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Paris, 30 January

Who said intellectual life in Paris was dead? Who said anthropology was no longer lively and attractive? Here we are, on a cold morning in January, in a room packed with people from various disciplines and several countries eager to hear a debate between two of the best and brightest anthropologists.¹ The rumour had circulated through chat rooms and cafés: after years of alluding in private or in print to their disagreements, they had at last agreed to air them in public. 'It will be rough,' I had been told; 'there will be blood.' In fact, rather than the cockfight some had anticipated, the tiny room in the Rue Suger witnessed a *disputatio*, much like those that must have taken place between earnest scholars here, in the heart of the Latin Quarter, for more than eight centuries.

Although the two had known each other for 25 years, they had decided to begin their *disputatio* by each reminding the audience of the important impact of the other's work on their own discoveries.

Philippe Descola acknowledged first how much he had learned from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro when he was trying to extirpate himself from the 'nature versus culture' binarism by reinventing the then outdated notion of 'animism' to make sense of alternative modes of relation between humans and non-humans. Viveiros had proposed the term 'perspectivism' for a mode that could not possibly hold inside the narrow strictures of nature versus culture, since for the Indians he was studying, human culture is what binds all beings together – animals and plants included – whereas they are divided by their different natures, that is, their bodies (Viveiros 1992).

This is why, while the theologians in Valladolid were debating whether or not Indians had a soul, those same Indians, on the other side of the Atlantic, were experimenting on the conquistadors by drowning them to see whether they would rot – a nice way of determining that they did indeed have a body; that they had a soul was not in question. This famous example of symmetric anthropology led Lévi-Strauss to note, somewhat tongue in cheek, that the Spaniards might have been strong in the social sciences but the Indians had been conducting their research according to the protocol of the natural sciences.

Descola's four modes of relation

Descola then explained how his new definition of animism could be used to distinguish 'naturalism' – the view most often taken to be the default position of Western thought – from 'animism'. While 'naturalists' draw similarities between entities on the basis of physical traits and distinguish them on the basis of mental or spiritual characteristics, 'animism' takes the opposite position, holding that all entities are similar in terms of their spiritual features, but differ radically by virtue of the sort of body they are endowed with.

This was a breakthrough for Descola, since it meant that the 'nature versus culture' divide no longer constituted the inevitable background adopted by the profession as a whole, but only one of the ways that 'naturalists' had of establishing their relations with other entities. Nature had shifted from being a resource to become a topic. Needless to say, this discovery was not lost on those of us in the neighbouring field of science studies who were studying, historically or sociologically, how the 'naturalists' managed their relations with non-humans.

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Fig. 1. Tupinamba Indians attacked by demons, c.1562, engraving by Théodore de Bry, from Jean de Léry, *Navigatio in Brasiliam Americae (detail)*, Musée de la Marine, Paris.



It was then possible for Descola, as he explained, to add to this pair of contrasting rapports another pair in which the relations between humans and non-humans were either similar on both sides (what he called ‘totemism’) or different on the two sides (a system he termed ‘analogism’). Rather than covering the globe with a single mode of relations between humans and non-humans which then served as a background for detecting ‘cultural’ variations among many peoples, this background itself had become the object of careful enquiry. People differ not only in their culture but also in their nature, or rather, in the way they construct relations between humans and non-humans. Descola was able to achieve what neither modernists nor post-modernists had managed: a world free of the spurious unification of a naturalist mode of thought.

Gone was the imperialist universality of the ‘naturalists’, but a new universality was still possible, one that allowed careful structural relations to be established between the four ways of building collectives. Descola’s big project was then to reinvent a new form of universality for anthropology, but this time a ‘relative’, or rather, ‘relativist’ universality, which he developed in his book *Par delà nature et culture* (2005). In his view, Viveiros was more intent on ever deeper exploration of just one of the local contrasts that he, Descola, had tried to contrast with a number of others by casting his net more widely.

Two perspectives on perspectivism

Although they have been friends for a quarter of a century, no two personalities could be more different. After the velvet undertone of Descola’s presentation, Viveiros spoke in brief aphoristic forays, waging a sort of *Blitzkrieg* on all fronts in order to demonstrate that he too wanted to reach for a new form of universality, but one even more radical. Perspectivism, in his view, should not be regarded as a simple category within Descola’s typology, but rather as a bomb with the potential to explode the whole implicit philosophy so dominant in most ethnographers’ interpretations of their material. If there is one approach that is totally anti-perspectivist, it is the very notion of a type within a category, an idea that can only occur to those Viveiros calls ‘republican anthropologists’.

As Viveiros explained, perspectivism has become something of a fashion in Amazonian circles, but this fashion conceals a much more troublesome concept, that of ‘multi-naturalism’. Whereas hard and soft scientists alike agree on the notion that there is only one nature but many cultures, Viveiros wants to push Amazonian thought (which is not, he insists, the ‘*pensée sauvage*’ that Lévi-Strauss implied, but a fully domesticated and highly elaborated philosophy) to try to see what the whole world would look like if all its inhabitants had the same culture but many different natures. The last thing Viveiros wants is for the Amerindian struggle against Western philosophy to become just another curio in the vast cabinet of curiosities that he accuses Descola of seeking to build. Descola, he contended, is an ‘analogist’ – that is, someone who is possessed by the careful and almost obsessive accumulation and classification of small differences in order to retain a sense of cosmic order in the face of the constant invasion of threatening differences.

Note the irony here – and the tension and attention in the room increased at this point: Viveiros was not accusing Descola of structuralism (a critique that has often been levelled at his wonderful book), since structuralism, as Lévi-Strauss has it, is on the contrary ‘an Amerindian existentialism’, or rather ‘the structural transformation of Amerindian thought’ – as if Lévi-Strauss were the guide, or rather the shaman who allowed Indian perspectivism to be transported into Western thought in order to destroy it from the inside, through a sort of reverse cannibalism.

Lévi-Strauss, far from being the cold, rationalist cataloguer of discrete contrasted myths, had learned to dream and drift like the Indians, except that he dreamed and drifted through the medium of card indexes and finely turned paragraphs. But what Viveiros criticized was that Descola risks rendering the shift from one type of thought to another ‘too easy’, as if the bomb he, Viveiros, had wanted to place under Western philosophy had been defused. If we allow our thought to hook into Amerindian alternative logic, the whole notion of Kantian ideals, so pervasive in social science, has to go.

To which Descola replied that he was interested not in Western thought but in the thought of others; Viveiros responded that it was his way of being ‘interested’ that was the problem.

Decolonizing thought

What is clear is that this debate destroys the notion of nature as an overarching concept covering the globe, to which anthropologists have the rather sad and limited duty of adding whatever is left of differences under the tired old notion of ‘culture’. Imagine what debates between ‘physical’ and ‘cultural’ anthropologists might look like once the notion of multi-naturalism is taken into account. Descola, after all, holds the first chair of ‘anthropology of nature’ at the prestigious Collège de France, and I have always wondered how his colleagues in the natural sciences are able to teach their own courses near what for them should be a potent source of radioactive material. Viveiros’ concern that his bomb has been defused may be off the mark: a bright new period of flourishing opens for (ex-physical and ex-cultural) anthropology now that nature has shifted from being a resource to become a highly contested topic, just at the time, by chance, when ecological crisis – a topic of great political concern for Viveiros in Brazil – has reopened the debate that ‘naturalism’ had tried prematurely to close.

But what is even more rewarding to see in such a *disputatio* is how much we have moved from the modernist and then post-modernist predicament. Of course, the search for a common world is immensely more complex now that so many radically different modes of inhabiting the earth have been freed to deploy themselves. But on the other hand, the task of composing a world that is not yet common is clearly opened to anthropologists, a task that is as big, as serious and as rewarding as anything they have had to tackle in the past. Viveiros pointed to this in his answer to a question from the audience, using a somewhat Trotskyite aphorism: ‘Anthropology is the theory and practice of permanent decolonization’. When he added that ‘anthropology today is largely decolonized, but its theory is not yet decolonizing enough’, some of us in the room had the feeling that, if this debate is any indication, we might finally be getting there. ●

1. ‘Perspectivism and animism’: Debate between Philippe Descola (Collège de France) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (National Museum of Rio de Janeiro). Maison Suger, Institute of Advanced Studies, Paris, 30 January 2009.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo 1992. *From the enemy’s point of view: Humanity and divinity in an Amazonian society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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