Animism, Fetishism, and Objectivism as Strategies for Knowing (or not Knowing) the World

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ABSTRACT *Animistic or 'relational' ontologies encountered in non-Western (i.e. pre-modern) settings pose a challenge to Western (i.e. modern) knowledge production, as they violate fundamental assumptions of Cartesian science. Natural scientists who have tried seriously to incorporate subject-subject relations into their intellectual practice (e.g. Uexküll, Bateson) have inexorably been relegated to the margins. Surrounded by philosophers and sociologists of science (e.g. Latour) announcing the end of Cartesian objectivism, however, late modern or 'post-modern' anthropologists discussing animistic understandings of nature will be excused for taking them more seriously than their predecessors. It is incumbent on them to analytically sort out what epistemological options there are, and to ask why pre-modern, modern, and post-modern people will tend to deal with culture/nature or subject/object hybridity in such different ways. Animism, fetishism, and objectivism can be understood as alternative responses to universal semiotic anxieties about where or how to draw boundaries between persons and things.*

KEYWORDS *Animism, fetishism, objectivism, modernity, epistemology, semiotics*

The topic of 'animism' continues to intrigue modern people. What, then, do we mean by 'modern'? As a number of social theorists have suggested, the social condition and technological accomplishments of 'modernity' have been founded on a categorical distinction between Nature and Society. It is by drawing a boundary between the world of objects and the world of meanings that the 'modern' project has emerged. By, as it were, 'distilling' Nature into its material properties alone, uncontaminated by symbolic meanings or social relations, modernists have been freed to manipulate it in ways unthinkable in pre-modern contexts.

Animism, of course, suggests the very antithesis of this objectifying mod-

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ern stance. Yet it is not a phenomenon that can be relegated to a previous period in human history. As Tim Ingold (2000), Nurit Bird-David (1999), Philippe Descola (1994) and other anthropologists have shown, many contemporary people who are intimately engaged in gaining their subsistence from local ecosystems continue to approach their non-human environments through what is now being called a 'relational' stance. Entities such as plants or even rocks may be approached as communicative subjects rather than the inert objects perceived by modernists.

I would like to discuss the notion of 'animism' from the perspective of what Bruno Latour (1993) has called a 'symmetric anthropology': an anthropology that does not merely represent an urban, 'modern' perspective on the 'pre-moderns' in the margins, but that is equally capable of subjecting modern life itself to cultural analysis. For animism raises more questions about ourselves than about the animists. To begin with, is it really true that we, modern 'Westerners', do *not* animate the objects around us? And, to the extent that we are indeed Cartesianists, whence does this objectifying stance derive? Is it a product of our social organization, our education, our personal biographies? What are the consequences of objectification, for our selves, for social relations, and for the environment? Finally, why are we asking these questions today, and what relation do they have to actual social and ecological processes in our time?

Bruno Latour argues that we have, in fact, 'never been modern'. The notion that the world of objects and the world of subjects are separable, in any other than an analytical sense, has been an illusion from the start. Not only do human beings everywhere impute personhood and agency to entities which according to official modernist doctrine ought to be classified as objects (need I mention our favourite trees, houses, cars, teddy bears?), but Latour makes the important point that modernity itself, through the new socio-technical networks unleashed by its dualist epistemology, continually generates ever more obvious examples of 'hybrids' or 'quasi-objects' that contain both subjective and objective aspects, and that span the divide between Culture and Nature. In other words, the 'official' Cartesian ideology of subject–object dualism is not only contradicted in our everyday lives; when applied in social and technological practice, it inexorably produces increasingly conspicuous evidence of its own invalidity. From the ozone hole to genetically modified organisms, the real world afflicted by modernity has shown itself to be not only permeable to, but *imbued* with, politics, meanings, and human intentions. The new technologies and networks prove to be not

objects but what Latour calls 'quasi-objects': part Nature, part Society, and brimming with agency.

So, if Cartesian dualism has indeed become invalidated by its own technological success, what is there to replace it? As we realize that one half of our technology and ultimately also of the Nature to which it refers – previously defined in terms of 'pure' efficiency and 'pure' material essence – is in fact politically constructed, we must ask ourselves, where we can go from here? At one point, Latour's advice is to retain what I understand as the *analytical* acknowledgement of 'an external Nature distinct from subjects,' while (and this is interesting:) 'using the *premodern categories* to conceptualize the hybrids' that increasingly inhabit our world (Latour 1993:134, emphasis added). This would seem to mean taking seriously the agency of objects – perhaps indeed to the point of reconsidering animism – while (and this is the modern contribution:) keeping a clear view of the exact extent to which this agency is politically inscribed.

Although Tim Ingold and Bruno Latour represent different disciplines and academic genres, there are some interesting parallels in their recent work which suggest that they are in the process of unravelling similar arguments from quite different vantage-points. Both are preoccupied with the dubious modern distinction between persons and objects and between Culture and Nature, both recognize that this distinction is paradoxically itself cultural,[1] and both keep returning to the phenomenon of *technology* as an arena where the distinction becomes blurred or at least problematic.

If we are to reconsider animism, we need to discuss what this might imply, not only from an academic point of view, but also from a personal one. To the extent that we have 'never been modern,' it could be argued that we probably all have treasured spaces in our lives where we *are* practising animists, in the sense that engagement and 'relatedness' take precedence over detached observation. The Cartesian programme has raised our doubts from the start. Our 'disenchantment' would never be as complete as Max Weber predicted. Philosophers like Martin Buber or Maurice Merleau-Ponty have explicitly encouraged us to retain our innate capacity to *relate* to the things around us. And to a greater extent than they feared would be possible, we probably have. As Latour suggests, modernity has not made us into quite the monsters that anti-modernists have imagined. To be sure, modern alienation and social disembeddedness are not conducive to 'relatedness' – and are undoubtedly at the root of modernist epistemology (cf. Hornborg 1998, 1999) – but all of us are actually *born* 'pre-modern', have an ontogenetic familiarity with

'relatedness', and will generally tend to struggle to maintain some measure of community in our lives. Our training in the skills of modernist detachment and objectification is *contextual*, as illustrated by the professional logger who privately cares for his garden, or the industrial butcher who privately cares for his dog. The efficacy of modernity in unleashing wholesale transformations in human-environmental relations lies in the creation of a spectrum of highly specialized occupations, each emphasizing its own specific application of objectification and detachment, so that the *total* impact of modern society is unrestricted by moral concerns, while each individual is able to maintain, by and large, a moral identity. In other words, it may not so much be an incapacity to relate as such that distinguishes us from the animists, as the incapacity to exercise such 'relatedness' within the discursive and technical constraints of the professional subcultures which organize the most significant share of our social agency. Science and technology does not so much make us into robots, as make specific *parts* of our behaviour robot-like.

Or does the difference indeed go deeper than this? Do modern people have a generalized tendency to perceive their environments as collections of objects? A compelling observation in this direction is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's (1999) intriguing suggestion that Europeans and Amerindians have diametrically opposite images of how humans and animals are constituted. Whereas Europeans tend to conceive of human beings as biological organisms masquerading in a cultural costume, Viveiros de Castro observes that Amazonian Indians view animals as fundamentally persons concealed under their animal surface. For Europeans, then – or at least for European biologists – living things are fundamentally objects, while for Amazonian Indians they are fundamentally subjects. The latter, of course, is an unusually concise statement of animism. But then, any one of us who has looked into the eyes of a dog or a cow would be prone to agree with the Amazonians. The Cartesian view of nature is obviously counterintuitive, even to the most ingrained modernist. A telling illustration of this is the classical example of the early European vivisectionists, who felt compelled to sever the vocal chords of the dogs whose living anatomy they explored (cf. Evernden 1985:16–17). In effect, they could only perform their modernist task after having shut off the communicative link – the *relation* – between dog and human.

Would modernity be impossible in a world where living things are consistently recognized as subjects? Latour's answer seems to be yes. It is only by severing or submerging our capacity for 'relatedness' that we are set free to impose our modernist designs on the world. Significantly, to make this point

he refers to Philippe Descola's (1994) suggestion that traditional societies of Amazonia retain their relative inertia – compared to Europe – precisely because their conception of the non-human environment remains embedded in their moral conception of society (Latour 1993:42). Animism, to Descola, is the projection of social metaphors onto relations with the non-human world. In not separating Nature and Society, Amazonian Indians like the Achuar automatically embed their ecological practice in a compelling moral system. For centuries, mainstream European society has refused to be thus constrained, and this liberation of capitalist modernity has been founded on the incommensurable distinction between Nature and Culture. Against this background, it seems ironic that calls are now being made for an 'environmental ethics.' How, indeed, shall we be able to reintroduce morality into our dealings with our non-human environment, now that we have invested centuries of training and discourse into convincing ourselves that Nature lies beyond the reach of moral concerns?

Probably because animism would imply such moral constraints, the few Western scientists who have seriously championed an animistic world view have inexorably been relegated to the margins. Not because their arguments have been shown to be invalid, but because – predictably – they have been found *irrelevant* to the modern project. I am thinking here not of theologians or philosophers, but natural scientists, and would briefly like to mention two such scientific animists of the twentieth century whose contributions continue to haunt us.

The first is the Estonian zoologist Jakob von Uexküll (1940), who created his own version of theoretical biology by focusing on the obvious but neglected fact that all living organisms inhabit their own subjective worlds – their *Umwelt* – defined by their sensory capacities. In reminding us that organisms are not mere metabolism, but live by the exchange and interpretation of *signs*, Uexküll provided us with the possibility of a radically different science of ecology. Ecosystems, in this perspective, are not merely flows of energy and matter, but even more fundamentally flows of *signs*, for without these communicative flows between myriads of living subjects, the material flows which preoccupy mainstream ecologists would simply not exist. Nature, in other words, is just as much founded on *communication* as the human social realm from which modern Europeans have banished it. Uexküll would have found himself at home among the Achuar or the Cree, who recognize that human communication is but a subset of the communication that goes on within the total community of living things. But, predictably, Western

biology found little use for his ambition to approach organisms as subjects. Although he is recognized as one of the founders of ethology (the study of animal behaviour), and although he deserves to be mentioned in any study of biological communication (for instance, the recent discovery of pheromones), the primary interest of Western science is not to get to know living organisms as subjects, but as objects.

The second scientific animist that I would like to mention is Gregory Bateson (1972), whom anthropologists like to think of as one of the giants of twentieth-century anthropology, but whose creativity spanned several other fields, including psychiatry, ethology, and biology. He applied a remarkably consistent approach to the study of incredibly diverse things, from rituals in highland New Guinea to schizophrenia, alcoholism, animal behaviour, evolutionary theory, and ecological crisis. The common denominator, again, was communication. Bateson showed how living things, their attributes, and their behaviour are everywhere moulded by the communicative relations in which they are engaged. Bateson, too, would have been at home among the Achuar or the Cree. For him, environmental crisis was a crisis of communication. But the ultimate response of mainstream Western scientists has been a peculiar mixture of admiration and puzzlement: 'fascinating, but how do we use it?'

Yes, how indeed? If the systematic modern denial of 'relatedness' is somehow at the root of ecological crisis, as many environmentalists believe, what are our prospects for resurrecting it? It is difficult to imagine that modern society as an act of instrumental reason should begin inculcating in its citizens the long-term ecological validity of pre-modern metaphors of what Bird-David (1993) calls 'subject-subject relatedness.' However much we admire the eco-cosmologies of the Nayaka, the Achuar, or the Cree, we should not expect to encounter them anywhere but in the anthropology departments, and definitely not in mainstream textbooks in ecology or 'sustainable development.' Nor can we put much hope in what has become known as 'New Age' spirituality. The movement as such is highly relevant from the point of view of this discussion, but it is a flimsy platform on which to build a future: a post-modern symptom of epistemological collapse rather than an advance on modernity. When 'neo-pagans' and other New Age enthusiasts proclaim that this or that sacred site possesses such strong 'energy', it seems as if they are indeed struggling for 'relatedness' – for a restoration of meaning beyond the existential wasteland of modernity – but remain confined to the modernist (and, in fact, scientistic) vocabulary through which objective properties are attributed to distinct, external things.

Surrounded by philosophers and sociologists of science announcing the end of Cartesian objectivism and acknowledging the extent to which human meanings infuse the material world, anthropologists discussing animistic understandings of nature will now be excused for taking them more seriously than a generation ago. But rather than 'going native,' or adopting some version of New Age spirituality, it is incumbent on us to analytically sort out what epistemological options there are, and to ask why pre-modern, modern, and post-modern people will tend to deal with subject–object relations in such different ways. We might begin by suggesting that the 'object' – in the sense of a material, intrinsically meaningless, but essentially knowable reality – is a thoroughly modern invention. If modernity is built on the subject–object dichotomy, this implies that whatever pre-modern people had to worry about, it was not epistemology. Whichever interpretative schemes conventionally adhered to in pre-modern societies, they enjoyed a kind of immutable authority that modern knowledge rarely achieves. It is the predicament of modern people to remain chronically uncertain about the validity of their own representations. This modern condition of *reflexive uncertainty* can either be harnessed in the production of new but provisional certainties (as in science) or assume the form of solipsism, disengagement, and indifference. The latter alternative is what we have come to know as the 'post-modern'. It is a condition where the exhausting attitude of chronic scepticism tends to give way to a kind of *resigned gullibility*. All hope of certainty has vanished, but precisely because no pretence to power or truth can be admitted, any pretence is as good as any other (witness the claims of the 'neo-pagans'). As in the pre-modern condition, a sign is again naively perceived as an unproblematic *index* of identity – rather than an arbitrary symbolic convention demanding to be challenged – but now simply by virtue of positing itself as such, rather than because of an assumed correspondence with some underlying essence. This post-modern abandonment of essence is what Jean Baudrillard (1973:127–128) has aptly called the 'autonomization of the signifier.'

The problem with objectivism – as unimaginable for the pre-moderns as it is unacceptable for the post-moderns – is the notion of a 'knowledge' that is not situated as part of a *relation*. By posing as disinterested representation, decontextualized from any political aspirations, modernist knowledge production suggests a relinquishment of responsibility, but in fact serves – through technology – to set the instrumental rationality of the powerful free to go about its business in the world. But the post-modern mirror-image of objectivism – that is, *relativism* – certainly fares no better in terms of responsi-

bility. Both these epistemologies have been spawned by the same, modern subject–object dichotomy. The division into natural versus human sciences, pitting 'realism' against 'constructivism' in Western knowledge production, remains a projection of this fundamentally existential, dualist scheme. The former takes the represented object as its point of departure, the latter the constructing subject, but neither acknowledges their *recursivity*, that is: their *relation*. One reason why animism continues to intrigue us may be that this is precisely what animism *does*. Rather than viewing knowledge as *either* representation *or* construction, animism suggests the intermediate view that knowledge is a relation that shapes both the knower and the known. An animistic or 'relational' ontology is a mode of knowing that is not only constitutive of both the knower and the known – as is *all* knowledge, according to the cognitive scientists (cf. Maturana & Varela 1992) – but that crucially also *acknowledges* this fundamental condition, and thus also the responsibilities that must always adhere to the very act of 'knowing'. Beyond objectivism and relativism, there can only be *relationism*. If only because purely instrumental knowledge and rational risk assessment can never be as powerful incentives for human action as moral imperatives, we do need new metaphors capable of sustainably *relating* us to the rest of the biosphere.

Animism raises our curiosity as the hesitant acknowledgement of suppressed childhood experiences, the assertion of which would challenge the entire modern project. As I suggested earlier, we were all born 'pre-modern'. 'Relatedness' is a condition that all of us continue to be capable of achieving in particular, experiential contexts of some minimal duration. Our 'modernity' – our inclination toward abstraction, detachment, and objectification – is the product of our disembedding biographies. It is in being involuntarily *deprived* of 'relatedness' that we become Cartesianists. The powerful historical trajectory of objectivism relies on a peculiar recursivity between social disembeddedness, Cartesian epistemology, and technology– ultimately, that is, between individual existence and socio-technical power structures. The epistemological predicament articulated by Descartes was not so much an innovative, cognitive shift from animism to objectivism, as the emergence – or unprecedented generalization – of a social condition of alienation. Through processes of increasing commodification and alienation – and more recently through the proliferation of new technological 'hybrids' in Latour's sense – the social condition of modernity has accentuated our anxieties about where or how to draw boundaries between persons and things (cf. Kopytoff 1986), amplifying a pervasive (Cartesian) dissociation of self from non-self that, as

we have seen, is at the root of both solipsism and objectivism. To the extent that we do continue to animate our favourite trees, houses, cars, or teddy bears, it is because we continue to need concrete reference-points onto which to anchor our selves (cf. Shweder & Bourne 1984, Hornborg 2001b:206-208). It is the long immersion in the concrete and experiential *specifics of place* that yields conditions conducive to 'relatedness' – vis-à-vis irreplaceable persons, localities, and things. This, if anything, should provide us with clues about the prospects for resurrecting 'relational' ontologies.

But there is another – and supremely modernist – way in which things can be animated, which has to do not with experiential resonance but with ideology and political economy. 'Animation' is in fact fundamental to fetishism (cf. Ellen 1988, Hornborg 2001a), and fetishism to Karl Marx was central to modern capitalism. It is indeed important to ask how animism relates to fetishism. There is a crucial difference between representing relations between people as if they were relations between things (Marxian fetishism), and experiencing relations to things as if they were relations to people (animism). The former is an ideological illusion underpinning capitalist political economy, the latter a condition of phenomenological resonance. We should probably further distinguish between the animation of living things such as trees (animism, more narrowly defined) and that of non-living things such as stones or machines (that is, fetishism). Cartesian objectivism and fetishism here emerge as structural inversions of one another: the former denies agency and subjectivity in living beings, whereas the latter attributes such qualities to inert objects. In this framework, a more strictly defined category of animism would be reserved for the intermediate and quite reasonable assumption that *all living things are subjects*, i.e. equipped with a certain capacity for perception, communication, and agency. Animism, fetishism, and objectivism can thus be understood as alternative responses to universal human problems of drawing boundaries between persons and things.

Perhaps some of these problems can be alleviated by recognizing the difference between drawing boundaries in an analytical and an ontological sense. We can probably all agree with Latour that Nature is continually being intertwined with Culture or Society in our landscapes, our bodies, and our new hybrid technologies that obviously invalidate ontological versions of the Cartesian dichotomy. But does this mean that the categories of Nature and Culture, or Nature and Society, are obsolete and should be discarded? On the contrary. Never has it been more imperative to maintain an *analytical* distinction between the symbolic and the pre-symbolic,

while acknowledging their complex interfusion in the real world. Only by keeping Society and Nature analytically apart can we hope to progress in the demystification of that 'hybrid' web in which we are all suspended, and which more than anything else obstructs our pursuit of 'relatedness': the realm of animated objects that we call 'technology'. We more than ever need to retain our capacity to distinguish between those aspects of technology that derive from Nature and those aspects that derive from Society. The Laws of Thermodynamics and the political economy of oil prices require completely different analytical tools.

I am thus able to conclude by returning to that favourite topic of mine: *machine fetishism*. For a number of years now, I have been struggling with the intuition that there is something mysterious about technology. Something that strangely seems to escape us, both as social scientists and as citizens. On one hand, modern technology seems quite obviously to be a strategy for *capacitating* an affluent minority of the world's population through an asymmetrical exchange – an expanding net *appropriation* – of resources from the rest of the world (Hornborg 2001b). On the other hand, technology tends to be represented as a politically innocent and intrinsically productive union of human inventiveness and the 'pure' material essence of Nature – indeed as a gift of the wealthier, 'developed' nations to the rest of humanity. How are these two contradictory images of technology able to coexist, without the former contaminating the latter? The answer, Latour would undoubtedly say, lies again in that rigid categorical distinction between Nature and Society, between the world of 'pure' objects and the world of human relations. Once classified as object, technology is automatically immune to political critique. For how could 'pure' objects be conceived as sources of malign agency? If the behaviour of the early nineteenth century Luddites today strikes us as odd, it is because they were not yet quite modern. Today we supposedly know better than to direct our political frustrations at machines. The efficacy of technology, we hold, comes from 'objective properties intrinsic to the nature of things' (cf. Latour 1993:51). Like economic rationality and scientific truth, says Latour, technological efficiency 'forever escapes the tyranny of social interest' (*ibid.* 131).

But *if* these modernist convictions were indeed to collapse, as Latour predicts, and we should realize the extent to which our technologies are in fact politically constituted, our machines would cease to be 'pure' objects and conceivably be accredited with a malicious agency far surpassing that of any pre-modern fetishes. For to expose the agency of these cornucopian

'productive forces' as a transmutation and deflection of the agency of other humans would be to render morally suspect that which modernity had couched in the deceptive neutrality of the merely technical. And in seeing, for the first time, the machines as they really are – as *machinations* – perhaps the animist within us would stir again, and we would ask ourselves: What manner of creatures *are* these things, part mineral, part mind, that serve the few to enslave the many, while fouling the land, the water, and the air?

Such a scenario serves to remind us that animism and 'relatedness' bring possibilities not only of harmony and community, but also of horror and rage. It might help us understand how the Cartesian suppression of 'relatedness' has served a fundamental ideological purpose in the emergence and expansion of industrial capitalism. Against this background, nothing could be more revolutionary than to try to rekindle some of our pre-modern attitudes as we confront the demons of our own making.

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Note

1. Compare, e.g., Fig. 3.1 in Ingold (2000:42) with Fig. 4.2 in Latour (1993:99).

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