

LÉVY BRUHL AND ONTOLOGICAL DÉJÀ VU:

AN APPENDIX TO VIGH AND SAUSDAL

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Vigh and Sausdal have recently (2014) raised some concerns about the ontological turn or what I call ‘de Castrism’. They have written cogently about the prospects and problems of anthropological ontologies. This piece is intended as a postscript or appendix to their article.

There is some irony that, at about the time that Viveiros de Castro (in his 1998 Cambridge lectures, conveniently published in the journal *Hau* in 2012) was developing his use of ontology within anthropology, people in informatics led by Tim Berners Lee were developing another very different use of the word, equally distant from its philosophical origins, as part of the so-called ‘semantic web’. As used in informatics, an ontology is a description of the categorical structure of a subject domain, mapping out the relationships and dependencies of its constituent parts so that indexes and searches of catalogues can produce relevant results more efficiently. As many have pointed out, this is beset with problems since only a few domains can be mapped out explicitly and unambiguously, and the existence of uncertainty, contradiction and lack of clarity is part of the social world we live in.¹

Leaving that aside, let us return to the use of ontology within anthropology. What should we conclude from its growing popularity? Frequent usage (trendiness?) alone does not a useful concept make, and I for one have some deep reservations which are clearly shared by Vigh and Sausdal (2014). Keane (2013) makes some similar points, particularly in making an important distinction between weak and strong ontologies, arguing that anthropology deals with weak ontologies (accounts of the world) even when claiming they are strong ones (worlds *tout court*).

Following the lead given by their article, I offer some reflections on the ontological turn to complement those of Vigh and Sausdal: one about Lévy-Bruhl’s idea of mentalities, the other about the comparative method and its implications.

¹ I have been told by Sebastian Rahtz (personal communication, June 2013) that the semantic web can deal with real-world ambiguity and vagueness by defining a RDF triple which notes or acknowledges it. This may allow such ontologies to deal with claims such as the following: ‘the concept of “freedom” is essentially contested’ (Gallie 1956). Maybe this will work in practice, but it does not address the conceptual issue. To my mind this is worryingly reminiscent of Zadeh’s fuzzy logic (1975), which assumes a precise continuum underlying uncertainty or vagueness: the logic requires one to specify exactly (numerically) how vague a concept is. I don’t think this is a correct characterisation of how vagueness operates.

Theoretical déjà vu

Consider a thought experiment: perform a global edit of articles and books by anthropologists using ontologies but replacing ‘ontology’ with ‘mentality’. To my eye the replacement works well (ontology, ontologies perfectly; ontological less so). What we have been offered is a repeat of Lévy-Bruhl some eighty years after the idea was first developed (1975 (1923)). And the negative argument works just as well – the criticisms of Levy Bruhl’s mentalities also apply to ontologies (see e.g. Lloyd 1990). I discuss two below.

How many are there? Multiplication of ontologies/mentalities.

Having a different point of view, looking at things differently, even making different fundamental assumptions about how the world is structured (for all of the above there is an implicit ‘than us’, whoever ‘we’ are) does not require us to move to a multiplicity of ontologies/mentalities. Worse, there is the very real possibility that within what is usually called a single social group there might have to be many ontologies: one could easily imagine an argument that the old understand the world profoundly differently from the young, men from women, rich from poor etc., etc. But if a single group has many ontologies, then does it really deserve to be called a single group? How can intragroup communication be achieved if it is not within an ontology? And if we are not to allow many ontologies within a group, then why should we allow them between groups, granted all the well-established arguments about the porosity and fuzzy boundaries between social groups (however defined)?

Assertions of incommensurability: mentality/ontology alike

Incommensurability has been discussed for a long time in the philosophy of science. From Kuhn’s paradigms, the idea was imported into anthropology as part of the rationality debates in the 1970s and early 1980s (Horton and Finnegan (eds.) 1973, Hollis and Lukes (eds.) 1982). More recently it has been extensively discussed by Povinelli (2001), but mainly in a political context. Applied to ontologies, this comes down to taking seriously the claim that ‘they live in another world’ (see Boghossian 2006: 123 for a further critique of such claims). The problem for de Castris is that, if taken seriously, then serious problems arise.

The deepest problem with claims of incommensurability in both the philosophy of science and anthropology is that, in order to assert that two mentalities or ontologies (belief systems, theories) are incommensurable, the person making the judgement has to be able to judge or comprehend both, in which case, at least at one remove, they are comparing them, rendering them commensurable (Keane 2013: 187 makes a similar point). Especially for anthropology, it

matters not that the entities are different and that direct translation may not be possible. The point of ethnography – the reason that anthropologists need to spend pages (chapters, books) in the analysis of concepts which are easy to use, taken for granted by people raised in their use – is that for those unfamiliar with them to appreciate the subtlety and refinement of the ideas in languages whose underlying metaphysics are quite different requires space (partly in order to cancel out and circumscribe the implicit metaphysics of the target language, which I will not call ontology). If translation is possible, then there is no incommensurability; if translation is impossible, then so too is anthropology (see Zeitlyn and Just forthcoming). The objection holds not only for anthropologists: what about people from the Amazonian groups that practice linguistic exogamy (I take linguistic differences as plausible indicators of ontological boundaries)? Another, not too fanciful example would be of individuals from one group captured in war by a second group, then traded to a third cultural group, only later to be freed and settled with a fourth group, so forcing them to move between four ontologies or mentalities. As I understand it, world history is full of such examples.

Believing what you are told: de Castrism and Fredrik Barth's exploding head

De Castro tells us to take other views *seriously* (2011: 133). This is not new in anthropology: 'For me, respect means *accepting fully* beliefs and phenomena which our system of knowledge holds preposterous' (Harry West 2007: 23, quoting Stoller and Olkes 1987: 229, my emphasis).

There is a simple point to make here: it is one thing for Stoller to make that claim for his work in Songhay, but quite another if he were to have worked with a group that made exclusive claims about the world (which I don't think the Songhay quite do), let alone were he to have worked as, for example, Fredrik Barth has done with many groups. Perhaps the same is true for the many different groups in the Amazon basin (as suggested above, we must ask whether there is there one Amerindian ontology or many).

The comparative method or perspective which is or has been key for anthropology has implications which are quite other than Stoller et al. suggest. We are forced into irony and detachment not through neo-colonial condescension or the suggestion 'that "our" science is better than "their" superstition', but rather from an abdication or an abstention from choosing one over another: 'they can't all be right' (when they make mutually incompatible/contradictory claims about the world). Zeitlyn and Just (forthcoming) argue that this puts anthropologists in a situation of bad faith which is uncomfortable but uncomfortably different from those seriously committed to a single ontology of choice.

Fredrik Barth is perhaps an extreme case, since he has worked in so many locations round the world. If he were to take Stoller or de Castro's injunction seriously, consider the different things that he would have to (really, really) adhere to. A list of Barth's fieldwork locations (taken from Barth 2007) can serve as a proxy for the different ontologies associated with the socio-cultural traditions found there:

Norway

Bali

Sudan (Darfur)

Papua New Guinea (Baktaman)

Iran (Basseri tribe of the Khamseh Confederacy)

Pakistan (Swat Pathans)

Oman (Sohar)

Of course, his knowledge of each society is less profound than if he had spent a lifetime there. Of course, his understanding is incomplete (as is everyone's). But if we accept that it is possible that he knows a little about these highly disparate places, then that one head encompasses many ontologies.

A final thought

Vivieros de Castro and Bruno Latour are often thought of as sort of bedfellows. I don't think they are. If we were to take seriously de Castro's injunction to take things seriously, then where would Science and Technology Studies (STS) be? STS start with a corrosive cynicism that distances their researchers from the assertions of the scientists being studied. If they were to take them seriously, then they too must share realist ontologies. Candea makes this point in the 2011 *Common Ground* seminar. De Castrism is not reflexive, as it does not take seriously the anthropological ontology, the implications of the comparative stance.

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