

The Nature of Culture. Towards a Realist Phenomenology of Material, Animal and Human Nature

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The nice thing about culture is that everyone has it. The Bororo, the Mekeo, the Baktaman, the Katchin, the Nuer and the Taliban have it, but so do IBM, McDonalds and the International Sociological Association.¹ Culture has become a global phenomenon. By this Marilyn Strathern (1995a, b) means that the Euro-American perception of the ubiquitous role of culture in human affairs, typical of cultural anthropology, post-colonial and cultural studies, can be summoned in almost any context and at almost any level of human interaction. To the extent that anthropology puts things in contexts and conceives of culture both as a particularising context and as a generalising metacontext of contexts, anthropology can be understood as an analytical machine for creating and comparing differences, for making incommensurables and providing at the same time a comparative framework for making them commensurable.

Travelling to exotic countries and coming back to their homes and universities, anthropologists import culture and export cultures. Culture may now be everywhere—in the streets and the universities but also on the shelves of your local supermarket—the fact remains that this double conception of culture as a singular *plurale tantum* is in itself most singular.² It is a European invention and one that is not very old. As a concept of philosophical significance, it emerged in Germany in the eighteenth century as a romantic reaction to the universalism of the Enlightenment.³ Like its conceptual counterpart nature, and like alienation, which dialectically thematises the ontological degradation of culture into (second) nature, culture is, as Raymond Williams (1976: 76) has remarked, “one of the two or three most complicated words of the language”.

1. THE NATURE OF CULTURE

In European languages, the word culture is used in at least three different senses, a more philosophical one, an anthropological one, and a common one (Schnädelbach,

2000: 10–19). As opposed to nature (*physis* in Greek, referring to that which grows by itself and exists independently of humans – Aristotle, *Phys.*, II, 1), culture in the broadest sense refers, first of all, to everything that has been created by humans and is socially transmitted and reproduced. Culture, one could say, is everything human, everything which is produced by humans and which cannot be understood by itself. Without humans there is no culture, but without culture there are no humans either. Culture in this encompassing sense refers to the totality of human products that produce humans. Moving from culture in the singular to cultures in plural, we arrive at the second meaning: Culture as a symbolic expression and emanation of the “soul” of a collectivity that differentiates that collectivity from other collectivities and determines their “whole way of life, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep” (Eliot, 1948: 31). Babylonian, Egyptian, Hindu, Arabic, Chinese, European and—why not?—Mancunian, Kwakiutl and Omaha cultures represent so many cultures, so many different ways of world-making, so many different ways of life. Speaking of English culture, the American essayist and poet T.S. Eliot lists Derby Day, Henley Regatta, the Twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the dartboard, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar. Within each of those cultures, culture can, thirdly, refer to a social subsystem, differentiated among others from the political, economic and juridical subsystems, that is internally differentiated into several fields and subfields of cultural production, from museums, arts and literature to comics and haute couture, to only mention a few of the ones that Bourdieu has investigated. Culture in this sense is that for which there is never enough money.

Culture in singular, as opposed and yet internally related to nature, exists only in plural. The conception of culture as a *plurale tantum*, as one amongst other cultures and as a subsystem of the social system, is typically modern. Herodotos, Protagoras and other sophists were obviously aware of the existence of other cultures, but they nevertheless remained ethnocentric and conceived of the “non-Grecians” (Bush Jr.) as barbarians. Although modern cultures have also been prone to exclude the ‘other’, to phrase it mildly, they were also able and willing to consider themselves as barbarians and to question their own superiority.⁴ “The extent to which Western society has historically constituted itself through the denial of the ‘other’ and violent oppression of whole constituencies of the human species is indisputable and today increasingly well documented. So, too, is the process through which it began to question these exclusions, and to open itself to the possibility that these ‘others’ had been illegitimately excluded” (Soper, 1995: 66). In modernity, the recognition of cultures other than one’s own and the understanding of one’s own culture as one culture among others are correlative processes that trigger the reflexivity of culture as such. If there is culture, it is first of all between those that do not share the same culture.

Taking the attitude of the exotic other, seeing one’s own culture through the eyes of the culture of the other leads not only to a relativisation of one’s own

culture and a concomitant opening up to the other cultures in and through a progressive “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer), but also, and perhaps more interestingly, to a methodological self-objectification that estranges and thereby makes one aware of one’s own culture. This methodological self-alienation paves the way to a critical hermeneutics that is able to uncover and make conscious the culturally and historically determined deep symbolic forms that pre-structure our vision of the world and ourselves, and thereby mediate and make possible our being-in-the-world (Kögler, 1992). In any case, awareness and acceptance of multiple cultures induce reflexive processes of cultural self-relativisation and self-objectification that make one become aware of culture as such, and correlatively, of nature as such. This reflexive emergence of the distinction between nature and culture is an epochal cultural event. It grounds the human sciences in general and anthropology in particular, or at least that branch of anthropology that defines itself by its subject matter and proceeds by way of a comparative analysis of culture.⁵

Although pre-modern and modern cultures are both equally caught up in “the symbolical nets that they have spun themselves” (Cassirer-Geertz), the difference between “us” and “them” is that “we” are able reflexively to know that we are spinning the threads of reality whereas “they” are not aware of what they do, or at least not on this metalevel. Modern cultures are by definition reflexive cultures. They do not simply live in cultural worlds like fish in water, but they know that they do so. They not only know that the world they live in is their own product, but they also know that it is a contingent and conventional world that could be different and is amenable to change. In so far as this self-awareness of cultures proceeds from, and presupposes, a demarcation from nature (*phusis*), we can presume that “the concepts of nature and culture are co-original” (Schnädelbach, 2000: 16) and that they are thus constitutive of each other.⁶ Indeed, if we follow the speculative historians, from Hegel and Cassirer to Castoriadis, and link the de-differentiation of nature and culture to the epochal transition from *mythos* to *logos* that marks the coming of age of humanity, we can see that the emergence of the concept of nature is itself a moment in the “disenchantment” of the natural world and the advent of modernity. Nature only comes into existence as an autonomous domain when it is no longer conceived of as a “magical garden”, filled with demons, spirits and other anthropomorphisms, but objectified as an impersonal “mechanism that is submitted to the laws of causality” (Weber, 1922: 564). This scientific objectification of nature is inseparable from the progressive denaturalisation of culture. As a matter of fact, the objectification of nature is itself an important stage in the grand Weberian narrative of the rationalisation of culture and society that characterises the world-historical advent of modernity. In modernity culture is no longer alienated as “second nature”, created and instituted by the finger of God, but is thoroughly demystified and recognised as a human product. Conceived as *nomos*, culture appears to the modern mind as a conventional order of reality that is in principle transformable by humans. Unlike pre-modern cultures that occlude their creative potential by positing a metasocial

or divine foundation of their own constitution, modern cultures are thoroughly reflexive and autonomous. They give themselves their own laws, and to the extent that they know and accept that they do so, they are able to understand the cultural processes of “imaginary institutions” that constitute them as socio-cultural historical formations. History and culture have always existed, but it is only in modern societies that they exist in the reflexive form of “historicity” and “cultur-icity” (to coin a new term).

The difference between nature and culture is not completely unknown to pre-modern cultures, however. According to Lévi-Strauss (1968), this distinction is as universal as the incest taboo. All cultures make a demarcation between nature and culture, the wild and the domestic, or the raw and the cooked, even if their demarcation does not necessarily correspond to ours. But to the extent that pre-modern cultures lack reflexivity and are not aware of the distinction itself, we can paraphrase Bruno Latour (1991) and conclude with some irony that “they have never been modern”.⁷

2. TOWARDS A REALIST PHENOMENOLOGY OF NATURE

What is at issue in the contemporary debates on nature that oppose the realism of the “nature-endorsing” approach of the ecologists to the constructivism of the “nature-sceptical” perspectives of the feminists of the third wave and the sociologists of science (Soper, 1995), is not the nature-culture distinction itself, but the way it is to be drawn, and whether it is to be conceptualised as one of kind or degree. Are we thinking of an absolute distinction between the “ontological regions” of the material world of things and the cultural world of humans, or should we rather conceive of them as “typological regions”? Should we think of an opposition between absolute realms, or of a continuum in which no hard and fast distinctions can be drawn between nature and culture, between things and humans? Or should we perhaps follow the radicalisation of postmodernism-turned-into-post-humanism and ignore the distinction altogether, happily mixing humans and non-humans in a heterogeneous rhizomatic network of “actants” (Latour)?

3. A REALIST THEORY OF NATURE

In an attempt to answer those (admittedly) difficult philosophical questions and to overcome the stalemate of the opposition between naturalists and culturalists, I will seek guidance and inspiration in the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar. With Bhaskar and the realist movement, I start with the distinction between the “transitive” (or epistemic) and the “intransitive” (or ontological) dimension of knowledge (Bhaskar: 1978: 17). Applied to nature, the principle of the existential intransitivity of the objects of knowledge simply states that nature exists independently

of our observations and descriptions of it. Assuming for a moment that humans were to disappear, nature would presumably still exist. While the principle of existential intransitivity affirms that nature really exists “out there”, the principle of the socio-historical transitivity of the knowledge of the objects recognises that nature can only be known under certain descriptions and that those are socially and historically variable.

The whole point of this somewhat scholastic distinction is to foreclose the “epistemic fallacy” which, assuming that statements about being can be reduced to statements about knowledge, erroneously concludes from the fact that nature (“Natur an sich”) can only be known under certain descriptions that those descriptions constitute nature. Collapsed into “nature”, nature becomes culture, while the intransitive or extra-discursive existence of nature is simply elided. The signifier “nature” performatively constructs nature, and at the end of the day the signified is deferred and the referent “exterminated” by discourse. To counter the preposterous “de-ontological” claims of radical constructivism and to bring their practitioners back to their senses (and to common-sense), one should, however, take the risk of being pedant and remind them the elementary lessons of realist epistemology. Even if objects can only be known “to us” under certain descriptions, one is nevertheless not allowed to conclude that the descriptions actually construct the objects themselves. Régis Debray (1998: 267), the founder of “mediation studies”, has correctly remarked that “it does not follow from the fact that the objective world is inseparable from the practical representations that a society has of it that the latter can construct all its objective references. That a map contributes to the formation of a territory does not mean that the territory is the invention of the cartographer”. Indeed, even if mapping and map-making exemplify the ways in which spaces are made presentable and re-presentable in maps, charts, pictures and other inscription devices so that they become available for further exploration, specification, sale, contract, management or any other form of “government” (Latour, 1985, Rose, 1999: 30–37), the defetishisation of the map should not overstep its boundaries. To shore up its political arguments, it should rather recognise the existence of a mappable substrate and analyse how the techniques of mapping construct a political space of government through the enclosure of entities (land, estates, populations, constituencies, etc.).⁸

Once the independent, extra-discursive existence of nature “out there” is recognised and accepted, we can grant the constructivist that there is, and can be, no reference to nature that is independent of discourse—except in discourse.⁹ Provided that we do not interpret the discursive mediation and construction of nature as “nature” (“Natur für uns”) as an epistemological licence for the erasure of nature (“Natur an sich”), we can even accept Judith Butler’s most provocative thesis that the “construction of ‘sex’ as the radically unconstructed” (Butler, 1990: 7) is itself a discursive construction. Sex is, indeed, constructed as “prediscursive”, as nature, prior to culture, but, precisely, through discourse. Discourses of bodies and bodies of discourse intersect in and through reiterative and citational

practices that construct what appears as an unconstructed “outside”. Given that this outside is “not an ‘absolute’ outside, an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse”, but a “constitutive ‘outside’ which can only be thought—when it can—in relation to that discourse” (Butler, 1993: 8), the body doesn’t really matter for Butler, except as the unmarked body that makes the cultural distinction between nature and culture, sex and gender possible.¹⁰

Moreover, to avoid further misunderstandings, it should also be stressed that the distinction between the transitive and the intransitive dimensions of knowledge does not aim to deny the social construction of nature, or its social destruction for that matter. The realist conception of nature only aims to posit the existence of a natural substrate in the physical world that is always already presupposed by the natural sciences and that functions as a transcendental condition of the possible forms of human intervention in nature, from those of the engineer and the transsexual to the lyrical poet and the sociologist of science. With Kate Soper (1995: 155–160), we can indeed distinguish between the realist or “deep” concept of nature and the lay or “surface” concept of nature. The latter is used to refer to empirical or phenomenal nature, i.e. to the ordinary observable features and the directly tangible forms in the environment: the fauna and the flora, the countryside, the landscape, “the nature we have destroyed and polluted and are asked to conserve and preserve” (id., 156). As an object of human destruction or appreciation, nature is always, necessarily and inevitably, a human construct and a social-cultural construction.

Thanks to the distinction between deep and surface nature, we can even accept without any problem the fashionable thesis of the “end of nature” (Giddens and Beck, both in Franklin, 1998). Sociologists and anthropologists of science have convincingly demonstrated in the last decade that the nature on which the scientists are working in their labs, the brains of the rats they are chopping into slices, the genes they are manipulating, are effectively and literally social constructions (Latour and Woolgar, 1978). And so is the landscape we admire. The nature and countryside we love and drive to in our cars on sunny Sunday afternoons is mostly a cultural landscape. In the countryside, nature is mostly agriculture, and quite often the “pure nature” we crave for is a nature that has been transformed by tractors or even artificially reconstructed as nature by bulldozers (Keulartz, 1998). Finally and more subtly, we could also indicate that to see a stretch of nature as a landscape, we have to frame it, see it and constitute it categorically as a landscape (Trom, 2001).

4. REGIONAL ONTOLOGIES

Can we conceive of nature as something that exists independently of culture and at the same time as something that is always subsumed under culture? Can we combine the insight that the nature-culture distinction is universal with the fact

that not all cultures draw it exactly in the same way? To answer that question, let us move from the transcendental realism of Roy Bhaskar to the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Although the idealism of Husserl might seem at first incompatible with the materialism of Bhaskar, one should nevertheless remember that both of them are concerned with a transcendental inquiry into the conditions of possibility of knowledge. Taking the epistemic practices of the natural scientists as the starting point of their epistemological research, Husserl and Bhaskar each attempt in their own way to answer the Kantian question: “How is nature possible?” by reflexively uncovering the a priori conditions of knowledge. If Bhaskar demonstrates that the natural sciences always already and necessarily presuppose the intransitive existence of nature as an uncontroversible fact, Husserl insists for his part that this nature can only be grasped if it is categorically constituted as nature (of a certain kind) in and through the epistemic practices of the scientists.¹¹ By proposing a theory, or perhaps better: a method to describe and analyse in detail the “marvellous correlation between the object of knowledge and the phenomenon of knowledge” (Husserl, 1958: 12), that is the object as it appears to consciousness, Husserl goes further than Bhaskar.¹² Unlike Bhaskar, he not only shows that knowledge of nature necessarily presupposes *that* there is indeed something like nature “out there” (nature as transcendent object of knowledge—“Natur an sich”, to speak like Kant), but he also analyses in detail *how* this nature can be grasped as nature (of a certain kind), that is how the epistemic activities of the subjects constitute nature as an intentional object of a certain kind (nature as phenomenon or immanent object of knowledge—“Natur für uns”). By offering a method for describing in minute detail how the mind can grasp something that exists outside of the mind by constituting it inside the mind as an object of certain kind, he thereby solves an epistemological problem that Bhaskar does not really touch. Inversely, by insisting on the intransitive or transcendent properties of the objects of knowledge, Bhaskar can offer a transcendental index or guideline for the constitutive activities of the mind and act as an ontological safeguard so that the mind cannot constitute the object of knowledge as it pleases, but has to take into account the essential properties of the objects of knowledge. What I want to suggest is that a “cross-reading” of Husserl and Bhaskar indicates the way of a realist phenomenology of nature that is able to describe and account for the correlation between the object and the phenomenon of knowledge.

In a former article, I drew on Husserl’s complicated analysis of the structures of constitution of the material world (the thing-world), the animated world (the animal world) and the spiritual world (the human world) to contest the ontological confusion of things and humans that has become the trademark of actor-network theory (Husserl, 1952, III; see also Landgrebe, 1963).¹³ Going ‘back to the things themselves’ in order to analyse how different phenomena give themselves to consciousness and are intentionally constituted as givens of consciousness, I was claiming that all phenomena, human and non human, have an essence (*eidōs*) that

predetermines what they necessarily must be when they are to be things of a certain kind. This essence can be *a priori* determined through the procedure of “eidetic variation”. By submitting a given phenomenon, say a book, to a process of imaginative variation, we can freely vary the perspectives on the book, introduce other books, which are different from the first one in terms of colour, size, shape, texture, etc., and gain insight into the materially determinate essence of the book that remains invariant and of which any variation represents only a particular instance and possibility. Once grasped intuitively, an essence can be compared and contrasted with other essences at varying levels of generalisation and specification. At the highest level of generalisation, we can distinguish the three ontological regions of material, animate and spiritual nature that found respectively the physical sciences, the biological and psychophysical sciences, and the human sciences. Convincing ourselves that they are essentially different, we can arrive at a categorical determination of the essence of the thing, the soul and the spirit.

Simplifying the long and important but complicated eidetic analyses of *Ideen II* on the constitution of the world that were so important for Merleau-Ponty (Husserl, 1952, II), we can say that a thing belongs to the material world by virtue of the fact that it is causally related to other things in a unified spatial-temporal context. The spirit belongs to a human world by virtue of the fact that it is endowed with meaning and intentionally constituted as a cultural world. The transition from the first region to the latter is made possible through the body, which is both an object of nature and an organ of the will, something that can feel and touch, but also something that is touched and felt. Although Husserl distinguishes between three ontological regions, he is, in fact, mainly concerned with the *a priori* establishment of a categorical distinction between the regions of nature and culture, and with the relation between the natural world and the spiritual, whereby the latter is granted priority over the former.

5. REGIONAL TYPOLOGIES

Assuming for the sake of the argument that the distinction between the ontological regions of nature and culture could be established on secure transcendental-*eidetic* foundations, I will now reinterpret those regional ontologies as “regional typologies of the historical life-world” (Luckmann, 1970) in order to combine the transitivity of nature with the intransitivity of the nature-culture divide.¹⁴ This move from a transcendental to an empirical phenomenology of the constitution of the regions of reality re-codes the opposition between nature and culture, which corresponds to an objective order of the world, into an “artificial creation of culture” (Lévi-Strauss, 1967: xvii). This cultural re-coding of the universal divide allows one to make sense of the fact that even if all cultures draw a line between nature and culture, they nevertheless draw it differently.¹⁵

Without falling into the evolutionist traps of the early anthropologists, I think, however, that we can generally differentiate the typologies of the pre-modern and the modern life-worlds by saying that the former are holistic societies with gift economies that tend to interpret things within an anthropomorphic frame as if they were human, whereas the latter are individualistic societies with a commodity economy that tend to interpret humans in an fetishistic frame as if they were things.¹⁶ The reification of persons that marks the final stage of the protracted transition from a moral economy that is still embedded in the life-world to a political economy that is “disembedded” from it was accomplished in the eighteenth century with the emergence of the economy as an autonomous domain that is “outdifferentiated” from society and the polity and follows its own laws. Philosophers, historians, anthropologists and sociologists, from Hegel and Marx, Mauss and Durkheim, Tocqueville and Simmel to Polanyi, Dumont, and Gauchet, who have analysed the “great transition” in terms of a gradual, yet irreversible passage from holistic to individualistic representations and organisations of society, have not failed to link the emergence of the “free market” to the liberation of the individual from the feudal ties of a hierarchically ordered society. The unencumbered, free individuals that emerge from behind their societal masks in the seventeenth century as autonomous persons that are *Mündig* (Kant) and, thus, able to speak and think for themselves seem, however, to have immediately fallen prey to the alienating forces of industrial capitalism that their liberation from the traditional ties has unleashed.¹⁷ In spite of the Marxist insinuations to the contrary, this alienation does not necessarily mean that the newly acquired freedom is a sham. To the contrary, the processes of reification and personalisation, alienation and liberation should rather be interpreted as correlative processes. It is because the autonomous individual knows what freedom is that he or she resents so bitterly the alienation and refuses to be treated as a thing. With Durkheim (1970), we could say that it is the “cult of the individual” that has sparked off its profanation.

Be that as it may, the point I wanted to make by comparing the economy of the gift to the commodity economy is that entities of the world can be typified in different and incomparable ways. Whereas primitive economies treat things as if they were humans and endow them with a soul, modern capitalist economies treat persons as if they were things. By insisting on the *as if* character of those typifications, their conventionalist or imaginary status is recognised: Things are things and humans are humans by nature, but that does not mean that humans cannot be conceived and treated as animals or things, things as animals or humans. It is enough to swap the perspectives, seeing ourselves and the “others” through the estranging eye of the anthropologist, to obtain a perspective on the perspective that allows for a systematic relativisation or “symmetrisation” (Bloor) of both of the regional typifications. What seems strange to “us” is familiar and ordinary to “them”, and *vice versa*, but there’s no reason to assume that either of the miscategorisations is superior to the other. As Castoriadis (1975: 221) rightly

says, "Treating a human as a thing is not less but more imaginary than seeing a human as an owl".

In the realm of the imaginary, we are no longer dealing with differences in kinds or realms, but with a continuum of fluid transitions between the extremities. In a world in which nature can become culture and culture can become second nature, things, animals and humans can be more or less natural, more or less human, and shift from one end of the continuum to other, as can be gathered from the fact that the Greeks considered slaves as things, that the colonial masters considered Negroes as animals, and that there are still too many husbands who consider their spouses as pets. In the meantime, blacks, women and pets have jumped the ditch between humans and non-humans, while at the same time everything, or almost everything, from body parts, babies and football players to audiences and human capacities, can be alienated and reified into a commodity (Radin, 1996). Notwithstanding the fetishism that is attached to commodities, they don't grow on trees but are eminently cultural. Like slaves, goods have a trajectory or a biography (Appadurai, 1986). In the same way as slaves are dehumanised when they are sold as things and forced to work (the slave as "thing in the field") and rehumanised in a new setting (the slave as "person in bed"—Patterson, quoted by Kopytoff, 1982: 220), goods are reified into commodities when they enter the market and decommodified and repersonalised as they leave the sphere of circulation to enter the sphere of consumption.

By allowing for a cultural recoding of the ontological divide through regional typologies, the "interpretative flexibility" (Bijker) of the world is foregrounded. The regional ontologies of the world do no more determine the interpretations of the world than the base determines the superstructure, though the latter are obviously conditioned by the former. Nevertheless, if we want to conceive of some kind of progress through "epistemic gain" (Taylor, 1989), we have to assume as a regulative ideal that in the very long run the regional typologies of the life-world will come to overlap and coincide with the regional ontologies.¹⁸ When appearances and essences are identical, humans, animals and things will be considered as what they really *are*. This asymptotical overlap (or *Deckung*) of the ontological and the epistemological, of words and things, can be expected on the grounds of the self-corrective mechanism that is built in human cognition. Nothing forbids us to conceive of humans as baboons, baboons as cauliflowers, cauliflowers as stones and stones as persons, but the imaginary transfer of the project on the object is nevertheless restricted by the fact that the meanings that are intentionally transferred and projected from the subject onto the object will eventually be confirmed, modified or disconfirmed by the objects themselves. Thus, when I intentionally represent the stone as a person, the noematic meaning of the stone which I constitute in my present experience of the stone and automatically transfer to the next phase of the experience will be partially or totally confirmed or

disconfirmed, depending on whether the stone walks, talks, etc., or not. When the projected meaning is totally confirmed and the object fills and fulfils each and every one of the expectations, then the object and the project perfectly overlap. “Then the real *adequatio rei et intellectus* is produced. The object is really ‘present’ or ‘given’, exactly as the object is intended and as the object that it is intended to be; there is no longer a partial intention that lacks fulfilment” (Husserl, 1980: II/2: 118). This is the noetic experience of evidence, and when it is continuously repeated and sediments into a relatively natural worldview, we can presume—for the time being and until further notice—that we have arrived at the truth and that the object really is as it is and as it gives itself to consciousness. “The objective correlate [of noetic experience of evidence] is called Being or also Truth” (id.: 122). Truth may be an artefact, but when the artifice is intersubjectively validated and the relation between culture and nature is continuously confirmed in and through discursive practices, the ontology and the typology of the natural, the animal and the human world naturally overlap. When the congruence between them is given with evidence, we can counterfactually presume that that the regional typology is grounded in reality as such. When it speaks the language of reality, reason presumably cannot be wrong—or can it?

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NOTES

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² The interconnections between the singularity and the plurality of culture (culture as being both a *singulare tantum* and a *plurale tantum*) are of a “merographic” nature. Culture can be part of different systems that are internally related to each other via part-whole relations that can be described differently from different angles and thereby redescribed as something else. Following the connections and shifting perspectives on the connections, so that what looks as a part can also be seen as a whole of which it is part, we can return to the example of culture and say with Marilyn Strathern, whose work has inspired my approach to culture: “Culture belongs to the domain of human activity, and in that sense is universally part of it; but as an idea it may also be claimed as the specific construct of a specific era and thus (and to the contrary) also part of particular culture at one point in time” (Strathern, 1992a: 73).

³ In his new introduction to *Culture as Praxis*, Bauman (1999) notes that, together with *Geschichtsphilosophie*, anthropology and aesthetics, culture is the fourth and perhaps the most salient term that marks the watershed of the eighteenth century.

⁴ As Lévi-Strauss (1969: 22) said: “The barbarian is first of all the man who believes in barbarism”.

⁵ Speaking for the American school of cultural anthropology, Robert Lowie proclaimed in 1917 that culture “is, indeed, the sole and exclusive subject-matter of ethnology, as consciousness is the subject-matter of psychology, life of biology, electricity as a branch of physics” (quoted in Kuper, 1999: ix). In European anthropology, whose lead I’ll follow in this paper, culture is not opposed to society, but considered as an aspect of society: the cultural is the social viewed from another perspective, not a distinct analytic entity.

⁶ Unfortunately, the history of ideas does not confirm the original thesis of the co-originality of the concepts of nature and culture. The concept of nature as an inanimated causal mechanism is linked to the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, which is itself linked to the emergence of entrepreneurial capitalism. The concept of culture comes later in the seventeenth and eighteenth century and is linked to the colonial expansion of the great powers. Here, I am not so much concerned, however, with a Weberian genealogy of modernity as with a socio-epistemological analysis of the conditions of possibility of anthropology. For a similar attempt to account for the emergence of sociology, cf. (Vandenberghe, 1997–98, I: 9–24).

⁷ Jack Goody contests the universality of the distinction between nature and culture, but by contesting it, he affirms its artificiality as ‘our’ ethnocentric particularity: “The division between nature and culture is in some ways rather artificial. I would claim that there’s no such pair in either of the two African languages known personally to me (LoDagaa and Gonja). Though there’s a certain ‘opposition’ of ‘bush’ and ‘house’, ‘cultivated’ and ‘uncultivated’, there’s nothing that would correspond to the highly abstract and rather eighteenth century dichotomy that is current in western intellectual circles” (Goody, quoted in Horigan, 1988: 40–41).

⁸ For a documentation of several “cartocontroversies” (the Peters projection controversy, the Vinland map, etc.) that show how one can lie with maps and how maps continue politics on paper, see Monmonier, 1995.

⁹ After all, Derrida’s famous statement that we never get out of discourses and texts (“Il n’y a pas d’hors texte”) is not meant to deny that that he is writing his text with a pen on a piece of paper, that the trains in the underground in Paris are riding or the overground ones in London have once again collided. Inversely, my critique of the cultural deconstruction of nature does not aim to deny that texts can change nature. The example of the Shakespeare Society in Connecticut which, having obtained an inventory of all the birds that occurred in the texts of the great bard, imported them from England to set them free in the new world, proves that culture can literally construct nature. More generally, but less literary, culture “leaks” into nature and effectively helps to construct it in the same way as the indications of the architect direct the performances of the house-builders.

¹⁰ Judith Butler is the theorist of transsexualism. But in so far as one will hardly find any references in her texts to silicone injections, aesthetic operations or other material practices that subvert the naturalness of the distinctions between the sexes, one might as well say that her theory of transsexualism is really a theory of transtextualism. Always wrapped up in language, the body is as unfathomable as the Kantian Thing-in-itself.

¹¹ With Kern (1962), we can distinguish three ways to explore the “infinite continent” of phenomenology that Husserl has opened up for analysis, namely the Cartesian way, the way via intentional psychology and the ontological way. The latter is the one that interests me: it does not annihilate the world as object but takes it as an index for the analysis of the constitution of the world as phenomenon. When phenomenology is entered via the

ontological way, the dead end of the transcendental ego is avoided so that the realism of Bhaskar and the phenomenology of Husserl are no longer incompatible, but rather complementary. One might thus as well describe the ontological way to phenomenology as a phenomenological way to ontology.

¹² The method in question is the so-called “transcendental reduction” which “brackets” the real world in order to reflexively analyse the constitutive activities of the mind. By suspending temporarily the ontological question of the existence of the world “out there”, the latter is no longer treated as a resource but as a topic in its own right. After analysis, the world is not only entirely regained, but also entirely understood in its objectivity as the intentional correlate of the epistemic acts of the inhabitants of the world.

¹³ See Vandenberghe, 2002. I was only interested in establishing the ontological difference between the natural world and the social world, not the one between the animal and the human world. Humans are animals. According to the latest estimates, published in the *Proceedings of the American Academy of Sciences* (PNAS) of the 19th. of May 2003, we share 99,4 % of our genes with chimpanzees (and 52% with potatoes and 48% with bananas). On this basis, American scientists have recently proposed to reclassify the chimpanzee as *Homo (Pan) troglodytes* and the bonobo as *Homo (Pan) Paniscus*. If Peter Singer were to use the genetic argument to charitably extend human rights to our brothers and sisters in the forest and *a fortiori* to those in the zoo, I would not be opposed to it. I would salute it as a humane gesture.

¹⁴ Thomas Luckmann opens his culturalist attack on Husserl’s realism by exposing the tacit assumption that the transcendental ego is “somehow human”. For Luckmann, the human being is not constitutive, but socially constituted as human through the application of the typifications of the life-world. Instead of conceiving those views as exclusive of each other, I try to integrate them by conceiving of the regional typologies as differential or transitive interpretations of one single reality, differentiated into different regional ontologies.

¹⁵ Just one example, which I borrow from Marilyn Strathern (1999: 249–250). According to the Araweté, who assume a basic continuity between all animate beings, people share with animals the same kind of soul and thus the same identities and indeed mental constructs. What differentiates them are their bodies. It is bodies which see and which determine what is seen. From out of their human body, human beings can only “see” animals as non-human; but when the animals’ point of view is imagined, these creatures do not see human beings as human beings—to them people appear as animals, and the animals appear to another as people.

¹⁶ This distinction between animated things and reified persons corresponds to the one between gifts (Mauss) and commodities (Marx). In the same way as the distinction between nature and culture can only be made within culture, the distinction between gift and commodities only makes sense from the point of view of the commodity economy.

¹⁷ In his genealogy of the concept of the person, Marcel Mauss (1950: 350) indicates that the etymological origins of the concept point to the dramaturgical field of histrionic impersonations: “*persona* comes from *per/sonare*, the mask through (*per*) which the voice (of the actor) resonates”.

¹⁸ The notion of epistemic gain is post-metaphysical. “It aims to establish, not that some position is correct absolutely, but rather that some position is superior to some other. It is concerned, covertly or openly, implicitly or explicitly, with comparative propositions. We show one of those comparative claims to be well founded when we can show that the move from A to B contains a gain epistemically” (Taylor, 1989: 72). In spite of all the epistemic gain, the assumption of a perfect onto-typological overlap is introduced here as “regulatory ideal” (Kant). Even in the very long run, when all of the readers of this article will have passed away, there still will be a penumbra of meanings that is not shared.

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