

# Relative ontologies: things as concepts

Antropoteorie, 24. 4. 2019

# Symmetrical anthropology

- Ontological turn is one realisation of broader trend of **symmetrical anthropology**
- **symmetrical anthropology**: Term used for first time by Latour (1991), symmetry as methodological concept in STS
- Critique of anthropocentric character of anthropology, interest in non-human; belief that humans are shaped also by forces other than human
- Non-human is an agent other than human being – animal, plant, fungi, bacteria, material thing
- **Multispecies anthropology**: studies contact zones between *Homo sapiens* and other beings generating mutual ecologies
- Dona Haraway 2008: *When Species meet*
- Eduardo Kohn 2013: *When Forests think*

# Ontological turn

- Reaction to **social constructivism and postmodern anthropology** (writing culture)

Anthropologists study and interpret cultural representation of reality. If we want to describe differences (the main task of anthropology) we study cultures as differing perspectives to one, objective and universal reality: **'one world, many worldviews' – multiculturalism**

## **Inspirations:**

1. Latour

2. Deleuze, Guattari -> E. Viveiro de Castro and Perspectivism of Amerindians

# Latour

*Laboratory Life: the Social Construction of Scientific Facts* 1979

- objects of scientific study are *socially constructed* within the laboratory
- scientific activity as a system of beliefs and culturally specific practices—science is reconstructed not as a procedure or as a set of principles but as a culture

# Latour - ANT

*We Have Never Been Modern, 1991*

- Modernity makes a dualistic distinction between nature and society. However, modernist distinction between nature and culture never really existed. **Purification**: an endeavor to keep nature and society; objects and subjects; politics, science and religion separated.
- Reality of the world consists of **Hybridity**: mixing of human and non-human agents, of politics, science and religion, we can not recognize separate elements
- His concept of agency is a strategy against purification

# Perspectivism of Amerindians

**E. Viveiro de Castro: Cannibal Metaphysics, 2014; The relative Native: Essays on Indegenous Conceptual Worlds, 2015**

- Difference does not consist of different understandings (representations) of world, but in participation in various realities
- We do not have one world and multiple worldviews, we have many worlds and one epistemology – multinaturalism
- “supposes a constant epistemology and various ontologies, the same representations and other objects, a single meaning and multiple referents” (2004: 6).
- Question what exists

# Holbraad: Thinking through things

## **Thinking through things**

What thing is is ontologically arbitrary, not only culturally. There is not one world and various cultural representations of this world, there are various worlds we have to discover:

„The mission, then, is to give a genuine voice to difference that goes beyond our ontological understandings; to insist on taking it only on its own terms“

# Holbraad: Thinking through things

Difference between people and things is ontologically arbitrary  
Rozdiel medzi ľuďmi a vecami je ontologicky arbitrárny – we have to free our analysis from ontological determinism and approach things only heuristically, not analytically.

The thing as an empty vessel we will fill with ethnography-> Question is what thing is, not what thing mean

Concept = thing

“there are no points of view *onto* things, things and beings are the points of view *themselves*” (2007: 11).