

## A dialog about a new meaning of symmetric anthropology

Bruno Latour (interviewed by Carolina Miranda<sup>€</sup>)

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**Bruno Latour:** So here you are with a lot of questions again?<sup>i</sup>

**Carolina Miranda:** A lot, and in addition I have been asked to relay some questions from colleagues, — Gildas, Peter, Pierre. Some are tough, I have to warn you.

**BL:** Oh I am sure you don't need any help for that!

**CM:** Is this a compliment? I'll take it as one... A first set of questions has to do with philosophy.

**BL:** You are still at it then: wanting to decide if I am a philosopher or an anthropologist?

**CM:** Well, philosopher, I know you're not. At least not in the way it is practiced in the US.

**BL:** Fine with me. I have always found that philosophy in America has become something like golf: a highly skilled, highly competitive outdoor activity, but somewhat boring for the public to watch and of no relevance whatsoever.

**CM:** It was not always that way, though.

**BL:** And needs not to remain that way either, I agree. It was different in the time of William James, Dewey, Whitehead. But that was before what [Richard] Rorty called "the great glaciation"! He had lived through this glaciation after his own work on "eternal objects" in the philosophy of Whitehead. After the Cold War had begun, he told me, that sort of topic could no longer be studied. All was frozen. It seems that global warming has not reached American philosophy yet! At least what they call "analytical". So what is eating at you?

**CM:** But you are not an anthropologist either. Sorry to say, but looking at your footnotes, it seems that your knowledge of the field is, how should I say?...

**BL:** Spotty?

**CM:** Right "spotty".

**BL:** Which is your polite way of saying I am deeply ignorant of the literature! I confess, when I read my friends Philippe [Descola] or [Marshall] Sahlins or [Marilyn] Strathern, I am ashamed of my ignorance. But in spite of this they have accepted me as some sort of "honorary" anthropologist. Which is really fine with me. I feel more at home there than anywhere else.

**CM:** But what about your own original field, STS, [Science, Technology and Society]?

**BL:** That's my field. I am immensely proud of it! By the way it is exactly 40 years since the first meeting of our association, the 4S [Society for Social Studies of Science] in Cornell.

**CM:** And you were there?

BL: I was indeed. My first talk on *Laboratory Life*.

CM: You still claim STS as your own field but it looks a lot to me like another case of an “imaginary community”. No one seems to define the field the way you do.

BL: Well, yes, a real difference remains. When I talk to people, students or colleagues, I ask myself: have they *passed the test of going through* the STS field or not? If not, I have little to say to them because it means that Science, capital S will remain in the background unexamined, floating mysteriously above them. And as you know, this epistemological vision of science influences a lot of other topics as well. If my interlocutors have been through STS then we can begin to talk. If not, what’s the point of going on? That’s my shibboleth. Wouldn’t you agree?

CM: Well, it’s somewhat dogmatic, but I am in no position to dispute that: I have been through the test myself, [Steven] Shapin, [Harry] Collins, [Donald] MacKenzie, [Michel] Callon, [Donna] Haraway, etc. ever since I have read *Laboratory Life*. So I can’t imagine what the world could look like without STS.

BL: That’s my point: it makes for a big difference. Science is situated as a practice, not to be confused with knowledge or Reason. You’ve been vaccinated, so to speak! And then you have lots of options open. Without STS the question “Is it rational or irrational?” paralyzes all the others. With STS other questions, at least, can be tackled. So yes it’s my field. Do you really see a big difference between anthropology and science studies? For me the best label remains “anthropology of science”.

CM: Except you seem to shift at whim and include or exclude philosophy (continental philosophy I mean) when it suits you, right?

BL: This is unfair: philosophy for me is an insurance against closure. It was useless to understand science and technology because they were covered, so to speak, by a thick epistemological layer that only ethnographical method could pull over. But I still think that to *really pursue* anthropology, once epistemology has been put aside, philosophy is indispensable for opening up new possibilities of thought.

CM: To give a firm ground to anthropology? A foundation?

BL: No, no, just the opposite. To be sure ethnography remains unstable, without foundation!

CM: Are you really sure it is a good idea? We have lot’s of instability already!

BL: Yes this is so, but it matters what uncertainty you need and when. Without philosophy it is hard to benefit from the opening of thought allowed by fieldwork. Is this not a fairly standard position in your field as well? Let’s consider philosophy as a set of gymnastic exercises for becoming supple enough, thin enough, open enough to profit from the shock of alien modes of thought. If you look at our philosophical tradition (again not at what it has

become in the US of course) it plays exactly the role of some inner multiplicity, if you wish.

CM: Do you mean that Souriau, Whitehead, James, Bergson, Deleuze and so on, are the European *others* inside Europe?

BL: Sort of, yes, amazing tribes where you learn the trade before going elsewhere.

CM: That looks a lot to me like some sort of exoticism.

BL: Yes, that's always the risk, but whatever the issue, before going abroad you need to prepare, to rehearse, to train. Anthropology protects philosophy from closure; conversely, philosophy protects anthropology from using ready-made categories. That's why you need both.

CM: But then we will never reconcile the two; they will never share a common language. Are you not trying to get at some sort of "philosophical anthropology"?

BL: I am not sure sharing a common language to describe what the world is like and what different people make of it is the goal. No, not at all. We need to build trials where our metalanguage is put at risk by meeting the situations that our original categories focused on. So even description is not the goal, but putting the description at risk. That for me is the name of the game.

CM: Ah, this is your take on the "infra" language!

BL: Right. It has been a principle of actor-network theory from day one: actors have their own metalanguage, probably much more accurate than ours. Let's see how to bring it to the foreground and have our initial tools move more and more into the background. Everything I do is inspired by this tenet.

CM: How did you get it "from day one"? You were born that way?

BL: Why are you always so ironic? In a way, yes, I am born that way. I learned it from my philosophy class in "terminale" [last year of French high school] — reading Nietzsche by the way!

CM: But you told me you did your "terminale" in a Jesuit school?

BL: Right, I had a great teacher! On the first day of class, in 1965, I exclaimed "*Anch'io son filosofo!*" "Me too I am a philosopher". Then I relearned it from [Michel Serres]. It was really his main method: use La Fontaine to understand what a parasite in sociology is, not the other way around. He explains it well in the dialog I did with him.<sup>ii</sup> Then I relearned it yet again with semiotics and [Algirdas Julien] Greimas. Then again with ethnomethodology.

CM:???

BL: [Harold] Garfinkel is as important for me as Greimas or Serres. I learned immensely from reading him. The whole notion of what and "ethnomethod" is—that the metalanguage is inside the actors's practice of interpretation. Just fetch it and then replace your provisional language with that of the actors themselves.

CM: I like the idea of "just fetch it". It looks so simple...

BL: I agree that in practice it's tricky! But this seems to me the only way to gain some level of objectivity in our discipline.

CM: That's where I have a problem: you always assert that science studies was not supposed to weaken the claim to objectivity, simply to show through which pathways such an objectivity was generated, right?

BL: Uh-huh.

CM: And yet you deny to the discipline of anthropology its ability to be framed entirely as a scientific project. This is where all of us, I think, protest. How could you pretend to be a member of a field while rejecting its scientificity? We should be able to have a science studies-conscious anthropology, not an epistemologically naïve discipline, but still, be able to gain objectivity.

BL: I have no qualms about claiming that anthropology is a science. I never believed in the postmodern debunking of our field as being mere storytelling anyway.

CM: Except each of your books, as far as I can tell, is using some sort of fictional account.

BL: Yes of course, but fiction is entirely subservient to the task of obtaining "unique adequacy". This is Garfinkel's goal for ethnomethodology: to discover the literary form that allows the closest possible exchange between your informant's account and your own account. Well, "literary form" is not Garfinkel's expression, but it is my rendering of his principle.

CM: So for you fiction *adds* to objectivity?

BL: Yes, because without all the tricks of the trade you never manage to realize such a switch, a trade-off between the two languages, yours and that of the informants. This should really be common sense, no? Anthropologists and historians are masters of such skills.

CM: And that's the difference with natural sciences?

BL: No, not a bit. I have shown that often enough. Natural sciences need exactly the same tricks. It is just that it is much *easier* for physicists, biologists, and chemists to generate the switch because their objects are totally, naturally foreign so to speak. Their *otherness* is the easiest thing to show; they are born alien so to speak. In our fields it is much harder to generate the otherness. There is too much false familiarity.

CM: And this is why our field will never be part of hard science.

BL: Quite the contrary. I take your discipline as a *harder* science, much harder than many fields of "natural" science where constraints on the production of objectivity are very often much looser. Not only because of the harsh conditions imposed by field work, but also because of the obligation to deconstruct so much of our taken for granted metalanguage. For natural science, distance is easier to obtain. Compared to the strictures of many ethnographic monographs, most so-called "scientific" papers don't reach its level of objectivity — objectivity, remember, is the ability to meet *objections*. To

risk having your lab explode! Ethnography is a risky business. Objectors are close at hand. They might beat you hard.

CM: So?

BL: So the point is not, it seems to me, to rehash the old question of deciding whether anthropology is or is not a “really” scientific discipline. Only an outdated epistemology — precisely a pre-STS view of science — can still raise this question.

CM: But then what’s the question?

BL: It is to know if it is still *relevant*, in 2016, to take this as the main feature, the first claim, the most important tenet of the discipline. Of course anthropology strives for objectivity, that is to meet its objectors; of course it has devised many sets of practices able to generate objectivity; of course you should not make up your data, and fortunately so! Who would claim otherwise? But now the question is to decide what do you *make* of your data?

CM: Do you mean what to make *politically* of the data, the whole field has gone through that for the last thirty years, so it’s nothing new. If you mean because it has to speak with the “objects” of study, as they were called in the old days, instead of *about* them, we are doing this constantly. I have been doing this in Terra del Fuego from day one, finding ways to make the indigenous community co-produce the “data”, as you say, quite by themselves. And invent many alternative ways to “publish” the result. Where have you been?

BL: Wait Carolina, wait. “Political relevance” is certainly not what I am looking for, because that’s exactly where the definition of “politics” and “relevance” is at its most *ethnocentric*. It’s exactly the same situation as in the 1980’s obsession for “narratives” and “reflexivity” and “text”.

CM: What’s wrong with those?

BL: Those terms claimed to deconstruct Western epistemology and yet they imposed another extension of how that epistemology understood the nature of what was not objective science: if it is not objective then it has to be mere “story telling”; if it is not “naïve” then it is “reflexive”; if it is not about “truth” then it is about “text” or “textuality”. Same here, if it has to be “relevant” then it has to be “politically engaged”. If there is one case of blatant ethnocentrism, this is it.

CM: So you want to be politically irrelevant?!

BL: Absolutely, yes, I would say, *totally politically disengaged*.

CM: Back to good old objectivity, the view from nowhere? Great progress really!

BL: Funnily enough in French to situate the view from nowhere we say “*vue de Sirius*”. I insist: totally disengaged from what Westerners think engagement is, what they think politics is, what they think telling a story is.

CM: Sirius? So it is situated. Yes, it’s amusing. Still why look for a disengaged view?

BL: Such a disengagement is, precisely, to be engaged much closer at hand, much less distant than by believing you could be “relevant” or “engaged”. I am sure you would agree yourself that none of the notions of “knowledge”, “practice”, and “politics” that you would transport in your luggage going down to Punta Arena would have been fit to understand what Fuegians had meant by those terms. Imagine the work to be done to absorb what those terms mean in their own language.

CM: Is this miserable paradox what you label as “diplomacy”?

BL: Why are you so dismissive of that word? We are trying together to shift attention away from a problem—the epistemological paradigm (defined as, I think we agree, anthropology striving for a place in the pecking order of “really scientific disciplines”)—and to say that such a paradigm has generated by contrast a myriad of counter attitudes, all borrowed from the traditional bifurcated way — typically *modern* way — of couching alternatives to Science, capital S. I am asking — actually you were asking! — what would alternatives look like if we were not using that epistemological paradigm to define our discipline?

CM: According to you, that’s where philosophy comes in?

BL: Yes, it seems to me, because it has no pretention of being “scientific”; because it breaks down the pseudo “realism” of so much social science.

CM: Realism?

BL: You know the sort of cliché: “Let us start with humans endowed with speech, situated in a material world of objects, submitted to social norms, having in mind more or less biased representations of the real world”. Just what you find in social science textbooks as the obvious fully naturalized premises of any inquiry.

CM: But that’s not realistic, none of the Fuegian populations would have defined themselves this way.

BL: I know Carolina, I know; that’s why I said “pseudo” realism. But that’s why we, the poor folks who have no familiarity with the ethnographic literature, need philosophy to break away from such a cartoonish view. Philosophy is so totally unrealistic, such a wild exploration of alternative concepts on everything from time, space, self, and matter, to body and soul and nature. Just read Whitehead, or Thomas of Aquinas, or Nietzsche, or James, or Leibniz. As I said before, the difficulty of understanding those texts is at a par with doing fieldwork. The more abstruse the questions of metaphysics and ontology, the more you are protected against realism, *pseudo* or *spurious* realism.

CM: Is this why you always say that you never felt there was any difference between philosophy and anthropology?

BL: Right. I moved from trying to make sense of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* when I was a student preparing my “agrégation” to doing fieldwork in Abidjan,

without feeling any gap in the skills to be mobilized. As you put it well yourself, philosophy is our inner exoticism, so to speak.

CM: On your advice, I read, I tried to read [Etienne] Souriau's *Mode of existence* book.<sup>iii</sup> It's wild indeed and totally obscure to me, in spite of your introduction, I have to confess.

BL: And Stengers'.

CM: And Stengers' introduction, ok. But at no point in this book does this really white dead male envisage that he might not be talking for the whole universe. I did not feel the author had a sliver of interest for anthropology there. If diplomacy should start with abstruse universal assertions like those, don't count me in.

BL: I entirely agree about that. But consider the enormous distance between Souriau and, let's say, [John] Searle. Suppose you do field work on the Moderns (don't forget that this has been my goal from day one<sup>iv</sup>) and that you choose as your informant Souriau instead of Searle, what would you conclude? That the dualist view proper to naturalists — continuity of outside entities, discontinuities of internal entities, you know the argument<sup>v</sup> — is not the only representation Westerners have of themselves. That pluralism of modes of existence could be entertained, at least by some.

CM: Where will this lead us to? [Marcel] Griaule with the Dogons had the same experience with what's his name?

BL: You mean Ogotemmêli?

CM: Right, in Bandiagara.<sup>vi</sup> His recording of this local philosopher makes for a beautiful, how should I say, *elucubration* we would say in Spanish, if the word exists in English, but proves nothing on what a culture consists of. Although he is the butt of many of your jokes, Searle, in that sense, is much more representative of "Western philosophy" (I really hate this adjective "Western" you keep forcing me to use. I am Chilean, what the heck...)

BL: Do we want someone representative of the entrenched categories of a culture, or do we want to seize the occasion given by rare diplomatic encounters to modify deeply what we hold to? That's where couching ethnography in a diplomatic instead of an epistemological mode makes a big difference. A diplomat is the one who finds degrees of liberty where none was visible before, when the parties at the negotiation table were simply stating their cases, their interests, and simply drawing, as the saying goes, red lines they don't want to trespass. With representatives of the official view attempts to move the line will surely fail. If Searle is being sent as the ambassador, nothing will move. He will keep formatting any encounter with the prolegomenon: "is this rational or irrational?" What I am saying is that things would be different if it is Souriau who is sent! He might have been an *ignoramus* in ethnography, but at least he won't start with Searle's question.

CM: Bruno, Bruno nothing of what you say works here. Where have you seen a negotiation going on? What chance did the Fuegians, for instance, have to negotiate? In 50 years they have been wiped out. All of them. To the last canoe. Who is sent as a diplomat? Guns, microbes, greed, an abominable landgrab. Diplomacy? It's a sickening idea really.

BL: Don't get angry at me, Carolina. I am well aware of those land grabs, of the destruction, of those ethnocides. But I am talking of *the new land grab*, the one where the respective positions of the "objects" of study as you said before and the "scientist" or "observer" have totally changed because they both find themselves invaded, dispossessed, attacked.

CM: Are you claiming that we the anthropologists with Phds, grant money, university job (I still hope to get one!) coming from big cities are *at a par* with those for whom we have become willy-willy the spokespersons? Those to whom we try to give a voice?

BL: Yes, take Nastassja [Martin]'s book on Alaska I like so much [*Les Ames sauvages*]...<sup>vii</sup>

CM: Good case, yes, but would you dare saying the Gwich'in she describes are being seated at some "negotiation table" together with the missionaries, ecologists, trappers, Federal officials, tourists that are crushing them to bits? And at the same level?! Sorry but this is nonsense.

BL: Carolina, I am not sure what I am hinting at, but what I feel is that there is a new sense of "symmetric" in the expression of "symmetric anthropology". I took it first to mean: "Use the same ethnographic method for those who call themselves 'Moderns' or 'developed' and for those who are said to be 'premodern' or 'in development' or 'archaic'; and then see which difference you really can detect". Not that they ended up being "the same", mind you, but simply (I think I have shown it fairly convincingly) that the differences are in no way where the clichés of Modern versus non-Modern would have placed them.

CM: This is familiar terrain: your moving from Africa to California and bringing science under ethnographic scrutiny. But this is old stuff.

BL: I guess I am beginning to talk like a veteran. Well but...

CM: You are a veteran!

BL: I am well aware of that, thanks. What's new is that the situation of losing one's ground, of seeing one's land being taken out by new circumstances impossible to anticipate, is now common, I insist the situation is *common* to all those who are today on any piece of land. In Alaska the same thing happens to the Indians and, let's say, to Sarah Palin, and to Nastassja: they are losing their ground and trying to cope. The symmetry is not complete, I agree, but...

CM: A fraternity between Palin and the Geswh'in, well that would certainly come as a surprise to the author of *Les âmes sauvages*!

BL: But when you read in older monographs the complete incomprehension, I don't know, for instance of the Arapesh studied by [Don] Tuzin as they see their culture, their vision of the world disappear in one generation,<sup>viii</sup> and then reading what happens to Alaska, modern Alaska, what happens to the oil there, to the ice, to the economy, to the legislation, and all of that in less than a generation, I see a *symmetry* between the two catastrophes as they come crashing down on to entire cultures, a symmetry that did not exist before. I would even say a *fraternity* — at least a common ground. Or rather a common loss of ground.

CM: But there is no equivalence in respective power; no similarity in the size of the tragedy between the First Nations still resisting there, and, for God's sake, Sarah Palin!

BL: I know, but it's because you consider the two sides at two different moments of the crisis they are thrown into: the Indians have been crushed to pieces for a century and a half — and have evolved very clever ways to cope and resist, according to what Nastassja reports — while Palin, (okay, let's not use Palin, she is probably hopeless, she will disappear without realizing what has happened to her, she won't be able to cope) but take the activists, ecologists, whoever: are they not themselves carried through the same maelstrom they had earlier inflicted on the Indians when they colonized their land? They might still believe they will stay intact, but I doubt it; I think they are *submitted to some of the same trials as the Indians*, except they have not yet been crushed to pieces fine enough that they have had to find new original ways to cope. Ways we could finally learn from.

CM: Learning “to live within the ruins”, this is what you mean? As Anna Tsing's book explores.<sup>ix</sup>

BL: Yes. *The Mushroom at the End of the World* is for me the American pendant of Nastassja's book but I think even more symmetrically so: we are back to [Richard] White's *Middle Ground* in a way totally unanticipated.<sup>x</sup> The only difference is...

CM: Are you thinking in terms of a sort of belated *retribution*: because of the ecological crisis, you modern people are submitted to the *same* traumatic experience that is at the heart of anthropology's destiny? Some return of the repressed?

BL: Rather something like the end of a parenthesis. I don't know if you know the marvelous chapter in Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence*?<sup>xi</sup> It is called “Escaping the land constraints” — of America to be precise. As if somewhere in the 1830s, Europeans could break through the limits of their own ecological bottleneck and get to the apparently infinite cornucopia of a land emptied of its inhabitants.

CM: And replenished with slaves!

BL: Right. Pomeranz says “depopulation and repopulation”; that’s the key to the “great divergence”. A totally contingent set of events by the way. No civilizing mission there. Well now the parenthesis is closing. We are once again back to feeling the constraints of the land and we, I mean the Europeans, the Westerners, are reinterpreting our past 150 years in entirely different ways.

CM: And do you really think that what begin to happen to them could be enough to make them come to their senses?

BL: At least enough to reinterpret their past, something at any rate where the plurality of voices, of interpretation of modernism, becomes suddenly foregrounded. Yes. That’s why philosophy becomes so important. We have never been modern, for God’s sake. We did not know what to do with such a piece of news. It was sitting there, totally useless. And now...

CM: And now it would be finally useful?

BL: Yes, because suddenly we are *all* non-moderns: those who believed they had been, those who have been forcefully modernized, and those who suddenly realize that they have never been modern after all. Does this not open a new form of commonality, one totally different from the old idea of a *universality* of humanity, I agree, but still a strange, a perverse, a *tragic* form of universality.

CM: And also a perverse way of escaping from the field of postcolonial studies!

BL: Why do you say that? It is exactly the postcolonial situation. I have read this literature, mind you, and immensely profited from it. I have provincialized Europe fairly well myself, especially when dealing with its main export product, the universality of Science! But now the situation has moved one step further. Would not Chile be a good case? Is not the land trembling under your feet in a really completely literal way?

CM: Especially this year, and with El Nino. But still I am infinitely far from granting any symmetry between poor and rich, the victims and the profiteers of the capitalistic land grab!

BL: But would you really disagree that it would be possible to detect a sort of inverse history at work here? At the beginning of *Middle Ground*, remember, we are in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. You see how weak are the envoys of the Kings of England and France; they have to parley their ways through nations that are still powerful (whenever English and French think they are so strong that they don’t need to negotiate, they are roundly defeated!). Two centuries later, there is nothing to discuss: the Indians have been literally pushed aside.

CM: So?

BL: So what I am hinting at with this new version of symmetric anthropology is that, because of the ecological mutation, three centuries later we are now bound to observe a reversal that I take to be exactly symmetrical to White’s narrative: the Old Empires (so to speak) are so weakened, so taken aback, that they have to negotiate anew and are looking everywhere for cues on how to cope! Those who were doing the colonization now exclaim: “Ah that’s what

you meant by having your culture broken down” and those on the receiving end of the colonization sigh back: “Ah! Maybe you will finally understand”.

CM: And that’s would be your definition of the postcolonial situation?

BL: Or maybe the post-postcolonial situation.

CM: Hence the necessity of diplomacy?

BL: Yes, for no other reason than to *accelerate* changes in what you are right to say is still a huge, a gigantic asymmetry in power relations. This is how I read Tsing’s or Nastassja’s or actually Eduardo Kohn’s books.<sup>xiii</sup> Because of the way their writings assemble the weaker parties that they try to *reinforce*, and stronger parties the claims of whom they attempt to *deflate*, they end up producing a *level playing field*.

CM: A level playing field!

BL: Which of course does not exist, as least not yet, but that will have to be convened at some point, forcing both parties to cooperate and to negotiate in ways entirely different from the past. No need any more to be patronizing, or nice, or polite, or respectful with the “other”, this famous “other”. No other is really any longer that much *other* anyway, for the simple reason that we have all been thrust into the same lifeboats. Just as in the *Middle Ground*, we are similarly lost in the middle of intense warfare and complex alliances, where the fragile peace could break down any minute. Time to tiptoe... and keep our guns or tomahawks close at hand...

CM: So time to learn from these “savages”?

BL: Probably, and in a totally new situation, not only because we suddenly realize what they have been through in a much more direct way — it is happening to us in a slower, less tragic but as momentous a way — but also because the situation is new for all of us. No human collective has been in the Anthropocene before. The size of the threat, the extent of the ruins are such that it’s a new task for all collectives and that’s a good learning opportunity, believe me, when no one knows. It is not because of an epistemological requirement, nor to be politically correct, we are thrown into a land that is disappearing under the feet of all protagonists. Don't you think it creates a sense of communality?

CM: Too much asymmetry.

BL: But why do you stay in Terra del Fuego if not to explore this new communality?

CM: Eduardo [Viveiros de Castro] will say that the experts in coping with extermination are certainly not us, the Whites as you like to call them...

BL: Eduardo is right. But he is also the one who pointed out that indigenous people — as officially counted — are more numerous than the United States! . History is not finished. The First Nations are still there, and still coping.

CM: Spread apart, powerless, not a State, not a hint of sovereignty. Look at what they achieved at the COP in Paris. I was there, I saw them, I was with them.

Playing music in the lobby of the Bourget! Totally useless. Not even able to be a powerful lobby. Bruno, this is always your weak point, you forget the immense dissymmetry in power relations.

BL: But is this not precisely the task of anthropology, to *render* the balance symmetric — and faster than what you would expect from economics or sociology? Of course it is never balanced at first. But that's the link between the two meanings of "symmetric anthropology": to generate, at first artificially, a symmetric balance so as to *then* register the asymmetry in power relations. It is called an instrument! This is in keeping with my initial project.

CM: But no one ever understands that point!

BL: I am always criticized for "ignoring power relations" when I have kept inventing sensors for registering their presence!

CM: Or you might be wrong!

BL: Wrong? What I could not anticipate in 1973 was that anthropology would become *really* even more practically symmetric because ecological mutations were throwing everybody onto the same playing field, and simply moving the ground so much that the catastrophic experience of losing ground is now common to all.

CM: *L'arrêt de monde*, Danowski and Eduardo [Viveiros de Castro] would say.<sup>xiii</sup>

BL: Right, much like an "*arrêt cardiaque*". So you would agree that if we move to such a post-postcolonial tragedy we could envision a level playing field because it has, or will be, *leveled* for good?

CM: Something like the Lisbon's earthquake then?<sup>xiv</sup>

BL: Beautiful. You're right, Lisbon had an enormous ripple effect over the whole of European philosophy. What we are witnessing is somewhat similar, except it is an earthquake of vastly larger magnitude.

CM: So what you seem to say is that the intellectual regime of anthropology depends on the ecological situation?

BL: I did not put it that way but yes that's very clarifying: anthropology started with the land grab, and now that the land is grabbed from under everyone's feet anthropology is changed once yet again. We shouldn't be surprised.

CM: But it remains totally virtual, it's just a playing field for academics. There is no real Indians, real CEO of major capitalist corporations, no real tycoons, no real heads of state, in what you claim to assemble. Sorry to say, and I don't want to be mean, but it's diplomacy just for university professors.

BL: Oh, come on. You aren't even mean. I *am* a university professor! I start just where I stand. With the tools I have at hand. I have no megalomaniac illusion, if you want to know. Don't try to shame me with this little trick of academics isolated from "the real world". What do you know about the "real world" anyway?

CM: Ah, I have touched a nerve, here... But still it is a serious limit.

BL: Of course it is a serious limit! Thinking is a seriously limited trade! I am paid to know it. But I also know how it spreads and how far it may go. Take the idea of naturalism or modernity. What I am trying to understand with my tools is what happened at the COP 21, for instance. And there, indeed, there were heads of state, tycoons, NGOs and plenty of your activist friends, Carolina. You saw them with your own eyes, and they seemed to be fairly concerned with exactly what we are talking about.

CM: Great example! What did they decide in the end? They agreed to do next to nothing.

BL: I still think it was the most important event in the history of diplomacy: one hundred and eighty nine states telling one another that the Earth on which they plan to modernize is too small for them all. It is all written in the INDC [Intended Nationally Determined Contributions]. You have read them too.<sup>xv</sup>

CM: But that's exactly the reason why many people believe the situation will get much more asymmetric. Exactly the opposite of your expectations: every state will become even more selfish and will defend its interests to the last patch of land.

BL: Which is another way to say we are at war; yes, that's also my point. Just the reason why diplomacy is so relevant. Before war is explicitly declared, you can't even think of peace.

CM: But back to my initial question: what philosophy adds, according to you, to this new diplomatic encounter?

BL: Do we agree that the level, or leveled, playing field gives a new relevance to diplomacy or not?

CM: Diplomacy as a new uncertainty on which all sides hold on to? This is the way you have defined it, if I caught it right.

BL: Diplomacy is when you are not exactly sure of what you cherish most. You begin to realize that you lose track of your real interest. You begin to suspect that another definition of your position will better save what you have been sent to defend by those whose interests you have been mandated to represent.

CM: And you are claiming that this is when you need to revive this old treasure trove of philosophical concepts?

BL: Yes, that's why I said that if you send Searle — metaphorically! — to the negotiation table nothing will move. It would be like sending, I insist metaphorically, Sarah Palin to learn a lesson or two from the Geswh'in on how to cope with new old animist ways of hunting!

CM: Please leave Pahlin out of the discussion. What I am sure of is that sending Souriau will make no difference whatsoever. He is too blissfully unaware that other civilizations have been thinking for millenaries in other ways than his.

BL: But that's not the point. (Also, don't forget that the man wrote his book in 1940: what would any Chilean would have thought about the contributions of Fuegians to philosophy, back then?) The point is that you are the one now

being threatened by the destruction of *your* civilization, and you turn around in a somewhat frenetic way to find alternative definitions of what you, you the Moderns, have been through. This is where the “inner exoticism” of philosophy comes in handy. I agree “exoticism” is inadequate, but you see the point.

CM: You mean that because of the negotiation being so tense, former modernists will suddenly realize that they have never been naturalists for good, never bifurcated, to use your expression, between subject and object, and will suddenly, miraculously, entertain this ontological pluralism you, you rather than Souriau, have developed?

BL: Sort of. More exactly, because of the new symmetry between cultures that are now equally threatened and in order to heed the lessons of the others — who have changed their type of otherness a lot because we are all back to the middle ground — it has become necessary for the former Moderns to find ways to cope with what they suddenly realize about the world through the experience of those who are facing them.

CM: But that’s exactly what anthropology has been doing all along.

BL: Right, except for one little twist: the epistemological paradigm of anthropology-as-science had *no urgency*, or rather no other urgency than losing precious information on fast disappearing cultures with their wealth of knowledge being destroyed. Earlier ethnographers could shed tears for those disappearing cultures, but their duty was to record those cultures' ways of *having been* in the world as quickly as possible — and then to dry their tears with a sigh of nostalgia. Things now are much more tense — no time to weep, and no time for nostalgia either. It is our turn to be threatened, our turn to realize we will disappear, and we are now in exactly the same non-epistemological situation where our former “objects” of study had found themselves when they encountered the White Man! When they had been “discovered”. I mean your forebears.

CM: If you were right, it would make the notion of symmetry a lot tenser.

BL: I bet. And it has nothing to do with the polite and somewhat patronizing way in which you would try to help those cultures to resist, as was attempted in the 1980s. We are *also* the ones at stake. And we have no time limiting ethnography to so much story telling, because we have to tell stories, for good, and fast,

CM: What’s the difference?

BL: Because we need to orient ourselves in the dark. Instead of the urgency of seeing data disappear and recording them before it is too late, it is the urgency of saving all the story-tellers! That’s a pretty good reason to become much more attentive to the diversity of ways others have to encounter you; that’s when we will also do anything to find diversity in our own tradition. That’s when philosophy and anthropology are cooperating best.

CM: But this situation is made more confusing for me by your infatuation with the concept of Anthropocene.

BL: What you don't seem to realize is how new the situation is when the "land constraints", to quote Pomeranz again, are *no longer abolished*.

CM: But everyone seems to criticize the notion of Anthropocene.

BL: Everyone on your side of campus, maybe, but I take the work done by the Anthropocene working group as a resource for a total renewal of the whole scene of anthropology.<sup>xvi</sup> Now here are people who are seriously registering the ripple effects of the new Lisbon earthquake. They have the instruments to calculate symmetry and asymmetry between the various forms of collectives. What a balance they have built! They register power relations fairly efficiently. It's impossible to *situate* anthropology, literally to give it a ground, a soil, a land, without taking into account what those guys are saying. And, mind you, they are all university professors!

CM: But their anthropology is so simplistic. What do you want to do with this return of the "human? Why not Man while they are at it? Man as "agent of history". The whole thing stinks in my view. And reading the literature, everyone criticizes it.

BL: But I still think for largely for the wrong reasons. Social scientists seem discontented that those who record the transformations of the land are coming from the other side of campus. Yet the job those geochemists do is simply amazing. Ignoring it or reproaching those geologists their lack of knowledge of ethnography is simply stupid. The new symmetry is obtained by reading both literatures.<sup>xvii</sup> That anthropologists, historians, and sociologists whose specialty is the study of the "human could believe that their fields would remain more or less intact after natural scientists have defined the Anthropocene, is beyond me. Anyway, that's another conversation.

CM: On the whole, I don't think I believe a word of this new form of symmetry in your symmetrical anthropology project...  
And yet.

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- <sup>€</sup> Carolina Miranda is a postdoctoral student working with Professor A. Prieto at the University of Magallanes, Puerto Natales, Chili, doing field work in Terra del Fuego. (I thank Gabriel Varela for correcting her Spanish version of English and Michael Flower my French version of English). The interview took place in December 2015 during the COP21 where Carolina had accompanied the Chilean delegation.
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