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Talking Violence: An Anthropological Interpretation of Conversation in the City. Nigel Rapport. St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1987. 193 p. $16.95.

ELLIOTT LEYTON

THIS IS AN eccentric book which disappoints at many different levels. Written by a British social anthropologist who spent some fourteen months between 1984 and 1985 in St. John's, the book purports to be a study, not of violence *per se*, but of the manner in which people in the city talk about violence. This could have been a fascinating enterprise, but the manner in which it was conducted betrayed even its limited aims.

The book opens inexplicably with pages of direct quotations about Newfoundland from sources as diverse as the Eastern Provincial Airways' house magazine, J.R. Smallwood's *Book of Newfoundland*, and a pamphlet on St. John's published by the city's tourist commission and convention bureau. Hard upon that follow several pages of a remarkably unanthropological confession by the author that the Newfoundland aborigine's un-English language left him "depressed" and "threatened part of the social identity I had been accustomed to believing I could communicate."

The text itself is no less idiosyncratic. At the descriptive level, the research might still have been enlightening had it not been so constrained by the intellectual blinkers of the author. His subject matter — conversation — is the lifeblood of anthropology; and it is the task of the analyst to take part in, and observe, a thousand conversations before distilling their essence. In this manner the enquirer can uncover the culture's subtle nuances as well as its explicit dogmas, taboos, and obsessions. But this author gives us no such distillation. Instead he simply records, as faithfully as his pen or tape recorder can manage, eleven different conversations which took place in his presence in the city — at an academic party, a MUN criminology course, provincial court, a halfway house, three pubs, the Detoxification Centre, a hospital, and a department of occupational therapy.

This purely descriptive part of the book occupies the first 135 of the book's 193 pages. If the conversations had been studied in their richness,

annotated with cleverness, or explicated in some meaningful way, even such a short list might have been illuminating. But the conversations are simply reported, as if by a tourist or travelling journalist. And they are both interminable and dull, like most conversations. The art of the anthropologist is to transcend the mundane: simply to repeat it without visible purpose or higher goal makes little sense. In this manner, the clever idea of studying the city's conversations about violence in order to gain an enriched understanding of the subject is hurled away in a fit of mindless magpie-style collecting.

At the theoretical level, the very real creative intelligence of the author — always hidden in the first three-quarters of the book — occasionally surfaces in the form of insights which, if they had been developed properly, might have become significant ideas. For example, he notes in passing that the moral pluralism and diversity that characterize modern civilization produce a situation in which "hero, prophet, madman and criminal become totally confused, and there is politicised competition for irresolvably contrasting and conflicting utopian values." But each of these scattered and provocative insights is picked up and then resolutely set down again, as if another matter has suddenly distracted the attention of the author. Similarly, abstractions of the very highest level are made, but rarely related in any comprehensible way to the data.

Critics of the social "sciences" will be pleased to hear that he comes perilously close to denying entirely the existence of society and sociology. For him, it is the individual, not the society, which constitutes the prime force in shaping lives: "He [the individual] is the source of social energy, responsible for the making of experience through an active and possibly idiosyncratic interpretation of what he perceives, and a creative imparting of meaning to it." Thus it is language, not social forces, which intrigues the author; Wittgenstein, not Malinowski, who seizes his scholarly imagination. These are perfectly legitimate concerns to be sure, but they take us nowhere in understanding either the phenomenon of violence, or people's conceptions of it.

It is only at the end of the book that the author reveals how little such an understanding would matter to him. For him, talking about something is more significant than actually doing it, talk about violence more illuminating than actual physical assault. Indeed, he goes so far as to state categorically that violence cannot even be "defined outright as abnormal or pathological." Nor is it "directly investigatable": indeed, to define or invest-igate it would merely "lead to vulgar generalisation." He much prefers the work of a British criminologist who studied the brutal London underworld to learn "the 'theme-tunes' of this culture" so that "he could explain the displays of cold-blooded butchery which he found as that which routinely overtook those who had taken liberties with a shared code of honour, and needed to be reminded of proper respect." These are very old and sad tunes — the

romanticization of the violent, and the abuse of philosophy to define a phenomenon out of existence.

The book is handsomely produced, in the agreeable new style of the ISER Press paperbacks. Lovers of incomprehensible sociograms, charts, circles and arrows will be delighted by the tables on pp. 176-86.

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