

The Great Divide

Modern and premodern societies, according to classical anthropology, are separated by a Great Divide. The Great Divide has been a powerful concept in the modern imagination, positing civilization on one side of the abyss and the primitive and archaic on the other. Accusing premodern societies of animism was partly what sustained the idea of the Great Divide. Another aspect was reaching out to that other (the other as prefigured in the imagination: condemned to play the opposite of the modern), and finding there redemption of the constraints and evils of modernity. The latter has been called Primitivism, which, as is well known, plays a major role in the emergence of modern art.

But what makes moderns modern? A categorical distinction between Nature and Society, social scientists generally assume. Only moderns carefully differentiate between what belongs to the material hard core of nature and what are cultural symbolic meanings or social relations.

“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 (Donna Haraway), we believe our duty is to extirpate ourselves from those horrible mixtures.”(1)

Modernity is different in that it thinks it holds the truth about nature—not merely an image or social representation. The indisputable, universal truth is acquired through objectification, by distinguishing what is inherent to the object from what belongs to the knowing subject and has been unduly (or inevitably) projected onto the object. Only what can be objectified has a right to be called “real,” everything else enters the realm of “mere” image, representation, passion, fiction, fancy, fantasy.

“Century after century, colonial empire after colonial empire, the poor premodern collectives were accused of making a horrible mishmash of things and humans, of objects and signs, while their accusers finally separated them totally—to remix them at once on a scale unknown until now...”(2)

In ridding Nature of all ties it held to social, collective relations; in ‘distilling’ Nature into its material properties alone, uncontaminated by symbolic meanings, modernists have been free to manipulate it in ways unthinkable in pre-modern contexts. The price the moderns paid for this freedom was that they remained unable to conceptualize themselves in continuity with the premoderns. They had to think of themselves as absolutely different, they had to invent the Great Divide.

“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 [...]. In effect, the first is the exportation of the second.”(3)

Yet the nonhumans of this first divide take the form of an empire of facts established through an objectified nature that is devoid of meaning: from here stems the assertion that modernity “disenchanted” the world.

Primitivism

A milestone in the debate on the primitive and art is the critique of the *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* exhibition at MoMA in 1984, which presented modernist masterpieces next to "tribal" objects to expose their "affinities." The debate that evolved in the aftermath of the MoMA exhibition exposed the very category of the "primitive" as a Western fantasy and a master narrative projected onto its colonial others firmly situated in a spatial and temporal outside. The exhibition took place at a time when the category of the "primitive" could no longer pass uncontested. In the preceding decade, art had increasingly taken its cue from theoretical attacks on modernity's system of imaginary oppositions. The notorious dualisms had already been under attack. Feminism, queer studies, and postcolonial theory, among others, drew attention to exactly how these dualisms resulted in confining border regimes. Whether it be children, the insane, "primitives," the colonial other, women or gays, the differences monitored by the border regime and its respective institutions in each case, fundamentally relied upon rationalizing the "irrational." The other was a prisoner of an image.

But as much as that image of savagery unified the "rest" for the moderns, it inflicted terror and fragmentation on those locked inside it. On the frontier of modernization, rationality acts through irrationality, arbitrariness becomes systematic, and the power to install order is established on the power to induce separation, physically and socially. The imaginary expression of this primitivism can be found in the fragment, the un-cohered: the aesthetics of the collage, the flipside of rationalizing discipline and machinic fragmentation.

"Wildness challenges the unity of the symbol, the transcendent totalization binding the image to that which it represents. Wildness pries open this unity and in its place creates slippage. ...Wildness is the death space of signification,"(4) writes anthropologist Michael Taussig:

This space of death has a long and rich culture. It is where the social imagination has populated its metamorphizing images of evil and the underworld: in the Western tradition Homer, Virgil, the Bible, Dante, Hieronymos Bosch, the Inquisition, Rimbaud, Conrad's heart of darkness; in northwest Amazonian tradition, zones of vision, communication between terrestrial and supernatural beings, putrification, death, rebirth, and genesis, perhaps in the rivers and land of maternal milk bathed eternally in the subtle green light of coca leaves. With European conquest and colonization, these spaces of death blend into a common pool of key signifiers binding the transforming culture of the conquerer with that of the conquered. But the signifiers are strategically out of joint with what they signify. "If confusion is the sign of the times," wrote Artaud, "I see at the root of this confusion a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation." He wonders if it is that cleavage which is responsible for the revenge of things; "the poetry which is no longer within us and which we no longer succeed in finding in things suddenly appears on their wrong side." Marx pointed to the same disarrangement and rearrangement between us and things in the fetishism of commodities, wherein poetry suddenly appeared on the wrong side of things now animated. In modern history the fetishism of commodities rejuvenates the mythic density of the space of death—with the death of the subject as much as with new-found arbitrariness of the sign whereby a resurgent animism makes things human and humans things."(5)

Animism, originally a theory of the origins of religion, which its authors believed were to be found in the human mechanism of projecting human qualities onto objects of the environment, is the counterpart to the modern objectifying stance—it treats things as if they possessed the capacity for perception, communication, and agency. Its inventors believed that perceiving elements of Nature as if they were alive and had personhood was a primordial mistake, an incapacity of distinguishing between object and subject, reality and fiction, the inside and outside. Animism thus is a generic name for the mixtures of humans and things. Can animism be anything else than the imaginary opposition of modernity, that expanded mirror as fantasy space, simultaneously full of horrors and transformative fantasies?

Bruno Latour argues that we have, in fact, “never been modern.” The practice of modernity, he asserts, is diametrically opposed to its conceptualization and self-description. This practice intertwined Culture and Nature on a previous unknown scale, as exemplified by the ecological crisis and the impact of technology—but it was a practice that wasn’t accounted for officially. However, if indeed we have never been modern, the critique of modernity missed its target, too. Animism, Primitivism, the Great Divide: these concepts and their powerful imaginaries may tell us more about modernity than its others, and may also be a starting point for a different history in which other histories find a place.

(1) Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) *Ibid.*

(4) Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1987).

(5) *Ibid.*