

Reviews

Anthropology beginning again

Pierre Charbonnier, Gildas Salmon and Peter Skafish, eds, *Comparative Metaphysics: Ontology after Anthropology* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016). 364pp., £95.00 hb., £31.95 pb., 978 1 78348 857 5 hb., 978 1 78348 858 2 pb.

‘Sometimes one feels like one has nothing “new” to say,’ writes Eduardo Vivieros de Castro in his contribution to *Comparative Metaphysics: Ontology after Anthropology*. Yet new things must, nevertheless, be said – or so insists this collection of essays, which bears the dual purpose of taking stock of a project already well underway, known in anthropology for the past decade or so as the ‘ontological turn’, and re-announcing its coming in the form of a profound disciplinary re-composition arising from the encounter between anthropology and philosophy. To these ends, the collection assembles an impressive cast of anthropologists and philosophers from across the Anglo-French academic divide – aside from Vivieros de Castro, there are chapters by Philippe Descola, Marilyn Strathern and Eduardo Kohn, among others, and an interview with Bruno Latour – encompassing a range of interpretations of the proposition contained in the title. Anthropology is metamorphosing, the volume suggests, into our new, planetary-crisis-era metaphysics.

Our metaphysics – as in, *all* of ours. Or rather, none of ours. For the point is to wrench ‘metaphysics’, which bears something of an unstable meaning across this collection of essays, from its European locus and to remake it on the shifting grounds of comparison itself. In this way, the project of *Comparative Metaphysics* positions itself as the latest charge in the ongoing battle with a philosophical canon resistant to de-centering. Anthropology has played this revitalising, or relativising, role in relation to philosophy before: from the 1960s onwards, following in the footsteps of Claude Lévi-Strauss in particular, a generation of young French philosophy students turned their backs on their discipline, which they considered to have

grown repetitive and stale, to try their hand at ethnography. Many worked with indigenous peoples in remote parts of the Amazon; if a concern common to structuralist projects was to associate the conditions of science with an epistemological *décalage*, or displacement, then for structural anthropology this was conceived in quite literal, geographical terms. Cultural difference – provided the emphasis was placed on the play of difference itself rather than a substantialist notion of culture – was viewed as the terrain upon which speculative thought could flourish.

By the 1980s, however, cultural difference had become a problem. Lévi-Strauss’s project had revealed itself, in the eyes of its many critics, to be a troubled enterprise: structuralism, they argued, had rendered cultures as closed systems operating behind the backs of their bearers yet visible to the omnipotent anthropologist. Accordingly, as Étienne Balibar noted, culture had assumed the determining function previously played by nature. In the end, culture wasn’t much better than race, and it served many of the same ideological functions. Anthropology in turn plunged into a crisis of self-criticism from which it could only emerge (so goes the ‘ontological’ line) by destroying the concept of culture altogether. This is where the work of ontological anthropology is at its most astute, on a political level – in realising that even a concept of culture reformed by reflexivity and intertextuality was complicit in the ethnocentrism it claimed to overcome. For as long as difference was concentrated in culture, the former remained confined to the level of representation, as a matter of belief or a set of ‘world-views’ variously adequate to a nature whose order was adjudicated by the natural sciences. If cultures

were so many ways of ‘making sense of the world’ – or so many mediations between humanity and a universal Nature, the truth of which only the ‘moderns’ knew – the subtext would always be that some of these ways made more sense than others. The multiculturalist gesture did little to conceal the fact that the management of the planet and access to its resources, including simply inhabitable space, would be differentiated accordingly.

Ontological anthropology hopes to disrupt this order of things by taking aim at some of its key epistemological assumptions. It entreats us to think that there is nothing ‘beneath’ what we inadequately call culture: neither nature, nor mode of production – nor even, it would seem, history. Or rather, the essence of the ontologising gesture is to ‘provoke a crisis’, as the editors put it, in such categories, by letting the thought of the subjects of that anthropology invade the workings of its conceptual construction. This is what many in the collection call ‘reverse anthropology’; it is the essence of Vivieros de Castro’s claim that the coming anthropology will facilitate the ‘ontological self-determination’ of those studied. But if the positions assembled in the book can agree up to this point, the project thereafter splits into two. On the one hand we have the comparison of metaphysics – of metaphysical systems, that is, assigned to the many different ‘worlds’ in existence. Placing indigenous metaphysical systems alongside those of the moderns seeks to force revisions of the central categories of the latter, such as nature and culture, human and nonhuman, and life and nonlife. This first project is exemplified by Philippe Descola’s major work, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, in which he constructs a four-fold schema composed of ‘modes of identification’ that he terms animism, totemism, analogism and naturalism. In the useful set of methodological reflections he contributes to this collection, Descola defends this approach as closest to the original structuralist aim of constructing a ‘combinatory matrix’ facilitating the comparison of formal properties of phenomena, which he insists is ‘in no way a grid for describing empirical situations’, but rather a model for an always-incomplete comparative endeavour.

But if this still feels too foundational, as a number of those in the book suggest, we can move to an

epistemologically more ambitious operation. This is comparison *as* metaphysics, in which the foundation – that which is known to be true – ascends to the realm of the virtual, such that the truth of the actual is only the possibility of alteration, as Patrice Maniglier puts it, or ‘being otherwise’.



As well as providing the most systematic set of reflections on this second operation, Maniglier offers a rare determination of the term ‘metaphysics’, whose baggage in the history of philosophy otherwise goes unacknowledged in the volume; he takes it in the sense of Descartes’ metaphysical reasons for doubt. Titling his chapter ‘Anthropological Meditations’, Maniglier argues that anthropology, as the science of comparison *par excellence*, *is* metaphysics not because it has found a new object in questions of being, but because the two ‘share the same *epistemological situation*’, existing likewise in the shadow of radical doubt. The difference is that while Descartes took this kind of doubt as the point of departure from which to ascertain the indubitable, the anthropologist stays with it, allowing it to transform any putative identity into a ‘variant’: a peculiar ontological entity that exists only by way of its differentiation from other entities.

But if anthropology is on its way to becoming comparative metaphysics, the nature of this transformation is yet to cohere, at least across this collection, at a philosophical level. For Martin Holbraad, the 'radical reflexivity of conceptualization' associated with the work of Marilyn Strathern, Roy Wagner and Vivieros de Castro might be understood as a variant of the Kantian transcendental deduction, 'multipl[ied] kaleidoscopically' along ethnographic lines. Morten Axel Pedersen, on the other hand, suggests the likeness between the ontological turn and the *departure* from the Kantian project in the work of those such as Quentin Meillassoux. And while many of the contributors insist on the 'critical' import of ontological anthropology, the jury is certainly still out on the question of critique. For despite the array of philosophical points of reference in the volume, the underlying conviction of the project is that critique alone can only take one back to where they began. As Charbonnier, Salmon and Skafish write in their introduction: 'You want to think modernity? You had better start from the outside – the concrete outside of an era and a people, not that of thought in the abstract.' It is this will to take leave of the work of negation, and instead seek out positive representatives of what Ghassan Hage calls elsewhere an 'alter-modernity', that draws this anthropological tendency toward those forms of cultural alterity apparently most unscathed by capitalist modernity; that is, to regain – however self-consciously or ironically – a *primitivist* imagination.

The charge of primitivism is by no means new to the ontological turn. It is first on the list of the critiques coming out of what Holbraad terms a 'veritable industry' of commentary, from within anthropology, on this body of work. For many anthropologists, ontological anthropology signals a violent reduction of heterogeneous modes of thought and life in the interests of creating a new grand narrative of the (especially Amazonian) primitive, whose world persists somehow unchanged on the sidelines of world history. It is all the more strange, then, that within philosophy, where the work of Vivieros de Castro in particular has begun to be taken up enthusiastically as part of both a philosophy of nature and a broader 'metaphysical turn', these criticisms should so rarely make an appearance. Is this perhaps because they miss the

(philosophical) point? After all, any science of comparison must work at some level through reduction and schematisation, or it must be willing to take a leap of faith, grabbing at a conceptual problem and working it in new directions. On the other hand, perhaps it is because the project of turning anthropology into philosophy, or the reverse, circulates on *one* conception of philosophy at the expense of others.

If so, this would appear to be a philosophy on the hunt for new beginnings. This is one response to the problem of philosophy's corruption by its own history, a glance at which makes evident the inextricability of ideas such as universalism with their apparent contraries – such as racism, a term whose complete absence from this collection is striking. It is a response which also risks isolating itself from the work of indigenous intellectuals who have recognised themselves to be somewhere within this history, for better or worse, and sought to work its contradictions to crisis point – work which underpins fields such as indigenous studies, black studies and anticolonial thought. Ontological anthropology effectively seals itself off from these fields, perhaps because they would prompt difficult, but vital, questions: can the 'outside' to modernity on which comparison is to be grounded really be present under global capitalism? Is seeking it out really such a novel project, or is it rather part of an older philosophical imaginary in which thought persists autonomously from (its) history? And in engaging this imaginary are we not participating, whether we mean to or not, in a remaking of indigenous and modern thought as uncomplicated and non-dynamic categories?

The ontological project, however novel it appears, certainly has *its* own history. It tends to present itself as the endpoint of such, following Vivieros de Castro's notion in his *Cannibal Metaphysics* of a closure of anthropology's 'karmic circle'. To do this, it must construct certain histories of anthropology: notably, the one in which a high structuralism of the 1960s was gradually torn down by postmodern anthropology from the 1980s onward. Yet anthropology, even in its French variant, was not *only* going through this dialectic of theoreticism and penitent reflexivity. For example, while Lévi-Strauss institutionalised the discipline around the study of indigen-

ous peoples in the Americas, far from the disasters of French colonisation, a parallel current of 'Africanists' maintained a rather different relationship with their imperial history. This current worked, in opposition to Lévi-Strauss, under the tutelage of the 'political anthropology' of Georges Balandier, a student of Michel Leiris and anticolonial militant who had realised early on that the colonial situation made it impossible to do ethnography in the synchronic, depoliticised manner of Lévi-Strauss and his follow-

ers. In light of this minor history, it is notable that most of the proponents of today's comparative metaphysics appear little interested in probing the relationship between their effervescent new discipline and the memory apparatus of the French state. If anthropology is set to change the future of philosophy, including its most foundational questions such as universalism, then we had better make sure it's the right kind of anthropology.

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Who is the subject of violence?

François Cusset, *Le déchaînement du monde. Logique nouvelle de la violence* (Paris: La Découverte, 2018). 240pp., 20.00 euro pb., 978 2 70719 815 0

Elsa Dorlin, *Se défendre. Une philosophie de la violence* (Paris: Zones, 2017). 200pp., 18.00 euro pb., 978 2 35522 1103

Just over two years ago, on 19 July 2016, Adama Traoré died in custody after being suffocated by three members of the *gendarmerie*, a branch of the French military that also possesses a policing power. Adama died in the yard of the police station of Persan, in the region of Paris, on his 24th birthday. His brother – who was also under arrest – and the firemen who were called by the *gendarmes* to give first aid to the young black man testified that Adama, who had passed out, was still handcuffed, face against the ground, when the latter arrived and that they had to insist the policemen take the cuffs off in order to revive him. Yet, despite their efforts, it was too late. To the family, who arrived rapidly at Persan, the police initially maintained that Adama was still alive. They kept up this lie for four hours before allowing his mother and his brother Yacouba to enter the station, where they were asked: 'If we tell you something, will you take it badly?'

While neither addresses the Adama Traoré affair specifically, it is in the context of deaths like this, and the responses that they have engendered, that two books on violence, by François Cusset and Elsa Dorlin, have recently been published in France. Each helps us to better understand the case by analysing both state violence and violence as resistance outside of the common frames of an opposition between violence and non-violence or in relation to a notion of legitimacy.

At the same time, they also raise awareness of the ways in which the government of the suburbs in contemporary France shares much with the government of former French colonies.

In *Le déchaînement du monde. Logique nouvelle de la violence* [A Ruthless World: New Forces of Violence], François Cusset identifies three minorities that are, today, subjected to what he calls a 'postcolonial violence': black people, the majority of Muslim people and indigenous people in the former colonies. Adama Traoré was French, black and Muslim. It should come as no surprise, then, that in a country where those who have power generally try to prevent a debate about postcolonialism from happening at all, he was used to facing systemic violence from the state. Cusset reminds us that the law of the 'imperial man', according to which 'might is right', is not an accidental and unfortunate flaw of power, but its rule. The failure of the state to provide protection to some of its citizens – most obviously, the residents of the suburbs – rather than acting only to control and assault them, means the state is not a third party which helps to resolve social conflict for such residents, but a stakeholder in such conflict and confrontation. In Adama Traoré's case, the state has too much to lose. Indeed, the judges deliberately neglected to interrogate the *gendarmes* involved. Cusset links this situation, in