

Amerindian perspectivism (concept)

Written by: Lucas da Costa Maciel

Translated by: David Rodgers

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Amerindian perspectivism refers to the conceptual synthesis formulated by Brazilian anthropologists Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1951-) and Tânia Stolze Lima to describe an important Amazonian philosophical matrix referring to the relational nature of beings and the composition of the world. The concept synthesizes a series of phenomena and elaborations encountered in earlier ethnographies on Amerindian peoples. Generally speaking, the notion refers to indigenous conceptions determining that beings endowed with a soul recognize themselves and those to whom they are related as human but are perceived by other beings in the form of animals, spirits, or other non-human modalities. The construction of this shared humanity is affected through the construction of bodies. In other words: humanity only becomes visible to those who share the same type of body, or to shamans, who are people capable of assuming the perspectives of other beings and seeing them as human too.

The human is thus the form by which the self perceives itself, while the animal and the spirit are forms by which the other is perceived. Hence Viveiros de Castro's famous assertion that Amerindian worlds are determined by cosmological pronouns, referring to the point of view of a specific subject through which beings and things assume a particular form. The idea of point of view, central to the concept, implies that there only exists a world for someone. This is clear in Tânia Stolze Lima's argument that the construction "the Yudjá think that animals are human" is ethnographically false – the Yudjá (Juruna) are an indigenous people of the Upper Xinguriver in the Amazon basin. Instead, she proposes the Yudjá (Juruna)

formulation that “animals are human to themselves.” In other words, everything that exists is emergent for someone: there is no reality independent of the subject.

The Amerindian conceptions that support the concept of perspectivism thus point to the irreducibility of their contexts to an ontological distinction between nature and culture. This configuration cannot be used to think about Amerindian cosmologies without taking precautions that involve a critique of the separation between the human and the non-human, as well as the very status of reality. In other words, among Amerindians, nature does not exist in itself as an ‘objective’ sphere but always as an effect of a point of view. The mode in which Amerindian worlds are determined leads to presuppositions that are irreducible to the modern-Western notion of cultural relativism. The unity of the soul and the multiplicity of bodies to which these ontologies point lead not to modern-Western multiculturalism, but to an Amerindian multinaturalism in which culture is the common background to a multiplicity of natures that emerge from bodies. Hence the condition shared by humans and animals is not animality (as it is for modern science, according to which humans pertain to the animal realm) but humanity. This characteristic is evident in myths which refer to a virtual space-time in which different beings communicate and are recognized as reciprocally human. The myths tell of events that led to the speciation of living beings, which no longer recognize themselves as human, depending on the formation of their bodies.

In her ethnography of peccary (*Tayassuidae*) hunting, Tânia Stolze Lima shows that what the Yudjá apprehend as hunting is apprehended by the peccaries as warfare. This does not mean that the event engenders the same reality perceived in different forms by peccaries and humans, but that it produces two parallel events that can intersect in such a way that one includes the other. In this sense, the hunter needs to take precautions to prevent the peccary perspective from being imposed on him, which would make him lose his humanity as a condition shared with his kin. Put otherwise, if the inverse dimension of hunting (for humans) is warfare (for peccaries), then, in a cross-perspective, hunters fight warriors. The hunter must maintain his point of view so that he can hunt peccaries without his soul being

captured by their perspective. Otherwise, the hunt slips into warfare and the hunter's soul will assume the perspective of the peccaries, going to live with them. Losing the point of view of the event is dangerous because what begins as a hunt can end in death through warfare.

The humanness to which Amerindian perspectivism refers is not the notion of the human species (humankind) but the reflexive condition of the subject (humanity). Indeed, the Amerindian terms that are usually translated as 'human' are forms of self-designation that denote the place of the person, situating the point of view of whoever is naming themselves. They are pronominal expressions that mark the point of view from which the subject is formed or for which the subject is human. This is important because it reveals the subject activated by the enunciated perspective. Reality is produced by a metaphysical continuity (given by the potentiality of the soul) and by a physical discontinuity (given by the different points of view that emerge from bodies). From this arises the central idea that difference is intrinsic to the world that forms around a specific subject (perspectivist multinaturalism) rather than its cultural elaboration (cultural relativism or multiculturalism). It is in this sense that we can affirm that perspectivism offers a radical twist to anthropological thought, shaking its epistemic foundations. Viveiros de Castro extracts an additional yield from the concept by twisting and reworking contemporary anthropological theory with the help of philosophical dialogues with the poststructuralism of Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Félix Guattari (1930-1992) and with the baroque thought of Gottfried W. Leibniz (1646-1716), leading, among other things, to what has become known as the 'ontological turn' in anthropology.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Tânia Stolze Lima have also pointed out that perspectivism should be understood as a mechanism for decolonizing thought; it does not serve to describe Amerindian worlds but to form a pragmatics of speculation, a way to think about what can become plausible and make an opening in the real that allows us, as Stolze Lima declared recently, "to think in the presence of indigenous peoples."

Editor’s note: The authors have written extensively on the subject since the 1990s, and some of their publications have been translated into English. Tânia Stolze Lima published “The Two and Its Many: Reflections on Perspectivism in a Tupi Cosmology” in *Ethnos*, in 1999; and “Towards an Ethnographic Theory of the Nature/Culture Distinction in Juruna” in *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, in 2000. On the subject, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro published the articles “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism” in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* in 1998, “Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Cosmologies” in *Common Knowledge* in 2004, and “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation” in *Tipiti – Journal of the Association for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, in 2004. His book *Cannibal Metaphysics* was translated into English in 2014 – originally released in French as *Métaphysiques cannibales* (2009). “Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere”, based on four lectures Viveiros de Castro gave at Cambridge University, in 1998, was published in *HAU: Masterclass series*, in 2012.

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KEYWORDS

Amazon; Brazilian anthropology; ethnology; cosmology; nature/culture; ontology/ontological turn; Native Americans

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