
Florence HEYMANN et Danielle STORPER PEREZ (dir.), *Le corps du texte, pour une anthropologie des textes de la tradition juive*

Isac Chiva



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Florence HEYMANN et Danielle STORPER-PEREZ, dir. par, *Le corps du texte. Pour une anthropologie des textes de la tradition juive*. Paris, CNRS Editions, 1997, 352 pages.

It is the privilege of the ethnologist to grasp more so than others, to which extent the body is unique by its functions and its diversity in that it offers, like from inside of ourselves, a framework and a language for expressing the most hidden and buried part of our thoughts, feelings and soul. But the body is also, and at the same time, a baseline and a language to express the part of ourselves which is the most enrooted in the culture, the most dependent on the social shaping of the individuals.

And still, paradoxically, the body, an agent loaded with meaning, translator of our most unmentionable second thoughts, of the most alienating stereotypes which we host, of our most irrepressible joys, of our states of sickness and of our most repressed secrets, this body, the exclusive instrument of our sexuality, has been for a very long time the great lack of ethnology. It is like if the most natural part of the human being, its body, had some difficulty to have recognized by the collective and individual unconsciousness, by the constraint and mortality, by the religion and metaphysics, by the tight intertwinement of the systems of social, symbolic, magic, ritual, literary representations which organize each cultural system, the fact that this part is at the same time its most cultural and most overdetermined part. It is like if, an ultimate alibi, the refusal of nudity was the major metaphor of the human discourse on their body! It is like if, paradoxically, the body was too much, so undesirable that the best way to accept it is to go around it, to depart from it, not to look at it – which is the best manner not to see it –except in its two extreme states which are illness and death.

This constitutes the obvious importance of a book entitled in a provocative way “Le corps du texte” (The Body of the Text)! This reveals also the pretention of an ethnologist who is neither a specialist nor a connoisseur of the “Judaica” and who will try to tell the originality and the importance of what he thinks is intended and is in the full sense of the word a plea “for an anthropology of the texts of the Jewish tradition”, in order to quote the terms of the book's subtitle.

Obviously the works in social anthropology, ethnography and folklore of Judaism do not date to just yesterday. Nevertheless under the pressure of the recent history, mainly in Europe, of the events connected to the Second World War, a tendency emerges more and more strongly in the Jewish Studies. It concerns the memory, its work, its traces, the knowledge of the fate of the

Jewish communities recomposed by the memory of the genocide survivors, the indirect re-elaboration of the Jewish identities. But it concerns also the forgetting. The forgetting of the survivors and against which the “tellers of the disaster” fought who, before passing, have written... to death and have hidden their handwritten memorials and journals, in a final act of at the same time duty, despair and hope¹.

These works coming, we must not forget, after the considerable collections of folklore and stories concerning the everyday life in the “shtetl” and the dragonnades suffered by the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe at the turn of century, have allowed us to speak of an anthropological approach in the largest sense of this multiform phenomenon, at the same time, religious, identity based, political, historical, cultural, that Judaism represents; but should we say rather Judaisms? At the heart of these cultural traditions formed and expressed over a long duration, in response to the catastrophes, all have placed the danger as an unchanged millenium, a theme supposed to have modeled the collective forms of the Jewish memory².

Regarding this and in counterpoint, the Book, the texts, and the traditional Jewish literature in all of its forms are encountered massively. It is this massive and constant presence, co-extensible to the diaspora, this “...centrality of the Text/texts in the Jewish societies and cultures...” that the editors of this book, Florence Heymann and Danielle Storper-Perez, who have written a substantial introduction, as well as Frank Alvarez-Pereyre, author of the introductory essay intitled “En deçà et au-delà des evidences : quelle anthropologie du judaïsme ? (Beneath and beyond obvious facts: Which anthropology of Judaism?)” have seized upon in order to demonstrate the possibility of existence of a classical anthropology of complex societies with written traditions and history. Obviously the “status of the text” is essential here: “...two and a half millenia of texts...”! It is simultaneously with this longevity, in this centrality, in the role of the texts as “agents of social transformation” and in the detailed knowledge of the contexts in the ethnological sense – practices, rituals, knowledge, organized circumstances – that our authors mean to establish an original analytical procedure truly and in every point anthropological. And they succeed!

¹ On this matter, we may read the dense and authoritative recent synthesis by Nicole Lapierre, ““Des bouteilles à la terre”, des archives pour l’avenir”, *Sociologie et sociétés*, XXIX, 2, 1997, pp. 11-19.

² See notably the two following books: Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Response to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984. David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1984.

“The anthropological approach of the texts of Judaism appears... to be a particularly complex operation” write Florence Heymann and Danielle Storper-Perez: a bold and very ambitious enterprise, we are tempted to add, regarding the two introductory essays as much as the ten papers which form the body of this volume. Thus we are back to the initial topic: “the centrality of the body: the body of the words and the words of the bodies” as our two authors note, who see in it the framework and the justification of an anthropology of the textual and para-textual tradition of Judaism.

I will emphasize the three-fold challenge maintained which this book represents in the eyes of an ethnologist. It summarizes for the non-specialist a considerable amount of concrete ethnography, expressed in professional words. It offers an ethnology handbook of Judaism which, to our knowledge, did not exist and which will have a certain didactic significance. In the meantime, it illustrates the critical phase – crossing the desert or inventive mutation? – that social and cultural anthropology is presently experiencing.

I. Chiva
(Translation: C. and K. Delage)