



COLLOQUIUM

## The ontological turn Where are we?

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Sahlins makes a forceful case for unification of Descola's fourfold scheme of ontologies. De Almeida graphically demonstrates differences possible even in unifying models. Descola continues his synthetic anthropology in Durkheimian, Lévi-Straussian mode, answering Sahlins with a strong defense of his four-ontologies view. Fischer tests Descola and Latour with Wittgensteinian skepticism of Whitehead, and a sensibility more post-Foucauldian than Lévi-Straussian. Fortun probes the politics of scientific inquiry in an age of extreme risks.

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Myriad questions are under discussion here and elsewhere, fathoming an ontological turn in anthropology. Many immediately connect the question of ontology to the history of study of culture, but not all. And more, it seems to me, connect the question of an ontological turn to its politics. The discussion here, acutely, underlines by its endpoints the priority of politics in our current disciplinary practices.

I want to begin this framing of next questions by remembering that twentieth-century anthropology already connected complex political questions to the study of culture. There were politics intrinsic to scientific challenges to racial and social hierarchies. In an America pursuing world war, Boasians announced a goal of "a world made safe for differences," Kluckhohn and Benedict's insistent reformulation of the Wilsonian vision of a world of self-determining democracies, "a world made safe for democracy" (see, e.g., Benedict 1946). The reflexivity and global concern of the Boasians was very different than, for example, the later reformulation by Leo Strauss (1964), "a world made safe for the Western democracies," which has more lately been so influential especially in US policy implementation. Can the Boasian valorization of cultural difference be a renewable counterpoint?



In our first set of papers, difference continues as the predominating anthropological theme, finding, and issue. In the works of Descola, and also in the works of Sahlins, the Lévi-Straussian heritage of an advancing ethnological science is reopened. Serious engagement with an extraordinary range and depth of ethnography leads to continuing disagreement about how to name and count fundamental humanly lived ontologies—in short, whether Descola's revision of Lévi-Strauss's famous hot/cold, savage/domesticated dualisms into a fourfold range of possibilities can be rearranged, by Sahlins, into one overall human ontology. De Almeida then shows us how the connections still matter, even in one connected system. The ontologies under comparison in this first half of our discussion tend to come named and placed, associated with particular peoples. Thus the premise of a comparative ethnography, peoples with their cultures, tends to organize the units compared. Starting from the reality of culture, this discussion seriously and systematically addresses comprehensive comparative issues, and with a comity that comes from acknowledgment of shared goals and premises.

Our second and more openly political loop of critique and response does not locate the ontological turn within a discipline exploring differences and anticipating peoples, places, and cultures. Fortun seeks an anthropology relevant to manifest power especially in the environments of a planet remade by extractive industries. Fischer equally reflects and reflects upon the history of studies of imperialisms and the legacies not so much of Lévi-Straussian ethnological science as Foucauldian critique of scientific knowledge/power. Latour's leadership in the ontological turn is therefore put to a much more caustic test—though perhaps no more or less fundamental—by scholars who share a sensibility with him of the priority of the praxis of construction.

But in the end, we still await Latour's considered response. There are several open questions. For example, we might look forward to a reply from Latour to Fischer's depiction of Descola's ontology as one that humanizes all actants, and Latour's as an antihumanism reconstituting everything as things, with agency primarily in emergences. And perhaps above all the political questions seem salient. Ironically, I am not sure whether this is because they are more fundamental, or if they simply speak to the contemporary imaginary, our discipline not merely as it is but as it wishes to be. If the first half of this discussion proves that we are and can be, still, the social science that seeks to understand rather than reduce or explain away real human differences, the second half demonstrates our impatience with mere insight in preference to a wish not merely to understand the world but also to intervene in it, a premise, figured variously (in humanitarian and human rights crises, in increasing class domination, in Anthropocene nightmares), that Rome is burning and we should not fiddle. Without Latour's reply, one might be left with the significant misunderstanding that his associology must intrinsically lack politics. In fact, taking up Fortun's challenging questions and comments, I actually want to add to his difficulties, and opportunities, here, by remembering something of the history of his critical political observations and even interventions.

The Latour of new social science burst onto the intellectual scene in the mid-1980s with fundamental challenges to the quickly normalizing nexus of Foucault- and Bourdieu-inspired social science. Power had a pride of place, the substructure to things, and puzzle solving in this Foucauldian-Bourdieuian social science was



frequently the task of finding the politics of things not yet properly understood. The Latour of the 1984 text “War and peace of microbes,” translated into English in 1988 as the first half of *The pasteurization of France* (Latour [1984] 1988), did not overturn the priority of power, but, in keeping with trends in French philosophy (Deleuze 1972; Badiou 1988), pushed new questions about emergence and its relations with power dynamics. Latour anticipated the distinction later brilliantly captured by Michael Hardt in his decision to translate Antonio Negri’s division of power between constituted power and constituent power as Power capital-*P* and power small-*p* (see Negri 1999). Latour, contrasting his own study of the emergence of Pasteur and his biology with Foucauldian concepts of epistemic break and powerful discourses, criticized scholars of domination and discipline who “can begin their analysis only at the point where almost everything is over” ([1984] 1988: 140). In this light, he might feel that he has already answered objections about the priority of power in place, decades ago.

But there is something interesting here. In this 1984/English version 1988 passage, he concluded, “to limit the analysis to this coercion is to understand nothing that has happened before. . . . There is no shortage of sociologists to do that. They think that they are denouncing power and ignore the decades during which the hygienist movement was trying to claim power, without having it, by looking in such unexpected places as the laboratory” (ibid.: 140). So, in this version, there is actually a division of labor in the study of power. There is no shortage of research on the side that thinks it denounces power by studying coercion—and, we might add, thinking of Fortun, the catastrophe consequent on the impunity of consolidated power. In 1984 (there’s a neutral year), Latour pushed hard to open critique of emergence of power unseen by this other critical science.

But is this division of labor still viable? Is the solution to the challenge of constituted power to be insistence on the significance of emergent phenomena, the point that each side should respect the contributions to the study of power from the other? Fortun’s and Fischer’s arguments show more than a little restiveness over the proposition that emergence studies can make its contribution by supplement. And, as Latour’s AIME project has developed, seeking an increasing range of redefinition of enunciative regimes and the interactive realities of various kinds of truth, is there no room left for two kinds of study of power, armies of angry sociologists notwithstanding? We can all look forward to Latour’s thoughts on these and the other questions raised here.

The politics of difference and the politics of power, the actual range of human realities and the modes of science that can apprehend, and perhaps intervene: anthropological questions now configure ontologically.

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