

Strange People—Familiar Faces A Portrait of Universality

Review of Paul Ekman, *The Face of Man: Expressions of Universal Emotions in a New Guinea Village*. New York, NY: Garland STPM, 1980.

Ever since the tower of Babel, human beings have been searching for a universal language. They have often searched within idioms designed to give voice to the common human condition, for example in the arts. But alas, it is disheartening to discover Africans who grew up with the pentatonic scale finding the white keys of 'our' piano far from melodic—some too sharp, some too flat. Or again, when attempting to express in English truths about the human condition rendered by a German poet, one confronts agonising, Heisenberg-like choices: One can preserve the rhythm, tone and 'voice' of the poem or express its nuances of metaphoric meaning. To the extent one does the one, one loses the other. God could not have chosen a better punishment. Important, even universal, understandings seemed to depend on the existence of congruences between arbitrary sign systems.

The language of the body has been no more successful in revealing a basis for culture-free communication. In particular, many prominent social scientists have come to accept that 'what is shown on the face is written there by culture.' Given this context, Ekman and his colleagues appeared with what may be among the most remarkable findings in the last few decades. Armed with a theory linking facial expressions to emotion, and concentrating only on the 'dictionary' meaning of emotional expressions (that is, their meaning as judged in isolation), Ekman showed that certain

links between facial expressions and emotions were universal: The same face that looks 'sad' to an American college student also is judged 'sad' by a preliterate native of New Guinea.

The Face of Man is Ekman's second attempt to introduce these findings and their significance to the general public. And in that endeavour, this volume succeeds admirably. The core of the book is a series of candid, still photos of the faces of the South Fore, a preliterate, visually isolated culture of New Guinea. Nine types of facial expression are represented, each believed to be universal. Just looking at the photos is itself a powerful demonstration that Ekman must be right. One finds oneself 'knowing' in detail what these faces mean in a way that is unlikely if they represented some foreign system of communication. The photos are engaging on purely artistic grounds and Ekman, who took the photos, interprets them for the reader like a chess master commenting on the particulars of a game. Using his own findings, knowledge of context, and ethnographic common sense, he indicates what aspects of the pictures convey universal, emotional meaning, and what aspects are culturally specific, interesting or just plain mysterious.

However the Marxists among us might immediately detect reification at the sight of an 'expert' telling us what our facial expressions mean. And here, indeed, lies the book's main danger.

General readers may misinterpret it along two familiar lines. They may decide that facial expression of emotion constitutes a universal language, in the common sense use of the term, 'language.' But, in terms of the sort of thing anthropologists and ethnographers mean by 'meaning,' the meanings of emotional expressions are not universal. Their interpretation in natural, cultural situations, by both observers and actors, varies considerably with culture, situation and individual. Ekman's meanings, which he calls the emotion 'expressed' by the face, are very special: indexically coded, biologically based ones. The faces he uses in his experiments are also special. They exhibit patterns of muscle firings believed to be physiologically linked to specific emotions. This selection is not surprising, given the interesting fact that Ekman's own system for describing facial action is production based, not recognition based. That is, one face is different than another for Ekman, if it is produced differently by the facial musculature, not if it is recognised as different by observers.

Thus, more sophisticated and/or prejudiced readers may react in disbelief. Yet another social scientist has managed to portray the richness, diversity and intricacy of cultural interpretation as somehow less basic and natural than biology. Perhaps there are certain physiological links between emotion and facial muscles. But if one concentrates on recognition rather than production, Ekman's findings dim in importance. His special faces and their accompanying special modes of interpretation probably occur rarely in the daily life of most cultures. What possible significance can they have in helping us understand the interpretation of faces moving in time, within complex social contexts?

An answer to this question, a controversial one, is suggested by what appears to be a major organising metaphor for the first chapter of the book. Universal facial expressions of emotion can be thought of as basic 'themes' upon which layers of culture and individual biography act so as to produce 'variations.' For instance, here and in other work, Ekman distinguishes the emotion a face might 'express' from other meanings the same face might 'mention,' 'illustrate,' 'simulate,' or 'display.' He distinguishes biologically, psychologically, and culturally based systems of meaning and suggests how they interrelate and interact. In this first chapter he describes the universalist-culturalist controversy, explains how his theory resolves seemingly contradictory findings from both sides, and tells his own story like an intellectual adventure with a happy ending: the settling of a major research issue. The book also contains, at the insistence of the publisher, a more detailed review of research on the face designed for academic readers. Its inclusion was probably a mistake since its narrative style is not suited to the book's intended audience.

In sum, *The Face of Man* is a provocative book that raises complex issues which, given the book's intentions, may be beyond its own scope to satisfactorily resolve.