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# Perspectivism in Social Anthropology

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## **Introduction**

In his essay on Chinese popular religion, A. Wolf introduces an incident of apparition. One evening during his fieldwork stay in a Taiwanese village, a villager claimed that he had met an apparition, an object “floating across the fields”. Seeing that Wolf was sceptical of his experience, the villager told him that across the field where he had spotted the ghost, a family was preparing their ancestral death-day ceremony at the time of the apparition. He argued that the ghost he saw must have been the family’s ancestor travelling to participate in the ceremony. Reflecting on this incident, Wolf writes, “[w]hether a particular spirit is viewed as a ghost or as an ancestor depends on the point of view of a particular person”, and makes his widely cited statement, “[o]ne man’s ancestor is another man’s ghost” (1974: 146). In order to come to terms with this relativity in the identity of the dead, he concludes, “we must shift our perspective” (146).

Wolf does not explain how exactly an investigator can put into practice his proposed shifting perspective. However, his insights into the shifting moral identity of the dead have spurred a creative debate among scholars of Chinese religious culture. As critics note (Watson 1982; Stafford 2000), this field of studies has been dominated by the assumption that patrilineage is the backbone of Chinese society and the related idea that ancestor worship is a practical expression of the centrality of this lineage paradigm in regulating social relations. Wolf’s remark unsettles these ideas by unsettling the categorical stability of ancestors.

Villager in Taiwan move in and out of the house where they worship ancestors in everyday life. The spirits of the dead, in their general understanding, also can be mobile in their own life-world. When people are gathered inside the house for the purpose of performing a tribute to their ancestors, the invited spirits of the dead are categorically ancestors. Beyond this domain, the social status of the spirit is uncertain and may take on the opposite category of a ghost (Kwon 2006). Whereas the identity of ancestors is changeable and place-specific, observers usually miss this variable, fluid reality because they see the affairs from a static point of view. I believe that these ideas are what Wolf hoped to illustrate with his ghost story—the disparity between the relativity of social reality and the immobility of social enquiry.

Wolf's proposal for narrowing this gap between the phenomenal world and the descriptive project is for the observers to move across different points of observation just as the objects of their observation are moving along different surfaces of social life. This idea of mobility as an instrument of representation was central to an aesthetic movement generally called perspectivism, which emerged forcefully among certain circles of European intellectuals and artists at the turn of the last century.

### **The Perspectivist Movement at the Turn of the Twentieth Century**

In the theory of art, there is a notion of “positive negative space”. This notion is a radical departure from the traditional view that representing the landscape consists of dividing the space into positive and negative space. Positive space is made up of the objects that come to the painter's view, whereas negative space is the background against which the painter locates the central objects in his or her representation. A new art movement at the turn of the last century changed the status of negative space. In the cubist art movement and its pictorial language in particular, the background in painting became a positive element, equally important as the foreground objects, thereby bringing to an end a long Western artistic tradition that had begun as early as the fifteenth century (Golding 1959: 17; Hess 1975: 36). The cultural historian S. Kern describes this aesthetical revolution (1983: 152–3):

One common effect of this transvaluation was a levelling of former distinctions between what was thought to be primary and secondary in the experience of space. It can be seen as a breakdown of absolute distinctions between the plenum of matter and the void of space in physics, between subject and background in painting, between figure and ground in perception, between the sacred and the profane space of religion. Although the nature of these changes differed in each case, this

striking thematic similarity among them suggests that they add up to a transformation of the metaphysical foundations of life and thought.

Kern suggests that the aesthetics of transvaluation was intimately related to the war of mass mobilization and mass death. He quotes Gertrude Stein, who believed that the Great War (1914–1918) and the art of cubism both had the same composition “of which one corner was as important as another corner” (288): the war departed from the composition of previous wars in which “there was one man in the centre surrounded by a lot of other men” (288), and, likewise, the composition of modern art broke down the traditional rule that rendered the negative space an inert void, devoid of aesthetic relevance.

The perspectivist movement in art rejected the homogeneity of space, and it made the radical assertion that there are as many realities as points of view. This assertion may not come as much of a surprise to contemporary anthropologists. The ideas such as “there is no absolute space because there is no absolute perspective” or “a perspective is perfected by the multiplication of its viewpoints” may be intuitively intelligible to many anthropologists. If they add the adjective “cultural” to the term “perspective”, the arguments of aesthetic perspectivism will appear to be close to principles of cultural pluralism or relativism. Perhaps because of this overt similarity, the perspectivist theories have had relatively marginal influence on anthropological thought compared to their importance in the philosophy of art and perceptual psychology (Berleant 1991; Gombrich 1982; Gibson 1966; Goodman 1978). The similarity, however, is deceptive. As an aesthetic and intellectual movement, perspectivism advocated the relativity of space in experience, not necessarily relativism of spatial experience. Anthropological projects contribute to painting the global space of human culture as having a multitude of cultural perspectives but tend to do so, as Leach pointed out (1961: 5–12), by painting each cultural entity as if it entertained a singular organizing principle. This strategy generates a disparity between a plural composition of human culture as a whole and a traditionalist (pre-cubist) composition of its constituent parts.

### **Perspectivist Developments in Social Anthropology**

E. Leach was an exception on this. Throughout his career, he was interested in how contrary principles of relationship and conflicting systems of ethics can coexist in a single social field. In his work on the Highland Burma, Leach (1954) painted the Kachin communities as oscillating between two polar ideals of political organization—the feudal, autocratic Shan polity on the one hand, and the equalitarian, democratic (*gumlao*) principle, on the other—and he described their

structural social changes in terms of continual shifts in the focus of political power between the two ideals. He continued to pursue his interest in the relativity of social space in a Singhalese village, which he described in terms of a dialectical interplay between the principle of locality and that of consanguinity (Leach 1961). Through these works, he went against the then dominant tendency in British social anthropology, which approached social structure in a unitary perspective and as consisting of a singular organizing principle such as the rule of descent. For Leach, social structure meant a dynamic interaction between contrasting principles of relationship rather than a unitary system of rules, and he identified ritual action as the principal arena in which the transforming structural patterns of a society are expressed.

Leach was not alone in advancing this dynamic view of the social order. Broadly similar views were brought forward by M. Mauss at the turn of the twentieth century and later by Evans-Pritchard (1940). In this remarkable work *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo*, published originally in the journal *l'Année Sociologique* in 1904-1905, Mauss advances a “twofold morphology” of the Inuit society—the idea that the society is a dynamic, rhythmic entity consisting of “two systems of social life” and of the interaction and reciprocal effects between these two jural systems (Mauss 1975: 74–7). Mauss calls these two seasonally variable—yet mutually interacting—jural systems “communism” (referring to the congregated winter ceremonial life of the Inuit) and “individualism” (referring to their summer-time pattern of dispersion and isolation). After Leach, there have been several other important perspectivist developments in anthropological research. Analytical interests in gender have made by far the most notable contribution to relativizing the ethnographic space, and this development has been particularly forceful when combined with a theory of gift exchange. The analysis has brought the hitherto “negative space” of the female domain of experience to a “positive negative space” in the composition of ethnographic representation. It has presented the gift objects (female bodies) exchanged between corporate groups in the structure of exchange marriage as subjective entities having unique points of view of the structure.

Strathern opens her *The Gender of the Gift* with a note on the plural conception of human culture and the unitary conception of ethnic culture mentioned earlier: “The plural and the singular are ‘the same’. They are homologues of one another” (1988: 13, also 1992). Arguing that this conception is self-contradictory, she proceeds to outline what she calls an alterative anthropological strategy:

People’s positioning with respect to one another entails each party perceiving the relationship simultaneously from its own and the other’s

point of view. Imagining that the world is divided into ‘two kinds of’ things, relations, times [...] is to imagine the person from two different vantage points (1992: 271).

In Strathern’s picture, Melanesian social life appears to be fundamentally perspectivist, consisting in different gender-specific perspectives and the system of exchange which mediates and relativizes their differences (230).

Another forceful inception of perspectivism into anthropological research had recourse to perceptual psychology. The psychologist J.J. Gibson (1966) has written about what he calls the “serious business of living”, which he defines as the changing perception of the built environment in motion. Against the static and passive spectator that traditional Western art assumed, Gibson stresses mobility as a fundamental condition for the perception of the environment and coined a famous dictum: “[s]hift your position and you alter the image” (cited from Gombrich 1982: 197). T. Ingold elaborates on this centrality of movement in human perception and advances a theory of ecological practice with reference to Gibson’s ecological psychology and the related stream of thought in art philosophy known as “aesthetics of engagement” (Berleant 1991; Carlson 1979). Unlike Strathern, who draws upon a theory of gift exchange to paint a dynamic picture of Melanesian social reality, Ingold is not particularly concerned about the mobility of objects or that of object-like subjects (such as women in an exchange marriage system). His central concern is rather “to exclude all that is static and thinglike from the concept of man”, as he explains it, borrowing the words of Ortega y Gasset, the formidable Spanish philosopher who is intimately associated with the early twentieth-century perspectivist movement (Ingold 1986: 342). Ingold focuses on the mobility of the purposeful human subject, such as the hunter in the prairie, who discovers the contours of the environment in “a continually changing perspectival structure” through the itinerary of his practical, habitual movement (2000: 226–8). Referring to Merleau-Ponty, he argues that observation “consists not in having a fixed point of view on the object, but ‘in varying the point of view while keeping the object fixed’” (2000: 226). Thus he notes that human beings acquire their view of the living house, for instance, through seeing it from everywhere, not from somewhere (2000; see also Bourdieu 1990: 280–2).

Although these brief summaries hardly do justice to their complex formulations, it is nevertheless evident that there are interesting gaps in the ways of discovering and describing the ethnographic world suggested by the above scholars. We learn from Ingold how human individuals discover the world through their practical, mobile actions, but his formulation does not consider this mobile life activity and the shifting views it generates in the milieu of social relations of exchange. The circumpolar hunter—a principal idiom for Ingold—is

not necessarily a solitary actor in the environment, which is how Ingold characterizes him. His life-taking action may proceed in symbolic communication with the semantically opposite actions such as the fertility practices of his spouse (Kwon 1999: 385–7). It is a widely observed social fact across circumpolar hunting societies that a successful hunt traditionally involves a successful seduction—to have the game animal see the act of predation it faces as that of seduction by magical means instead. Hunting in this context is a ritualized act that involves an exchange of contrary perspectives to the same act between humans and animals (as well as between men and women) (Brightman 1993; Kwon 1998: 119; Tanner 1979; also Devisch 1993: 123).

What is ignored in Ingold's formulation is richly laid out in Strathern's. In her depiction of gendered Melanesian practices of hunting, warfare, and gardening, in which one domain of activity appears in intimate but conflicting dialogues with other domains, we see a continual paring of perspectives and divorcing of the paired. While we see a prolific reciprocation of gendered perspectives and reciprocal contestation of these perspectives in her ethnographic material, the large comparative picture within which the material is presented, however, comes up against the problem of plurality and singularity addressed earlier. As J. Carrier (1995) points out, Strathern's gift exchange theory of gender perspectives foregrounds a dynamic picture of Melanesian culture, but does so against background of the Western culture (of commodity relations) rendered unduly static.

Considering these different inceptions of perspectivism to anthropological research, it is instructive to think about the recent initiative of Viveiros de Castro (1998). Instead of trying to summarize his elaborate arguments, which leads to the bold conclusion that Amerindian cosmology is based on a perspectivist ontology, I will introduce a story of apparition from a related ethnographic field, which I believe is relevant to our discussion.

One day, in his account of his fieldwork among the Hoti, a small hunting and horticultural people of Venezuelan rainforest, R. Storrie (1999) writes that he was alerted by a peccary that was dashing through the hamlet. He ran to his Hoti friends and urged them to gather their hunting weapons and chase after the wild pig immediately. Hearing this, the Hoti men laughed and later told the anthropologist that what he had seen was a ghost—the ghost of a wild pig which they had killed in the past. Storrie could not subscribe to this view and insisted that the pig was real, not at all phantom, remarking that he had seen it in his own eyes. His Hoti friends said that wild pigs never came to human settlements and explained that only ghost pigs, not real pigs, could turn up in their hamlet. For the Hoti, according to Storrie, real pigs and ghost pigs are both equally real: the two

groups have particular patterns of behaviour: how they behave and act defines whether they are ghosts or not.

Storrie begins his engrossing ethnography of the Hoti with the question of how it is possible that peccaries can be game or ghost depending on the point of view. This question of perspective arises not merely between the natives and the European observer. It is also, as Storrie explains later in his work, embedded in the cultural life of Amerindians, and this is what Viveiros de Castro (1998) sets out to unpack in his densely argued piece on Amerindian perspectivism. Here, the Amerindian world comprises in multiple realities populated by various separate groups of vital subjects (animals and humans; the living and the dead) and has a pronounced notion of “trans-substantiation” or metamorphosis across different subjectivities. In his earlier work, Viveiros de Castro described how the Arawete warriors of the Brazilian rainforest can transform to and “become” enemies who they had slain in the past through singing for the latter (1992: 238–51). For the Arawete, by this account, being a subject means having a particular point of view, and all important social activities such as marriage, hunting, and warfare involve the risk of trans-substantiation; that is, becoming the other. As a result, what is apparently a potential prey to a hunter may turn out to be a spirit and be identified as such ritually. Peccaries, in Amerindian cosmology, can be marriage partners or enemies as well as an important alimentary resource. How to reconcile these diverse perspectives to the pig (or diverse subjectivities in the shape of a pig), and to other key cultural objects, is a complex task that requires a wealth of cosmological knowledge and is, in fact, an important symbolic process that enriches Amerindian cultural traditions.

## Conclusion

In his critique of pure reason and the rationalist insistence on absolute space, Nietzsche wrote:

These always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense (cited from Kern 1983: 150).

And he proceeded to suggest, according to Kern, an alternative way of seeing: “[w]e must look at the world through the wrong end of the telescope as well as the right one, see things inside out and backwards, in bright and dim light” (150). Developing on this and also referring to the general theory of relativity, developing at the time in physical science, Ortega y Gasset asserted, “[t]o be



absolute, space has to cease being real. If the idea is extended to morals and aesthetics, we shall come to experience history and life in a new way” (151). In Kern’s account of the cultural history of modern Europe, the development of cubism in art and that of perspectivism in moral and political philosophy were intertwined, and the social relativity of space they advocated had strong ethical and political implications. Perspectivist critics, working mainly in cultural fields, contributed to advancing the aesthetic superiority of modern democracy over monarchy (Ortega y Gasset 1932) and militated against the outbreak of war in 1914 on the ground that it was a political consequence of each European nation taking its own view as the only true one.

As a counterpart in human sciences to the theory of relativity in physical science, linking the vital nature of things to the mobile nature of human perception and the aesthetics of relativity to the ethics of pluralism, the rise of perspectivism was inseparable from the dynamic and creative (sometimes destructively creative) environment in Europe during and after World War I. It is within the unprecedented mobility of information and population and in the face of the catastrophic mass production of death, during what G. Stein saw as “the Cubist War”, that their ideas advanced, leading to the radical conclusion that “reality is perspective”. Rilke wrote in 1920 on the mass death of World War I, “[w]ith no figure to draw all this around itself and expand it away from itself—this way tensions and counter-tensions are set up without a central point that first makes them into constellations, into orders, at least orders of destruction” (cited in Wyschogrod 1985: 12).

As discussed above, some of these ideas found their way into anthropological discourses. There are significant efforts in economic anthropology (Goodman 1978; Hart 2000), development studies (Scott 1998), kinship studies (Bouquet 1993; Carsten 2000), and in the theory of metaphor (Wagner 1986) and identity (Battaglia 1990; Harrison 1993) to move beyond traditional composition and to account for the relativity of social order without falling into undisciplined pluralism. The attempts to relativize sets of key concepts such as body and mind, individual and society, or place and space are also continuing. These perspectivist developments in the anthropological project, however, do not yet engage seriously with their intellectual precedents in the history of ideas, nor with the historical circumstances in which they flourished. It is perfectly legitimate to apply modern aesthetics to describing other “traditional” cultures, for it is already an aspect of the former that we come to imagine different cultural viewpoints. However, it is important to recognize that “the Western eye” doing this creative work cannot be rendered to that of a pre-cubist traditional artist. If we need to “open up ‘our’ own self-referencing strategies” in order to undertake cultural comparison, as Strathern

suggests (1988: 9), it is not intelligible why these strategies refer only to the traditions other than the modern perspectivist tradition.

I believe that the above disparity must be corrected. Further perspectivist development in anthropology will depend on more ethnographic accounts being observed and written in shifting perspectives, but it also requires a more historically grounded reflection on the modern techniques of representation that we bring to the description of other cultures.

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