

## ENDO/EXO

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In recent years, anthropologists have increasingly admonished each other to “take seriously” the people they work with. And yet the moral valence of “taking seriously” has often been clearer than its precise meaning. One crucial achievement of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s article here is to infuse this phrase with a convincing, theoretically sophisticated, and precise content—and in the process to produce a characteristically exhilarating account of the anthropological endeavor, one that takes forward and refines the author’s previous definition of anthropology as “the science of the self-determination of the world’s peoples.”<sup>1</sup> I must declare an interest here and, in so doing, delineate a specific public for which “Zeno and the Art of Anthropology” will be of particular importance. I am an anthropologist working in Europe (among other places), and as a result my admiration for Viveiros de Castro’s work has always been accompanied by a slight uneasiness under one particular heading: the idea that the anthropological endeavor is properly that of engaging with non-Euro-American ontologies has left me with the apprehension that anthropologists who, in some respect or another, are probing European or American forms of life, having grimly fought their way into the relative acceptance of the discipline in the 1980s, would once again end up out in the cold. I think that this article—and its definition of seriousness—

1. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *And* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2003).

allows one to envisage a more hopeful outcome. Although Viveiros de Castro is principally concerned with exo-anthropology in this essay, he also gives us the tools with which to articulate the specificity and particular value of an endo-anthropology (of sorts).

The article begins with a vigorous critique of Richard Rorty's avowed ethnocentrism. Rorty's refusal to take seriously "visions" that are too far from our own provides the precise antidefinition of Viveiros de Castro's anthropological project: the commitment to "taking seriously that which Western intellectuals cannot take seriously." Crucially, however, "taking seriously" here does not equate to believing in the truth of what people say, any more than it means "respecting people's beliefs." Indeed, the suspension of the traditional relativist problematic of belief is the very condition of "taking seriously" in this new sense. Drawing on Deleuze, the author casts "taking seriously" as a self-imposed suspension of the desire to explicate the other, to verify the other's possible world. This kind of verification of the other by the self, which—crucially—is what occurs "in the normal course of social interaction," dissolves the possibility of the other's world by resolving it into either the reality of our own world or mere fantasy. Taking seriously, by contrast, involves "refraining from actualizing the possible expressions of alien thought and deciding to sustain them as possibilities." "Taking seriously" recalls what the author has elsewhere described as a practice of enabling "ontological self-determination": refraining from either assent or critique, in order to allow the people themselves to specify the conditions under which what they say is to be taken.<sup>2</sup>

To this elegant and rousing argument, I wish to add a comment and a suggestion. The comment is this: a naive reader might object that Viveiros de Castro's commitment to "taking seriously" does not extend to a more intimate other, namely Richard Rorty (and the Western, liberal, multiculturalist "vision" for which he is made to stand). Our naive (or falsely naive) reader would be trying of course to transpose to this project the classic critique of relativism (articulated from the *Theatetus* onward); namely, that it can accept any vision except a universalist one and thus falls into self-contradiction. However, our naive critic would be missing the crucial distinction between Viveiros de Castro's new relationism and the old relativism: relationism is not some loose form of generalized "tolerance" but a precise and controlled instance of asymmetry. As Viveiros de Castro points out, taking some visions seriously requires that we not take other visions seriously. About the latter, the author is quite specific: "almost all of the things that we must *not* take seriously are near to or inside of us."

However, Viveiros de Castro's suspicion of liberal Western intellectuals, his call for us to get away from "where we are," from "the suffocation of the self,"

2. Viveiros de Castro, *And*, 18.

should not make us forget that not taking (ourselves) seriously has acquired a technical meaning here that is the exact the opposite of what our naive reader might think. On Viveiros de Castro's redefinition of seriousness, the things we do not take seriously are precisely those we do subject to explication, those we resolve into truths and falsehoods, those we agree or disagree with, adopt as our own, or reject as fantasies—in other words, those with which we have normal social interactions (and intellectual intercourse). Consistent with his position, the author subjects Rorty (along with the Western liberal, multiculturalist vision he stands for) and Deleuze (along with the Western antihumanist intellectual tradition he stands for) to such treatment. Unlike the Amazonians, Rorty and Deleuze are not taken seriously—not left in a state of sustained possibility. On the contrary, Rorty's possible world is verified and rejected, just as Deleuze's possible world is verified and provides a definition of anthropology.

To reiterate this somewhat convoluted point: what separates Viveiros de Castro's project from relativism (and renders it immune from the usual "self-refutation charge") is a sustained and pivotal asymmetry in the treatment of visions that are procedurally identified as "ours" (or close to us) and "theirs" (or far from us).<sup>3</sup> Within the former sphere, there is intellectual debate (which involves agreement and disagreement, belief and disbelief) and normal social interaction; with the latter, there is "taking seriously" (which means leaving in a state of possibility) and a specifically anthropological relationality. Or as the author puts it: "to be an anthropologist is to divide the human race into, on the one hand, people whose beliefs one can legitimately challenge and, on the other hand, everyone else." The crucial question thus raised, of course, is where one might locate the pivotal distinction between us and them, close and far, that enables the entire project. My own ethnographic interests—most of my work to date has been on identity and relationality in Corsica, and I am now conducting research among British scientists who study animal behavior—make me rather resistant to the thought that this line could straightforwardly be drawn between "Euro-Americans" (or "moderns," or "the West") and everyone else.

While the rhetoric of Viveiros de Castro's article does occasionally suggest such sweeping divisions between "the Western Bank" and elsewhere, a careful reading offers us a more precise and hopeful possibility. In what is a very important refinement upon his earlier statement about "the ontological autodetermination of the world's peoples," the author here justly notes that "the problem is that each person is a people unto him- or herself." This caveat makes clear the immeasurable distance between the project of "ontological self-determination" and that of the "ontological determination of the self."<sup>4</sup> The latter (as when people

3. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Unloading the Self-Refutation Charge," *Common Knowledge* 2.2 (Fall 1993): 81–95.

4. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, personal communication.

essentialize around themselves the boundaries of “a” people or “a” culture) may well be a consequence of the former but is not, or should not be, a precondition. After all, within “a” people, there are always *other* people, and anthropology should take them seriously too. For some of the people I worked with in Corsica, being Corsican involved significant stable differences that required political (and anthropological) recognition. For others, being Corsican was just a version of being a French citizen like myself. Others did not live in either of those worlds and spoke to me as Europeans, Mediterraneans, teachers, or mothers. In cases such as these (which I suspect means most if not all cases with which anthropologists actually deal), allowing people to specify the conditions under which what they say is the case must crucially involve refraining from deciding who the “they” is, to begin with. Hence the importance of this new argument as a continuation of the author’s discussion in his essay “And” (2003). Viveiros de Castro’s earlier proposal for a science of the ontological self-determination of *the world’s peoples* was easy to misread as aligned with strategic essentialism and identity politics (I myself had done so).<sup>5</sup> But “taking seriously,” as defined here, does not rely on the prior stabilization of difference at the level of peoples or cultures; even less so, therefore, at the level of metaconstructs such as “the West.” As the author notes, the conditions of possibility of a “we” (and I would add, therefore, of a “they”) are always under interrogation.

I would argue that this shift from “ontological self-determination” to “taking seriously” leaves room for the so-called project of “anthropology at home” to play a very specific and important role (here I am moving from my comment to my proposal). Viveiros de Castro writes: “The viability of an authentic endo-anthropology, a desideratum that today finds itself at the top of the disciplinary agenda, for multiple reasons . . . seems to me, therefore, to depend crucially on the theoretical airing that exo-anthropology has always enabled, it being an outdoor or ‘field’ science in the sense that really matters.” However, this claim in turn raises the symmetrical question: how might an endo-anthropology fertilize an exo-anthropology? What, in other words, is the complement/obverse of “theoretical airing”? I think the greatest contribution of endo-anthropology might be to keep firmly in our sights the problematic nature of the endo/exo contrast itself. Starting off from the Western Bank “inward,” as it were, one finds just as much difference as one might find in setting sail to farther shores. Taking these “internal” differences seriously (that is, asking “internal to what?”) ultimately highlights the constitutive impossibility of endo-anthropology as a straightforward account of “one’s own people”—an impossibility that any ethnographer supposedly “at home” constantly comes up against: there is always more difference within! But

5. Matei Candea, *Corsican Fragments: Difference, Knowledge, and Fieldwork* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

this impossibility cannot be taken as axiomatic, a reason to abandon the project: it must be an ever-repeated attempt, an ever-repeated failure, which forcefully underscores that the endo/exo contrast is not a starting point but an outcome (of anthropology, among many other things).

This corrective is useful because, while defining the discipline by opposition to “where we start from” is crucial, such a definition too easily leads us to assume we know where that is. For instance, pointing out similarities (from an Amazonian perspective) between Western liberal intellectuals and Nazis might be a powerful rhetorical device, but figuring out the very important differences between the two (and indeed, where in that landscape, or out of it, one might place the tradition of Western antihumanism) remains an anthropological task, a task that requires us to take seriously all sorts of things that are close to us, including some that an exo-anthropology cannot take seriously (such as Western liberalism, in its various incarnations). Working with schoolteachers in Corsica or with scientists in the U.K. raises just these kinds of question. “Zeno and the Art of Anthropology” gives us an excellent account of what makes such endeavors anthropological: the commitment to taking seriously the multiplicities internal to what we thought was simply “us,” instead of either taking these worlds for granted or subjecting them to the usual critical unveiling. This is Viveiros de Castro’s gift to endo-anthropologists: a new language in which to claim their place at the anthropological table. In return, the ever-repeated experiment (and failure) of endo-anthropology offers a salutary reminder, to the rest of the discipline, that the line between those visions we *ought* to take seriously and those we ought *not* to is never fixed or self-evident.