

“LOOK AT A HUMAN BEING, AND LEARN TO SEE HIM”: ON ALBERT PIETTE’S “EXISTANTIAL” ANTHROPOLOGY

ALBERT PIETTE, *THEORETICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OR HOW TO OBSERVE A HUMAN BEING*

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Albert Piette is frustrated with anthropology. He wants to understand human beings, but anthropology does not help him see them properly. While ostensibly focusing on people, the gaze of anthropologists routinely passes through them to reach other things: society, culture, religion, interactions, systems of kinship or knowledge, sports, media, or political systems. Why does this happen, Piette asks. Why is the human subject so elusive? Why is there a need to dilute him in culture, or to see him as a sum of disjointed parts? After all, in our non-academic life we do not experience other people as vehicles for society or culture, but as living beings, solid and unified. Yet when we look at them as scholars, we suddenly cease to see them clearly, and we can only treat humans as a means to grasping something else. For Piette, this constitutes a fundamental failing of anthropology. In his work, he wants to talk about people – not as indicators of abstract notions but as valid research objects in their own right.

Albert Piette is a French anthropologist, currently working at University Paris X Nanterre, and a member of the Laboratoire d'ethnologie et sociologie comparative at CNRS. During the 1990s, he became known mainly as a scholar of religion, publishing a number of books and articles

dedicated to understanding the practical functioning of religious and quasi-religious action. The most comprehensive account of this period can be found in *Le fait religieux. Une théorie de la religion ordinaire* (2003b). Later, he focused on epistemological and methodological questions. Throughout his works, Piette seeks to establish a scientific method that would allow anthropologists to grasp the specificity of human existence. He accentuates the need to consider the details of everyday life, and the specific ways in which people engage in activities.

Theoretical Anthropology or How to Observe a Human Being is Piette's latest work dealing with these questions, and it serves as a manifesto of sorts: he gathers here principles for his own approach to the systematic study of human beings (or, as he prefers to call them, human volumes). And while in the past he devoted considerable energy to debate, in *Theoretical Anthropology* he focuses on presenting a positive research programme. A mainly methodological work, *Theoretical Anthropology* is aimed primarily at practising anthropologists, but it could certainly be of interest for the broader public of social scientists, as sociology is a constant presence, albeit mainly as a negative point of reference. Piette develops an intriguing perspective, examining the foundations of anthropology and questioning its role as a social science.

Theoretical Anthropology appears as the first volume in ISTE and Wiley's Research, Innovative Theories and Methods in Social Sciences and Humanities set, which is coordinated by Piette himself with Emmanuelle Savignac. Piette's proposition is, indeed, innovative. It consists of nothing less than a total remodelling of anthropology and its rebuilding with a new focus, better suited to the discipline's stated purpose. It would no longer be a social science but rather a proper study of individuals. According to Piette, the initial promise of anthropology – contained in the discipline's very name – was instantly conditioned with limiting adjectives: a *social* anthropology or a *cultural* one. Such adjectives suggest a narrow view: anthropologists are interested in humans only as social or cultural beings, in specific dimensions of their lives. Thus, anthropology concentrates only on parts of the human being, neglecting the whole; it fragments its own object of study, and dilutes individuals in social relations and interactions. On the other hand, anthropologists do not focus on people they observe, but rather try to see through them to study society or culture. As such, anthropology is nothing more than a sub-discipline of sociology, marked by the use of the ethnographic method. But, as Piette reminds his readers, a method does not constitute a field of study. It is then crucial for anthro-

pology to construct the human being as a proper object of scientific inquiry and to develop a new research scale: that which is neither sociological nor biological, but properly anthropological. Only this would allow the curious absence of research on actual human beings to be remedied. As for now, the “human being is an astonishing entity in the sciences,” claims Piette. “It is possible to work on a cell to understand a cell, or a city and an institution to understand a city and an institution. However, we look at the human being in search of other things” (Piette 2019: 116).

From this observation ensues Piette’s main methodological advice, which may seem deceptively simple: “Looking at a human being means looking at him and nothing else,” though “this is not easy” (2019: 61), as the author hastens to add. He proposes viewing humans as volumes: clearly delimited and separate from their environment; comprising multiple qualities, while providing structuring unity; occupying a certain amount of physical space; observable; and finally, preserving their unity through changes in time. With his volumocentric focus, Piette aims to change the way we observe the world: to highlight the figure and not the background; to look at a person and not its environment (a process described as “anthropological reversal,” since it contradicts the usual way of looking).

For Piette, there are five crucial points illuminating the concept of a human volume. First, when observing an individual, we should keep in mind that a volume is comprised of elements but is also an entity with a certain consistency; we should consider the volume and its contents simultaneously. The notion of “voluments” designates elements that are situated inside a volume, and cannot exist separately.¹ The anthropologist’s task consists of indicating active voluments (several are always compresent) to describe the density of a volume. Second, a volume is an entirety which cannot be fragmented and described as a sum of its parts. It has a specific unity, formed by the interplay of voluments; it is thus inutile to extract only some of them for analysis, as social sciences routinely do. Rather, anthropologists should try to describe the details of a volume conceived as a whole. Thirdly, each volume has a specific nature; it is distinct from others. Contrary to the anthropological figure of a person as a vehicle for shared traits, human volumes are not interchangeable. Fourth, volume has a consistence over time; it remains in continuity even though specific voluments may change.

¹ They can include, among others, “actions, gestures, words, the body, a body posture, thoughts, mental images, reasons (for action), perceptions, sensations, feelings, affects, emotions, desires, wishes, intentions, moods, memories, values, cognitive abilities, types of consciousness, knowledge, know-hows, so-called social and cultural characteristics, various memberships and roles, different habits or style” (Piette 2019: 3).

Each human has his own distinctive style. Finally, a volume is marked by a certain “lessereity,” or indifference to the outside world. This constitutes an important organising principle for the voluments; an individual is never fully committed to an action, there is always more going on inside of him, detaching him from his environment and protecting his singularity. Taken together, these qualities of a volume allow it to be treated as “an individual unity separate from the others” (Piette 2019: x) and “a separate body that is about to continue” (ibid.: 47). Importantly, the unity of a volume is not understood as unifying an individual in a strong sense of self; rather, it is an empirical quality of being a discrete entity. Subjectivity is considered only as one volument among others; as Piette puts it bluntly, “[I]n a volume, there is no ‘I.’ It may be at most an effect, occasionally felt, of voluments bouncing off one another” (ibid.: 8–9).

Since Piette intends to shift anthropology’s focus to a different object of study, it is only fitting that he should propose a novel methodological approach too. He suggests replacing ethnography by a “volumography” – the art of describing human volumes. The scientific study of human beings should be based on continuous, detailed observation of individuals. “Ideally,” writes Piette, “we would obtain a film of each human showing all his life uninterruptedly” (ibid.: 30). This would allow the researcher to meticulously track voluments as they come to the surface and recede, undergo mutations, influence each other, or react to external stimuli. It could also allow the elements that contribute to the volume’s personal style, pervading all his actions and marking it by a definite continuity, to be identified. This is not all speculative, as Piette bases his methodological approach on an analysis of a twelve-hour uninterrupted film following him as he fulfils his daily tasks (ibid.: viii). To reach those voluments that are not directly observable, Piette suggests using explicitation interviews and detailed diaries. Descriptions of individuals could then be compared, both diachronically (when comparing the same person at different stages of life) and synchronically (when comparing different people) to develop a scientific understanding of the functioning of human volumes.

Throughout his work, Piette remains a consistent empiricist, insisting that all the qualities of a volume can (and should) be observed. The core theoretical argument of the book is presented as a guide on how to observe human beings, and what properties to consider. In effect, seeing is central to Piette’s approach, on both a methodological and a rhetorical level. And since the social sciences routinely neglect human beings, Piette turns for inspiration to the arts. The anthropologist’s gaze should resemble that of

a sculptor, who does not observe his subject from a fixed point of view (as does a painter), but rather tries to construct a multidimensional, detailed model of a living, moving individual.

Piette calls his approach “existential anthropology” (this spelling signals separation from existentialism and underlines the root in “existants”), and positions it in contrast to virtually every other line of anthropological thought. *Theoretical Anthropology* is conceived as a positive proposition, aiming to showcase Piette’s thinking without engaging with his main opponents: relational and interactionist social scientists, including (among others) Bronislaw Malinowski, Erving Goffman, ethnomethodologists, Pierre Bourdieu, Bruno Latour, and the representatives of the recent “ontological turn” in anthropology.² Nevertheless, a fair share of Piette’s latest book is devoted to differentiating “existential” anthropology from other approaches, which could seem similar: phenomenology, existential and personalist philosophy, as well as the works of Tim Ingold, João de Pina-Cabral, and Cristina Torres. Seeking footing in the tradition of anthropology, Piette turns to structuralism, although he intends to follow the spirit, rather than the letter, of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s approach. While this reclaiming of intellectual lineage may seem surprising, it becomes more understandable in the light of one of many different definitions of a “human volume” proposed by Piette: it is “a whole that includes all of his components and a way of structuring” (ibid.: xx).

Piette does not conceal the fact that, for him, the re-founding of anthropology constitutes a project of great personal importance. He “cannot bring [himself] to accept that anthropology forgets the scale of the human being and the continuous instants” (ibid.: 149). For Piette, focusing on individuals is necessary for anthropology to justify its own disciplinary distinctness. “If one wants to practice anthropology,” writes the author, “one should do so in radical terms and not by bypassing the human being himself. Either there is anthropology or there is no anthropology” (ibid.). But even more importantly, Piette writes from a position of personal disappointment. It is clear that he is passionate about the human being as an object of study; he devotes his time and effort to understanding the functioning of real humans in real situations. This has been the focus of his work from the beginning, as attested by studies such as *Les jeux de la fête. Rites et comportements festifs en Wallonie* (1988) or *La religion de près. L’activité*

² Piette’s polemical thinking can be found for example in *Contre le relationnisme* (2015a), *Existence in the Details: Theory and Methodology in Existential Anthropology* (2015b) or *Separate Humans: Anthropology, Ontology, Existence* (2016).

religieuse en train de se faire (1999), which are detailed accounts of the lives of the people he studied. He wants to observe humans in a rigorous, scientific manner, but does not find an established methodology that would entirely satisfy him.

But it is not enough for Piette to find answers for himself; he wants to convince others. The text is highly argumentative, and often utilises conventions approximating oral lectures. The key concepts are constantly repeated and illuminated from different perspectives, to ensure the reader understands them well. At times, Piette makes use of unorthodox methods of conveying his message – as is the case with his drawings, illustrating the main qualities of human volumes. And while the use of amateurish sketches for visualisation might seem eccentric, they ultimately prove effective for the elucidation of Piette’s arguments (just as a quick scribble made on a blackboard during a lecture might, although few would consider it worthy of publication).

Piette’s work presents a novel approach to the study of human beings; it is a perspective worth exploring even if one would not want to adopt it wholeheartedly. It underlines singularity without being essentialist, and allows the scholar to concentrate on individual existence without giving up empirical rigor. Indubitably, *Theoretical Anthropology* is a work by an exceptionally skilled observer of humans – it could not have been written had Piette not spent hours tracing small gestures and almost imperceptible changes. For sociologists, it could serve as an inspiring point of reference, pointing out the artificiality of a fragmented and over-socialised vision of individuals. On a more abstract level, a demand for research on a scale that would not be sociological, psychological, nor biological, but specifically anthropological, could open new perspectives for the study of human beings.

At the same time, Piette’s proposition is certainly controversial. It is hard to imagine that his anti-sociologism would become widely adopted in anthropology, nor is it obvious that it should be. After all, as the author himself admits, the discipline was founded on investigating social phenomena. For this reason, Piette’s critique of anthropology may seem misguided: as if he accused the discipline of not being what it never intended to be in the first place. In this context, even if we were to accept Piette’s diagnosis that there exists a gap in scientific knowledge, it is not entirely clear why it should be anthropology’s task to fill it. At times, Piette seems to disregard the real discipline, as it is practised, for an ideal “science of human beings.” Moreover, while his aim of establishing a properly anthropological scale of research is alluring, in the absence of an exemplary analysis it is not entirely

clear what type of conclusions should arise from the (comparative) studies of human volumes proposed by Piette. There would certainly be a risk of becoming buried in individual observations, with any type of synthesis being hard to reach. As always, the cost of antireductionism is the danger of a too-detailed analysis.

Despite these reservations, reading Piette's work might be beneficial even for scholars who do not want to reject the sociological perspective, as he highlights several important points about human beings which could be inspiring even for those working in different, more traditional lines of research. Among these points, continuity and lessereity seem especially pertinent.

Piette underlines the crucial role of personal style, which pervades an individual's actions and allows him to maintain his unity in time. Crucially, those stylistic elements are specific for every human volume, as they originate within, from the repeated patterns of interplay between voluments. Obviously, they can incorporate outside sources; but the impact is never the same for different people, as their internal constitution differs. Combined with the fact that volumography is always a temporal analysis (because it traces the voluments as they mutate over time, while keeping their unity), this approach can illuminate the way in which cultural or social factors are integrated in each individual. They are incorporated, but the change does not break the volume's continuity. Crucially, this allows individuals to be viewed not as disjointed but as unified – maintaining relations with the outside world but not defined by them, as is the case in the relational social sciences. For Piette, personal style – each individual's specificity and continuity – constitutes the basic principle of our understanding of others.³

Similarly, the notion of lessereity is a product of the attentive observation of human beings and the way they function in real situations. It calls attention to the fact that human beings are never fully committed to action; there is always the possibility of distancing oneself. This observation refers back to Piette's earlier works on religious faith (see, e.g., Piette 2003a, 2014). Believers are not necessarily following the logic of faith to its conclusions; they stop short of admitting the necessary implications, condition their faith with a “yes, but...” or hold contradictory convictions simul-

³ It is worth noting that Piette's insistence on continuity posits him in contrast with Latour's perspective, emphasising discontinuity (e.g., in Latour 2012). Although today Piette positions himself as anti-relationist, some of his earlier works were influenced by actor-network theory. See, for example, Piette's *La religion de près* (1999), and its endorsement in Latour's *Reassembling the Social* (2005: 119). Later, with the development of the project of “existential” anthropology, their paths have decidedly diverged.

taneously. Over time, the intensity of their belief oscillates: sometimes it comes to the fore; sometimes it recedes, depending on circumstances. This type of lessereity can be found in all the areas of human activity, and just as the concept of oscillation served to illuminate the way religious faith functions, it can also shine a new light on other domains. Moreover, those earlier analyses prove that the core concept of lessereity can function independently of the greater frame of Piette's anthropology.

Taken as a whole, Piette's approach is certainly quite idiosyncratic. But *Theoretical Anthropology* is also refreshing; it presents methodological reflection as a personal quest to find answers to burning questions. It is also a necessary work, for its author, at least – since Piette cannot satisfy his scientific ambitions using conventional methods he has no choice but to develop his own, and produces a whole new anthropology in the process. In accordance with this goal, the volumocentric perspective offers a novel way of looking at the human being: as an individual – unified, continuous, and distinct – but also as a base for a properly anthropological scale of research. Obviously, this individual exploration does not need to become standard for the whole discipline. Ultimately, Piette's proposal might be rejected for reasons equally personal: the unified and unique human being is simply not what social scientists are interested in. But it is worth remembering that adopting a perspective always necessitates disregard for some aspects of the object of study. At least, Piette's *Theoretical Anthropology* may serve as a reminder of what we give up when we adopt a sociological point of view: the richness and individuality of each human being.

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