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The Principle of Invention (Outside In)

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Nothing Is Given, Everything Is Invented

When all is said and done, when all epistemic warrants and methodological prescriptions have gone, when good sense and moralistic injunctions have run aground, when all guarantees of stable ground have come undone— all that is left is the principle of invention: *Nothing is given, everything is invented*. It is this that Roy Wagner (2016: 35-36) taught us, is it not? It is this that he encouraged us to (un)learn, when he put it to us that all learning comes in the form of a shock, that all study is given over to an improvisation it barely manages to control, to a dance of forms out of which it does not merely hallucinate but must invent that which it seeks to understand, drawing it in, taking it on, transforming both knower and known through the very dynamics of dance that renders “culture” itself nothing but an act and process of invention and turns anthropologists as much as “all human beings, wherever they may be,” into “fieldworkers of a sort, controlling the culture shock of daily experience through all kinds of imagined and constructed ‘rules’, traditions, and facts.” It is this that he intimated when he intimated that invention gives way not only to that which is learned but to the very faculties that make learning possible in the first place, that by which the world is deemed stable or changing, safe or perilous, cosmos or chaos, such that order and disorder, “known and unknown, conventional regularity and the incident that defies regularity are tightly and innately bound together, they are the functions of each other and necessarily interdependent. We cannot act,” he ruminated, “but that we invent each through the other.” (2016: 51)

Nothing is given, everything is invented. Nothing could be more groundless, more unhinged, more unprincipled. Groundless, for it tears at the seams of every foundation, confronting every practice of knowledge with the depths of its own abyss, with the hollowness of its commanding authority. Unhinged, for it is radically anarchic, subjecting every act to a kind of contingency no methodological justification, ethnographic or otherwise, could allay. Unprincipled, for it includes the formulation of the principle itself, inventing, like a defeated rationalist, one final rule for a world that does not invent it for itself. Yet it is not a matter of dogmatising on behalf of an anthropologist that so explicitly –and so wisely– refused

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the company of one Immanuel Kant, of one Alfred Schütz, and sought to preempt (with whatever degree of control any invention can hope to exert) becoming the subject of spurious philosophical analogies. And it is certainly not a matter of reading Wagner's (2016: 138) *The Invention of Culture* ironically, as part of the symptomatology of a (modern, Western, anthropocentric) culture of invention that, enthralled by the power of its own symbolism, made "Man" a "mediator of things, a kind of universal catalyst," capable of making and unmaking worlds at will.

Rather than inventing a philosophy for an anthropologist who didn't invent it for himself, to take seriously (for now, anyway) what I am calling "the principle of invention" is to give oneself over to a speculative improvisation, to the possibility and necessity of a counter-invention. It is to try and learn Wagner's lesson through another kind of dance that might not only take us past what he called "the allegory of man" but in so doing might allow us to step *outside*. Which is to say that, through the artifice of this most radical and most inoperative rule, what I am after is the chance to veer out to a zone *The Invention of Culture* opens a door to, leaves it ajar without crossing, a shatter zone out-in-the-outside where "the general phenomenon of human creativity" is not what explains the fact and process of invention but that which the principle of invention itself must explain (2016: 10-11). After all, if "wolves treat one another with the tempered gentility of rococo courtiers, and tigers kills for the abandoned young of other carnivores, why single man's forebears as the only real beasts in the zoo?" (2016: 134) If nothing is given, if everything is invented, does not the spider invent its own web, the bird its own nest, with a style humans could only strenuously imitate? Do not forests, as Eduardo Kohn (2013) teaches, invent their own language and forms of thought? Do not baboons themselves invent forms of sociality that lead them to wonder whether humans have culture at all? (Despret, 2016) Is not Jane Roberts, her writing as much as herself, invented by Seth, by the late William James, and all those whom she channels (Skafish, forthcoming)? Does not every organism have to invent, be shocked and learn in the ongoing and unfinished dance it performs with its milieu, the singular manner by which it might come to inhabit and be inhabited by it? Does not life itself refuse the imperative to passively adapt to prefigured forms so as to "create a form for itself, suited to the circumstances which are made for it" (Bergson, 2003: 58)? (Aren't some of these forms, sometimes, what we're wont to call "human" if not "Man"?)

It is not in the spirit of some post-humanist *cri de cœur* that these questions are asked, however. It is not to make a point about "humans" that I suggest it is perhaps not so much *from* them that invention flows but *through* them that invention passes. If I invent the principle of invention and in so doing attempt to push invention over the guardrails, out of bounds, beyond all reason, it is to rediscover the passion for the outside. Which is to say that it is in order to step out, to escape the modern epistemological terms of order that, when it comes to knowledge-making –especially, perhaps, when it comes to forms of knowledge-making such as ethnography– inevitably render all forms of invention suspect, the last

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recourse of the faithless, the trick of the twice-born souls who in the grips of an epistemological crisis have ceased believing in the world only to become infatuated with the power of their own words. If it is not to “human creativity” that invention refers but to a more radical principle of invention that “human creativity” belongs, what is invented and what is real no longer oppose or displace but necessarily implicate one another. Nothing is given, everything is invented, and whatever is invented is in some way real, whatever is real is in some sense invented.

The problem has changed— the anxiety of modern epistemology over a knowing subject that would confuse her own symbolic creation with the world from which her symbols are drawn suddenly begins to dissipate. But in one and the same breath, we no longer know what “invention” means, where it comes from, what it involves, or what risks it poses, when it is no longer merely the outpouring of a beautiful soul, when it is the world itself that invents us and invents through us. And yet it is in the throw of this unformed dance, in the opening to the outside, that perhaps, just perhaps, the very act and process of invention might become perceptible in a different light. It is here, out there, that one might once again read the word *invention* for what it has always intimated, that to which it has always pointed and to which we’re given over again and again: *in-vention* —from the Latin. *in venire*— that which comes or is brought *into* the world, that which irresistibly connects us to the Outside. In the end, in the beginning, that is what the principle of invention might render perceptible: the vertiginous worldquake, the perilous practice and experience of opening to a radical exteriority with which all inventive practices communicate, to the unformed and inappropriable zone of indeterminate forces out of which invention draws that which is not *into* existence, by which it transforms what is. In other words, *a pragmatics of the outside*.

Outside In

It cannot be denied that such a way of approaching the question of invention has something eccentric about it, appealing to an elusive zone of reality —the Outside— which resists every attempt at epistemic capture; demanding that one take the armour off, lose oneself, step outside, escape from the technical equipment of representation so as to give oneself over to an improvisation with the unformed and undetermined, with the impossible and the inappropriable. But it cannot be accepted that there’s anything gratuitous or arbitrary about such eccentricity— for the *ex-centric* is one of the marks of the outside. And after all, it was only very recently, in the course of the eighteenth century, that the notion of “invention”, retaining the senses of fabrication and creation until today, was severed from its evident connection with the sense of *discovery*, with the “action of coming upon or finding,” with the process of “finding out”— senses which only some dictionaries now appear to recall (Savransky, 2016: 78). And if

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this is no coincidence, it is because that was roughly also the time of the Western rejection of the outside: the time of “progress”, as the intellectual flame-keepers of European empires were wont to call it; of the “Great Confinement”, as Michel Foucault (2009) more perceptively named it in *The History of Madness*, one which involved not only the interiorisation of the outside of reason –unreason, vagrancy, blasphemy, prostitution– but also the very attempt to turn the world itself into a Great Interior, a systematic universe subject only to general laws, to universal principles, rational knowledges, and timeless truths (Toulmin 1990). A world, in other words, all given in advance, a through-and-through universe whose unruly edges and unformed exteriorities could safely ignored, and eventually confined to mere footnotes in the providential unfurling of History.

Which is why to refuse to prolong the recent history that turned invention into an affectation of the mind, to escape the story that made of invention a “necessary illusion” humans have to participate in so as to impose meanings upon situations that are bereft of them, is also to step out of the ready-made world, to throw it out of whack. In relay and return, to affirm the principle of invention, to reclaim the forlorn history of invention as fundamentally bound up with discovery *and* fabrication, is to accept the risk of learning to live in a world that is ongoing and unfinished, fundamentally incomplete, and not certain to be saved, at all times subject to addition and liable to loss. It is to affirm, in other words, that if there is invention at all it is because –when all is said and done, when the seams of reason have come undone– reality “*is still in the making*, and awaits part of its complexion from the future” (James, 1975: 122). In this incomplete world, invention is but the event that regularly punctuates the wait, the improvised dance through which reality gets made. It is an apprenticeship in the discovery of the outside coming in, the fugitive habitation of an interstice through which one can conjure a relation with exterior forces (of life, of thought, of the Earth, of the otherwise) and draw something in, thereby engendering new forms out of the unformed, creating possibles out of the impossible. What does the bird do except invent the very possibility of home and of refuge out of the very fugitive space which is the experience of flight? What does the spider do except weave into existence a surface and force of capture out of that which was not? If to discover is to invent, then invention is also a response. It is a matter of responding to an insistence that precedes what the invention, once achieved, will make exist. It is what thinker of the outside Maurice Blanchot (1992: 58) calls “a response to what is not yet heard, an attentive response in which the impatient waiting for the unknown and the desiring hope for presence are affirmed.”

Such is the radical gesture clandestinely harboured in the effort to think the act and process of invention ethnographically, as a matter not only of symbolic mediations but of situated practices, generative devices, techniques of sociality, and methodologies of life. Much more than an extension from “theory” to “practice” is at stake. For if it is true that the “anthropologist makes experiences understandable (to himself as well as to others in his society) by perceiving them and understanding them

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in terms of his own familiar way of life, his culture,” (Wagner 2016: 36) such that, in the course of her practice with others she “invents them as ‘culture’,” it is neither her perception nor the reality of others that she invents. It is with others and in their presence, in what Adolfo Estalella and Tomás Sánchez Criado (2018: 18) appositely call the “joint problem-making” they together improvise, in the unformed dance to which they’re given over, that ethnographers and those to whom they relate respond to an outside that belongs to no-one but insists in their midst. It is as and through their collective improvisation that they conjure exterior forces and draw them in, *inventing* not only in words on a page but in and through the very devices their improvised sociality has articulated, the sounds and noises they generate in their responses to what has not yet been heard, the stream of thoughts that begins to circulate through them in their collective poking of the unthought, the possibles their own experimental collaborations have snatched from the impossible, the forms their unformed dance has brought into existence and by which worlds are *transformed*.

This is the reason why, if our “symbols do not relate to an external ‘reality’ at all” it is not because there be no reality “out there” to which they could relate, or because “at most they refer to other symbolizations” by means of which they translate (Wagner 2016: 42). It is rather because the “out there” from which they’re invented, whose forces their practices draw in, “*is farther away* than any external world and even any form of exteriority, which henceforth becomes infinitely closer.” (Deleuze 2006: 86). Becoming at once infinitely farther and closer, the first transformation to which ethnographic invention gives way is of course none other than that of ethnographers themselves, who become not so much the practice’s subject but its prey, themselves invented in the very process of collective improvisation which they then –in lettered or multimedia reinventions– proceed to make their own. And in relay and return, the others whom the dance implicates are transformed by the manner in which the conjured forces of the outside enter into a relationship with other forces configuring their own worlds, entertaining questions and matters of shared concern they might not have posed alone, elaborating new forms of assembly and collective storytelling for the invention of stories and histories which henceforth become their own. As such, if there is no translation without invention, there’s also no invention without *intranslation*: a collective but nonsymmetrical act, at once conceptual, political, and pragmatic, of *introducing* (“intraduire”) generative forces of alteration, contingent curves of divergence and runaway variations that do not create possible openings in the world without simultaneously opening the world up to an infinite cartography of other impossible worlds (Cassin 2014, Savransky 2021).

Pragmatics of the Outside

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Far from recoiling from reality, far from trapping us in the imperium of our own epistemes, in the deepest interiority of our own, therefore, it is the outside that is the active force of invention, but it is invention that, in destituting the established terms of order, constitutes the affirmative power of the outside. Which is to say that it is by way of invention that reality grows, in a metaphysics of call and response that draws the outside in whilst pushing the inside out of bounds, over the guardrails, rendering it a mere folding, a fragment of a fragmentary exterior, another impatient wait for the unknown, another desiring hope for presence. “In this way the outside is always an opening on to a future: nothing ends, since nothing has begun, but everything is transformed.” (Deleuze 2006: 89) Because the principle of invention prompts us to step out, to turn human creativity into an anoriginary vector of what has always escaped “the allegory of man,” we can follow Wagner outside when he writes that if “man has ‘changed’ over the past few hundred millennia, if his inventions and possession of ‘self’ has increased in control through the gain in control over his external creativity (and vice versa), then nature itself has changed quite as much as man; we have not ‘diverged’ from nature at all.” (Wagner 2016: 138) Indeed, it is not “man” that invents “nature” for himself but both of them that diverge by virtue of a process of invention which turns them into some of its multiple means—foldings of an outside through which its exterior forces pass. It is *as and through* them and more, each through the other, that the outside contingently comes in, engendering the always precarious invention, the possibility and necessity of ongoing transformation, of what we usually call “world.”

Nothing is ever given, and what is invented does not depict, represent, or mediate the comings and goings of an indifferent world. Instead, every invention—in words or in place, in thing or in thought, in method or in life—enjoins the adventure of a radically incomplete world, ongoing and unfinished, underway and in the making, open to the outside, subject to addition or liable to loss. “Now the empiricist world can for the first time truly unfold in all its extension: a world of exteriority, a world where thought itself is in a fundamental relation to the Outside, a world where terms exist like veritable atoms, and relations like veritable external bridges—a world where the conjunction ‘and’ dethrones the interiority of the verb ‘is,’ a Harlequin world of colored patterns and non-totalizable fragments, where one communicates via external relations.” (Deleuze 2002: 163) It is only fitting that, in such a strung-along and loosely connected world, the principle of invention—the most groundless, unhinged and principled of all—would offer neither guides nor guarantees. It is only fitting that it would confront every practice—of knowing and making, of thinking and living—each in their own way, with the riskiest and most perilous question, one that is posed even when the answer can never be readily available. Not, that is, the question of whether or how the invention relates to a pre-existent reality which it destitutes, but that of its consequences, of the differences it is liable to make to the ongoing and unfinished reality in which it will

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inevitably participate. “*What difference will it make?*” (James 1975: 62) The risk of invention – ethnographic and otherwise– is therefore that of a radical *pragmatics of the outside*, of the indelible debt that binds every drawing in of the outside to the effects and transformations it is liable to precipitate. For if the world remains forever incomplete, ongoing and unfinished, without warrants or guarantees, open to the outside and uncertain to be saved, inventions constitute novelties as much as losses, beginnings as much as endings, joys as much as tragedies. As such, when all is said and done, the question concerning all invention, the problem posed to every practice that in giving itself over to an unformed dance also gives to the outside the power to make it think and create, is none other than this: With your invention, with your collective improvisations and your affirmation of the outside, with every “and” which your practice inevitably adds to the ongoing metamorphosis of the world, does the world “*rise or fall in value?* Are the additions *worthy or unworthy?*” (James 1975: 122-123).

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