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AN INTERVIEW WITH PHILIPPE DESCOLA

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Interview conducted by Quentin Deluermoz and François Jarrige at the Collège de France (Paris) on 15 January 2016

Philippe Descola is a French anthropologist, a disciple of Claude Lévi-Strauss and a Professor at the Collège de France. He has authored an extensive body of work which transcends the field of anthropology, thus giving food for thought to all the social sciences. After spending several years among the Achuar people on the Ecuador-Peru border in the late 1970s, Philippe Descola published his doctoral thesis *La nature domestique*, followed by a more personal book entitled *Les lances du crépuscule* (1993) in the "Terre Humaine" collection. Starting with this initial field study, he has offered an extensive analysis of modern societies from the perspective of the plurality of their "ontologies" and the diversity of relationships between "humans and non-humans". The aim was to propose a unified analytical framework for the different ways in which relationships between beings are conceptualized, rejecting the distinction between nature and culture, which he deems ethnocentric. The project came to fruition in 2005 with the publication of *Par-delà nature et culture,* which continues to enrich the work of historians. This seminal monograph completely rethinks our naturalistic cosmology and underlines its relative nature. The question of animals, in general, occupies a unique and central place in this vast and ambitious work. We met with Philippe Descola to discuss the place of animals in the social sciences in general—and history in particular—, their role in various cosmologies, their place in the 19th century and, more widely, in his own works.

RH 19: Animals are omnipresent in your work, as they are in the representations of the Achuar communities you have studied in depth. While there has been a distinct animal turn over the last twenty years in the social sciences, anthropologists and ethnologists were without doubt the first to place animals at the heart of their analyses, well before historians. How do you explain this? Is it simply the result of observing other societies which had not yet removed the animal world from their communal social interactions?

Philippe Descola: I am addressing historians, so I must periodize. Let's start by reminding ourselves that anthropology was born out of the following oddity reported by observers; in many parts of the colonized world, people did not appear to make a clear difference between humans and animals, plants and spirits or other life forms considered to be present in the environment. It can be said that anthropology was born out of the necessity to explain this mystery, which was previously part of a discipline belonging to historical sciences—folk studies—and approached more from a literary perspective, seeking patterns and themes, and looking at how animal symbolism took root in the local tradition of legends, and pilgrimages and the worship of saints. The first ethnographers and observers frequently reported that local communities personified animals. I have called this a "logical scandal", for this was at least how it was perceived by contemporary observers, and it was this scandal in the eyes of logical reasoning which was, to a great extent, at the origin of anthropological thought. The important texts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, etc.—focus largely on these questions; how can we consider an animal to be an ancestor, a parent, a double or an interlocutor? These questions were present from the outset and are a constituent of anthropology. But while studies by folkorists were focused on texts, anthropologists attempted to understand the immediacy in the relationship and the network of institutions that joined humans and animals together. We can even see this in the sometimes very precise and in-depth studies of proto-ethnographers, who were often missionaries. Father Kemlin, for example, who went to eastern Cochinchina (present-day South Vietnam) in 1898 to live with the Moi communities on the high plateaus, spoke of a woman who made a pact with a tiger. He recounted at length the pact and the conditions under which it was made. Here is a first answer to your question: from the perspective of what were known as primitive religions, the study of our relationship with animals is a constituent of anthropology. With relation to the work of historians, ethnologists' interest in this respect is founded on the perplexity and astonishment of discovering the still thriving existence of attitudes and customs that could be thought to have belonged to a distant past, at a time—the end of the 19th century—which was otherwise very rationalistic and in which the distinction between nature and culture appeared self-evident on an epistemological level for European elites. The descriptions brought back from the margins of the colonized worlds tended to shake this established distinction.

And then, much later, came the 'animal turn' that you mention. It is difficult to know how it all started. Practitioners don't like engaging in presentist history and don't always have the necessary perspective to understand how it came about. But it is evident that the field of 'animal studies'

is now a well-established one. The current began in the Anglophone world in Britain and the United States. Anthropologists are not the only ones who have played a role in this process. Philosophers who tackled the notion of 'animal welfare' and various other authors like feminist Donna Hathaway have played a crucial part in that respect. Hathaway noticed that many central figures of primatology were women, which led her to analyze the naturality of the man/animal relationship, between the care given to animals and specific attitudes assigned to women, etc. Several questions were first asked at that time, questions which went beyond anthropology and which helped crystallize the field of animal studies. The latter have since become a field in its own right with specialized journals, chairs and university departments, although my own work does not belong to this field of speciality, even if I attach great importance to the relations between humans and non-humans.

RH 19: In France, the turning point towards Animal Studies seems to have happened later than in the Anglo-American world. How can we explain this? Is it linked to the early creation of animal welfare movements in the United Kingdom?

Philippe Descola: Yes, the fact that it all started in the United States and the United Kingdom is not a matter of chance; the relationship with animals is very anthropocentric or sociocentric in France, that's how it has been built. The Grammont Law in 1850 especially comes to mind, which condemned public acts of violence towards animals given that the visibility of such acts belittled the image of Man. From the outset, these questions were seen differently in the Anglophone world, particularly as a result of the philosophical tradition of Bentham. Many historical and anthropological studies have addressed these questions. I am thinking especially of the ethnologist Vanessa Manceron and her work which compares the joint development of bird protection societies in France and the United Kingdom.[1]

RH 19: We would like to return to the question of scientific investigation methods and their impact on the different ways in which animals are dealt with by historians and anthropologists. You mention folklorists, but among historians, studying animals through the prism of cultural productions still happens at times, although it may appear somewhat naïve. Does the direct contact with animals you mention in your field study among the Achuar people change anything?

1. Vanessa Manceron, 'What is it like to be a bird? Imagination zoologique et proximité à distance chez les amateurs d'oiseau en Angleterre', *in* Michèle Cros, Julien Bondaz and Frédéric Laugrand (éd.), *Bêtes à pensées. Visions des mondes animaux*, Paris, Éditions des Archives contemporaines, 2005.

Philippe Descola: Yes, without a doubt. Being part of the daily life of communities who are surrounded by animals, and who treat them in ways that are very different from your country of origin provides a fundamental experience of otherness. Anthropologists are urban people, although maybe not from the beginning, but they studied in towns and they live there. Yet when they leave for more exotic locations, they find themselves immersed in the midst of the bush or forest at a relatively young age, when the rural world of their own country is often still unfamiliar to them. They thus engage on a path of discovery via a great difference in conducts, of which they had no prior knowledge, and this cannot fail to have a great impact on them. One of the things that really struck me among the Achuar, and which I have written extensively about since,[2] is the great number of tamed animals that shared their houses. I have personally shared my life with numerous cats since childhood; I also did a lot of horse-riding at one point, so I was used to a certain sort of animal. Yet living in a house where numerous and very different types of animals came and went as they pleased, interacting both among themselves and with humans, was a totally new experience for me. Having direct contact like this actually leads us to question the way our education teaches us to consider animals, leading us to view them, except for certain domesticated animals, more as signs and symbols than as beings or social partners we interact with on a daily basis. This is a central element which, in a way, we ethnologists perceive in a more direct manner since we travel to distant countries. In the case of historical work, there must surely be a conscious and reflexive effort to move away from the animal perception schemas of modern Europe in order to perceive animals differently.

RH 19: On the same note, have certain historical studies had an influence on your own research?

Philippe Descola: Yes. One historian in particular has played a very important role for my work: Keith Thomas. I started to read his work quite early on when the French translation of his book *Man and the Natural World*[3] came out in 1985. For me this is a seminal work which greatly contributed to my discovery of the historicity of our relationship to nature. It demonstrates how the attitudes of the British towards animals changed considerably over a relatively short period of three centuries, by showing both the

2. Philippe Descola, « Pourquoi les Indiens d'Amazonie n'ont-ils pas domestiqué le Pécari ? », *in* Bruno Latour and Pierre Lemonnier [dir.], *De la préhistoire aux missiles balistiques*, Paris, La Découverte, 2004, pp. 329-344.

3. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1983; French translation *Dans le jardin de la nature: la mutation des sensibilités en Angleterre à l'époque moderne: 1500-1800*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985.

convergences and divergences of the different social classes in that respect. I also think here of Robert Delort's book *Les animaux ont une histoire* and the work by Jean-Claude Schmitt on the cult of the holy greyhound Guinefort. I read them for a research seminar that I started giving at the EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales) when I returned from my field studies. I knew little about animals in the Middle Ages and there, all of a sudden, I discovered a dog personified and worshipped as a saint! Moreover, as Jean-Claude Schmitt's book was written with quite a structuralistic approach, it really fell into the field of structural anthropology, and I felt at home with it. It took me longer to find something similar among scholars of ancient history. It was therefore only later on that I discovered the work of Liliane Bodson from the University of Liège, who is a great figure in the study of animals in the Ancient World, and an erudite pioneer who has done much to encourage our interest in this question. But the great classics of Greece's historical anthropology that I was reading at the time (Gernet, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet) didn't seem to pay particular attention to the subject, even if Vidal-Naquet had written about game and the hunter. More generally, and here I digress a little, when I was appointed to the École des Hautes Études, I had just returned from my field studies and defended my thesis. At the time, an assistant professor had to ask permission to give a seminar. So, I went to see François Furet to tell him that I wanted to work on what I already called the anthropology of nature. He was most surprised and didn't really understand this apparent oxymoron that interested me so much! Moreover, at the time, apart from a few who were interested in the anthropology of techniques such as François Sigaut, or economic anthropology, such as Maurice Godelier, my colleagues at the EHESS were very sociocentric. The fact that social life does not solely take place in a sort of fish tank with the environment as its backdrop was discovered very slowly in France. Yet I was already persuaded that social life is founded on multiple interactions with all sorts of beings, not all of which are human.

RH 19: In your work, you have sought to understand the ontological foundations of the West by distinguishing several possible ways of categorizing beings. In *Beyond Nature and Culture,* you distinguish four possibilities according to the different ways in which the interiority and physicality of beings may be divided up: totemism (others possess the same elements as I); analogism (the interiority and physicality of the others are distinct from mine); animism (similar interiorities and heterogeneous physicalities); and finally naturalism (different interiorities and analogous physicalities). For readers who are unfamiliar with your work, would you kindly tell us more about these four ontologies? Moreover, why do animals occupy such a special place in these

cosmologies and in the relationships between beings? And could you explain how our naturalistic cosmology creates a new system of existence for animals?

Philippe Descola: There is a first difficulty which stems from the eternal problem of terminology. We must first note that humans are animals too. Man and Animal are two complex categories which are undoubtedly too all-encompassing. It is precisely because we are animals that the closeness and difference between human animals and non-human ones have, for a long time, continued to stimulate our imagination, taxonomic invention, as well as the symbolic capacity of humans. As a result of being close, notably with animals that appear to have abilities, dispositions and functions that are similar to humans, the latter's desire to distinguish differences by specifying certain properties and excluding others seemed important to me. Indeed, I devoted the last part of my inaugural lesson at the Collège de France to explaining my positions, drawing examples from the relationships that different societies have with birds, in other words by using the four ontologies you mention to demonstrate how they also represent four ways to conceive and enter into a relationship with birds. Why birds? Because, despite the morphological differences, they have long given humans food for thought due to their great similarity with us, in their behavior, ontogenetic development and their systems of communication. Firstly, they display a clearly recognizable family life, with mating rituals to create pairs, the building of a home, adults caring for children, along with a generally pronounced sexual dimorphism that evokes the differences in clothing and accessories between men and women; second, ontogenesis occurs according to clearly defined stages with important physical changes, as is the case with humans. Finally, they use communication by sound and it is probable that, even before ethnologists became interested in the subject, most humans had noticed that, just as with human language, birdsong is transmitted through learning, is characterized by dialectal variations within the same species and messages are modified according to whether or not they are in the presence of their counterparts, and so forth. These are things that can be observed. So I described four ontologies.

First of all, I chose the toucan as a result of my ethnographical experience among the Achuar people. The toucan is considered a social partner, able to have relationships of competition and solidarity. It is considered a generic brother-in-law, and a seducer too, showing a capacity for intentionality, having at any rate intentional agency that is very close to that of humans, while differing from them in that it lives in a very different world, high up in the forest canopy, a world to which its body is adapted. And so, the difference between the Achuar and toucans is not where we would consider it to be: they are both people with subjectivity and a moral dimension;

and the birds moreover see themselves as humans. But their toucan nature distinguishes them irremediably from humans since it leads them to live in a world that converges only partially with that of the Achuar. I called this animism: the interiority of humans and non-humans is similar, but they are distinguished by their bodies.

It is a most particular ontology. Essentially, what I have wanted to do for years is distinguish between phenomena that anthropology had previously grouped together. As I said before, this questioning about the nature of animals is very old and there was a tendency, whatever the terminology (totemism, animism, naturalism, nagualism,[4] etc.), to group together animal conceptions that were fundamentally distinct from ours and those of 19th-century Westerners. All the information reported at the time tended towards non-distinction between human and non-human animals. Anything not Western was but a vast exotic ball of wool within which no distinctions were made. And so what I wanted to do was to establish internal differences since it was obvious that the toucan was not considered in the same manner as, for example, the cockatoo or the crow, which are two bird totems among the Noongar people. That was my second ontology, totemism as illustrated by these two birds. The Noongar form a society divided into two totemic groups, one bearing the name of the crow, the other of the cockatoo. The birds are not ancestors from which they descend, but animals which will visibly incarnate a set of properties that are characteristic of all the human and non-human members of each totemic group. They are totemic prototypes which, at the time they were living on earth in no way resembled the birds they are today, and which are at the origin of the two classes grouping together humans and non-humans. Totemism is counter-intuitive yet fascinating. It is not a matter of chance that it fascinated the learned elite of the 19th and 20th centuries. At the same time, specifically designated species embodied certain qualities of these prototypes. The name generally given to these totemic species is therefore not the name of a species but that of a quality—"the watcher" or "the hunter"—which also designates the species. This makes it possible to move away from the notion of ancestral descent from an animal, since it is obviously conceptually difficult to imagine how it can be possible to descend from a bear, an eagle or a cockatoo. We are in an ontological system where animals are in fact the incarnation of the qualities that preexisted them.

For the third ontology, I chose the vulture, the urubu. The urubu, or black vulture of Mexico, is quite often a double of the human person—there are other animals too; the bird is born at the same time as a human,

4. In Amerindian belief, the nagual is a mythological being which is both human and animal, a protecting spirit that can take the concrete form of a particular animal or be the abstract representation of a species. Since the end of the 19th century, Nagualism has been of great interest to archeologists, linguists and ethnologists.

it develops and all the accidents that may happen to it will also happen to humans, and vice versa. This is a completely different relationship with birds than the ones I have already mentioned. The people do not know which one is their double, and the relationship with their double is one of correspondence with no direct link. Something happening in one domain will have repercussions in another. I call this ontology analogism; it corresponds to a world of singularities in which the relationships between the different beings of the world are organized according to diverse forms of correspondence; the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm, for example, or hierarchical doublings.

For the fourth ontology, which I call naturalism, I took the parrot, which is not a European animal, but which has stimulated the imagination of Western philosophers from the 17th century onwards—it was used by Leibniz, Descartes and Locke—in their systematic study of what distinguishes humans from non-humans. All philosophers have insisted on the fact that parrots, but also other talking animals, give the illusion of humanity as they sometimes show a certain aptness in their use of language, yet they are not humans since they do not have the capacity to create new languages, but merely imitate those they hear. This distinction assigned animals to a specific place in what I call the naturalistic world, that is to say beings devoid of the cognitive and moral capacities of humans, but possessing physical capacities which, in certain cases such as talking birds, placed them in direct continuity with humans. And so, the four ontologies can be illustrated by four types of relationships to birds.

RH 19: Can you explain the impact that affirmations of naturalistic cosmology have had on social organization? Is it possible to observe the effects of these great divides in the daily life of communities, notably in the 19th century when they appeared to have become more entrenched?

Philippe Descola: The situation we find ourselves in is always a very complicated one: the more detailed information we possess on a situation or a moment in history, the harder it becomes to reduce this moment in history to a unique formula. The advantage (or drawback) that anthropologists have, and it is surely worse for archaeologists, is that they have only partial information, which makes it necessary to reconstitute systems by developing models that account for most of the aspects of these systems as they have been described. This is possible for periods such as the 19th century. Marx did it for economics and many others have done so for political institutions, but to reduce this diversity to a single ontology is far more delicate. For instance, what is the characteristic of the 19th century? A shift occurred, as clearly demonstrated by Keith Thomas; a paradoxical discrepancy which

has become increasingly marked—I speak here as a user of history and not a producer—between the removal of animals from the urban environment and the increasing sensitivity shown towards them. Keith Thomas, for example, describes expeditions set up in the 16th century to slaughter wild animals—such as stags on royal estates—when hunting parties were sent out to slay all the stags to annoy a neighbor. It was a most bizarre attitude which supposed an almost substantial identity between the lord of the land and the animals under his control. Something else which struck me was the practice of bull and dog fighting in rings, a practice which still existed in the 18th century. These shows were appreciated by commoners and aristocrats alike. How is it possible in such a brief space of time, a century, to go from such an attitude to societies for the protection of wildlife, while still accepting that domesticated animals be used and exploited in mines and for transport—I am thinking of the horse in particular—or during wars as cannon fodder? An astounding contradiction existed in the 19th century with the industrialization of working animals and, at the same time, the development of a certain sensitivity towards wild and domesticated animals.

RH19: Grasping the contradiction between sensitivities is indeed a question we feel is central to understanding the situation in the 19th century.

Philippe Descola: This is an idea that I have vaguely outlined in *Beyond Nature and Culture* (thereafter BNC) and although I would be incapable of giving it a solid empirical grounding, it would nevertheless appear to me that the 19th century is both the period when what I call naturalism emerged and a period when what Boltanski and Thévenot call "cities" ("Cités") proliferated, that is to say extremely diversified value systems and interactions which were not very compatible, and which gave social living all its tension and complexity. The relationship to animals is a good example of this great diversity. Yet when we develop models, it is necessary to make choices which do not necessarily consider the variety of empirical situations. Developing models involves retaining the most pertinent facts to qualify a collective group, a period, a society, a civilization, and eliminating others in a somewhat arbitrary manner.

RH 19: Following this line of thought, is there a history of coexistences: can we identify periods and places where one model was more dominant than others?

Philippe Descola: I think this is indeed a possibility. I have suggested principles which I felt to be relevant in understanding the essential aspects

of life in non-modern collective groups from outside Europe, but I was very interested to see that historians have applied these proposals to the empirical study of specific periods; I was interested, for example, to see a marvelous doctoral thesis by one of Jean-Claude Schmitt's students on animality in the Middle Ages,[5] in which the author precisely periodizes the conceptions and treatment of animals by demonstrating the transition from a typically analogistic field to the premises of naturalism. I also have in mind a Sinologist, Patrice Fava, who is working on the possibility that in Chinese history, which I considered from afar as being mostly analogistic, there were, at certain periods and in certain regions, regimes which were characterized by other ontologies. I think this is a path to be followed, but the only answer to that is empirical.

It would moreover appear to me that one of the most typical aspects in the blossoming of naturalism in the 19th century was precisely the transformation of domesticated animals into a source of strength and energy—in particular for transportation—and as a result their industrialization with the development of zootechny. Studbooks, in other words registers cataloguing animals belonging to a certain species, sub-species, race or line where the lineage is known, are certainly older, but the standardization of animal production became particularly widespread at that time, to answer the needs of expanding societies. Standardization came from the upper classes of course—think of horse racing—but it also became generalized with stud farms if my memory serves me well. At that time, there was a great deal of measuring, classifying and standardizing work carried out, which I feel is symptomatic of naturalism and, although they were gaining strength, I believe the animal protection groups that emerged at the same time remained a minority.

RH 19: Let's continue along these lines. The 19th century, the century of industrialization, technical rationalization, and the emergence of social sciences and ideologies of progress, was evidently a time when the "great divide" you mention was accomplished. And yet several works debate its realization. They encourage us to ask whether the whole population, Europe included, shared this new naturalistic cosmology. In rural areas, for example, it appears that mixed cosmological forms subsisted throughout the 19th century, as evidenced by the vigor of magical cultures functioning, to use your terminology, on an analogical model.[6] For possibly a majority of the populations of the time, the

5. Pierre-Olivier Dittmar, *Naissance de la bestialité. Une anthropologie du rapport homme-animal dans les années 1300*, doctoral thesis in History, Paris, EHESS, 2011.

6. See Vincent Robert, L*a petite-fille de la sorcière. Enquête sur la culture magique au temps de George Sand,* Paris, les Belles Lettres, 2015.

place of animals and the role of plants did not, or did not *always*, obey the naturalistic division. On a different matter, though less substantial, did not some Westerners follow other ontologies to subvert the vision of the Western world? We are thinking, for example, of the small group known as the "naturian anarchists" in the late 19th century, who were concerned with reinventing a new socio-ecological balance by following the path of primitive populations that were becoming increasingly better known at the time. Consequently, how can we interpret these "breaches" to understand the Western *situation* which, as Bruno Latour said, may perhaps "never have been modern"?

Philippe Descola: Thinking about the discourse and practices of refusal or resistance to what I call naturalistic cosmology would indeed be an interesting path to follow. Literature is also a good source for this. There is a novel by Maurice Genevoix which I find very instructive from this point of view, *Raboliot* (1925), in which Genevoix exalts the free existence of a poacher from the Sologne region in central western France. He basically demonstrates what you are saying very well, namely that not far from Paris, in Sologne, a poacher can lead the life of an Achuar; this poacher is somebody who has completely lost the social references of his day, who has given in to the call of the forest, and who will by the way meet a very sad ending. I remember discussing this with Tim Ingold who has an almost moral stance on this question concerning what he calls 'hunter-gatherers'. It is a somewhat generic term to refer to societies which, to his mind, have a less mediated contact with the natural world or the environment. He considers this type of existence to be better than our dominant Western practices, while maintaining that there is no possible comparison with the world of a hunter-gatherer, an Inuit or an Australian Aboriginal, and that of a contemporary scholar. And yet *Raboliot* shows how such people can exist within the cracks of naturalism and that they have not disappeared. When I was growing up in the Haute-Ariège, I met somebody who was very similar to Raboliot, a guy who lived solely on poaching and only felt good when hand-fishing trout.

RH 19: The return of anthropology between 1970 and 1980, notably visible in the "Terre humaine" collection, also highlighted the presence of a multiplicity of minor or unnoticed players in industrialized societies, who were still not totally incorporated into naturalistic cosmology.

Philippe Descola: Yes, but they did not systematize, that is the difference. What I refer to as an ontology are inferences that we make concerning the furniture of the world. I sometimes say they are creases we choose to accentuate or ignore to create systems of differentiation. But we anthropologists, with our interest in comparativism, do not have access to all the

ways in which these creases are dealt with, we can only access things which have already been systematized, either by individuals who are particularly gifted or who have a more advanced way of thinking than others in relation to their world, or by historians and ethnologists who will produce the local and temporal synthesis of the objectivation of some of the creases by the human group they are interested in. But deep down, each of us, and this is something I must stress, is capable of having animistic or analogistic intuitions at one moment or another, but these intuitions are partly inhibited since they are not acceptable to our world, they are considered bizarre. Raboliot, and others like him, live in a somewhat isolated manner, they do not have the means to systemize an animistic culture since there needs to be many people together to exchange and produce sub-cultures. It is necessary to have this type of collective system for things to gel. It is for this reason that we see Raboliot as a strange individual rather than as a small fragment of submerged continents subsisting within the general boundaries of naturalism.

RH 19: In the 19th century, many people believed in the devil. Most populations were without doubt, as we said, more disposed to function in an analogous fashion, but the authors we read and who push themselves to the top of our sources subscribe more to naturalism than those who remained silent. This being said, the 19th century was also the century of colonization, and of Western-dominated international trade, leading us to ask three questions: could explain further your relationship to history as a scholar? In your chapter entitled "Histories of Structures" (BNC), you refer to a transformation on a millennial scale. Are the four ontologies not developed simultaneously? Are there different levels of action (history/structure) or are there intersections and accelerations? Consequently, what was the impact on colonial domination? In your opinion, is the 19th century marked by the domination of one ontology over another or rather by the incessant indigenization of ontologies on a global scale? Does the question of acceleration in the intersecting of ontologies in the 19th century seem, in your opinion, a good question for structural anthropology?

Philippe Descola: In my book, I introduced history in a structural form since this seemed to be fundamentally the only way for me, given the elements available to me and the fact that I am not a historian. The book was at least 150 pages longer and Pierre Nora in his infinite wisdom (laughter) suggested I cut it down, as being tempted towards universal history is a risk in such a project. This history of structures was a way of envisaging structural transformations by moving, not in time by following the evolution of certain traits and their reorganization into new ensembles, but in space, in

this case from North America to southern Siberia in order to see how it is possible to pass from one ontology to another via intermediary stages. In my book, there is a diffusionist element, not in the literal sense—as it is not a question of following the diffusion of specific cultural traits or of attempting to create an "epidemiology of representations" as Dan Sperber[7] would put it—but which results from the attention given to the way things transform along a spatial continuum without ever prejudging the direction in which history flows. It is the logic of the transformation which interests me, the way Marx proceeded by studying in reverse how, from his definition of capitalism, it was possible to go backwards in time to find certain of his constitutive elements in the transformation of pre-capitalist economic forms.

Concerning the 19th century and colonization, there were indeed forms of acceleration, but I strongly believe that we must begin earlier, starting with the first Iberian colonial expansions, the impact of which was wide-ranging. I'm an Americanist and I observe how representations of Amerindians developed, beginning in the 16th century and continuing into the 20th century, including prejudices and the treatment of these colonized populations by the colonizers. It is a long story. The 19th century was characterized by the fact that naturalism was well-established among the elites and in large cities, it was the period with the greatest difference between the naturalism of elites and what these elites discovered in distant populations, whereas in the 16th century, it was frequently the case that analogistic elements were shared by colonizers and colonized alike. Moreover, the great globalization movement, notably the movement of animals and plants, began very early and these beings moved spatially while modifying the situations at departure and arrival points. In the region I know best, Latin America, both plants and animals arrived complete with their instruction manual. This was striking with dogs, but was also the same for cattle and pigs. It is very easy to see how different systems concerning the relationship to animals can coexist, since the new animal did not arrive alone, but came with all the domestication techniques, foodstuff and representations transmitted by the colonizer. It was thus placed in a 'niche', which was itself new and which could induce behaviors that differed greatly to those existing in relation to native animals. The same can be said for plant forms. All this created an extraordinary complexity very early on, as well as a great diversity of situations, a diversity and complexity which I feel characterizes the 19th century particularly well.

RH 19: Historians continue to speak in terms of centuries, however artificial this may be. Yet we can see in the 19th century that complex

7. Dan Sperber, *La contagion des idées,* Paris, Odile Jacob, 1996.

temporalities intertwine, and your comments on the long-term history of South America demonstrate this well. Moreover, there are surely several 19th centuries; after 1860, indigenization accelerated in the age of new imperialism and the many expeditions to the new world, such as Africa, which was not well-known beforehand. With the globalization of trade, the transport revolution and the new mindset of seizing control of distant territories, did the dynamics of indigenization not become multitudinous?

Philippe Descola: There are many fascinating studies by historians on the prefiguration of so-called "modern" methods of managing nature in 19th-century colonial empires. The first nature reserves were created in the empires far before than in the metropolises. We must mention the work of Richard Grove and his book on "Green Imperialism".[8] Research on environmental history, notably on the first nature reserves, has played an important role in such reflection on the sharing and hybridization of ontologies through concrete empirical research. For example, the work of Frédéric Thomas in France on Indochina clearly demonstrates the incomprehension of French agronomists and foresters regarding indigenous practices and their continuous work on technical normalization which can still be found today among the technocratic elites of former colonized countries. The same can be observed in Africa.[9] The density of European presence obviously played an important role in this process. The first Europeans settlers in the modern age were often pioneers who adopted the way of life of the communities they lived with. They were, to a certain extent, the first ethnologists even if, like the trappers in French North America, they unfortunately left no documents behind them. In the 19th century, when the network of territories and the control of environments, men and animals tightened, an increasing number came to apply the different formulas they had acquired and learnt on the mainland, such as modern zootechny and its naturalistic cosmology.

RH 19: In *Lances du crépuscule* you refer to ancient Andean beliefs, shared by numerous Amazonian tribes, that white people had an insatiable appetite for indigenous fat they were said to collect by heating the natives in enormous cooking pots, and some claimed that "these

8. Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism 1600–1860*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; and in French: *Les îles du Paradis. L'invention de l'écologie aux colonies 1600-1854*, Paris, La Découverte, coll. "Futurs antérieurs", 2013.

9. See Frédéric Thomas, « Protection des forêts et environnementalisme colonial: Indochine 1860-1945 », *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 56/4, 2009, pp. 104-136; or James Fairhead and Melissa Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape. Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

macabre practices serve[d] to supply them with lubricants and fuel for the giant machines white people used to establish their power over the world, monstrous metal Molochs to be fed by constant sacrifices".[10] For 19th-century historians, this anecdote reflects the persistence of the mass practices of the period, during which whales were hunted, for example, for their blubber, used for both lighting and lubrication.

Philippe Descola: It was indeed a very widespread belief which still exists today. Initially, this was a specifically Andean phenomenon, generally called *pishtaco*; originally a *pishtaco* was a member of an indigenous community in the Andes who became a sorcerer and captured the vital energy of others to sustain himself. Slowly this initial belief changed, notably when white men arrived. At first, human fat was meant to allow them to make candles, now it is supposedly used for rocket fuel! Behind this legend lies the denunciation of predatory physical exploitation, and as the technical capacities of the colonizers evolved, so did the use to which the fat was put. Since then, the story has spread and descended towards the Amazonian communities at the foot of the Andes, where this story was still unknown at the end of the seventies. The simple explanation is that victims whose labor force is being exploited feel as though they are being truly devoured. But there exist other forms of this legend today throughout indigenous Latin America, particularly through the constant fear of organ trafficking. Although established instances of this are rare, it has become a contagious wave of fear and anguish among native communities.

RH 19: Finally, we would like to ask you about what may be considered the more political stakes of your work. In your works, you avoid denouncing our modern naturalism too radically. Compared with the 1970s and the radical writings of authors such as Pierre Clastres or Jacques Lizot, contemporary anthropology seems to have become somewhat depoliticized. What is your opinion? You seem prudent in your assessment of contemporary issues and yet you also highlight the deep socio-ecological contradictions of our modern ontology; moreover, you organized a symposium on the "Anthropocene" at the Collège de France in preparation for the COP 21. What can social sciences, whether history, sociology or anthropology, bring to such questions? At the end of *Lances du crépuscule*, you remind us that the exploration of societies with a different way of life and thinking may also help to conceptualize the plurality of possibilities in the present world. In

10. Philippe Descola, *Les lances du crépuscule. Relations Jivaros, haute Amazonie*, Paris, Plon, coll. « Terre Humaine », 1993, p. 161.

***Beyond Nature and Culture*, you are perhaps even more prudent when you underline the fact that other ontologies do not provide a solution and that it is for each of us to work towards building a fairer world. Do they not nonetheless offer leads to reinvent another cosmology which would be more adapted to current issues?**

Philippe Descola: These are pertinent and legitimate questions and I have in fact decided to devote my lessons at the Collège de France to this in the coming years! For obvious reasons, my once militant personal orientations were seeking to transform the state of the world in which we lived through direct political or union action. Now, I feel I can be most useful in carrying out in-depth work reconceptualizing the tools we use to reflect upon our relationship to the world. I envisage this work as a scholar, that is to say by seeking to understand and by fighting the Euro- or ethnocentric language of social sciences, a language which has been indispensable in modern Europe's path to emancipation, but which now distorts our understanding not only of extra-European realities, but also of the world emerging before our eyes. History as an antecedent causality of events and a condition of the future, society as an ensemble composed solely of humans transforming a nature external to it, the economy as a domain separated from the rest of social life, all these notions which are so central to the objectivization process of Europe's historical trajectory and foundations to this day of social sciences, immensely distort the understanding of extra-European realities. In the same way, these conceptions do not enable us to grasp the intricate relationship we have established with new non-humans, from thinking machines and robots to climate itself and genetically modified organisms. I feel it is essential today to reformulate concepts to escape from this Eurocentrism, to better comprehend the diversity of situations in which humans interact with other non-humans, notably animals. From this work of reconceptualizing and reformulating concepts, it will be a question of envisaging paths or solutions enabling us to break these contemporary deadlocks.

In the symposium on the Anthropocene that you refer to, my lecture stressed the existence of three fundamental concepts in naturalism and in our current relationship with non-humans: appropriation, adaptation and representation. It is these three very anthropocentric concepts which require in-depth reworking, if we are to escape from the deadlock of possessive individualism, that is to say from the idea that the actors of social life are humans who own their person, capable of establishing dynamics of appropriation and exchange between themselves and the rest of the world. That is what I consider the work of intellectuals to be. It is obviously a collective work and I have no ready-made solutions to offer. My contribution tries to redefine the concepts which form the basis of how we conceive the

world. That is what I am attempting to do with the "collective" concept, initially borrowed from Bruno Latour, but which I interpret slightly differently. What are collectives made up of? What forms of hybridization do they allow? How can collectives of different compositions coexist? Beyond this, it is essential to escape from the notion of (political) representation and the fact that it is always humans who represent other beings. I feel the most common solutions used to escape this do not seem to change anything; I'm thinking of the extension of the ancient concept concerning representation vis-à-vis other beings, such as animals that share certain characteristics with humans—either on a cognitive or a sensitive level—as suggests the philosopher Peter Singer, who wrote the famous book *Animal Liberation*[11] in 1975. We must go way beyond this and attempt to understand how living environments could themselves have rights, rights of which humans would be in some way an extension. It is therefore the entire legal system which must also be rethought. I believe my role and my potential usefulness reside, first and foremost, in such reconceptualization work, in this attempt to reformulate in terms which do not violate the way other civilizations have conceived their relationship to the world, rather than directly adopting a political or activist role.

RH 19: One last question, perhaps a more personal one: when rereading your texts, we sense a desire for utopia, or at least the search for a fairer world. Could you explain in more depth this utopian and political perspective?

Philippe Descola: I do not know any reactionary anthropologists. It has sometimes been said that Lévi-Strauss was one, but that was most unjust and really not the case. You simply need to read the recently-published conference that he gave to members of the CGT trade union (*Confédération Générale du Travail*) on the revolutionary nature of ethnology.[12] From the outset of the discipline, Tylor asserted that anthropologists were necessarily reformers. Because they observe ways of living the human condition which are very different from those in place in Europe, they are immediately sensitive to the diversity of things and conditions. Ethnologists and anthropologists see with great clarity the fact that there is nothing normal or natural in exploitation, domination and violence: indeed, the three come in many disguises and exist both in the societies they study and those from which they originate. When I was a young, extreme left-wing militant in

11. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals,* New York, Harper Collins, 1975.

12. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *De Montaigne à Montaigne*, ed. and preface by Emmanuel Désveaux, Paris, EHESS, 2016

the 1970s, the question of nature did not arise, we only saw it, at best, as a "secondary contradiction" of capitalism; the political theorists of the day considered that it was first necessary to have a revolution and transform the proletariat into a pure avant-garde so that things would sort themselves out. Yet, even at the time, it already seemed obvious to me that the degradation of living environments, the industrialization of agriculture and excess pollution—already very much present and denounced by militants and theoreticians of political ecology such as Gorz—were a central issue. Marx himself was a theoretician who penetrated forms of capitalism; it was the watered-down version of Leninism that wreaked havoc at the time. Even an anarchistic anthropologist such as Pierre Clastres moved over to my way of thinking concerning the question of the relationship to non-humans; he was a complicated person, holding views close to "socialism or Barbary" but he remained very sociocentred. His model of the primitive war against the State continued to be, just as the majority of the social sciences at the time, very sociocentred and non-humans hardly played a part in his analyses. At the time, I had the intuition, on reading ethnological accounts and chroniclers from history, that the Indians from the South American lowlands had a strange relationship with nature. They were presented as being a sort of appendage of nature, "second rate" animals as Buffon said in the 18th century, and I felt it necessary to explore this dimension in greater depth. They were seen as being unduly submissive to nature, either in a positive way (in the sense of Rousseauistic harmony) or negatively (dominated by instincts and the forces of nature). I felt that if there was such a continuity between the observations of the first chroniclers of the 16th century, those of 19th-century observers and the "cultural ecology" or sociobiology models of the mid-20th century, then it meant that there was a most particular relationship to nature and that the latter was a fully-fledged part of social life. At the time, this intuition was obviously still poorly formulated, but it was this very feeling that I sought to explore in all my work that followed. Even before going to live with the Achuar people, I had the feeling that the sociocentrism of social sciences had to be transcended.