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Ghassan Hage
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Critical anthropological thought and the radical political imaginary today

Ghassan Hage
University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract
This article begins by defining the specificity of critical anthropological thought and the way it can articulate with radical politics. It shows how the anthropology of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro offers a paradigmatic example of an anthropology that is both critical and radical, highlighting both the critical and political nature of Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism and his concept of multinaturalism. It shows how this concept can offer a political and critical perspective that forms a basis for the unification of the concerns of both ‘primitivist’ and ‘modernist’ anthropology.

Keywords
Critical anthropology, multinaturalism, primitivism, radical politics, the ungovernable, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

What kind of imaginary inspires radical politics today and what role can critical anthropological thought have in the formation of this imaginary? Only a few years ago, this question might have come across as very ‘1960s’ and dated. Today it seems of increasing pertinence. It is so thanks to the growth in radical politics that has marked world events in recent times, and which has included the various forms of anti-globalization and ecological protests, the Spanish ‘indignados’, the spate of Arab revolutionary upheavals and, most recently, the various ‘occupy’ movements that have mushroomed internationally. But, as I will argue, it is also so thanks to an increasing reaffirmation of the critical anthropological tradition that we have been witnessing since the turn of the century.

In their work, Commonwealth, Hardt and Negri (2009, 123–4) mobilize the work of anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in their search for a way to conceive the struggle for what they call alter-modernity. I want to contend that this rapprochement between radical political theorists and the anthropology of Viveiros de

Corresponding author:
Ghassan Hage, Department of Anthropology, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Vic. 3010, Australia
Email: ghage@unimelb.edu.au
Castro is more than a mere isolated event. Rather, it points to a more pronounced opening in the radical political imaginary to the offerings of the critical anthropological tradition. The anthropology of Viveiros de Castro is not, of course, the only way this critical tradition expresses itself. Nonetheless, particularly because of the way it pro-actively weds the critical and the radical, I want to consider it here as an avant-gardist ideal type of how critical anthropological thought can generate new problematics that are of pertinence to radical politics.

Critical anthropological thought, as I will define it below, has not often had a prominent role to play in the conception of radical politics. The imaginary that propelled radical politics in the modern era and up until the 1970s has raised issues and questions that called on a critical sociological tradition more than a critical anthropological one. However, as I will argue below, the historical circumstances that gave rise to this quasi-symbiotic relation between critical sociological thought and radical politics have themselves been waning. While critical sociological thought remains an important and necessary anchorage of any radical politics, we are witnessing a transformation whereby some of the new key issues confronting radical politics have an increased affinity with critical anthropological thought.

I will start by explaining what I mean by ‘critical thought’ and in what way the ‘critical anthropological tradition’ is different from other critical traditions. I then examine some of the key features that mark the transformation of the current radical political imaginary and its relation to critical intellectual production. After that, I analyse aspects of the critical anthropological tradition as represented in the work of Viveiros de Castro and the way it articulates itself to the radical imaginary. Finally, I reflect on other ways in which critical anthropology can participate in the on-going transformation of the radical political imaginary.

On the nature of the critical anthropological tradition

Whatever discipline in the humanities and the social sciences one studies at university today, this discipline is bound to provide the student with a number of domains of knowledge that express its particularity. Among other things, it will provide an account of its own history, of the debates aiming to define the specificity of its object, of the positive knowledge it has accumulated, and of the research methods and the theories that are specific to it.

Of course, a student might find that there is a lot in common between certain aspects of one discipline and another, and that indeed some units are taught as multi-disciplinary units. It might even be hard to work out in some instances what is the difference between a sociological, a historical, a political science or an anthropological approach to a particular socio-cultural formation. Indeed it can be said that this is increasingly the case, and I am keen to say, so as not to let someone misinterpret my purpose here, that I think that this multi-disciplinarity or even trans-disciplinarity is both inevitable and good. Nonetheless, there are certain specific problematics and particularities that emerge in the history of a discipline’s
development, and what interests me here is one specific domain where disciplines develop such particularities: the domain of critical thought.

There are many ways in which ‘critical thought’ can be defined but it is important right from the start to make clear that critical thought is not ‘radical’ thought. ‘Critical’ is an intellectual property of thought not a political one, even if there is a clear affinity between critical thought and radical politics. Sociologists and anthropologists might or might not define themselves explicitly in political terms. They also might or might not give their politics primacy in orienting their research. But when they engage in critical thinking they are inevitably associating themselves with a politics that breaks routinized adhesion to a given social order. Nonetheless, it remains important to stress the primarily intellectual nature of the critical.

Critical thinking is most generally associated with the way it enables us to reflexively move outside of ourselves such that we can start seeing ourselves in ways we could not have possibly seen ourselves, our culture or our society before. It is in this sense that disciplines have particular ways of being critical: they have particular ways of taking us outside of ourselves. One critical dimension of historical knowledge, for example, is that it can take us outside of ourselves in time. Depending on which historical tradition one is working from, historical critical thought can allow us to reflect on the way our history has shaped us, or it can help us look at ourselves differently by allowing us to compare ourselves with past versions of ourselves as it were. Foucault’s ‘history of the present’ is a well-known example of a critical history. A critical sociology also takes us outside of ourselves. It not only allows us to capture the existence of social relations, structures and forces that are a *sui generis* reality and as such exist ‘outside of us’ (such as the classical Durkheimian idea that there are such things as ‘social facts’), it also allows us to examine the causal power of these social structures and social forces, and ascertain the way they work to help make us into what we are. Most importantly, critical sociology has helped us see these relations as relations of power and domination that reproduce a certain given order of things and, as such, invites us to think the possibility of resisting or even undermining such dominant order of things.

A critical sociology produces what Bourdieu (1990: 15) has called processes of de-naturalization and de-fatalization. That is, by helping us see ourselves, and the social spaces that we inhabit, as ‘social constructs’ and/or as ‘objects of struggle’, it makes us see our lives as less to be taken for granted and unchanging than they might, at first sight, appear to be. In doing so, critical sociology induces a hope in the possibility of social change. Likewise, we can look at psychoanalysis as a kind of critical psychology, it takes us outside of where our ego dwells such that we start seeing that our ego is far from being a ‘master in its own house’ (Freud, 1953: 135), as it safely likes to imagine itself to be. Psychoanalysis as a body of critical thought gives us a far more complex and dynamic image of what we are as a form of subjectivity, and of how we come to be what we are. These are obviously very broad examples, and it would be interesting to do a wider study of the ways various kinds of thought take us outside of ourselves.
In the process of its historical emergence the anthropological tradition has also provided us with various modes of critical thinking; some are very similar to sociology, in so far as every anthropology necessarily involves a sociology, but there is also a specific critical function that has emerged from the anthropological tradition that is quite unique to it.

It is well known that anthropology as a project began as a study of human cultures that are situated outside the dynamic of our capitalist modernity. This was so even if, paradoxically, it was that dynamic itself that was behind the very possibility of the anthropological encounter between modern and non-modern peoples. And even if that very process was part of making what was outside modernity inside modernity. It is in this sense, as many have argued, that we can say that early anthropology captures what was outside modernity in the very process of it becoming inside modernity, with anthropology itself being part of that very assemblage of capture. Nonetheless, capture is not domestication, and even domestication itself can never be a total process.

The people outside modernity that the early anthropologists studied were people who at least partially remained radically different from us not just in modes of living or technological capacity but in terms of their cosmology, their conception and their sense of reality, and the way they dwell in and relate to their immediate surroundings. This is what we have come to call sometimes self-critically as ‘the savage slot’ (Trouillot, 2003), that is, the study of radical cultural alterity: a mode of difference that is so seriously different from us that we cannot simply think it and make sense of it just by relying on our socially and historically constrained imagination. Such difference disorients us to begin with and in the process of helping us reorient ourselves within it and in relation to it, anthropology widens our sphere of what is socially and culturally possible. This anthropology was given a multiplicity of names such as ‘primitivist anthropology’ or ‘anthropology of pre-literate people’ or ‘pre-state people’... etc. The category one chooses today is dependent on one’s intellectual sophistication and desire to be ‘politically correct’. Yet, regardless of which category is deployed, this anthropological project rested on the assumption that: (1) there is such a thing as radical cultural alterity, (2) it is nonetheless knowable by those of us who are variously grounded in the processes of modernity, and (3) knowing such radically different cultures involves a specific kind of labour (ethnography) for, to say as we did above that ‘to be captured does not make you domesticated’ also means that to be captured by modernity does not immediately make you easily knowable.

In the conclusion to a lecture given in Japan around the topic of ‘Anthropology in the face of the problems of the modern world’ and which succinctly summarizes the ethos behind all his work, Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that:

Anthropologists are here to witness that the manner in which we live, the values that we believe in, are not the only possible ones; that other modes of life, other value systems have permitted, and continue to permit other human communities of finding happiness. Anthropology, thus invites us to temper our beliefs in our own importance,
to respect other ways of living, and to put ourselves in question through the knowledge of other customs that astonish us, shock us or even make us repulsed. (Lévi-Strauss, 2011: 51)

It is in such a project that we can see the prototypical moment of critical anthropological thought, the specific mode in which anthropology takes us outside of ourselves, come to life. It does so by telling us that, regardless of what and who we are, we, as individuals and as a society, can dwell in the world in a completely different way from the way we dwell in it at any given moment. This critical anthropological thought does not therefore only challenge us by telling us that there are people who live differently from the way we live. It challenges us by telling us that they are of relevance to us. The other has, but we can have, different ways of conceiving sexual relations, kinship, our relation to plants, animals and the landscape, causality, sickness...etc. It can therefore be summarized by the very simple but also paradoxically powerful formulation: we can be radically other than what we are. It is paradoxical because in the very idea of ‘we can be’ other than what we are lies the idea that ‘we already are’ other than ourselves. Our otherness is always dwelling within us: there is always more to us than we think, so to speak.

One should immediately note here how this critical anthropological knowledge differs from other disciplinary critical thought. It differs not just in the fact that it takes us outside of ourselves culturally rather than temporally, socially or psychologically but also in the way it posits a relation between the outside-of-ourselves space it takes us to and the space in which we are dwelling.

Here is the crucial difference that I want to emphasize: one can note that for certain standard forms of critical history, critical sociology and critical psychology, we are taken outside of ourselves (or outside of our ego in the case of psychoanalysis) into domains that are seen to have a causal role in making us what we are: our history, the social structures and the governmental processes in which we are embedded, the unconscious are all forces that are both outside and inside ourselves. They contribute to making us what we are. In the case of critical anthropology, however, we are taken outside of ourselves without there being such a direct causal nexus between this outside and ourselves: learning about the cosmology of the Arrernte might tell us that there are ways of relating to the surrounding universe and to the flora and fauna that are radically different from the way we moderns relate to them, but in no way are we invited to see a causal relation between the cosmology of the Australian Indigenous Arrernte people and the constitution of our own. And yet, we are still invited to think that the Arrernte’s way of life does have a bearing on our lives. That there is always something in us that allows us to become Arrernte.

Consequently, we can say that critical sociology, history and psychoanalysis work critically through giving us access to forces that are outside of us but that are acting on us causally, continuously constituting us into what we are (the social structures, the past, the unconscious). Anthropology on the other hand works critically through a comparative act that constantly exposes us to the
possibility of being other than what we are. It makes that possibility of being other act as a force in the midst of our lives. Critical sociology invites or initiates a reflexive analytical act that induces an understanding: it invites us to see how our social world is constituted and the way it can be unmade and remade by us. Critical anthropology, appropriately enough, is more akin to the shamanic act of inducing a haunting: indeed it encourages us to feel haunted at every moment of our lives by what we are/could be that we are not. In this sense critical sociology uncovers social forces and social relations that are believed to be already having a causal effect on us regardless of whether we are aware of them or not (class relations, gender relations, etc.), critical anthropology invites us to become aware of and to animate certain social forces and potentials that are lying dormant in our midst. In so doing it incites what was not causal to become so.

As it should be clear by now, what I refer to as ‘critical anthropological thought’ means ‘this mode of being critical that has emerged within the discipline of anthropology’. Likewise, ‘critical sociological thought’ is ‘that mode of being critical that has emerged within the discipline of sociology’. They are not referents to what sociologists and anthropologists necessarily do but to historical points of emergence. Anthropologists, sociologists and others can engage in both or either critical anthropological or critical sociological thought wherever there is an inclination to do so. Historically speaking however, it is critical sociological thought that has dominated the imaginary of radical thinkers whatever discipline they belong to. Throughout the 20th century, and while there was no shortage of anthropologists emphasizing the critical side of the discipline, radical anthropology was nonetheless predominantly concerned with sociological questions largely grounded within a mainly Marxist paradigm: uncovering relations of colonial domination, struggling against and deconstructing racist ideologies, fighting essentialist conceptions of culture...etc. This dominance occurred because radical politics itself in the 19th and 20th century centred its political quest on such critical sociological rather than critical anthropological questions.

On the radical political imaginary

Throughout capitalist modernity there has been a politics that saw institutional and conventional political practices as unable to deal with certain social problems proclaimed to be fundamental by those who espouse such politics. These problems are perceived to be generated also by the very nature of society of which conventional politics is considered an integral part. Poverty, inequality, exploitation, colonialism/imperialism, racism, sexism, alienation, rampant materialism and individualism, the deterioration in the quality of social bonds and, more recently, the ecological crisis are all issues that have generated a radical politics that sees a solution to such problems as impossible within existing social, economic and political frameworks. Instead, a total transformation of society is seen as the answer. What I am calling the radical political imaginary here is a general cognitive and affective structure that, rather than being an empirically minute description of the
various features of a politics of radical change, portrays and arranges such features according to the strategic and emotional investment in them.

For example, the radical political imaginary always contains images of the perceived enemies: the state, the capitalists, America, the media . . . . The importance that one or the other of those enemies acquires within a particular radical imaginary does not necessarily have to do with any empirical evaluation of the importance of such an enemy. That is, whether the state is imagined as all-powerful and all-intrusive ‘substance’, whether ‘America’ is imagined as omnipresent everywhere working at subverting everybody else’s will for freedom, or whether the media is seen as a pervasive network capable of capturing and shaping all the minds, or ‘brainwashing’ them, as some less intellectually sophisticated radicals would have it, is more than a mere observation of facts. They derive their particular importance from a specific politico-affective conception of the sources of society’s ills that a radical subjectivity has invested itself in struggling against. A particular radical imaginary is therefore the product of what Bourdieu (2000) would call a specific radical illusio: not just a conception of the world but an investment in it.

The same goes for other imagined components of the radical imaginary such as the forces perceived as having an interest in bringing about change (the masses, the working class, the colonized, the poor, the multitude) or the forces imagined as capable of leading a radical uprising (the party, the intellectuals, neighbourhood organizations); and of course, no radical imaginary is complete without fantasies of what a post-revolutionary society should be like: lots of freedom, lots of equality, lots of sex . . . etc.

A radical political imaginary can be specific to an individual, though at least certain key features of it are more often than not collective and shared. In much the same way, the dimensions of life deemed important and requiring radical change can be a reflection of personal choice but they can also reflect broader historical changes. A clear example of the latter is the way ecological questions have become more important features of the radical political imaginary than they were in the 19th century. Similarly, a new dimension was added to the radical political imaginary when the feminist declaration that ‘the personal is political’ caught radical people’s imagination.

Which components make up the structure of the radical political imaginary and how much importance is assigned to each of these components is always subject to change and is dependent on on-going struggles within radical politics. The debates between Marxists and anarchists over the question of the state and the need for a revolutionary party reflected itself in a more general struggle over the place of radical political organizations in the imaginary conception of the unfolding of revolutionary change. Likewise, the debates between Marxist communists and the followers of what they dubbed as ‘idealist’ or ‘utopian communists’ such as Fourier and Saint-Simon was a struggle over the relative importance that should be given in the radical political imaginary to the labour of detailing and living the communist fantasy prior to revolutionary change.
Marxists were clearly moved by an alter-capitalist communist fantasy. But their politics was guided by a political imaginary that highlighted the anti-capitalist analytic moment over the imaginative labour of conceiving what a communist society would entail. The analysis of the present socio-economic tendencies and contradictions in the development of capitalism, and the political organization of the proletarian forces of anti-capitalism, were always supposed to take precedence. This was how Marxists famously imagined themselves to be engaging in the hard work of fusing both social science and revolution.

More generally, and in relation to the above, we can say that the structure of the radical political imaginary at any given time is characterized by a certain balance between ‘anti’ politics and ‘alter’ politics: oppositional politics aimed at resisting and defeating the existing order, and a politics aimed at providing an alternative to the political order. It is here that one can see the different affinity that critical sociological and historical thought and critical anthropological thought have with those two dimensions of the radical political imaginary. Critical sociological and historical thought has often been mobilized in conjunction with the oppositional ‘anti’ dimension of politics, since the latter is always concerned with the social and historical conditions of radical practice. It is critical sociology that allows oppositional politics to move outside of itself and outside of an existing social order, both to understand it and to find within it the spaces where it can maximize its oppositional impact to it. The ‘alter’ dimension of politics, on the other hand, finds a more useful resource in an anthropological critical thought that aims, as we have argued above, at taking us outside of ourselves precisely to continuously remind us of the actual possibilities of being other to ourselves.

This alter/anti opposition is not absolute of course and never an either/or question, but it is clear that at various phases during the historical transformation of the radical imaginary, one side has had the upper hand over the other. It is equally clear that the rise and dominance of Marxism at the expense of the ‘anarchists’ and the ‘utopian socialists’ and its hegemony over the radical political imaginary from the late 19th century until the late 20th century has reflected and reinforced a socio-historical situation where it is the ‘anti’ side of the equation that has dominated radical politics. ‘What are the social and historical conditions of possibility of change?’, ‘What form does social subjugation take within a given social formation?’, ‘How to critique relations of power and domination?’ and ‘What are the social forces capable of producing change?’ are all so many questions that emanate from the profound dominance, but also the necessity, mind you, of an ‘anti’ politics. It is these imperatives that explain the dominance of critical sociological thought within the radical political imaginary, since the latter is equipped precisely to answer such crucial questions.

To most observers of radical politics, however, it is very clear that today, we are increasingly moving into an era where the radical imaginary is starting to be as dominated by the problematic of the ‘alternative’ as it is with the problematic of the opposition, as ‘alter’ as it is ‘anti’. Whether such a move proves to be a fertile ground for a more effective politics of change remains to be seen. What is
nonetheless certain is that this has given radical politics a qualitative difference
easily perceived in movements such as the ‘indignados’ of Spain, the Egyptian and
Tunisian popular uprisings, and the ‘Occupy’ collectives around the globe.
Whether in the importance of occupying and dwelling in central spaces (in contrast
to the ‘passing’ demonstrations of the past), or in the plural internal politics
that govern those spaces, or in the emphasis on peaceful confrontation with the
authorities, what we see is higher awareness of an intimate relation between means
and ends where the first is not as easily sacrificed on the altar of the second as it has
been in the radical politics of the past. It is this emphasis on laying the grounds for
alternative realities that has opened the way for a relative rise in the importance of
critical anthropological thought, not, let it be clear, as an alternative, but as a
complement to critical sociological thought’s search for efficient oppositional
politics.

The new radical imaginary

From the rise of the Soviet Union to the Iranian revolution via the various
anti-colonial revolutions of the 20th century, a history of ‘anti-capitalist’ and
‘anti-colonial’ revolutions ending up producing societies that had very little
that was revolutionary and too many features in common with the societies
they toppled has discredited a politics that is dominated by an ‘anti’ ethos with-
out worrying about what comes after the oppositional moment.

Furthermore, since the gradual decline in ‘working-class’ centred politics, it is
more an anarchist 1968 spirit rather than the search for an avant-garde political
party that dominates the radical imaginary of the new social movements that have
become the main driving force of radical politics in the later 20th and early 21st
century. Michel Foucault gave what is perhaps the most important theoretical
understanding of this politics in his theorization of the specific forms that resistance
to the rise of pastoral governmentality and its historical offshoots takes. He showed
the necessarily fragmentary nature of such an oppositional politics, which no
longer aimed at either the appropriation or the destruction of the power of the
sovereign but at an endless destabilization by ‘life’ of the very mechanisms of power
that are constantly aiming at capturing, controlling and bio-politicizing it. It is a
similar understanding of power and resistance that gave rise to the Deleuzian
notion of the ‘multitude’, further developed by Negri and Hardt.

As importantly, the ecological crisis has increasingly necessitated a ‘green’ pol-
tical imaginary that rose above the left–right political spectrum. For example, in
industrial politics, rather than simply restricting itself to a politics of taking sides
with labour against capital, radical green politics required an anti-economic growth
stand that could not easily accommodate either labour’s or capitalist interests. It
required a shift towards a politics putting in question the general direction of
industrial production itself and, even more fundamentally, the way human
beings’ relation to nature has been imagined and lived. Likewise anti-globalization
activism, and despite the ‘anti’ that is part of its very definition has increasingly
defined itself less in terms of its opposition to globalization and more in relation to its search for an ‘alter-globalization’. One can say, that the radical imaginary today is the product of both a social imperative: emerging social spaces that lie outside the existing order of governmentality and intelligibility and requiring an imaginative politics that can think them in their difference, and a political imperative: existing struggles which have generated an endless stalemate are increasingly requiring a new politics that comes from outside the existing space of conventional political possibilities.

The social imperative points to new realities that have begun to emerge as the capitalist modern assemblage that has been expanding, governing and colonizing the planet for the last centuries has started to shrink. The social spaces that we have come to occupy and dwell in are losing their apparent homogeneity and internal coherence and generating new alter-modern spaces lying outside existing governmentality, outside the dominant instrumental/rational logics of modernity and even outside existing symbolic systems altogether. Such spaces can sometimes be re-integrated into capitalist rationality, such as the rise in new age belief systems and alternative medicine. But they can also be spaces that are much more difficult to integrate in any of the contemporary governmental assemblages of modernity.

To be clear, even when they are captured by the capitalist process in the forms of what Beth Povinelli (2000) has aptly called ‘Popontology’, these forms of spirituality and irrationalism remain cracks in the logic of modernity. Importantly, however, ‘popontology’ is not the only mode of conceiving life in such alternative spaces. Deep ecology has certainly generated pop-animism but that is not all it has generated. In my own work, particularly in relation to the impasse in which the western governance of immigrants from Islamic backgrounds has found itself, I have argued that this encounter is generating ‘ungovernable’ spaces that cannot be easily understood or governed either by the logic of multiculturalism or the logic of assimilation. It invites us to think outside the existing governmental parameters of conceiving of intercultural relations (Hage, 2011a).

The ungovernable, by its very nature, is that which becomes immune to the possibility of capture by any existing political assemblage and as such requires a radical rethinking of the very nature of politics itself within it. The ungovernable exhausts the conventional political imagination that is part of a particular form of governmentality and as such demands a radical politics that comes from nowhere, as it were. It can make of the search for an alter-politics not only a mere possibility but an imperative. Such imperatives are most commonly emerging in relation to pressing global issues that demand solutions, such as global warming, but they can also emerge in the face of particular situations such as the endless and murderous political dead-ends generated around and by the Palestinian–Israeli conflict (see for example Bamyeh, 2010).

Such self-perpetuating antagonisms have punctured the ‘dialectical’ imaginary of social struggles which always saw contradictions as a mere step on the way to a ‘higher’ resolution. Instead, there is a routinization of notions of crisis where conflict and war situations are increasingly perceived as states in their own right rather
than as transitional towards something else. As such they necessitate an alter-politics that comes from a space outside the existing unproductive and endless oppositions.

It is all of the above that has created the opening whereby the critical anthropological tradition I have defined above and the critical anthropological ethos associated with it are of renewed significance to radical politics. One can see, for example, in the domain of the politics of anti-globalization, how close Seattle’s battle cry ‘another world is possible’ is to the general driving idea behind critical anthropological thought: ‘we can be radically other to what we are’. One can also note how anthropological works, capturing the plurality of the ways in which such relations are lived, have become important resources for a radical ecology in search for alternative forms of human–nature relations. And perhaps, in the most recent and clearest example of all, the influence of David Graeber’s anthropology of Madagascar on the form of political organization that has marked the Occupy Wall Street movement has been widely reported in the international media.

In light of all of the above, it is not surprising therefore to see radical social theoretical literature increasingly opening itself to integrate critical anthropological thought. This began in the work of Deleuze and Guattari and has continued in the more recent work of Phillipe Pignare and Isabelle Stengers, *La sorcellerie capitalist: pratiques de désenvoûtement* (2005), where the rapprochement to critical anthropology is present not only in the thematic of sorcery and spells that propels the work and which speaks to Seattle’s political catch cry ‘another world is possible’ but also in the way the work is dominated by a search for ways of opening up a space for radical otherness in our midst.

It is in the configuration of the above encounters that one can understand Hardt and Negri’s struggle to conceptualize what they call the struggle for an ‘alter-modernity’. As they explain – and very much in line with what has been argued above – the term aims ‘to indicate a decisive break with modernity and the power relation that defines it since alter-modernity in our conception emerges from the traditions of antimodernity but it also departs from modernity since it extends beyond opposition and resistance’ (2009: 103).

What has been argued above should help to explain the attraction of the critical anthropological tradition to alter-modern theorizing such as that of Negri and Hardt. But, if radical thought is opening itself up to critical anthropology, it is also true that the encounter is most pronounced where critical anthropology is itself reciprocating the move. The fact that Negri and Hardt’s work linked with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s work and not any other critical anthropology has as much to do with the latter’s work as to the general nature of the encounter.

Viveiros de Castro’s work has increasingly aimed at articulating itself to radical thinking: his critical anthropological thought comes with a clear sense of its place within the radical political imaginary and as such it is both critical and radical. It explicitly aims to both ‘take us outside of ourselves to see how we can be radically
other to ourselves’ and to articulate itself to a radical alter-politics that always aims at finding a possibility of a different life outside a given order of things.

The radical and critical anthropology of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

Viveiros de Castro’s radical/political dispositions are very clear in his writings. His thought, continuously and, I would say, increasingly, has a conception of itself as part of a critical anthropology associated with a radical political rejection of the existing order of things.

We live in an era in which prurient Puritanism, guilty hypocrisy and intellectual impotence converge to foreclose whatever possibility of seriously imagining (rather than merely fantasizing) an alternative to our own cultural inferno, or even of recognizing it as such. (Viveiros de Castro, 2010a: 18)

He places his work in the lineage of an anthropology that notably includes Claude Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Clastres, Roy Wagner, Marshall Sahlins and Marilyn Strathern. He is also in continuous dialogue with the work of Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers. Most importantly perhaps, his work is particularly grounded in the work of Deleuze and the Deleuzian tradition. Deleuze is important to mark Viveiros de Castro’s disposition to radical political thought not just in terms of philosophical affinity but as a gesture of reciprocity in the face of what he sees as: ‘The embarrassed and embarrassing silence with which anthropology as a discipline received the two books of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, in which take place one of the most exciting and disconcerting dialogues that philosophy and anthropology have ever had’ (Viveiros de Castro, 2010a: 34, 2010b).

This disposition towards a political investment in an anthropology of radical alterity is already present in the work *From the Enemy’s Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society* (1992), based on his doctoral ethnography among the Arawate, a Tupi-Guarani people of eastern Amazonia. Central to that work is a putting in question of the very notion of society, normalized in our culture, as a network of social relations that attempt to remain ‘identical with themselves’ and that consequently aim to ‘introject and domesticate’ difference, and contrasting this societal ideal-type to Arawate society as a society that is continuously open to its own otherness and ‘with a dynamic that dissolves those spatial metaphors so common in sociological discourse: interior, exterior, center, margins, boundaries, limen, etc.’ (Viveiros de Castro, 1992: 4).

As I have argued above, critical anthropology does not only work through an exploration of radical alterity. This radical alterity has to be other enough such that it cannot be reduced to sameness and yet same enough so as to be an otherness that can still speak to us and haunt us. It is this haunting that Viveiros de Castro tries to produce, not just with the above conception of an-other society but also a
conception of personhood that is radically other to our own but that nonetheless seems to speak to us, even if it does so with a Deleuzian language:

The Tupi-Guarani construct the person through a process of continuous topological deformation, where ego and enemy, living and dead, man and god, are interwoven, before or beyond representation, metaphorical substitution, and complementary opposition. We move into a horizon where Becoming is prior to Being and unsubmit- sive to it. (Viveiros de Castro, 1992: 4)

Critical anthropology, for Viveiros de Castro, does its work by being positioned in that space where otherness is both radically other and yet has something to say to us. Two metaphors are deployed to explain the work anthropologists have to do in this domain. The first is that of ‘translation’. Although a common enough trope, the concept is given a radical edge by grounding it in Michael’s Herzfeld’s point that ‘the anthropologist and the native are engaged in directly comparable intellectual operations’ (quoted in Viveiros de Castro, 2004: 4) and in Talal Asad’s view that, in anthropology, comparison is in the service of translation and not the opposite. The conception of translation we end up with is conveyed through a paraphrasing of Walter Benjamin’s idea that to translate is to betray the destination language, not the source language. Consequently, for Viveiros de Castro, anthropological translation ‘allows the alien concepts to deform and subvert the translator’s conceptual toolbox so that the intention of the original language can be expressed within the new one’ (2004: 2). We end up both more and less than what we originally were: to be precise, less the same as what we were and more other than what we were. In this sense, anthropology is a practice that never allows our thought to rest, capture reality and be same with itself. As he provocatively puts it in a recent book Métaphysiques cannibales, anthropology is ‘the theory-practice of the permanent decolonisation of thought’ (2009: 4).

A similar idea is conveyed by the second metaphor which is that of the non-reflexive mirror. In his introduction to Clastres’ Archaeology of Violence (2010), Viveiros de Castro explains that:

Anthropology incarnates, for Clastres, a consideration of the human phenomenon as defined by a maximum intensive alterity, an internal dispersion whose limits are a priori indeterminable. ‘[W]hen the mirror does not reflect our own likeness, it does not prove there is nothing to perceive,’ writes [Clastres] in ‘Copernicus and the savages.’ This characteristically curt remark finds an echo in a recent formulation of Patrice Maniglier (2005, 773–774) concerning what this philosopher calls the ‘highest promise’ of anthropology, namely that of ‘Returning us an image (of ourselves) in which we do not recognize ourselves.’ The purpose of such a consideration, the spirit of this promise, is not then to reduce alterity, for this is the stuff humanity is made of, but, on the contrary to multiply its images. Alterity and multiplicity define both how anthropology constitutes itself. ‘Primitive society’ is the name that Clastres gave to that object, and to his own encounter with multiplicity. (2010a: 14–15)
And in a typical turn which highlights his mode of mixing the critical and the radical, Viveiros de Castro continues:

And if the State has always existed, as Deleuze and Guatari (1981/1987, 397) argue in their insightful commentary of Clastres, then primitive society also will always exist: as the immanent exterior of the State, as the force of anti-production permanently haunting the productive forces, and as a multiplicity that is non-interiorizable by the planetary mega-machines. ‘Primitive Society,’ in short, is one of the conceptual embodiments of the thesis that another world is possible: that there is life beyond capitalism, as there is society outside of the State. There always was, and – for this we struggle – there always will be. (2010a: 15)

It is this struggle for a society outside the state, outside capitalism and outside modernity that is at stake in his translation/mirroring of Amerindian perspectivism and the concept of ‘multinaturalism’ he has come to share with Bruno Latour (Latour, 2004a).

Multinaturalism

The notion of multinaturalism emerges in Viveiros de Castro’s work as a logical complement of his conception of Amerindian perspectivism. The latter, he argues, challenges not only the varieties of perspectives that we have ‘on reality’ but the very idea that we have of perspective as being a subjective/cultural perspective on a natural reality. This idea of a perspective as a multiplicity of cultural ways of apprehending a unified ‘nature’ is subverted by Amerindian perspectivism, which posits a unified subjectivity producing a multiplicity of natures or realities. Before seeking, as a cliché anthropological formula would have it, to understand reality ‘from the natives’ point of view’, we need to work out first what the natives think ‘a point of view’ is: their point of view on the point of view as it were.

Building on a long tradition of Amerindian ethnographies and anthropologies where Lévi-Strauss has pride of place, Viveiros de Castro presents us with a world where the animals and humans share the same soul: a kind of Kantian pre-social and pre-perspectival subjectivity. Consequently, in such a world, while humans and animals have different perspectives, this difference is not primarily a difference between the soul/mind of the animals and the humans, since this is what they share. Rather, the different points of views emerge from the ways in which different bodies constitute different modes of relating to, inhabiting and being enmeshed in, their environments. If, generally speaking, Shamanism involves the capacity to move between the perspectives of humans, animals and things, Amerindian shamanism highlights the fact that such a move is not a move between different subjective interests but is ‘defined as the ability shown by certain individuals to cross the corporeal barriers between the species’ (Viveiros de Castro, 2009: 25). Consequently, in Amerindian perspectivism, he tells us, ‘a perspective is not a representation, for representations are properties of the spirit, while the point of
view is in the body’ (Viveiros de Castro, 2009: 39). As such, perspectivism should not be confused with relativism: ‘far from the subjectivist essentialism of relativism, perspectivism is a corporeal mannerism’ (Viveiros de Castro, 2009: 40).

Here, the body is not just flesh or socialized body but, Viveiros de Castro stresses, a ‘body with its affection’. Affection here is used in Spinoza’s sense: the body’s ‘capacities to affect and be affected by other bodies’ (Viveiros de Castro, 2004: 3). As Katherine Swancutt has explained:

Bodily affects, in Viveiros de Castro’s sense of the term, are not just physical characteristics, such as comportment, mannerisms or tastes consistently ascribed to a given subject, they are also ‘forces’, ‘energies’ or ‘talents’ which are taught, acquired and refined over time. (2007: 237)

In being the site of a multiplicity of forces and energies each body constitutes a multiplicity of bodily modes of engagement with its surroundings. It is this multiplicity of bodily engagements which in turn produces a multiplicity of realities or ‘natures’ that the notion of multinaturalism alludes to. The term stands in opposition to the discourses of multiculturalism which presuppose one nature/objective reality’ and a multiplicity of cultures/subjectivities. Highlighting this distinction is important, yet I prefer to speak of multiple realities rather than ‘multinaturalism’ and its allusion to multiple natures. This is because the very idea of ‘nature’ emerges out of the very specific reality that requires of us humans to delineate a world of ‘nature’. It is thus preferable not to reintroduce it in a multiplicity of other realities where it has no referent. After all, the idea that there are realities where the nature culture/divide is unthinkable, and that, given that our conceptual world is straitjacketed with binary oppositions, it is a challenge for us to experience and conceptualize this unthinkable, is precisely at the core of both Viveiros de Castro and Latour’s argument.

The critical and political ramifications of multiple realities

Clearly, the multinatural argument is a critical anthropological argument. That is, it is more than a ‘the Amazonians have their reality and we have our reality’ argument. It does mean the latter, but it also means that their reality speaks to ours. It haunts us with the possibility that we, as well, live in multiple realities. Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism highlights the Amazonian’s sense of multiplicity of natures structured around the multiplicity of bodies and bodily perspectives: the body of the human, the body of the jaguar... etc. In speaking to us, however, it also – and it is crucial not to think in either/or terms here – highlights the multiplicities that are within each and every body. If a reality is an encounter between the affective, postural, libidinal and physical potentiality of the body and the potentiality of the Real, to think of ourselves as inhabiting a multiplicity of realities is to recognize the multiplicity of the potentialities of the human body. That is, it is also to recognize the multiplicity of modes in which the body is enmeshed in
its environment. Perhaps more so than the dominance of binary oppositions à la ‘nature/culture’ and instrumental reason, western modernity’s greatest ‘achievement’ has been to make us mono-realists, minimizing our awareness of the multiplicity of realities in which we exist. But minimizing is not obliterating, and it can easily be argued that other such realities continuously make an incursion into our modern world giving us a hint, and sometimes more than a hint, of their presence. It is not surprising, therefore, that minor strands of western thought have always been in touch with such multiplicity.

Peter Otto has shown in a recent book, Multiplying Worlds (2011), that a version of this multiple conception of the real was familiar to the Romantic imagination and was later influential in forming the thought of both Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze. In Métaphysiques cannibales, Viveiros de Castro argues that Amerindian perspectivism and the notion of multinaturalism speak to certain contemporary ‘philosophical programes such as those that are developing around “possible worlds” theory’, but also around ‘speculative materialism’ and ‘transcendental realism’, all of which are seen as aiming to direct thought away from ‘the infernal dichotomies of modernity’ (2009: 13; see also Bryant et al., 2011). Bruno Latour (2004b) has also linked it to William James’s notion of ‘pluriverse’. Latour himself has been inspired by the works of the French philosophers Etienne Souriau and Gilbert Simondon (Simondon, 1989) on the plurality of ‘modes of existence’, a concept that has become central for him as he refines his conception of multinaturalism. A new edition of Etienne Souriau’s book Les différents modes d’existence (2009) has been prefaced by both Latour and Isabelle Stengers.

Although most works on multinaturalism have dwelled on its supposed ‘post-humanism’ and the ontological questions this raises, it seems to me that the notion of humans as living continuously and concurrently in a multiplicity of realities provides an important meta-ethnographic consolidation of the critical anthropological ethos of ‘we can be other than what we are’. What does it mean to speak of the ‘existence of otherness’ – of other cultural forms, of other modes of being – within and among us? This is perhaps one of the most productive problematics that anthropology has generated through the works of its many critical practitioners. Does this otherness exist in a virtual or potential state within social reality? And do anthropologists, like the shamans they study, bring that virtuality into being, allowing it to disrupt and haunt our dominant modes of dwelling in the world? Or does this otherness exist in the form of a psychological disposition or a mental structure that can be linked to the presumed ‘unity of human kind’?

The multinaturalism and radical perspectivism of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Bruno Latour is therefore hardly the first anthropological work to think through this question. Its originality is that it opens up a way of thinking differently about this otherness that is within us. Rather than seeing it, as it has often been seen, as based on the unity of the human mind, it invites grounding it in the multiplicity of the human body’s enmeshment in the Real: the fact that at least some of this multiplicity is everywhere the same and the fact that it produces everywhere a similar array of realities. This allows us to think of the
otherness-within-us as articulated not to virtual but to actual realities – albeit minor ones: realities that are continuously present, even if they are overshadowed by more dominant ones. This is how it goes: if all humans share a multiplicity of realities, and if the socio-historical path of our own society and culture has made us dwell more in one reality more so than in others, this does not mean that we have simply stopped dwelling in those other realities in which people from other cultures are more clearly dwelling. As such, we are continuously shadowed by realities in which we are dwelling, of which we are not fully aware, but which often induce in us a vague feeling, or a sense of their presence. It is here that critical anthropology transforms into a critical politics. ‘Being other than what we are’ is not just conceptually possible. It is materially possible since one is already dwelling in that very otherness.

Such a conception of multiple modes of being, dwelling and thinking has one of its earliest theorizations in Lévy-Bruhl’s differentiation between logical and mystical mentalities. Frederic Keck recently explained that for Lévy-Bruhl:

The difference between ‘primitive mentality’ and ‘civilized mentality’ does not separate two historically and geographically separated modes of thinking as an evolutionist philosophy of history would have it—one whose presuppositions Lévy-Bruhl has always criticized—, but two logical principles that direct the human mind in every society and in every individual. (Keck, 2008: 7)

As Lévy-Bruhl himself points out, ‘there is a mystical mentality that is more easily demarcated and therefore more easily observable among the “primitives” than in our societies, but it is present in every human mind’ (1985: 131). For Lévy-Bruhl, therefore, which mentality comes to dominate is not at all linked to a belief that the primitives are inherently more mystical than us, as some crude interpreters still like to read him. Rather, especially as his later writings becomes less about ‘mentalities’ and more about experience, the difference becomes about which experience, or, as we have put it, which modality of enmeshment in the Real, comes to dominate over others. That is, if we are to make him speak in the language of multiple realities, the reality that mystical mentality is part of is not unique to the primitives. Likewise, logical mentality is not unique to us. We and Lévy-Bruhl’s primitives are bodily enmeshed in a multiplicity of realities and among them are both the realities alluded to above. Which reality comes to dominate can perhaps later be analysed sociologically and historically in the form of asking the analytical question such as: what are the historical conditions which lead us to over-dwell in a reality that highlights instrumental reason more than other forms of thinking? The crucial point here is that being enmeshed and dwelling in one reality that becomes dominant never stops us from being enmeshed and dwelling in a multiplicity of other realities, even if we lose a sense of these.

There are many important political ramifications to thinking of our own modern spaces in terms of multiple realities. The most immediate one stems directly from the opposition proposed by both Viveiros de Castro and Latour between
multiculturalism and multinaturalism. Here, the opposition is an invitation not to think ‘cultural difference’ in the facile ‘cosmopolitan’ way multiculturalism, especially in its American variant, invites us to think of culture and cultural difference: that is, as a difference that can be easily understood, reconciled or transcended with a little bit of respect and tolerance here, and valorization and understanding of the other there. Multinaturalism here invites us to give some cultural differences a stronger ontological consistency, highlighting the fact that there are certain differences that simply cannot be encompassed and captured by one’s own symbolic, cultural or political apparatus. Some differences are the product of different realities rather than different subjective takes on reality. As such, they are either destined to enter into conflict or coexist without either side coming to understand the other. The latter possibility is often precluded in cosmopolitan thought, as Latour has argued in his critique of Ulrich Beck’s cosmopolitanism. The latter assumes that the ‘cosmo’ part of the cosmopolitan is not an object of politics and as such forecloses the very possibility of a cosmo-politics (Latour, 2004b; see also Stengers, 2003). In this sense there is definitely an element of truth in Matei Candea’s argument that:

Ontologies usually come in when anthropologists feel that culture…does not take difference seriously. The need for the word ontology comes from the suspicion that cultural difference is not different enough, or alternatively that acultural difference has been reduced by cultural critics to a mere effect of political instrumentality. By contrast, ontology is an attempt to take others and their real difference seriously. (Carrithers et al., 2010: 175)

More importantly perhaps, a conception of multiple realities opens up the possibility to perceive domination not only as the product of a struggle *within* a reality but also the struggle *between* realities. This idea that dominant groups do not just dominate an already given reality but impose their reality is already present in social theory, most explicitly in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Although, Pierre Bourdieu’s concerns are far more grounded in what we have called critical sociology rather than a critical anthropology, it is nonetheless interesting to note that he, more so than any other theorist, gets very close to a multi-realist conception of the world. For Bourdieu derives from Spinoza, but also particularly from an adaptation of Husserl’s notion of *Umwelt*, a conception of the bodily *habitus* as always being part and parcel of a social reality it helps give rise to (see Hage, 2011b). In this regard, Viveiros de Castro and Latour sometimes exaggerate the extent to which the notion of perspective as non-subjectivist bodily enmeshment is absent from western thought. Indeed, behind Viveiros de Castro’s multinaturalism lies a conception of the body that is strikingly similar to that of Bourdieu. At one point, in explaining the conception of the body that he is deploying, he writes:

What we are calling her ‘body’, therefore, is not a distinctive physiology or a characteristic anatomy; it is an ensemble of manners and modes of being that constitute a *habitus*, an ethos, an ethogram. (2009: 40)
It is true that Bourdieu’s different worlds are produced by different competing interests and orientations within an always modern conception of reality. As such, they are far from encompassing the possibility of radical alterity in the way it is present in Viveiros de Castro’s work. Nonetheless, Bourdieu’s conception of power and domination, particularly his theory of symbolic violence can complement multinaturalism by providing it with a politics conceived as a struggle between different realities. Indeed, symbolic violence is primarily a form of ontological violence: certain realities come to dominate over others, so much so that they become simply ‘reality’. They foreclose their history as a process of domination and equally foreclose the very possibility of thinking reality as multiple.

From an analytic-political perspective, and in relation to the alter/anti components of the radical imaginary referred to earlier, such a conception of realist multiplicity undermines the core Marxist-inspired political division between materialism and idealism that dominated radical politics for so long. The latter division presupposes the existence of one reality: either your thought speaks to ‘reality’ and to the forces that emanate from it and you are a materialist, or it doesn’t and you are a utopian and an idealist. With a conception of multiple realities emerges the possibility that thought, even when not speaking to the dominant reality is still speaking to a reality, even if a minor one. Old-fashioned materialism becomes complicit in reproducing the belief in the existence of one and only one reality.

This has an important ramification for critical anthropology. From a multiple realities perspective, when critical anthropology delineates the possibility of us being ‘other than what we are’, it is always materialist. It is always speaking to a world, a reality, that is not necessarily dominating our consciousness, but which anthropology – in speaking to it – helps bring to the fore and haunt us with its very possibility.

In his most recent work, Debt: The First 5000 Years (2011), David Graeber does precisely this in relation to ‘communism’. Communism is often conceived of, even by communists, as a totally unrealistic utopia that can only begin to realize itself in the very distant future, or that existed in the remote past. In opposition to this ‘epic communism’, Graeber shows how an important dimension of our sociality rests on a really existing everyday form of communism that forms an important dimension of our collective practical reality (2011: 94–102).

**Conclusion: towards an anthropology of new ‘New Worlds’**

Through its foregrounding of the ‘we can be other than what we are’ trope this article has explicitly argued that any anthropology, whether concerned with the modern world or with non-modern tribal formations, needs to allow for the flourishing of the ethos of critical primitivist anthropology if it is to remain critical. Implicit in this argument is a rapprochement between modern and non-modern anthropology centred around this critical ethos. In this sense, the work of Viveiros de Castro and the multiple realities approach in general is exemplary. By inviting us to consider
the worlds analysed by primitivist anthropology as present in our very own modern world in the form of ‘minor realities’, this approach does more than create a rapprochement between these two traditions – it moves towards dissolving them. And it does so precisely by a re-centring of the primitivist/alterist ethos as a critical foundation for the discipline. This is by no means an easy feat, for there are certain dominant trends within anthropology that conspire against such an ethos. Chief among those trends is a view of the discipline as grounded in a kind of anthropological original sin: this being, of course, anthropology’s relation to colonialism.

Within this quasi-Catholic construct, the future of anthropology simply depends on the way it seeks forgiveness for this original sin and its variants: primitivism, exoticism, etc. In the name of anti-colonialism, what became known as the ‘reflexive turn’ has brought with it an anti-primitivism that has in many places banished the founding notion of ‘radical alterity’ from the imagination of many undergraduate anthropology students. It is often forgotten that the postcolonial critique of anthropology was fundamentally, and legitimately, a sociological/political critique. That is, it questioned things such as whether ‘indigenous holistic bounded cultures’ existed given their transformation by and continual entanglement with the structures of colonial domination; or whether indigenous cultural forms were useful variables in accounting for indigenous cultures and to what extent (see for example, Wolfe, 1999). Such a critique has left aside the question of whether indigenous cultures were useful to think, as it were, for all of us indigenous and non-indigenous people.

I personally cannot count the number of ‘introduction to anthropology’ texts in books or given to students on university open days where the story line begins precisely with some kind of gentle repudiation of primitivist anthropology: ‘this is how anthropology started but now anthropologists study all kind of things’ declares the anthropologist cum-PR specialist to prospective students with a sense of relief, hoping this proves music to their ears. Within this disciplinary configuration a divide has been created between primitivist anthropology and the anthropology ‘that studies all kind of things’. It is in this process that the distinctive critical side of the discipline has ended up being minoritized from within.

While there are still many anthropologists working on non-modern cultural forms within relatively remote tribal cultural formations, only a minority are interested in seeing in their findings something that speaks to the societies and the modernities they come from. On the other hand, the number of anthropologists working on modern ‘all kind of things’ is rapidly increasing, but not many see a critical continuity between their work and the early anthropological tradition. They mainly see the relation as one of method, ethnography, and a general interest in ‘culture’.

Just to be clear, it is certainly not being suggested here that anthropologists who are attracted to articulating their work to the radical political imaginary should necessarily go back and find a primitive tribe somewhere in the galaxy to generate radically alternative cultural food for the radical imagination. It is being suggested that the ethos of primitivist anthropology is necessary wherever one is doing
ethnography if one is to produce this kind of critical anthropology. The critical anthropologist is someone who is always on the lookout for minor and invisible spaces or realities that are lurking in the world around us. And, as this article has suggested, these realities are increasingly showing up in the cracks of western modernity and are the fertile ground on which a critical anthropological ethos can deploy itself. One can best describe this ethos as a search for an encounter with spaces where we are faced with what Husserl calls: the accessibility of the inaccessible. Spaces that give enough of themselves to tell us that they exist but are nonetheless impervious to easy capture and to being assimilated to our dominant realities.

To further develop this, let us go back to the original encounter with primitive tribes in the history of anthropology. Capitalist modernity takes us to the new world and makes accessible obscure and inaccessible realities. Anthropology becomes the willingness to move into this accessible and yet inaccessible domain. Accessible in the sense that one can perceive it and move into it physically; inaccessible in the sense of it being symbolically inaccessible, opaque, and one does not know what one will find there. In this sense, as many have noted, radical alterity can only be found to begin disappearing as radical alterity. This, however, does not mean that it does not offer us a glimpse of its radical alterity if we persist in wanting to know it.

If I am an anthropologist working on a racist social formation, I should take it for granted that part of my work is to elucidate the working of racist relations of power, their history and the various ways they lodge themselves in all kinds of subtle and not so subtle ways within a given culture. But, if I am to be a critical anthropologist in the sense defined above, I must also think outside of such racist relations to see what exists outside of them as a radically other form of sociality that might initially exist only in symptomatic form. I have to train my ethnographic gaze to see certain social forms that hint metonymically at the existence of minor less obvious realities in which people are equally enmeshed without fully giving a cultural expression to this enmeshment.

Likewise if I am an anthropologist of Israeli colonialism in Palestine it remains important to look sociologically at the various modes in which colonial subjugation has exercised itself and the subtle ways Israeli culture has convinced itself that it is not being colonial at the very moment so many aspects of its relation to Palestinians speak of colonial domination. But if I am to be a critical anthropologist in the sense defined above, I might use Clastres’ ‘primitive society’ and a society outside and against the state to direct my ethnographic gaze towards other realities, which might contain the possibility of forms of sociality between Palestinians and Israelis that are not encompassed by and contained in the state form and its reality, and that the proponents of ‘the Jewish State’ and the ‘Palestinian State’ continuously reinforce as the only ‘realist’ solution to the conflict.

It is this pursuit of those spaces of an encounter where inaccessible forms of life are nonetheless accessible that marks the critical anthropology I am referring to here. Sniffing the presence of such inaccessible spaces is part and parcel of this critical anthropological labour no matter where one is doing ethnography.
Radical alterity is present everywhere. There is always an outside of a system of intelligibility, of governmentality, of domestication, of instrumental reason...etc. There is always an excess to how one defines a social relation also: it is always more than a ‘relation of power’, a ‘relation of domination’, a ‘relation of exploitation’, an ‘ethnic or a racial relation’...etc.

In a interview with George Steinmetz recorded in 2007 but published at the end 2010 in *Actes de Recherches en Sciences Sociales*, Georges Balandrier, has provided a good concept to think with in relation to what I am trying to define here. He talks about the need for anthropology to move to study what he calls: *les nouveaux nouveaux mondes*, ‘the new new worlds’:

I am certain that in a period of long-term instability, a historical situation such as that of the present time, anthropology will be increasingly necessary. We have entered a period of large immaterial configurations, of hyper-systems open to all and to everything. It is no longer *open society*, it is *open systems*, something of the sort, and in the plural as well. We cannot accept being identified as an expert who is studying one’s own area of competence, one’s own problem. We must study these large configurations, otherwise we cannot understand anything at all. How does one characterize the internet? It is not easy, despite its globalization as a shared practice. I have proposed a book to PUF, *Le grand derangement* [2005], I suggest calling these new territories ‘the new new worlds’. The geographic worlds have been recently mapped. We know them, except for a few territories that are hard to access. But we don’t know, we don’t realize that we are creating ourselves ‘worlds’ that are not geographic worlds, we are creating universes of existence that are techno-worlds. I say that anthropology here regains its full legitimacy for we are as disoriented in these new worlds as we could have been when arriving in New Guinea, as Malinowski did. (Balandrier et al., 2010: 58)

Balandrier had in mind worlds such as web-based social spaces, Facebook, etc. That moving into analysing such ‘new new worlds’ is important both analytically and politically was well exemplified by the importance of Facebook during the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. But, it seems to me that behind Balandrier’s idea is not a desire to essentialize such ‘techno-worlds’ as new worlds. That they are so in Egypt does not necessarily mean that they are so in China, for example, or that they will remain so forever. Rather I think that the power of Balandrier’s view is more general: the idea that the New World once was and we’re finished with it is refreshingly replaced with the idea that, for anthropology, each era and each world has its own New Worlds that ought to be discovered and analysed. And it is precisely because of this that, as this article has argued, the anthropologies that deal with the modern world can only lose their anthropological critical edge if they are to abandon the ethos of primitivist anthropology and distance themselves from it.

**Note**

1. All translations of quotations in this article are by the author.
References


**Ghassan Hage** is Professor of Anthropology and Social Theory at the University of Melbourne. He has published extensively in the areas of comparative nationalism, migration, racism and multiculturalism.