

Stranger, quo vadis?¹

Epistemological considerations on culture-confrontational thinking

Abstract: Anthropology and ethnography have been under fire for some time for their eurocentric or openly colonialist approach of the "other". The essay discusses their fundamental biases since Rousseau's noble savage referring to the possibilities offered by recent progresses in theoretical physics and neuroscience. It states that postmodernist, writing culture, reflexive anthropology, practice theory, post colonialist, savage slot and post human attempts were not able, so far, to resolve the basic epistemological problems, and proposes a return to the "self" as one possible issue for the science of the "stranger".

"Sich zu kennen, dazu muß das
bloße Ich zu anderen gehen."
(Ernst Bloch, Das Prinzip Hoffnung)²

"Singing my life with his words
Killing me softly with his song"
(Norman Gimbel, Killing me softly)

It must have been a strange but also impressing experience that the Aborigines of the Australian southeast had experienced. Gigantic birds with dark bodies and light wings

¹ The text is based on the two versions of my work (inaugural dissertation (1984) and book publication (1985)) on the Australian Aborigines (Eckhard Supp, Australia's Aborigines – End of the Dreamtime?, 1984/85), supplemented by discussions as part of the anthropology seminar "Current Theories" at the University of Hamburg in the winter semester 23/24, in which I was gratefully allowed to take part. There were a good 40 years in between. Anthropology today is much broader and more self-critical, but the (epistemological) question remains: Can we really understand foreign, non-European Western cultures? And that when we often have difficulty understanding related and neighboring cultures or groups of our own civilization? Translated using Google translate and DeepL and controlled by the author.

² "To know oneself, the mere I must go to others." – „Sich zu kennen, dazu muß das bloße Ich zu anderen gehen. In ihm selber steht es in sich versunken, dem Innen fehlt das Gegenüber. Doch an dem anderen, woran ein sonst unsichtiges Inneres sich faßt, geht es leicht wieder in Fremdes von sich weg.“ (Bloch, Ernst, Das Prinzip Hoffnung, 1959, 3. Band 1243)

had glided in over the sea and were now bobbing in the waves of the bay, habitat of the small ethnic community since ancient times. Human-like creatures had emerged from the birds, pale as death. Were they ghosts? Were they the deceased returning from the islands across the sea? Maybe ancestors of your own group to whom you had to give wives and feed them? Or were they creatures of an enemy people? Harbingers of disaster?

Anthropologists to whom their local informants reported the arrival of the "ghosts" generations later – the impression must have been so deep – had a completely different interpretation of the incident, if they were even at least somewhat familiar with the history of the British Empire. They knew of a Captain James Cook who, according to the British calendar, had landed in 1770 in what is now known as Botany Bay, the headquarters of the airport in the metropolis of Sydney, and had declared the continent completely and without any fuss the property of the British Crown. A few years later, he was followed by a fleet of eleven ships under the command of Captain Arthur Phillips loaded with soldiers and convicts from British prisons, who founded the first European settlement on the continent.

Was this the same event, was it two? Maybe just two perceptions of the same thing? But which of the two was right and which was wrong? Or could both be right and both wrong, as the physicist Sabine Hossenfelder suggests as a possibility when discussing the physicist concept of time³? Were there two truths for one and the same event, did it perhaps happen at the same time in two realities, universes, in a metaverse?⁴

The question seems irrelevant to us because we "know" what "really" happened. But did that make Aboriginal knowledge any less true? After all, they already had the upcoming disaster "on their agenda". And as the Thomas theorem teaches us, situations defined as "real", even if they are only incorrectly perceived as real or correct, are in any case "true" and "tangible" in their consequences. Conversely, is perhaps our own knowledge "wrong" or at least falsely "value-driven"⁵? Does it consist of fantasy images, abstractions from any immediate sensory perception, as are, for Max Weber⁶, hidden in every search for historical causality?

Everyone of us would now spontaneously say: Of course the European version of history is the right one. After all, we don't believe in ghosts, although we can't use our

³ Hossenfelder, Sabine Karin Doris, *Existential Physics: A Scientist's Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*, 2022, 8: „Who is right? Neither of them.“ And later: „It sounds crazy, but the idea that the past and the future exist in the same way as the present is compatible with all we currently know.“ (loc. cit., 11)

⁴ The German ethnologist Michael Schnegg pursues an analogous issue in his essay "Ontologies of Climate Change" (in: *American Ethnologist*, Vol 48, 2021), see below.

⁵ Weber, Max Carl Emil, *The Methodology Of The Social Sciences*, 1949, 112

⁶ Weber, M., *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 1922/1988, 275

logic to prove that they don't exist.⁷ Probably even every living Aborigine would agree and at the same time lament the regime of the British colonial rulers.⁸

Civilizing colonially

Since the memorable event of 1770, more than 200 years of ruthless, brutal colonization of the continent and its native populations have thrown together two cultures that could not be more contradictory. The fact that the “white” culture dominated the “black” culture, that the society of the country's former “masters” became a largely pauperized and marginalized ethnic group within the dominant Western-influenced overall society, is more or less known and a fact accepted – even if that unfortunately does not mean that the political and social consequences of this cultural confrontation (keyword land rights) have been at least remotely resolved.

This raises the question of what, other than perhaps sheer curiosity, should motivate us to engage with Aboriginal cultures – as with all other non-European, non-Western ones in the “global south”, considering that most of them have long since been defeated and assimilated or simply “eliminated”.

The answer to this must be two-part: If we look back at the five centuries of colonialism and the emerging world market, the still acute, political-social dimension of our relationship to non-European, foreign cultures quickly becomes apparent. It was and is largely a relationship of exploitation – often trivialized in our world as “underdevelopment” followed by “development aid”. It began with the infamous triangular trade – beads, fabrics, weapons and trinkets from Europe to Africa, African slaves from there to America, highly profitable American sugar and tobacco back to Europe – to which a large part of our inherited wealth in the northern hemisphere still can be traced back, continuing through the outsourcing of production processes to so-called low-wage countries up to the child labor in the raw material mines for our cell phones, smartwatches and laptops. A relationship that, with all its violent consequences, has been striking back for some time in the form of uncontrollable flows of migrants and will continue to strike back as long as we do not put an end to the exploitation of the “global south”.

The second proof of the usefulness of such a confrontation lies, on the one hand, in the fact that the (ethnological) confrontation with foreign cultures – emphasis on

⁷ Even if we assume that ghosts do not exist, simply believing in them is a reality that can be “calculated” and can have practical, material consequences. Hossenfelder says about the analogous problem in physics: “It’s impossible to predict that nothing unpredictable will happen” (Hossenfelder, S., 2022, 39)

⁸ Hossenfelder writes about one of the creation myths of contemporary physics: “How would you prove this story wrong? You couldn’t ... It is impossible to prove this story wrong, because of the way our current natural laws work.” (loc. cit., 23) It seems as if we are trapped in our logic.

confrontation, because this should not encourage the illusion that one can and only needs to copy them – always brings us back to our own epistemological questions. And, on the other hand, the fact that it is so difficult to really understand these “foreigners” if one follows the ethnological discussion of the last 100 years.; to understand and not just to impose our own concepts, terms and theories onto them.

Anthropologists became aware of the latter point quite late. For a long time, they saw themselves, in the spirit of scientific modernity influenced by Descartes' rationalist philosophy, as neutral observers, field researchers, who only recorded what they saw and what people – in this case their informants from the cultures they examined – reported to them. Their interest in knowledge was either the same as that of the colonial rulers or it was guided by the hope of unlocking the secrets of a general development of mankind by accessing the “primitive archetypes” of human societies.

This “neutral” role in the cultural confrontation was always an illusion. Of course, the days are over when anthropologists encouraged the atrocities of the European settlers, when they were involved in schemes such as the forced placement of Aboriginal children stolen from their families in strict and violently run homes. Times in which people like the zoologist and later anthropologist Baldwin Spencer⁹, whose writings are among the classics of Australian anthropology, were appointed by politicians as “chief protectors” of the Aborigines and ensured their smooth demise. Facts, which once prompted the sociologist and Namibia researcher Ingolf Diener to call for ethnography as such to be abolished entirely.¹⁰ However, this will not be discussed further here.

This also applies to all those who, in their ethnographic work, ultimately only sought to project their own dreams of a better society onto the “strangers”, as Margaret Mead was accused of doing, where she “discovered” an allegedly sexually libertarian society in Samoa. It ultimately turned out to be a big misunderstanding, to put it politely. Not only Jean-Jacques Rousseau – the Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot once referred to him as the father of anthropology – and contemporaries with the figure of the “noble savage”¹¹ attempted this type of projection, but also the emerging ecological movement of the 1970s Pacifism of the 1980s, feminism, the evasion into a new inwardness. They all “fed everywhere on deformed images of these cultures, which in extreme cases they condensed into mystical belief systems.”¹²

⁹ Cf. for example www.rct.uk/collection/1124881/across-australia-v-2-by-baldwin-spencer-and-f-j-gillen

¹⁰ Postscript to Streck, Bernhard & Thomas Zitelmann, *Die Herrschaft der Blutsbande*, Vorstudien zu einer Kritik der gentilen Produktionsweise, 1979, S. 149

¹¹ Cf. Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, *Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness*, in: Bonilla, Yarimar, Greg Becket & Mayanthi L. Fernando (eds.), *Trouillot remixed: The Michel-Rolph Trouillot Reader*, 2021, 62. The essay was first published in 1991 already.

¹² Cf. Supp, E., 1985, 5

The fact that even the most humane and (self- and colonialism-)critical anthropologists knowingly or unknowingly acted as “troublemakers”¹³ in the Aboriginal groups they visited and documented ethnographically – not accepted as a fact for a long time – is now widely recognized: scientific curiosity was always an intervention in the society being studied – not least because those observed in turn observed the observer and adapt to him, as the French anthropologist and psychoanalyst Georges Devereux noted in the 1960s.¹⁴

Primitive or complex

Finally, the all too transparent and pejorative labeling of non-European (non-American) cultures as “simple”, “primitive”, “Stone Age”, etc. has largely disappeared. In view of the difficulties many anthropologists have in “deciphering” the extremely complex social structure of the Australian Aborigines, such terms have long been laughed at. Although, it must be added, unfortunately, time and again and with all the subtlety of which the scientific language is capable, even in the writings of Eurocentrism critics categorizations such as pre(capitalist) and (literate)less – definitions ex negativo – celebrate “resurrection”.

Even in the case of Bronislaw Malinowski, who rightly or wrongly and together with the British Alfred Radcliffe-Brown is considered the founder of the “method of participant observation” in anthropology¹⁵, hardly can be talked as of neutral observation. On the contrary, his work, like that of many scientists of his time, was characterized by the (economic) “a prioris” of modernity. His scientific approach was one of strict reproduction rationality, as if Australia's Aborigines were the logical ancestors of the “homo oeconomicus”, the “rational (economic) actor”¹⁶ with the “invisible hand”, the “utility maximizer” of classical economics. Marshall Sahlins was therefore right to once mock Malinowski, saying that for him, culture was only a gigantic, metaphorical extension of the digestive system.¹⁷

The model that Malinowski imposed on the societies he visited was and is not unknown in European cultural history. It is one of teleological, in extreme cases deterministic and of course Eurocentric evolutionism, which sees the entire history of humanity moving

¹³ loc. cit., 4

¹⁴ Devereux, Georges, *De l'angoisse à la méthode – Dans les sciences du comportement*, 1967, 56

¹⁵ Cf. Kohl, Karl-Heinz, *Ethnologie – die Wissenschaft vom kulturell Fremden*, 1993, 109. However, the German geographer and (ethno)sociologist Franz Boas had already laid the foundations for ethnological “field research” at the end of the 19th century.

¹⁶ Neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett comments: “I have lost count of the number of experiments published over the past fifty years showing that people are not rational actors.” (Barrett, Lisa Feldman, *How Emotions are Made – The Secret Life of the Brain*, 2017, 81)

¹⁷ Cf. Sahlins, Marshall, *The Use and Abuse of Biology*, 1976 (quoted from the French translation: *Critique de la sociobiologie*, 1980), 26

towards a (uniform – hence evolutionism is also universalism) goal, be it the “modern” society itself or the one “liberated” by the proletariat, whom Marx appoints as its heir.¹⁸

Let aside the fact that neuroscience has fundamentally questioned this evolutionary idea since the 1990s at latest, it is interesting that even a simple look at the development of anthropological theory itself destroys the illusion of this kind of directed timeline, apart from the fact that we know since Einstein that not even physical time is a fixed reality, not even to mention subjective or social time.¹⁹ After all, at the end of the 19th century, long before Malinowski left for “his” Trobrianders, Franz Boas had already developed his attempts at cultural relativism and done away with the evolutionist narrative – as well as its biological variant, racism – both of which, regardless of this “resurrected” again and again.

At the same time as Malinowski, at the beginning of the 20th century, the German philosopher and sociologist Max Ferdinand Scheler²⁰ as well as the French philosopher and anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl²¹, to whom Scheler refers, emphasized the historical independence of non-European societies that had not to be read and interpreted based on the economism of high capitalism.

Just as the history of anthropology began long before modernity (and ethnocentrism also existed outside of Europe), the dialectic of synchronicity and asynchronicity can be observed in a wide variety of social and scientific fields: in the repeated interplay between the geocentric (Ptolemy) and the heliocentric (Copernicus) world view, in the development of the economic society from the non-economic one, in the appearance and disappearance of the windmill compared to the actually “older” watermill, in the pre-existence of Roman private law compared to the one – related to it but appearing much later – of the bourgeois society and on and on

Without allowing itself to be “disturbed” by this historical interplay, the evolutionism of modernity has been so dominant since the end of the Enlightenment that it has “incorporated” the theories of the harshest critics of colonialism and capitalism, and I am not even talking about those anthropologists that Devereux refers to when he mocks

¹⁸ Darwin laid the biological-scientific foundation for this combination of evolutionism and universalism – unfortunately also the roots of social Darwinism and sociobiology – although in fairness it must be noted that his efforts, which were praiseworthy for the time, were aimed at dealing with the traditional church doctrine of creation.

¹⁹ Cf. Hossenfelder, S., 2022, 4 f.

²⁰ Cf. Scheler, Max Ferdinand, Probleme einer Soziologie des Wissens, in: Scheler, M. F., Versuche einer Soziologie des Wissens, 1920

²¹ Cf. Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien, Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures, 1910

attempts to interpret cannibalism as economic – perhaps even rational? – practice.²²

Rather, what is meant is Marxist anthropology, which, quite unlike Marx himself, is also based on such historical teleology. As far as the Aborigines are concerned, the Australian anthropologist and archaeologist Frederik McCarthy²³ thus postulated that their societies were relics of the "first mode of production of homo sapiens" and that their study was suitable for shedding light on "basic human traits". Which at least leaves the question open as to why these "collector and hunter societies" did not develop into a modern, bourgeois-capitalist society. The most prominent representative of Marxist anthropology in Australia, Frederick Rose, still assures us that when he calls in the "first" mode of production, that this can of course only be a "theoretical meaning" which refers to the Aborigines from a "universal-historical standpoint."²⁴ What this "universal-historical" means, however, he leaves pretty much in the dark.

Human history with a target

Even Friedrich Engels²⁵, who could be accused of not always fully understanding his Marx, saw these cultures as ones that were to be classified at the level of "savageness" in the course of human history, and thus succumbed to the illusion of many, including later historical-materialist ideologists who confused the logical structure of capitalist relations of production and their structural "finality" with the actual course of history. The philosopher Alfred Schmidt aptly criticized this in his essay "History and Structure"²⁶, which is why it does not need to be discussed further here. Hegel, in whose footsteps Marx followed in an "upside-down manner," was already further along than many of Marx's "disciples." In the introduction to his "Science of Logic," Hegel speaks of the "two-thousand-year-long working of the spirit,"²⁷ and it would be insinuating too much if one were to assume that he had no inkling of the existence of any mankind before or outside the cultural world of Plato or Aristotle.

Incidentally, the idea of ethnological evolutionism shows weaknesses even without the goal of modernity/socialism. As the German anthropologist Karl-Heinz Kohl states in

²² Cf. Devereux, G., 1967, 134. This at least would raise the question of whether this verdict also applies to the Christian Lord's Supper ("This is my body", Luke 22, 19) gilt.

²³ McCarthy, Frederik David, Ecology, Equipment, Economy and Trade, in: Sheils, H. Australian Aboriginal Studies, 1963, 173

²⁴ Rose, Frederick George Geoffrey, Australien und seine Ureinwohner, 1976, 26. (Significantly, Rose names the Aborigines he interacted with by number.)

²⁵ Engels, Friedrich, Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staates 1884, 30

²⁶ Schmidt, Alfred, Geschichte und Struktur – Fragen einer marxistischen Historik, 1971. Schmidt writes inter alia: "Marx... explicitly explains that what matters is the 'whole as it appears in the head as a whole of thought' – he calls it (with Hegel) 'a spiritually concrete thing' – to be distinguished from the world itself as a real-concrete..." (80) and quotes Marx with the well-known saying from the introduction to the Critique of Political Economy: "World history did not always exist; History as world history a result." (29).

²⁷

his introduction to the “Science of the Culturally Foreign,” one cannot even speak of “directed” lines of development between the various non-European cultures.

“Evolutionary theorists,” he writes, “tend to see the big man system (Melanesia and Polynesia, E.S.) as a precursor to the chiefdom system (e.g., New Guinea, North American First Nations, E.S.). In fact, both institutions have a number of similarities that seem to suggest that one arose from the other”²⁸ – a fallacy, as shown in the comparison of the two systems.

Incidentally, economistic projections in anthropology can still be found in recent times. The Swiss Jürg Helbling, for example, in his recently published book “New Political Economy of Simple Societies”²⁹, tried to transfer the concept of “homo oeconomicus”, sacred to classical economics and game theory, to “simple” societies³⁰. His method, writes Helbling, “consists of applying theoretical models that have been developed in various sciences for the analysis of complex, industrialized and state-run societies ... to societies of a simple type.” That the explanatory potential of classical economics to which he refers is even rejected for the analysis of the social or economic reality from which it stems³¹, he ignores. He only attains that it “fits” non-European cultures with a trick, based on the motto “What doesn't fit is made to fit” – in this case by continually “purging” the “oeconomicus” concept of any more concrete definition; until it ultimately becomes applicable even to the animal kingdom.

Of course, that doesn't mean that anthropology shouldn't also focus on forms of reproduction, but Helbling makes it too easy to himself. The danger of ultimately ending up again and again with the myth of non-European “hunger societies” is too great, from which the conclusion is quickly drawn that “subsistence” economies could not have developed into decent commodity production or later into a capitalist mode of production due to a lack of feed, and almost inevitably have to remain at the pre-capitalist level.

Numerous ethnographic studies paint a different picture: the Australian Aborigines, for example, apparently regularly produced the necessities of life with great ease and rarely suffered from famine³². Fear of food shortages appears to have been unknown, and even the driest years in the central Australian deserts posed little threat to life³³. Sahlins

²⁸ Kohl, K.-H., 1993, 62

²⁹ Helbling, Jürg, *Neue Politische Ökonomie einfacher Gesellschaften – Wirtschafts- und politikethnologische Erkundung*, 2021. Interesting is the attempt to replace the unpleasant “primitive” with “simple”.

³⁰ loc. cit., IX

³¹ Cf. Maddrick, Jeff, *Seven Bad Ideas – How Mainstream Economists have damaged America and the World*, 2009

³² Penny, D.H. und J. Moriarty, *Aboriginal Economy – then and now*, in: Hetzel, B. S. und H. J. Frith, *The Nutrition of Aborigines in Relation to the Ecosystem of Central Australia*, 1978, 19

³³ Blainey, Geoffrey, *Triumph of the Nomads – A History of Ancient Australia*, 1975, 95 & 224

coined the term of “original affluent societies” and Richard Lee³⁴ speaks of subsistence routine with, at best, surprising abundance. Similar facts are reported from other “subsistence” economies around the world. Hunger, where and before it was actually introduced into the world through the colonial destruction of traditional economies, appears to have been little more than a projection coming from those societies that were responsible for it.

What many of these so-called historical-materialist explainers of the world – Marx himself does not give a damn about this type of “contemplative materialism” in his Feuerbach theses³⁵ – embezzle is the fact that non-European peoples do not see themselves as natural, but explicitly as cultural peoples. The Australian anthropologist Robert Tonkinson³⁶ reports how, as part of his field research in the 1950s, he asked the members of an Aboriginal group in Jigalong, Western Australia, whether they knew how children were begetted. Not only did he get two contradictory answers to his question during two visits, he also provoked a real conflict. After one of the younger men had confirmed in response to his question that he “knew,” the ethnographer turned to the older men in the group and reported on his conversation. As soon as he mentioned conception and birth, the men interrupted him: What he was saying was in bad taste, only women talked about such things. The young man was reprimanded for his statement, because men were only allowed to know about spiritual conception – they “dreamed” the children who were subsequently born. When Tonkinson intervened on the boy's behalf, the elders justified themselves by saying that they were men and not dogs.

Civilized bias

Devereux once described the problem of many, if not all, ethnological models that have been used to explain this or that non-European society over the decades as a kind of implicit and unavoidable cultural bias³⁷. The models – from the “noble savage” passing the “homo oeconomicus” and the “libertarian” Samoan women up to postmodernism – they all come from the European-Western culture and are subject to Devereux's biased perception, which of course clouds the view even more when it deals with particular aspects of the foreign culture such as the relationship between men and women.

³⁴ Lee, Richard B. und Irven DeVore (eds.), *Man the Hunter*, 1968, 30

³⁵ Cf. Marx, Karl, *Thesen über Feuerbach*, MEW 3, 1958

³⁶ Tonkinson, Robert, *Outside the Power of the Dreaming – Paternalism and Permissiveness in an Aboriginal Settlement*, in: Howard, Michael C., *Aboriginal Power in Australian Society*, 1982, 82

³⁷ Together with the French sociologist and anthropologist Émile Durkheim, Devereux noted that the image which people form of their universe is usually modeled on the image that they have of (their) society. “Most of the time,” he emphasizes, “science ... gets entangled in the meshes of ideology and the cultural model and for this reason produces anything but objectifiable results.” Durkheim was one of the early critics of utilitarianism and economism.

Anthropology has almost inevitably always viewed this from the distorting perspective of predominantly male anthropologists – a fact that has only slowly changed in the last five or six decades. In Australian anthropology this began between 1960 and 1980, and the credit for this, despite all possible other criticism, goes to Catherine Berndt³⁸ and Diane Bell.³⁹

Stating such bias, acknowledging the fact that the “reality we examine and the conceptual apparatus into which we constrain it ... do not (obey) the same imperatives”⁴⁰ raises the (epistemological) question of whether and, if so, how a real understanding of foreign cultures, an understanding without constant projections, without constantly imposing one's own concepts on the 'other', is even possible. In the encounter we described at the beginning, was one side even able to understand the other side? To translate the other's narrative into its own terms?

Anthropology, which for a long time flattened the difference between the “self” and the “stranger” or “other” instead of recognizing and using it as a productive tension, and which to this day has found it difficult to distance itself from ethnocentric concepts and terms, is still not able to refrain from producing “the universal from the local,” as the French cultural scientist Jacques Le Rider once put it⁴¹. It has been struggling for some time at least to find a solution to these antinomies of bourgeois thinking the “foreign”⁴². Trouillot⁴³, however, accuses it of claiming to go to the “unknown” in order to get to know itself, but no one exactly explains how that is supposed to work (“spelling out exactly the specifics of this understanding”).

In everyday life as well as in science, understanding the “other” seems to be one of our most difficult exercises, and with good reason, as we will see. It is similar to our inability to understand and imagine certain abstract categories that our brain can, through abstractification⁴⁴, deal with and represent as concrete realities: infinite, for example – a quantity that we even calculate with in mathematical models – or eternal, beginning,

³⁸ Berndt, Catherine Helen, *Women and the 'Secret Life'*, in Berndt, Catherine Helen und Ronald Murry Berndt, *Aboriginal Man in Australia*, 1965, 239

³⁹ Bell, Diane Robin, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, 1980, 28

⁴⁰ Supp, E., *Vorwort zur Inauguraldissertation*, 1984, 9

⁴¹ *Le Monde* 17-18/04/1983

⁴² After all, a lot has happened since Malinowski, the discourses have become more delicate and self-reflective, more “modern”. No anthropologist today would probably argue as woodcut-like as the well-meaning Theodore Strehlow once did, who certainly shouldn't be accused of any bad intentions. “Just as the koala bear, the possum, the platypus... deserve to be protected so that they can continue to exist in their native environment, the Aboriginal deserves a chance to work out his own future within the framework of Australian society, without being forced to completely abandon all elements of his cultural and ethnic identity.” (re-translated from the German translation, Strehlow, Theodore G. H., *Assimilation Problems: The Aboriginal Viewpoint*, 1964, 3

⁴³ Trouillot, M.-R., 2021, 64

⁴⁴ Cf. Barrett, Lisa Feldman, *Seven and a Half Lessons about the Brain*, 2021

end, nothing or its counterpart⁴⁵, the undetermined being (Sein), which with Hegel only becomes something (Etwas) through concretely determined existence (Dasein).

The neuroscientist Jeff Hawkins⁴⁶ once pointed this out from the opposite perspective, noting that we have “knowledge” of abstract realities such as democracy, mathematics or human rights, which are stored by the brain like sensual objects ... without, however, being such, i.e. without being perceptible to the senses, “visualizable”⁴⁷ or imaginable. To understand this, it is enough to try to imagine an infinite distance concretely, step by step, kilometer by kilometer. The attempt will fail because you will have lost your earthly, finite existence long before you “reach the goal”.

Culture and the neocortex

In the last two decades, neuroscience has extensively demonstrated how difficult, if not impossible, it is to leave cultural biases behind in perception, including in encounters with foreign societies. With the help of modern imaging techniques, scientists such as Lisa Feldman Barrett and Jeff Hawkins were able to show that all thinking and understanding works via culturally influenced “models” (simulations of the outside world⁴⁸) and “reference frames”⁴⁹, which are stored in the wirings⁵⁰ of neocortex-neurons. Without these concepts, which are shaped by experience or upbringing (from early childhood onwards – in the beginning, the neocortex is empty⁵¹) and thus culturally shaped, according to Barrett⁵², people would proverbially be “blind”. It is only through them that perceptions of our senses become meaningful.⁵³ This cultural influence is so dominant that we are even able to give completely different meanings to the same sensory perception.⁵⁴

According to Barrett, not only thoughts and perceptions, but even emotions are not “universal”⁵⁵, but rather culturally influenced “productions” of the neocortex. She distinguishes the emotions of the neocortex (fear, anger, disgust, etc.) which are not

⁴⁵ Hegel, G.W.F., 51 ff.

⁴⁶ Cf. Hawkins, Jeff und Richard Dawkins, A Thousand Brains: A New Theory of Intelligence, 2021

⁴⁷ loc. cit., 89

⁴⁸ Barrett, L.F., How Emotions are Made, 2017, 27. It is important to note at this point that Barrett expressly emphasizes that the “social models” of the neocortex are in no way contrary to the free will of the individual. But that touches on the moral-philosophical level, which is not the subject here.

⁴⁹ Hawkins, J. & R. Dawkins, 2021, 68

⁵⁰ Cf. Eagleman, David, Livewired – The Inside Story of the Ever-Changing Brain, 2020

⁵¹ Hawkins, J. & R. Dawkins, 2021, 48

⁵² Barrett, L. F., 2017, 29 und 85. Analogous to this, Gerhard Roth and Nicole Strüder explained “How the brain makes the soul” back in 2014.

⁵³ Barrett, L. F., 2021, 117

⁵⁴ Barrett, L. F., 2017, 33

⁵⁵ loc. cit., 45

genetically “built-in”⁵⁶ and therefore not “generally human” from the simple (physical, E.S.) feelings called “affects”, such as tiredness, the feeling full of energy, the warmth of the sun on the skin, pain, etc. We perceive these physical sensations as pleasant/unpleasant or calm/excited, and they are registered in the limbic system (amygdala).

The fact that such emotions are “constructed” by the brain itself is shown not least by the fact that the neocortex retrieves its stored models and makes them available even before the sensory perception is completed and its impressions are available for the brain. These predictions⁵⁷, as Barrett points out⁵⁸, are deeply imbued with social reality and influence our own perceptions of what we eat and drink. Max Weber had anticipated this in a certain way: “Never and nowhere is a mental insight into even one's own experiences a real 're-experiencing' ... the 'experience' always wins ... (over) perspectives and connections which are just not 'known' in the 'experience'.”⁵⁹ A popular example of this is the disgust that affects the vast majority of Americans at the idea of eating horse or donkey meat, while French or Italian gourmets are more likely to have their mouths watering. The same applies, of course, to our aversion to snake-eating Aborigines, Chinese fresh monkey brain lovers, and so on: everything, both positive and negative, is purely culturally explainable emotional likes and dislikes.

Apart from the fact that the cited current neuroscience research results have (must have) an impact on our general, philosophical epistemology, they also explain in a certain way the different perception patterns behind our two different narratives of one and the same event quoted at the beginning. Just as one side had no concept of large sailing ships and white Europeans, the other lacked models for dead and ghostly ancestors on distant islands. The mutual lack of understanding that extended far beyond this first encounter was inevitable.

The fact that we are now able to perceive both sides, at least in their coding, and accept them as realities has something to do with the historical development in the first half of the 20th century, the final phase of colonialism, and with the simultaneous development in the natural sciences. On the one hand, the succession of two devastating world wars and the barbarism of the Nazis (“Writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric,” says Adorno⁶⁰) made that the belief into civilizational rationality of homo sapiens and into the teleological (incremental) constitution of (Western) cultural history began to show cracks. Phenomenological epistemologies, existentialism, a radical critique of evolution

⁵⁶ loc. cit., 33

⁵⁷ Hawkins, J. & R. Dawkins, 2021, 46 f. and 57

⁵⁸ Barrett, L. F., 2021, 111

⁵⁹ Weber, M., 1988 (1922), 280

⁶⁰ Adorno, Theodor W., *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, 1951, 231

and finally postmodernism were the direct or indirect results of this new thinking.⁶¹

At the same time, in natural science (in physics) and subsequently in philosophy, the belief in the one, only reality and truth was destroyed⁶² with the coexistence of the theory of relativity and quantum physics. The truth of the moment was no longer wave or particle, but wave and (!) particle – or neither⁶³. Schrödinger's simultaneously alive and dead cat became a symbol of the postmodern world. It became possible to think of the two opposing descriptions of reality together, at least in principle – physics is still working on how the two fit together in practice to this day. A tinkering that, according to Sabine Hossenfelder ("I invent new laws of nature, that's how I make my living." ⁶⁴), can be taken quite literally, and of which as a result more than the so far known dimensions of our universe are even conceivable.⁶⁵

"Should there be a kind of fusion between act and being, between wave and particle in the unknown world, the atom? Do we have to talk about complementary aspects or complementary realities? ... It is no longer the thing that can teach us directly, as the empiricist faith had proclaimed,"⁶⁶ said the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, defining the new world puzzle. Late⁶⁷, but still, colleague Jean-François Lyotard responded by formulating his theory of "postmodern"⁶⁸ knowledge, which is above all a knowledge full of doubt ("le doute des savants"⁶⁹).

Should, if one continues Lyotard's question, our "natural laws" always only be a model, a structure-seeking approximation to the infinite – and therefore not concretely imaginable – complexity of the world on behalf of the (bourgeois) mind? And is that why we always reach the limits of our thinking?⁷⁰

Perhaps this also explains the strange similarity between the models of the creation story of modern physics (e.g. the "Big Bang") and the dream time myths of the

⁶¹ Of course, as already mentioned, there was criticism of evolutionism on the part of anthropology as far back as Franz Boas in the 19th century. But this was more of a special case than a broad socio-cultural movement.

⁶² Hossenfelder writes: „Without quantum mechanics, the laws of nature are deterministic.“ (2022, 107)

⁶³ Hossenfelder, S., *Das hässliche Universum*, 2018, 80

⁶⁴ loc. cit., 8

⁶⁵ loc. cit., 21. Not that anyone misunderstands that. I do not claim that theoretical physics solves the problems of anthropology. It merely made concepts of thought possible, showed and resolved antinomies, which ultimately also benefits ethnological theory.

⁶⁶ Bachelard, Gaston, *Epistemologie – Ausgewählte Texte*, 1974, 17

⁶⁷ Not until 1979, while the term had already appeared in fine art as early as at the end of the 19th century.

⁶⁸ Lyotard, Jean-François, *La Condition Postmoderne*, 1979

⁶⁹ loc. cit., 18, Cf. my essay „About knowledge and doubt (Vom Wissen und vom Zweifel)“ (www.enos-mag.de/klturblogu/wissenschaft-und-zweifel/)

⁷⁰ Limits which Sabine Hossenfelder suggests when she complains: "There has been no progress in fundamental physics for over thirty years now." (Hossenfelder, S. 2018, 15)

Australian Aborigines, which I had described 40 years ago without daring to explain it . "With what right," I had asked, "does (the) new religion of the 'big bang'⁷¹, according to which ... the ancestors of a uniform natural and social evolution ... emerged by means of an energy discharge from the disordered chaos should actually adorn itself with the label of greater 'scientific objectivity', than the Aboriginal myth of the rainbow serpent? This (manifesting itself as lightning, E. S.) was also the... forefather of the worldly order, which it created from the existing chaos, the pre-existing unformed world."⁷² A similarity that could not and cannot be solved with scientific or historical-materialistic determinism.⁷³

New roads

It is clear that, regardless of this far-reaching intellectual-historical "turn", which was articulated in form of massive criticism of functionalism⁷⁴ from the 1960s and 70s onwards, the old paradigms⁷⁵ did not give up without a fight, and the accusation of (cultural) relativism and (unethical) leveling of "civilized" and "uncivilized" societies quickly emerged. That this accusation was groundless as soon as relativism was not understood in a judgmental or value-negating manner and also not in a historicizing way, as soon as it was no longer said in the direction of the "foreigners" that "we are more developed, more civilized, simply better," but rather as an invitation, as a humanistic message – "Let them live their way, according to their beliefs", as adapted to the dominant Western world as seems right to them – becomes clear from what was said above.⁷⁶

That is why, once the teleological time model of evolutionism is put aside, non-European civilizations that continue to exist despite colonialist destruction are perhaps just as modern, as contemporary as our own, highly technical, dominated by

⁷¹ „We have hundreds of stories about the beginning of the universe, none ... is ... necessary to explain anything we have observed.“ (Hossenfelder, S., 2020, 36)

⁷² Supp, E., 1985, 74

⁷³ Hossenfelder writes about the Big Bang under the heading "Modern Tales of Creation": „In the beginning, superstrings created higher-dimensional membranes. That's one story I've been told, but there are many others. Some physicists believe the universe started with a bang, others think it was a bounce, yet again others bet on bubbles. Some say that everything began with a network. Some like the idea that it was a collision of sorts, or a timeless phase of absolute silence, or a gas of superstrings, or a five-dimensional black hole, or a new force of nature.“ (Hossenfelder, S., 2022, 25 f.)

⁷⁴ Asad, Talal, *British Social Anthropology*, in: Asad, T., *Towards a Marxist Anthropology*, 1979, 367

⁷⁵ Cf. Kuhn, Thomas Samuel, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962

⁷⁶ In current political discussions, cultural relativism is often accused of (also) legitimizing the violation of human rights and undermining criticism of dictatorships. However, the argument is largely ineffective. Contrary to the prevailing narrative, human rights – in general or in a specific form (keywords: women's rights, LGPTQ, disabled people's rights, etc. pp) – are not just a demand of Western societies, which they themselves repeatedly trample on. The demand for them is the fruit of very different oppressive cultures, and that is why it is difficult to lump them together, nor to demand or implement them from outside, if they did not arise from within the culture that is foreign to us: a difficult topic and a political minefield, as the discussions about certain religious practices (circumcision) and sensitivities (caricatures) show.

economics. That was the reason to place my description of Aboriginal society under Chaplin's title "Modern Times" time ago.⁷⁷

In anthropology, this change manifested itself in a way that attempts were made at an ever-increasing pace to save this whole science, whose research object, the "foreigner," was in danger of being overrun by an all-consuming world market culture, from disappearing. They were attempts that were mostly borrowed from other disciplines: sociology, philosophy, psychology, and linguistics above all⁷⁸. And they were asynchronous attempts, as in the entire history of theory, which is why it doesn't seem to make much sense to force the different approaches into a temporal "logic" of any kind.

The analysis starts with postmodernism, which has already been mentioned several times. The term, which makes no claim to historical precision – postmodernism simply includes everything historically later than modernity, which itself is only vaguely defined – was used as early as 1870 in the visual arts and around the time of the First World War in philosophy. It was only much later that Jean-François Lyotard was to propose it for the social sciences⁷⁹, specifically for the analysis of "developed", bourgeois society⁸⁰. Lyotard is therefore more coherent than Helbling with his "homo oeconomicus", although one could accuse him that while making it clear what he is writing against, he is largely leaving it unclear where he sees the socio-historical foundations of his scientific approach.

This approach was motivated by the now widespread criticism of evolutionism, universalism and the metanarratives of science, a criticism that was heard early on, with Boas and Scheler, as Trouillot⁸¹ also notes. With the exception of attempts to make phenomenology fruitful⁸² for anthropology, it was the leitmotif for all attempts of "saving" anthropology such as of postmodernism, post-colonialism or reflexive anthropology.

For the study of the "foreigner", the term postmodernism was developed primarily by the American historian James Clifford⁸³. He stated that there could be no such thing as a purely "objective" or "neutral" ethnography, since everyone who writes about other cultures always carries their own backpack of allegories and metaphors with them⁸⁴. Through the process of writing, the ethnographer inevitably reduces the testimony he

⁷⁷ Supp, E, 1985, 50

⁷⁸ Cf. Asad, T., 1979, 369

⁷⁹ Cf. Lyotard, J.-F., 1979

⁸⁰ „Cette étude a pour objet la condition du savoir dans les sociétés les plus développées. , (loc. cit., 7)

⁸¹ For him, the deconstruction of metanarratives begins before World War II, cf. Trouillot, M.-R., 2021, 56

⁸² I will get back to this point.

⁸³ Cf. Clifford, James & George Marcus, Writing Culture, the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, 1986

⁸⁴ loc. cit., 172

registered (during field research) in a way that only “partial truths”⁸⁵ or the aforementioned biased results emerge.

Like the anthropologist and sociologist Ernest Gellner in his essay “Concepts and Society”⁸⁶ a decade and a half earlier, Clifford assumes that making the allegories transparent, i.e. translating them (in Gellner's case the concepts and beliefs) adequately was the central problem in ethnographic writing⁸⁷. Therefore, with the entry of “indigenous ethnographers”⁸⁸, insiders writing about their own culture, “new perspectives and depths of understanding” could be offered. The question is whether this really solves the problem of adequate understanding described above. It is undeniable that the task of “cultural translation”⁸⁹ would then no longer exist between the ethnographer of the culture he is studying, since he would no longer allow foreign allegories to flow into his writing.

But, and this seems just as undeniable, the problem of appropriate translation has only been shifted from the relationship between foreign culture and ethnography to that between the ethnographer and his reader. Shifted, not resolved. I don't want to discuss at this point whether this antinomy could perhaps be cured by ethnographers of “both worlds”, but I think that is a bit of a pious dream. This could only help in some areas. A possible example was once provided by the Swiss ethnographer Andrée Grau⁹⁰, a former dancer who, according to her dedicated narrations, not only observed and described the dances of the Australian Tiwi of the Torres Strait Islands, but also took part in them. But even in this case, the translation problem with regard to social concepts shifts towards her readers or listeners.

Postmortem reflexivity

Trouillot fundamentally criticizes postmodernism's lack of problem-solving approaches, probably also because of its unresolved antinomies, and negates it's a priori. He complains that even after the end of the metanarrative, the postmodernist mood is still fundamentally “Western” and “petty bourgeois”⁹¹. If, Trouillot continues, the collapse of metanarratives characterizes postmodernity, then some of the non-Western cultures that have been deconstructing themselves for centuries have long been postmodern,

⁸⁵ loc. cit., 42

⁸⁶ Gellner, Ernest, *Concepts and Society*, in Emmet, Dorothy & Alasdair McIntyre, *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis*, 1970, 115 ff.

⁸⁷ loc. cit., 172

⁸⁸ loc. cit., 39

⁸⁹ loc. cit., 233

⁹⁰ Cfl. Grau, Andrée, *Dreaming, Dancing, Kinship: The Study of Yoi, the Dance of the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Island*, 1983

⁹¹ Trouillot, M.-R., 2021, 56 f.

and postmodernity was “nothing new under the sun.”⁹² The “postmortem” that is inherent in the postmodern still implies a previous “world of the universal”⁹³. In other words: If universalism was a projection, a phantom, then this was also true of postmodernism.

A possible way out of our epistemological problem could be the request that the researcher with “foreigners” must “always keep his own knowledge-guiding interest transparent”⁹⁴ through self-reflection, i.e. by including his own individual or social conditioning in the research work, as I already stated in the mid-80ies in my criticism of Devereux. A consideration that was probably also the starting point for reflexive anthropology⁹⁵, as Pierre Bourdieu developed it with his practice theory (“*théorie de l'action*”, the concept of the social field and habitus) from the 1970s onwards, and as it later should occur in another variant.

Pierre Bourdieu, like Lyotard, is a sociologist by training, not an ethnologist. He, too, developed his practice theory first and foremost for his own society, and does not really question its intellectual and social-historical “foundation”. His claim is to develop a pattern of the relationship between the social conditioning of social actors and their actions, a claim that goes against economic Marxism – despite Bourdieu’s partial use of economic vocabulary. To do this, he develops a system of social fields whose actors express their interests through a precise habitus⁹⁶ and invest a certain form of capital to enforce them, which then – the circle closes – defines the fields⁹⁷. Fields – such as economics, health, law, etc. – are systems of objective relationships, products of the social involvement in things and mechanisms. They have the reality of physical objects⁹⁸, are autonomous and differentiated from one another: each field has its own and unique field interest, which is expressed in the habitus of its actors⁹⁹. These habitus, “systems of perception, evaluation and action schemes” are both permanent and transferable.¹⁰⁰

One may find Bourdieu's attempt, directed against certain Marxist approaches

⁹² loc. cit., 57

⁹³ loc. cit., 66

⁹⁴ Supp, E., 1984, 9

⁹⁵ Bourdieu, Pierre & Loïc Wacquant, *Reflexive Anthropologie*, 2006 (im Original: *Réponses: pour une anthropologie reflexive*, 1992)

⁹⁶ The concept of habitus (a person's appearance, social behavior, etc.) in its anthropological meaning goes back to the Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).

⁹⁷ Bourdieu, P. & L. Wacquant, 1992, 146

⁹⁸ loc. cit., 160

⁹⁹ ”Each field presupposes and activates a specific form of interest, a specific illusion as a tacit recognition of the value of the objects of interest at stake in it and as a practical mastery of the rules that apply within it. (loc. cit., 149)

¹⁰⁰ loc. cit., 160

(Althusser & Co.) to forego purely economic explanations of how societies function, to be sensible or sympathetic; yet, he does not solve the epistemological problems of anthropology, especially since he himself uses economic terms – such as that of capital, which he then defines in three ways (economic, social and cultural) or that of investing.¹⁰¹

All in all, Bourdieu's approach to anthropology probably raises more questions than it offers solutions¹⁰². This applies even more to another variant of reflexive anthropology, as represented by the German sociologist Gesa Lindemann, who in turn clearly distinguishes herself from Bourdieu. While Bourdieu still assumes that only people can be actors in his system of fields and habitus, Lindemann wants to remove this restriction. She defines the question of “how indeterminate humans must be in order to understand socialization processes”¹⁰³ as the main question of reflexive anthropology, although her “plea for a de-anthropologization of social science”¹⁰⁴ sounds a little like the demand for a de-anthropologization of anthropology which in this general sense can only seem absurd and bizarre.

Her statement that “other societies draw the boundaries of the social in a different way and include gods or animals in the circle of legitimate persons¹⁰⁵,” i.e. social actors, contains, and this is the positive side, first of all the statement that non-European cultures understand the concept of social actor differently than we do ourselves. That “deceased people, otherworldly beings such as spirits, gods, demons or angels as well as animals and plants or even technical artifacts can also be considered legitimate actors”. Emphasis on “can”. But to then spin this idea so concretely that “angels... do not need to get on a plane or use a telephone in order to stay in touch with each other or with their Lord, even over long distances,”¹⁰⁶ in my eyes is a bit misleading and doesn't really help us understand such concepts.

The first question that arises is whether actor status does not presuppose (self-) consciousness, because even if one wanted to attribute such consciousness to animals, in the case of technical artifacts it would probably be difficult for anyone outside of societies with totemic belief systems to see it that way. The fact that Lindemann then defines, as an alternative, that her “order” should not only be understood as the order of

¹⁰¹ In the German translation, terms like “invest” seem even more strictly economic, because the French “investir” in its reflexive form (“s’investir”) means more like “get involved” in a thing or action.

¹⁰² The question of the gain in knowledge from Bourdieu's system for the sociology of bourgeois society should be left out at this point. In general, however, new “systems” in anthropology or sociology should be assessed to see whether they offer real gains in knowledge or are just academic gimmicks.

¹⁰³ Lindemann, Gesa, *Das Soziale von seinen Grenzen her denken*, 2009, 16

¹⁰⁴ loc. cit., 39

¹⁰⁵ loc. cit., 13

¹⁰⁶ loc. cit., 17

the social, and that it also includes materiality as well as space and time, only seemingly conjures up the problem and does not really lead to an understanding of the magic trick.¹⁰⁷

Post-human, post colonialist

However, Lindemann is not alone in her attempt for a “post-human anthropology”. A decade and a half ago, Celia Lowe¹⁰⁸, anthropologist at Washington University in Seattle, in the spirit of a postmodern contradiction to traditional anthropology even expanded the group of actors relevant to anthropology to include viruses. In her study, which seems more epidemiological than anthropological, she deals with the outbreak of bird flu in Indonesia at the beginning of this millennium. In it she speaks of “multispecies clouds” made up of people, birds or poultry and viruses and examines the relationship between them – also with regard to political measures for “biosecurity”. With her statement that viruses, as part of the human metagenome are also part of anthropology (“This is one reason to care about viruses: viruses are us”), Lowe comes dangerously close to a sociobiology of unfortunate memory, although she would probably vigorously defend herself against this suspicion.

From an epidemiological point of view, what Lowe calls “multi-species ethnography” may be correct and coherent, but what it has to do with (ethnology or) ethnography (from the Greek “ethnos”, people) or anthropology (to “anthropos”, human) or in how far it contributes to the solution of epistemological problems in anthropology is difficult to understand. Lowe justifies her approach to “post-human” or “posthumanist” anthropology by stating that science has so far focused too much on people. “Viral ethnography,” on the other hand, now asks what new forms of being (“new ontologies”) could emerge alongside microbes and then writes in another essay no longer about peoples and people, but about elephants and herpes viruses.¹⁰⁹

At around the same time as Lowe with her “post-human ethnography,” other scientists also (experimentally) redefined the subject of research and the role of the researcher. Since the political end of colonialism in the middle of the 20th century – whose way of thinking, according to critics, lived on – there have been attempts to deal with the colonial legacy of anthropology, especially under the heading of “post-colonialism”. The first explicitly “post-colonialist” works did not appear until the 1970s and 1980s, i.e. more

¹⁰⁷ One could also discuss Lindemann’s attempt to see the nature-culture distinction not as posited, but only as a possible way of accessing knowledge about the world, but that would go too far at this point. Therefore, I would just like to point out that nature and culture can only be understood as an inseparable conceptual pair of opposites, and that including nature in the circle of actors in anthropology/sociology does not really help.

¹⁰⁸ Lowe, Celia, *Viral Clouds: Becoming H5N1 in Indonesia*, in: *Cultural Anthropology* 25 /4

¹⁰⁹ Cf. https://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/2017_i1_lowe_0.pdf

or less at the same time as my own work on Australia's Aborigines.

The starting point of postcolonial anthropology was the criticism of bourgeois “ratio”-oriented science. Because feminism “took place” in the latter just as rarely as research through indigenous authorship – something like ethnography in the first person. The philosophical “companions” of this movement were skepticism and a fundamental criticism of ideology; In addition to the described expansion of the research subject to non-human actors, the claim to address any kind of oppression was also formulated.

What is striking in many texts that are linked to Bourdieu¹¹⁰ on this point is the basic critical attitude towards a diagnosed intellectualism of anthropology, with the underlying accusation that the intellectuals are no closer to the “foreigner” than the apologists of colonialism. With this anti-intellectualism in the texts of intellectuals par excellence (such as Bourdieu, for example), it is striking that they also apparently feel empowered to speak in the name of “others”: this time in the name of the victims of colonialism and old anthropology. Basically, pretty much the same as colonial anthropology did, only this time with a more benevolent attitude. “Killing me softly, ...”

The driving force of the post-colonialists obviously lay less in understanding foreign cultures than in their own emancipatory, i.e. political, interest; their demand was to decolonize anthropology. “Decolonizing Anthropology” was the title of a text by Faye Harrison, one of the much-quoted authors of the movement.¹¹¹ In it she states that after the end of colonialism, a neo-colonial system was established¹¹², without even beginning to explain what it looked like and how it was able to establish itself. The fact that – astonishing for a liberation theorist – the term “Third World” is used uncritically also leaves questions unanswered. Her “post-colonialism,” which Harrison sees as a kind of instrument of class struggle, necessarily appears blurred and vague over long stretches.

If you look at when Harrison wrote her text – the first discussions about correct gender¹¹³, about wokeness and political correctness¹¹⁴ began at relatively the same time – you could even believe that this was not about anthropological science at all, but about “cancel culture” in general. A political concern of our society that was once again being imposed on the “foreigner” – but this time by defenders of the “good”.

Perhaps, if it were really about anthropology as a science, it would have been better to

¹¹⁰ Bourdieu, P. & L. Wacquant, 1992, 153

¹¹¹ loc. cit., 1

¹¹² Cf. Trouillot, M.-R., 2021, 73

¹¹³ Cf. Trouillot, M.-R., 2021, 73

¹¹⁴ Cf. Kohl, K.-H., 1993, 169

focus on specific questions instead of using this kind of “buzzword” theory to beat all the “colonized” people through one bar, namely that of an “anti-imperialist” struggle. For example, how the economic structures of the world market affect social structures, belief systems, etc. of regional societies. Or how the Australian Aborigines managed to keep their society stable longer than we even remember ours. Why a country as, in our eyes, underdeveloped as India was able to digitize practically the entire payment system. Also important is the question of whether the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women is always an expression of oppression, and if so, of what kind. Or how the unequal exchange between the “North” and the “South” continues to further and further destroy “subsistence” economies of all kinds. Perhaps also what manifestations of discrimination and exploitation of individual societies or social classes developed in the post-colonial era. Which problems arose between rural areas and urban elites within Western societies. There are certainly enough questions and possible research approaches with or without explicit political implications.

An interesting, mainly because of its critical inventory contribution to “post-colonialist” anthropology, is made by Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his essay “Anthropology and the Savage Slot”¹¹⁵ already cited. He criticizes the anthropology that predominates in the USA because it treats the “discipline as closed,”¹¹⁶ which seems unjustified, at least compared to “post-human” anthropology with its inclusion of animals, viruses and machines in the circle of actors, no matter how useful or not you think this inclusion could be. He demands that anthropology must address enormous challenges and changes and make its own historicization¹¹⁷ part of its program of an “archeology of the discipline”.

In parts, Trouillot's criticism corresponds to the theses of this essay, although in the end he develops surprisingly few constructive, forward-looking ideas – strangely enough, as he complains about exactly this (lack of) constructiveness of the postmodernists.¹¹⁸ Referring today to the “collapse of the Western metanarrative” seems almost a bit out of date – even at the time of my work on the Aborigines forty years ago, this was no longer anything really new. And whether the reference to this “ongoing collapse” really helps solve the dilemmas of anthropology¹¹⁹ should probably be questioned in view of the attempts that were mentioned. As a consequence of his criticism, Trouillot postulates that a possible solution for the challenges is possible through a change in the “thematic field” of anthropology itself and the search for new “grounds”¹²⁰. Yet, to do this, it is not

¹¹⁵ Cf. Trouillot, M.-R., 2021, 53

¹¹⁶ loc. cit., 53

¹¹⁷ loc. cit.

¹¹⁸ loc. cit., 74

¹¹⁹ loc. cit., 72

¹²⁰ loc. cit.

enough, as does Clifford, to examine the metaphors of anthropology, but one must rather view them as metaphors themselves¹²¹, whatever that may mean. Metaphor for what?

All in all, “post-human” and “post-colonialist” anthropologists seem to have sadly lost their research subject – be it due to the actual destruction or the forced assimilation of many non-European cultures, or be it due to the development of antinomies of thought in our own culture – and can’t find a replacement. Perhaps in order to find it again, some, in recent years, have activated philosophical concepts such as phenomenology.

Phenomenological perception

In contrast to those approaches that want to build new theoretical systems or want to change ethnographic writing so that allegories are made transparent, or even call for class struggle, Michael Schnegg, based on his field research in Namibia, explicitly deals with the actual topic of this essay, the epistemological problems of his guild. There, the Damara people and local meteorologists have agreed that it rains less often than before. But: While the Damara refer to the rain as “Inanus”, a term that encompasses everything, people, life and death, the meteorologists simply speak of the physical phenomenon of precipitation, without any explicit human reference.¹²² Based on this distinction, Schnegg asks whether these are two representations of the same fact or rather two distinct facts, a question that reminds the one in our initial example.

Schnegg sees the solution in a phenomenological approach that he borrowed from philosophy. “Phenomenology,” he explains, “is the theoretical approach to exploring a phenomenon from the myriad perspectives of those who have experienced it.”¹²³ Let apart the fact that philosophical phenomenology does not really reflect the different experiences of myriad “others” – these would rather be collective and social experiences – but those of a cognizant subject¹²⁴, the actual problem lies elsewhere. If you believe the findings of neuroscientific research described above, there is no perception, no comprehension or understanding without the socially conditioned models of the neocortex, which are not based on our purely subjective perception. Thus, the phenomenological approach neither solves our initial problem nor the “translation” of evidence from foreign cultures that takes into account the inevitable allegories as

¹²¹ loc. cit., 74

¹²² Schnegg, M., 2021, 260

¹²³ loc. cit., 261

¹²⁴ This applies above all to the most radically subjectivist variant of phenomenology, as developed by the French existentialists Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945) and Jean-Paul Sartre (*L'Être et le Néant*, 1943).

Clifford demands.

The recognition of a truth or even facticity that may be different from our own, which, according to Schnegg, arises from different perceptions, also says nothing about whether we really understand it, that is, whether its meaning is clear and usable for us. Husserl's (father of phenomenology) demand to "go back to things", to the structure of our experience, only makes sense if one recognizes that without recourse to the models of the neocortex there are no "things" and certainly no terms, structures or concepts of these things for us. As already emphasized: without these social concepts we are "blind".

Schnegg mentions the example of the hammer, which only becomes a hammer when used for hammering¹²⁵; Without this action it would just be a wooden handle with a metal block at the end. From the individual perspective of who never has seen a hammer before, this may be true, but it ignores the fact that our neocortex not only processes perceptions, but can also "visualize" the stored concepts. For anyone who has previously gotten to know the image and meaning of the hammer, the hammer is also a hammer when no one is actually hammering, and even when someone is just imagining it in its mind's eye.

If science "functions" both inductively and deductively, if cognition is subjective and socially shaped – which Hegel already recognized, when bringing phenomenology and ontology or logic together – then anthropology cannot unilaterally get to valid results through "pure" perception. We are back to our original question about the possibilities of recognizing the "foreign". The suspicion arises that the attempt to activate phenomenology for anthropology could imply a return to Malinowski's "participatory observation". We have seen that Husserl's "radically unprejudiced insight" did not work, especially with Malinowski.

Quo vadis, science?

Is anthropology really at its end? Or has it, after all, a future? Many people will have asked themselves this question when reading these pages. Trouillot sees the collapse of the "savage" narrative as an opportunity to expand the boundaries of the discipline: thematically, as already described, as well as in terms of the researching, writing subjects. We have already questioned his suggestion of transferring authorship to indigenous ethnographers¹²⁶ discussing Clifford's allegories: it doesn't even begin to solve the translation problem between indigenous reality, perception, terminology and

¹²⁵ „Without hammering to get nails into the wall, we have no hammers.“ (Schnegg, M., 2021, 263)

¹²⁶ Trouillot, M.-R., 2021, 75

our own, it just shifts it.

The argument that these new fields are subject of sociological, not anthropological research because they are located “with us” is, in my opinion, unsound. They can also fall into the area of sociology, but only partially. Everything that concerns economics, mythology, anthropology, religious studies, etc. belongs much more to anthropology than to sociology, even if of course anthropology today can hardly be operated other than with pluri-disciplinary concepts – something like what I tried to do by incorporating philosophical, physical and neuroscientific ideas into this text. Anthropology is simply culturally richer than sociology.

However, the epistemological problems that were discussed are by no means eliminated; the antinomies of culturally confrontational thinking have not simply disappeared. To deny it would be tantamount to returning to the scientific model of the one, objective facticity of modernity. In this respect the natural sciences, to which this scientific model is in general attributed, are already further along. In her latest book, Sabine Hossenfelder addresses the contrast between science and belief using the example of the two-world discussion, which was and is a consequence of quantum theory. Science, she explains, can neither prove its truth nor its falsity. Instead, she speaks of a “science-compatible belief system”¹²⁷. That, in my opinion, currently offers the most acceptable way to think about the abstract and the concrete together, as I wrote above.

It has already been mentioned that anthropology would first have to take the positive, non-judgmental relativism outlined seriously and avoid projections as much as possible. “Live and let live,”¹²⁸ you could call it, if Schiller’s quote didn’t come from a context that was a bit too irrelevant for this case. First of all, this means that the ethnographer does not even pretend to be able to provide an objective, complete and scientifically causal understanding of the foreign society. This claim to always want to understand everything and everyone ultimately and causally is, like the entire modernity born in colonialism, not least our still active part of the colonial legacy; With this claim we are

¹²⁷ Hossenfelder, S., 2022, 106

¹²⁸ “The Schrödinger equation has the property that if we have solved it for two different initial states, then the sum of those solutions, each multiplied by arbitrary numbers, is also a solution to the equation. And that’s what a superposition is: A sum. That’s it. No, I’m not joking. Entangled states are a specific type of superposition. Yes, they’re also sums. So where did all the fabled weirdness go? The weirdness appears only if you try to express the math verbally. If one of the states that solved the Schrödinger equation describes a particle moving to the right, and the other one a particle moving to the left, then what’s the sum of those? It has become common to use the phrase “the particle goes in both directions at the same time.” Does that adequately describe what a superposition is? In all honesty, I don’t know. I’d prefer to leave it at “it’s a superposition.” (loc. cit.)

still supposedly world history and world spirit (Weltgeist) in one.

Hossenfelder describes this with a nice image for physics: Sometimes science only comes to the realization that when she had pulled the rug (in the act of understanding) there only was a deep, empty hole underneath.¹²⁹ Then, she says, she can just roll out the carpet again and live with it. During my research in Australia, an Indian friend pointed out to me in a (heated) argument how much this claim to produce science “without holes” seems to be influenced by the West. He wouldn’t understand why we Europeans always asked “why” and expected a causal “because” as an answer. This, he said, was completely unknown to his culture.

Methodologically, this would mean presenting the foreign society ethnographically and perhaps also in a structural way always keeping one's own cognitive interest – the social conditioning of one's own thinking – transparent, as I earlier put it.¹³⁰ This demand for transparency also relates to the aforementioned Clifford allegories. In addition, there would have to be the important historical and political-social contextualization (Trouillot) of the ethnographic investigation.

If we practice this cultural openness, we may have achieved what was intended by Bloch's “going to the stranger”. The comparing view of the “other” can, looking at the “self”, at least prepare us for the right questions aimed at self-knowledge. If this succeeds, anthropology, in conjunction with philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, etc., can achieve what Bloch pretended.

February 15th, 2024

¹²⁹ loc. cit., 39

¹³⁰ Supp, E., 1984, 9