

From Nature/Culture to Culturally-Dominated Nature: A Spring Conference Overview

2010-06-30 14:12:00

By

A particularly packed spring conference season recently wound up for me, having attended four conferences over the course of about a month and a half. Two of these stood out for the contrast of the approaches to the human, personhood and the self and the questions they raised for the study of each. What was most interesting, was the relative absence of the human in these social science meetings (one anthropology, the other a multi-disciplinary crowd of sociologists, historians and anthropologists, among others), either ignored or present only in its most generic form. The two conferences in question were the biennial meeting of the [Society for Cultural Anthropology](#) (SCA) and the annual meeting of the [Association Francophone Pour le Savoir](#) (ACFAS). I will start with a discussion of the second, but focus on the first.

I participated on a day and a half long panel at ACFAS (10-14 May, Montreal) entitled “Des ‘affections nerveuses’ au XIXe siècle aux anxio-dépressions contemporaines: continuités et ruptures” (From ‘nervous disorders’ of the 19th century to contemporary anxieties and depressions: continuities and ruptures). During [Danilo Martucelli](#)’s (e.g. [Dominations ordinaires: explorations de la condition moderne](#) [2001]; [Les sociologies de l’individu](#) [with François de Singly, 2009]) introductory presentation at our session a big, round bumble bee flew in through one of the open windows. It buzzed lazily around the large room, circling the heads of attendees including Martucelli’s, moving in and out of the attention of the audience and presenter depending on their proximity to the buzzing. The bee, at least for me, provided some moments of levity –observing Martucelli’s eyes very nearly cross as he watched the bee move in to circle his head yet again – in a presentation that earnestly set about debunking theories concerning the causes of an apparent rise in mental illness. The explanations he found lacking included: an actual increase in rates of psychological disorder; increased demands for autonomy and individualistic personalities leading people consider themselves psychologically disordered if they fail to meet this contemporary behavioural and personality standard; social constructionist arguments about the increasing inclusiveness of mental illness categories; and institutional changes that encourage individuals to explain suffering using psychiatric languages.

In place of these explanations, Martucelli asked us to be persuaded by his thesis that there has been a “singularization” of the modern individual in the way daily life is experienced (e.g. weakening of the social bond) and the way that personal disordered states are treated (e.g. with a pill rather than psychosocial interventions). He further argued that this is an increasingly ‘normal’ way of living with the ‘pathological’ in which personal challenges are seen through the interiorizing lens of mental illness rather than in relation to socio-economic or political circumstances. Martucelli’s presentation provided an interesting overview of the differences he perceived between largely macro sociological explanations of shifts in individualism provided by French theorists. Though I – among other attendees, judging from their questions – remained uncertain of the theoretical distinctiveness that Martucelli that claimed existed between his argument and those theories he interpreted and criticized, which included arguments about individualism and autonomy put forward by [Alain Ehrenberg](#) (e.g. *La fatigue d’être soi* [1998] recently translated as *The Weariness of the Self* [2009]) as well as [Marcel Gauchet](#)’s arguments about individualism and the social bond (e.g. *La démocratie contre elle-même* [2002]) and even work on the language of suffering (though the topical and methodological differences between Martucelli and [Didier Fassin](#) are the most vast and obvious), his generalized discussion of theories of the role of psychiatric disorder and modern individuals succeeded in raising questions and debates. However, little insight was shed on the individual he discusses, who is not identified according to chronology (though it is a ‘contemporary’ individual), geography (though we might assume France), economic, political or gender traits, revealing the limits his sweeping, distanced analysis.

Somewhere mid-way through Martucelli’s 45 minute presentation, there was a “THWAP!!” followed by “Bang! Bang! Bang!”. The big, fuzzy-looking bee was no more, having been ‘taken care of’ by a young French sociologist. Culture had just obliterated nature and no one appeared bothered by it. This event brought me out of the stream of Martucelli’s talk and it was at this moment that it struck me – and continued to strike me through the rest of Martucelli’s presentation – that I wasn’t in Santa Fe anymore.

I had returned the previous Sunday from [the biennial SCA meeting](#) based this year in Santa Fe, NM (May 7-8, 2010). The theme of this year’s conference was Nature/Culture. It was the flattening of the bee that brought into stark contrast the vast differences –too numerous to detail here though I will attempt to outline a few – between the conferences. Looking back at the SCA meeting, it seemed unthinkable that any harm could come to a creature such as a bee, at a conference where non-human animals and non-human actors (e.g. dingoes, dogs, chickens, floods, fish, tubing, monsters) took a more central place than humans in

many participants' presentations. These animals, objects and creatures took on different roles in attendees' papers: at times drawing attention to the fabricated discontinuity between animals and humans, the relationship between the way we live and the effects on our natural environment, specialist versus non-specialist claims to knowledge about 'nature', and at other times creatures were evoked to refer to what was otherwise unspeakable in human relations. But what the flattened bee reminded me of was the opening up of particular moral concerns for the non-human at the SCA meeting and ways in which this has raised questions about the practice of social science and constructions of humanness and personhood.

[Deborah Bird Rose](#)'s May 8th presentation (entitled "Double Death: In the Shadow of Extinction" in the programme, though changed to "Ethnographies of Extinctions in Multi-Species Communities" if my notes serve me well) – which was part of the morning plenary session alongside [Judith Farquhar](#) and chaired by [Danilyn Rutherford](#) – about the extermination of pit bulls as a moral enterprise made this moral argument most clear to me. In her paper, Rose drew attention to how the study of non-humans is central to understanding how we construct knowledge about the world around us and the essential beliefs that guide our actions and ethics whether in regards to non-humans (e.g. animals, natural resources) or humans (e.g. animalized humans). Rose described her interest in what renders something or someone killable – this is the word I have scribbled in my notes though I remember that "killable" was not the word she used. She criss-crossed her analysis about the "knots of connectivity in the extinction process", focusing on dingoes in Australia, pit bulls in the United States and an analysis of [Emmanuel Levinas' writings about a dog named Bobby](#) who visited him and his fellow Jewish detainees in Nazi Germany. Rose evoked Levinas' story of Bobby in order to raise questions about a type of humanism (influence by Levinas) she wants to question in contemporary anthropology, particularly one in which responsibility is felt toward other humans – the encounter with the face of the other – compared with the indifference we give to our fellow species such as animals. What Rose focused on was the role that non-humans play in the emergence of defining humans as animals who (normally) cannot be treated with impunity versus the non-humans who can.

Rose's description of the extermination of dogs and dingoes appeared to be a call for a different model of humanity involving the 'humanization' of animals (also raised in exchanges between [John Law](#) and [Donna Haraway](#) in the May 7th evening plenary session) and it seemed she might almost be implying parity between treating animals and animalized humans (e.g. in Nazi labour camps) with impunity. Part of Rose's support for her position comes from her Australian aboriginal informants, one of whom she quotes as saying "nothing is nothing" (i.e. we have to question

reigning humanism and cannot treat animals as nothing). Rose's paper highlighted the strength of a particular moral position in anthropology represented at this conference and a shift toward studies of companion species (and other objects) in which the humans they are companions to become less and less visible.

While non-humans were highlighted in many sessions, this position toward humanism was not necessarily the reason for their presence. At the sessions I attended, humans had a higher profile than in others perhaps, even if they were often distinguished by being dead, magic or monsters. Their 'other' human nature was often evoked to raise questions of personhood and the self more commonly represented in anthropology. One of these was "SuperNature" whose participants focused on the role of magic, spirituality, ghosts and belief among the people anthropologists study and anthropologists themselves. Presenters examined the history, uses and changing meaning of magic tricks such as the "spirit cabinet" ([Graham Jones](#)) as well as the role of economic and class disgruntledness in modern day spiritual specialists alongside the gendered distinctions between (feminine) mediums and (masculine) technologically-armed ghost hunters who use their tools to 'make visible' the ghosts among us ([Misty Bastian](#)).

In another panel entitled "Architectures of the Future: Human Potentials and Hypothetical Monsters", monsters appeared as incipient terrorists ([Mona Bhan](#)), symbols of political and affective spaces (Courtney Nickerson) and really bad bosses ([Noelle Mole](#)). They were also discussed in terms of efforts to find the material signature of evil in the brain (Mark Robinson). Discussant [David Valentine](#) questioned the role of monsters in panelists' presentations, asking what it is that makes a monster, and if it is just a metaphor for something more monstrous, do we need to talk about the monsters themselves? In the papers presented, he continued, was it not the state, global capital and science as the real monsters? While there appeared to be general agreement on this issue, he and the panelists noted that the interesting quality of monsters was in their temporal transformations: how they change, how they might now be understood to straddle nature/culture in new ways and what that might tell us about the 'real monsters' within or surrounding us.

I presented on the panel organized by [Matthew Wolf-Meyer](#) "Tarrying with Neurodiversity: Moving Beyond Pharmaco-natures" that was one of the few panels to focus on humans, even if our focus was on their neurotransmitters. Each panellist tackled the concept of neurodiversity from a different angle, including as a means of reimagining pathology as normal variation ([Matthew Wolf-Meyer](#), introductory comments on autism and further discussion of the medicalization of diverse sleep patterns), to the politics of recognizing biological difference among human groups

(Stephanie Lloyd), to discourses about the need to medicate neurodiversity and its relationship with pre-existing social expectations ([Michael Oldani](#)), and the way in which people recovering from mental illness use neurological explanations to imagine a future as a ‘different’ person rather than someone simply in life-long recovery ([John Marlovits](#)).

These two conferences, ACFAS and SCA, offered radically different ways of approaching some of the core issues in medical anthropology, STS and bioethics. Methodologically, they push us to look for answers to questions about humans and human suffering in different places and from different sources and each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. Some yield big answers, such as Martucelli’s thesis concerning the singularization of society and the effects on the individual. However, when asked about when this transition in thoughts about the self took place, Martucelli’s response was an untroubled, “Je n’en sais rien” (I have no idea). His responses were similar to other empirical questions. He was, it seemed, talking about a highly generic human, found presumably everywhere but nowhere and defining this person was not of interest to him. Rose’s approach urged a much more minute consideration of the species surrounding humans to understand where a definition of humanness originates, leading us to a range of ethical considerations using a very specific lens. Social scientists studying monsters, ghosts and debates about neurotransmitters use these stand-ins to examine how it is that humans depict, to a certain sense, themselves to themselves.

The variety of ways that humans were present and absent in these two conferences – and the compatibility and incompatibility of these approaches – provides fodder to analyse the use and limits of each of the perspectives (for example, Danilyn Rutherford asked how Levinas’ ethics could apply to people with autism, which is a question that could equally apply to a range of humans considered emotionally or cognitively compromised), for how they encourage us to reconsider traditional anthropological terms such as the self and personhood and for scholars of many different disciplines to ask themselves what they want a study of humans and the life sciences to be about.

AMA citation

. From Nature/Culture to Culturally-Dominated Nature: A Spring Conference Overview. *Somatosphere*. . Available at: . Accessed February 25, 2013.

APA citation

. (). *From Nature/Culture to Culturally-Dominated Nature: A Spring Conference Overview*. Retrieved February 25, 2013, from Somatosphere Web site:

Chicago citation

. . From Nature/Culture to Culturally-Dominated Nature: A Spring Conference Overview. Somatosphere. (accessed February 25, 2013).

Harvard citation

, *From Nature/Culture to Culturally-Dominated Nature: A Spring Conference Overview*, Somatosphere. Retrieved February 25, 2013, from <>

MLA citation

. "From Nature/Culture to Culturally-Dominated Nature: A Spring Conference Overview." . Somatosphere. Accessed 25 Feb. 2013.<>