

***Anthropology as multi-natural ontology? A response to Marianne de Laet's
"Anthropology as social epistemology"***

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Introduction

As her title indicates, Marianne de Laet suggests that social epistemology could be thought of as anthropology, in terms of how this mode of knowing has helped flesh out the social dimensions of scientific knowledge. She does so firstly, by accounting for how anthropological methods and concepts have contributed to science and technology studies (STS) by providing an alternative to "believing the natives" i.e., scientists, hence challenging positivist and objectivist accounts of science. She then specifies selected analytical insights of anthropology. The concepts 'culture' and 'practice', she argues, enable us to learn how "knowledge is social in an epistemic sense" (2012, 421). She concludes her argument by questioning the distinction between epistemology and ontology, maintaining that anthropology is social epistemology.

De Laet touches several key debates in the history of STS and much of her commentary on the sociality of knowledge is difficult to disagree with. There are however, also some elements in her argument with which I wish to engage critically. These include the relationship between anthropology and STS and the relationship between the concepts of culture and ontology. I will do so by drawing my inspiration from a contemporary a debate across STS and anthropology that — like de Laet — regards entanglements of epistemology and ontology, practice, and materiality. This project is also known as post-ANT and empirical philosophy in STS (Mol 2002; Gad and Bruun Jensen 2010, 55-80; Law and Hassard 1999) and lateral, multi-natural and ontological engagements in anthropology (Maurer 2005; Riles 2000; Strathern 2004 [1991]; Carrithers et al. 2010, 152-200; Viveiros de Castro 2004, 463-484). De Laet mentions some of the same sources.

I will focus my commentary on these debates' implications for the concept of culture and "our terminological tinkering" (2012, 420). My aim is to provide a different account of what anthropology has to offer STS and, as a consequence, to keep some interesting tensions open between the conceptual and the empirical, between "us" and "them", which I believe de Laet resolves too quickly.

Culture and ontology

De Laet characterizes anthropology's main contribution to STS as providing an alternative account of science to that of the scientists. As she writes, "[o]ur terminological tinkering – refusing to adopt the terms of the actors – is, then, also an epistemological tinkering; we account of these practices in terms of our own" (2012, 419). She characterizes this anthropological tinkering as necessary (2012, 419). In this way, studying science becomes a question of choosing between 'our' or 'their' terms.

STS to a great degree evolved around the ambition of providing alternative accounts of science than dominant positivist accounts emphasizing its neutrality and objectivity. The early laboratory studies, as de Laet also notes, illustrated the cultural aspects of science, rendering it situated in contingent and socio-material practices rather than neutral and universal (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Knorr-Cetina 1999). In that regard, de Laet's account of anthropology's early influence on STS is easy to agree with. However, given her aim is to engage in a *general* discussion of how anthropology — not only influences STS — but *is* social epistemology, the stakes are raised.

This invites the question of whether analyzing science through the concept of culture is still an adequate ambition for STS. It has been argued that STS research, through privileging the genre of case studies, has already spent considerable time reiterating the contingent and cultural aspects of science, at the cost of empirical-conceptual innovation (Beaulieu, Scharnhorst, and Wouters 2007, 672-692). Insofar as this is the case, it is important to draw inspiration from current debates across anthropology and STS regarding exactly the tensions that de Laet also grapples with (culture vs. ontology; our vs. their terms; strange vs. familiar).

Unfortunately, we learn little from these debates in de Laet's article as anthropology is somewhat homogenized, firstly through the prevalence of the concept of culture, and later that of practice. However, anthropology, as I will argue below, is a heterogeneous project. Recognizing this not only makes it hard to claim that "anthropology is social epistemology", but also invites empirical-conceptual innovation as opposed to affirming that science is culture (in culture).

At least since the crisis of representation in the 1980's, anthropology has critiqued and deconstructed the concept of culture (Wagner 1981; Liep and Olwig 1994, 7-21), yet de Laet emphasizes this concept as a central contribution from anthropology to STS. While she does hint at some problematic aspects of the concept (2012, 422), she writes that it is "effective: it works" (2012, 422). The question is 'for whom' and 'in which way'. For de Laet, it 'works' in relation to teaching her engineer students to look differently at science and discover its social aspects. While this pedagogical contribution is undoubtedly important I do not think that it does full justice to the question of how anthropology has inspired (and continues to inspire) STS.

The recent anthropological debate about the distinction between ontology and culture provides such inspiration (Carrithers et al. 2010, 152-200; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007). This debate is especially interesting considering how de Laet herself emphasizes both concepts. The anthropological debate regards to what extent an 'ontological turn' in anthropology also means 'turning away from' culture. The argument is more or less that culture is an *epistemological* approach, tending to questions of representation and knowledge of 'one world', whereas an ontological approach takes as its starting point that multiple realities or worlds exist (Carrithers et al. 2010). Anthropologists thus usually introduce the term of ontology (or rather, ontologies) in *opposition* to culture. As anthropologist Matthei Candea writes, depicting this turn, "the study of culture is cast as

merely the study of meaning and interpretation, of people's episteme" (Carrithers et al. 2010, 173). Anthropology, in this stream of argument is neither a question of "writing culture" (cf. Clifford and Marcus 1986) nor of "applying analytical concepts to ethnographic data" (Holbraad 2010, 180). As I will discuss to below, the ontological turn entails different implications for anthropological concepts. Although this turn to ontology has (unsurprisingly) been criticized for reducing the richness of the concept of culture (Carrithers et al. 2010), the difference between these two concepts is nevertheless an important anthropological debate, a difference that is somewhat concealed in de Laet's account.

A similar point can be made about de Laet's comment on anthropology and *practice*. In her conclusion, she detects a shift in "anthropological renderings" towards seeing "knowing emerge as practice, and anthropological inquiry as an investigation of how knowing is *done*" (2012, 429, her emphasis). This she claims, is what "anthropologists have been doing ... for a very long time" (2012, 430). Interestingly, several anthropologists actually criticize (practice studies) in STS for this exact move: if everything is seen as "practice", informants' own thinking and agency may be downplayed (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Holbraad 2004, 1-27; Miyazaki 2013; Strathern 2011, 87-103).

In sum, I do not think that a *general* anthropological position exists — certainly not in connection to the question of how culture is related to ontology or what the implications and importance are of practice studies.

Ontologizing epistemology

To be fair, when de Laet actually makes references to "ontology", she does so not through anthropologists but through philosopher and STS scholar Annemarie Mol's 'empirical philosophy', which entails a somewhat different concept of ontology than the current ontological turn in anthropology (Gad, Jensen, and Winthereik 2014, 1-24). However, comments are also warranted on the relationship between Mol's "version" of ontology and the concept of culture.

In addition to the fact that Mol criticizes the concept of culture (Mol 2002), her empirical philosophy, with its focus on ontology, has implications for whether we can see empirical philosophy as "social epistemology". De Laet actually raises this question herself, asking whether "an empirical turn in philosophy asks us to rethink the use of the word epistemology" but, unfortunately, refrains from providing an answer ("I leave it up to you to decide") (2012, 430).

Mol's empirical philosophy would indeed demand such rethinking, as it entails "ontologizing epistemology." When she suggests to understand ontologies (in plural) as a practical and dynamic phenomena, this assumes neither "ultimate categories of being *below*, [n]or abstract metaphysical principles *above*, world(s)" but instead, worlds being created by socio-material practices that can be studied ethnographically (Gad, Jensen, and

Winthereik 2014, 1-24). This suggests — metaphysically, ethnographically and conceptually — something rather different than de Laet's account of reflexive relationships "between structure and agency" (2012, 422) and between "science is culture" and "science in culture" (2012, 424). Empirical philosophy does not invite "drawing things together into a coherent whole [culture] and thereby differentiating them from others" (Mol 2002, 77), nor does it invite "traditional scales in which the local is part of something larger" (Mol 2002, 80). These analytical differences are important, insofar as one commits to empirical philosophy.

Our vs. their terms

Now, let's go back to anthropology. The above-mentioned debate about the relationship between culture and ontology also regards the role of the "natives'" accounts and terms. This matter it is not merely a question of choosing between "emic" or "etic" approaches, as de Laet suggests, but a classic conundrum in anthropology that continues to engage scholars in interesting debates about what anthropology is and how it should engage with (and be transformed by) 'the empirical'.

Quite a few anthropologists currently argue for the need to 'take seriously' ones interlocutors (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 2-33; Walford 2013). Now, 'taking seriously' is a question of neither naively believing what 'they say' nor using the concept of culture as an explanatory device (Holbraad in Carrithers et al. 2010, 152-200). Indeed, according to these scholars, what we study is not even necessarily a question of culture (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 137-156). Thus, 'taking seriously' is a way to *disturb* conceptual resources such as 'culture', allowing for conceptual innovation but also for enhancing our knowledge of multiple worlds (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007). Indeed, if reality is multiple, as de Laet suggests (2012, 429), then concepts such as culture are a very singular take on that world, these anthropologists would argue.

One could object that 'taking seriously' the natives may be the case for traditional 'exotic' and 'Other' field sites and not the study objects of STS, (often) situated in Euro-American contexts. It is somewhat unclear where de Laet positions herself in relation to this issue. While she acknowledges that "distance is [not] natural" (2012, 423), she nevertheless writes that "in STS, we have modified the anthropological propensity to make the strange familiar and invented the technique of making the familiar strange" (2012, 420). This hints a rather simplistic and settled way of how we look at "difference" (it is either "familiar" or "strange"). It is however, an ongoing debate in anthropology how near or far it considers its object to be from itself (Riles 2000; Strathern 1987, 16-37). Social anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, for instance, points to the recursive dynamic of how "difference" continues to reinstate itself "at home" (1987, 16). There may not be an *a priori* need for STS scholars to "mak[e] the familiar strange" in order "to add anything to ... [their] stories," as de Laet suggests (2012, 420). Indeed, scholars in both anthropology and STS offer alternatives to this dichotomy. Examples include exploring the "partial connections" between "our" and "their" terms (Strathern 2004 [1991]; Ratner 2012; Jensen and Lauritsen 2005, 59-77) and taking encounters of "difference" or

"similarity" as a saliency for our own conceptual givens (Riles 2000; Carrithers et al. 2010, 152-200; Walford 2013). In other words, such analytical engagements can become an invitation to question how we think about the world in a more general sense.

Studying with

How we approach 'ours vs. their' terms also has implications for how we engage with those we study. Again, I am uncertain about de Laet's argument. As discussed, she considers STS' (anthropological) task to "not believe the natives' but provide our own accounts of science. Such an approach is rather asymmetric, claiming that anthropology can explicate (social and cultural) aspects of knowledge production to which the scientists are blind. Later however, she characterizes the relationship between the researcher and researched as a "dance", "each with agency as to what the final piece will entail," using terms such as "collaboration," "pedagogy," and "studying with" rather than "of" (2012, 428). When de Laet elaborates on what it means to "study with," it turns out to be the following prerogative: "We must teach the interlocutors what we learn from them...[and] respectfully, we adjudicate" (ibid.). We can teach them (and make judgments) about "cultural" and "political" "contexts". This raises the question of what we learn from them (obviously, not anything that challenges the conceptual idea that "cultural" and "political" contexts provide explanatory frameworks). But should we not also challenge ourselves in the same ways as we challenge informants, to explicate and discuss our "infra-languages" and concepts, too? While de Laet does mention this reflexive aspect of anthropology (2012, 425), it is less clear how (or whether) it relates to her idea of "studying with".

Among anthropologists also engaged in collaborative research, the term collaboration is taken to consider informants as "epistemic partners" (Holmes and Marcus 2008, 81-101), to avoid a conceptual colonization the informants' own conceptual work (Carrithers et al. 2010, 152-200), or to "*explor[e]* common futures *with* practices ... that would simultaneously add more agency to researcher *and* to practices" (Jensen and Lauritsen 2005, 72, original emphasis). This has a somewhat different tone than "teaching them" and "adjudicating".

Concluding remarks

In my response to de Laet's article, I have refrained from offering a settled version of how STS should do anthropology or how anthropology should influence STS. Instead, my aim has been to illustrate some of the productive discussions and tensions among scholars. I have done so because I believe that they can inspire a continued conceptual-empirical innovation across STS and anthropology. These debates are already there, introduced through terms such as "lateral compatibility" (Ratner 2012), "inter-reflexivity" (Gad 2012, 367-392), "a non-humanist disposition" (Jensen 2010) and "comparative relativisms" (Jensen et al. 2011, 1-12), to mention a few. More than

anything, they illustrate that questions regarding the relationship between researcher and interlocutors, and also the empirical and the conceptual, are far from resolved. The challenge, as I see it, is thus not to take a "truly empirical turn," as de Laet suggests (2012, 430). Instead, keeping these tensions alive may be the most important resources we have for posing questions anew about how (scientific) worlds are made, how to analyze this making, and how we allow analysis to be a proxy for questioning our own conceptual repertoires.

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