

## **Bifurcations: Comparative Relativism**

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[Text prepared for translation for *Conexoes Parciais*]

The point of bifurcation came at the moment when I could no longer hold certain terms steady but needed to make evident what I was assuming in the relationship of the language of description or analysis to the object of study (Strathern 2011, 89)

A few years ago, comparative relativism was the exploratory rubric for a symposium that drew together a series of scholars, prominently from anthropology (Marilyn Strathern and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro) but also from philosophy (Isabelle Stengers) and from cultural studies/literary theory (Barbara Herrnstein Smith).<sup>1</sup>

As we wrote in the invitation to the symposium, the point was to “place in unlikely conjunction the two terms comparison and relativism”. Presenters did so in ways both expected and unexpected. In her contribution, Marilyn Strathern described our phrasing as “sheer provocation” (Strathern 2011, 90), before granting herself what she referred to as “binary license”; a license that entailed playing with various relationships between the comparative and the relative. Binaries, Strathern implied, are often viewed as the enemy of relational analytics, requiring effort to deconstruct dualisms, but they might also be seen as carrying generative force. Rather than strive to rid ourselves of binaries, we might learn to work both with and against them. Indeed, Strathern’s observation is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari’s famous statement:

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<sup>1</sup> The symposium was held in September 2009 at the IT University of Copenhagen and organized by Brit Ross Winthereik, Morten Pedersen and I. Papers and commentaries were subsequently published in *Common Knowledge* 17(1) in 2011.

We invoke one dualism in order to challenge another. We employ a dualism of models only in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models. Each time, mental correctives are necessary to undo the dualisms we had no wish to construct but through which we must pass. Arrive at the magic formula we all seek – PLURALISM = MONISM – via all the dualisms that are the enemy, an entirely necessary enemy, the furniture we are forever rearranging.  
(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 22–23, cf. Jensen and Rödje 2009, 25-26)

Although, taken at face value, Deleuze and Guattari seem to suggest that binaries are themselves static; as furniture that may be rearranged but not *redesigned*, their own conceptual inventiveness gives the lie to this reading. But in any case Strathern explicitly points our attention to the creativity of binaries.

Her key word is *bifurcation*. Binaries locate us, unstably, in positions that require conceptual and empirical selection; they construct points of bifurcation that lead argumentation and thinking down on path or another; paths, that are never neutral. Below, I shall have more to say about this idea, which effectively posits binaries as facilitating conceptual *events*.

For now, I simply note that the invitation to write the current piece replicates how Strathern describes the process that led to the writing of “Binary License”. She had been asked to write another paper, for another occasion, and, at a point of bifurcation, she realized that the argument could not be contained within one paper. Another piece of writing spun off from the one originally planned, took a different path, and became the paper we have in front of us today.

Likewise, I have already written one introduction to “comparative relativism” (Jensen 2011). But since the present setting and audience is different, since not all the original papers from that special issue are equally relevant to social anthropology, and since time has passed, a point of bifurcation presents itself: how to re-situate the stakes of the original discussion, to keep open, as it were, the potential to facilitate the event in this new context?

To deal with this challenge, in the following I retain a number of points and indicators of context from the original introduction, while deleting others.

Subsequently, I re-specify and augment a number of arguments that arose in the comments and discussions that followed the symposium and was printed in *Common Knowledge* 17(1). To set the scene, I begin with some introductory statements made as part of the original context. Bifurcation ensues, shortly.

### **Contexts for a Comparative Relativism**

On the one hand, comparison, in the most general sense, involves the investigation of discrete contexts to elucidate their similarities and differences. On the other hand, relativism, as a tendency, stance, or working method in social anthropology, and more recently in science and technology studies (STS), usually involves the assumption that contexts exhibit, or may exhibit, radically different, incomparable, or incommensurable traits (cf. Bloor 1976). Comparative studies are required to treat their objects as alike, at least in some crucial respects; otherwise it is impossible to establish measures that enable the researcher to determine what is shared and not between, for example, cultures or practices. Relativism, however, indicates the limits of this stance by suggesting that the observation of difference and similarity depends on a pre-established “outside” perspective from which comparison can be made—and, of course, relativism is skeptical of the possibility that such a view from nowhere-in-particular can be established. Given the deep divide between these analytical and methodological entry points, the term comparative relativism is likely to seem incongruent or paradoxical.

An inquiry into comparative relativism must thus take as its starting point the notion that incongruence or paradox is no bad thing and, indeed, can be productive (Viveiros de Castro 2011). In the analytical modes of Strathern and Viveiros de Castro, for example, the term encourages what may be termed a “comparison of comparisons,” in order to relativize what different peoples — say, Western academics and Amerindian shamans — compare things “for.” What is simultaneously compared and relativized in this endeavor are anthropological methods of comparison and relativization themselves. The ambition of the *Comparative relativism* colloquium was

to find ways of locating these terms 'on the same terrain' in the belief that this might allow for new configurations of inquiry. It is on this level that Isabelle Stengers (2011), with her attention to the difference between unilateral and multilateral comparison, made her contribution. But whence is the juxtaposition of comparison and relativism so troublesome? A classic example from structural anthropology, held up against more recent insights from science and technology studies may shed some light on this question.

### **Models and comparisons**

Thus, I turn to Claude Lévi-Strauss. In the chapter "Social Structure" of his classic text *Structural Anthropology* (volume 1), Lévi-Strauss (1963) considers the different status that comparison and the notion of the comparative held for various ancestral figures of anthropology. He notes that for A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Robert Lowie the problem with earlier anthropology was that it was full of merely "alleged correlations" between the structures of diverse societies and that these were "lacking empirical support." In the place of these spurious analytical practices, Lowie argued that anthropology should be put on a "broad inductive basis" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 288, quoting Lowie). Lévi-Strauss contrasts this approach with that of Durkheim, whose reference point was 'laws of science'. As Durkheim put it: when a scientific law "has been proved by a well-performed experiment, this law is valid universally" (288).

Considering these two possibilities — one associated with Lowie, the other with Durkheim — Lévi-Strauss formulated the dilemma of the anthropologist as whether "to study many cases in a superficial and in the end ineffective way; or [else] to limit oneself to a thorough study of a small number of cases, thus proving that in the last analysis one well-done experiment is sufficient to make a demonstration" (288). As is well known, Lévi-Strauss had no fear of seeking inspiration in the natural sciences, a fearlessness that has more than occasionally been regarded as negative. But what is perhaps most interesting about both the scientism of Lévi-Strauss and the critique of structuralism is that both take the idea of scientific method and scientific law for

granted. Since then, however, science and technology studies (STS) research has repeatedly shown the variability of scientific methods and the different status that supposed natural laws have within and across scientific communities, as well as within and across historical periods. Indeed, it might be said that STS research has established the uncertainty of the factual.

In his magisterial work *Image and Logic* (1997), the STS historian Peter Galison, for example, posed for modern physics roughly the same question as Lévi-Strauss had raised for anthropology. According to Galison physics exhibits two distinct modes of making knowledge, one oriented toward image and the other toward logic:

One tradition has had as its goal the representation of natural processes in all their fullness and complexity—the production of images of such clarity that a single picture can serve as evidence for a new entity or effect. These images are presented, and defended, as mimetic—they purport to preserve the form of things as they occur in the world. Against this mimetic tradition, I want to juxtapose what I have called the “logic tradition,” which has used electronic counters coupled in electronic logic circuits. These counting (rather than picturing) machines aggregate masses of data to make statistical arguments for the existence of a particle or effect. (19)

The competition between image and logic is more commonly thought of as between experimentalists and theorists. The theorist “sacrifices the detail of the one for the stability of the many,” while the experimentalist relies on the idea that “information about a single event rendered with full detail is in all relevant ways equivalent to information deduced from partial details about many events of the same class” (20). The image-based experimentalists hold that the “passivity of their systems of registration” ensures that theoretical assumptions do not enter their analysis of experimental results. But the logic-based, statistics-oriented theorists hold that

“anything can happen once,” for which reason singular exemplary cases (so-called *golden events*) remain dubious claimants to epistemic authority.

Unsurprisingly, there are differences between these parallel debates among physicists and among anthropologists. Yet, they are perhaps not the differences that would be expected. The problem is not that anthropology, as an interpretive discipline whose subject matter is culture rather than nature, can never become a natural science. For what Galison’s analysis shows—as does much other STS research — is that even within the “hardest” of natural sciences uncertainties comparable to those with which social scientists must deal are invariably found. The one key difference that does emerge is that, in his argument, Lévi-Strauss mixes elements that Galison’s physicists separate. Like the advocates of the image-based tradition in physics, Lévi-Strauss seeks a golden event with which to establish a general demonstration. But unlike Galison’s image-based experimentalists, Lévi-Strauss does not purport to establish his case through strictly inductive means, untainted by theory. With regard to the necessity to theorize and model, he is firmly on the logicians’ side.

This complex stance may be the cause of his contemplation of whether the fidelity of anthropologists to the comparative method should be “sought in some sort of confusion between the procedures used to establish . . . models” (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 288). What Lévi-Strauss meant was that Durkheim’s demand for scientific laws could be met only under a statistical regime (similar to the logic tradition in physics) that relied on the gathering of large amounts of data. Yet such data are acceptable “insofar as they are all of the same kind,” which is a demand that cannot be met by ethnography. Thus, Lévi-Strauss eventually proposed that the way forward “lies in the selection of the ‘case,’ which will be patterned so as to include elements which are either on the same scale as the model to be constructed or on a different scale” (1963, 288-289). But this is a very loose proposal that immediately raises all manner of relativistic questions about elements, scales, models, and their relations.

Arguably, the questions that Lévi-Strauss raised have remained, to this day, intractable. His own paradoxical injunction: to study singular cases—golden events —

that somehow can count as general demonstrations, remains underexplored. Such would have to be studies that eschewed *common notions* of comparison, having learned with Nietzsche that “to dream of two equal forces, even if they are said to be of opposite senses is a coarse and approximate dream, a statistical dream” (Deleuze, 1983: 43) -- without for that matter letting go of a comparative aspiration, differently defined.

In contemporary anthropology, it is perhaps the work of Marilyn Strathern and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro that best exemplifies the potentials of such a stance. But what might count as a golden event in anthropology? What might a unique demonstration exemplify, show, or prove? What kind of abstraction or generalization might it rely on, or enable? In short, might comparative relativism offer a potential for comparisons of a different order (see also Jensen 2012)?

### **Multinaturalist paradoxes and “special effects”**

One place in which comparison of a different order in fact seems to have emerged is in Amazonia, and, in particular, in the studies affiliated with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and his colleagues and students. Given the present context, it would be redundant to reiterate the central tenets of Viveiros de Castro’s multinaturalism, or multiply examples from the ethnological record. Instead, I let this commentary bifurcate by placing in conjunction the previously mentioned questions concerning anthropological golden events, and the set of multinaturalist issues and paradoxes that Viveiros de Castro outlines in “Zeno and the Art of Anthropology: Of Lies, Beliefs, Paradoxes, and Other Truths” (2011).

This text introduces its own point of bifurcation early on. Picking up on Richard Rorty’s exemplification of those whose “we cannot take seriously” as *Nazis and Amazonians*, Viveiros de Castro argues that Rorty’s liberal-ironic stance constitutes an almost perfect “anti-definition” of anthropology. This is the first bifurcation:

Anthropology is the Western intellectual endeavor dedicated to taking seriously what Western intellectuals cannot, so Rorty tells us, take seriously.

Anthropology takes very seriously as well the question of *how* to take seriously what Rorty refers to as “visions”. The constitutive problem of the discipline is how to acquire the tools that allow us to do so (2011, 133).

These tools are required precisely in order to prevent anthropology from remaining within the limits of classical understandings of comparison and relativism. Rorty is, of course, famously, a “relativist”. But as his juxtaposition of Nazis and Amazonians against ironic liberals clarifies, he is also not averse to hierarchical comparison. Specifically, his two categories of “others”, Nazis and Amazonians define the limits of what his relativism can contain. They are equally, though for different reasons, out of bounds of the interesting “conversations” that can be pursued from within the politico-epistemological horizons of liberal irony.

A second bifurcation then follows. What does it mean to take serious? Whereas Rorty, irony aside, feels obliged to insist that seriousness demands that some “visions” or “beliefs” cannot be entertained, this ‘belief’ is inverted by Viveiros de Castro. He concurs: yes, there are certain visions that should not be taken too seriously, but they are usually our own: “almost all of the things that we must *not* take seriously are near to or inside us” (133). What is seriously required, therefore, is a well-developed sense of humor, rather than Rortian irony. Humor is needed as much to take seriously “what we ‘cannot’ take seriously”, as “not to take seriously what we ‘simply’ cannot *not* take seriously” (133). The anthropological golden event, pursued through comparative relativism, might have this doubled, impossible, seriousness and un-seriousness as a necessary (if not sufficient) condition of possibility.

But we are then at a third point of bifurcation, in fact one very closely related to Strathern’s original one, the moment when certain terms could “no longer be held steady”, so that it became necessary for Strathern to make explicit what she “was assuming in the relationship of the language of description or analysis to the object of



study” (2011, 89). The issue, as it now emerges is the relation between the humorously serious and seriously humorous attitude required to do anthropology in the form advocated by Viveiros de Castro -- and the ethnographic material that is engaged with this attitude.

In particular, the tension that leads to bifurcation is between the two “components” that Viveiros de Castro states that multinaturalist anthropology must entail: a theory of people’s ontological autodetermination and a practice of the permanent decolonization of thought (Viveiros de Castro 2011, 128). For this project, what is the relation between the (humorously serious) language of description and the object of the study? The question is particularly important insofar as the “theory” is about “ontological autodetermination”; which sounds like a theory that aims to alleviate anthropology of the need to speak for others.

In a commentary, Matei Candea picks up on just this point, explicating the obligation of multinaturalist anthropology as entailing restraint: “refraining from either assent or critique, in order to allow the people themselves to specify the conditions under which what they say is to be taken” (2011, 147). But insofar as people themselves specify the conditions under which what they say is to be taken, does this not obviate the need for anthropological theory, even redefined as a practice of the permanent decolonization of thought?

This seems to me a very specific point of bifurcation that might send anthropology along different trajectories, most of which are unsatisfying; such as the road of elucidating indigenous concepts (taking at face value the notion of ontological autodetermination) or of unrestrained theorizing in a poststructuralist/postcolonial mode (putatively a practice for the permanent decolonization of thought). And if Candea’s formulation seems to point in the direction of the first option, this seems to me to be because he literalizes the notion of ‘autodetermination’ a bit too much.

Recognizing humor, not just the anthropologists’, but perhaps as well the *worlds’* coyote like humor (Wagner 2010) is crucial for selecting a path here. This is why Viveiros de Castro is clear that taking serious has little to do with taking literally

(2011, 135); emphatic that: “enabling ontological auto-determination” is never about repeating what informants say, ascetically abstaining from anthropological conceptualization, in order to let ethnographic facts speak for themselves.

Which, of course, also means that, slogans aside, strictly speaking, we are never quite witness to something quite either “auto-“, or quite “determined”. Insofar as “ontological auto-determination” is the activist task to be promoted by multinaturalist anthropology, it is something that must induced and facilitated, egged on by a comparative relativism that allow others to speak, by speaking in different terms to what their concerns might be. This is how I would interpret Viveiros de Castro elegant use of Henri Michaux’s statement “even if it is true, it is false” as indicative for a future of anthropology (2011, 143). Michaux’s formula is magical, Viveiros de Castro says, and magic is always about effects, achieved, in part, through *artificial means*, including the whole set “special effects” (2011, 145) through which anthropologists make others speak in other voices.

### **Partial comparisons and “remaindering effects”**

Clearly, then, questions about what we compare for are wrapped up in every choice of what to compare, and in every comparative analysis. Moreover, as Strathern observes, the scale of comparison influences what count as data, analysis, interpretation, and theory. The conventional categories or “persuasive fictions” (Strathern 1987) of any discipline will influence deeply what can count as fact or as interpretation, also what can count as an explanandum and what as an explicator. Those categories have an effect as well on why an explanandum, explanation, or comparison is regarded as interesting (or not), and for *what*. These are among the themes explored in “Binary License”.

Here, Strathern unfolds an argument that, on one level is about changing patterns of social practice in Mt. Hagen, Papua New Guinea, and about contemporary anthropological analyses of conflict. On a second level, however, her argument

concerns anthropological means for dealing with the unstable relations between theory and data, between the conceptual and the empirical.

As noted, her strategy is to pay special attention to “the point of bifurcation” at which a “distinction between terms could lead analysis down different routes.” The example she offers is based on revisiting her own experiences on arriving in Mt. Hagen. Engaging this material anew, she says, could as well move in the direction of “theorizing reflexivity” as of “elucidating ethnography.”

Even as distinctions both between and within disciplines rely crucially on the work of binary divisions such as that between theory and data, it would seem that for Strathern theories exist on the same level as practices: “Ideas are as contingent on themselves as on their objects,” she writes. The obvious extrapolation is that the theoretical and the empirical are both equally and fully empirical and theoretical (Gad and Jensen 2010).

Here Strathern’s observations intersect with issues encountered in the previous section. It is precisely insofar as “ontological autodetermination”, is neither quite auto, nor quite determinative, that an art of humorous seriousness is required for the inventive co-constitution of “others”, capable of articulating their modes of *diverging* from “other others”, without, for all that, claiming that this divergence is a “found” ethnographical object. Strathern’s reflexive attention to points of bifurcation, in that sense, resonates with Viveiros de Castro’s discussion of “controlled equivocation” (2004), as the “method” through which it might be possible to “establish a continuity between the object of description and the description itself” (Viveiros de Castro and Goldman, 2008-9: 31): a continuity; that is, an uncertain relation, rather than an adequate representation (Jensen 2012a). But as always, where we seem to have found a ‘consensus’, we might look for yet another point of bifurcation.

In “Binary License”, we might locate it at the point where Strathern relativizes her Mt. Hagen comparison by drawing in Balkan material. Referencing Sarah Green’s (2005) argument that the Balkans, always seem to “throw up ‘messy remainders’ from any orderly account” (Strathern 2011, 99), Strathern notes that: “indeed one might

observe that the very application of a distinction has its own effect, for there is always another dimension implied. Something is left over from making a distinction, not least people's knowledge of other applications".

The bifurcation I have in mind is the following: Whereas Viveiros de Castro separates Amerindian ontologies from Western ones, in order to grapple with the unique distinctiveness of the former, Strathern bifurcates *both* Western and "Other" ontologies by continuously focusing on their "messy remainders"; a term with obvious conceptual affinities to Derrida (1978). Moreover, not taken the distinction between theory and analysis as settled, Strathern finds *the same kinds of bifurcations* to be operative in ethnographical material and in description and theorization. If the 'messy remainders' evinced both in the Balkas and in Mt. Hagen complicate the question of "ethnicity", so, likewise, will any anthropological theorization generate residues that trouble "any orderly account".

This quasi-Derridean sensibility, I suggest, accounts for Strathern's only apparently paradoxical statement that: "Partiality is the remaindering effect of being aware that so much more lies 'out there,' so many accounts into which one could, with great intellectual profit, be locked" (101). For notice the emphasis on how one would, through the very making of accounts, *simultaneously* garner great intellectual profit and *be locked*. Precisely: one becomes locked, step by step, by moving, at each point of bifurcation, down one path rather than another, realizing in the process, that there is no turning back, and that this is a precondition for making (Western) knowledge. But realizing *also*, reflexively, that the knowledge gained is always many other knowledges lost.

Though far more submerged than Viveiros de Castro's activist call for ontological autodetermination, "Binary License" also has a political tenor. In his commentary, Morten Pedersen (2011) highlights the lack of sympathy with which Strathern treats the analytics of ethnicity, exemplified by Simon Harrison's *Fracturing Resemblances* (2006).

As Candea did with reference to Viveiros de Castro, Pedersen perhaps takes the importance of “getting one’s descriptions right” too literally (117), underplaying the ways in which that aspiration is itself troubled by the Derridean/fractal analytics put in motion as one becomes attentive to “points of bifurcation”.

Yet the question remains whether *that* very attentiveness creates a distinctive vantage point for thinking politics. Pedersen suggests, “yes”, and names that politics “non-identity politics”. This is an apt term, insofar as neither a politics of identity nor, certainly, ethnicity, makes much sense in a situation where each ethnic classification necessarily generates “messy remainders”. It corresponds well with Strathern’s unusually blunt statement of disagreement with an “ethnic theory” untroubled by reflexive insight into its own conditions of emergence:

We may all become like the Balkan peoples and accept a hegemonic description of conflict that makes ethnicity a universal model for loyalty and cultural solidarity. When one day we all use the same vocabulary, there will be no need to worry about where it has come from! (Strathern 2011, 103)

As Strathern emphasizes, however, she “would defer that day as long as I possibly could”.

But while non-identity politics works excellently to signal what an anthropology of comparative relativism would want to stay away from: homogenized or universalized theorization, reflexively inattentive to the “remaindering effects” of ethnography, description, analysis, and their composites, it cannot form a positive program, and *for the same reason*. Strathern does not say so herself, at least explicitly, though I take a hint from the title of her final response to commentators: “What Politics?” (Strathern 2011a).

The central point here is that even as conceptualizations of ethnic politics and non-identity politics may be different in substance, point by point, insofar as they are both conceptualizations they have been generated by the same kinds of processes.

Both, that is, are, *equally* constructed from messy conglomerates of ethnography and analysis. Both are, *equally*, results of paths taken, and therefore innumerable others not taken. Realizing this, there is no way in which non-identity politics, or, indeed, *any politics*, can be posited as a *general alternative* to an identity politics. Doing so would simply replace one falsely universalized model for another, conveniently forgetting its own remaindering effects.

### **Persuasive fictions and “recalcitrant effects”**

Turning now to the contribution of Isabelle Stengers, “Comparison as a Matter of Concern” (2011), another point of bifurcation immediately presents itself. Stengers, after all, is a philosopher of science, not an anthropologist at all. And she makes much of the fact that certain natural sciences are indeed very different from social ones. Whereas Strathern talks of the persuasive fictions of anthropology, Stengers’ interest is in specifying how scientists produce what are initially fictions, only in order to demonstrate their factual incontestability.

Invoking the example of Galileo, Stengers argues that he had to struggle not only against the recalcitrance of nature but also against the ingrained skepticism of society, liable to view his results as precisely fictional. This is why she uses the term “conquering skepticism” to describe scientific efforts. Central to such endeavors are the nonhuman objects that ensure that facts are “not imposed” by scientists, but, rather, arising from “something belonging to the phenomena studied”. And contrary to anthropology, Stengers suggest that a reductive ambition is likewise central to natural sciences, because the singularity of these knowledge practices “depend upon, or at least implies, eliminating the charms of conversation” (Stengers 2002, 235).

But if, in Stengers’s account, the “charms of conversation” have little place in the practices of natural scientists, the development of one particular capacity on the part of nonhuman actors—the capacity “to object”—is crucial. If the establishment of new facts is dependent on events through which phenomena are made expressive in new

ways, those events in turn are generated in and by settings in which nonhuman entities obtain the capacity to be recalcitrant, to reject the questions asked of them.

Stengers refers to Charles Péguy's discussion of Corneille's *Polyeucte* as a "perfect comparison" (2011, 55). This comparison pitches the roman knight Severus as an embodiment of the pagan world against the Christian martyr Polyeucte. And the perfection of the comparison lies in its fairness, since both appear in their "particular full force" (56). "They share the idea that who will win does not depend on them. What depends on them is that the one who wins will not have won by having managed to weaken the other" (56). We can now see how this example relates to the issue of recalcitrance. The implication Stengers draws from Péguy is that "no comparison is legitimate if the parties compared cannot each present his own version of what the comparison is about; and each must be able to resist the imposition of irrelevant criteria" (56).

Stengers, however, also use the example to point to the complications that arise when this comparative demand is tested against social and human sciences. Contrary, to Galilean science, she argues, such sciences have all too often drawn strength *precisely* from weakening alternative perspectives through the imposition of irrelevant criteria. She points here to binaries that have organized intellectual controversy, including "myth" and "science", "nature" and "culture". The terms science and nature are not neutral in these controversies, Stengers notes, but rather appear as polemical weapons to be wielded against those whose practices can be designated as irrational, drawn to "myths" now rejected by rational science.

Of particular interest here is that Stengers extends this critique to concepts such as natureculture and multinaturalism, promoted by Viveiros de Castro, Latour and Haraway, because such terms can be seen as attenuating the originating dualisms, without respecting the "full force" of the fact that they were originally *defined by their very opposition*. This is why, Stengers say, they may be "ill protected from foul play" (56).

What, though, will provide protection against the foul play of weakened comparisons? Stengers' turn to the etymology of the French term *rapport*, which, she reminds us, carries a "constellation of meaning" that include connotations of *logos* and *ratio*; that is proportion, signifying "an operation of comparison" (48), which the English term relation has lost. For Stengers this distinction is crucial, since "everything may be described as related, but not everything entertains 'rapports'" (48-49).

It is also why relationality, for Stengers' comparative endeavor, cannot be a starting point, though it might be an endpoint. The starting point for comparisons that respect the recalcitrance of actors and practices, is rather *divergence*, specified by Stengers as *constitutive*, rather than relational (59). The divergence of practices is constitutive, she suggests, because it has nothing to do with defining a practice "in terms of its divergence from others". Constitutive divergence is rather a matter of respecting self-defined singularity of practices; their "own positive and distinct way of paying due attention; that is, of having things and situations matter" (59).

In spite of the worry about the conceptual apparatus of multinaturalism, this demand locates Stengerian recalcitrance in the immediate vicinity of Viveiros de Castro's notion of ontological auto-determination. However, it also leads straight back to the question of how to speak to the constitutive divergence of practices, when neither "auto", nor "determination", can be taken literally. We are thus shuttled back to the issue of humor as a requirement for learning. Humorous learning involves finding ways of bridging what may initially seem like incommensurable domains of knowing and practicing; perhaps as in Helen Verran's descriptions of the fragile attempts of aboriginals and scientists to create a ground for sharing knowledge (Verran 2002). On the other hand it is harder to see how Stengers' demand fits with the binary license evoked by Strathern, since its manner of "reporting home" (Stengers 2011a, 82) to anthropology is certainly not always constrained by practices' own ways of defining questions and concerns. Indeed, "Binary License" both exemplifies another way of "reporting" and articulates the importance (or is it



unavoidability?) of doing so with a certain freedom from the obligations formulates by Stengers. Thus we are at yet another point of bifurcation.

### **Comparative Relativism and Golden Events**

Let us therefore stick a bit longer with this obligation: “Whatever the achievements in the human sciences, they depend upon an increasing recalcitrance about accepting irrelevant or insulting questions” (Stengers 2011a, 83). Comparisons enabled by articulation of constitutive divergence in *full force*; lack of interest in “winning” by “weakening” the positions of others. This obligation raises questions, not least about extension. Recall how Viveiros de Castro, defined as a starting point for anthropology the double requirement to learn to take seriously what we “cannot” take seriously, but also to learn how *not* to take seriously many things that we *cannot* not take seriously. Are those “many things” then deprived from entering a comparative endeavor in full force?

This issue is raised in slightly different terms by Matei Candea, who points out that it would seem that Rorty, for example, is *deprived* of his full force, when rendered as the anti-definition of anthropology (2011, 147). But, Candea asks, where to draw that line? As an ethnographer “at home”, he is concerned to ensure that it is not used to distinguish “between ‘Euro-Americans’ (or ‘moderns’, or ‘the West’) and everyone else (2011, 148) in general. Accordingly, his proposition is that what is required is an ongoing reflexive vigilance with respect to how the distinction is drawn. Viveiros de Castro concurs, adding simply, but crucially, that our *general* inability to make the distinction does not preclude it from being drawn *specifically*, in each case: “alterity is not indeterminable, but simply motile, or variational” (Viveiros de Castro 2011a, 164). But, he further adds, at the point when the distinction between what should be taken seriously and what should not *is drawn*, it immediately begins to have implications. Making the distinction locates the anthropologist at a point of bifurcation. Consequences follow; drawing the distinction is a matter of “tactical quintessentialism” (165).

I would suggest that this is a point of *convergence*. Stengers' comparisons in full force, are central to the ability of intellectuals to deal with the fact that Western political systems and knowledge systems have established supremacy by ruining, disrupting or undermining most other forms of practice. As heirs to this history, the obligation to facilitate comparisons in full force becomes an inherently 'symmetrical' move, since it aims to level a historically overdetermined, *hierarchical*, playing field. It is an integral part of Stengers' project to not turn her back to "modernity", but rather invent an "antidote to the belief that makes us so formidable, the belief that defines truth and fiction in terms of an opposition, in terms of the power that makes the first destroy the second" (2000, 164). Ontological auto-determination and 'tactical quintessentialism' clearly seem to speak to the same ambition.

And how about Strathern's "Binary License" and her open-ended question "What Politics?" How does *that* fit in the picture? Stengers qualifies her notion of the "antidote" in the following way: "We do not have invent ourselves as radically different from what we are, for we are already very different from what we believe ourselves to be" (2000, 165). This seems to be a more or less perfect characterization of Strathern's *oeuvre*, ever since she brought Melanesian concepts to bear on English kinship or audit cultures, beginning her effort at comparative relativism.<sup>2</sup>

Recall how Lévi-Strauss proposed that anthropology should search for singular cases that are likely to be suitable as models — likely to facilitate a golden event. Perhaps one negative lesson that might be drawn from the multiple bifurcations followed in this text is that Lévi-Strauss' task is an impossible one, insofar as one imagines "cases" to be delimited empirically. Cases, models, descriptions are inventions, resulting from following paths of bifurcation that do not respect our casual (or formal) distinctions between concepts and worlds. As Roy Wagner remarked many years ago, even the finest ethnographic "text collections are lame and

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<sup>2</sup> I note that, following the Comparative Relativism symposium, Stengers' discussion of Péguy has been picked up by Strathern for a discussion of UK Higher education. See <http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ias/insights/Strathern8Dec.pdf>.

uninformative, unless quickened into event by theoretical interpretation” (Wagner 1978, 12).

The event – golden, insofar as it can be extended (not generalized) into new insights – as multinaturalism has done, moving to Inner Asia, or Strathernian individuals have done, emerging in Europe – must always be prodded, supported, mediated (cf. Hennion 2007) — and it must be constructed in thought.

If one can speak of comparative relativism as an empirico-conceptual matrix of any sort, therefore, it is one that has no authority of its own. The matrix works, if it does, “through insinuation and transformative effects as an infectious lure for new creative contrasts” (Stengers, 2002, 245).

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