

Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*

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Alejandro Martín López

Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET); Instituto de Ciencias Antropológicas; Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina
astroamlopez@hotmail.com

Astronomy in culture, as an interdisciplinary field, addresses the ways in which the diversity of human groups construct, now and in the past, knowledge and practices related to the sky. Because of this, astronomy in culture should be in close relationship with theoretical-methodological debates in social sciences. That is why this book is relevant to academics dedicated to this area of knowledge, as it deals with one of the most significant but also controversial contemporary theoretical trends in social sciences since the end of the 1990s: the so-called “ontological turn”. This is a theoretical and methodological perspective that is currently present in philosophy, the study of science and technology (STS), archaeology and anthropology. Although its roots are older, it has gained prominence since the end of the 1990s. It is not a homogenous current, but it presents multiple variants and also assumes specific characteristics in each academic discipline involved. It is the forms that the ontological turn has taken in anthropology that are of particular importance for astronomy in culture. A sample of this relevance is the roundtable discussion on this very subject that was carried out at the meeting of SEAC 2018 in Graz, Austria.

The text addressed here is written by two of the most active contemporary representatives of the ontological turn in anthropology, Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen. Both are part of what we could call the “second generation” of the ontological turn in anthropology, after the “founding generation” (Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold, amongst others). However, a warning must first be made at this point: although the book attempts to systematise this current of thought within anthropology and to situate it in the general context of the social sciences and anthropological thought, it does not do so from a critical perspective. The authors seek – as they make clear from the introduction – to present the particular version of

the ontological turn of which they are a part, which we might call the “methodological ontological turn”. In doing so, they give an account of the overall theoretical current, but always focusing on the form of it to which they adhere. In fact, it could be said that the text has a clear programmatic and apologetic intention, in that the specific variant of the ontological turn that the authors discuss is presented as the most authentic and profound interpretation of it, as well as surpassing all other contemporary theoretical approaches in anthropology. This must be taken into account by readers: although legitimate, in that the author’s stance is explicitly stated, their position often leads them to be unresponsive to criticisms from other perspectives on the ontological turn and from other theoretical currents.

The structure of the work is straightforward, and very consistent with its programmatic and systematising purpose. However, although the preface, introduction, first chapter and conclusion are clear, the work elsewhere uses language that in many cases is obscure and excessively abstract (a criticism that has been made of many theoretical works in this current) and not easily accessible for those unfamiliar with readings on anthropological theory of the 1980s and 1990s. The applied examples are few, and not sufficiently detailed to compensate for this inconvenience. Further, the programmatic nature of the book means that criticisms are presented in a very simplistic way, while the answers offered are presented as being of universal application. For a theoretical approach that appeals to permanent conceptual experimentation, this is not a good sign. Three chapters focusing on three particular figures – Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro – are especially complex to read, which is particularly a shame in the case of Viveiros de Castro, as he is himself one of the clearest and most direct authors of the ontological turn. His own classic presentation of his ideas (Viveiros de Castro 2002) is easier to digest.

The preface, introduction and conclusion present the ontological turn as being a response to the crisis of postmodern anthropology in the 1980s. For the authors, this anthropology, in its critique of structuralism, emphasis on language and reflection on the role of the anthropologist, led to the dead end of the “representational” model – the crisis of what they understood as the basic “ontology” of “Euro-American” science, meaning its idea of “one world and many cultural perspectives on it”. The rise of phenomenological anthropology and the ontological turn in the 1990s, the authors suggest, are the two theoretical alternatives to postmodern anthropology.

The authors characterise their variant of the ontological turn as “methodological” because its main objective is to use the experience of the ethnographic field to question the ontological assumptions of anthropology itself. This is not, though, a question of replacing one ontology with another, but rather of opting for a permanent state of “ontological inquiry”: for the authors the ontological turn extends and brings to an end point ideas already present in previous anthropological approaches. The three key axes of this project are *reflexivity*, *conceptualisation* and *experimentation*. Regarding reflexivity, the authors emphasise that innovation will come from questioning the anthropologist’s assumptions about what phenomena and beings could come into play in each ethnographic field. To take the “native” point of view seriously would be to accept and

acknowledge that the world their interlocutors describe involves entities and relationships that might be “fantasy” for the researcher. The emphasis here is on not taking this as a “native belief”, though, but as the description of a possible world and extracting the consequences of this for an understanding of the experience of that ethnographic field. This leads to the second axis, that of conceptualisation. In this context, this would be a question of submitting the analytical concepts of the researcher to criticism in order to be able to account for the specific ethnographic experience that is being addressed. The authors insist on not interpreting “metaphorically” the ideas of the interlocutors in the field. On the contrary, they propose that taking these ideas “seriously” implies broadening the analytical categories to be able to account for them. The third axis, experimentation, would consist precisely in using all these ethnographic experiences and the transformations they produce in the researcher’s analytical categories as a source of knowledge.

The choice of the term “ontology” – sometimes replaced by “cosmology” – also seeks to emphasise the importance and seriousness that should be given to the categories with which our interlocutors in the field describe the world. However, the authors fall into the mistake of thinking naively about these categories. We must not forget everything we have learned about how social, political and economic factors influence the production of all types of knowledge, including scientific knowledge. The socially constructed nature of scientific knowledge does not imply that we do not take seriously the world it describes, and in the same way, giving credence to the ideas of other human groups does not mean ignoring the social character of their construction. In each society there are different levels of conceptualisation, different types of discourse and diverse articulations between language, action and perception. The monolithic use of the term “ontology” erases the useful analytical distinctions that are established by, on the one hand, categories such as ontology-cosmology and, on the other, the family of categories that includes habitus, cosmovision-worldview and lifeworld (*lebenswelt*). In the same way, in their analysis the authors generally fail to reflect on the ways in which position in the social field, social trajectories and power relationships affect the ways in which people build their knowledge. Social sciences have neither the goal of nor the tools to establish which ideas about the world are the most metaphysically consistent. They are instead involved in understanding relationships among the different aspects of the life of social groups, including their different types of knowledge. To avoid all these problems, a deeper dialogue with what Bloor (1991) calls the “strong programme in the sociology of knowledge” (SSK) would be desirable.

Chapter 1, in which the authors contrast their own variant of the ontological turn with other perspectives, presents in a simplistic and almost caricatured way some theoretical projects that could be of great interest to those who work in cultural astronomy. For instance, the works of Marisol De la Cadena (2010), Mario Blaser (2013) and Arturo Escobar (2007) on the “cosmopolitics of knowledge” seek to show the way in which the geopolitics of knowledge gives voice to some ontologies and silences others, while Michael W. Scott (2014) explores the “ontologies” or “cosmologies” that for him are the baselines that organise the experience of the world of different societies. Yet such thinking is not prop-

erly represented in the text, although their presence demonstrates how the bibliography of the book can serve as a starting point to explore other interesting options.

The above-mentioned chapters on Wagner, Strathern and Viveiros de Castro cast them as representatives of three great anthropological traditions – North American cultural anthropology, British social anthropology and French structural and post-structural anthropology – that reformulated, respectively, the key concepts of culture, social relations and structure. This scaffolding, though, although very interesting in itself, also shows certain limitations; in particular, the great classical tradition of German anthropology, and theoretical currents that have arisen from academies outside the big “Euro-American” centres, are totally absent. Some of these referents (such as De la Cadena, Blaser and Escobar) are mentioned, but only briefly, and to use Viveiros de Castro as a representative of French anthropology while ignoring his links with Latin American, and especially Brazilian, academies is symptomatic. In fact, in terms of the ontological turn project itself, it would be very illustrative to shed light on how Viveiros de Castro, proclaimed as its founding father, was driven to appeal to his “French” credentials to gain the possibility of having a voice in the international theoretical debate. As a genealogical scheme of the ontological turn, this volume has other significant absences. There is an over-accentuated emphasis on the novelty of the “ontological turn”, leaving elements that had already been thematised by previous authors in the shadows. For instance, there are the crucial contributions of Irving Hallowell (1953, 1955, 1975 [1960]) to the use of the category “ontology”, and the proposition of the existence of “ontologies” in American aboriginal groups that are very different from those of the “Western” tradition (Turner Strong 2012; Reynoso 2018, 26). However, absences of this sort are also frequent in other texts of this nature (Reynoso 2018, 26).

The chapter on Wagner focuses on his controversial concept of “culture as invention”, showing how, starting from the conceptualisations of his Daribi interlocutors in Papua New Guinea, he questioned the analytical notion of culture itself – a crucial notion for the cultural anthropology tradition in which Wagner is rooted. It is certainly important that the authors address this development, but the explanation is unclear, and the examples given to demonstrate Wagner’s method in action unconvincing.

However, it is the chapter on Strathern that is the least accomplished of the book. Certainly, it is not a straightforward task to address the way in which she reconceptualises the category of “relation” or explain her crucial role in understanding the Melanesian notion of person; but the text is not persuasive in its presentation and assumes an audience already very familiar with her ideas. If the book is addressed to a narrow and specific audience, the chapter should have focused more directly on her links with the ontological turn; whereas if written for a broader audience it ought to have tried to explain her central concepts more clearly, especially those of a methodological nature such as “self-differentiation” and “scaling”. Her ideas are presented as completely new proposals, ignoring for example similarities between her idea of “dividual” and notions in classic works by Marcel Mauss (1985 [1938]) and Maurice Leenhardt (1979 [1947]).

The chapter on Viveiros de Castro is the most successful of the three devoted to the works of the founders of the ontological turn, perhaps because of the clarity of Viveiros

de Castro's own writing (noted above). However, the authors' failure to recognise the limitations and criticisms of their theoretical perspective is noteworthy here. Thus, for example, a footnote on page 167 on the ethnographic applications of perspectivism leaves an impression of its general and universally accepted application to a great variety of scenarios – yet this ignores the intense debate that has taken place in South America regarding the relevance of Viveiros de Castro's model to Amazonian societies (Turner 2009; Brightman *et al.* 2010; Halbmayer 2012; Ramos 2012) or the possibility of extending it to other Amerindian societies (Wright 2016; López and Altman 2017).

Chapters 5 and 6 act as a kind of reflection on the application of the methodological proposals of the ontological turn to specific fields, chosen because they test important methodological aspects. However, it is striking that during the authors' analysis of the various cases they seem to lose detail, diversity of voices, historical density and processual character. Although some brushstrokes of ethnographic density are initially provided, the analyses are based on a kind of "ethnographic present" that is timeless, ubiquitous and homogeneous, with little or no effective role for change, the variety of scales, the relational character of social identities or the "hybridity" of many processes. This is a point that has been mentioned by numerous critics of the ontological turn (Ramos 2012; Citro and Gómez 2013; Reynoso 2018, 5, 22). In the same way, there is a tendency to give little place to diversity in the presentation of "Euro-American" thinking (Bartolomé 2014). Another major absentee in the case studies presented are power relations – another criticism that has also been made recurrently about works relating to the ontological turn (Ramos 2012; Citro and Gómez 2013; Reynoso 2018, 5).

Chapter 5 is articulated around the idea of thinking about "things as concepts". A summary of tendencies in the study of "things" is proposed, the axis of which would be the deep imbrication between humans and "things"; but the field is separated into "humanists", who would maintain the relevance of the distinction between humans and things, and "post-humanists", who would seek to transcend it. It is in this last variant that the authors locate writers like Latour, Ingold and their own methodological ontological turn. The chapter draws on ideas in a previous book co-edited by Holbraad (Henare *et al.* 2007); at the core of the proposal is the idea of using what the participants in the field say about "things" to suggest to the analysts new ways of understanding what they are. They even ask themselves how things could "speak for themselves", coming to consider a "pragmatology" that practically ends up being a "non-naturalistic" alternative to the "natural sciences". The first case explored is a study by Holbraad himself (Holbraad 2007) of the *ache* in African-Cuban divination, a term related to power and simultaneously to the consecrated powder used in divination rituals. The second case is Pedersen's (2007) work on the *ongod* or talismans of shamanic spirits in Mongolia. Both cases are interesting and present inspiring ideas but suffer from the schematic and oversimplified use of the ethnography that I mentioned above.

Unfortunately for those who are dedicated to archaeoastronomy, the book does not, either in this chapter or elsewhere, deal in detail with the implications of the ontological turn for archaeology. Among the references that are mentioned (p. 31) and that the interested reader could explore is another text by Holbraad himself (Holbraad 2009)

and one by Alberti – although a different text by the latter author (Alberti 2016) would have been more useful. In particular, a discussion of the contrasts or similarities with landscape archaeology (Tilley 1994; Criado Boado 1999; David and Thomas 2008), of such importance in contemporary archaeoastronomy, would have been very desirable.

Chapter 6 aims to go beyond the concept of “relation”, to exemplify the character of permanent conceptual experimentation that the authors assign to their theoretical proposition. In order to do this, they examine a case that they consider especially complex: conversions to Christianity in Melanesia, understood as the passage of multiple relations with non-human beings to the belief in a single transcendent God. The authors propose that this is a rupture or the disappearance of pre-existing relations. The approach that the chapter takes to these issues is based on the “anthropology of Christianity” promoted by Joel Robbins (2004). The relationship between these two theoretical currents is not casual: both present structural similarities in the way in which they have been installed in academia, ignoring many conclusions from the field of debate in which they are situated. Thus, the treatment they give to Christian experiences such as confession or conversion seems to ignore the long anthropological tradition on these issues. This allows the authors to sustain their hypothesis, despite other reflections on conversion and cosmological change that suggest different things with important implications for a change in astronomical conceptions (López and Altman 2017). Also, it is not clear how the authors propose to go beyond the concept of “relations” in this ethnographic case.

The conclusion recapitulates what was written in the introduction. The synthesis that the authors make of post-structuralist anthropology proposes the ontological methodological turn as being the great possibility of theoretical renewal in contemporary anthropology. Here, the ideas repeated throughout the book that propose this approach as the only alternative are nuanced a little, and the antecedents of their central concepts are recognised a little more (p. 285), but in the context of the whole work these nuances are insufficient. Finally, the conclusion seeks to respond to repeated criticisms that the ontological turn lacks political commitment. This attempt is shipwrecked because it deploys a naive notion of the political dimension of human existence. The lack of dialogue with political anthropology, and especially with the geopolitics of knowledge, is remarkable. This certainly reflects the difficulties that their methodology suggests when accounting for the type of task that is proposed: that knowledge is a source of power and power is involved in the production and management of knowledge, including that which we produce as scientists and that which is produced by the groups we study.

In summary, this is an interesting book that gives to those who work in the field of astronomy in culture a general view from the inside of these important movements in contemporary anthropological theory. However, it is hardly a guide when trying to implement their proposal or even some aspects of it. Nor is it a critical balance of the pros and cons of this particular theoretical current. We believe that the preface, introduction and conclusion can be a good first step for exploring these developments, and that the bibliography will undoubtedly be useful for exploring specific aspects in more depth. For a critical assessment, however, readers should look elsewhere.

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