicate them here.¹¹ It is unwise to think of argument as necessarily involving explicit disagreement or even words. As styles of arguing are inflected culturally, you have to learn to appreciate them. Two quite different examples may make the point.

¹¹ I have done so at length elsewhere for those who are interested (<http://www.criticalia.org/symposia--panels/how-indonesians-argue.html>).

The case of the irritating underpants

During the Japanese occupation of Bali in WWII, there was great material hardship. In the research village the headman, backed by the court and a small coterie of high castes and rich villagers ensured they had the lion's share of available rations, including cotton. Ordinary villagers were forced to use barkcloth. One villager, Ketut Mara, found barkcloth underpants irritating – literally (**Slide**). Arguing the case in the *banjar* assembly proving fruitless, he managed to wangle a permit for fifteen metres of cotton: five red, white and blue. Early one afternoon, he proceeded slowly towards the main square trailing the cloth behind him on the ground as a large crowd gathered round him. Arriving in front of court, he sat at a food stall and ordered a coffee. The event crystallized opposition to the court, which lost control of the village and its wider role in local politics irrevocably. Not a word was said, but the cultural argument was rich. Cloth worn by a low caste person, doubly so trailed along the ground, was too polluted to be worn by high castes. And the three colours indicated the high castes, *triwangsa* or *triwarna* (which translates as 'three colours'). You can express Ketut Mara's actions syllogistically, but it does not match the visual impact. Villagers insisted on telling me the story some thirty years later with great amusement.

The exile of the Pandawa

In 1991 a van full of villagers came to collect me from the airport. On the journey home, they insisted on telling me about a dance drama, *Sendratari*, recently broadcast as part of the Bali Arts Festival. *Sendratari* are dance-drama spectacles, which are distinctive in that the dancers mime to the voice of a single *dalang*, puppeteer. It was a form ideally suited to the monologic inclinations of the New Order régime, by which senior political figures spoke and everyone else was obliged to listen passively. What form seems less suited to argument? The episode was from the Mahabharata when the Pandawa brothers have been condemned to exile in the forest. Before they leave the sage, Bagawan Byasa, advises them on the proper conduct of rulers. Having instructed them always to be honest and just in thoughts, words and actions, he added: (**Slide**) (**Video**). It looks like a conventional moral story. That was not how the more educated spectators understood it. The *dalang* had engaged in an elegant *sesimbing*, an indirect criticism in which the ostensible and intended targets are quite different. The villagers treated it as a blistering, but carefully modulated, indictment of President Suharto and family as well as the then Governor of Bali. Its cleverness lay in being an exemplary moral example. It was up to the spectators how to interpret it. Argument lies in the relationship between the speaker and the spectators on that occasion. (**Slide**) Unlike contemporary Europe, Balinese understand agency as lying more with whom a performance is for than with the creator – a point of which actors and *dalangs* are fully aware.¹² It would be unwise to forget the many considerations – including the role of brute coercion and threats – in creating the illusion of Asian values.

Summary

What have I been trying to say – and what not? First, I am not arguing that existing disciplinary paradigms are irrelevant. If knowledge is for a purpose, and especially if the aims are practice- or policy-oriented, then you have to engage with your interlocutors in politics, the

¹² The *dalang* Déwa Madé Sayang once explained to me why he had felt obliged to engage in public argument. The intellectuals whose job it was to hold those in power to account – namely academics and journalists – were too frightened to do so.

civil service or business, or risk being ignored. If, however, you are after critical understanding, you need to question the presuppositions and purposes of these paradigms. This includes interrogating the practices of intellectuals themselves – something we too rarely ask.

These two aims of knowledge are antithetical. For instance, mass communications research (in no small part funded by industry) works with an implausible transmission model of information that its proponents explicitly disavowed (Shannon & Weaver 1949). It uses a model of audiences that is risible. However it produces the kinds of ‘findings’ that suit industry, government and the professoriate who ensure its continuity. Mass media academics mostly applauded the rise of social media as liberating ordinary citizens to become ‘prosumers’. Often they uncritically echo the advertising blurb of the telecommunications’ corporations in reiterating European techno-utopianism. They ignored – or were ignorant of – arguments about new technologies creating new modes of knowledge/power that allowed new modes of surveillance, control and dissimulation. Then came fake news.¹³

Disciplines are not monoliths. In my terms, they comprise a range of different, even incompatible practices. Some work is quite outstanding; some dire. What makes the difference? Broadly, insofar as research engages with how the subjects of study live, think and argue, it can be revelatory and open up previously unimagined possibilities. Insofar as research relies on familiar, often Eurocentric, metaphors and models, it tends to be predictable, boring, unilluminating and reassert prevailing hegemonies.

What then, if anything, is so special about argument? It is not just part of a shift from structure and system to process and practice. It disaggregates the engineered products of articulation from its constitutive practices. It asks who represented what *as* what to whom on what occasion for what purpose. In so doing it exposes how, and for what purposes, hegemony is articulated in any instance. (Here the mass media are prominent in naturalizing particular interpretations, or ‘preferred readings’.) Approached as articulatory practices, society and culture cease to be unitary wholes or social Imaginaries. They become sites of struggle articulated around ethnic, class, gender, religious, generational and other differences. There is of course a major academic industry busily denying such differences. That is mass communications’ role in generating endless quantitative data in *Desperately seeking the audience* (in Ien Ang’s neat phrase, 1991).

Argument enables us not just to understand how our subjects imagine the world, but to appreciate the criteria they use in judging events and actions. That arguably is the task of Anthropology. An example is the role of anthropologists in Development Studies, whose task is to counter a Eurocentric vision of technical, economic and social development by elaborating the worlds of social practice of those being developed. Something similar is found in History in *History From Below* (Slide).¹⁴ In its strong form, the philosopher R.G. Collingwood argued that the approach requires the discursive move of historians re-enacting the thinking and arguments of their subjects as far as possible (1946). As with Anthropology, the method is double discursive. The scholar’s task is to understand the subjects’ lived worlds quite separate

¹³ Development Studies is another example. The entire discourse is articulated in the hegemonic language of the developers – it being taken for granted that the myth of technical evolution entails that the ignorant developed only need developed world to come to their rescue – which often means condemning them to industrial sweat shops. For an alternative account, see Hobart 1993.

¹⁴ There is an informative discussion on the website of the University of London, School of Advanced Study about *Making History* (<https://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/index.html>).

from its academic explication. If that is what studying argument encourages, then I think it eminently desirable. I do not know about you.

Slide

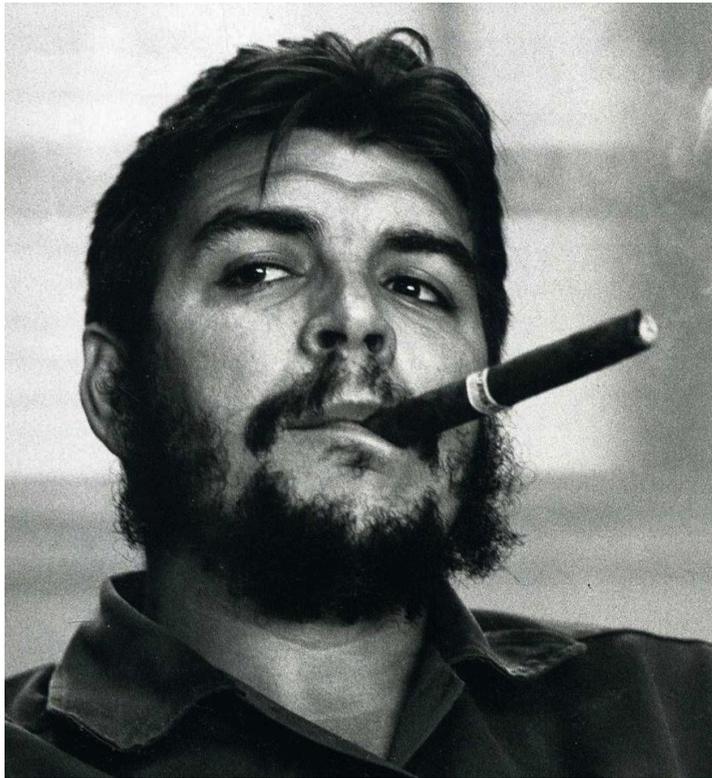
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Why argue?

Silence is argument
carried out by other
means (Che Guevara).



Arguments are to be
avoided, they are
always vulgar and
often convincing
(Oscar Wilde).

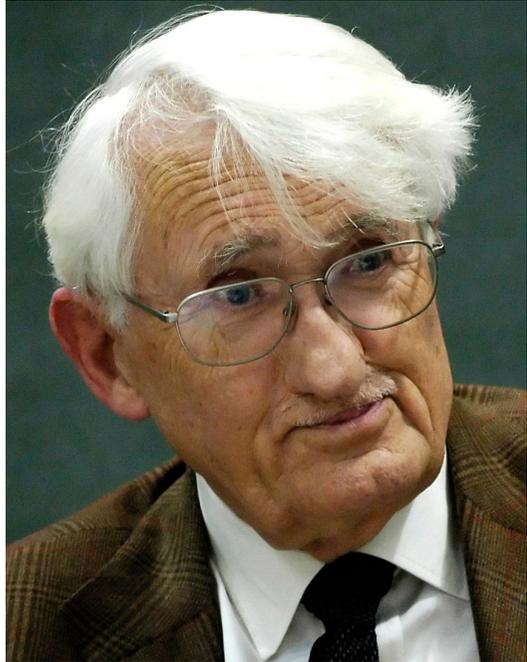
Gramsci on common sense



Common sense is a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything that one likes. (*Selections from the prison notebooks*)

From what has the certainty of common sense originated? Essentially from religion... but religion is an ideology, the best-rooted and most widespread ideology, not a proof or a demonstration (*Further selections from the prison notebooks*).

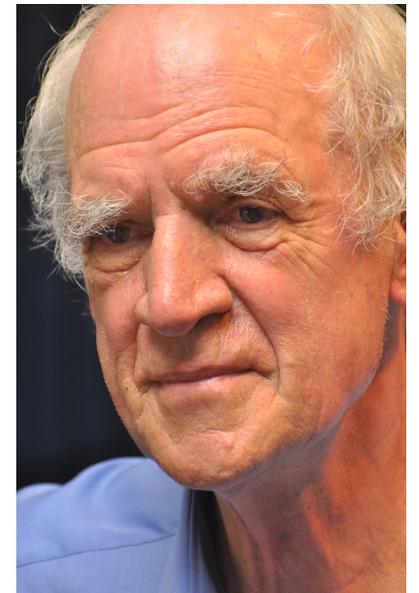
The public sphere as social imaginary



Jürgen Habermas

Books, pamphlets, and newspapers circulated among the educated public, conveying theses, analyses, arguments, and counterarguments, referring to and refuting each other. These were widely read and often discussed in face-to-face gatherings, in drawing rooms, coffeehouses, salons, and in more (authoritatively) public places, like Parliament. The general view that resulted from all this, if any, counted as public opinion in this new sense (Taylor on Habermas).

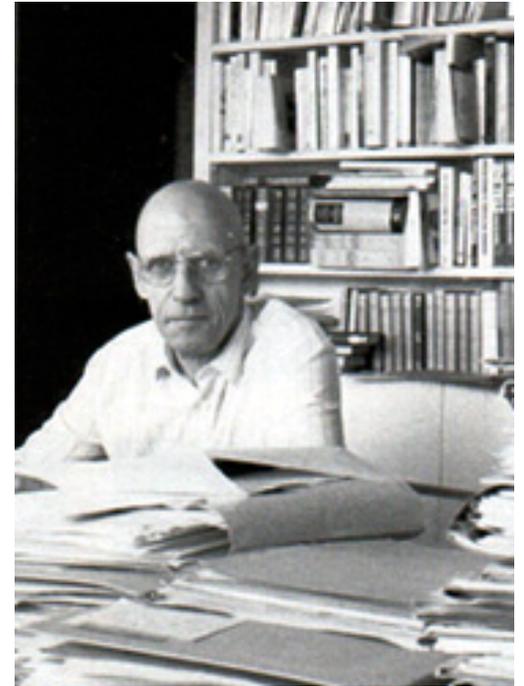
[However, such a] social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society (Taylor *Modern social imaginaries* 15, 169).



Charles Taylor

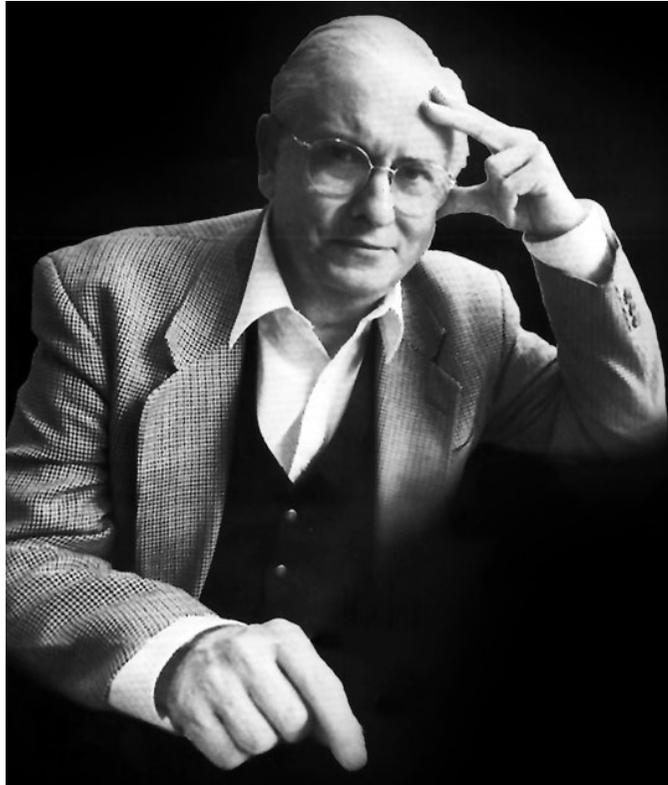
Foucault on discourse

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality... we can isolate another group: internal procedures, since discourses themselves exercise their own control; procedures which function rather as principles of classification, of ordering, of distribution, as if this time another dimension of discourse had to be mastered: that of events and chance (Foucault *The order of discourse* 52).



Michel Foucault

Society as impossible

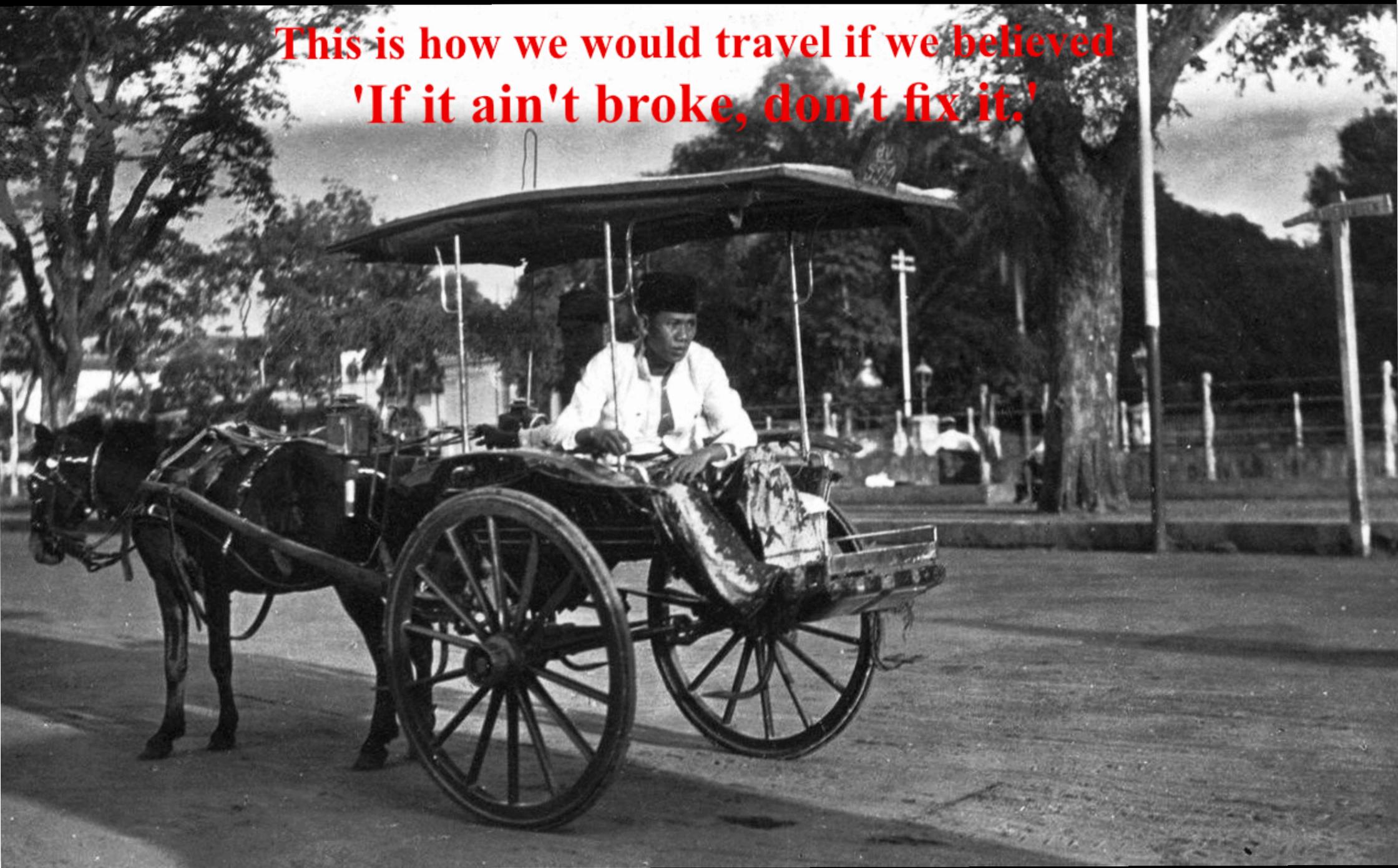


Ernesto Laclau

Any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an ‘excess of meaning’ which it is unable to master and that, consequently, ‘society’ as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility... But if we maintain the relational character of any identity and if, at the same time, we renounce the *fixation* of those identities in a system, then the social must be identified with the infinite play of differences, that is, with what in the strictest sense of the term we can call *discourse*... The social only exists as the vain

attempt to institute that impossible object: society’ (*The impossibility of society* 90, 92).

**This is how we would travel if we believed
'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.'**



Culture as a totality

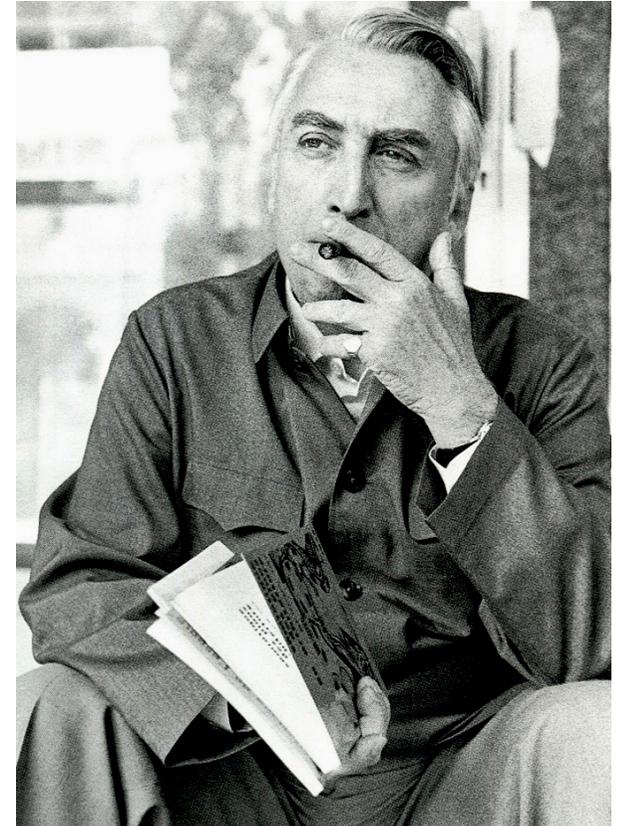
Certain powerful theoretical abstractions promised to help academic ethnographers 'get to the heart' of a culture more rapidly than someone undertaking, for example, a thorough inventory of customs and beliefs. Without spending years getting to know natives, their complex languages and habits, in intimate detail, the researcher could go after selected data that would yield a central armature or structure of the cultural whole... since culture, seen as a complex whole, was always too much to master in a short research span, the new ethnographer intended to focus thematically on particular institutions... In the predominantly synecdochic rhetorical stance of the new ethnography, parts were assumed to be microcosms or analogies of wholes (Clifford *On ethnographic authority* 31).



Margaret Mead researching Balinese culture, which she treated as an unproblematic totality

Barthes on Text

- The Text is not to be thought of as an object that can be computed.
- The work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the Text is a methodological field...
- Text is not the decomposition of the work, it is the work that is the imaginary tail of the Text;
- *The Text is experienced only in an activity of production...* The Text is that space where no language has a hold over any other, where languages circulate (From Barthes *From work to text*).



Roland Barthes

A patch of paint = a stately home

What Constable 'really' saw in Wivenhoe Park was surely a house across a lake. What he had learned to paint was a flat patch that allowed of any number of readings, including the correct one. Ambiguity cannot be seen, and so we rightly ignore the innumerable weird interpretations that must also lurk behind the serene surface of the painting (Gombrich *Art and illusion* 264).



Battleship Potemkin



Eisenstein on Montage

In my view montage is not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another

Eye + Water = Crying

Door + Ear = Eavesdropping

Child + Mouth = Screaming

Mouth + Dog = Barking

Mouth + Bird = Singing

Knife + Heart = Anxiety, etc.

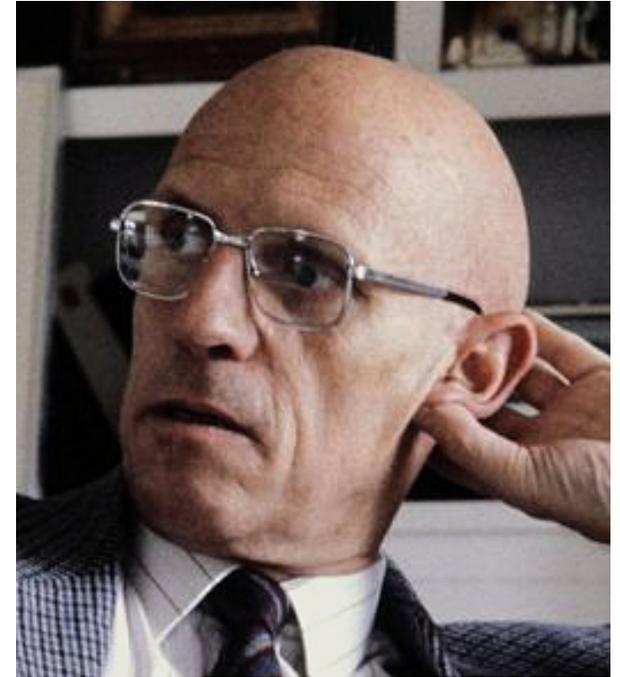
*(Eisenstein *The dramaturgy of film form* 95-6; *Beyond the shot* 83; words in red are my emphasis).*

The combination of two hieroglyphs of the simplest series is regarded **not as their sum total** but as their **product**... The combination of two 'representable' object achieves the representation of something that cannot be graphically represented.



Foucault on academic knowledge as practice

If the genealogist...listens to history, he finds that there is “something altogether different” behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms. Examining the history of reason, he learns that it was born in an altogether “reasonable” fashion – from chance; devotion to truth and the precision of scientific methods arose from the passion of scholars, their reciprocal hatred, their fanatical and unending discussions, and their spirit of competition – the personal conflicts that slowly forged the weapons of reason (Foucault *Nietzsche, genealogy, history* 142).



Practice defined

I prefer to think of practices as those recognized, complex forms of social activity and articulation through which agents set out to maintain or change themselves, others and the world about them under varying conditions. Such a working account is deliberately open. Rather than attempt some universal definition which inevitably risks Eurocentrism and anticipating how other people imagine practice, I prefer to leave problematic for the time being what it is to articulate, to recognize as, or to ascribe agency and so on (Hobart *What do we mean by 'media practices'* 63).



The hidden agenda behind articulatory practices

Objectivity is an empiricist concept that has been under attack for most of the twentieth century, especially from structuralism, post-Einsteinian physics, and psychoanalysis... Yet news professionals

still cling to it as both an achievable goal and a central justification... [However] objectivity is the 'unauthored' voice of the bourgeoisie.

A wider and more confident recognition of this essential fictionality of news...justifies thinking of the news as masculine soap opera. (Fiske *Television Culture*).



John Fiske

OED: English words for 'argue'

Argue

5.II.5 trans. To bring forward the reasons for or against (a proposition, etc.); to discuss the pros and cons of; to treat by reasoning, examine controversially.

II.II To bring reasons, to reason, dispute... b.II.4.b Hence, To reason in opposition, raise objections, contend, dispute.

9.II.9 to argue (a person) into or out of: to persuade him by argument into, or out of, a course of action, an opinion or intention.

Argumentation

1.1 The action or operation of inferring a conclusion from propositions premised; methodical employment or presentation of arguments; logical or formal reasoning.

Argument

3. a.3.a A statement or fact advanced for the purpose of influencing the mind; a reason urged in support of a proposition;

5. a.5.a Statement of the reasons for and against a proposition; discussion of a question; debate.

The ideal Indonesian

Indonesians rarely disagree in public. To succeed in negotiations with Indonesians, do not apply pressure or be confrontational (eDiplomat 2016).

Indonesians avoid confrontation at all costs, as it is again considered ill mannered or uneducated to confront someone in public. In some cases, you will never ever know whether you have offended someone as she/he will



remain polite and hide her/his feelings from you. The Javanese are very good at this. Showing your anger, raising your voice to anybody in the workplace in front of others will cause loss of face to both yourself and the person you are being angry at. If this happens, your Indonesian colleagues will lose their respect for you and the person you shouted at will not be able to bear the 'loss of face' you caused for him/her. Chances are she/he will resign immediately after this incident (Centre for Intercultural Learning 2014).

Indonesians avoid anger in public

A Social Imaginary that runs counter to evidence everyday in the mass media



Rizieq Shibab
Founder of the Front Pembela Islam



Ahok - Basuki Cahaya Purnama
Former Governor of Jakarta

Stereotypes as Imaginaries



Louis Althusser

[Such stereotypes however] do make allusion to reality, and they need only be ‘interpreted’ to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world (ideology = *illusion/allusion*).

[Social Imaginaries are part of] ideology which ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing (Althusser *Ideology and ideological state apparatuses* 154, 160).

Yet another Social Imaginary



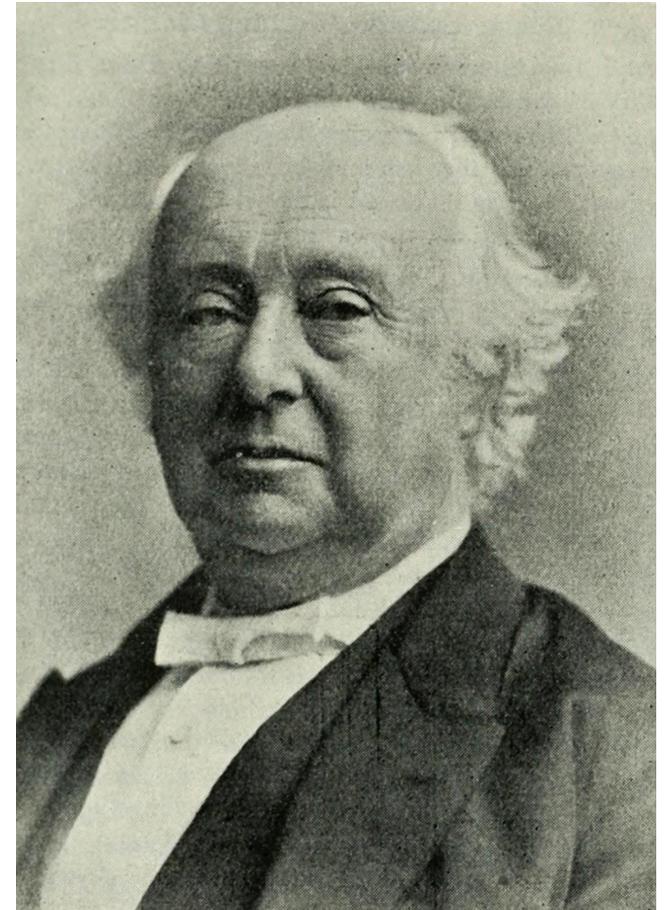
Balinese Lègong dance as ancient cultural heritage is an invented tradition.
In its present form, it dates from the 1930s and the advent of tourism.

Jowett on logic and research

Logic is neither a science nor an art, but a dodge (Jowett *Letters*).

On the word 'research' being mentioned by a visiting American academic:

'Research! Research! A mere excuse for idleness; it has never achieved, and will never achieve any results of the slightest value (Cited by L.P Smith *Unforgotten years* 169).



The famous Oxford classicist
Benjamin Jowett

Useful Greek terms

Logic

The study of valid inference/reasoning from premises (the results are logically correct, not necessarily true of the world).

Dialectic

Discussion between two or more people who hold different views, aiming to agree through reason.

Rhetoric

The art of informing, persuading or motivating, above all persuading



Sukarno - one of the great rhetoricians

The refined command



The Sultan of Yogyakarta

Perintah halus...is generally understood to mean the giving of orders in polite and indirect language, sometimes even in the form of a request rather than a command; the request is nonetheless understood by both parties to be a command. But within the context of traditional Javanese thinking, the *perintah halus* is by no means a weak or indirect command designed to cover the uncertainty of the order-giver as to how far his authority will be obeyed. On the contrary, it is a more powerful command than an express order, because it is necessarily given by a *halus* person, one of higher power and status and closer to the center of Power (Anderson *The idea of power in Java* 54).

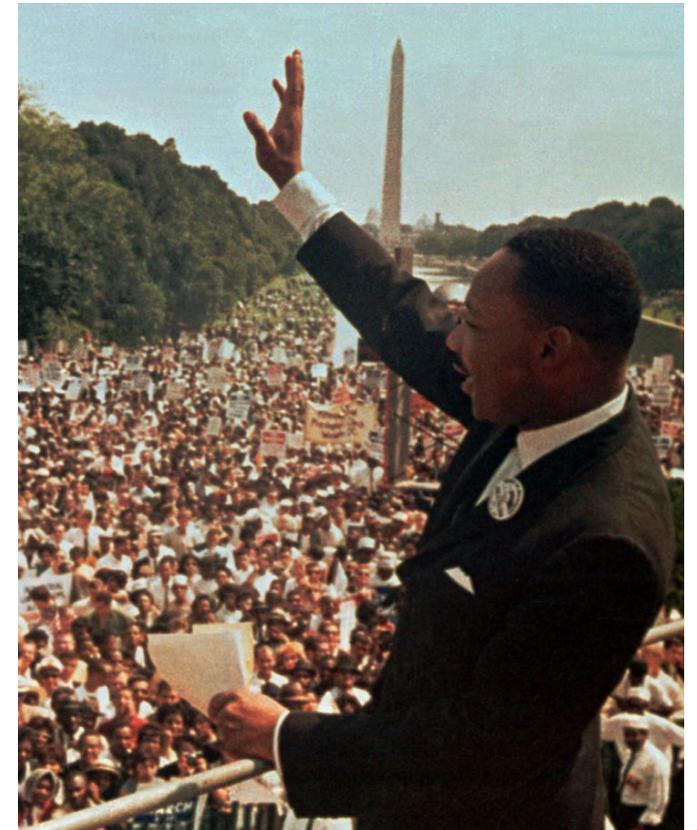
Terms for modes of persuasion

Convincing an audience through:

Ethos an ethical appeal to the speaker's credibility or character.

Logos an appeal to logic or reason, the use of culturally approved argument.

Pathos An appeal to emotion (positive or negative), to arouse empathy, anger or whatever moves people.



Martin Luther King, who was very skilled at Pathos - e.g. his famous speech 'I have a dream'.

Reaching decisions

Decisions are reached within the council by unanimous agreement of its members, in a Quaker-like meeting in which each man speaks his mind as the spirit moves him (Hildred Geertz *The Balinese village* 29).



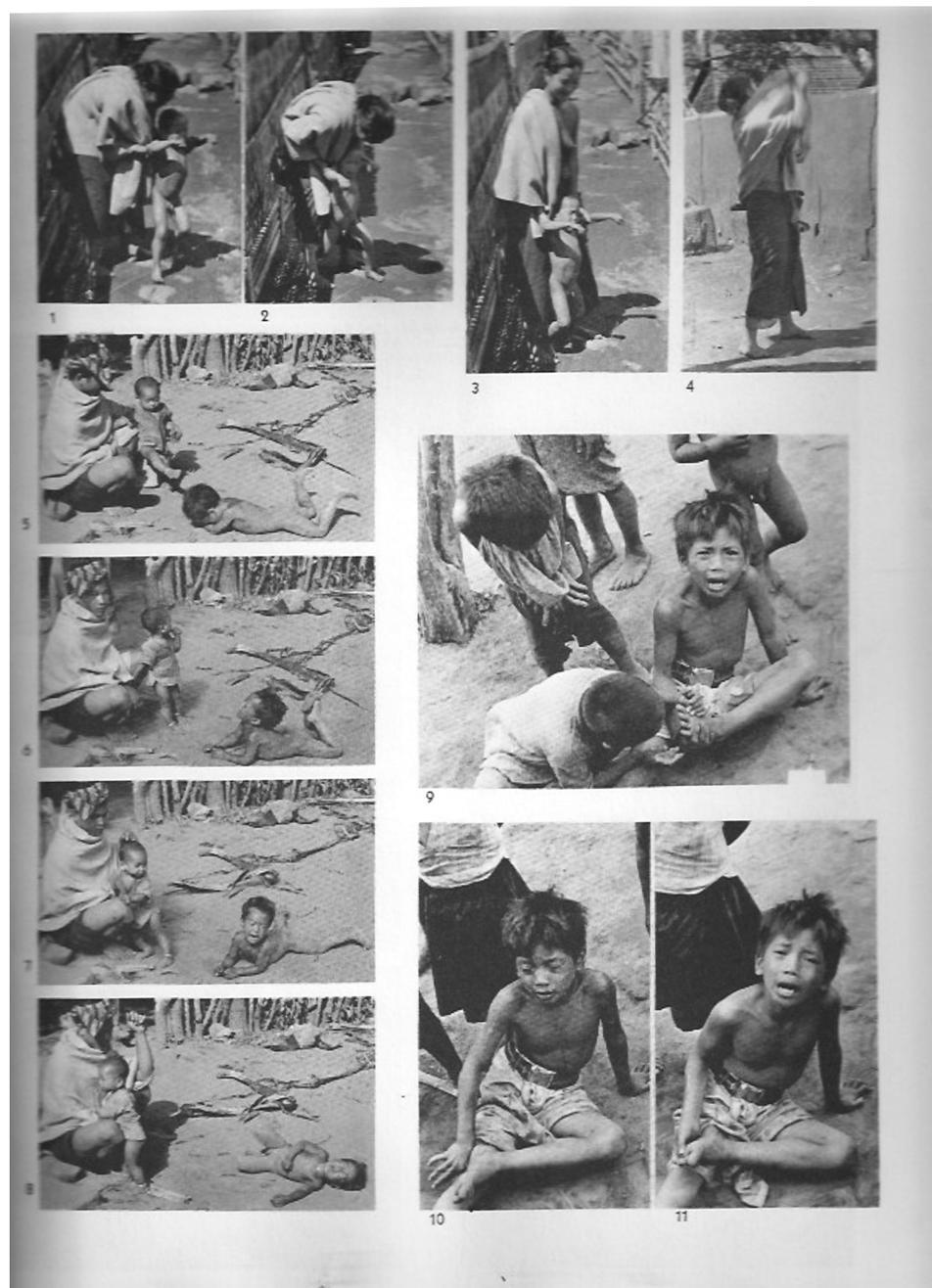
The Theatre State?



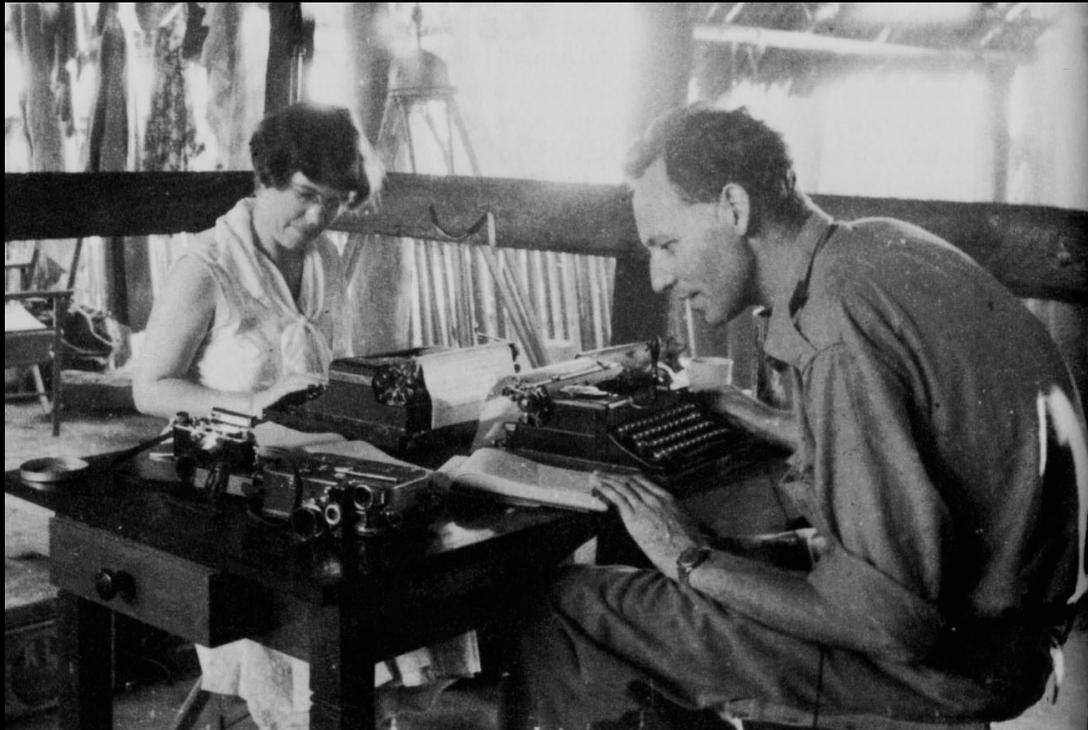
[Bali was] a theatre state in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience. The stupendous cremations, tooth filings, temple dedications, pilgrimages, and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds and even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to political ends: they were the

ends themselves, they were what the state was for. Court ceremonialism was the driving force of court politics; and mass ritual was not a device to shore up the state, but rather the state, even in its final gasp, was a device for the enactment of mass ritual. Power served pomp, not pomp power.... The ritual life of the court, and in fact the life of the court generally, is thus paradigmatic, not merely reflective, of social order (Clifford Geertz *Negara* 13).

Teasing and borrowing babies



The two faces of fieldwork



How Mead and
Bateson saw Balinese

How Balinese children
saw Mead and Bateson



The case of the orator's underpants

I Ketut Mara -
the low caste
villager who
humbled a
royal court
(Photo some 25
years later)

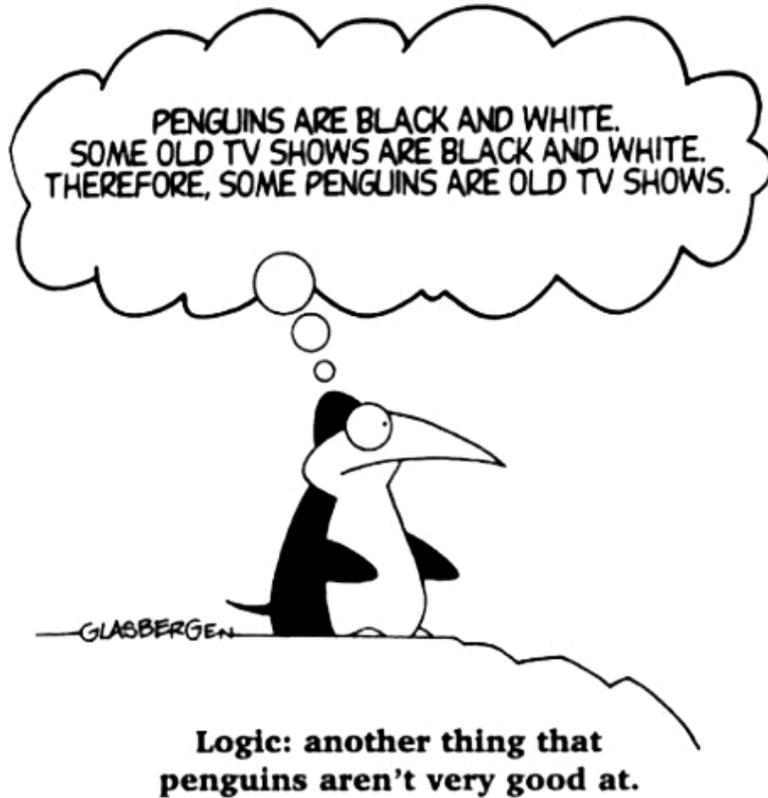


Bagawan Byasa's Exhortation

If you are the leader of a people, if you rule over them, you cannot live too well. You must not have too luxurious a lifestyle, but should live simply. You are such a leader. Now none of your subjects should be allowed to be corrupt — that is what you must command. But this must be seriously observed in practice. It should not just take the form of words: you order the masses to obey, but then it turns out that you did not do so yourself. That is the difficulty of becoming a ruler. It is easy to give orders; it is hard to put them into practice. That is the first thing to grasp. When a ruler is not honest, the world goes to rot. No way may you do that. This is what it is to be just. You have to strive to be fair and just to all of your subjects.

Bagawan Byasa's Exhortation

Two faces of argument



Argument as
argumentation or
logical reasoning



Argument as lying in the
relationship between the
two interlocutors

History from Below

History from below seeks to take as its subjects ordinary people, and concentrate on their experiences and perspectives, contrasting itself with the stereotype of traditional political history and its focus on the actions of 'great men'. It also differed from traditional labour history in that its exponents were more interested in popular protest and culture than in the organisations of the working class (https://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/themes/history_from_below.html)



Hogarth's depiction of the knight errant Hudibras
from Samuel Butler's poem

A Balinese Élite Vision of Argument



The respectful and deferential attitude with which the Balinese élite imagine their monologues ought to be greeted.

The appalling fate meted out to those who mistakenly thought argument meant dialogue.

