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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE ENIGMA OF STRANGENESS

1. The Enigma of Alienity as Anthropology’s Thorn

Anthropology lives with a thorn in its flesh. If it were to remove this thorn, it would lose an important impulse for its work. If it were to give itself over to this thorn completely, it would turn into literature. Anthropology must, I believe, learn to live with this tension.

What does the thorn of anthropology consist of? It is the paradox of that which is simply strange (Waldenfels 1998). The anthropologist’s calling is to provide the most accurate account possible of strange cultures and life-forms. However, when anthropologists engage in their work, they are occasionally overwhelmed with doubt about their ability to fulfill this calling. On the one hand, it seems highly unlikely that we could ever even approach the absolutely strange or strictly heterogeneous—what I will call “alienity” here—let alone comprehend it. On the other hand, it becomes immediately clear that if we can only talk about that which is strange in our own terminology, its strangeness threatens to be lost in the process.

Because the enigma of alienity has repeatedly seduced anthropologists into engaging in methodologically questionable enterprises, anthropology has come to be seen as an uncertain candidate, no longer taken seriously by neighboring disciplines and confused and even uncertain about itself. In this essay, I would like to focus on the issue of alienity, an issue that can neither be dismissed off hand nor pursued methodologically in the conventional sense. While the virtue of empirical social science lies observing the limits of its own methodology and bracketing out all other issues as (at least provisionally) unsearchable, the discipline of anthropology cannot subject itself entirely to these structures. We should, I believe, tolerate this disturbance if we are interested in gaining something truly worthwhile from the enterprise of anthropology.

2. Methodological Attempts to Remove the Thorn

In their professional everyday life, anthropologists rarely discuss this fundamental epistemological issue. As a rule, they dismiss the question of alienity
as a self-contradiction. In order to do this, various arguments are available, all of which arrive at the same conclusion (see Mersch 1997).

There is an analytic argument, for example, which draws on the work of Donald Davidson (2001): An “other” of thinking cannot be thought, because this would mean thinking other than we do. Or as Wittgenstein put it: “Thought can never be of anything illogical, since, if it were, we should have to think illogically” (Tractatus §3.03). From this perspective, the assumption of radical incomprehensibility proves to be an aporia because it is presumed here that when we speak a comprehensible meaning already exists. For this reason, we need only to postulate a common framework and allow a principle of charity to reign.

Hermeneutic and discourse theory arguments about the impossibility of alienity, drawing on Gadamer (1975) and Habermas (1994), insist on the necessity of assuming some form of mediation. From this perspective, the relativity of cultures presupposes universal structures of linguistic comprehension as a necessary given. Or formulated differently: Communicative reason is the condition for the possibility of the diversity of cultures.

Philosophical anthropology assumes the unity of humanity as the root of different human cultures. The fact that we are all human beings and are able to reflect on our affective, practical, and symbolic bases enables translation and understanding.

Finally, there is also a systems theory argument about the impossibility of alienity: A system makes its environment “readable” by copying its own framework or coding onto that environment. Only in this way do the events of the environment become meaningful as information for the system (Luhmann 1977).

As a rule, anthropologists presume in their everyday work that alienity must be rejected as a contradiction in terms—either on the basis of one of these four arguments or, as occurs most frequently, simply intuitively. They then turn to an abated version of this issue, i.e., to familiar strangeness or otherness as a variety of oneself. The term for this is “alterity”.

While alienity has been excluded as an option, a norm has emerged within the discourse of alterity that is difficult if not impossible to question. There appears to be general agreement today that anthropological representations of alterity are threatened by one particular kind of error: that of “othering”. According to the prevailing critique, anthropologists often “other” different cultures or life-forms, when in reality these are not all that other or different (see diagram).

This accusation of othering usually assumes one of two forms. The first is called ethnocentrism. The sin here consists of interpreting and evaluating the other in terms of our own criteria and thereby failing to articulate the inner logic and value of that other. Ethnocentric arguments do not claim, “the other is like us,” but instead, “although the other is different than us, we are capable of seeing through it and can therefore explain it in socio-cultural terms”.

The second variant of this accusation of othering is exoticism. Here the sin lies in describing the other to as great a degree as possible in the concepts and values of that other life-form. I leave aside the question of whether and to what degree this is even possible. According to this accusation, the attempt to represent the rationality and ethos of another culture or life-form unintentionally becomes a form of othering: Differences are magnified, while commonalities are covered over.

Accusations of othering have been popular since the 1980s, particularly within the discipline of anthropology. It is now assumed to be self-evident that less is more, i.e., that smaller and situationally fluctuating differences are better than larger and more stable ones. Woe to anyone who asserts today that particular human beings, on the basis of their affiliation to a particular culture, think and act in a particular way. Admittedly, this kind of critique is as a rule justified because the situation is invariably more complex. I am not, however, interested in this here. My concern rather is the unnoticed discursive effects of such an argument, for it implicitly presumes that the problem of othering can be resolved through appropriation. As a consequence this argument, which is accepted almost unquestioningly today, denies the indisputable reverse error: that we can violate alterity not only by othering it, but also by appropriating it. In other words, here, too, we are on the wrong track. The path we have traversed thus far can be illustrated by a diagram:

**Figure 1**

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<tr>
<th>Enigma</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Aliency Alterity</td>
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<tr>
<td>X      X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Othering Appropriation</td>
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<tr>
<td>X      X</td>
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<td>Ethnocentrism Exoticism</td>
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Readers will surely object at this point that the opposition we have drawn here between self and other as two already existing entities is incorrect. After all, the self can only be constituted as self-interpretation through the other. The entities “self” and “other” are merely auxiliary constructions of perspectival and relational self-ascertainment. Identity has at its basis no substance that could be thought without reference to alterity. Behind one mask we always find only another mask.
I agree with this objection up to this point. But what can we conclude from it? The fact that collective identities are always plural social constructions that are hybrid, relational, and situationally fluctuating does not exclude the possibility of alienity. Trying to take into account radical strangeness does not necessarily imply naive realism or some other form of essentialism. Rather the opposite is the case: Only those who believe that they possess a universally valid explanatory schema will regard everything that eludes that schema not merely as irreconcilably strange, but as something that cannot even exist. From this perspective, there can only be alterity (i.e. familiar strangeness), but not alienity (radical strangeness). In contrast to this view, all of the different varieties of social constructivism do not seek to attain (absolute) universal truth and do not conceive of truth solely in terms of external reality. Instead they emphasize the simultaneous importance of conceptual schemas and the historical and cultural situatedness and contingency of knowledge practices. For this reason, the constructivist move from a universe to a pluriverse implicitly and principally takes into account the possibility of alienity. Thus, the conclusion that we draw from the arguments in this section must be a different one. If all the paths still available to us after the turn to alterity prove to be cul-de-sacs, then perhaps we must return to the first fork in the road—alienity or alterity—and reflect on the matter anew.

What was it that spoke against alienity? When the current anthropological conceptions of alterity, identity, and difference deny the possibility of alienity, they continue a long philosophical tradition, "that seeks either to explain or exclude, to appropriate or humiliate, to embrace or eradicate that which is strange", as Dieter Mersch has argued (1997: 28-9), drawing on the work of Emmanuel Lévinas (1986). Both alternatives—integration of alterity as well as its exclusion—pursue the same strategy of immunization: They assert that alienity is simply unthinkable. The form of argumentation employed here, according to Mersch, is homologous to the standard refutation of skepticism and relativism: "Not everything can be true, because then the assertion of universal falseness would be false as well. In the same way, nothing could be "absolutely other", because we have no concept of the other that does not always refer us back to our own thinking" (Mersch 1997: 33; see Davidson 1980: 221-22).

This, however, is circular reasoning. It presumes precisely that which it is supposed to demonstrate, for the simple reason that it is unable within the limits of its own argumentation to provide the necessary proof. As a result, it does not prove the impossibility of alienity, but only the impossibility of expressing it logically within the framework of a predicative procedure. Again Wittgenstein expressed this point well: "Unless you can show that a puzzle is not a puzzle you are left with what really are puzzles: a puzzle is something with no solution" (Wittgenstein 1988: 348). If Wittgenstein is correct here, then we must continue to insist on the possibility of alienity. The scandalous enigma remains:

This, however, also means that alienity and alterity do not represent two separate paths that we could choose alternatively. If we examine something enigmatically strange for an extended period of time, it slowly becomes accessible to us, perhaps even familiar. However, if we continue to examine this strange object, we discover indissoluble traces of the enigmatic in precisely what had appeared to become familiar. And if we maintain this inquisitive attitude, we will at some point involuntarily turn to ourselves, and our own culture and life-forms will suddenly appear enigmatically strange.

Following Mersch and Lévinas, we can therefore ask: Could it be that the methodological abolition of alienity is ultimately the most arrogant position we could take toward strange cultures or life-forms? Does this position contest the possibility that the vantage point of a strange life-form makes visible something that remains hidden from our own vantage point? Does it implicitly assert our own familiar image of the world as the only one possible? And why is it that the methodological abolition of alienity has gained general acceptance in an era, in which universal claims of any kind have encountered more difficulty than ever before?

There is a minor anthropological tradition that does not follow the call to abolish absolute strangeness. This tradition experienced a little noticed renaissance with Fritz Kramer's book The Red Fiz. Art and Spiritual Possession in Africa, published originally in 1987. In this book, Kramer shows how African art and African cults of being spiritually possessed appropriate radical strangeness through a process of mimesis without at the same time abolishing it. Kramer analyzes mimesis as a way of approaching alienity, allowing oneself to be touched and moved by radical strangeness without reducing it logocentrically to oneself or to that which is familiar. Kramer was influenced here by Heidegger's distinction between comprehending, fixing "talk about" and non-objectivizable, reserved "talk of" (1971). I leave aside the legitimacy of this distinction, as I do not want to pursue Kramer's approach any further here.

The reason for this is that I believe another approach is now possible and perhaps even necessary, one that also does not accept the methodological exclusion of alienity, but justifies this in a different way. This new approach—which was developed within the sociology of knowledge and research on science and technology—has had difficulty finding its way (back) to anthropology. I hope that this essay will be a modest contribution to this process.
order to present this new approach, I need to say a few words about the context in which accusations of othering arose.

3. **The Background and Consequences of the Abolition of Strangeness**

The political and cultural changes in the 1980s that led to accusations of othering are connected to a number of different developments (Schiffauer 1997). I mention only three of them here. First, it was not until the 1970s and 80s that the (admittedly older) idea of the constructedness of all knowledge and the performativity of all descriptions of the world gained general recognition. This recognition made anthropologists more aware of the political responsibility they had for the knowledge they produced about strange cultures and life-forms.

Second, the devaluation of grand narratives of emancipation made the critique of domination more complicated. There was a shift from conceptions of power as a resource that can be centralized and capitalized to conceptions of power as a resource present in all social relations and made possible through the process of subjectivation. This gave rise to a concomitant shift from “we below/you above” to “we inside/you outside”.

Finally, today anthropologists no longer address a primarily Euro-American audience interested in knowledge about distant countries and cultures. Precisely those people who are the objects of anthropological studies (or at least the intellectuals among them) are always potentially part of this audience as well. Like their Euro-American counterparts, these readers pay close attention to the differences constructed in such anthropological texts, although they tend to interpret them somewhat differently. That which might appear to Euro-American readers as a welcome inspiration for reflecting on their own established convictions is often regarded by readers who are the objects of such studies as oppressively restrictive and therefore insulting markings of difference.

These changes in the 1980s meant that anthropology’s fondness for the losers of modernity and others on the margins could no longer present itself simply as “talking truth to power”. Today we presume, on the contrary, that anthropological discourse about excluded groups or cultures can itself contribute to their exclusion. It has, in other words, become more difficult to speak about difference, because the central topos of the present is exclusion and because the establishment of differences can contribute to mechanisms of exclusion in globalization.

A number of current anthropological approaches can be understood as a response to these more difficult conditions of intellectual production. I am interested here in only two of them, which can be regarded as two sides of the same strategy. First, the notion of culture as a homogeneous and unified fabric of meaning has been replaced by the notion of culture as a heterogeneous arena of discursive practices that create the world. This has shifted attention to those spaces or practices lying between cultures (Shimada 2000).

Second, concern with the self, which has always been constitutive in anthropology, has gained new significance. While anthropology is always necessarily also self-interpreted through the other, the anthropologist’s own culture has increasingly become the direct object of study as well. This has meant a growing concern with European, North American, and other industrialized societies. It has also meant focusing on modern forms of social ordering traditionally regarded as “Western” (e.g., formal organizations, laboratories, and the media), which are no longer limited to the Western world and, in a certain way, never were (Rottenburg 2002).

Both of these anthropological strategies for dealing with a problematized strangeness aim at overcoming the so-called great divide between “modern and pre-modern” or between “the West and the rest” as an ideological description of the world. When I refer here to an implicit problem that this new anthropology has with strangeness, I do not mean to suggest that anthropology of the 1980s had no such problems or that we can or should return to it.

4. **From the West/Rest Divide to the Reality/Representation Divide**

The old and persistent suspicion about pre-modern societies is that they lack the capacity to draw clear distinctions between the world and language or things and names, or on another level, between nature and culture. They are supposedly incapable of developing a notion of inanimate material and therefore continuously confuse nature and culture, remaining trapped in animism and magic. As a result, they are unable to develop a science that could control and manipulate nature. To state this suspicion abstractly: In pre-modern societies, human beings confuse cause and effect.

This would mean, however, that the external great divide between West/rest is connected to an internal “great divide,” that of world/language. In the West, the internal great divide is understood as the overcoming of superstition through enlightenment. The development of an empirical science independent of theology and politics plays a central role here. This science in turn presupposes an external reality independent of God and human beings, whose laws science is supposed to uncover. Thus if we want to understand the external great divide, we have to look more closely at the internal great divide or at the relation of these two divides.

Two trends in contemporary scholarship can be identified here. The first concentrates within the anthropological tradition on the question of whether and to what degree pre-modern societies actually confuse signifier and signified and therefore cause and effect. The second begins at the opposite ends and asks what precisely humans in modern societies do when they treat world and language or nature and culture as always already separate entities.
Anthropologists have investigated the first question exhaustively, drawing on the works of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1927/1965) and James Frazer (1890/1994). Lévy-Bruhl’s and Frazer’s answer to this question can be summarized as follows: Yes, “primitives” do confuse signifier and signified and therefore—this is their main point—confuse expressive action and technical action. Animism, according to this line of argument, is a mixing of things that do not belong together, a kind of hybridization, and magic a kind of false technology. The answer of the numerous scholars and critics who, inspired by Lévy-Bruhl and Frazer, have subsequently focused on this question, can be summarized as follows: No, “primitives” do not confuse expressive action and technical action. If they occasionally confuse signifier and signified, this is certainly an error in thinking, but it is a very complicated one. And if they do at times make this mistake, they are in very good company, as Edmund Leach pointed out almost thirty years ago in his structuralist theory of communication.

Leach’s argument runs as follows: When we turn on the television in the evening with the remote control, we do so merely out of habit and not because our technical knowledge leads us expect that the remote control will actually function. We treat the remote control as signal A, which triggers an effect B, although for us the remote control is in fact merely a signifier, for the simple reason that we do not understand how it works. I find this kind of argument, whatever its merits, ultimately unsatisfactory. We may indeed use the effects of the television remote control as a kind of magic, but our conviction that it is technology and not magic is, I think, ultimately justified and verifiable as well. Furthermore, there is always a trace of hypocrisy, at best an ironic arrogance, in such superficial coquette attempts to assert an equality between “modern” and “pre-modern” (Leach 1976).

This theoretical controversy has yet to be resolved, to say nothing of the existential issue of magic and witchcraft. The reason for this probably lies in the fact that Leach did not reject consistently enough one of the problematic premises assumed by Frazer. Frazer’s position presumes that only magic is in need of explanation (even when we suspect magic, as was the case with Leach, in our own culture as well); and only those who claim to possess an objective perspective, a “God’s eye view of the universe” are, on the contrary, capable of providing explanation. At this point in the argument, any attempt to appropriate the other becomes a denunciatory othering.

In order to avoid this subtle othering disguised as its opposite, anthropologists in the 1970s began to address the issue in the other direction. Instead of investigating the question of whether pre-modern societies actually confused signifier and signified, their project—as “symmetrical anthropology”—focused on what actually occurs in modern societies and what individuals do when they distinguish between world and language, reality and representation, and ultimately nature and culture.

5. From the Reality/Representation Divide to the Enunciation of Reality

In order to summarize the problematic of the modern distinction between reality and representation or nature and culture, I turn to social-constructivist scholarship on science and technology. I will not examine the theoretical presuppositions of this development here but simply presume them as a necessary basis. In doing so, I omit a significant step: the moments of re-interpretation of the reciprocal effects of representation and social reality as they were worked out by Berger and Luckmann (1972). I mention only in passing as well the two central authors responsible for the next development, from the idiom of representation to the idiom of performativity: Pierre Bourdieu with his theory of practice (1977; 1990; in particular 1991) and Michel Foucault with his discourse theory (1971). While Bourdieu and Foucault focused on the production of social reality through representation, their students Bruno Latour (see below) and Michel Callon (Callon/Latour 1981; Callon 1986) radicalized this approach in regard to the production of reality in general, directing their attention consistently to natural science and technology. David Bloor (1991) and the Science Studies Unit at Edinburgh have contributed significantly to this radicalization. In Germany, Karin Knorr-Cetina (1981) has been decisive in the development and establishment of such an approach. It is rarely mentioned that already in 1936 Edmund Husserl (as part of The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology) outlined how Galileo was compelled to mathematize the world and thereby reduce its diversity and variety in order to make it fit into his philosophical project.

Here is a brief summary of the scientific construction of nature according to social constructivists. The Constitution of the modern, as Latour calls it, presumes two propositions. The first is that in science scientists serve as the representatives or intermediaries of things, saying nothing but “what the things would have said on their own, had they been able to speak” (Latour 1993: 142-3; 1997; 2004). At issue here is not only the muteness of things, but also the demand that speaking in their name should be free of socio-cultural impurities, in short, free of politics. The second proposition is that in politics politicians serve as representatives who say in one voice no more and no less than what the many citizens they represent would have said had they all been able to speak. At issue here is not only the democratic principle of the faithful representation of citizens, but also the demand that nature be kept out of society as much as possible, so that we have it at our disposal as an object of human control and manipulation.

On the basis of this quasi-constitutional conception, scientists and politicians, like all representatives and intermediaries, are continually subject to the suspicion that they have not been faithful in their translations, but have instead allowed their own interests to enter and thus have committed treason in the sense of the Italian saying: traditore, traditore. According to the modern Constitution, the natural and social orders in their respective perfected forms
could dispense with scientists and politicians, because objects and citizens would be able to truly represent themselves. This, however, can never actually occur, nor can we even conceive of representatives who function as purely passive intermediaries. It is necessary, in other words, to look for a different path here.

The social-constructivist argument is irresistibly simple at this point: We do not have access to the external world in two distinct forms, once as representation (i.e., as image and word) and once as naked reality. Consequently we are never in a position to determine whether a representation in fact corresponds with reality. This moves us onto the terrain of the analytic philosopher Willard van Orman Quine, in particular his thesis about the empirical under-determination of scientific theories. If we have access to external reality only once, then we are able to test the validity of a proposition only by repeating the various individual steps of the entire process of representation. In other words, we can always only compare different representations with one another; we never have access to reality itself in a direct or unmediated form. The impossibility of establishing a criterion of correspondence between reality and representation and the performative dimension of representation arising from this means that it is occasionally more appropriate to speak of enunciation than representation (as the root of “enunciation” recalls nuntiare [to preach or proclaim] and nuntius [messenger], and makes evident the proximity to “denunciation”).

It is important to emphasize that this argument does not dispute the existence of a reality beyond human language. Rather, the construction of analogous regimes of scientific and political enunciation underscores the fact that external reality must be represented in order to attain social validity, just as the general will only becomes legitimate reality through political representation.

According to this argument, representations always include more than the reality they represent. They inevitably include something from the necessarily selective and performative process of representation as well; and the choice of conceptual schemas and procedures can never be derived solely from the objects themselves. We can designate this position as empirical social constructivism. Thomas Kuhn (1970), Willard van Orman Quine (1960) and Hilary Putnam (1998) have helped us to understand that we can recognize the existence of multiple scientific truths without being compelled to regard all scientific conclusions either as equally valid or as simply contingent. Matthias Kaufmann (2003: 26) has called this “faulsifiable direct realism”.

This position relativizes the question of relativism (Latour 1993). Absolute relativism and universalism share the conviction that translation between languages, cultures, paradigms, and conceptual schemas requires a common standard of measure. While universalists are convinced that such a standard of measure actually exists, absolute relativists amuse themselves by contesting its existence. Relativized relativism shifts this question onto the terrain of pragmatics and praxis. In their research on science and technology, social constructivists—as relative relativists—have focused in particular on “putting things in relation”, on the construction of standard measures and measuring instruments, and on the process of standardization and the forms of investigation and manipulation that this enables.

6. The Great Divide as a Process of Purification

In the perspective outlined above, enunciations of nature and society proceed not only analogously, but are inextricably intertwined as well. If we examine the practices of these two domains—i.e., work in scientific laboratories and activities in the political sphere—we find in each an inextricable mixture of nature and society. Technology—as nature transformed by human labor and functioning as a social actant—plays a central role in this mixing or hybridization. According to this perspective, instead of fruitlessly struggling to remove all traces of society from representations of nature and conversely to remove all nature and technology from representations of society, we should limit ourselves to making this mixing visible (e.g., with genetically manipulated organisms), without ever claiming to have unmediated access to an external reality that could serve as an absolute or ultimate ground.

In this sense, social-constructivism shifts attention away from the ostensibly pre-given distinction between world and language onto the practices of producing or enunciating external reality and knowledge. While knowledge (including science) in fact co-produces technology, nature, and society through its mediations, so to speak, backstage, a process of purification follows that renders this mediation invisible for official accounts of the modern Constitution. After this laborious mediation has been concealed, the two poles reality/representation (or nature/culture) stand in apparently unmediated opposition as if they were the already existing starting points.

Successfully rendering this mediation invisible thus results in a form of self-deception. The collectively recognized realities “nature” and “culture” are necessarily the effects of continuous practices of mediation, since we do not have unmediated access to either of them. Officially, however, the actual effects of these techno-scientific practices are recognized solely as their causes. The situation here is not unlike that of religion: While an external, unbelieving observer can regard God only as the effect of religious practices, within a particular religious discourse God appears solely as the cause of these practices. We speak of “culture” and “society” in a similar way in everyday discourse: While both “culture” and “society” can only be the effects of discursive practices, they appear to our everyday consciousness as causes or explanations for actions, in particular for the incomprehensible actions of others.

Rendering invisible these practices of mixing and in this way treating modern societies as though they were identical with their official Constitution thereby surreptitiously confuses cause and effect. This in turn gives rise to the external “great divide” in the following way. Pre-modern societies, which of-
officially recognize their own mediation and thus allow for commonalities between living people, dead people, plants, animals, spirits, angels, devils, witches, and gods, treating them as equal actors, appear to commit a fundamental error, which distinguishes them from modern societies through a radical epistemological break. Only if we employ the modern Constitution as a comparative measure, does it appear as if pre-modern societies commit a unique epistemological error.

If, on the contrary, we take as a comparative measure the modern Constitution together with the modern practices of mixing human and non-human *actants*, we find no radical difference in this regard between “modern” and “pre-modern”. There are in fact confusions on both sides, which means that the incontestable differences between modern and pre-modern societies must be located elsewhere.

Drawing on Bruno Latour, we can describe this state of affairs as follows: The modern, according to its official Constitution, has never actually been modern because it has never been able to distinguish clearly between external reality and its own representations. This would allow us to continue to speak of modern and pre-modern, but only in the radically shifted sense that I have tacitly presumed throughout the essay. “Modern” is the purification process that renders invisible these practices of mixing. Modern in this sense would be de-coupled from the West, insofar as the ardent representatives of this ideology are currently dispersed throughout the entire globe, with presumably the majority of them living in the former “rest” of the world.

7. The New Presupposition for Alienity

If the arguments presented thus far are correct, then the project of a symmetrical anthropology has identified the modern internal great divide of nature/culture as the Archimedean point of the external great divide of West/est, recognizing this as the doubling of an error. Seen in this light, modern and pre-modern are identical in the sense that they both confuse cause and effect and that they both produce nature-culture hybrids. There is, in other words, no epistemological break here.

This might appear at first glance to be the most radical version yet of appropriating the other. At the same time, however, the relative relativism of social-constructivism stands at odds with the methodological elimination of alienity. On the basis of this relative relativism, we can neither issue offers of appropriation nor pronounce prohibitions on othering. Within this framework, we must simply endure the tension between “it is so” and “it could also be different”. If we presume that there is not merely a single scientific truth but multiple scientific truths, then we have to take into account the possibility of multiple realities. In this way, we take alienity into account not as reality but as an irrefutable possibility. We recognize it as a true enigma that no science could ever resolve, an option that we can in principle no longer eliminate.

Contrary to what some might like to suppose, the refutation of an epistemological break between Western science and all other forms of knowledge does not necessitate abandoning the distinction between science and protoscience. On the contrary, while we have determined that this distinction is not an epistemological one, we continue to recognize the significance of the development of science as a separate realm. Modern science has produced its own regime of truth (primarily for socio-political and legal reasons): systematic strategies of falsification, criteria for logical consistency, and therefore better prognostic capacities. However, science is not able to get behind the situational determinateness of all knowledge and will continue to produce hybrid *actants*, a number of which will regularly escape our control. In contrast, proto-sciences process everyday experiential knowledge unsystematically on a trial and error basis and possess much more powerful immunization strategies against falsification, which in turn diminishes their capacities for self-improvement and prognosis. At the same time, the hybrid *actants* they produce are relatively harmless.

The first gain provided by our detour through the enunciatory regime of modern science to strangeness in anthropology is that the question of alienity is de-coupled from cultural enigmas. Alienity as the indissolubly enigmatic is shifted into the center of the most effective truth generator we know, the modern sciences. Scholars of science can no longer explain the regime of truth of the modern natural sciences through references to underlying socio-cultural conditions—something that would re-introduce through the backdoor a (particularly weak) foundation with universal claims, just after having demonstrated the impossibility of such a foundation. In this sense, some enigmas remain truly enigmatic. This means not only, for example, that there is no scientific answer to questions about the meaning of life and death. It also means that techno-scientific solutions always give rise to new questions and enigmas, which perhaps become fewer in number but for this the more acute and momentous. To the extent we are able decipher holes in the ozone layer and greenhouse gases, we are immediately confronted with new and more difficult enigmas, for example, the development of genetically manipulated organisms. The second gain—and for my purposes here the more significant one—is the recovery of the enigma for the discipline of anthropology. Only those who believe they possess a universally valid explanatory schema will regard everything that eludes this schema as irreconcilably strange, reducing it to something misguided and ultimately simply fantastic. However, if we do not raise such claims or if we agree to abandon them, we should have no problem in presuming the possibility of unfathomable strangeness. In this way, we may presume the possibility of an enigma in that which is strange and thereby offer it our recognition.
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