4

□

RELATIVISM

4.1 How to End the Asymmetry

At the beginning of this essay I proposed anthropology as a model for describing our world, since anthropology alone seemed capable of linking up the strange trajectory of quasi-objects as a whole. I quickly recognized, however, that this model was not readily usable, since it did not apply to science and technology. While ethnographers were quite capable of retracing the links that bound the ethnosciences to the social world, they were unable to do so for the exact sciences. In order to understand why it was so difficult to apply the same freedom of tone to the sociotechnological networks of our Western world, I needed to understand what we meant by modern. If we understand modernity in terms of the official Constitution that has to make a total distinction between humans and nonhumans on the one hand and between purification and mediation on the other, then no anthropology of the modern world is possible. But if we link together in one single picture the work of purification and the work of mediation that gives it meaning, we discover, retrospectively, that we have never been truly modern. As a result, the anthropology that has been stumbling over science and technology up to now could once again become the model for description that I have been seeking. Unable to compare premoderns to moderns, it could compare them both to nonmoderns.

Unfortunately, it is not easy to reutilize anthropology as it stands. Shaped by moderns studying people who were said to be premodern, anthropology has internalized, in its practices, concepts and questions, the impossibility I mentioned above. It rules out studying objects of nature, limiting the extent of its inquiries exclusively to cultures. It thus remains asymmetrical. If anthropology is to become comparative, if it is

to be able to go back and forth between moderns and nonmoderns, it must be made symmetrical. To this end, it must become capable of confronting not beliefs that do not touch us directly – we are always critical enough of them – but the true knowledge to which we adhere totally. It must therefore be made capable of studying the sciences by surpassing the limits of the sociology of knowledge and, above all, of epistemology.

The first principle of symmetry upset traditional sociology of knowledge by requiring that error and truth be treated in the same terms (Bloor, [1976] 1991). In the past, the sociology of knowledge, by marshalling a great profusion of social factors, had explained only deviations with respect to the straight and narrow path of reason. Error, beliefs, could be explained socially, but truth remained self-explanatory. It was certainly possible to analyze a belief in flying saucers, but not the knowledge of black holes; we could analyze the illusions of parapsychology, but not the knowledge of psychologists; we could analyze Spencer's errors, but not Darwin's certainties. The same social factors could not be applied equally to both. In this double standard we recognize the split in anthropology between sciences, which were not open to study, and ethnosciences, which were.

The presuppositions of the sociology of knowledge would not have intimidated ethnologists for long, if epistemologists – especially in the French tradition – had not erected as a founding principle this same asymmetry between true and false sciences. Only the latter – the 'outdated' sciences – can be related to the social context. As for the 'sanctioned' sciences, they become scientific only because they tear themselves away from all context, from any traces of contamination by history, from any naive perception, and escape even their own past. Here is the difference, for Bachelard and his disciples, between history and the history of sciences (Bachelard, 1967; Canguilhem, [1968] 1988). History may be symmetrical, but that hardly matters, because it never deals with real science; the history of science, on the other hand, must never be symmetrical, because it deals with science and its utmost duty is to make the epistemological break more complete.

A single example will suffice to show to what lengths the rejection of all symmetrical anthropology can be taken when epistemologists have to treat true sciences differently from false beliefs. When Georges Canguilhem distinguishes scientific ideologies from true sciences, he asserts not only that it is impossible to study Darwin – the scientist – and Diderot – the ideologue – in the same terms, but that it must be impossible to lump them together: 'Distinguishing between ideology and science prevents us from seeing continuities where in fact there are only elements of ideology preserved in a science that has supplanted an earlier ideology. Hence such

a distinction prevents us from seeing anticipations of the *Origin of Species* in [Diderot's] *Dream of d'Alembert'* (Canguilhem, [1968] 1988 p. 39). Only what breaks for ever with ideology is scientific. It is difficult indeed to pursue the ins and outs of quasi-objects while following such a principle. Once they have passed into the hands of such epistemologists, they will be pulled out by the roots. Objects alone will remain, excised from the entire network that gave them meaning. But why even mention Diderot or Spencer? Why take an interest in error? Because without it the truth would shine too brightly! 'Recognizing the connections between ideology and science should prevent us from reducing the history of science to a featureless landscape, a map without relief' (p. 39). For such epistemologists, 'Whiggish' history is not a mistake to be overcome but a duty to be carried out with utmost rigour. The history of science should not be confused with history (Bowker and Latour, 1987). The false is what makes the true stand out. What Racine did for the Sun King under the lofty name of historian, Canguilhem does for Darwin under the equally usurped label of historian of science.

The principle of symmetry, on the contrary, reestablished continuity, historicity, and – we may as well say it – elementary justice. David Bloor is Canguilhem's opposite number, just as Serres is Bachelard's. 'The only pure myth is the idea of a science devoid of all myth,' writes the latter as he breaks with epistemology (Serres, 1974). For Serres, as for actual historians of science, Diderot, Darwin, Malthus and Spencer have to be explained according to the same principles and the same causes; if you want to account for the belief in flying saucers, make sure your explanations can be used, symmetrically, for black holes (Lagrange, 1990). If you claim to debunk parapsychology, can you use the same factors for psychology (Collins and Pinch, 1982)? If you analyze Pasteur's successes, do the same terms allow you to account for his failures (Latour, 1988b)?

Above all, the first principle of symmetry proposes a slimming treatment for the explanations of errors offered by social scientists. It had become so easy to account for deviation! Society, beliefs, ideology, symbols, the unconscious, madness – everything was so readily available that explanations were becoming obese. But truths? When we lost our facile recourse to epistemological breaks, we soon realized, we who study the sciences, that most of our explanations were not worth much. Asymmetry organized them all, and simply added insult to injury. Everything changes if the staunch discipline of the principle of symmetry forces us to retain only the causes that could serve both truth and falsehood, belief and knowledge, science and parascience. Those who weighed the winners with one scale and the losers with another, while shouting '*vae victis!*' (woe to the vanquished), like Brennus, made that

discrepancy incomprehensible up to now. When the balance of symmetry is reestablished with precision, the discrepancy that allows us to understand why some win and others lose stands out all the more sharply.

4.2 The Principle of Symmetry Generalized

The first principle of symmetry offers the incomparable advantage of doing away with epistemological breaks, with *a priori* separations between 'sanctioned' and 'outdated' sciences, or artificial divisions between sociologists who study knowledge, those who study belief systems, and those who study the sciences. Formerly, when the anthropologist returned from his remote land to discover sciences that had been tidied up by epistemology at home, he could establish no continuity between ethnoscience and scientific knowledge. Thus with good reason he abstained from studying nature, and settled for analyzing cultures. Now when he returns and discovers studies – becoming more numerous by the day – that focus on his own sciences and technologies at home, the abyss is already narrower. He can move without too much difficulty from Trobriand navigators to those of the United States Navy (Hutchins, 1980); from calculators in West Africa to arithmeticians in California (Rogoff and Lave, 1984); from technicians in the Ivory Coast to a Nobel laureate in La Jolla (Latour and Woolgar, [1979] 1986); from sacrifices to the god Baal to the Challenger explosion (Serres, 1987). He is no longer required to limit himself to cultures, since Nature – or, rather, natures – have become similarly accessible to study (Pickering, 1992).

However, the principle of symmetry defined by Bloor leads rapidly to an impasse. If it requires an iron discipline in its explanation, the principle itself is asymmetrical, as the following diagram will make clear. Epistemologists and sociologists of knowledge explained truth through its congruence with natural reality, and falsehood through the constraint of social categories, epistemes or interests. They were asymmetrical. Bloor's principle seeks to explain truth and falsehood alike through the same categories, the same epistemes and the same interests. But what terms does it choose? Those that the sciences of society offer social scientists – that is, Hobbes and his many successors. Thus it is asymmetrical not because it separates ideology and science, as epistemologists do, but because it brackets off Nature and makes the 'Society' pole carry the full weight of explanation. Constructivist where Nature is concerned, it is realistic about Society (Callon and Latour, 1992; Collins and Yearley, 1992).

But Society, as we now know, is no less constructed than Nature, since it is the dual result of one single stabilization process. For each state of

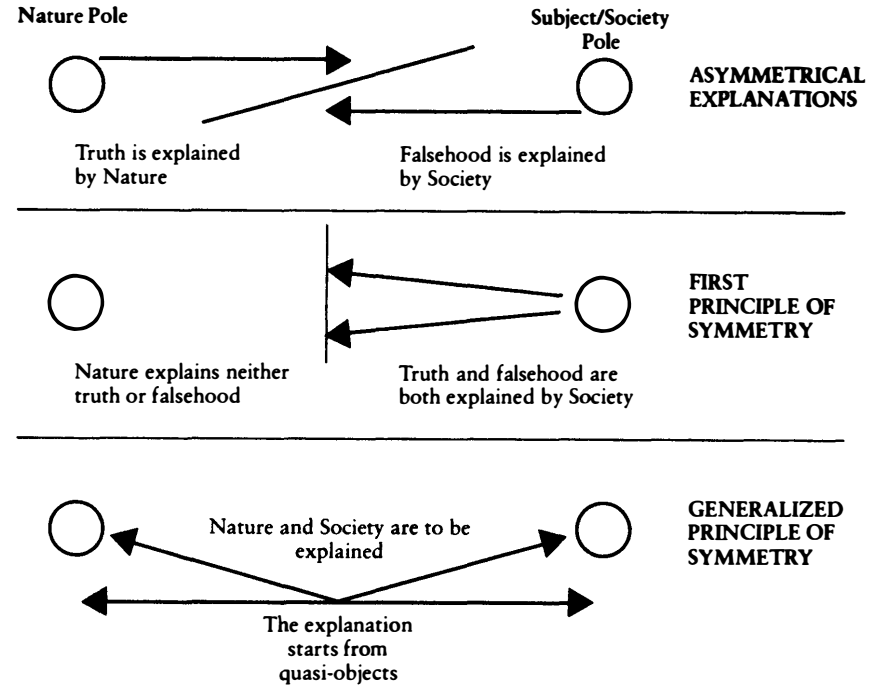


Figure 4.1 The principle of symmetry

Nature there exists a corresponding state of society. If we are to be realist in the one case, we have to be realist in the other; if we are constructivist in one instance, then we have to be constructivist for both. Or rather, as our investigation of the two modern practices has shown, we must be able to understand simultaneously how Nature and Society are immanent – in the work of mediation – and transcendent – after the work of purification. Nature and Society do not offer solid hooks to which we might attach our interpretations (which should be asymmetrical in Canguilhem's sense, or symmetrical in Bloor's), but are what is to be explained. The appearance of explanation that Nature and Society provide comes only in a late phase, when stabilized quasi-objects have become, after cleavage, objects of external reality on the one hand, subjects of Society on the other. Nature and Society are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

If anthropology is to become symmetrical, therefore, it has to do more than take in the first principle of symmetry – which puts a stop to only the most flagrant injustices of epistemology. It has to absorb what Michel

Callon calls the principle of generalized symmetry: the anthropologist has to position himself at the median point where he can follow the attribution of both nonhuman and human properties (Callon, 1986). He is not allowed to use external reality to explain society, or to use power games to account for what shapes external reality. In the same way, he is of course forbidden to alternate natural realism and sociological realism by using 'not only' Nature 'but also' Society, in order to keep the two original asymmetries even while concealing the weaknesses of the one under those of the other (Latour, 1987).

So long as we were modern, it was impossible to occupy this central place from which the symmetry between Nature and Society becomes visible at last, because it did not exist! The only central position recognized by the Constitution, as we have already seen, was the phenomenon, the meeting point where the Nature pole and the Subject pole were applied to one another. Hitherto this point has remained a no-man's-land, a nonplace. Everything changes when, instead of constantly and exclusively alternating between one pole of the modern dimension and the other, we move down along the nonmodern dimension. The unthinkable nonplace becomes the point in the Constitution where the work of mediation emerges. It is far from empty: quasi-objects, quasi-subjects, proliferate in it. No longer unthinkable, it becomes the terrain of all the empirical studies carried out on the networks.

But isn't this place the one that anthropology prepared so painstakingly over the course of a century, the one the ethnologist occupies so effortlessly today when she sets out to study other cultures? Indeed, we can watch her move, without modifying her analytical tools, from meteorology to the kinship system, from the nature of plants to their cultural representation, from political organization to ethnomedicine, from mythic structures to ethnophysics or to hunting techniques. To be sure, the ethnologist draws the courage to deploy this seamless web from her profound conviction that she is dealing merely, and solely, with representations. Nature, for its part, remains unique, external and universal. But if we superpose the two positions – the one that the ethnologist occupies effortlessly in order to study cultures and the one that we have made a great effort to define in order to study our own nature – then comparative anthropology becomes possible, if not easy. It no longer compares cultures, setting aside its own, which through some astonishing privilege possesses a unique access to universal Nature. *It compares natures-cultures.* Are they comparable? Are they similar? Are they the same? We can now, perhaps, solve the insoluble problem of relativism.

4.3 The Import – Export System of the Two Great Divides

'We Westerners are absolutely different from others!' – such is the moderns' victory cry, or protracted lament. The Great Divide between Us – Occidentals – and Them – everyone else, from the China seas to the Yucatan, from the Inuit to the Tasmanian aborigines – has not ceased to obsess us. Whatever they do, Westerners bring history along with them in the hulls of their caravels and their gunboats, in the cylinders of their telescopes and the pistons of their immunizing syringes. They bear this white man's burden sometimes as an exalting challenge, sometimes as a tragedy, but always as a destiny. They do not claim merely that they differ from others as the Sioux differ from the Algonquins, or the Baoules from the Lapps, but that they differ radically, absolutely, to the extent that Westerners can be lined up on one side and all the cultures on the other, since the latter all have in common the fact that they are precisely cultures among others. In Westerners' eyes the West, and the West alone, is not a culture, not merely a culture.

Why does the West see itself this way? Why would the West and only the West not be a culture? In order to understand the Great Divide between Us and Them, we have to go back to that other Great Divide between humans and nonhumans that I defined above. In effect, *the first is the exportation of the second.* We Westerners cannot be one culture among others, since we also mobilize Nature. We do not mobilize an image or a symbolic representation of Nature, the way the other societies do, but Nature as it is, or at least as it is known to the sciences – which remain in the background, unstudied, unstudiable, miraculously conflated with Nature itself. Thus at the heart of the question of relativism we find the question of science. If Westerners had been content with trading and conquering, looting and dominating, they would not distinguish themselves radically from other tradespeople and conquerors. But no, they invented science, an activity totally distinct from conquest and trade, politics and morality.

Even those who have tried, in the name of cultural relativism, to defend the continuity of cultures without ordering them in a progressive series, and without isolating them in their separate prisons (Lévi-Strauss, [1952] 1987), think they can do this only by bringing them as close as possible to the sciences.

'We have had to wait until the middle of this century', writes Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*, 'for the crossing of long separated paths: that which arrives at the physical world by the detour of communication [the savage mind], and that which, as we have recently come to know, arrives at the world of communication by the detour of the physical [modern science]' (Lévi-Strauss, [1962] 1966, p. 269).

> The false antimony between logical and prelogical mentality was surmounted at the same time. The savage mind is as logical in the same sense and the same fashion as ours, though as our own is only when it is applied to knowledge of a universe in which it recognizes physical and semantic properties simultaneously . . . It will be objected that there remains a major difference between the thought of primitives and our own: Information Theory is concerned with genuine messages whereas primitives mistake mere manifestations of physical determinism for messages . . . In treating the sensible properties of the animal and plant kingdoms as if they were the elements of a message, and in discovering 'signatures' – and so signs – in them, men [those with savage minds] have made mistakes of identification: the meaningful element was not always the one they supposed. But, without perfected instruments which would have permitted them to place it where it most often is – namely, at the microscopic level – they already discerned 'as through a glass darkly' principles of interpretation whose heuristic value and accordance with reality have been revealed to us only through very recent inventions: telecommunications, computers and electron microscopes. (Lévi-Strauss, [1962] 1966, p. 268)

Lévi-Strauss, a generous defence lawyer, imagines no mitigating circumstances other than making his clients look as much like scientists as possible! If primitive peoples do not differ from us as much as we think, it is because they anticipate the newest conquests of information theory, molecular biology and physics, but with inadequate instruments and 'errors of identification'. The very sciences that are used for this promotion are now off limits. Conceived in the fashion of epistemology, these sciences remain objective and external, quasi-objects purged of their networks. Give the primitives a microscope, and they will think exactly as we do. Is there a better way to finish off those one wants to save from condemnation? For Lévi-Strauss (as for Canguilhem, Lyotard, Girard, Derrida, and the majority of French intellectuals), this new scientific knowledge lies entirely outside culture. It is the transcendence of science – conflated with Nature – that makes it possible to relativize all cultures, theirs and ours alike – with the one caveat, of course, that it is precisely our culture, not theirs, that is constructed through biology, electronic microscopes and telecommunication networks. . . . The abyss that was to supposed to be narrowing opens up again.

Somewhere in our societies, and in ours alone, an unheard-of transcendence has manifested itself: Nature as it is, ahuman, sometimes inhuman, always extrahuman. Since this event occurred – whether one situates it in Greek mathematics, Italian physics, German chemistry, American nuclear engineering or Belgian thermodynamics – there has been a total asymmetry between the cultures that took Nature into account and those that took into account only their own culture or the

distorted versions that they might have of matter. Those who invent sciences and discover physical determinisms never deal exclusively with human beings, except by accident. The others have only representations of Nature that are more or less disturbed or coded by the cultural preoccupations of the humans that occupy them fully and fall only by chance – 'as through a glass darkly' – on things as they are.

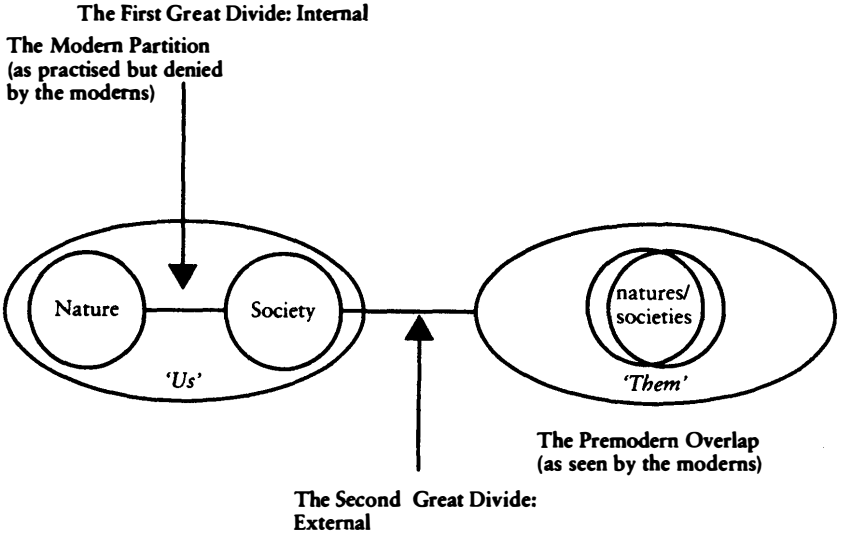


Figure 4.2 The two Great Divides

So the Internal Great Divide accounts for the External Great Divide: we are the only ones who differentiate absolutely between Nature and Culture, between Science and Society, whereas in our eyes all the others – whether they are Chinese or Amerindian, Azande or Barouya – cannot really separate what is knowledge from what is Society, what is sign from what is thing, what comes from Nature as it is from what their cultures require. Whatever they do, however adapted, regulated and functional they may be, they will always remain blinded by this confusion; they are prisoners of the social and of language alike. Whatever we do, however criminal, however imperialistic we may be, we escape from the prison of the social or of language to gain access to things themselves through a providential exit gate, that of scientific knowledge. The internal partition between humans and nonhumans defines a second partition – an external one this time – through which the moderns have set themselves apart from the premoderns. For Them, Nature and Society, signs and things,

are virtually coextensive. For Us they should never be. Even though we might still recognize in our own societies some fuzzy areas in madness, children, animals, popular culture and women's bodies (Haraway, 1989), we believe our duty is to extirpate ourselves from those horrible mixtures as forcibly as possible by no longer confusing what pertains to mere social preoccupations and what pertains to the real nature of things.

4.4 Anthropology Comes Home from the Tropics

When anthropology comes home from the tropics in order to rejoin the anthropology of the modern world that is ready and waiting, it does so at first with caution, not to say with pusillanimity. At first, it thinks it can apply its methods only when Westerners mix up signs and things the way savage thought does. It will therefore look for what most resembles its traditional terrains as defined by the External Great Divide. To be sure, it has to sacrifice exoticism, but not at great cost, since anthropology maintains its critical distance by studying only the margins and fractures of rationality, or the realms beyond rationality. Popular medicine, witchcraft in the Bocage (Favret-Saada, 1980), peasant life in the shadow of nuclear power plants (Zonabend, 1989), the representations ordinary people have of technical risks (Douglas, 1983) – all these can be excellent field study topics, because the question of Nature – that is, of science – is not yet raised.

However, the great repatriation cannot stop there. In fact, by sacrificing exoticism, the ethnologist loses what constituted the very originality of her research as opposed to the scattered studies of sociologists, economists, psychologists or historians. In the tropics, the anthropologist did not settle for studying the margins of other cultures (Geertz, 1971). If she remained marginal by vocation and method, and out of necessity, she nevertheless claimed to be reconstituting the centre of those cultures: their belief system, their technologies, their ethnosciences, their power plays, their economies – in short, the totality of their existence (Mauss, [1923] 1967). If she comes back home but limits herself to studying the marginal aspects of her own culture, she loses all the hard-won advantages of anthropology. For example Marc Augé when he resided among the lagoon-dwellers of the Ivory Coast, sought to understand the entire social phenomenon revealed by sorcery (Augé, 1975). His marginality did not hinder him from grasping the full social fabric of Alladian culture. But back at home he has limited himself to studying the most superficial aspects of the metro (Augé, 1986), interpreting some graffiti on the walls of subway corridors, intimidated this time by the evidence of his own marginality in the face of Western

economics, technologies and science. A symmetrical Marc Augé would have studied the sociotechnological network of the metro itself: its engineers as well as its drivers, its directors and its clients, the employer-State, the whole shebang – simply doing at home what he had always done elsewhere. Western ethnologists cannot limit themselves to the periphery; otherwise, still asymmetrical, they would show boldness toward others, timidity toward themselves. Back home anthropology need not become the marginal discipline of the margins, picking up the crumbs that fall from the other disciplines' banquet table.

In order to achieve such freedom of movement and tone, however, one has to be able to view the two Great Divides in the same way, and consider them both as one particular definition of our world and its relationships with the others. Now these Divides do not define us any better than they define others; they are no more an instrument of knowledge than is the Constitution alone, or modern temporality alone (see Section 3.7). To become symmetrical, anthropology needs a complete overhaul and intellectual retooling so that it can get around both Divides at once by believing neither in the radical distinction between humans and nonhumans at home, nor in the total overlap of knowledge and society elsewhere.

Let us imagine an ethnologist who goes out to the tropics and takes along with her the Internal Great Divide. In her eyes, the people she studies continually confuse knowledge of the world – which the investigator, as a good scientistic Westerner, possesses as her birthright – and the requirements of social functioning. The tribe that greets her thus has only one vision of the world, only one representation of Nature. To go back to the expression Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim made famous, this tribe projects its own social categories on to Nature (Durkheim and Mauss, [1903] 1967; Haudricourt, 1962). When our ethnologist explains to her informers that they must be more careful to separate the world as it is from the social representation they provide for it, they are scandalized or nonplussed. The ethnologist sees in their rage and their misunderstanding the very proof of their premodern obsession. The dualism in which she lives – humans on one side, nonhumans on the other, signs over here, things over there – is intolerable to them. For social reasons, our ethnologist concludes, this culture requires a monist attitude. 'We traffic in ideas; [the savage mind] hoards them up' (Lévi-Strauss, [1962] 1966, p. 267).

But let us suppose now that our ethnologist returns to her homeland and tries to dissolve the Internal Great Divide. And let us suppose that through a series of happy accidents she sets out to analyze one tribe among others – for example, scientific researchers or engineers (Knorr-Cetina, 1992). The situation turns out to be reversed, because now she

applies the lessons of monism she thinks she has learned from her earlier experience. Her tribe of scientists claims that in the end they are completely separating their knowledge of the world from the necessities of politics and morality (Traweek, 1988). In the observer's eyes, however, this separation is never very visible, or is itself only the by-product of a much more mixed activity, some tinkering in and out of the laboratory. Her informers claim that they have access to Nature, but the ethnographer sees perfectly well that they have access only to a vision, a representation of Nature that she herself cannot distinguish neatly from politics and social interests (Pickering, 1980). This tribe, like the earlier one, projects its own social categories on to Nature; what is new is that it pretends it has not done so. When the ethnologist explains to her informers that they cannot separate Nature from the social representation they have formed of it, they are scandalized or nonplussed. Our ethnologist sees in their rage and incomprehension the very proof of their modern obsession. The monism in which she now lives – humans are always mixed up with nonhumans – is intolerable to them. For social reasons, our ethnologist concludes, Western scientists require a dualist attitude.

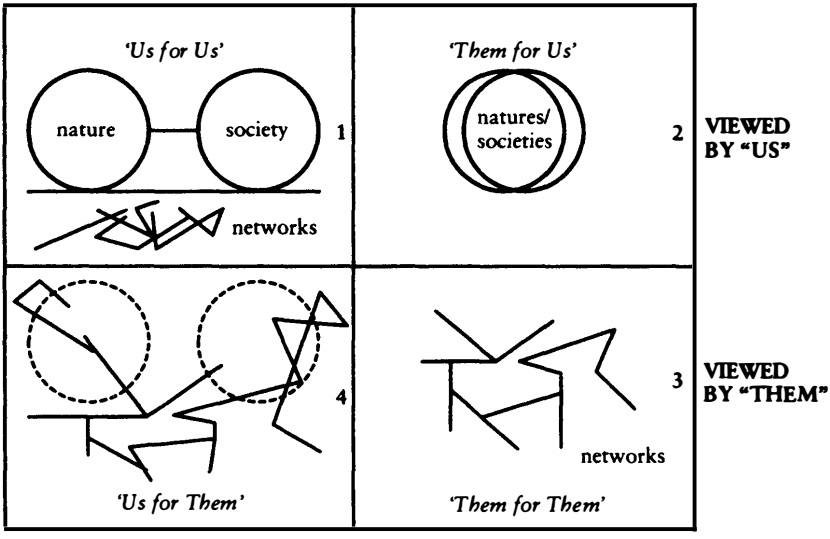


Figure 4.3 Them and Us

However, her double conclusion is incorrect, for she has not really heard what her informers were saying. The goal of anthropology is not to scandalize twice over, or to provoke incomprehension twice in a row: the

first time by exporting the Internal Great Divide and imposing dualism on cultures that reject it; the second time by cancelling the External Great Divide and imposing monism on a culture, our own – that rejects it absolutely. Symmetrical anthropology must realize that the two Great Divides do not describe reality – our own as well as that of others – but define the particular way Westerners had of establishing their relations with others as long as they felt modern. 'We', however, do not distinguish between Nature and Society more than 'They' make them overlap. If we take into account the networks that we allow to proliferate beneath the official part of our Constitution they look a lot like the networks in which 'They' say they live. Premoderns are said never to distinguish beween signs and things, but neither do 'We' (Figure 4.3.3 and the bottom of 4.3.1 look very much alike). If, through an acrobatic thought experiment, we could go further and ask 'Them' to try to map on to their own networks our strange obsession with dichotomies and to try to imagine, in their own terms, what it could mean to have a pure Nature and a pure Society they would draw, with extreme difficulty, a provisional map in which Nature and Society would barely escape from the networks (Figure 4.3.4). But what does this picture represent, this picture in which Nature and Culture appear to be redistributed among the networks and to escape from them only fuzzily as if in dotted lines? It is exactly our world as we now see it through nonmodern eyes! It is exactly the picture I have tried to offer from the beginning, in which the upper and lower halves of the Constitution gradually merge. Premoderns are like us. Once they are considered symmetrically, they might offer a better analysis of the Westerners than the modernist anthropology offered of the premoderns! Or, more exactly, we can now drop entirely the 'Us' and 'Them' dichotomy, and even the distinction between moderns and premoderns. We have both always built communities of natures and societies. There is only one, symmetrical, anthropology.

4.5 There Are No Cultures

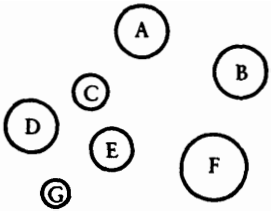
Let us suppose that anthropology, having come home from the tropics, sets out to retool itself by occupying a triply symmetrical position. It uses the same terms to explain truths and errors (this is the first principle of symmetry); it studies the production of humans and nonhumans simultaneously (this is the principle of generalized symmetry); finally, it refrains from making any *a priori* declarations as to what might distinguish Westerners from Others. To be sure, it loses exoticism, but it gains new fields of study that allow it to analyze the central mechanism of all collectives, including the ones to which Westerners belong. It loses its

exclusive attachment to cultures alone – or to cultural dimensions alone – but it gains a priceless acquisition, natures. The two positions I have been staking out since the beginning of this essay – the one the ethnologist is now occupying effortlessly, and the one the analyst of the sciences was striving toward with great difficulty – can now be superimposed. Network analysis extends a hand to anthropology, and offers it the job that has been ready and waiting.

The question of relativism is already becoming less difficult. If science as conceived along the epistemologists' lines made the problem insoluble, it suffices, as is often the case, to change the conception of scientific practices in order to dispel the artificial difficulties. What reason complicates, networks explicate. It is the peculiar trait of Westerners that they have imposed, by their official Constitution, the total separation of humans and nonhumans – the Internal Great Divide – and have thereby artificially created the scandal of the others. 'How can one be a Persian?' How can one not establish a radical difference between universal Nature and relative culture? But *the very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off.* Cultures – different or universal – do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures, and these offer the only possible basis for comparison. As soon as we take practices of mediation as well as practices of purification into account, we discover that the moderns do not separate humans from nonhumans any more than the 'others' totally superimpose signs and things.

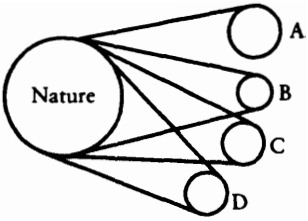
I can now compare the forms of relativism according to whether they do or do not take into account the construction of natures as well. Absolute relativism presupposes cultures that are separate and incommensurable and cannot be ordered in any hierarchy; there is no use talking about it, since it brackets off Nature. As for cultural relativism, which is more subtle, Nature comes into play, but in order to exist it does not presuppose any scientific work, any society, any construction, any mobilization, any network. It is Nature revisited and corrected by epistemology, for which scientific practice still remains off camera, *hors champ.* Within this tradition, the cultures are thus distributed as so many more or less accurate viewpoints on that unique Nature. Certain societies see it 'as through a glass darkly', others see it through thick fog, still others under clear skies. Rationalists will insist on the common aspects of all these viewpoints; relativists will insist on the irresistible distortion that social structures impose on all perception. The former will be undone if it can be shown that cultures do not superimpose their categories; the latter will lose ground if it can be proved that the categories are superimposed (Hollis and Lukes, 1982; Wilson, 1970).

In practice, however, as soon as Nature comes into play without being attached to a particular culture, a third model is always secretly used : a



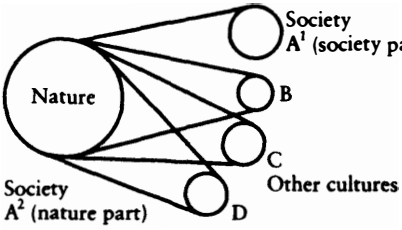
ABSOLUTE RELATIVISM

Culture without hierarchy
and without contacts,
all incommensurable;
Nature is bracketed



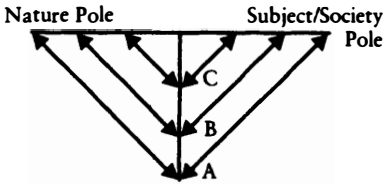
CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Nature is present but outside cultures;
cultures all have a more or less precise
point of view toward Nature



PARTICULAR UNIVERSALISM

One of the cultures (A) has
a privileged access to Nature
which sets it apart from the others



SYMMETRICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

All the collectives similarly constitute
natures and cultures; only the
scale of the mobilization varies

Figure 4.4 Relativism and universalism

type of universalism that I would call 'particular'. One society – and it is always the Western one – defines the general framework of Nature with respect to which the others are situated. This is Lévi-Strauss's solution: he distinguishes Western society, which has a specific interpretation of Nature, from that Nature itself, miraculously known to our society. The first half of the argument allows for modest relativism (we are just one interpretation among others), but the second permits the surreptitious return of arrogant universalism – we remain absolutely different. In Lévi-Strauss's eyes, however, there is no contradiction between the two halves, precisely because our Constitution, and it alone, allows us to distinguish society A^1, made up of humans, from society A^2, composed of nonhumans but forever removed from the first one! The

contradiction stands out today only in the eyes of symmetrical anthropology. This latter model is the common stock of the other two, whatever the relativists (who never relativize anything but cultures) may say.

The relativists have never been convincing on the subject of the equality of cultures, since they limit their consideration precisely to cultures. And Nature? According to them, it is the same for all, since universal science defines it. In order to get out of this contradiction, they then either have to limit all peoples to a representation of the world by locking them up for ever in the prison of their own societies or, conversely, they have to reduce all scientific results to products of local and contingent social constructions in order to deny science any universality. But to imagine billions of people imprisoned in distorted views of the world since the beginning of time is as difficult as it is to imagine neutrinos and quasars, DNA and universal gravitation, as Texan, British or Burgundian social productions. The two responses are equally absurd, and that is why the great debates over relativism never lead anywhere. *It is as impossible to universalize nature as it is to reduce it to the narrow framework of cultural relativism alone.*

The solution appears along with the dissolution of the artifact of cultures. All natures-cultures are similar in that they simultaneously construct humans, divinities and nonhumans. None of them inhabits a world of signs or symbols arbitrarily imposed on an external Nature known to us alone. None of them – and especially not our own – lives in a world of things. All of them sort out what will bear signs and what will not. If there is one thing we all do, it is surely that we construct both our human collectives and the nonhumans that surround them. In constituting their collectives, some mobilize ancestors, lions, fixed stars, and the coagulated blood of sacrifice; in constructing ours, we mobilize genetics, zoology, cosmology and hæmatology. 'But those are sciences!' the moderns will exclaim, horrified at this confusion. 'They have to escape the representations of society to the greatest possible extent!' Yet the presence of the sciences does not suffice to break the symmetry; such is the discovery of comparative anthropology. From cultural relativism we move on to 'natural' relativism. The first led to absurdities; the second will allow us to fall back on common sense.

4.6 Sizeable Differences

Still, the problem of relativism has not been solved. Only the confusion resulting from the bracketing off of Nature has been provisionally eliminated. We now find ourselves confronting productions of natures-