“Being Precise About Vague and Incomplete Knowledge: Realism and Indeterminacy in Fieldwork.”

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Ethnography is under constant pressure to prove itself “scientific.” Herzfeld will argue, however, that this is poor science – that the recognition that many phenomena are vague, imprecise, or unclear even for local informants is an important part of what we should be describing. Using examples from his fieldwork in Greece, Italy, and Thailand, he will suggest that sometimes the evocative power of well-written prose can offer a better approximation to experienced reality than any formal analysis, and that it is incumbent on social and cultural anthropologists to defend this approach against the distortions of scientific rhetoric.

Michael Herzfeld is Ernest E. Monrad Research Professor of the Social Sciences in the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University, where he has taught since 1991. He founded and served as the first Director of the Asia Center’s Thai Studies Program. He is also IIAS Visiting Professor of Critical Heritage Studies at the University of Leiden (and Senior Advisor to the Critical Heritage Studies Initiative of the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden); Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne; and Visiting Professor and Chang Jiang (Yangtze River) Scholar at Shanghai International Studies University (2015-17).

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