

Book Review: How Forests Think

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Eduardo Koch. 2013. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 288 pp. ISBN 9780520276116

In 'How Forests Think', Eduardo Kohn sets the agenda for an ambitious plan; to develop, an anthropology that could attend not only to the ways in which non-humans act or react, but also to the ways other species interact with us, think about us and finally make us think about us. The author sets out this agenda by exploring the interactions between humans and non-humans among the Runa of Ecuador's Amazon in different fields of the human experiences, including hunting, after-life transformations and daily contact with domestic animals. In Kohn's account, the Runa's lived world emerges with profound intimacy in which different 'selves', both human and non-human, participate in social relations.

Kohn's advocacy for anthropology beyond the human begins with a question, how to make 'theory' permeable to ethnography. The author approaches the question of how to represent Runa social and ecological intimacies by recognizing the current limits of anthropocentric models of analysis and the need for an analytical strategy that could recognize the semiotic role of nonhumans, as Runa people do. By treating Runa modes of socio-ecological analysis in comparative rather than in hierarchical terms with anthropological theory, 'How Forests Think' makes an exemplary case for a 'reverse anthropology' (Kirsch 2006). As envisioned by Viveiros de Castro, such a theory 'starts out from the premise that the procedures characterizing the investigation are conceptually of the same kind as those to be investigated' (2003: 20).

In approaching Kohn's work, one question immediately comes to mind. What is new about 'How Forests Think' in relation to the recent anthropological endeavour to explore the pluralist character of ontology? 'How Forests Think' might look at first like a further validation of anti-representational anthropology, to which Strathern, Latour, Viveiros de Castro and more recently, Holbraad are affiliated. However, there is something that makes Kohn's ethnographic analysis more than a mere validation of the ontological turn. While anti-representational tendencies in anthropology have focused on the dangers of reducing complex ontological and cosmological principles to matters of worldview, Kohn invites us to look at representations not only as an anthropological conundrum, but also as a process intrinsic to those life processes, in which human and non-human ontological barriers are blurred. Rather than getting rid of the anthropocentric power of representation, anthropology should open itself up to the possibility that non-humans also represent the world around them. In this sense, by showing how non-humans (at least some of them) do not only act, but also think, 'How Forests Think' is a step further from the early insights of Science and Technology Studies on non-human agency.

Kohn unfolds the claim that life is intrinsically semiotic (page 9) by focusing on key concepts in each chapter.

Chapter 1 offers a definition of an ‘open whole’, characterized by a complex set of communicative exchanges open to non-humans through non-linguistic signs. Chapter 2 gives new life to the classic anthropological debate on Amazonian animism and perspectivism by showing how different ‘semiotic selves’ are related in complex ecological networks of ‘living thoughts’ (page 78). In Chapter 3, Kohn examines Runa anxieties over the phenomenon of ‘soul blindness’, the inability to see other as selves and consequently be seen as one, in order to reveal how different forms of communication among selves are central in Runa self-determination as humans. Transspecies communication (‘pidgins’) is further discussed in Chapter 4, through an ethnographic analysis of Runa interpretations of animals’ behaviour (dogs in particular). In my opinion, the fourth chapter is the one that most vividly illustrates the extent and modalities of non-linguistic semiotic exchanges among humans and non-humans. By focusing on different propagation of patterns in the tropical forests, Kohn shows that ‘form’ emerges in the world neither as language nor as inert material. Form is finally amplified through distinctive manners in which humans and nonhumans harness it (page 157). Issues concerning power and colonialism are explored in the last chapter of the book, in which hierarchical relations within Runa ecology of selves are discussed.

‘How Forests Think’ has several merits beyond its contribution to regional anthropology and it will be of great interest to academics and beyond specialists in Amazonia. As a matter of fact, the only minor shortcoming of the book might possibly be detected by Andean specialists, who might have wished for a comparative discussion with materials on nearby Andean groups, with whom the Runa share linguistic configurations. Having said that, there are many insights in ‘How Forests Think’ that decisively move forward anthropological theory. Firstly, Kohn’s analysis of the semiotic potentials of non-humans can lead us to rethink ethnographic analysis of the divide between nature and society in Western societies. While Kohn’s work can be arguably taken as a step further in the anthropological interest in animism, his emphasis on non-human semiosis is a far-reaching contribution to the ontological liberation of the nonhuman inaugurated by Science and Technology Studies. Secondly, Kohn’s focus on non-linguistic semiotics brings the role of embodiment to the forefront of anthropological analysis. While phenomenology is not explicitly discussed as an influence, Kohn’s emphasis on bodily exchange of signs and openness to the world can potentially rejuvenate the debate on the relation between phenomenology and anthropology, which lost its momentum after the 1990s.

Thirdly, Kohn’s rediscovery of early ecological thinkers, Pierce and Bateson in particular, can contribute to the opening up of a renewed ecological stance in anthropology, of which Ingold has been the primary contributor in the last decades. The joining of forces between semiotics and ecology is a particularly fertile field of enquiry. I sense that one way in which Kohn’s proposal of non-human semiotics might be further developed in future works is the ‘ecological’ rephrasing of dialogical approaches to human communication, whose origins can be traced backed to Mikhail Bakhtin. In particular, Kohn’s claim that what lies ‘beyond’ the human also sustains us and makes us

the beings we are and might become (page 221) is arguably congruent with Wagner's proposal that cultures are invented by way of mutual determinations. Do humans define themselves in relation to how non-humans represent them? Lastly, 'How Forests Think' represents an innovative stance to the study of colonialism in indigenous Latin America. Rather than relying on classic political theory, Kohn chooses to approach colonial relations by inserting them into the broader discussion of ecology of selves. For this reason, it would be a false impression to think that colonialism emerges a secondary topic in Kohn's work. The predominant focus on the process of ethnicity and identity formation implicit in a vast body of literature on indigenous activism in South America runs the risk of undermining the uniqueness of local political theories as well as the specific meanings and properties of the disputed political object, such as natural resources. Kohn's rephrasing of these politics in terms congruent with Runa socio-ecological theories might help us in the much-needed effort to provincialize Euro-American political theory, upon which anthropology is too often dependent.

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