

# 54 Relativism

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## The Import-Export System of the Two Great Divides

[...] 'We Westerners are absolutely different from others' – such is the moderns' victory cry, or protracted lament. The Great Divide between Us – Occidentals – and Them – everyone else, from the China seas to the Yucatan, from the Inuit to the Tasmanian aborigines – has not ceased to obsess us. Whatever they do, Westerners bring history along with them in the hulls of their caravels and their gunboats, in the cylinders of their telescopes and the pistons of their immunizing syringes. They bear this white man's burden sometimes as an exalting challenge, sometimes as a tragedy, but always as a destiny. They do not claim merely that they differ from others as the Sioux differ from the Algonquins, or the Baoules from the Lapps, but that they differ radically, absolutely, to the extent that Westerners can be lined up on one side and all the cultures on the other, since the latter all have in common the fact that they are precisely cultures among others. In Westerners' eyes the West, and the West alone, is not a culture, not merely a culture.

From *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 97–106, 146, 148–53.

Why does the West see itself this way? Why would the West and only the West not be a culture? In order to understand the Great Divide between Us and Them, we have to go back to that other Great Divide between humans and nonhumans that I defined above. In effect, *the first is the exportation of the second*. We Westerners cannot be one culture among others, since we also mobilize Nature. We do not mobilize an image or a symbolic representation of Nature, the way the other societies do, but Nature as it is, or at least as it is known to the sciences – which remain in the background, unstudied, unstudyable, miraculously conflated with Nature itself. Thus at the heart of the question of relativism we find the question of science. If Westerners had been content with trading and conquering, looting and dominating, they would not distinguish themselves radically from other tradespeople and conquerors. But no, they invented science, an activity totally distinct from conquest and trade, politics and morality.

Even those who have tried, in the name of cultural relativism, to defend the continuity of cultures without ordering them in a progressive series, and without isolating them in their separate prisons

(Lévi-Strauss, [1952] 1987), think they can do this only by bringing them as close as possible to the sciences.

'We have had to wait until the middle of this century', writes Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*, 'for the crossing of long separated paths: that which arrives at the physical world by the detour of communication [the savage mind], and that which, as we have recently come to know, arrives at the world of communication by the detour of the physical [modern science]' (Lévi-Strauss, [1962] 1966, p. 269).

The false antimony between logical and prelogical mentality was surmounted at the same time. The savage mind is as logical in the same sense and the same fashion as ours, though as our own is only when it is applied to knowledge of a universe in which it recognizes physical and semantic properties simultaneously... It will be objected that there remains a major difference between the thought of primitives and our own: Information Theory is concerned with genuine messages whereas primitives mistake mere manifestations of physical determinism for messages... In treating the sensible properties of the animal and plant kingdoms as if they were the elements of a message, and in discovering "signatures" – and so signs – in them, men [those with savage minds] have made mistakes of identification: the meaningful element was not always the one they supposed. But, without perfected instruments which would have permitted them to place it where it most often is – namely, at the microscopic level – they already discerned 'as through a glass darkly' principles of interpretation whose heuristic value and accordance with reality have been revealed to us only through very recent inventions: telecommunications, computers and electron microscopes. (Lévi-Strauss, [1962] 1966, p. 268)

Lévi-Strauss, a generous defence lawyer, imagines no mitigating circumstances other than making his clients look as much like scientists as possible! If primitive peoples do not differ from us as much as we think, it is because they anticipate the newest conquests of information theory, molecular biology and physics, but with inadequate instruments and 'errors of identification'. The very sciences that are used for this promotion are now off limits. Conceived in the fashion of epistemology, these sciences remain objective and external, quasi-objects purged

of their networks. Give the primitives a microscope, and they will think exactly as we do. Is there a better way to finish off those one wants to save from condemnation? For Lévi-Strauss (as for Canguilhem, Lyotard, Girard, Derrida, and the majority of French intellectuals), this new scientific knowledge lies entirely outside culture. It is the transcendence of science – conflated with Nature – that makes it possible to relativize all cultures, theirs and ours alike – with the one caveat, of course, that it is precisely our culture, not theirs, that is constructed through biology, electronic microscopes and telecommunication networks... The abyss that was to supposed to be narrowing opens up again.

Somewhere in our societies, and in ours alone, an unheard-of transcendence has manifested itself: Nature as it is, ahuman, sometimes inhuman, always extrahuman. Since this event occurred – whether one situates it in Greek mathematics, Italian physics, German chemistry, American nuclear engineering or Belgian thermodynamics – there has been a total asymmetry between the cultures that took Nature into account and those that took into account only their own culture or the distorted versions that they might have of matter. Those who invent sciences and discover physical determinisms never deal exclusively with human beings, except by accident. The others have only representations of Nature that are more or less disturbed or coded by the cultural preoccupations of the humans that occupy them fully and fall only by chance – 'as through a glass darkly' – on things as they are.

So the Internal Great Divide accounts for the External Great Divide: we are the only ones who differentiate absolutely between Nature and Culture, between Science and Society, whereas in our eyes all the others – whether they are Chinese or Amerindian, Azande or Barouya – cannot really separate what is knowledge from what is Society, what is sign from what is thing, what comes from Nature as it is from what their cultures require. Whatever they do, however adapted, regulated and functional they may be, they will always remain blinded by this confusion; they are prisoners of the social and of language alike. Whatever we do, however criminal, however imperialistic we may be, we escape from the prison of the social or of language to gain access to things themselves through a providential exit gate, that of

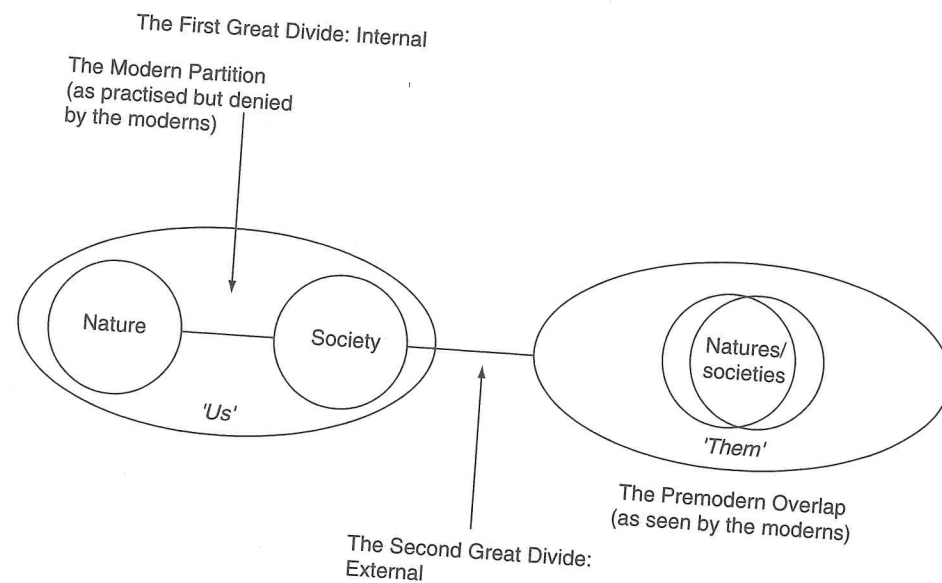


Figure 54.1 The two Great Divides

scientific knowledge. The internal partition between humans and nonhumans defines a second partition – an external one this time – through which the moderns have set themselves apart from the pre-moderns. For Them, Nature and Society, signs and things, are virtually coextensive. For Us they should never be. Even though we might still recognize in our own societies some fuzzy areas in madness, children, animals, popular culture and women's bodies (Haraway, 1989), we believe our duty is to extirpate ourselves from those horrible mixtures as forcibly as possible by no longer confusing what pertains to mere social preoccupations and what pertains to the real nature of things.

### Anthropology Comes Home from the Tropics

When anthropology comes home from the tropics in order to rejoin the anthropology of the modern world that is ready and waiting, it does so at first with caution, not to say with pusillanimity. At first,

it thinks it can apply its methods only when Westerners mix up signs and things the way savage thought does. It will therefore look for what most resembles its traditional terrains as defined by the External Great Divide. To be sure, it has to sacrifice exoticism, but not at great cost, since anthropology maintains its critical distance by studying only the margins and fractures of rationality, or the realms beyond rationality. Popular medicine, witchcraft in the Bocage (Favret-Saada, 1980), peasant life in the shadow of nuclear power plants (Zonabend, 1989), the representations ordinary people have of technical risks (Douglas, 1983) – all these can be excellent field study topics, because the question of Nature – that is, of science – is not yet raised.

However, the great repatriation cannot stop there. In fact, by sacrificing exoticism, the ethnologist loses what constituted the very originality of her research as opposed to the scattered studies of sociologists, economists, psychologists or historians. In the tropics, the anthropologist did not settle for studying the margins of other cultures (Geertz, 1971). If she remained marginal by vocation and method, and out of necessity, she nevertheless claimed to be reconstituting the centre of those cultures: their belief

system, their technologies, their ethno-sciences, their power plays, their economies – in short, the totality of their existence (Mauss, [1923] 1967). If she comes back home but limits herself to studying the marginal aspects of her own culture, she loses all the hard-won advantages of anthropology. For example Marc Augé when he resided among the lagoon-dwellers of the Ivory Coast, sought to understand the entire social phenomenon revealed by sorcery (Augé, 1975). His marginality did not hinder him from grasping the full social fabric of Alladian culture. But back at home he has limited himself to studying the most superficial aspects of the metro (Augé, 1986), interpreting some graffiti on the walls of subway corridors, intimidated this time by the evidence of his own marginality in the face of Western economics, technologies and science. A symmetrical Marc Augé would have studied the sociotechnological network of the metro itself: its engineers as well as its drivers, its directors and its clients, the employer-State, the whole shebang – simply doing at home what he had always done elsewhere. Western ethnologists cannot limit themselves to the periphery; otherwise, still asymmetrical, they would show boldness toward others, timidity toward themselves. Back home anthropology need not become the marginal discipline of the margins, picking up the crumbs that fall from the other disciplines' banquet table.

In order to achieve such freedom of movement and tone, however, one has to be able to view the two Great Divides in the same way, and consider them both as one particular definition of our world and its relationships with the others. Now these Divides do not define us any better than they define others; they are no more an instrument of knowledge than is the Constitution alone, or modern temporality alone [...]. To become symmetrical, anthropology needs a complete overhaul and intellectual retooling so that it can get around both Divides at once by believing neither in the radical distinction between humans and nonhumans at home, nor in the total overlap of knowledge and society elsewhere.

Let us imagine an ethnologist who goes out to the tropics and takes along with her the Internal Great Divide. In her eyes, the people she studies continually confuse knowledge of the world – which the

investigator, as a good scientific Westerner, possesses as her birthright – and the requirements of social functioning. The tribe that greets her thus has only one vision of the world, only one representation of Nature. To go back to the expression Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim made famous, this tribe projects its own social categories on to Nature (Durkheim and Mauss, [1903] 1967; Haudricourt, 1962). When our ethnologist explains to her informers that they must be more careful to separate the world as it is from the social representation they provide for it, they are scandalized or nonplussed. The ethnologist sees in their rage and their misunderstanding the very proof of their premodern obsession. The dualism in which she lives – humans on one side, nonhumans on the other, signs over here, things over there – is intolerable to them. For social reasons, our ethnologist concludes, this culture requires a monist attitude. 'We traffic in ideas; [the savage mind] hoards them up' (Lévi-Strauss, [1962] 1966, p.267).

But let us suppose now that our ethnologist returns to her homeland and tries to dissolve the Internal Great Divide. And let us suppose that through a series of happy accidents she sets out to analyze one tribe among others – for example, scientific researchers or engineers (Knorr-Cetina, 1992). The situation turns out to be reversed, because now she applies the lessons of monism she thinks she has learned from her earlier experience. Her tribe of scientists claims that in the end they are completely separating their knowledge of the world from the necessities of politics and morality (Tra-week, 1988). In the observer's eyes, however, this separation is never very visible, or is itself only the by-product of a much more mixed activity, some tinkering in and out of the laboratory. Her informers claim that they have access to Nature, but the ethnographer sees perfectly well that they have access only to a vision, a representation of Nature that she herself cannot distinguish neatly from politics and social interests (Pickering, 1980). This tribe, like the earlier one, projects its own social categories on to Nature; what is new is that it pretends it has not done so. When the ethnologist explains to her informers that they cannot separate Nature from the social representation they have formed of it, they are scandalized or nonplussed. Our ethnologist sees in their rage and incomprehension the very proof of

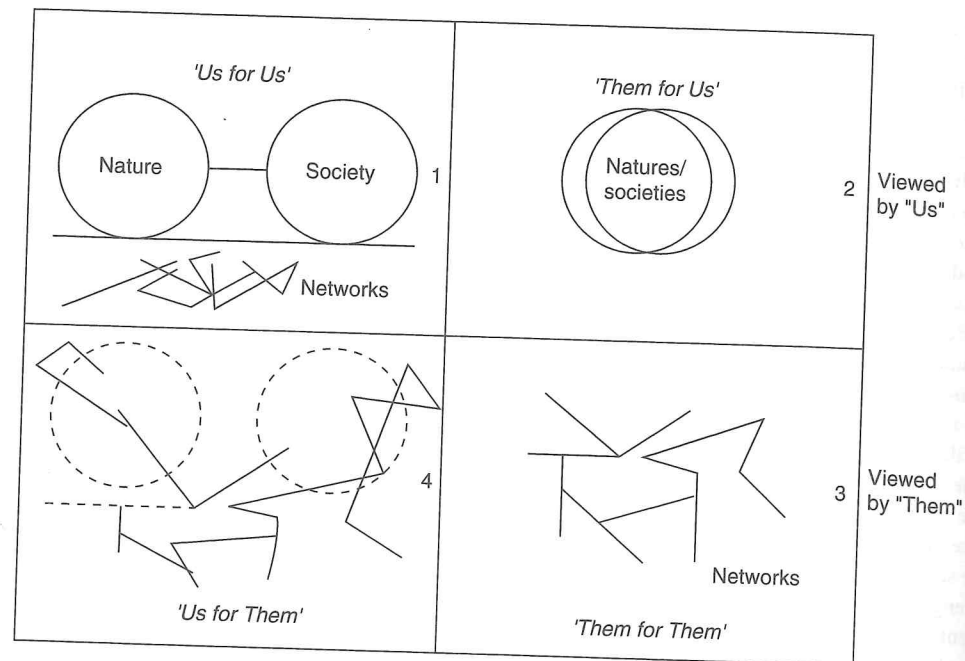


Figure 54.2 Them and Us

their modern obsession. The monism in which she now lives – humans are always mixed up with nonhumans – is intolerable to them. For social reasons, our ethnologist concludes, Western scientists require a dualist attitude.

However, her double conclusion is incorrect, for she has not really heard what her informers were saying. The goal of anthropology is not to scandalize twice over, or to provoke incomprehension twice in a row: the first time by exporting the Internal Great Divide and imposing dualism on cultures that reject it; the second time by cancelling the External Great Divide and imposing monism on a culture, our own – that rejects it absolutely. Symmetrical anthropology must realize that the two Great Divides do not describe reality – our own as well as that of others – but define the particular way Westerners had of establishing their relations with others as long as they felt modern. ‘We’, however, do not distinguish between Nature and Society more than ‘They’ make them overlap. If we take into account the networks that we allow to proliferate beneath the official part of our Constitution they look a lot like

the networks in which ‘They’ say they live. Premoderns are said never to distinguish between signs and things, but neither do ‘We’ (figure 54.2.3 and the bottom of 54.2.1 look very much alike). If, through an acrobatic thought experiment, we could go further and ask ‘Them’ to try to map on to their own networks our strange obsession with dichotomies and to try to imagine, in their own terms, what it could mean to have a pure Nature and a pure Society they would draw, with extreme difficulty, a provisional map in which Nature and Society would barely escape from the networks (figure 54.2.4). But what does this picture represent, this picture in which Nature and Culture appear to be redistributed among the networks and to escape from them only fuzzily as if in dotted lines? It is exactly our world as we now see it through nonmodern eyes! It is exactly the picture I have tried to offer from the beginning, in which the upper and lower halves of the Constitution gradually merge. Premoderns are like us. Once they are considered symmetrically, they might offer a better analysis of the Westerners than the modernist anthropology offered of the premoderns! Or, more

exactly, we can now drop entirely the ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ dichotomy, and even the distinction between moderns and premoderns. We have both always built communities of natures and societies. There is only one, symmetrical, anthropology.

### There Are No Cultures

Let us suppose that anthropology, having come home from the tropics, sets out to retool itself by occupying a triply symmetrical position. It uses the same terms to explain truths and errors (this is the first principle of symmetry); it studies the production of humans and nonhumans simultaneously (this is the principle of generalized symmetry); finally, it refrains from making any *a priori* declarations as to what might distinguish Westerners from Others. To be sure, it loses exoticism, but it gains new fields of study that allow it to analyze the central mechanism of all collectives, including the ones to which Westerners belong. It loses its exclusive attachment to cultures alone – or to cultural dimensions alone – but it gains a priceless acquisition, natures. The two positions I have been staking out since the beginning of this essay – the one the ethnologist is now occupying effortlessly, and the one the analyst of the sciences was striving toward with great difficulty – can now be superimposed. Network analysis extends a hand to anthropology, and offers it the job that has been ready and waiting.

The question of relativism is already becoming less difficult. If science as conceived along the epistemologists’ lines made the problem insoluble, it suffices, as is often the case, to change the conception of scientific practices in order to dispel the artificial difficulties. What reason complicates, networks explicate. It is the peculiar trait of Westerners that they have imposed, by their official Constitution, the total separation of humans and nonhumans – the Internal Great Divide – and have thereby artificially created the scandal of the others. ‘How can one be a Persian?’ How can one not establish a radical difference between universal Nature and relative culture? But *the very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off.*

Cultures – different or universal – do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures, and these offer the only possible basis for comparison. As soon as we take practices of mediation as well as practices of purification into account, we discover that the moderns do not separate humans from nonhumans any more than the ‘others’ totally superimpose signs and things.

I can now compare the forms of relativism according to whether they do or do not take into account the construction of natures as well. Absolute relativism presupposes cultures that are separate and incommensurable and cannot be ordered in any hierarchy; there is no use talking about it, since it brackets off Nature. As for cultural relativism, which is more subtle, Nature comes into play, but in order to exist it does not presuppose any scientific work, any society, any construction, any mobilization, any network. It is Nature revisited and corrected by epistemology, for which scientific practice still remains off camera, *hors champ*. Within this tradition, the cultures are thus distributed as so many more or less accurate viewpoints on that unique Nature. Certain societies see it ‘as through a glass darkly’, others see it through thick fog, still others under clear skies. Rationalists will insist on the common aspects of all these viewpoints; relativists will insist on the irresistible distortion that social structures impose on all perception. The former will be undone if it can be shown that cultures do not superimpose their categories; the latter will lose ground if it can be proved that the categories are superimposed (Hollis and Lukes, 1982; Wilson, 1970).

In practice, however, as soon as Nature comes into play without being attached to a particular culture, a third model is always secretly used: a type of universalism that I would call ‘particular’. One society – and it is always the Western one – defines the general framework of Nature with respect to which the others are situated. This is Lévi-Strauss’s solution: he distinguishes Western society, which has a specific interpretation of Nature, from that Nature itself, miraculously known to our society. The first half of the argument allows for modest relativism (we are just one interpretation among others), but the second permits the surreptitious return of arrogant universalism – we remain

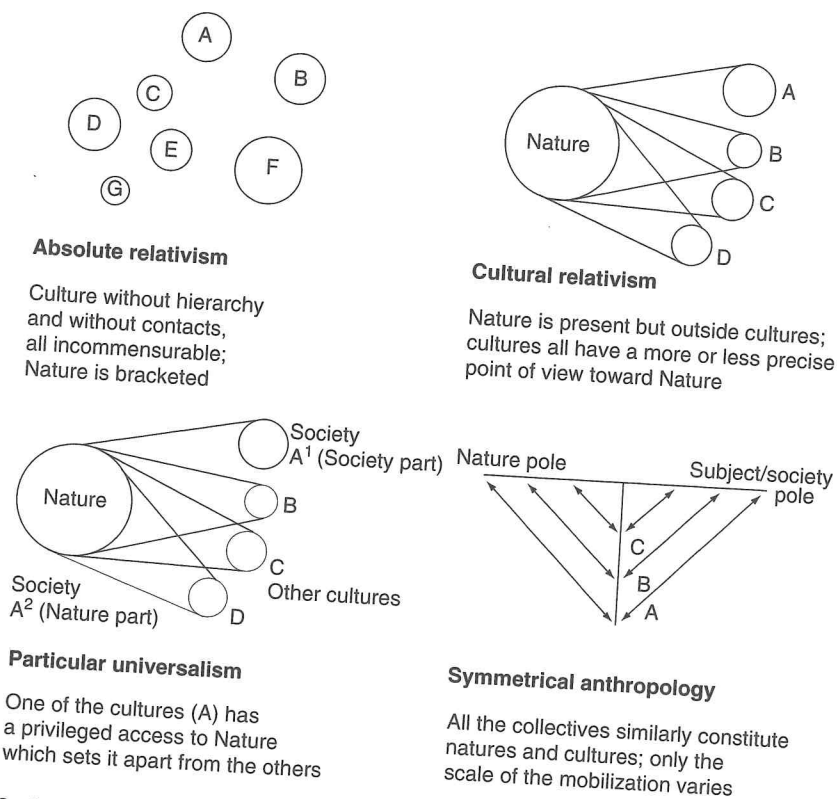


Figure 54.3 Relativism and universalism

absolutely different. In Lévi-Strauss's eyes, however, there is no contradiction between the two halves, precisely because our Constitution, and it alone, allows us to distinguish society A<sup>1</sup>, made up of humans, from society A<sup>2</sup>, composed of nonhumans but forever removed from the first one! The contradiction stands out today only in the eyes of symmetrical anthropology. This latter model is the common stock of the other two, whatever the relativists (who never relativize anything but cultures) may say.

The relativists have never been convincing on the subject of the equality of cultures, since they limit their consideration precisely to cultures. And Nature? According to them, it is the same for all, since universal science defines it. In order to get out of this contradiction, they then either have to limit all peoples to a representation of the world by locking

them up for ever in the prison of their own societies or, conversely, they have to reduce all scientific results to products of local and contingent social constructions in order to deny science any universality. But to imagine billions of people imprisoned in distorted views of the world since the beginning of time is as difficult as it is to imagine neutrinos and quasars, DNA and universal gravitation, as Texan, British or Burgundian social productions. The two responses are equally absurd, and that is why the great debates over relativism never lead anywhere. *It is as impossible to universalize nature as it is to reduce it to the narrow framework of cultural relativism alone.*

The solution appears along with the dissolution of the artifact of cultures. All natures-cultures are similar in that they simultaneously construct

humans, divinities and nonhumans. None of them inhabits a world of signs or symbols arbitrarily imposed on an external Nature known to us alone. None of them – and especially not our own – lives in a world of things. All of them sort out what will bear signs and what will not. If there is one thing we all do, it is surely that we construct both our human collectives and the nonhumans that surround them. In constituting their collectives, some mobilize ancestors, lions, fixed stars, and the coagulated blood of sacrifice; in constructing ours, we mobilize genetics, zoology, cosmology and hæmatology. 'But those are sciences!' the moderns will exclaim, horrified at this confusion. 'They have to escape the representations of society to the greatest possible extent!' Yet the presence of the sciences does not suffice to break the symmetry; such is the discovery of comparative anthropology. From cultural relativism we move on to 'natural' relativism. The first led to absurdities; the second will allow us to fall back on common sense.

[...]

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