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LET A HUNDRED NATURES BLOOM:
A POLEMICAL TROPE IN THE 'ONTOLOGICAL TURN' OF
ANTHROPOLOGY

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'What I liked in anthropology was its inexhaustible faculty of negation, its relentless definition of man, as though he were no better than God, in terms of what he is not. But my ideas on this subject were horribly confused, for my knowledge of men was scant and the meaning of being beyond me.' Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*.

Is the concept of Nature, as we make use of it in the humanities at large, a concept whose unity is at stake? If that is so, does it still make sense to pursue merely *naturalist*¹ agendas in anthropology and in philosophy, and isn't it better to adopt an alternative, enriched position, that its proponents call 'multinaturalism'? In recent years, under the heading of the 'ontological turn'², certain trends of post-structuralist anthropology raised this very question by appropriating and dynamizing motifs of critical philosophy (or, at the least, notably considered ethnographic data as an ideal site for the philosophical production of concepts). In more negative terms, this could be seen as the effect of a 'crisis of late structuralism' (Turner 2009), if one considers the departure from the project of a formal analysis of culture that was at the origin of many works of the pre-1968 era in the French social sciences. Another, more moderate, and more cogent characterization of such a moment has been spelled out as the 'birth of neo-classical anthropology'³, one which could be broadly conceived as the

response to the postmodern critique of authorship in post-Malinowskian ethnology, resulting in the regulative ideal of a delegation of the authority of the ethnographer to the collectives under study. An ethnographer, who, among other things, pleads guilty of importing remnants of a monolithic 'naturalist' ontology that is deemed to be insensitive to the (reconstructed) ontologies of non-Modern collectives.

In what follows, we will first attempt to give a sense of the origin of the conceptual neologism that is 'multinaturalism'. Secondly, and considering that the latter concept is polemically opposed to naturalism, we will examine how naturalism survived in structuralism itself up to post-structuralism. Thirdly, we will narrow down the problem posed by naturalism in such a context to that of its postulated theoretical alliance to multiculturalism. Fourthly, we will give a more thorough analysis of the construction that is opposed to the alliance of naturalism and multiculturalism, namely the consideration of multinaturalism itself as designator of the reconceptualization of Nature as a multiplicity of 'natures'. Fifthly, we will examine this reconceptualization from the point of view of its implicit social ontology, or theory of social beings. Lastly, we will go through a reconstruction of the very idea of a multinaturalism, giving a comparative analysis of its uses.

Making the 'multinaturalist' scene

If two names are attached to the ontological turn, at least in a 'French Theory-centered' context, they are Philippe Descola's, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's.⁴ Descola developed his theses in a moderately systematic way in *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Viveiros gave his enterprise a more philosophical, albeit rather polemical⁵, twist with the publication of a book entitled *Cannibal Metaphysics*, all the while maintaining the mission for anthropology, in his words, of 'being the theoretical practice of a permanent decolonization of thought' (Viveiros de Castro 2009: 4). Furthermore, against the thesis for which the account of the forms of life of 'non-Modern' collectives⁶ is nothing but an Occidental distortion on his part, Viveiros insists on the fact that his own theoretical proposal rather

constitutes the opportunity of ‘putting our imaginary into variation’ (Viveiros de Castro 2009: 5), a motivation which will be important in our own acceptance of the idea of a ‘multinaturalism’. In any case he takes, quite boldly, the influence of a certain ‘indigenous praxis’ as fostering an ‘immanence’ of anthropology against the ‘transcendent’ (read here: hegemonic, oblivious of singularities) points of view of sociology and economics. Towards the end of his book, Viveiros states that his life-long project (the *Anti-Narcissus*), of which we today read scattered elements, has more to do with the projection of possible social worlds from indigenous thought *reconstructed*, than with a thorough analysis of ‘indigenous cognitive processes’ (Viveiros de Castro 2009: 160)⁷. In what could have been a useful *proviso* to the book, he later stated that such a ‘thought-experiment (...) may be read as outlining a sort of imaginary identikit picture of an Amerindian philosophy which would stand to indigenous mythopoiesis as Cartesian or Kantian ideas, say, stand to what I’m calling the Modern West’ (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 64). In a similar fashion, his colleague Marilyn Strathern stated, in *The Gender of the Gift*, that she had ‘not presented Melanesian ideas but an analysis from the point of view of Western anthropological and feminist preoccupations of what Melanesian ideas might look like if they were to appear in the form of those preoccupations’ (Strathern 1988: 309)⁸. In the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Viveiros’ wish could be construed as the drawing of philosophical conjectures from a human science whose global movement is more ‘centrifugal’ than ‘centripetal’ (that is, less preoccupied by the examination of its own posits than by an ‘estrangement’ of those very posits by building conceptual bridges with indigenous ontologies).

But for reasons pertaining to disciplinary divisions, the situation of Descola’s discourse might appear clearer: he’s involved in a theoretical program (and leads a Chair at Paris’ Collège de France) baptized ‘Anthropology of Nature’, which aims at giving an account of how human collectives relate to their environments in situations where it is not at all clear that the Western division between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ holds. Thus, Descola’s Anthropology of Nature sees itself as exposing elements which could potentially make us drift away from the certainties of our own native ‘naturalist ontology’, which is, as we shall see, idiosyncratically taken here to be reducible to the postulating of a continuity of ‘physicalities’ and a discon-

tinuity of ‘interiorities’. In other words, naturalist ontology is taken to fundamentally affirm the *necessity* of bodily entities (warranted, we could add, by the unification of the formal discourse of physics) and the *contingency* of the realm of spirit (broadly, singular expressions of subjectivity and their correlated cultural formations). How then, considering the conceptual lineage in question here, is one to consider not naturalism *tout court*, but particularly the naturalism that pertained to structuralist anthropology itself?

Naturalism, from Lévi-Strauss to Descola

It is the case that structuralist anthropology itself subscribed to a certain naturalism (sometimes verging on an unholy alliance of formalism and empiricism, by e.g. the use of a group-theoretic model to analyze cultural phenomena, a characterization made by Badiou, 1968/2007). Nevertheless, it appears that Lévi-Strauss tried in a certain fashion to escape one form of naturalism opposed to his own, which was conjoined with a ‘cultural materialism’ (attached in the United States to the name of Marvin Harris, and to the publication of his book, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*). To do so, Lévi-Strauss articulated a position for which the environments subject to human socialization were to be fully taken in account if one was to do the genealogy of symbolic systems, systems among which one finds the elements of our Modern ‘cultures’ (a position which is summed up in Lévi-Strauss’ (1973) detailed answer to Marvin Harris under the title ‘Structuralism and Ecology’). By human ‘socialization’, one must discern something that is more akin to a continued collective transformation and predation of entities in given environments and its related symbolic production, than to some kind of pacific and autonomous process of identification between humans and given ‘natural kinds’. Such socialization of the environment finds its paradigmatic expression in totemism, or the collective attribution of a common ancestor shared by the human group and definite natural kinds. Totemism is in turn characterized by Lévi-Strauss (1971) (against Durkheim’s view for which totemic associations pertained to a certain logics of representation) as the consequence of definite hunting practices.

This is a part of what Lévi-Strauss conjectured under the heading of a theory of ‘double determinism’, thus refuting the mono-directionality of theorization characteristic of Harris’ anthropology. Indeed, Harris proceeded from a determinate combination of categories (infrastructure, or environmental constraints; structure, or modes of production; superstructure, or the ensemble of symbolic systems), originating in a Marxism which saw infrastructure as shaping structure without reciprocity, superstructure being here specified as *ideology* - granted that Harris maintains the motif of a kind of ‘monopoly of symbolic production’ on the part of special individuals.

From here, going back to *The Savage Mind* could be a good way to further seize the identity of the discourse that is in direct line of inspiration for Anthropology of Nature. Towards the middle of his book, Lévi-Strauss (1966: 94-95) states that: ‘The first point is that natural conditions are not just passively accepted. What is more they do not exist in their own right for they are a function of the techniques and way of life of the people who define and give them a meaning by developing them in a particular direction. Nature is not in itself contradictory. It can become so only in terms of some specific human activity which takes part in it; and the characteristics of the environment take on a different meaning according to the particular historical and technical form assumed in it by this or that type of activity. On the other hand, even when raised to that human level which alone can make them intelligible, man’s relations with his natural environment remain objects of thought: man never perceives them passively; having reduced them to concepts, he compounds them in order to arrive at a system which is never determined in advance: the same situation can always be systematized in various ways.’ To sum up, and if one wants to get a global grasp of such an approach, the ‘structuralist’ trait could be reconstructed through three posits:

- (a) There are general forms of socialization of environments by human collectives;
- (b) Those basic forms are - for reasons that have to do with intersubjective constraints consequent to the use of definite techniques - dynamized by collectivity in various symbolic forms which are, in turn, in position of co-

determination with definite techniques;

- (c) There is a possibility of registering those variations in a kind of transformative model (and *that* defines the matter of structural anthropology in the strict sense - granted that we have to keep in mind that each systematic variation bears its own regime of sense⁹).

After this, and as a disciple of Lévi-Strauss, Descola opened the way to a ‘practical structuralism’, a theory of action and practice in a thesis, *La Nature domestique*, subtitled ‘Usages et représentations de la biosphère’. Interestingly, the editors of the book have retained a subtitle that echoes more strongly both structuralist and Marxist subscriptions of the thesis, that is ‘Symbolisme et praxis dans l’écologie des Achuar’.

But it is with his addendum of sorts to *Beyond Nature and Culture* that Descola (2011: 71) vindicated the novelty of his orientation, amending a sometimes too indistinctive theory of natural-cultural hybrids, whose prime defender is Bruno Latour. In the ‘symmetric anthropology’ of *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Latour circumscribes the project of Modernity as oblivious of its perpetual practice of ‘hybridization’ of entities that are at the same time deemed to be either ‘natural’ or ‘cultural’: ‘Indeed, symmetric anthropology is still lacking a general theory of the stabilization of collectives of humans and non-humans in singular forms of practice. But for such a theory to be developed, one would have to go against certain principles of the sociology of associations (or actor-networks) which are foundational for symmetric anthropology, and grant more credit to instituted apparatuses which organize the manner in which hybrids are produced, here and there, which render a given configuration of humans and non-humans, possible or impossible.’ (our translation)

There are many ‘ways of treating Nature’, so to speak, if we consider them as governed by the interplay between various symbolic forms and definite economies of subsistence and existence. From such a manner of considering things, Descola identifies such salient ways, thematized as ‘modes’ of identification, and a posteriori posited as *ontologies*:

Analogism, or the postulation of a discontinuity of physicalities and interiorities¹⁰; animism, or the postulation of a discontinuity of physicalities and of continuity of interiorities; naturalism, or the postulation of a continuity of physicalities, and of a discontinuity of interiorities; totemism, or the postulation of a continuity of physicalities and interiorities.

Those ‘ontological’ distinctions could also be considered as the most general characterizations of very diverse ‘symbolic ecologies’, of the many ‘symbolic’ ways in which non-Modern collectives relate to a given environment through a systematic, albeit popular knowledge (Descola 2006: 66). At any rate, the ontologies in question are to be counted amongst (to borrow the rather Oxbridge-spirited terms of Strawson 1959) *revisionist* ontologies, or in more Lévi-Straussian terms, the ‘centrifugal’ ways in which ‘our’ naturalist ontology could repopulate itself. Such an imperative could also, and realistically it seems, be read as the call to acceptance of more entities than those that are spelled out by reductionist trends in philosophy, which have little patience for the specificity of the objects of the social sciences. This notwithstanding, and problematically, anthropology is often in that regard the most argumentatively secure, as it is sometimes characterized by Lévi-Strauss as ‘the social science of the observed’ (or as we would sum up, a science *of* indigenous praxis for the sake of introducing progressive variations in the observer’s imaginary).

Naturalism’s strange bedfellow (multiculturalism)

To get closer to our point, we could say that post-structural anthropology allows a certain mode of reconsideration of Modern thought (at least if we take Modern thought to be organized by the central concept of Nature and a correlative ‘naturalist’ ontology) by (notably) Amerindian¹¹ cosmologies, and by what Viveiros reconstructs at its margins as the Amerindian ‘metaphysics of predation’, picking up the venatic (‘related to hunting practices’) element so central to many non-Modern collectives. Reconsideration which brings forth the conceptual couple of ‘multinaturalism’ and ‘perspectivism’, the former being deemed to counter the ‘multiculturalism’ of our parliamentary democracies, the latter being the crux

of the metaphysical dimension of those cosmologies¹², or what Viveiros defines precisely as an ‘ethno-epistemological corollary of animism’.

Lacking here is of course a careful examination of what the term of ‘multiculturalism’ implies beyond the facilitation of a broad mapping of what appears to be a genuine ideological conflict around cultural essentialism, a position which we could trace back to Franz Boas and especially to his disciple Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* of 1934. Today, in the hegemonic space of ‘parliamentary democracies’, the problematic seems also to include the alliance between naturalism and multiculturalism, as it overlooks the level of symbolic ecologies. Such an ideological alliance is taken to be considering that ‘cultures’ are a myriad ways of singularization through fixed intra-communitarian expressions, and to ignore preexisting and complex ‘ways of treating Nature’. The latter is a trait notably picked up by Viveiros in his defence of indigenism (Viveiros de Castro, 2006), when he stresses that the Amazonian ‘virgin forest’ as conceived by Western administrations¹³ is a broad fiction, its distribution and composition having been affected by thousands of years of human intervention.

Such an agenda of cogently articulating *symbolism* and *praxis* in the body of anthropological study is shared with Descola, inasmuch as the latter explicitly addresses the problem of transformation of singular environments by human collectives. Doing that, the latter expresses more materialism by evoking the solidarity of symbolic systems with ‘schemas of practice’ (Descola 2006, ‘Les schèmes de la pratique’) and not mere ‘conceptual schemes’¹⁴, the disproportion of which stand, in multiculturalism, as subject to pacification through communicative action only, thus masking wider forms of systemic segregation. This is why one finds more acuteness in the concept of ‘symbolic ecology’, a concept which also includes in earnest the prescriptive dimension that given collectives deploy regarding the organization of knowledge.

Another characterization of the aforementioned articulation may indeed be expressed by what Baptiste Gille called (after Gayatri Spivak) a ‘strategic essentialization of cosmologies’, as a necessary theoretical move to strike collective imaginaries as well as (broadly multiculturalist) power apparatuses (Gille, 2012). Such a characterization doesn’t neutralize the interest of

a merely comparativist approach: Viveiros even further affirms, after Martin Holbraad, that the aim of anthropology is also that of being a ‘comparative ontography’. In a way, the anthropologist thus sets her task as the recording of diverse ontologies, giving to ontology in a broad sense a richer pragmatics, exposing its social conditions of emergence. But however we reproach the multiculturalist model, it seems that we have to examine more patiently this postulate of unity of Nature, a unity which is supposed to a multiplicity of cultures.

Considering Nature through multiplicity

It is to be noted that Viveiros associates naturalism with the posit of an ‘objective universality of bodies and substance’.¹⁵ But what ‘substance’ stands for is not entirely clear. Viveiros’ naturalist, if not a straw man, is a rather curious beast, who defends a naïve version of Spinoza’s rationalism¹⁶ (a version where the concept of Nature is bluntly equated with that of Substance, stripped bare of the fine-grained distinctions of the Ethics), along with a foggy synthesis of the different programs found under the heading of ‘physicalism’, or the general theory for which everything supervenes on a more fundamental physical level.

Considering this, and for the sake of conceptual clarity, it seems useful to distinguish at least two main regimes of philosophical naturalism. We would tentatively categorize them as the ‘short’ and ‘long’ ways of naturalism¹⁷. The short way being that of a dogmatic and reductionist tendency towards a unification of other spheres of thought through the model of the natural sciences (e.g. the unmediated philosophical assimilation of the proceedings of the ‘neo-Darwinian synthesis’ in biology). The long way being indeed that of the use of the natural sciences by philosophy through the normative scope of a certain ‘immanentist’ trend, Spinozist in inspiration (the conceptual historiography of which has recently been initiated by Italian researcher Vittorio Morfino in a book entitled *Il tempo della Moltitudine*, see Morfino (2010), and in another measure see also Sharp (2011)).

For matters of conceptual refining now, we could even say with Viveiros that there is another kind of naturalization, pertaining not to the domain of philosophical discourses, but to that of a process that is central in Amerindian cosmologies themselves: that of a slow morphogenesis, accounted in the terms of a cosmogony, of a slow bodily differentiation from an abstract principle standing for the attribute of humanity, a principle which is in its turn conflated by Viveiros de Castro with ‘culture’.¹⁸ But such a ‘naturalization’ would then be a misnomer, and even more if one follows the path of a symmetric anthropology (if we borrow Latour’s terminology for a moment). We could then say that naturalizing, in the (reconstructed) Amerindian sense, is thought to be a process towards multiple embodiments of a primordial, mythical (human) subjectivity, whereas in the Modern sense, naturalizing means restituting the inferential commitments of opaque theoretical posits, or getting rid of remains of a philosophical discourse immune from instrumental testability¹⁹ (including the conception of the Self as a fixed and innate entity, a problem that nourished philosophical *oeuvres* in contemporary naturalism from Daniel Dennett’s *Consciousness Explained* to Thomas Metzinger’s *Being No One*, among others).

Nevertheless, and interestingly, Viveiros de Castro precisely refers to Dennett’s naturalism when he goes on to describe the central trait of Amerindian ‘perspectivism’, which he calls an ‘imputation of agency’ to non-human entities. Such an imputation is precisely what Dennett describes as the adoption of the ‘intentional stance’. In a few words, and if we still follow Viveiros’s reading of Dennett, taking the intentional stance is imputing the intentionality (or in Viveiros’ words, the agency) of a certain entity, bearing in mind that in an Amerindian context the imputation proceeds from the primacy of the predator/prey relation. And it is characteristic of Viveiros’ discourse that he sometimes stands in a relative epistemological proximity with a naturalism that he rejects in another form.²⁰ At any rate, the most pertinent metaphysical motif for Viveiros is that of perspectivism, for which ‘salient’ entities of a given symbolic ecology are considered as intentional systems, or at the very least, as entities endowed with a *point of view*, able to reciprocate human action in some.²¹ It is also crucial to note that only species which play a key symbolic or practical role in a given environment are so endowed (it is thus still tempting, in

Althusserian fashion, to introduce here in earnest the question of an ‘indigenous’ mode of production).

Furthermore, Viveiros de Castro (2009: 38) states that ‘different types of beings see different things in the same fashion’, which leads to a problematic characterization of this ‘sameness’. It is clear that such a criterion of ‘sameness’ can’t be based upon a physicalist description of what happens, unless we take the richness of phenomenological experience to be contingent on the possession of a complex nervous system, which sounds a bit tricky if we, following Amerindian cosmology, ‘let spirits in’ (and granted that Viveiros himself only draws an *analogy* between a possible perspectivist model and the phenomenon of multi-stability in psychophysics). A formal model that would account for this ‘sameness’, which then pertains to being a position in a system of permutations, could be helpful to get a global grasp of it. For that matter, we could formalize the Amerindian system of perspective permutations (from now on noted PsPm) after Viveiros, using a simple conventional notation where \perp designates perception under one of the following types:

Human (hm)
Animal (an), and predator/predated subclasses (an1), (an2)
Spiritual (sp), and predator subclass (sp1)

And where \downarrow indicates a tautological account of the perception of types and \rightarrow the account of a relation of ‘standing as’ (for example, in the case of humans perceiving humans as humans, we have $(hm \perp hm \downarrow)$):

PsPm1 $(hm \perp hm \downarrow)$

PsPm2 $(hm \perp an \downarrow)$

PsPm3 $(hm \perp sp \downarrow)$

PsPm4 $(an1, sp1 \perp hm \rightarrow an2)$

PsPm5 $(an2 \perp hm \rightarrow sp1, an1)$

PsPm6 $(an, sp \perp an, sp \rightarrow hm)$

Such a simple formalization may be a part of what Viveiros aims at when he states that perspectivism supposes ‘a constant epistemology’, which seems here at least reducible to a rudimentary model, even though it remains far from Lévi-Strauss’ attempt to produce a ‘canonical formula of myth’²² in his *Structural Anthropology*. This is at least the core of what drives Viveiros to make Nature multiple, so to speak. Here lies the ‘bomb’²³ that could make naturalist ontology shift to ‘multinaturalism’. Viveiros adds that those permutations suppose ‘variable ontologies’ (Viveiros de Castro 2009: 41). As he states it, speaking for Amerindian collectives, ‘what is for us blood, is beer for jaguars; what is for the spirits of the dead a rotten corpse, is fermented manioc for us; what we see as a puddle of mud, is a big ceremonial house for tapirs...’ (our translation).

We might be dealing with variable ontologies in the sense in which the speculative ethology of Jakob von Uexküll, for example, helps in deducing different material ontologies for every observed animal, granted that for him, every animal is taken to be capable of distinguishing as many objects as the actions it is able to perform in its environment.²⁴ But even if Amerindians recognize a physiological unity of animal bodies, it seems to be thematized by their perspectivism in a non-totalizing way. Indeed, Amerindian perspectivism seems to be doing away with corporal morphology, presenting a sort of enriched ‘ethogram’ (an inventory of behaviours and capacities), which stands as the result of considering bodies as sites of ‘sheaves of affects and capacities’ which integrate, to use Descola’s phrasing, a class limited by a given symbolic ecology (Viveiros de Castro 2009: 40).

Now, Viveiros often insists on the fact that such a ‘seeing as’, down to *perspectival* units of experience, has, in the very context of Amerindian symbolic ecologies, to do with *non-conceptual* content (at least if we stick to a rather minimalistic definition of what a concept is). The questions we could ask ourselves at this point are:

(a) What could be a ‘seeing as’ relation in the realm of non-conceptual content?

(b) Considering the reading in terms of social ontology or ‘theory of social beings’²⁵ that such a transformative anthropology elicits, could it be more productive to reformulate the question, and draw the differences that must be existing between facts in the order of ‘seeing as’, and facts in the order of ‘standing/counting as’?

Sketch for a socio-ontological take

It is pretty clear that elucidating how such a ‘seeing as’ holds in the realm of non-conceptual content leads us to consider action as deeply modified by certain types of experiments, to the extreme (in the commerce with ‘spirits’) augmented by intake of hallucinogenic decoctions (like *Brugmansia*, *Datura* or *Banisteropsis* according to Descola’s reports), or more simply, in the horizon of expectations set by ceremonies and incantations - like the *anents* of the Achuar, such as the one sung during the hunting of woolly monkeys. One can here get a glimpse of how kinship is extended to predated non-humans (under what Descola names their ‘*affinal* nature’, to distinguish it from *consanguinity* and *filiation*) as well as of the dark beauty borne by the sublimation of those modes of relation (hunting, the archetypal activity in this context, being at the intersection of the familial and cosmological planes) (Descola 1986: 321):

‘Little brother-in-law (4x), let’s now see in which point I will break you into pieces.

Little brother-in-law (2x), the little *shuni* man is on your tracks, little brother-in-law(2x), in which point will I pass through you?

Little-brother-in law of mine, I will kill you on distant lands.

In which point will I get through you? (4x), Little woolly monkey, let’s see in which point (2x), I will pass through you (5x).²⁶

To go back now to the perspectivist permutations, let us deploy, as we announced a bit earlier, a few elements of social ontology, or the systematic study of social beings (surprisingly, despite its extreme critical poverty, one of the most orthodox works on that question remains John Searle’s in *The Construction of Social Reality*). When faced with the question of the ‘counting as’ relation in Searle’s social ontology, we can stress the fact that for such a relation to be satisfied, there should be a recognition, on the part of the agent, that an entity X is the token of a class Y, (for example that a \$20 bill is the token of the type ‘money’), and a knowledge of the rules and norms governing such a type. Considering the insufficiency of such an account, the semiotician Chris Sinha (2009) was one of the first to stress that the relation of ‘counting as’ as part of a *normative* level had to be distinguished from the relation of ‘standing as’ as part of the *semiotic* level. Thus the relation of ‘seeing as’ picked up by the anthropologist is not a relation of ‘counting as’, but more cogently specifiable as a relation of ‘standing as’. It is the case for Achuar perspectivism that, for an animal like the jaguar, human blood *stands for* manioc beer, and doesn’t merely ‘count as’ manioc beer.²⁷

The biggest problem here remains that of a certain conventionalism where *conventions* don’t seem to be holding. If we were to ignore the difference between the semiotic and the normative and, from the ethnography of the Akuryio of Surinam, accept that vultures in *seeing* worms in rotten flesh *as* roasted fish do so because of a collective acceptance of norms (however we could conjecture it) we would be put in the realm of a pleasant but rather inconvenient account of the situation, at least for our own (Western, rationalist) symbolic ecology. It thus seems more adequate to reinvest the Marxist concept of ‘real abstraction’²⁸, in order to sustain the thesis for which all conventionalism in our hyper-managed environments is rendered null and void. Furthermore, it simply doesn’t seem fruitful to sever the question of such a ‘seeing as’ disposition from a certain functionalism, about which we will say more soon).

In human societies, what we experience when we use, say, money, is not essentially the quasi-automatic attribution of a disposable ‘status-function’²⁹, but the efficacy of a ‘real abstraction’, that is, a symbolic disposition that took a relative autonomy from individual or collective agency

to the point of dominating social relations. Thus conventionalism as regards the core features of a society is pragmatically undermined by the fact that one could not suspend any status-function without experiencing marginality and precariousness (which is maximally true for paradigmatic abstractions like money as expression of the value-form).

Our point is that in a way (and even if Descola precisely refused to embrace the Marxian variations on the concept of ‘structure’, granted that for him talking ‘ontologies’ gives us a grasp of something more fundamental and dynamic) it seems cogent to say that the concept of ‘symbolic ecology’ is more in tune with Marxian realism about social entities than the bourgeois conventionalism of a John Searle for example (at least if we provisionally take them to be the two extremes, respectively heterodox and orthodox, of contemporary social ontology). Indeed, Searle drew up the blueprint of an analytic social ontology where social entities are nothing but constructions, in the sense that they require ‘collective acceptance and recognition’. An account of acceptance and recognition which deprives itself of all historical and speculative inquiry on those constructions - which is why historical materialism provides a better explanation of the autonomization of symbolic dispositions, even more so if one considers combining it to a comparativist program like that of an Anthropology of Nature.

Considering the question of the autonomization of abstractions, and if we now go back to the use of schematism by Descola in *Beyond Nature and Culture*, bearing in mind that we here oppose Descola’s richer ‘symbolic-ecological’ point of view to a mere ‘conceptual-schematic’ point of view, what we have is no longer the actualization of the conceptual apparatus deployed in Kant’s first *Critique*, where schematism was deemed as the power of imagination through which an abstract schema (that is, *not* a representation) presents a category to consciousness.³⁰ In Descola’s conception of what he goes on specifying as ‘integrative schemes’ (or modes of relationships and identification to others and the environment), representation itself (or mental images) and the afferent declarative knowledge are absent. In addition, it is the institutional distribution of those schemes that is put to the fore (as well as, if we consider Viveiros’ elaboration from Amerindian ethnography, their fixation through affectivity). Such a use

of schematism is interesting inasmuch as it vindicates something that was overlooked by Lévi-Strauss in his polemics with American cultural ecology: something that could be conceived as a schematism directly connected to the practices of given collectives.

At any rate, practice is here, again, specified as the active transformation of given environments. This is precisely why one has to consider such a symbolic ecology as a space of ‘lived abstractions’ so to speak, and not one where individuals seek to partake exclusively (as the official philosophies of multiculturalism like those of Jürgen Habermas or Charles Taylor have it), in a collective deliberation on norms (the question of the validity of the identification of shamans as the main producers of ideology notwithstanding³¹).

The very idea (a reconstruction)

Such is the richness of the comparativist project that lays at the heart of Descola’s Anthropology of Nature, and it is somehow tempting to equate the correlated idea of a ‘multinaturalism’ with that of a diversity of symbolic ecologies, against a ‘multiculturalism’, which ciphers the project of a regulation of exogenous (and preferential) beliefs. But to go further into distinctions, the idea of a multinaturalism could be said to include the following (non-exclusive) theoretical components (some of which we will immediately specify):

- (a) As we saw it, a discrimination of Modern and non-Modern senses of ‘naturalization’. It then concerns a program of subversion of philosophical conceptuality by, an Anthropology of Nature or Viveiros’ comparative ontography;
- (b) An abandonment of the importance given to the conceptual scheme attached to Substance (in a monistic sense), and the endorsement of:
 - (b1) A conflation of ‘Nature’ with sets of ‘natural kinds’ in a non-essentialist sense, along the lines of an ‘affinal substantialism’ and its

amended theory of *affects*;

(b2) A ‘historicist’ grasp of scientific results, and furthermore, its possible integration in the program of a ‘cosmopolitics’.

Nature as sets of (affinal) kinds?

That Viveiros has little sympathy for contemporary evolutionism³² is manifest, and it is to be doubted that he would accept a conflation of multinaturalism with a (mainstream) essentialist conception of ‘natural kinds’ (that would be for him, and rightly so, another step backwards to a form of a *reductive* naturalism, to an all-too-Modern form of naturalization). But to invoke another source in the philosophy of biology, John Dupré (2001) recognized (in a *textbook* piece on the concept) that defenders of natural kinds in biology resort to higher levels of abstraction for formulation of ‘real laws of nature’ (as candidates: predator; population; species, all considered here as *categories* and not as particulars). As such, according to Dupré, the genealogical investigations of evolutionists differ from those suited to investigations of contemporary interactions in ecology, and certain kinds applying to isolated species (mammals, birds) may not be suited e.g. to bacteria or flowering plants. To sum up: science and everyday life could need a cross-cutting classification and lead us to drop strictly essentialist distinctions (Dupré calls such a position ‘promiscuous realism’, and Viveiros, in an expression that we could reconstruct following his ‘post-structuralist lines of anthropology’, ‘affinal substantialism’ (Viveiros de Castro 2009: 40)³³, giving it a less formal ground). But multinaturalism does not lead as such to a program of theoretical ecology, and retains more of Spinozism than it seems to be willing to admit (inasmuch as it maintains that, more than morphology or physiology, it is a theory of *affects* that is in order).

As regards the form of such an ‘affinal substantialism’, the couplings of which (e.g. beer/blood) could be sets of *functional* equivalence, the anthropologist Terrence Turner (2009: 34) makes a clearer point when he comments on other indigenous (animist) ontologies: ‘The generic forms

and contents of these processes consist of functional activities (i.e., hunting, foraging, eating, drinking, finding shelter, mating and reproducing) which are essentially identical for all embodied spirit-beings regardless of the particular differences in their forms and contents. Beings of different species can thus identify their concretely different activities on the basis of their functional equivalence from the perspective of their common engagement in sustaining their bodies and spirit-forms.’

Following Turner, we could consider culture in this context as an ‘incremental transformation’, consisting in the coupling of processes that were isolated before their integration in the same process of production (Turner 2009: 32). And a certain stability of such processes of production in the Amerindian case define those functional nodes that integrate the regional ontology of affinal substantialism, and stand as potential candidates for ‘affinal kinds’.

A historicism in our grasp of scientific results

To be more explicit, as post-Quinian naturalist philosopher Penelope Maddy tellingly puts it, a ‘historicism’ (our use of the term, not hers) in our grasp of scientific results consists in the realization of the importance of historicizing experiments, beyond the fantasy of a unity of science through a ‘final theory’ and its strong criteria of demarcation between scientific discourse and so-called ‘ordinary language’. But nonetheless, even if foundational discourses or first philosophies are revoked by this type of moderately reflexive naturalism, a certain attitude or ‘internalization of methods’ remains, as Maddy (2001: 48) characterizes it in the following remarks (our emphasis): ‘My naturalist’s methodology isn’t ‘trust only science!’; her methodology just is a certain range of methods, which happen to be those we commonly regard as scientific. When asked why she believes in atoms, she says, ‘because of the experiments of Perrin’ and such-like, not ‘because science says there are atoms and I believe the methods of science’. So my naturalist applies no necessary and sufficient conditions; as a *native* of the contemporary scientific world view, she simply proceeds by the methods that strike her as justified.

The program of a 'cosmopolitics'

If we turn to Bruno Latour and his broad project of a 'symmetric anthropology', the horizon changes a little, largely because his theoretical aim in the social sciences is, even more than Viveiros, deemed to be the consequent of a more *polemical* than analytical (or even political) gesture. First, Latour recognizes in Descola's enterprise a certain performative faithfulness to naturalist ontology, and sees the three other ontologies (analogism, animism, totemism) as opportunities for naturalism itself, as *ontology*, to explore permutations of its fundamental categories. But furthermore, and at a time of massive socio-technical entanglement of practice, a so-called 'second' Latour (2011: 2) may be right for once when he converts the concept of multinaturalism as the point from which one could fully embrace the consequences of a perpetual merging of *experience* and (managed) *experiments*: 'Today, however, it would be an understatement to say that nothing, absolutely nothing remains of... [the] trickle-down model of scientific production... the laboratory has extended its walls to the whole planet. Instruments are everywhere. Houses, factories, hospitals have become subsidiaries of the labs... The boundary between natural history - outdoor science - and lab science - indoor science - has slowly been eroded.'

Throughout this development, Latour associates naturalism (along with a lax use of the term 'natural history') with a certain production of a 'unitarist' discourse, for which the unity of formal methods in science equals a unity of Nature. Now if such a 'modernist' situation called for a proper globalist politics (or a *cosmopolitics*, as the term was revamped by Isabelle Stengers), the new, conjectured situation where multinaturalism enters the scene comprises of a new cosmopolitics, not mediated by the nation-state but by what Latour calls after John Dewey the 'public' (or the body of citizens standing as 'patient' of the negative externalities consequent of State decisions), and boils down to a more democratically-sourced expertise. Thus, Latour seems to associate naturalism *tout court* with a centralism of scientific experimentation, whereas multinaturalism would somehow allow its 'folk-federalization' or at least, a wider evaluation of what scientifically matters in the contemporary phase of hyper-management of life. Furthermore, Latour (2011: 9) proposes a sort of 'litmus test' to reveal

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the spontaneous ontology of the (non-)modernist: 'A simple, sharp, but... very discriminating test: do you associate nature with unification or with even more divisions?'

Put in today's ideological context, it is clear that the question as such is a bit critical, the alternative being: either a *conceptual* unification of natural phenomena through a 'protocol language' consistent with the posits of contemporary physics (if one puts aside the difficult question of the unity of Substance in Spinoza's system), or a conceptual 'rhapsody', of which a taxonomic ingenuity tied to groupuscular experiences may be the main pole of production. There, Descola might be on the right path when he suggests that Latour's symmetric anthropology would be considerably enriched by more case-studies of singular practices.

To conclude

From a strongly philosophical stance, one can recall the Fregean insight: a monism/pluralism/nihilism is vouched on an operation of numerical predication (x is to be considered one/many/null). But one has to distinguish those general characterizations of philosophical systems not only from a philosophical practice of pluralism, but also from a certain philosophy of multiplicity in post-Deleuzian theory - a philosophy which considers the opposition between unity and multiplicity as one of understanding, and multiplicity itself as the substantive category. In that regard, 'multinaturalism' is the thesis for which Nature itself is to be reconceptualized through multiplicity, and according to us it reconceptualizes 'Nature' in the last instance to sets of ways to affect and to be affected (or, to be closer to Viveiros, ways to predate and to be predated). In a sense, and in minimal Spinozist terms, it retains a small portion of *natura naturata* and abruptly sidelines *natura naturans*.

Once the New Age varnish is rubbed off it, Joseph Almog's recent take on this question stands as one of the best articulated. In the midst of an interpretation of Spinoza's oeuvre where one encounters thinkers as different as Cantor and Balibar, Almog (2014: 39) states that the aforementioned

Spinozist distinction is often obscured by the false dilemma raised up by globalist and localist takes:

‘On the globalist interpretation, the very idea of a local nature is that of a Nature-development. All beings, natured this or that way, are precisely nothing but Natur-*ings*, developments of Nature at a given cosmic locale. In contrast, on the localist reading, individuals come first and have relational natures all right ... At this stage, there is no logical need to mention the existence of global Nature.’

On such terms, we could characterize multinaturalism as a flamboyant problem child of Spinozism (if we set aside Descola’s sobered-up concept of symbolic ecology). We could add that it stands as a conceptual attempt to give a sense of the utter perplexity that emerges in shared experiences between ‘Modern’ and ‘non-Modern’ collectives. But more importantly, the correlative position might be taken as an index of post-structuralist anthropology’s wish to remain a discursive formation where the (naturalistic) assumptions of the observer themselves are subject to transformation in the course of inquiry. Furthermore, in the midst of a vulgar materialism bearing the clothes of ‘naturalism’, it seems that the multiplicity contained in the concept of ‘multinaturalism’ points to a universe of discourse where purely theoretical reform appears to be a secondary task, perhaps after a sort of activism of the theoretical imaginary.

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¹ Inasmuch as 'naturalism' could be considered a position which takes Nature to be the conceptual unifier of all phenomena.

² For a recent and lively introduction to those debates, see Pedersen and Holbraad (2014), and related comments.

³ Salmon G., 'La délégation ontologique. Naissance de l'anthropologie néo-classique'. Talk at the 'Pratiques/Ontologies' seminar at Sophiapol, Université Paris Ouest - Nanterre-La Défense (December 11th, 2013). Salmon considers here 'classic anthropology' as the interplay of localized observations and a comparative knowledge of a higher order, a move which requires what he somewhere else calls a 'desindexation' of spatio-temporal coordinates. In considering the ontological turn as 'neo-classic anthropology', he also takes into account two traits: the precedence of very traditional ethnographies; the reinvestment of concepts (totemism, animism) that forged the identity of anthropology between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th Century.

⁴ The case of Bruno Latour is also interesting, but won't concern us before the attempt at a reconstruction of those three thinkers' shared concerns later on.

⁵ One could indeed identify, in such works of Viveiros or in some of Bruno Latour's, a 'polemical style' in the philosophy of the human and social sciences.

⁶ It is one of the characteristic traits of the 'turn' to use the term 'collective' instead of 'society'. Descola many times affirmed that he did so to avoid the latter concept which, according to him, not only led to too much totalization in the fields in which it operated, but more importantly made too much space for human intentionality.

⁷ But Viveiros' grasp of cognitive science under the term 'cognitivism' appears to be rather synechdocal as, for him, the practice of cognitive science implies a belief in the centrality of 'mental representations', which is a highly problematic assumption for many practitioners.

⁸ Such a discursive characteristic is precisely what motivated Gildas Salmon's forging of the term 'ontological delegation'.

⁹ For more on this question and a cogent critique of Lévi-Strauss' mentalism (that is, the position for which all those variations are brought about only thanks to the combinatorial faculties of the human mind) see Descombes (2005: 257 ff).

¹⁰ Recall that one could more cogently read under those rather opaque terms 'bodies under description by a formally unified physical theory' and 'cultural phenomena'.

¹¹ A characterization moderated by Viveiros himself, who writes that the adjective refers to 'a limited number of native cultures from Lowland South America (mainly from Western Amazonia) and from septentrional North America (Northwest Coast, N. Athapaskan, N. Algonquian, Eskimo)'. A problematic consequence of the style proper to the thought experiment he proposes being, as he recognizes, the erasing of 'internal differences in social morphology, economic and political structure, ceremonial life, religion, and so on'.

¹² According to Viveiros, such perspectivism and/or what he as well calls 'cosmological transformism', is found in South America among the Vaupes, the Wari' of Rondonia, the Yudja of the Middle Wingu, the Rock Cree of Canada, and other hunter-gatherer populations in the great American North and in parts of Asia (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2012).

Before him, Lévi-Strauss saw this ‘reciprocity of perspectives’ as the very character of mythical thought, see Lévi-Strauss (1988, 206).

¹³ For a study of the lingering romanticism that pervades U.S. preservation policies, or what he calls the ‘wilderness cult’, see Nash (1967).

¹⁴ For less critically oriented developments about ‘conceptual schemes’, see Davidson (1974). The present text, inasmuch as it embraces the drive towards a supplementation of ‘conceptual-schematic’ accounts of symbolic production, could have been called ‘On the Very Idea of a Symbolic Ecology’; but that would in a way have occulted the rhapsody of senses attached to the idea of ‘multinaturalism’ and its polemical aspects.

¹⁵ Even though, as we’ll see, animist ontologies are also deemed to postulate a universality of physical substance in a certain sense.

¹⁶ This problem seems of importance, and a Spinozist voice would insist on the fact that the idea of a universality of bodies is a product of imagination, and that ‘substance’ can be grasped only by a certain mode of intellection – but developing this would put us too far from our present preoccupations.

¹⁷ To paraphrase Larrère & Larrère (2006), such a problematic is part of the redefinition of the socio-political conventions that surround the question of ‘Nature’, set against a distant cousin of the naturalism of the Cynics, which for Diogenes Laertius constituted the ‘short way’ of naturalism.

¹⁸ With little doubt, a hardline Hegelian would here superimpose the trait of the ‘oriental view of things’ denounced in the *Lessons on the History of Philosophy*, where a primordial absolute identity is the basis for differentiation. It is also the case in such mythological schemes, but in the Amerindian case, that the formal identity of the Subject and Substance can be affirmed, in a way that seems to partly resist the Hegelian rejection. Note that Viveiros himself deals with such a metaphysical problematization of identity and difference, but in a more ‘regional’ way. To be more precise, and as Viveiros (2009: 33–34n) puts it, the extensive differentiation proper to speciation in Achuar ontology is accompanied by an ‘infinite internal identity’, every species counting equal representatives of itself. Granted that this is sometimes relativized in cases where sexual preferences in the

human species are informed by knowledge of their ‘animal essences’ (the latter serving justifications of judgements on the degree of desirability of sexual partners). We can’t dwell on this too much here, but it seems to be a problem worthy of exploration. Viveiros (2009: 61) himself briefly evokes the problem of a Hegelian subsumption of such philosophical propositions, admitting that no doctrine of concepts is latent there but a ‘fluent’ schematism of symbols and figures.

¹⁹ Other types of naturalization (and correlative culturalization) are detailed by Lévi-Strauss (1966: 127), in the ‘Totem and caste’ chapter of *The Savage Mind*, where he writes that ‘Simplifying a great deal, it may be said that castes picture themselves as natural species while totemic groups picture natural species as castes. And this must be refined: castes naturalize a true culture falsely, totemic groups culturalize a false nature truly.’

²⁰ But if he was to reject, in Dennett’s characterization of the intentional stance, a certain air of ‘explanatory adaptationism’, Viveiros could refine his argumentative strategy in the same way that Lévi-Strauss did against Marvin Harris’ very own brand of adaptationism (remember that according to Harris’ account, structures and superstructures were subordinated to infrastructures, thus constraining human collectives to find appropriate solutions on the last two planes).

²¹ Interestingly, and against the motif of a theoretical hegemony of anthropology, Viveiros soon stresses that perspectivism contains the theory of its own description, that of a constant shifting of perspectives (even if it is here more akin to the way one experiences the shifts on the surfaces of a Necker cube). Such a characterization of method is correlative to his evaluation of Descola’s theoretical gesture: in the style of the great ‘meta-’ questions that came with the reception of canonical philosophical texts, by extraction of one of their fundamental categories (e.g. the determination of the faculty from which Kant’s three *Critiques* were written, or of the type of knowledge from which Spinoza’s *Ethics* was composed), Viveiros states that *Beyond Nature and Culture*, and its moments of ‘combinatorial’ reconstruction of ontologies, proceeds along a methodological *analogism*, sometimes verging on totemism (Viveiros de Castro (2009, 50)).

²² $F_x(a) : F_y(b) \approx F_x(b) : F_a^{-1}(y)$

a/b being a qualitative opposition of terms

a/b being a qualitative opposition of terms; x/y being a qualitative opposition of functions, where $F_f(t)$ signifies that the term t possesses the function f and where $F_a^{-1}(y)$ signifies: that there has been an *inversion* of the value of term a as an inverse value a^{-1} ; that there has been an *exchange* between a term-value and a function-value.

It is this very formula that made Jean Petitot (1988) state that there could well be a ‘morphological turn’ of structuralism, applying to Lévi-Strauss’ formalization his own approach from ‘morphodynamics’. Petitot, with René Thom, is one of the figures identified by Viveiros as decisive in Lévi-Strauss’ shift from algebro-combinatorial to topologico-dynamical models.

²³ To borrow the words of Bruno Latour (2009) who, in a short commentary piece, attempted to evaluate the difference between Viveiros’ and Descola’s use of perspectivism and a ‘classical’ use of perspectivism as a category in a typology (one could of course think of Leibnizian perspectivism as a source of such classical use).

²⁴ For more details, see Uexküll (2010), and a critical commentary of the most recent French translation in Surel (2014).

²⁵ We could even add that a question lingers in Viveiros’ book: that of social organization outside of the State-apparatus, at a level of analysis that is often that of a free-form social ontology. He himself recognizes, in a Deleuzo-Guattarian fashion, that his book is an attempt at subtracting his thought from the ‘monarchic regime’ of enunciation that pertains to the legacy of Ancient Greek philosophy, through the means of a positive consideration of ‘savage minds’.

²⁶ Our translation from the French cannot warrant a considerable loss in sense.

²⁷ Let me note briefly that such a characterization could help us in getting out of the aporias of Viveiros’ theory of symbolization that he elaborated from Roy Wagner’s semiotics, in which perception itself proceeds from ‘conventions’, which seems quite a difficult way to get out of a ‘direct realism’ (at least if such a task is on one’s agenda).

²⁸ On the distinction between living and abstract labour in Marx, and the consequent Marxist concept of ‘real abstraction’, see Toscano (2008).

²⁹ According to John Searle, a ‘status-function’ is anything that human social practices impose as a function on an entity that can’t be induced from the physical structure of the given entity.

³⁰ Or in the words of Kant, it is ‘the representation of a general process of imagination to give to a concept its image’ (Kant: 1999).

³¹ This being said, the shaman does stand at the verge of *anomia*, and is somehow a legislating figure: *he* establishes contracts with hyper-predating ‘outlaw’ entities that are the jaguar or the anaconda, the latter also being held responsible, in its moments of ire, for earth tremors (Descola (1986: 206)) - note that such mythological associations seem to be the closest point where catastrophe could elicit a more realistic singularization of Nature as a sphere of non-manageable contingency. It is thus not entirely clear that the deliberative trait is totally absent from ‘indigenous praxis’. But here, it is maybe the ‘contemplative’ trait that is the most misleading, granted that it was, at the time when Descola wrote *La nature domestique*, entertained by ethnology itself (Descola (1986: 11)).

³² And thus actualizes Lévi-Strauss’ rather impressionistic critique of cultural evolutionism in *Race and History*, according to which ‘an axe can’t give birth to an axe’, delivering a skimmed-up version of the Kantian argument of the *Critique of Judgement* (§ 65), which sustained a strong distinction between machine and organism, and correlatively, of *motor* and *formative* forces.

³³ Recall that ‘affinity’ is here distinguished from consanguinity, and characterizes the symbolically mediated relationship between distant kins and enemies. A beer/blood entity is considered by Viveiros to be such an affinal substance in Amerindian cosmology.

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