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In Praise of Social Sciences

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Should we expect the social sciences in general, and anthropology in particular, to enlighten us about society's problems and how they might be solved? According to Philippe Descola, it is rather by requiring us to consider the multiplicity of ways of being that the social sciences can help change the world.

This is the speech Descola delivered upon being awarded the gold medal of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (the National Center for Scientific Research, or CNRS) on December 19, 2012. The following version has been slightly modified.

It is perfectly normal for human beings to demand accountability from sciences that study human beings. It is reasonable to hope that such sciences will enlighten human beings about what makes their species so unique, offering greater insight into their behavior and how it might be conceptualized, the ways that human beings in the past and present have interacted with their environment, and the problems arising from the inherently collective nature of human existence. In short, far more than mathematicians, astronomers, or botanists, we are expected to help people understand the immediate world in which they live—and perhaps even to change it. There are, however, two opposing attitudes regarding the practical implications of the social sciences: a utilitarian attitude, which is pervasive outside the social sciences themselves, and a critical attitude, which prevails among its practitioners.

The utilitarian point of view sees the cultural and social sciences as a body of knowledge that can diagnose social dysfunction and perhaps offer solutions. They should, in any case, improve our understanding of why technological, scientific, and social innovations are accepted or rejected. Thinking like social engineers, these utilitarians expect researchers to be vigilantly on the lookout for symptoms of crisis or anomie and to prescribe cures for any diseases they detect. Unlike our colleagues who specialize in quantum physics or embryogenesis, who are drawn to the phenomena they study because they believe they can explain them, social scientists are commonly asked to elucidate phenomena first suggested to them by others—such as the

media or pressure groups—and which they are reluctant to regard as legitimate research topics. When called upon to solve "social" issues, such as identifying a "threshold of tolerance" for immigrants or the ideal family structure, social sciences can only admit their impotence. I would not go so far as to say of these unusual sciences, that, as Claude Lévi-Strauss once remarked, "the true way to let them exist is to give them much but, above all, to ask nothing of them."[1] Yet it must be forcefully reiterated that true science decides for itself which phenomena it will study, so it is illusory to believe that social scientists could offer serious answers to questions they did not formulate. This does not, of course, mean that anthropologists and sociologists are indifferent to the obvious effects of inequality or domination in the contemporary world, pervasive anxieties, or the perpetuation of prejudices of all kinds. Their way of problematizing these trends, however, only rarely overlaps with the views of public opinion, politicians, or the business community.

By contrast, the critical approach relies on analyses that emerge from deep within the social sciences. They seek to shed light on the hidden mechanisms that shape the objects of our study and, through this unmasking, to make society more just and connected. Faithful to the Enlightenment, in which this tradition is rooted, and steeped in the emancipatory ideals of the founders of the social sciences who, from Marx to Durkheim, by way of Weber and Boas, never distinguished their theoretical reflections from their political goals, the critical approach nevertheless has the disadvantage of creating a considerable disconnect between, on the one hand, the learned scholar illuminating, with the torch of science, the path to a future that has been cleansed of all the present's imperfections, and, on the other, the masses who remain ignorant of the motivations and rules that guide their behavior. In anthropology this kind of academic prophecy-making can take the form of a reformist teleology: to purge modernity of its epistemological errors and moral failures, an indigenous philosophy is proposed as a counter-model, canonically reconstructed according to a system of concepts that are oddly analogous to those the West long specialized in producing. One might, for instance, show how a "hunter-gatherer epistemology" provides a superior account of the body's relationship to its surroundings because it rejects the subject/object distinction. In this way, both the utilitarian and the critical approaches strike me as missing the point of what the social sciences in general and anthropology in particular can contribute to the absolutely essential goal of changing our present way of life.

The Distant Gaze

One such contribution is so obvious that it should not even have to be mentioned. Still, it is often overlooked. It is, quite simply, the imperative of knowledge itself. Neither the description of an Australian language, an annotated edition of a Tibetan manuscript, nor the

[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale II*, Paris, Plon, 1973, 343.

ethnography of an African initiation rite has practical, immediate effects. Yet by providing us with the materials to study the multiple ways of being human, such documents are absolutely central to understanding who we are. Yes: erudition, specialized knowledge, linguistic and technical mastery in obscure fields—all these competencies acquired through years of hard work and self-denial are still the backbone of research in these disciplines and must be preserved at all costs.

Another, more specifically anthropological contribution is that researchers in my field have, over the years, accumulated experience from every corner of the earth of forms of collective life based on premises that are quite different from our own. Though the reasons for this experience are contingent—and tied to Europe's colonial expansion and the resulting need to understand colonized populations—it has provided anthropologists with an "off-center" point of view. This, in turn, allowed them to examine their own society, at least partially, from the perspective of the societies they studied, which demonstrated the relative nature of ways of seeing and acting that were the fruit of two and a half millennia of Western self-reflection. By restoring the "vision of the vanquished," to borrow the phrase Nathan Wachtel used to describe the Indians of the Andes[2], anthropologists are not simply giving greater recognition to the contributions that peoples subject to internal as well external colonialism have made to the common human heritage, they are also providing an initiation into the distant gaze that allows them to consider their own world from a point of view that is free of the present's illusions. This perspective could certainly be called "critical," but it seems to me to go much further, as it implies a genuine plurality of modes of being. It is not the same as the idea, which has fortunately became commonplace, that the world can be considered from several different perspectives, that all cultures are equally deserving in dignity and must interact with one another in a cosmopolitan dialogue. Rather, it means that the premises on the basis of which we, as human beings, formulate our judgments, aggregate phenomena, and integrate into our environment objects endowed with unusual properties vary considerably depending on the milieus in which we are socialized. Consequently, a massive amount of work is required if we are to understand the conditions under which these premises might become compatible with one another or contribute to new configurations in which none would have special privileges.

The pluralistic anthropology that I advocate does not consider other peoples' consciousness of their forms of life as ideologies whose principles must be made explicit, nor as alternative cosmologies that should be embraced because they explain reality more accurately than our own, but rather as the result of predicative operations that are accessible to all, but which tend to stabilize themselves selectively within a community of practices, in such a way that, within the collectivities constituted by these operations, specific patterns of thought and

[2] Nathan Wachtel, *La Vision des vaincus. Les Indiens du Pérou devant la conquête espagnole,* Paris, Gallimard, 1971.

action emerge which infuse communal life with observable coherence. These operations can be seen as a kind of ontological sifting of the world's qualities that affects many dimensions of the human experience: how entities are distributed into categories; the kinds of agency that are attributed to these entities and the types of relations they can form; the ways in which collectivities are constituted and how they interact with other collectivities; how one defines "agents" and "patients"; how a legitimate or efficient action occurs; the conditions under which a proposition can be considered true and a form of knowledge authentic; and the kinds of metaphysical and epistemological problems human beings face and the procedures they use to resolve them. All these fundamental characteristics of human existence—and many others—are established through distinct modalities that are a function of the qualities and relations which the habits acquired from within a particular collectivity have helped us to perceive or ignore.

In this way, a pluralistic anthropology does not consist in contrasting an elusive West to an undefined Rest. Rather, it places different ways of ordering the world's diversity on an equal footing, developing a descriptive and analytical language that can account for forms which, while highly diverse, are not infinite and group together entities, qualities, processes, and relations without drawing on the tools that were used to conceptualize these functions in our own cultural tradition. If concepts like "society," "nature," "history, "economics," "religion," or "subjectivity" played significant roles in the self-reflective work through which Europeans created modernity and, in the same process, established a distinctive space of positivity in which the human and social sciences could emerge, these concepts are nonetheless indicative of ways of objectifying phenomena that are characteristic of historical trajectories that not all societies have followed. They must be treated not as universals, but as the local expression of a particular way of arranging the world's components—and one, moreover, that has known many different modalities. My plea is thus for a universalism that is both real and realistic—one that, in other words, refuses to universalize the relative concepts that make us think that we can use terms borrowed from the cosmology of modernization to describe peripheral cosmologies; a universalism that seeks, rather, to devise analytical tools that are less dependent on an anthropocentric conception of the relationship between humans and non-humans that naturalism has created.

Universalizing Particulars

The paradox of a revamped universalism of this kind is that it is the result of lessons anthropologists have learned from circumstances that seem so unique as to be immune from any effort to draw general conclusions from them. Indeed, when I look back at the findings of my ethnographic work with the Achuar Indians of the upper Amazon, I realize that each one of them challenged concepts and values whose universal validity I would never dreamed of contesting

before. The first and perhaps most important of these lessons is that nature does not exist everywhere and in all periods; or, more precisely, that the radical split the West posits between the natural and the human world has little meaning to other peoples, who bestow upon plants and animals all the attributes of social life, see them as subject rather than objects, and are thus incapable of relegating them to an autonomous realm governed exclusively by scientific and technological laws. This is why saying the Indians are "close to nature" is a total fallacy: in attributing to the beings that populate it dignity that is equal to their own, the Indians do not really treat them any differently than they treat one another. To be close to nature, nature has to exist—an exceptional arrangement of which only moderns have proved capable, a fact that without question makes our cosmology more enigmatic than all those that have preceded us.

The Achuar people also taught me that one can live one's life without divine or historical transcendence, the two sides of the coin between which many contemporary societies continue to hesitate. In the latter, isolated individuals are not determined by a superior and external principle, they are not in the grips of collective movements of which they are unaware, they are not defined by their place in a social hierarchy, and the meaning of their lives does not depend on the position into which they were born. Rather, they exist only by virtue of the fact that everyone has the capacity to affirm themselves through actions according to a generally accepted scale of desirable goals. Another lesson I learned from the Achuar people is that one can have a collective identity without being bogged down by a national consciousness. Unlike the movements for popular emancipation that, beginning in late eighteenth-century Europe, founded their demands for political autonomy on shared cultural or linguistic traditions, the Achuar do not conceive of their ethnicity as a list of distinctive traits that makes their shared destiny ontological and eternal. The meaning of their communal existence is not to be found in a language, a religion, or the past; it draws on a common way of experiencing the social bond and relationships with neighboring peoples, be they human or otherwise. This way of establishing a collective existence offers valuable evidence in support of the view that ethnic nationalism is less a legacy of pre-modern societies than a consequence of the contamination of earlier forms of communal organization by modern doctrines of state hegemony.

Each of these lessons, like all those that anthropologists have drawn from their ethnographic studies, constitutes a promising alternative experience. Overcoming the frenetic exploitation of nature achieved by pillaging the living conditions of future generations; ending blind nationalism and the predator arrogance of nation states and some multinational firms; eradicating unbearable inequalities in access to resources, particularly those that should be held in common; the need to provide the various non-humans with whom our fate is invariably bound with some sort of public representation: all of these are concrete challenges faced by modernity, which could usefully be considered as analogous to the way peoples studied by ethnologists

establish their own relationship to the world. Not that we could adopt their practices as such, since historical experiences cannot be easily transposed, even if it were desirable. What anthropologists can do, however, is to provide evidence that other paths are possible, since, improbable though it might seem, they have been explored in other times and places. Anthropologists can show, in other words, that the future is not simply a linear prolongation of the present, that it is full of amazing potentialities whose realization we must imagine if we are to build, as soon as possible, a truly common home—one that is actually livable, less exclusive, and more fraternal.

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