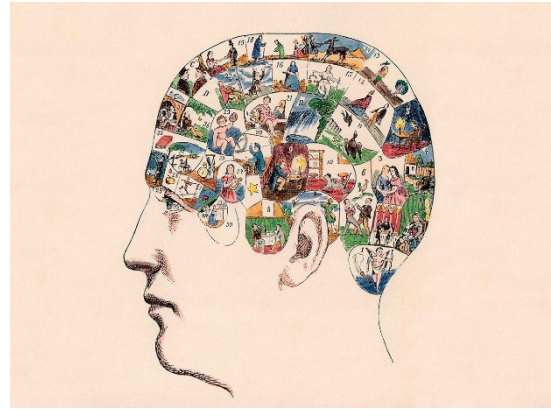


## Rationality

*PREPARED BY: Diana Szántó*

If there is a notion that seems difficult to relativize, it is that of rationality. More exactly, in theory it is easy to conceive that other people think in a different way than ourselves but when they actually do so, we are stunned. We are flabbergasted because what they say or do seems utterly absurd to us. From any subjective perspective, what is rational appears



unquestionably objective, almost naturally given, demanding no explanation. Whatever goes against this false objectivity, feels like something plainly and revoltingly irrational! Is our intuition correct? Is there one single straight line amongst the many lines of thought, one that would differ from all the rest, sticking out as the only correct way of thinking, existing out there, independently of the communities of thinkers, waiting to be discovered and celebrated when found as the Holy Grail? If this is the case, is there a hierarchy of knowledge systems in the world based on the truth content they reveal, and if yes, who sets the standard? Inversely, if we are able to conceive that different ways of reasoning might be valid in their own context and even able to produce relevant knowledge, then how could we decide who is right and who is wrong, for example between the climate change alarmists and the climate change negationists?

*A young, female Hungarian social worker tells her story:*

*Gypsy family: 50-year-old father, 42-year-old mother, 10-year-old son, 12 and 14-year-old daughter and children. They live in a very dilapidated one-room house with a view to the sky, the father is on social security, receives 22,000 HUF, the mother only the family allowance. Their longer term plan is to renovate the flat. Despite the family's very modest circumstances, the house is always tidy and the children go to school regularly. I keep in touch with the family because of their poor financial situation and the fact that the adults do not have a child together.*

*I have contacted the family to inform them that they will receive a food parcel. During our conversation, I found out that the parcel would arrive just in time because the father's brother*



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*had died and, as he had no other relatives, the family had buried him. They will take care of the funeral. For the funeral cake for at least 30 people, they have already borrowed about 30,000 HUF. They are stupid I say to myself. “Why do you have to make such a big feast?” - I say (without any stupid adjective for the family). “But Aunt Emese” - they say – “you know how it is....” They tell me that they would be reprimanded if they did not do the right thing and the damage would be much greater than the 30,000 Ft debt. I try to understand, but it is difficult.*

Note the adjective used: the social worker automatically qualifies the family as “stupid”. She knows that this is probably not correct to think so she keeps her opinion to herself but she cannot help getting annoyed: the family indeed seems to behave stupidly against some implicit criteria (that of rationality?), which she assumes universal. Rationality would mean to her to hierarchize “correctly” the family’s needs. What would be more important than to feed the family until the end of the month? That there is a tacit hierarchy of needs in which material and biological safety of the individuals composing the family enjoys an absolute priority over all the other individual or collective needs is an important cultural assumption. Cultural assumptions function like invisible compasses, hidden in the most inner layer of the “onion of cultural identity”: their own logic does not have to be revealed so that they serve as authoritative guides in social life. They remain concealed until they get challenged, for example in a conversation about food and burial. In some cases, however, cultural assumptions are made explicit by elaborated theories. This is the situation with the Maslow pyramid, which is so intuitive (rational?) that it is rarely challenged by students of social work when they first learn about it. It fixes as a universal law the priority of material needs over social, mental and spiritual needs for the whole humankind. The social worker’s judgement is thus based on her own cultural values (which she integrated as a member of an individualistic, materialistic society) reinforced by a professional canon (which she learned in university). Her harsh opinion on the family’s behaviour is explained by her own vulnerability: the family’s questioning the universality of basic human needs threatens something in the very foundation of her professional identity – a value so well integrated that it is probably also part of her personal identity.

On their side, the family expects that the social worker understands their logic, which is based on a very different hierarchy of needs. They say: ...”you know how it is” and they probably mean it. They cannot conceive that somebody could ignore the imperatives of social life to the point to think that taking a loan to obey these rules would be irrational. They take it for granted that rituals that keep together the wider community comes before the immediate material needs



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of the nuclear family and this fact should be so obvious for everybody that it needs no further explanation. Michael Stewart, a Britt anthropologist who studied a Hungarian Rom community in the 1980ies {Stewart, 1997} described how the common rituals of feasting together did not only express togetherness, but produced it, by performing the community. As the extended family expresses a more encompassing togetherness than the nuclear family, its ritual needs to be prioritized. The (non-Roma) social-worker and the Roma family put forward two different kinds of rationalities, which, from the other's perspective seem to be totally irrational.

The antagonism is however only apparent and reflects less a Rom-Non-Rom opposition than one might believe. The parties do not fully invalidate the other's choice (the family understands the importance of having enough money until the end of the month and the social worker in other circumstances would probably agree with the importance of family traditions). Their disagreement is about the order of importance. This difference characterizes the tension between more individualist and more collectivist societies. There are no absolute individualists or absolute collectivists in society. All societies are made of individuals who are very much aware of their own individual interest and are ready to fight for it. For all societies, community and collective life are important. The difference is not absolute, but rather relative, it is not in the ingredients, rather in their unique mix that might oppose rural and urban, poor and middle class, Western and Eastern, Northern and Southern cultures.

In the above case, the two colliding rationalities are not radically different, neither mutually exclusive, rather their apparent incompatibility points at two different value systems (or moral economies) composing with the same ingredients, putting the emphasis elsewhere. But there are surely examples in which truly opposing rationalities clash with no possibility of reconciliation?

Here is another story, this time coming from a French social worker. She works in a suburban neighbourhood with a high proportion of new arrivals from the Comoros, an island country off Madagascar. The island was colonised by the French and got its independence in 1975. France therefore is one of the most important destinations for international migrants from the island. The Social worker got in touch with this family because of the problems in school experienced by one of the children, an adolescent girl. The social worker found out that the girl lived with her mother and her small brother. The father left them and lived with his second wife also from the Comoros, in the same neighbourhood. The couple also had children that lived with them.



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Quite unexpectedly, the girl in the other household started to skip school and her results dropped. She also behaved rudely with her classmates. The teachers averted the social worker. This is when the latter took appointment with the mother. She visited the family in their home, which she found somewhat unkempt. The mother apparently did not understand the cause of the visit and assured the professional that her daughter was a nice girl and helped a lot at home. After a few visits, the social worker started to discover another reality. The girl kept running away from home too, she made her mother worried, who did not know what to do. To the surprise of the social worker, the mother was trying to get advice from the father's sister on the phone, who still lived on the Comoros, instead of turning to somebody closer. The father occasionally visited but he was in bad terms both with the mother and with the daughter. Until that point everything seems fairly usual, nothing surprising in the perturbed story of a classical mosaic family, with some difficulties in child rearing. What made the social worker finally nervous was when the mother exposed her own theory of the causes of the trouble. The social worker said:

*“The mother was very angry. She told me that it was her husband's second wife who was responsible for everything. She was sure that her rival was the one who gave the evil eye to her out of jealousy. As an irrefutable proof, she added that even her gas cooker broke down. Apparently, she meant that the gas cooker was cursed by the other woman. At this point, I started to suspect that she had some mental problems, and I suggested a consultation with a psychologist.”*

This social worker does not say or imply that the person on the other end of the table would be “stupid”; she plainly hypothesises that her client is out of her normal mind. She is an experienced professional who has worked previously with several Comorian families. She is aware of the notion of the evil eye – a cultural belief shared not only by Comorians but by many other people across the Mediterranean. During the analysis she says she can understand that people believe in the malevolent power of certain persons to affect other humans but she qualifies as pathological the idea that human will can affect an object. In other words, she has learned to rationalize the belief in witchcraft in psychological terms, but this rationalisation does not help her in a situation where the alleged “victim” of “woodoo” is not a person but an inanimate object.



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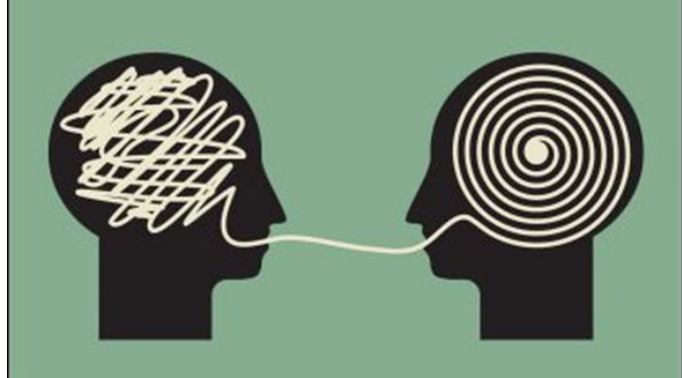
When we discussed the case with her, she started to remember other details that initially she treated as irrelevant. In reality, the mother in the story was not divorced. She was still married to her husband who had a second wife. In fact, the couple was polygamous, the two wives and all the children came together with the husband, but as the French system does not recognise polygamy, the municipal services separated the family by force and put them in two separate apartments, considering only the second wife with smaller children legitimate. This arrangement caused a lot of tensions, obliging the man to provide for two households (an obligation that he clearly was not up to), and setting the two wives against each other. The social worker did not mention these circumstances because she found nothing particular in the administrative arrangements. These for her were completely “normal”. Therefore, she could not suspect any relation between the family troubles and the role of the social services. What was irrational for her was the mother’s behaviour. It did not occur to her that the family’s dysfunction could have anything to do with the administrative measures – which with good chances - everybody in the family probably found pretty irrational. Her reaction is explained on the one hand by her incapacity to analyse the family’s situation that would have demanded from her to question the rationality of the administrative arrangements, and on the other hand by her fear to enter into the realm of the occult otherwise than by sublimating it as a psychological state.

This story shows that although the limits of rationality are not clear-cut, the domain of irrationality starts where the facts, utterances, and acts of the other explodes the belief system of the person who becomes their judge. Our rationality is somebody else’s irrationality and vice versa. Translations however are possible. This is the mission of “ethnopsychiatry” {Devreux, 2013} that operates in the context of transcultural encounters, treating folk theories of mental troubles as rational within their own context, revealing something not only about the cultural universe of the patient but also about the nature of the intercultural encounter. Ethnopsychiatrists are after meaning, just like traditional psychoanalysts, but they can conceive not only different layers of meaning but also different realities held together by different systems of meaning. Therefore, they do not propose a universal treatment, they treat their patients within the logic of their aetiological theories. From an ethnopsychiatric point of view, the theory about the relation between evil eye and gas cooker would probably look perfectly rational; it reveals less something about the mental health of the mother than about the family relations, subjugated to the French legal system. The “treatment” that an ethnopsychiatrist



would suggest might go along the lines of breaking a curse, instead of denying the reality of the mother's world.

Seemingly irrational statements might then reveal something valid about the objectively existing universe, and their meaning might be rendered accessible if we understand reality as layered as meaning. But if there is no other criterion allowing the distinction



between the irrational and the rational than our own meaning system, can it be that there is no objective difference between the epistemological status of the theory of relativity and that of the theory of the evil eye? Admitting this would make the little men living on the Moon reality and the Apollo 11 landing on the Moon a sheer myth. Such relativism might be useful for cultural dialogue, but It is doubtful that humanity could have ever constructed an arrow, let alone a spacecraft without a strong anti-relativist vision of reality.

How to explain then that people who apparently make irrational statements are perfectly able to perform rational acts? This is precisely the problem of Lucien Levy-Bruhl {Levy-Bruhl, 1923} one of the first theorists of rationality, inscribing himself in a line with an older generation of anthropologists, who - like Taylor and Frazer - supposed a radical difference between Western modern, and pre-modern, i.e. non-Western thinking. Writing about the Bororo, an ethnic group in Amazonia, he expresses his surprise, noting that these people can affirm with certitude that a Bororo is an Arara, which is to say that a man is a parrot. For Taylor and Fraser such a statement would have been a proof of prelogical thinking, but Lévi-Bruhl suggests that the Bororo instead made a choice, that of actively ignoring one of the most important rules of logical thinking, that of no-contradiction. If A is x , B is y, and x does not equal y, then it is not possible to state that A is B, without self-contradiction. Instead of the principle of non-contradiction, the Bororo use something else: the principle of participation - an idea that the essence of beings (living or not) is shared. Thus the Bororo would not try to think like the Western man and fail, rather they think differently! Despite the ethnocentric connotations of this theory - implicitly identifying logical thinking with Western (scientific) reasoning and denying this quality to what he calls “primitive mentality”, Lévi-Bruhl's intuition has the merit of allowing for the simultaneous existence of different meaning systems. He



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understands that the statement affirming that a man is a parrot does not stand on the same epistemological foundation as another one affirming that it is possible to make feather crowns out of arara feathers. His mistake is to use this difference for characterising whole societies. After all, the Bororo are capable to make both forms of statements, and closer to him, other people who have invented the space ship do not find it absurd to say that bread is the flesh of a man named Jesus. Levy-Bruhl might have been wrong in making the principle of non-contradiction a civilizational trait - but he was right in recognising the specificity of symbolic thinking. Others have picked up his insight that different forms of thought exist and not all of them obey to the same mental principles.

One such follower is Claude Lévi-Strauss, the father of structuralism and a founding figure of cognitive anthropology. Cognitive anthropology deals with the question of how humans think. Lévi- Strauss in *Savage Mind* {Lévi-Strauss, 1966 } makes the distinction between the “savage” and the “domesticated” mind, two forms of reasoning, however making it clear that the qualifiers are not to be understood in an evolutionary sense: in all societies there are examples of the two, and both of them are useful, as they provide solutions for particular, albeit different problems. The domesticated mind is systematic and follows the rules of formal logic. It is useful to solve practical problems, from that of making feather crowns to the invention of space ships. The savage mind, to the contrary, would proceed by “bricolage”, i.e. it would use any kind of available raw material (Lévi-Strauss insists that anything can be food for thought), in a trial and error manner, assembling them in a way that the result makes the most sense in their particular context. The savage mind is useful for putting order in an apparently chaotic universe by linking things together in a particular way, and then by applying the same relation to different objects. Lévi-Strauss looks at the Bororo statement about araras from a semiotic perspective, asking the question: if the arara is the signifier then what is the signified? In keeping with structural anthropology, he finds sense in the statement by supposing that it proceeds less from observation of nature, than from the structure of the mind projected to the observable features of the universe. In fact, in the original textual context from where Levy-Bruhl borrowed the phrase, the Bororo man does not only speak about his own people being araras, but also about a neighbouring group, the Trumai. He compares these to the capivaras, an aquatic mammal. So, what he really says – explains Lévi-Strauss – is that the Bororo are to the Trumai what the arara are to the capivara (of course expressing a relation of superiority – as the Trumai are often laughed at). The first opposition then allows a metonymic ordering of the universe, where one

relation stands for a series of other dyadic relations, opposing up and down, sky and earth, male and female, etc. According to Lévi-Strauss, this way of multiplying significations under a single signified is characteristic of totemism. According to Dan Sperber, another cognitive anthropologist, this is precisely the definition of symbolism. In opposition to scientific thinking, symbolic discourse – he says – only retains from experience a minimum of fragments to establish a maximum of hypotheses, without caring to put them to the test. {Sperber, 1977:4}



This definition allows Sperber to define what is not symbolic: a sort of reasoning that...tries “to account for a maximum of data by means of a minimum of hypotheses, and (is)open to falsification”. We know that falsifiability, i.e. the possibility that a statement can be proven wrong is what distinguishes scientific thinking for Karl Popper {Popper, 1959 }. Scientific thinking can be mistaken, because it tries to say something objective of the objectively existing world, symbolic thinking does not know error because it uses the objective world to say something subjective. Lévi-Bruhl then was right to notice the singular rationality of the Bororo statement but unlike him neither Lévi-Strauss, nor Sperber supposes that magical/totemistic/symbolic thinking would be a sign of primitivism in any conceivable sense, or that civilised/practical/domesticated/technical/scientific thinking would be the prerogative of the moderns. Sperber emphasises the “vigour of symbolism in our own culture” (Sperber,1977: 2) Lévi-Strauss points out that already in the Neolithic, our ancestors possessed and practiced both ways of thinking. They might have had magic, but without the scientific method, they would have never been able to invent “pottery, weaving, agriculture and animal domestication”. *“Thus, instead of opposing magic and science, it would be better to place them in parallel, as two modes of knowledge, unequal in their theoretical and practical results... but not in the kind of mental operations they both presuppose, and which differ less in kind than in the types of phenomena to which they apply.”* (26-27). Lévi-Strauss makes here four important statements: 1, there is indeed not one, but at least 2 different forms of reasoning, 2, these forms can be found in all societies and in all times, 3, one is not inferior to the other, 4, but they are





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not applicable in the same way. Sperber comes to very similar conclusions. “The ordinary use of language utilises categories to make statements about the world – he writes. Symbolic thought, on the contrary, utilises statements about the world to establish relations between categories.” (Ibid:7)

So far, it looks that what differentiates symbolic from scientific thinking is their respective relations to objectivity. The thinking leading to technological innovations and to science would reflect the objective truth, as opposed to symbolism, which also tries to say something important about the world but is not constrained by the requirements of objectivity. This way of looking at the question of different “mentalities” however just displaces the problem as it leads to a logical loophole: How do we know objective reality? By scientific thinking! What is scientific thinking? Thinking based on objective reality.

Thomas Khun, {Kuhn2, 196} in his revolutionary book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution (1962)* exited this tautology by affirming that although objective reality exists and all scientific thinking aims at its discovery, scientific paradigms (schools of thinking about the world in a particular way in a particular epoch), differ from each other radically, without necessarily invalidating each other. Disturbingly, different realities may coexist also in science, even if they appear mutually exclusive. Both Newtonian and Einsteinian physics are real although they seem to obey to very different principles. Accordingly, there is no one way of thinking science but many. Scientific progress is not happening by accumulation of knowledge, but by paradigmatic revolutions, putting everything that was said before on a new foundation. In between two paradigmatic shifts, what is happening is “normal science”, i.e. science not aiming at a revolution, but rather to fill out the blanks of a large puzzle, consolidating the scientific imagination, rather than renewing it. In “normal” times what makes a scientific theory true is its growing acceptance by the scientific community, until a point where some bold minds start to ask uncomfortable questions concerning anomalies of observation or in the theory, leading – in some lucky cases – to a new paradigm. The new paradigm becomes “normal science” if there are enough scientists joining the new wave of thinking and contribute to engross its theory. If this way of looking at science is sociologically convincing, in philosophical terms, it is quite disturbing, because it suggests that the only way of coming to terms with objectivity is by achieving a (momentary) collective agreement in a community composed of individual subjectivities. We sense the trouble: the objective, stone-hard reality of our world threatens to crumble into a desert of sand if we lose our faith in objectivity.



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Is it necessarily so? Is objectivity an unreachable ideal? If everything is circumvented by subjectivity, how can we make sure that gas cookers sometimes do not balk like terrified horses do? Husserl, the founder of phenomenology {Husserl, 1963}, reassures us: not only objective reality exists, but its reality is accessible to us, not despite of the subjective apparatus it is explored with (our brain), but because of it, or more exactly, because of the interconnectedness of many brains. The world is knowable because 1, our subjective experience is in objective relation with the outside world and 2, because subjectivities in interaction can mutually confirm each other's experience. When I say that I know that this green, tall tree standing 3 meters from me exists, I mean that I know that if you were in my place, 3 m from that tree you would see it as tall and green as I do, supposing you have the same ideas about trees as I have. It is people's participation in the same life-world that generates collective knowledge about the things of that world. It is not our own perception but our capacity to mentally "trade places with others" that helps us affirm that the world outside exist.

Following Husserl and phenomenology to the letter conducts us to a new dilemma. Can it be that when a Comorian woman says that her gas cooker was cursed, or a Bororo says that he is an arara, they do not only speak symbolically, revealing a meaning otherwise hidden about reality, but they speak objectively about the world in which they participate? Phenomenology is concerned with the problem of how we can know other life worlds than the one in which we have been socialised. In a twist, it also asserts that different socialisation processes create different life worlds, as each world depends on a community of speakers, thinkers and believers who collectively generate specific knowledge about that world by speaking, thinking and believing together. Unlike later critics, Husserl read enthusiastically Lévi-Bruhl. He writes about the author of *Primitive mentality*: "It is indeed possible, important and great to give oneself the task of "feeling from the inside" (Einfühlen) a closed humanity, living in a lively and generative sociality, to understand it through its world produced by its homogenous social life, a world which is not for it "representation of the world" but the *truly existing world* (*emphasis is mine*). By this, we manage to apprehend, identify and think their ways (Arten), penetrating thus into their logic as well as their ontology." (cited by Keck) {Keck, 2020 }

For Husserl, and possibly already for Lévi-Bruhl, the Bororo did not just produce another representation of the one, only existing single world, but lived in an ontologically unique world where the essential identity between bird and human is taken for granted. If semiology deals with the question of meaning, ontology deals with the nature of being. The intuition that people



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with different ideas of the world can indeed live in different worlds in the ontological sense, has been somewhat surprisingly affirmed by medical anthropology – a branch of anthropology dealing with something so real and supposedly universal as human biology. Medical anthropologists realised that groups who have unique expressions for highly specific culturally-bound symptoms or groups of symptoms, can identify these symptoms because they actually can feel these act on their bodies. One such example is the illness called *nervoso* inflicting huge populations in South America, causing headache, palpitation, nervousness and weakness. Scheper-Hughes {Scheper-Hughes, 1993} decrypted *nervoso* more or less as anguish caused by poverty. Notwithstanding, the Brazilian poor she conversed with did not need such intellectual exegesis to know exactly when they suffered from *nervoso*, just like you and me know when we have a headache. In the same vein, it is possible to say that somebody inflicted by the evil eye might actually develop symptoms of the evil eye (nervousness, weakness and unexplained series of misfortune) which is very different from saying that somebody experiencing nervousness, weakness and unexplained series of misfortune might interpret it as the evil eye.

If people talk about the world differently, it is because they experience it differently. This is a story told by Pauline, doctor in a municipal service of child protection in France:

*“In one of my rural villages, I received a family with 7 children who had recently immigrated from a mountainous region of Morocco. Only the father spoke a little French. The last child had just been born, a difficult birth. He was born with hip dysplasia for which he had to wear abduction pants. We then organized an interview with an interpreter. The mother told us (through an interpreter) that her child had been broken at birth. Afterwards, this child had big psychic and physical problems.”*

Remark Paulin’s implicit, only syntactically maintained theory connecting somehow the child’s physical disability, the incapacity of the mother to accept it and the child’s subsequent psychological problems. This implicit theory stands in opposition with the mother’s (implicit) theory who seems to link the child’s (physical and mental) problems to her medicalised birthing experience.

The doctor feels bad about the mother’s remark about the “broken child”. She interprets it as an accusation. She also feels that it is irrational (maybe irresponsible?) for the mother to make sense in this way of the difference of the child, instead of accepting it for what it is: a congenital



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disability. At first sight, the disagreement between the mother and the doctor is about the interpretation of an event, and its effects on the child's life. But there is more than that to it. The surface difference of verbal expressions hides a deeper difference between clashing life worlds. In a discussion with the child protection service, the mother explains that this is her 7<sup>th</sup> child. She gave birth to all the others in Morocco, at home, surrounded by the women of her family. She never experienced any difficulties. She had an easy pregnancy at the 7<sup>th</sup> time as well and she was proud that she would give birth this time in a hospital. However, she found the birthing experience very difficult. She felt alone and did not find it comfortable to give birth on a birthing chair. The use of the spatula was painful. She was horrified by the abduction pants, which she found particularly barbaric. There was nobody with her who could have explained her what happened and why. As she did not speak French, she could not even communicate with the medical staff. The circumstances that belong to the medicalisation of childbirth, constituting normalcy for the doctors, represents to her highly abnormal and absurd conditions. The clash is not simply about the meaning, it is first of all, about the lived experience. Giving birth at home in Morocco and giving birth in a French hospital are incommensurable experiences. The doctor probably comprehends this, but for her the Moroccan mother's painful experience of giving birth in the hospital is simply not accessible. Fadiman, in a famous case study on another immigrant child's bad fate in the Western medical system {Fadiman, 2007}, describes a similar unmediated gap between the birthing experience of a Hmong woman at home in Laos and in an American hospital. In both cases the medical staff's incapacity to conceive a different world than theirs stops them not only from understanding their patients, but also from accompanying these by giving them what they need to feel less alienated.

The idea that societies do not differ only in their worldviews applied to the only and one world, but rather different worldviews apply to different worlds came back strongly with the so called "ontological turn" in anthropology. The proponents of the "ontological turn" return in some ways to the insights of phenomenology: the difference between "cultures" (however uncertain the definition of that word might be) is not only epistemological but also ontological. Things are in fact more complicated. Much of anthropology's heritage is based on the idea that there are many cultures, relating in different ways to the same and one world. This statement supposes a universal opposition between nature and culture. But some anthropologists rebel to this idea, such as Marilyn Strathern, Philip Descola or Viveiros de Castro, challenging the relevance of the distinction, based on very concrete, empirical observations in particular cultural universes



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(in Papua New Guinea for Strathern; in Amazonia for de Castro and Descola). Viveiros de Castro {Viveiros de Castro, 2012} convincingly demonstrates that for Amerindians, humans and animals partake in the same humanised world (in their own world animals drink manioc beer, eat manioc and live in huts), but they see each other (and each other's worlds) from different perspectives: human see blood where a jaguar would see beer and vice versa. Humans and animals therefore do not differ in their respective belonging in culture and nature, but rather in their perspective. However, even this difference is relative, as perspectives can be exchanged, just like bodies: a jaguar can be turned into human and a human into a jaguar. The Amazonian Indian is not "culturally relative" – affirms de Castro, but "naturally relative"<sup>1</sup>. Instead of seeing different cultures he assumes culture to be one and sees nature realizing multiple possibilities. It is clear that when Castro says that for the Amerindians there is no fundamental difference between jaguars and men, he is not using a symbolic language, he does not speak about the way in which Amerindians interpret their world, but rather he introduces its readers into an unsettling universe in which western-modern reflexes do not work<sup>2</sup>.

Taking the Amerindian world-view seriously and not explaining it away as a form of symbolism (another way of saying that it is irrational) might have far reaching political consequences. For example it can cause the inclusion of the nature's rights next to human rights in Humans' big book of rights. The protection of the rights of Nature, known as *Pachamama* in Quichua and Aimara, is enshrined in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitution. For many ecologists, this apparent anthropomorphism is not a return to the past (to some kind of primitive mentality) but is the way to the future (being the sign of a higher level of human conscience).

The recognition of indigenous knowledge systems as equal with other knowledge systems produced by Western thought has in fact high political stakes. Not only because on a moral ground and from a decolonial perspective it is hard to justify epistemological inequality, but also because in the light of the multiple crises triggered by Western capitalism, it is much more difficult than before to maintain intellectually the superiority of the techno-scientific reason with which the latter is consubstantial. The idea of the *pluriverse* (as opposed to the "universe") emphasises the plurality of realities outside of the western epistemology and ontology. For Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria and Alberto Acosta, the editors

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/ontological-turn>

<sup>2</sup> For a wonderful cinematographic experience of the „natural relativity“ described by de Castro see the .Columbian film „El abrazo de la serpiente“.by Ciro Guerra



of the volume “Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary” {Kothari, 2019} the pluriverse is not a descriptive but a normative expression, it is the object of a struggle, „resisting injustice and seeking paths for living in harmony, with nature”. The quest for the pluriverse is part of the rising decolonial tide in social sciences, proposing to critically review and challenge the hegemony of the universalist, Cartesian, dualist world view, as the only acceptable source of valid knowledge. The decolonial critique highlights the close relationship between knowledge and power and claims for liberation by exploring counterhegemonic forms of knowledge and practice. This radical critique of the Western canonized rationality has been facilitated by a series of crises devastating post-industrial capitalism: the impeding ecological disaster, the crisis of democracy and beyond, a more surreptitious crisis of the social. In these domains, the failure of the world’s leading powers is so obvious that the idea that solution can only come from other sources of knowledge sounds more than plausible. Hence a rising interest, and sometimes a romantic faith in the politically subversive, ecologically and morally healing capacities of non-Western worldviews and forms of knowledge produced at the margin, by the subaltern. This critique, however well-founded, is not without its own dangers. Traditionalist ideologies on the authoritarian side (within and outside Europe) are particularly prone to use criticism of the Western epistemological hegemony to build a nationalist, backward looking political culture, which usually entails exclusion and persecution of those who do not fit in the illusory reconstruction of a mythological past. Thus, the exaltation of Ayurvedic medicine, the denunciation of Western imperialism and the growing persecution of the Muslim communities meet in a less than random fashion in today’s India under Modi.

In a time when fake news invade the media space, conspiracy theories gain momentum and facts are relativized by politicians and their allies to the point that commentators describe our epoch as a post-fact society, it is more important than ever not to abandon the idea that objective reality exists and it is knowable. This idea however is not incompatible with the recognition that reality has different layers and there are more than one path leading to its discovery. These paths are sometimes so different that that





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from the perspective of one the other looks utterly irrational...until, in the infinity, some of these paths meet. Such unlikely encounter happened for example when quantum physics discovering the phenomenon of entanglement, seemingly confirmed fantastic imaginations about the possibility of an object being and not being at a single place at the same time and about two distant objects affecting each other through the distance.

Irrationality is a serious accusation by which people deny full humanity to other people whom they do not understand or do not agree with. Once labelled as irrational, an argument, an act or an opinion is sealed against the possibility of comprehension. There is not much we can do with irrationality beyond rejecting it altogether. Such a blank refusal leaves little space for dialogue or for any kind of evolution of ideas (on either side). Instead of obeying to that first reflex, we can gain more from asking ourselves the question: what is the context and the perspective in and from which this statement or act makes sense? How does the world in which it is meaningful looks like from inside? And if we are optimistic because we believe that communication between worlds is possible because people can “trade places” we can even ask: What are the chances for translation?

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