

the recall of modernity

Anthropological Approaches

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— ABSTRACT

What has happened to the project of ‘symmetrical anthropology’ in the last twenty years? What difference does it make to consider a multiplicity of cultures over the background of a unified nature, or a multiplicity of natures in addition to a multiplicity of cultures? In which way does it open up another type of scientific anthropology, no longer based on comparison but on ‘diplomacy’? Can modernity, as an interpretation of the former West, be recalled?

— INTRODUCTION

When a company has distributed a product which it subsequently realises has some defect, it carries out a *recall* process, usually by way of advertisement. In no way does this recall aim to damage the product, nor, of course, to lose market share. Rather, it has quite the opposite strategy. By showing consumers the care it takes with the quality control of its goods and the safety of their users, it wants to demonstrate initiative, rebuild media confidence, and, if possible, recommence the production that was too quickly halted. It is in this sense—a little strange, but I will explain below—that I would like to put forward the idea of a recall of modernity, while at the same time, of course, retaining the allusion to the more literal sense of a return to founding principles, as well as my own intended meaning of an inquiry into what’s gone wrong with modernity, a dysfunction which too often tends to go unnoticed—hence the usefulness of this little recall.

I would like to pass quickly over these last thirty years, because this new seminar series is devoted to working out the empirical future of anthropology.¹ Nevertheless, I hope it will

be useful to glance briefly behind us, since the line of inquiry I have been pursuing all this time remains, despite everything, quite marginal. I'd like to thank Philippe Descola for accepting me, even on a provisional basis, into the ranks of this discipline whose colours I take on a bit like the jay sporting the feathers of the peacock.

I could call the first part of my talk: 'Summarising the earlier situation: Definition of so-called symmetrical anthropology'. For the second part, I would like to contrast the first kind of anthropology with what I would like to call a 'diplomatic' anthropology, equally scientific but in a different way. Finally, in the third part, by far the most difficult, I would briefly like to sketch out a program for the contemporary definition of modernity. As I proceed, I will explain what I mean by these terms.

— SUMMARISING THE EARLIER SITUATION: DEFINITION OF SO-CALLED SYMMETRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

My contribution to anthropology can be summed up by a sentence written exactly thirty years ago, almost to the day, when, scarcely having arrived in Abidjan, I decided to get a Fulbright scholarship to go to California and work in Roger Guillemin's laboratory: 'To apply ethnographic methods to scientific practice.' I would like to go over the reasons this little phrase had such significant effects on my actual conception of an *anthropological* project.

If we look back to thirty years ago, we can assess without too much trouble the path taken: social or cultural anthropology took care of cultures; physical or biological anthropology took care of nature. It was all quite obvious, in that distant past (but remaining, however, alive and well in teaching, the usual way the discipline presents itself) that the world could be studied in two incommensurable ways: one way being veiled, dressed, covered, hot, and the other naked, cold, even frozen; shall we say a metaphorical way and a literal way. Savage thought and scientific thought did not have any viable points of contact between them, even if, sometimes, they came wonderfully close, like iridescent interferences, because the former would cover the latter with a coat of many colours, completely foreign to the cold objective nature of things. Of course, one could embark on a history of scientific thought—French epistemology was right in there—but the aim of that project was to uncover, to lift even more veils from scientific thought in order to 'liberate' it even more fully from any remaining traces of irrationality, symbolism, metaphor or ideology which may have clung to the free exercise of Reason. Thanks to epistemology, we always knew exactly why Science could be distinguished absolutely, and not relatively, from ideology.

It is easy to understand the consequences, for the anthropological project, of such a division of labour, between cultures in the plural and nature in the singular. The very multiplicity of cultures only became clearly visible when set against the plain and homogeneous background of 'nature'. One could even say, without upsetting anthropologists, that the courage with

which they took on the diversity of cultures probably came from the assurance that nature was objective and cold, and certainly unmoved by and indifferent to humans, certainly without any symbolic value; but there it was, playing its role as background with robust confidence. It is so much easier to cash in on multiplicity when one can secretly rely on an unquestionable prior unification. For example, one can register so much more easily the various ways of understanding conception if one knows that physiology provides the one and only definition of the biological way of having children. Coming back from the tropics, anthropologists could always settle back into their scientific certitudes just like monks in prayer could lean against their misericords when they began to weaken a little ... Even if their own discipline never quite managed to achieve the required unity to pass the Science with a capital S test, anthropologists could always borrow from other more advanced areas the expected benefit of certainty. And we have to give them credit for having tried everything: from linguistics to economics, from demography to systems theory, from neurobiology to sociobiology. The fundamental point about this classical, or rather modern, situation is that at the end of the day the assertion of multiplicity didn't have much traction because it could not get a grip on anything really important. It didn't have any durable ontological grounding. The really real, the true and authentic reality, remained firmly unified under the auspices of nature.

So for thirty years I have thought this division of labour impossible to maintain. Of course, even if I wasn't aware of all the consequences, it seemed to me clear from the start that the project of a self-reflective anthropology had an asymmetry quite close to fakery. The reason for this is simple and has become commonplace now, but, rest assured, it wasn't at the time: my teachers at ORSTOM² had no hesitation in going ahead and finding in the African cultures they were studying the central kernel which would explain their coherence; and I have no reason to doubt that they achieved this in the process of doing their extremely refined analyses of the Alladians, the Baoulés or the Mossi traders. I can say without a trace of irony that their intelligence amazed me. But despite all this I was struck by the fact that when they turned their tools, concepts or methods on themselves, towards us, towards Paris, they modestly stated that they could deal with 'only certain aspects' of contemporary society, the aspects which seemed to me the most folkloric, archaic or superficial, or in any case the least central ones of modern societies. Unless—and everything was poised on this word—unless they *changed their methods completely* and started to trace the emergence of reason, of nature and of the modern economy in their battle with tradition, culture and superstition. We have already forgotten this period, thank goodness, but let me remind you of the mountains of discussion, documentary films, newspaper articles, theses and studies of peoples 'pushed and pulled', 'torn' or 'divided' between 'modernity' and 'tradition'. Of course, this idea still crops up from time to time, but the fervency is gone—I'll come back to this. So at the

time it seemed we could either carry out a genuine anthropology (by studying the centre of other cultures or the margins of our own) or recognise that we were torn between an anthropologisable existence and another radically 'unanthropologisable' way of being in the world.

Now, from that moment on, I started saying one of two things to myself: either we are much too *arrogant* when we pretend to analyse cultures in all their centrality, or we are much too modest when we set ourselves up to study our own societies and are content to nibble at the edges, without having a go at the central kernel: reason, nature, let us say what I call the three sisters, the three conjoined divinities: (technical) Efficiency, (economic) Profitability and (scientific) Objectivity. So I said to myself that we need to 'symmetrise' these approaches by imagining a more controlled equilibrium, which would not at the outset tip the scales as if someone had thrown Brennus' sword on them: a bit more restraint here, a bit more audacity there. In practice this came down to using the same ethnographic methods for the 'whites' and the 'blacks', for scientific and 'primitive' thought, but actually it came down to being very cautious about the very idea of 'thought'. Lucky for me I didn't know I was embarking on an adventure which would have a few repercussions.

I will omit the biographical or even academic details of no relevance for you, but I want to retain one point from this adventure. When we symmetrise the approaches in this way we notice with some alarm that the notions used to come to terms with the hard kernel of 'cultures' elicit, when we apply them to the heart of our societies (scientific reason in short) not only the indignant refusal of the practitioners, but also a profound feeling of dissatisfaction ... Everything I learnt during two years' fieldwork in Abidjan seemed pretty useless after two days in the Roger Guillemin laboratory at the Salk Institute, not to mention the uselessness of my five years of epistemology courses ... I must admit I still haven't got over this event. You can't go very far with ritual-myth-symbol in a laboratory.

But anyway, one of two things: either the Californian researchers managed to extract themselves from the narrow prison of their cultures in order to access nature, and that would explain why ideas imported from Africa to study cultures in the plural could not work. Clothed thought can't be used to understand naked thought; or, to speak more philosophically, secondary qualities cannot be used to think about primary qualities. Or ... or ... and I hesitate to continue with this second branch of the alternative in front of such an inner sanctum of anthropologists, the reasons given for the existence of cultures in the plural were not, after all, all that powerful ... If anthropological explanations, once they are applied to the exact sciences, give such an impression of incongruity, weakness, even of foolishness, it is perhaps because the occasion to become aware of the weakness is lacking under tropical conditions, but hits you full in the face in the Californian air-conditioned rooms. This is the

experience I lived through and from which I tried to draw out all the consequences with a fair amount of obstinacy. It was not that the sciences were all that hard to study, on the contrary, I think that my colleagues and I have shown this, but rather that they furnished the first real *test* where the essential fragility of the fundamental categories of anthropological explanation showed up most unequivocally.

To sum up my diagnosis, using terms too abstractly, this weakness came from an unmotivated separation between the unity (of nature) and the multiplicity (of cultures). This separation is too easy, too inexpensive, too automatic; it quickly oversimplifies problems by obtaining unity without much investment—without sciences (in the plural) being able to come on the scene—and it hands out multiplicity, plurality, in a cavalier fashion, forgetting that one can't get away with settling on a representation of the world which would only be 'one representation among many'.

That, I think, is the quickest way to sum up the contribution of science studies to the discipline of anthropology, even if it can only be carried out properly by real anthropologists, and I know that unfortunately I am not one of them. But someone had to take on the task of bringing the discipline back to the exact sciences, and even to the more exact parts of the exact sciences, so that the test of the quality of explanations of nature in terms of cultures could be properly carried out. So first we had to have a resounding failure, so to speak. This is what I call the *Felix culpa* of our sub-discipline: by failing to 'culturally' explain Nature, we have freed up our tools on both sides, both the side of multiplicity and that of unity. I even risk thinking, to take up the title of the chair welcoming us today, that an 'anthropology of nature' would have been less easy and would not have gotten as far without the slightly disorganised efforts of my colleagues and myself in the anthropology of sciences. (For my own part, I would be quite proud if I had the role of *ancilla anthropologiae Descolae!*)³

Whatever the case, the outcome is clear: the old way of dividing unity from multiplicity has now gone. On the side of nature we speak freely of 'multinaturalism', as Viveiros de Castro has shown us.⁴ And on the side of the former cultures we speak, following Marshall Sahlins, about the emergence of *new* cultures. We've gotten into this bath, but will Anthropology's swimming lessons save us before we go under?

So that is how I would sum up the key episodes in a brief run down of the last thirty years. Permit me to encapsulate all this in two slogans.

The first slogan is 'We have never been modern'⁵. This phrase is simply the consequence I derived about fifteen years ago from the programme I sketched in broad brush strokes above. What sums up western history is not the emergence of nature in the middle of cultures—as if just one of these cultures would have the extraordinary privilege of being able to grasp nature in all its nakedness, in some way divested of all its various bits of clothing—

but, quite to the contrary, the engagement, on quite a new scale, of *collectives* (the technical term I use to make it clear that it is neither a question of nature or of cultures) bringing multiplicities together. Moderns, far from presenting us with the image (both flattering and desperate) of beings finally naked in a world of richly decked out cultures, present us quite to the contrary with a huge procession of beings clothed, attached, immersed and implicated to ever greater degrees in the most intimate properties of evolving cosmoses. Sciences, far from presenting us the cold and indifferent countenance of absolute objectivity, offer instead the aspect, which is actually familiar to us, of a rich production of associations and attachments with beings of varied ontological status and of always greater relativity, which is to say in the etymological sense of always more related to each other. There are no longer arrangements on one side that can be anthropologised, and on the other things that cannot be. Moderns, on the contrary, present an interesting enigma for anthropologists, a point to which I shall return.

The second slogan to conclude this section is: 'postmodernism is a useful transition'. In fact, before going any further, I should point out a misunderstanding. The French, having sold postmodernism to the whole world, are proud of never having partaken of it, a little like cynical pushers who would sell coke, but only drink Coke. Now, postmodernism is an indispensable moment needed to get out of modernism, but precisely on the condition of getting out. As its name indicates, postmodernism is a way of using modernism without being sure that it is right. It extends it as it weakens it. Why? Well, simply because it uses, to try to understand the former unity of modernism, the very definition of multiplicity, or pluralism that modernism threw out in order to understand cultural diversity, that is, diversity only of cultures. This is where the weakness of the notion of 'deconstruction' lies. If the post-modern project of 'multiculturalism' seems to us to be so dim-witted, and if the use people sometimes make of it to talk about nature seems to be so PC, or even shocking, it is only because it is redeploying the definition that modernism always gave to the multiple, a multiple without any ontological anchorage, without any attempt at realism. Yes, of course, post-modern multiplicity is slapdash, but no more or less than the *unity* which modernism all too quickly latched on to. In consequence, the main virtue of postmodernism is to have shown the absurdity of modernism by applying its own notion of plurality to it. Certainly this kind of pluralism pulls the wool over our eyes, but the modernist unification of the world was itself a fake. In any case, the hope of exiting postmodernism by rebecoming, or by remaining or by finally becoming 'resolutely modern', as so many high-minded thinkers do, is without doubt even more absurd than staying postmodern ... As far as I am concerned, I think it would be more honest for the French to take some of those hard drugs they were happy to peddle around the campuses. The postmodern is an interesting symptom of transition,

let's accept it as such, use it to bring about the end of modernism more quickly, and, for goodness sake ... let's talk about something else.

— ON THE CONTRAST BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGY AND DIPLOMACY

I would like to spend my time on another little task. I could, of course, build on all the preceding points in some detail, but I would prefer to take them as given, even if I know I would be in the wrong to accept them as a common place. Since we find ourselves gathered here in the College de France this evening, let us use the time to push ahead with the project of a symmetrical anthropology, which, in the absence of an ad-hoc term, I am obliged to call 'non-modern'.

If we sum up the situation in a couple of sentences, it is quite clear: modernism was offering a division between unity (of nature) and multiplicity (of cultures); this division became untenable as the result of a series of events among which we would have to list little intellectual movements like the anthropology of sciences and postmodernism as well as massive events like the weakening of Europe and concurrent globalisations. So we now have to pose the following question: which anthropology is capable of *distributing* unity and multiplicity *in a different way*? In other words, which anthropology is capable (a) of 'registering' both the double shock of multinaturalism and multiculturalism by abandoning (b) the notion of nature along with the notion of cultures without in the process (c) losing the project of unification which was part of the notion of nature as well as the engagement in the human habitat which was part of the notion of culture?

To be more precise, I propose—borrowing an expression from Isabelle Stengers—to call the successor to the first anthropology 'diplomatic'.⁶ Note that this does not mean abandoning the anthropo-logical line: we will still very much be dealing with a 'logos' and an 'anthropos', but probably no longer with a 'science' of man in the sense that modernism chose to give to the word 'logos' by simplifying it a little too quickly. In other words, this anthropology would like to take over the running of the same enterprise. Diplomats, too, attach themselves to the *logos*. They have the gift of speech, they have a way with people, but they have to divide unity and multiplicity in quite other ways from the scientist of the first kind of anthropology who could respect multiplicity because he knew from unquestioned and solid science just what unity was. As Stengers explains, the diplomat is a figure who is both older than and younger than that of the scientist.

In the case of the old-style nature, the thing is pretty simple. As Philippe Descola has shown, plenty of things are mixed up under this heading, but in particular three: reality, exteriority and unity. These three elements of the older nature can now go their own way, and one immediately notices, by way of some history of science, just to what extent they

were never in step with each other. Unification, in particular, remains something to be done in the future, it cannot be the world is presenting itself to us as if it were in some way already unified. The 'pluriverse', as William James used to say, cannot be confused with the universe. Interminable quarrels about genetics here offer a particularly striking example.

As far as the former cultures go, the situation changes symmetrically. Under this heading we would have obtained multiplicity, but on condition of breaking contact with reality, as if it were not possible to obtain 'several' except in the name of the most unbridled fantasy, or, via another solution, of a fantasy regulated by structural transformations which bracket out the key questions of truth and access to the real. I remember a few years ago trying to discuss, with Sahlins and his students, the precautions we always have to take when we speak of 'cosmologies' in the plural, and of the obligation that one would then have to cross the courtyard of the University of Chicago in order to find out what the physicists might think of this plural if it were applied to *their* cosmology. Sahlins had no trouble admitting that his colleagues in physics would surely scream at the mere mention of a plurality of cosmologies, but, to my great surprise, he added that we didn't have to take much notice of these screams. I am sure of the opposite, not because I am frightened of scientists screaming, but simply because they offer a unique chance to listen to the power of the screams of the Others, the former 'others', at the idea that their cosmology might only be, in the end, an example 'among others' in a multiplicity, without any *privileged* contact with reality. There is so much violence in this assertion.

Because of the object I chose to study, I think I am more or less the only ethnographer who has been able to verify, through experience, all the dangers of this untenable position; untenable for the experimenter as much as the experimented. I have always thought that Alan Sokal, of the unfortunate eponymous affair, was not defending physicists, but everybody, myself included, when he protested so vociferously against the cheap relativism of a multiplicity obtained with so little effort. Of course I didn't follow up on the consequences he drew from his scream; that doesn't mean he wasn't right to scream (if I thought what he believed I thought, I too would protest out loud). It is that the argument, to my eyes, had always been symmetrical: if the unity of nature is in *front* of us, not behind us, then multiplicity of cultures can't be obtained by *dissolving* contact with a privileged point of view. None of us, I believe, would be happy to have just 'one vision among others' of the world. It is the notion of point of view, and especially of *privilege* which must, in turn, undergo modification. A point of view of the world which has no privilege does not seem to me to offer the slightest interest. So if we have to scream it is for two reasons: when we have a multiplicity without reality foisted on us, and when cut-price unification is unloaded on us.

But what changes even more radically, as soon as one imagines a diplomatic anthropology which puts into question both the idea of nature and that of culture, is obviously the very

identity of those fluid yet indispensable categories circulating around what is called the West. Once when we were modern, or rather, since we have never been modern, when we used to flatter ourselves by calling ourselves modern, the West could remain a floating and fluid idea, vague yet self-satisfied as it presided over the stripping of cultures everywhere. We could say that the West was there wherever the three goddess sisters revealed themselves in all their glory: Efficiency, Profitability and Objectivity. This revelation is exhilarating yet saddening because the richly coloured cloth of culture would tear to reveal the cold nudity of objects stripped of any human sense. (By the way, let me note a quite amusing thing, that the fantasy of the occidental conquerors—covering up the shocking nudity of savages—has always represented the exact inverse of their own pretension: to see the naked truth behind the veils of metaphor and symbol. As we shall see, this is what makes the moderns quite interesting: they always do the opposite of what they say!)

But now, that West has become a dream, or rather a divinity requiring its own anthropological inquiry. If we move from scientific anthropology to diplomatic anthropology, from the modernist *logos* to the non-modernist one, we are obliged to recognise that now we have to really ask ourselves where exactly the old West is. On which horizon is that sun setting? In which institution? Whose office? Answer: the West and Westerners no longer exist. What a relief! From now on there will be Europeans, North Americans, Japanese, Canadians, Turks, as well as all the ancient cultures already collected in Area Files, to which we will now have to add the ever-growing collection of neo-cultures which are popping up, any old how, from one end of the planet to the other. Quite a few of them, you might say? Yes of course *there are lots of them*, but at least we know that, if now there are so many of us, nobody can divide this crowd into those who are part of the West—with direct access to the nudity of nature—and those who would only be grouped with ‘the cultures’. Without mentioning those, now gone, which used to be, as they said, ‘torn between archaism and modernity’, or that they were living ‘in a land of contrasts’. Give me a break! Crowds, fine; but on the other hand, emptiness cleans things up!

If the idea of the West has set just like the occidental setting sun it is named after, what remains? We are here in the College de France, so couldn't we concern ourselves, at the end of the day, with smaller entities, like Europe, or even France, why indeed not? I guess it is a bit like every man for himself now. No-one can stick their neck out and speak ‘in the name of the West’. This is one of the great lessons of our postmodern friends, a negative one no doubt, but still a lesson. If the North Americans want to play their game well, good luck to them, and I hope they make peace overtures to us too. I am no more capable of speaking in their name than in ours.

In order to bring home to you the sense of the complete change of scene, I want to be quite clear in what I say. It is no longer western anthropological science which speaks of other

cultures while avoiding speaking of itself, or sheds tears while it watches other cultures disappear and be replaced by the inevitable cold surfaces of modernisation, or even that is delighted to see all these cultures melt slowly in the common crucible of planetary reason. No, not at all. Now, for the diplomat, the project is at the same time less grandiose, riskier, but also more vital and less condescending: *how to survive a bit longer?* The time has passed for the White Man to grieve, like Sisyphus or Atlas, over the weight of his legendary burden. These pretentious lamentations are of no interest to anybody. The question is rather: will anyone still be interested at all, at the end of the current century, in our various European projects? Will Galileo be taught at Shanghai University in 2075? Will the work of Spencer, Spengler or Boas mean anything for students in Bombay in 2080? Will cultural anthropology carry any weight for Javanese doctoral students in 2090? Do we really need to interrogate ourselves over anthropology's colonial, imperialist, chauvinist and racist character, as still often happens in the departments across the Atlantic, while the current problem, it seems to me, is to make European difference *exist* in the context of a project of planetary convocation, a convocation which no doubt got off to a bad start, but which should nonetheless be continued. The problem of the 'White man's burden' is more likely that pretty soon he runs the risk of only having a very small pack to carry on his ever weakening shoulders ...

From here we have a complete reversal of the diplomatic project. It is no longer just a question of knowing—of course we still have to know—but one has to be capable of a sustainable existence in one's own place. If it is true that it was the Europeans who invented modernity, it is important that they are able, if I dare say, to 'uninvent' it, or more precisely, to 'recall' it, just as industries recall defective products. (The recall of modernity should be understood, as I said at the beginning, in all the senses of this sonorous little word). This implies two intimately related tasks for any symmetrical anthropology. The first is to finally write its own history, the second is to be able, once having changed its spots, to appear once again in front of other peoples with a new peace offering. Diplomats are used to these kinds of redefinitions, they always know how to rephrase their requirements, this is why they are cleverer than scientist-philosophers. But they run the risk, or course, of being called unscrupulous traitors.

In the time remaining I would like briefly to sketch out these two tasks in order to show clearly why anthropology is not, as it is often thought to be, an exhausted discipline at the end of its life, but rather like a babe in arms which has its whole future in front of it. But this depends on whether we know how to take care of this child.

— PROGRAMME FOR A CONTEMPORARY DEFINITION OF MODERNITY

In this third and last part, I would like to ask a fundamentally simple question. Since the moderns were *never contemporary with themselves*, could they become so now?

If the expression ‘we have never been modern’ seemed so bizarre, it was because it expressed a particular imbalance among the moderns and which for a long time rendered their study, and therefore their representation of themselves impossible. I could just as well have used the happy formulation, attributed to Plains Indians in the Westerns, ‘Beware of the White Man, he speaks with forked tongue’ ... In other words, can these former moderns, the former westerners, finally talk straight? Or even, can they finally be of their time? The obsession with time, novelty, innovation and progress cannot hide the extraordinary inconsistency in these moderns’ definition of themselves: they always do exactly the opposite of what they say.

This is what always struck me about them, and made me, over the last thirty years, want to study them (North Americans, Europeans, French) over and above the Baoulés or the Alladians. It’s their exoticism that fascinates me—even, of course, if it is not a matter of substituting the blackness of occidentalism for the paleness of orientalism. Now for a few examples to remind us of the main outcomes of the considerable research which has been done in this area.

The above-mentioned moderns presented themselves to history as those who would in the end be *orn away* from all archaic and natural determinations; so what did they do then? They multiplied their attachments, at an ever increasing scale, to an ever more intimate degree of involvement, with those (ever more numerous and heterogeneous) who allowed them to exist. They speak of emancipation at the very same time that they have to take charge, via legal, technical, mechanical and human means, of beings as vast as the climate, oceans, forests, genes ... a strange liberation which has done the opposite: created attachments! They always assert, with a superior smile, that they have emancipated themselves from the earlier times of ‘their ancestors the Gauls’ who feared nothing except, as the French proverb goes, that ‘the sky fall on their heads’, and they assert this while they gather in Rio, in Kyoto, or in the Hague to collectively fight against global warming ... They speak of scientific objectivity, as if the sciences were the site of maximum distanciation between object and subject, whereas fact-making is where you can detect the maximum imbrication between the subjective and objective capacities of beings which the *libido sciendi* has allowed to fuse in the laboratory. This is a strange objectivity which reminds us, on the contrary, of the venerable etymology which Heidegger attributed to the *thing*, *causa*, *res*, *chose*, *ding*, at the same time physical cause and juridical cause, affair, assembly, grouping, care and objects ...⁷ Yes, these Whites certainly have a forked tongue. As far as I am concerned, this is what makes them so interesting, and, after all, attractive ... How can one speak, for example, about *homo oeconomicus*, when the smallest inquiry into economic anthropology, the tiniest little tweaking of experimental economics, shows to what extent one has to be equipped with diverse tools in order to carry out the simplest calculation of profit? Not once in their short history have the moderns

succeeded in gaining objectivity, efficiency, profitability and formalism, which they nevertheless pretend constitute their manufacturing secret, gained with means which would themselves be objective, efficient, profitable and formal. Yes indeed, 'naturalism', to pick up on the expression which Philippe Descola gives to this mode of identification with non-humans, offers a truly extreme case of anthropomorphism, a real passion for the political manipulation of objects.⁸

Of course this enigma can't simply be put down to notions of ambivalence, dissimulation, lying or bad faith. As I have often maintained (without, it is true, yet having been able to prove it with a systematic comparative study), the energy of the modernists came in large part, until recently, from their unshakeable belief that they were ahead of the rest, that they were emancipated, that they were close to the nature of things, that they were in agreement because of Objectivity, Profitability and Efficiency all coming together. This is the very thing, as I have shown several times, which defined the modern arrow of time: 'Yesterday we were archaic because we were still mixing up the clothed and the naked, the scientist and the savage, the real and the imaginary, facts and values, but tomorrow, without a shadow of doubt, yes, tomorrow, without doubt, the separation will be much greater, tomorrow we will see much more clearly, tomorrow we will be able to grasp the thing itself, in all its nakedness.' Being blind towards oneself: that was an integral part of the very modernity machine of the moderns. How else, without that, were they able to believe, for example, in the economy, that huge externalisation machine which still needs, in order to exist, everything it throws out? How, without that, were they able to believe in the formal description of formalism? Being blind to one's own capacity for enlightenment is already a pretty remarkable thing, but even more amazing is the capacity of the moderns to be blind to the very operation of critique, to the revelation of their own bad faith, as if it were necessary for them, while in the process of denouncing their own crimes, to create an apocalyptic drama about it. This is what the sociology of critique has recently demonstrated.⁹

What gives us licence today to speak of 'belief', 'blindness', 'forked tongues' and the 'sociology of critique' is the progressive realisation of moderns themselves that in the end they never were. Sobering up bit by bit, they have stopped being Westerners, and have become Europeans, North Americans, French, Japanese etc, each is looking for a home base, an attachment or a new place to become themselves again in what today we call the 'risk society', 'second modernisation', 'globalisation', a whole string of fairly recent terms which come down to saying, basically and on every register, 'The West no longer exists', or, to pick up on the phrase which I placed at the heart of diplomatic anthropology, 'How can unity and multiplicity be kick-started again? How can we bring the planet together again without this same sort of division into States—in the sense of the Third Estate—which would allow for

the division between nature and cultures?' Europeans are all the more inclined to ask themselves this question now that modernism doesn't seem quite so innocent, progressive, inevitable, and now that it is as manifest in Beijing skyscrapers, in South Asian information technology, and in the huge banks of Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Suddenly, taken off balance, the Europeans want to say to the newly modernised who are beginning to dominate them by way of global markets, 'Hey, wait a minute, *that's* not *only* what modernisation is!'—'Oh really? Sahib, me not know, me believe, you convince me ...' And Peter Sloterdijk puts it very nicely: globalisation seemed such a nice thing when we were the only ones to draw profit from it ...

What an unbelievable mess. Suddenly those who modernised 'first' and then wanted to modernise the planet, are finding all sorts of faults with modernisation now that it is, as they say, 'aped' by the others. 'Aped?' Well, well. Is it possible that modernity and its secrets have always, in the end, related to something else? Is it possible that we have always lived, in fact, with the help of other divinities? Could exteriorisation have always survived thanks to interiorisation? Formalism through the non-formal? Could emancipation have always been, in the end, a big reattachment project? Isn't it funny to notice that the same people who were unmoved by modern universalisation, are out in the streets protesting, with the tear-gas and barricades, as soon as anyone mentions 'globalisation'?

In any case, the situation has become clearer. We Europeans have never been modern; the West has disappeared, along with universality, and yet the requirements of the global are still around. Europe is unthinkable, unliveable, without a globalisation project, a planetary convocation. But this convocation, for which anthropology has always been the master of ceremonies, and, as it were, the head of protocol, cannot be done by setting out an array of all the Other cultures against the backdrop of nature, there to be knowable by one special one amongst them, ours of course ... end of chapter one of anthropology. One can of course carry on 'deconstructing' it, by piling up the infamous stigmata of 'colonial', 'imperialist', 'ethnocentric', but that is really of no importance. The problem is not one of endless deconstruction, but rather one of sustaining, in the midst of all this turmoil, the fragile habitat of a version of the *original European universe*. What matters is that anthropology continue. And that it transforms as it becomes another project, a new 'logos', a new total science of the human assembly or convocation.

— WHAT MATTERS MORE THAN LIFE TO US?

As I would like to contribute to this relaunching of the anthropological project, to this transferral of the former aims of planetary convocation, I should, as a good diplomat, outline the ending of my proposition. This is not a take-it-or-leave-it science, it does not define facts

about which I could say, banging my fist on the table, that 'they are there whether you like it or not'. This science depends on a representation which in turn depends on a far-reaching modification of Europeans' self-representation. Once the diplomat has presented the facts, the adversarial parties henceforth have to like them, appreciate them, share them, or at least put up with them. This is what distinguished the second empiricism from the first. The earlier moderns might now jump up saying, 'Aha! If we were always different from what we thought we were, the contrast which we were always supposed to have with the 'others' can change, and, all of a sudden, we can present ourselves again to the rest of the world, but a little differently.'

It is here that things become really interesting as they become more complicated. How would the rest of the world respond if Europeans no longer presented themselves as the modern avant-garde of a universal convocation project in the form of cultures set against a backdrop of nature, but in the more modest and considerate clothing of a planetary diplomacy which would take on the task, because of its track record in such matters, of proposing, as it were, the first presentations? 'Here is our peace offering.'

No example is more striking than that of the history of European sciences, because now we know, thanks to our colleagues in history, that that essential feature of western history, the emergence of universal sciences, is no longer what distinguishes us from the others (as if we had nature and they had to make do with their cultures) but on the contrary, as what enables us to start speaking again with the others. You will recall that Galileo, treated in the old manner, brought into history the proverbial 'epistemological rupture', the aim of which was to render Italian or world history incompatible with the arrival of a physics which was at last rational. But the Galileo of contemporary history, the Galileo turned once again into a contemporary of the Medicis and the cardinals, of reading glasses and fortifications, of exegesis and the Academia, that Galileo certainly ruptures Italian and European history, he certainly brings about an enormous event in the history of physics, perhaps even in the history of the cosmos, but, and everything hinges on this difference, this event no longer quite squares with the major division between nature and cultures. This event begins to differ, freely and irreducibly, without being able to exactly cut itself off, like the knife of epistemological rupture, from 'all the rest'. And I could say the same thing about Newton, Pasteur, Einstein and Poincaré (here I am thinking of the recent work by Peter Galison).¹⁰ By making each famous or ignored episode in the history of our sciences newly *contemporary* with each of the key episodes in our common history, or history itself (without going so far as to reduce it to a scrofulous social history) the historical science of sciences has done more than pile erudite fact upon erudite fact: it has, bit by bit, unpicked epistemological errors. It has brought to light beings which are important for the sciences, without immediately covering them up, on the pretext of uncovering their nakedness, with the thick veils of

objectivity. I would say, without fear of exaggeration, that this new form of historical meta-physics has retrospectively given us a liveable and thinkable Europe. It was the deceitful history of sciences made up of radical 'epistemological breaks' which forced us into a position of not being able to understand Europe, and hence not being able to understand the contrast with 'the others'. Everything changes if we finally make our sciences objective and our techniques efficient, yes, that's what I said, if we finally make our sciences objective and our techniques efficient. *By changing the history of sciences, Europe changes history itself.* All of a sudden we retrospectively see that the others are no longer the 'others' in the same way. So if they are no longer the others like before, it finally becomes possible for us to represent ourselves to them in a different fashion. Anthropology will only definitively shift its project when it finally becomes involved seriously with the history of sciences, which unfortunately means, probably, 'when pigs fly backwards'.

Of course it is a pity not to have begun the negotiations with this polite form of self-presentation. In Gaza, Lima, Sydney or Beijing, Europeans might be taken a little more seriously if they started proposals for peace in the 17th, 18th, 19th or even 20th century: when we were in a strong position, when we thought we were modern, when we were 'western'. In this sudden politeness there is a form of abasement, one must admit, a recognition that if we have become so cautious, civilised and considerate, it is because we suddenly feel weak, less numerous, stacked on the end of our little peninsula, begging for a little bit of attention and affection from other peoples we dominated for a long time who are now little by little becoming supremely indifferent towards us ... You have to say that in Djakarta, Salvador da Bahia, Saint Louis in Reunion or Goa, they must be making fun of us a bit, as they hear us all of a sudden speaking about 'risk society', 'precautionary principles', 'ecology' 'alter-globalisation', 'sustainable development' and 'cultural exceptions'. Really, what a pity 'cultural exception' wasn't a defensible idea at the time of the fall of Algiers; 'precautionary principles', how interesting, that would really have come in handy while cultures were being systematically destroyed; 'alter-globalisation', 'alter', is this for real?; 'sustainable development', god only knows if this principle would have been welcome when the Middle West was being occupied. Haven't the former colonies the right to ask us, 'But, shouldn't you have thought of all these great revisions to your history *before now?*' Yes, of course, we 'should have' thought of them before, it would have been better to change our image of ourselves before the killing and scorching, before having given birth to the planet the way it is, before having globalised, before having forced everyone else to modernise in turn ... But the real is not rational and history never expresses its own teleology. The failure of the modernisation project has left us with responsibilities, ones which remain in the de-modernisation project. Let us take them on board at least. This time willingly, somewhat sheepishly hiding behind the proverb, 'It's never too late to do the right thing'.

So the question is now; having become contemporaries of themselves, the former Westerners, now having come down to earth, and perhaps now Europeans (and there of course lies, as everyone knows, a huge work-site, itself enormously confused, but I have to simplify) decide to present themselves in a different way to the others and to do so in a fashion that I would call *polite*, I can't think of any other word. Where does this politeness come from? It comes from the diplomat, who, in calling together the assembly, but in no measure controlling its form or content, can only address the others by talking more or less like this: 'This is what we, from our side, have decided to hang on to like grim death, without which we would lose our identity'. So for an anthropology of the contemporary world the question becomes one of defining the essential requirements, this good old core which the former anthropology (the tropical one) believed it could decipher pretty quickly among other peoples, among the former 'others'.

But one can't begin to answer the question, 'What matters more than life to us?' if we think we know ourselves under the conventional forms of modernity, of the West. If we respond in one voice to the question of essential requirements by saying, 'What matters to us? But that's obvious: reason, science, universality, democracy, well-being, emancipation', then we would no longer be on the road to an inquiry, or to a search for peace. All we would have done is thoughtlessly bang away on the modernist project, the one that linked us all automatically, without discussion, without meeting any opposition, on the same old planet. All we would have done is once again invoke the political and unifying power of nature while continuing to fool ourselves as to our virtues as well as our vices. Yes, there is an additional perversity: the moderns love their vices, they love getting themselves up in monstrous costumes.

So we have to patiently (patience being the first virtue of the diplomat) put the question again: 'What matters more than life to you? What truly defines you?' Once again, there is no better guide than the new understanding of the sciences. Suppose the answer is: 'What matters most to us is scientific rationality'. Fine. I agree. But I also know, I learnt, and I have shown, that scientific rationality depends on a lot of things to make it possible: the whole rich vascularisation which science studies have brought to light, and which had no part to play in the traditional definition of the modernist project. (This is in fact, as I said, the way in which my project of symmetrical anthropology began. They used to say that people of the Ivory Coast had *pre*-scientific thought. It only took a quick study to reverse that idea; why not see, by going to San Diego, what would become of this good old scientific 'thought' once it was subjected to the same kind of study?) You can see why the diplomat is required to be patient, persistent and irritating all at the same time: 'So what really matters to you?' she has to ask again, 'universal scientific reason, or, *what allows* scientific reason to be rational, to become more and more scientific and get closer and closer to universality?' In the face of this repeated obstinate questioning, the modernist is stumped, no clear response is forthcoming.

If he replies angrily, 'In reason alone', he's lost it already since he has lost everything the fragile existence of the sciences depends on ... but if he replies, 'That which makes reason possible and progressively universalisable', then he has entered another world, precisely the one of planetary negotiation. What then do we *really* need to hold our reason in place?

Now you can see why the anthropology of the above moderns adopts a revised method and totally original procedures of inquiry. Moderns are so infrequently contemporary with themselves that one can never know what really matters to them. Of course it is difficult to spend a year in the mud of an Anka village. I admire the patience of my eminent colleagues who are capable of learning the impossible !Kung language. Never, I confess to my shame, would I have the courage to live for a long time with the Nuer, or to eat, for months on end, the Achuars' gluey manioc. But at least, in your patient and admirable labour, you have always had one difficulty less than I have: you are able to get an answer on the question of essential requirements; they know how to say what matters to them, they can show you what they would die of if they lacked it. Sadly the proof is that they do die, and often, before your very eyes. As for the 'Whites who speak with forked tongue', such objectivity is very difficult because they put their pride in a modernity which they cannot sustain. The proof lies in the notion of nature, which Philippe Descola has submitted to a bewildering anthropologising examination in this very room for several years now. Nothing in that long and meticulous inquiry had anything to do with the traditional notion of 'nature' as it was used until recently, as it is still used, in fact, by so many unreflecting scientists and philosophers. What is true about nature can be found in various forms in the technical domain, in religion, economy, politics, art—perhaps a little less in the law. Once again, it is not that the moderns don't know what they want, in which case they would be more or less like everyone else, language not having as its aim the mimicry of everyday practices, rather it is that they always do the opposite of what they say, and that they draw, or rather drew, their enormous energy from their massive disregard of the great gap, suspended under their dwelling, between their existence and their image of themselves, a gap which they carefully maintain.

Can we draw energy once again from a careful and determined regard to *not* allow this crack to open up between, for example, our science and its real conditions of production, between our techniques and whatever makes them occasionally work, between our politics and the practical means that make them occasionally representative, our economies and what really attaches us to the goods we cherish, our religions and what it is that makes them occasionally vital and true, and so on? We probably need to be able to change the overarching metaphor of the supposed 'retreat in advance'. The modern project is always described as a courageous leap performed by some teenage giant, out of the suffocating past, then purposefully turning his glowing face towards the future, a bit like those social-realist statues of heroes who were always moving, stationary, towards a glorious future. We might laugh at

these statues, but we haven't yet really designed our own: I actually think there really is a juvenile giant involved, but one that has until now walked, or rather run, *backwards*, pushing behind him haphazardly everything that is getting in his way, bumping into and destroying everything, without even noticing, since he is looking elsewhere, towards the despised past. This is a retreat, but backwards. Let us imagine that via some miraculous *metanoia*, he finally turns towards the future, he will first throw up his hands in horror in front the disasters in evidence, then, after having mumbled, we can only hope, a few embarrassed excuses, he starts walking again, then this time it will be as if he is walking on eggs, taking every precaution. Fleeing backwards from an archaic past, the teenage giant could see nothing of what he was doing. This is what I wanted to say when I noted that the moderns have until now never been contemporary with themselves. Once turned around however, they will be finally obliged to become 'of their time'. But in another transformation, this time recent and quite unforeseen, they should not be depicted as giants, but rather as dwarfs; they no longer have, unfortunately, a young person's features, but are old, terribly old. Wisdom comes very late, these precautions come very late. Still, the error would be even more compounded if we got the timing wrong.

In point of fact, time is just what I lack to sketch out the research I have been doing for the last fifteen years on these peace propositions, the essential requirements, which for me goes under the title of 'inquiry into regimes of speech'.¹¹ Basically it is about how contemporary societies can be grasped from two sides; the one naturalist and modernist, the other constructivist and non-modern. Tonight I think I have shown that the former does not allow people to understand themselves any more, or to understand others, and even less, of course, to be faithful to their worthy project of unification and pluralism. Now I am wedded to the second. Who are the beings who give Europeans the life to be able to say: 'If we could no longer have these, we would die.' The conditions are quite clear, at least from my point of view:

- These beings must really exist, and we must be able to join with them (in other words our connections are not adequately defined by the idea of emancipation).
- They must be able to be carefully constructed (in other words transcendence is not adequate for them).
- They have to be numerous enough in order to get the double effect of unity and pluralism which defines the very project of a common life—the European extension of the universal.

Each of these beings, transitions and modes of speaking corresponds to an essential requirement, that is, to one of the ways that Europeans have discovered to explore the universal. Hidden under the naturalism of yesteryear, each of these virtues became a poison for anyone

who tried to imitate them; presented once again with their constructivist side, there is nothing to prove that these virtues would not be able to universalise in the end, but this time round really and truly, and, if I might say, according to the rules. It is here that all the meaning of word 'recall' comes out: an industry only undertakes this painful operation in order to push itself even further ahead. Recalling modernity for Europeans cannot mean that they will abandon ambition, but, on the contrary, that they will finally become aware of their responsibility. If the virtues they cherish actually depend on much more complex constructivist workings than they formerly advertised to the outside world, a second phase of modernisation becomes possible. For example, extending Science with a capital S is a quite different affair from one looking to propagate sciences in the plural. If the attractions of the first modernisation have lost some of their sparkle, there is nothing stopping European-style modernisation, once it has got rid of its good as well as its bad conscience, of being seductive once again. I think I am able to show that by respecting the existence of a dozen or so of these beings and regimes of speech, we can respect our heritage and then present ourselves to others, not with pride ('being proud' is not what it is about any more), but rather with some hope of contributing to future peace negotiations. But that is another story I would have qualms to occupy your time with.

You know, people mistakenly think that an anthropology of contemporary worlds is very difficult. One is not necessarily easily locatable because one studies automatic metro systems, the Supreme Court, religious speeches, Louis Pasteur, the Salk laboratories or political representations. I issue regular news bulletins; I let people know exactly where I am by giving with the greatest possible accuracy my longitude and latitude; I believe I publish my results in a clear enough style, and yet it seems that my scientific expedition to the heart of the contemporary jungle is often considered lost, the whole kit and caboodle, just like those of Livingstone and Stanley, though theirs were much older and much more dangerous. I still haven't met anybody who had a fix, even approximately, of the location of the places I had just explored. It is true they are genuine *terrae incognitae*: the causes of modernism at the heart of modernism. I am still waiting for the moment when some anthropologist in a pith helmet, at the turning point of some technical or juridical device, would hold out his hand and greet me by saying, 'Dr Latour, I presume ...'

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1. This text was a lecture in the seminar of Professor Descola at the Collège de France, Paris, taking place on the 26 November 2003. Some aspects of the oral style have been retained. The original French was first published as 'Le rappel de la modernité—approches anthropologiques' in *ethnographiques.org*, Numéro 6, November 2004 [on line] <<http://www.ethnographiques.org/2004/Latour.html>>. The translation, by Stephen Muecke, is published here with the kind permission of *ethnographiques* and the author.
 2. The French Institute of Scientific Research for Development in Cooperation.
 3. Philippe Descola, professor at the Collège de France, the most prestigious academic position in France, holds the chair of 'anthropology of nature' not 'of cultures', as his predecessors did, among whom there was no less than Claude Lévi-Strauss.
 4. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'Les pronoms cosmologiques et le perspectivisme amérindien' in Eric Alliez (ed) *Gilles Deleuze. Une vie philosophique*, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, Paris, 1998.
 5. Bruno Latour, *We Have never been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1993.
 6. Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitiques—Tome 7: pour en finir avec la tolérance*. La Découverte-Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, Paris, 1997.
 7. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2005.
 8. Philippe Descola, *Par delà nature et culture*, Gallimard, Paris, 2005.
 9. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification*, trans. Catherine Porter, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2006.
 10. Peter Galison, *Einstein's Clocks and Poincaré's Maps: Empires of Time*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2003.
 11. See Bruno Latour's working paper, 'Enquête sur les régimes d'énonciation, Théorie des délégués, deuxième partie', 50 pp.