

BOOK REVIEW SERIES

The End of Anthropology: Roy Wagner and *The Invention of Culture*¹

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Roy WAGNER. 2010. *A invenção da cultura*. Translated by Marcela Coelho de Souza and Alexandre Morales. São Paulo: Cosac Naify.

There are at least three ways to approach *The invention of culture*: 1) emphasize the almost complete originality or untimely character of the book; 2) identify its debt to authors contemporary with it or to those from the recent or remote past; or 3) attempt a judicious balance between the first and second options. For numerous reasons, I deliberately chose the first alternative.

From this point of view, we could initially observe that the first edition of *The invention of culture*, in 1975, was almost simultaneous with two other books by North American anthropologists that marked contemporary anthropology: *The interpretation of cultures*, by Clifford Geertz, and *Culture and practical reason*, by Marshall Sahlins – published, respectively, in 1973 and 1976. The destiny of these three books, however, continues to be quite different. Ultimately, the last two achieved wide renown and a success that the first is only beginning to achieve and will achieve to the same degree only with difficulty. In Brazil, for example, the book by Geertz was translated, even if only partially, in 1987, and that of Sahlins in 1979³. Until today, it is rare to find a course in anthropological theory that does not include them in its bibliography.

The invention of culture, on the other hand, had to wait 35 years to be translated, in an excellent initiative by the publishing house Cosac Naify in a beautiful translation by Marcela Coelho de Souza and Alexandre Morales. Therefore, it is almost inevitable to speculate about what the destiny of

Brazilian anthropology would have been if the book by Wagner had already been translated in the 1970s and the other two had not. Maybe we would not be teaching an anthropology so removed from what is effectively done in the discipline today; maybe we would have resisted more effectively the imperialism of the constructionist and deconstructionist analyses that make reference to an atemporal power and inevitable hidden manipulations behind any context; maybe nothing would have happened.... Anyway, what is not easy to imagine is the translations of the books by Geertz and Sahlins having to wait 35 years after their initial publication to be released.

The “message” of these books seems so well adapted to the time in which they were written that it is difficult to conceive of them in any other context. In summary, in two cases, we observe an attempt to save culturalism from what we could say was always its ‘best enemy’, naturalist reductionism, in other words, that without which cultural anthropology simply could not function, in so far as its “other”, nature, which defines, albeit equivocally, what culture develops, interprets, symbolizes or transcends, would be missing.

We also observe, even if briefly, that this naturalism presented itself, both to Geertz and Sahlins, under a double form. On one hand, the so called ecological or materialist anthropologies, that both flatly rejected; on the other, the much more complex, nuanced, and, maybe, unexpected version of Levi-Straussian structuralism. Only two years prior to the publication of the book by Geertz, Levi-Strauss concluded his mythological trilogy with the book significantly entitled *The Naked Man*, in which the demonstration of the incredible sophistication that indigenous thought was capable of seemed to nullify any possibility of reduction. Levi-Strauss concludes his book however, with the precipitous affirmation that at the end of the day, this thought is nothing more than a product of the activity of the human brain, itself a product of the complex process of natural evolution. This Sahlins defined as *higher naturalism*⁴. Geertz in his turn defined it as *hypermodern intellectualism*⁵. However, if Geertz seems to simply refuse the Levi-Straussian alternative, seeking refuge in a hermeneutic that invariably functions as a sophisticated exit for those who do not like the notion of structure, the reaction of Sahlins is different. Originating from a materialist and neo-evolutionist anthropological tradition, a

stay in Paris led him to imagine the possibility of, so to speak, grounding structuralism in culturalism, making the “structures of the mind” the “instruments of culture”, not their “condition”⁶, and of the structure itself only a part of culture and history.

The book by Wagner takes a quite different approach, be it in terms of Geertzian interpretationism, or the structured culturalism of Sahlins. It is so different, that today we may have the impression that it is not only one or two years that separate *The invention of culture* from the other two books, but more like half a century! Indeed, if *The interpretation of culture* and *Culture and practical reason* appear today like the beginning of the end (in the double sense of completing and ending) of a *fin de siècle* anthropology (20th century), *The invention of culture* seems to announce the beginning of something else, that we could take to be one of the possibilities available to anthropology in the 21st century.

In this regard, it may be worth noting that the central *leitmotifs* of the work of Geertz and Sahlins, interpretation and symbolization respectively, are not neglected by Wagner, even if they are referenced only to introduce further reflection. Therefore, from the beginning of the book, “interpretation” appears in the form of the “modern American interpretative culture” (p. 10), a theme that will be developed in the section “The magic of advertising” (pp. 49-56) from Chapter 3, in a manner quite distinct from that of Geertz. This is because what Geertz treats as a methodological tool that merely extends and makes more sophisticated a procedure inherent to all human cultures (precisely “interpretation”), Wagner understands as a singularity of a particular “North American” culture. More precisely, it could well be that interpretation is a universal way of dealing with the world and society, but the problem is that this generality does not tell us anything about its function in concrete or specific situations. This means, of course, that it can operate perfectly well according to the basic mechanics of tools labeled ethnocentric: proposing as universal, what is actually a particular characteristic of the culture of the anthropologists themselves. In this case, Wagner insists on trying to make the conventional character of the culture in which we live increasingly clear, or what would be the same thing, motivating a desire to become more

self-conscious of that which, he argues, determines us. In anthropology, we know well where this ended up going, with our particular version of “post-modernism”, and it is not by accident that it was unfaithful students or disciples of Geertz who introduced this trend amongst us⁷.

Before considering so called anthropological post-modernism, however, we see that the opposition between “practical reason” and “cultural reason”, that structures the book of Sahlins, is in some way reconsidered in *The invention of culture*. However, contrary to the epic style of Sahlins, which opposes two reasons almost like God and the devil, Wagner highlights how the two varieties of anthropology derived from this opposition share the same foundation or, at least, meet a common need. If the naturalist or naturalizing anthropologies (analyzed in the section “Controlling culture”, pp. 99 – 101, chap. 6) attributes a highly determined and determining character to nature, the effect (the “counter-invention”) of this attribution is to establish a rigorous *control* on culture, eliminating everything creative and indeterminate that it may contain. On the other hand, (as shown in the section “controlling nature”, pp. 102-105, chap. 6), but in a symmetrical way, the culturalist anthropologies (and nothing stops the two varieties being able to coexist in varied doses) will attribute all or almost all power of determination to culture, such that *control* will now coincide with the side of nature, whose power and indetermination from now on will appear as mere simple limits to culture itself.

Neither interpretation nor symbolization, the central concept of the book by Wagner is obviously invention. In this sense however, it is necessary to be careful. As Martin Holbraad observes in the excellent sleeve notes written for the Brazilian edition, the term “invention” has the bad habit of awakening a series of associations, all equally inadequate for the correct understanding of the sense of the Wagnerian concept. Generally speaking, when hearing the word “invention”, we are almost always led to notions such as “artifice”, in the bad sense of the word, that is, to that which is “artificial” or opposed to “real”. In the *Houaiss* Brazilian Portuguese dictionary definition, “*invenção*” [“invention”] is an imagined thing that presents itself as true; invention, fantasy”; “a thing imagined in a clever way, frequently with a hidden objective”; or “which does not belong to the real world; imagination, fable, fiction, deception”.

Obviously it is also “productive or creative imagination, creative capacity; inventiveness, inventive”; and “ability to create, to conceive or put into practice something new, of realizing an idea, a conception; creation”.

For reasons that Wagner himself explains, anthropologists seem to prefer negative to positive definitions. Therefore, when we speak of the “invention of traditions”, we immediately imagine that these are “false”, in the sense of not corresponding to the history that they tell about themselves, and that certainly they were created by someone with unknowable objectives. Maybe given this, in the brief *post scriptum* that he wrote for the Brazilian edition, Wagner observes, curiously, that “in a certain sense, invention is absolutely not an inventive process, but a process of *obviation*” (p. 240). If it was not possible in 1975 or 1981 to imagine the direction that the understanding of the notion of invention would take, in 2010 we know exactly how things have unfolded. And this, even though *The invention of culture* calls attention to how “traditions are as much dependent on continuous reinvention as on idiosyncrasies, details and quirks” (p. 94). This means that “invention” and “innovation” are not the same thing (p. 77) that all tradition is invented and that, in an expression such as “invention of traditions” the first term (process of invention) should be much more important than the second (which had simply been invented).

Further on, we will see how to free the notion of invention from its critical status. However, firstly, if it is worth clearly distinguishing the thought of Roy Wagner from that of the most important North American anthropologists more or less contemporary with him⁸, this is also true in terms of what followed the publication of *The invention of culture* in North American anthropology. As is well known, it famously underwent a profound revolution starting from the middle of the 1980s, when the publication of *Writing culture* announced the advent of post-modernism in anthropology. If I am not mistaken, *The invention of culture* is only cited once in this book, in the “Introduction”⁹. This is done precisely to juxtapose the notions of “invention” and “representation”, in other words, to illustrate the central point of *Writing culture*, that the ethnography that anthropologists write is a work of fiction, not a representation of reality. It is the critical sense of the notion of invention that

operates, but now given an apparent positivity that it did not have.

The aim here, however, is not to attempt to resurrect the dead, nor anthropological post-modernism, nor the traditional criticisms that were directed at it. A quarter of a century later, I believe that the best that we can say of the so called post-moderns is that they were able to raise some very important questions, even if they did not offer interesting answers to any of them! This is probably because their objectives were never to respond to them, but, as one says, to adopt an “ironic” posture, in other words, that of someone who at least knew that they knew nothing or cannot know it with certainty. This attitude is possibly responsible for the ultimate inability to transform the “criticism of representation” and the declaration of the inevitably fictional character of ethnography into a new beginning for anthropology. Finally, as the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe wrote, although all “fiction was undoubtedly fictitious it could also be true or false, not with the truth or falsehood of a news item but as to its disinterestedness, its intention, its integrity”¹⁰.

This new beginning required the more consistent unification of the critique of representation as a form of knowledge and power. In other words, it required the renunciation of representation not because it is false or fictional, nor because it is always a power relation that gives someone the right to represent the other, but rather because the representation is part of the extension of power relations that the capitalist West established with the other societies of the planet, within the anthropological text¹¹. It is precisely the recognition of the immanent character of the power relations established within the anthropological text that can open lines of flight for the writer/anthropologist. This is because they are in proximity with the power relations in this space, the anthropological text itself, that is partially under their control. Therefore, it is possible to raise the question at the same time epistemological, ethical and political: how do we proceed so as not to reproduce, in the sphere of the production of anthropological knowledge, the relations of domination to which the groups with which anthropologists work find themselves submitted?

It was not necessary to go very far to find an answer. It was enough to connect the criticism of anthropology as representation with that, a little older, which criticized anthropological knowledge, exposing its dependency on the colonialist enterprise, not in the megalomaniacal sense that would make anthropology fundamental knowledge for colonialism, but, as Talal Asad¹² argued, in the way in which colonialism is too important for anthropology, obliging it, consequently, to seek to break this political, ethical and epistemological dependency:

Historical anthropology mirrored the ideology of the late colonial and supraethnic empires of Britain, France, Central Europe, and others. (These empires quite literally “did” Cultural evolution and diffusion as a matter of policy.) Systemic anthropology reflected the rational urgency of wartime mobilization and the economic nation-state (p. 231).

While attention to this relation between anthropological schools and concepts and colonialist and imperialist enterprises (established here in a way that we could qualify as immanent or intrinsic) demonstrates the interest of Wagner in the questions raised by Asad, the excerpt that follows shows that the line of flight that Wagner traces follows a quite different trajectory from that emphasized in the collection organized by the Asad¹³:

The curious “evolution” in which each one of the successive paradigmatic episodes worked itself into an obviation and contradiction of its original assumptions provides the most compelling evidence for the nature of anthropology as an academic discipline. It is a holding action against relativity, a kind of theoretical fixative that builds introspective insight into culturally supportive theory (pp. 213-232).

Wagner bets, therefore, on radicalizing the subversive power of the ethnographic practice of anthropology, but not on the analysis of the relations themselves between anthropology and colonialism or imperialism, as capable of breaking with the dependency of the first in relation to the second.

Therefore, the main problem of anthropological post-modernism, as Wagner showed in a little known review that he wrote for *Writing culture*¹⁴, is the intention to “do with ethnography what a more self-assured and less cynical anthropology (‘Grand Theory,’ as the cant goes) did with theory-develop powerful and decisive canons of comprehension”. In other words, introduce into ethnography itself the control mechanisms generally employed by theory. Therefore, if traditional anthropology operates as a type of critique of fact, like an art criticism that attempts to show that, as great as the novelty of what is being presented may appear to be, “it’s all been said before” (p. 109) and in truth, nothing is happening, the post-modernist anthropologist can be understood as the critic of a “theater of fact”, using “authority” (“the play within the play” as Wagner defines it) as an additional form of control. Neither the ideas, nor the facts should have the power to surprise anybody!

To trace this line of flight, Wagner firstly had to redefine, or to redirect, both the notion of invention as well as that of culture. It is given this that each word of the title of this book, including the article and the preposition, are fundamental and need to be clearly understood. To begin with, what does “invention” mean in *The invention of culture*?

At the beginning of *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari¹⁵, after provisionally defining this activity as “the art of forming, inventing, or fabricating concepts”, and arguing that concepts, in truth, “are not necessarily forms, findings or products”, conclude that “philosophy, more rigorously, is the discipline that consists of creating concepts”. I would risk saying that in the book by Wagner, the notion of invention should be rigorously understood in the sense established by Deleuze and Guattari for the notion of *creation*¹⁶.

This means that “invention” for Wagner, is not the imposition of an external, active form on inert matter, nor the discovery of a pure novelty, nor a manufacturing of a final product starting from raw material. This distances it from the most recurrent models used in the West to think the act of creation: the Greek hylomorphic model¹⁷, the Judeo-Christian creation *ex nihilo*, or the capitalist model of production and property¹⁸. Wagnerian invention is of the order of a continuous metamorphosis, as occurs in the majority of the cosmologies studied by

anthropologists, in which forces, the world and beings are always created and recreated starting from something preexistent. This finding leads to a series of consequences.

The first is that this concept of invention-creation has more to do with art than with science and technics. It is not by accident that the paintings of Bruegel, Rembrandt, Rubens and Vermeer, the poetry of Morgenstern and Rilke, the music of Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, and jazz appear throughout the book as a way of explaining anthropological activity. This activity is precisely defined in terms of its *creativity*, a term that generates the title of the second chapter ("Culture as creativity") and that appears directly or correlatively, more than one hundred times throughout the text. The particularity of anthropology is that the creativity of the anthropologist depends on another (and others): the creativity of the people with whom they choose to live during a period of their lives. Here, we touch on a fundamental point, because the recognition of the creativity of those we "study" is, for Wagner, a condition of possibility for anthropological practice. More than this, the anthropologist should be prepared and disposed to assume two premises: 1) recognize in those that they study the same level of creativity that they believe themselves to possess; and 2) not assimilate the form or "style" of creativity that we find in the field with that with which we are accustomed and that anthropologists themselves practice.

Therefore, Wagner is the first to propose a true constructivism for anthropology, or at least, to elaborate the fulfillment of what had long ago been established by Malinowski when declaring field work to be the only procedure adequate for the then "modern" anthropology. In 1935, Malinowski argued that field work should be, above all else, a constructive or creative activity, given that ethnographic facts "did not exist". Therefore a "method for the discovery of invisible facts by way of constructive inference"¹⁹ was necessary, an understanding that unfortunately, did not seem to have much impact throughout the history of the discipline.

Therefore, once again we must be careful. Wagnerian constructivism (as well as Malinowskian) has little or nothing to do with the pseudo political

rhetoric of the infamous social constructivism. This, as is known, is dedicated to affirming the "socially constructed" character of whatever it maybe (from kinship relations to genes and planets), but concedes a strange right of exception to its own procedures, as well as to that to which it attributes the role of great architect, that is to say, the social and political mechanisms that only the analyst has the ability to perceive. Therefore, there is no doubt that social agents pass all their time constructing, but, unfortunately, they are unable to perceive that they are "constructing", "naturalizing" and "essentializing", as is said, everything that they thought they found in their path, but that in truth they had constructed. It is the role of the analyst, therefore, to "deconstruct" these illusions, which means strangely, that social constructionism and deconstructionism would mean exactly the same thing. Durkheim at least knew what this "society" is, that creates everything, but was itself not created: God – and nothing could be more different from the idea of a creative invention of culture. It is given this, however, that "fieldwork is work in the field" (p. 22)

However, there are those who think that the position of Wagner coincides with this generalized fetishism from which only the anthropologist is exempt, this species of "creationism of the poor", as Latour defined it²⁰. The problem is that when we suppose that the culture studied by anthropologists is "socially constructed", not only "the invention of culture" becomes an "artifice" but at times, the people themselves become "socially constructed" for the interested anthropologist²¹. Given this, obviously, it is necessary to imagine a "native-in-itself" (for example, the Daribi of the Papua New Guinea Highlands, whom Wagner studied, or the Bororo of Central Brazil) absolutely impenetrable to our understanding, which, regardless, becomes surprisingly powerful and farsighted when determining the true political and social motives and causes that led the anthropologist to "construct" the native in this or that manner.

Wagner, however, never affirms that the anthropologist invents culture because there is nothing to see or because they are incapable of understanding what they think they see. The problem is different. It is that there are too many things to see, too many ideas to be understood and so little time in which to do it. The anthropologist does what he can, inventing culture to try to confer

a minimum of order and intelligibility where the plenitude of life dispenses with them completely. Therefore, Wagner is probably the first anthropologist to make *life* (and not evolution, history, function, structure, cognition...) the final referent of anthropological work. In addition to founding constructivism in anthropology, he also founds a type of anthropological vitalism²².

Constructivism, however, can only function if it is complete and generalized, and the obligation of the anthropologist is that their creation makes the creativity on which it itself depends (its own) appear and, principally, that of the people with whom they work. They resemble therefore, one of the mythological demiurges that they study who created a world, where another world had already and always existed. In this process, there are two temptations which we should resist: imagine that they are only "representing" what exists in itself and for itself; or pretend that they are creating from nothing.

In both cases, the creativity of those whom we study is denied. In the first, which corresponds, generally, to the anthropologies that Wagner designates as "diachronic" or "historical" and "synchronic" or "systematic" (p. 107), this refusal is hidden, under an apparent affirmation. In the end, if anthropologists do nothing other than represent other cultures, only the people that live there can be responsible for these cultures. The problem is that these anthropologists only affirm such a creativity to deny it, by attributing the determinant role to forces of which people know nothing and do not control: evolution, order, function, sense, the unconscious or whatever it maybe. In the second case, which corresponds more or less to the post-modernisms, constructionisms and deconstructionisms of recent years, we would be returning to an even more absolute refusal: native creativity is viewed as a type of chimera to which we simply have no access. Unconscious in one case, unthinkable in the other, the role of the native is to serve as a substrate for the academicism²³ of the representation or the pretext for the pessimism of a fiction. Both free us from all risk, leaving us intact and unscathed, but, at the same time, unable to be affected or modified, in other words, prevented from thinking:

The crucial step - which is simultaneously ethical and theoretical - is that of remaining true to the

implications of our assumption of culture. If our culture is creative, then the "cultures" we study, as other examples of this phenomenon, must also be. For every time we make others part of a "reality" that we alone invent, denying their creativity by usurping the right to create, we use those people and their way of life and make them subservient to ourselves (p. 21).

If creativity is a general phenomenon, even if it always manifests itself through specific styles, the anthropologist deals with a specific type of invention, that "of culture". In 1975, it would not be difficult to say of culture what Descartes had said of common sense: that it is the most widely shared commodity in the world²⁴. Invention, on the other hand, seemed a privilege of the few (we ourselves, actually). Thirty five years later, things seemed to have changed. Invention, in the bad sense of the word, obviously, seems to be everywhere, and culture (or tradition) only exists because it is an invention of natives and/or anthropologists defending their own interests.

Wagner, in some way, had already inverted this picture. It is invention, in the good sense of creativity that constitutes the plane of consistency for all humans (and maybe not only for humans). The invention of culture, on the other hand, corresponds to a more specific historical episode (cultural), which took place at a certain moment of the history of the Western world. It is in this sense that we can say that Wagner elaborates a properly cultural notion of culture, by establishing that the explanation that the notion of culture is itself a cultural artifact or the product of a specific cultural point of view, our own, is in fact an intrinsic and constitutive part of it.

The fundamental point, however is that the "Western" origin of the notion is not a testament to impotence or to its being malign, but only the sign of a work to be continually renewed. Therefore, that our notion of culture is derived from that of "cultivation" and later on received its sense from the "opera house" (p. 24), only becomes problematic when we interrupt the process of derivation or "metaphorization" (p. 24), making literal a sense that is always local, transitory and unstable. Each person thinks and speaks with words and categories which they have at hand, and the big question is how to proceed so that they are able to say more, or

something else, beyond the usual, while still maintaining its intelligibility²⁵.

Here, we should go back a few steps. The brief presentation of modern North American culturalist anthropology at the beginning of this review intentionally left out what is certainly the most important “influence” on Wagner, his doctoral supervisor, David Schneider, to whom *The invention of culture* is dedicated. Next to Geertz and Sahlins, Schneider completes the group of authors who in some sense finish (in the double sense of the word) anthropological culturalism. Now, the fundamental point of the work of Schneider²⁶, and his originality in relation to the other culturalists I believe resided in this, consists in arguing that even though it is inevitable to investigate other cultures based on our categories (kinship, in this case), this cannot lead us to imagine that our categories are universal. Therefore, and to the contrary of what many think, I do not believe that the book by Schneider simply condemns the anthropological study of kinship for being, at the end of the day, a “western category” (which one would not be?). It is, rather, to use kinship in a way that Wagner would designate as “analogical” (see, for example, p. 18). In this sense, *The invention of culture* can be read as an extension of the proposal of Schneider: why do we just focus on kinship given that the very notion of culture is also exclusively “ours”?

Once again, this does not mean condemning anthropology for being a western endeavor. It certainly is, but the question is what can be done based on this understanding. Therefore, we see that the notion of culture as cultivation was analogically extended to that of “opera house” culture, which allows us to imagine that the anthropological notion of culture consists in a new analogical extension:

The anthropological usage of “culture” constitutes a further metaphorization, if not a democratization, of this essentially elitist and aristocratic sense. It amounts to an abstract extension of the notion of human refinement and domestication from the individual to the collective, so that we can speak of culture as man’s general control, refinement, and improvement of himself, rather than one man’s conspicuousness in this respect (p. 24).

One of the central arguments underpinning *The invention of culture* is that both the historical changes (such as those the critics of colonial anthropology emphasize) and theoretical changes (those that the post-moderns liked so much) required a new extension of the concept of culture, one that was able to connect it to invention-creation, recognizing therefore in “cultures” a creativity whose universality, however, could not hide the singularities of the local styles.

This mechanism for extending meaning is what Wagner refers to as metaphor, allegory or more usually, *analogy*, and corresponds, therefore, to “differentiation”. The analogical procedure should obey three fundamental principles. Firstly, it can only operate in a field of differences, which means that, evidently, we only need analogies when we confront situations which at first sight are irreducible to those that are habitual for us, that is, analogy is not a synonym for similarity. Secondly, neither of the two terms placed in relation by analogy should be situated on a plane superior to the other, as if the first was capable of revealing the hidden truth of the second; analogy does not mean explanation. Finally, the two terms should be affected by the process, such that the Western concept of culture, for example, has to be at least lightly subverted when it serves as an analogy for native life, which means that the analogy is of the order of a relation: “the idea of “relationship” is important here because it is more appropriate to the bringing together of two equivalent entities, or viewpoints, than notions like “analysis” or “examination,” with their pretensions of absolute objectivity” (p. 29).

In this sense, culture can only be invented in situations of “culture shock” (p. 15), a shock which, paradoxically, preexists the culture itself; and it is because of this, as well, that “all human beings are ‘anthropologists’, an inventor of culture” (p. 34) in situations of initial unintelligibility. This means, at the same time, an important point to try to avoid the traditional anthropological hubris, that all anthropologists are only human beings, operating under more or less special conditions. To the contrary of the traditional intention, the maximum that we can hope for is to live in two (or more) worlds or different ways of living, but not between cultures, as if we were capable of transcending them:

Thus gradually, in the course of fieldwork, he himself becomes the link between cultures through his living in both of them, and it is this “knowledge” and competence that he draws upon in describing and explaining the subject culture. “Culture” in this sense draws an invisible equal sign between the knower (who comes to know himself) and the known (who are a community of knowers) (p. 13).

Therefore, the status of the notion of culture throughout *The invention of culture* is very complex, given that Wagner seems to define it in different ways or, to be more precise, looks at it from different angles. It appears now in a strong sense, now in a weak sense, which does not mean to say that the first is better than the second. “Culture” begins by being defined as what everybody has; subsequently, as what only we have and what the other only has because we put it there; subsequently as that which nobody has; and finally, as that which everybody has because we create in specific relational situations. In terms of Wagner himself, culture begins as given and goes onto the order of the constructed, firstly as a false invention and later, as an invention-creation.

We move on now to the “of” that separates “invention” and “culture”. Our academic habits are so deep seated that they can lead us to imagine that this preposition signified that it is only culture that is invented. If this was true, however, the whole book would lose its sense, since its central point is precisely to show that the invention of culture is inseparable from that which culture invents. “Invented” culture basically corresponds to what Wagner denominates “convention”, “inventive” culture which he calls “differentiation”, maybe the central concept of the book.

Convention and differentiation constitute, firstly, the two basic mechanisms of the particular semiotic adopted by Wagner. In this sense, a crucial point is that they do not constitute two “types” of things, but two faces of the same reality (see p. 40). Symbolizing is always using in a “differentiated” way, symbols that are part of “convention”, and it is only the respective weight of each procedure in each symbolic act that varies. Given this, “the distinction is more involved than simplistic ‘progressive-

conservative’ dichotomies, aptly parodied by Marshall Sahlins as ‘the West and the Rest’” (p. 16).

On the other hand, when we compare our own culture or, more precisely, the “modern, North American interpretative culture”, with the Daribi, or with any group that Wagner designates alternately with combinations of the substantives classes, groups, peoples, societies, traditions and with labor, ethnic, non-rationalist, religious, tribal and rural adjectives, we have the sensation that the investment in the conventional and in the differentiator changes place. Therefore, we tend to imagine that our rules are purely conventional, that which we make and, consequently, the domain that is under our responsibility (p. 19) and where we would invest our creativity. However, the Daribi and many others seem to imagine the contrary, that is, that this kingdom, for us conventional and constructed, is a *given*. Up until now there is nothing much new, images of primitives living under the reign of a tradition that is considered transcendent are well established. What makes Roy Wagner the most original of the anthropologists since Levi-Strauss is having proposed the missing question: where, then, do these “primitives” invest their creativity? In an enormous effort to singularize themselves in the face of a given convention, is the response.

This has enormous consequences. While the West was constructed, over the centuries, the hypothesis (that is taken as given) of a nature “outside” and, however, controllable (p. 225), the Daribi, the Bororo and others seem to prefer the “world as hypothesis”, that never submits itself to the rigorous demands of ‘proof’ or final legitimation, a *non-scientific* world (p. 171). However, once again, there is no need to see here one more great division:

Man is so many things, one is tempted to introduce him in a particularly bizarre get-up just to show what he can do [...] And yet everything that he is he also is not, so his more constant nature is not one of being but of becoming (p. 98).

All of this can seem a little strange, but it is, in truth, quite simple. *The Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la musique*²⁷ defines “improvisation” as the “musical execution created as it is played”, or “the free, unexpected composition or *performance* of a musical passage, generally according to certain freer

stylistic norms of the prescribed characteristics of a specific musical text", as the *Britannica* prefers. We, "consciously and purposefully we 'do' the distinction between what is innate and what is artificial by articulating the controls of a conventional, collective Culture. But what of those peoples who conventionally 'do' the particular and the incidental, whose lives seem to be a kind of continual improvisation?" (pp. 65-66), and where the controls

[...] are *not* Culture, they are not intended to be "performed" or followed as a "code," *but rather used as the basis of inventive improvisation* [...]. The controls are themes to be "played upon" and varied, rather in the way that jazz lives in a constant improvisation of its subject matter (pp. 66-67).

Additionally, the comparison with music allows us to raise, three complementary points. Firstly, not everything is permitted, and the improvisations have to be taken seriously by the others, that is, they cannot lose their relation to convention. Since they can also become, as the great jazz pianist Thelonius Monk declared, when interrupting a session of improvisation, *wrong mistakes* (see p. 64 for the "necessary errors" for the invention of personality). Secondly, both the notion of style and of interpretation should be understood, in Wagner, more in the musical than in the culturalist or hermeneutic sense of the term. A good musician is capable of playing in more than one style and of "interpreting" a work in different ways. The "opposition" between conventional cultures and differentiation, or between the North Americans and the Daribi, only serves to temporarily stabilize the dialectical tension that exists in any process of symbolization, and should only be sustained to the extent that it delivers a result. But it can also be stabilized within the culture, of an individual or of a singular symbolic act if this was interesting.²⁸

Finally, it is curious that, in English, *improvisation* can also be said as *extemporization* that, in Portuguese, leads us to the "extemporaneous" and "untimely", that is, to Nietzsche. It is not by accident that the final words of *The invention of culture* - "too human" - are by this author, cited only one other time in the book (pp. 65). There is something in the thought of Nietzsche regarding culture as a machine for the repression of life, and creativity as the only way of escaping from this, that is echoed in

the book by Wagner. It is obvious that the anthropologist Wagner, highlights the fact that anthropology can function as a machine of repression to the extent that it converts life into culture. If this conversion is inevitable, given that the anthropologist needs it to make the life they chose to live amongst other people livable, and later on intelligible, the anthropologist needs to invent a notion of culture that actively combats its repressive drive. This is a question that cannot be finally resolved and that, given this, requires us to always return to it. In this sense, the book could be called "Differentiation of Conventionalization" or vice-versa!

To conclude with the title, the small article "the" remains - but even this is fundamental. In its absence, the title could suggest a generality of the process of invention that Wagner intends at all costs to avoid. The "the" responds precisely in terms of the abstract character of the concept of invention of culture, but abstract in the precise sense that only underlines a condition that can be fulfilled in different ways, given that each invention is always realized according to a particular style:

And because the perception and comprehension of others can only proceed by a kind of analogy, knowing them through an extension of the familiar, each style of creativity is also a style of understanding (p. 27).

It is in this key that the main excerpt regarding what Wagner calls "reverse anthropology" (pp. 30-33), should be understood, which he illustrates using the example of the Melanesian Cargo Cult. It is on one hand to symmetrically imagine the literalization of the "metaphors of modern industrial civilization from the standpoint of tribal society" (p. 30); and, on the other, to understand this "pragmatic sort of anthropology" (p. 32), given that it evidently does not take the form of an academic discipline, constituting, prior to this, an analogy of this, in the sense that one speaks of "reverse engineering". That is, of opening up a black box (in this case, the anthropology itself that we practice) not only with the intention of uncovering its functional mechanisms, but principally, to be capable of reconstituting them. In summary, the reverse anthropology practiced by other societies explains the mechanisms that we employ in an implicit and at times, disavowed manner²⁹.

To conclude, we could say that *The invention of culture* follows its own assumptions to a much greater extent than the majority of works. The book is shot through by a series of dialectical contrasts that the author takes care to define as part of a dialectic not seeking any synthesis (p. 96): contrast between conceptions of culture (chap. 2), modes of symbolization (chap. 3), forms of subjectivity (chap. 4), styles of sociability (chap. 5), anthropological theories (chap. 6), amongst others. The idea of synthesis seems to be one of the great threats to thought identified by Wagner. In the end, the intention of the great syntheses, or the denouncing of the false ones, its all the same, is only a “strategy of ‘protecting anthropology from itself’” (p. 105), defending it from the relativity that it itself revealed when it is capable of “to analyze human motivation at a radical level” (p. 13). The first chapter of the book shows precisely this distance that separates the threatening *relativity* that anthropology reveals from the “relativism” that it professes, relativism that is the first form of control of relativity itself, given that, as Roland Barthes wrote, “soon one holds oneself in the unalterable heart of things: it is a security, not a disturbance”³⁰. For a more serious spirit, “the end of synthetic anthropology” (p. 106), or of “synthesism” (109), with which Wagner concludes the book, could well be understood as the end of anthropology itself. However, as *The invention of culture* does not tire of demonstrating, every ending is the moment of the invention of a new beginning. I believe that in this lies the gamble of Roy Wagner.

I hope that the Wagner that I have invented is sufficiently flexible to escape from a too quick conventionalization. Because nobody need deceive themselves: even authors as creative as Wagner cannot avoid being incessantly “counter-invented” in the conventional form of something like a neo-Durkheim, whose concepts and ideas would be capable of doing justice to whatever it maybe and to whom we owe respectful devotion. Before “applying him” here and there, it is worth considering the new form of connection between facts and theories that thoughts such as those of Wagner invite us to imagine. Certainly, things and ideas are not the same thing, nor the same idea. However, this does not mean that the relations between them is of the order of a vertical hierarchy, with some, it does not matter which, being more important than the

others. Their relation, as Guattari would say, is transversal; for an anthropologist, the question is how to transversally trace the relations between what they learnt in academia and what they saw and that their friends taught them in the field. Only in this way, will we be able to respond with a definitive “no” when our friends raise the question that the Daribi proposed to Wagner: “can you anthropologists intermarry with the government and the missionaries?”

Notes

1 Review of *A invenção da cultura* (Cosac Naify, São Paulo, 2010), Brazilian translation of Roy Wagner’s *The Invention of Culture*. Published as “O Fim da Antropologia”. *Novos Estudos CEBRAP* 89: 195-211 (March 2011): http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S0101-33002011000100012&script=sci_arttext

2 Professor at the Post-Graduate Program in Social Anthropology, Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Researcher for CNPq and Faperj. Author of *Razão e Diferença: Afetividade, Racionalidade e Relativismo no Pensamento de Lévy-Bruhl, Alguma Antropologia, How Democracy Works: An Ethnographic Theory of Politics, and Mais Alguma Antropologia*.

3 *The interpretation of cultures* was translated into around twenty languages; *Culture and practical reason* was translated at least into German, Spanish, French, Italian and Portuguese. However, *The invention of culture* is the first translation of the book by Wagner. Additionally, the book went practically un-reviewed after publication. Two exceptions — whose incomprehension and bad will are almost ridiculous — are: Beattie, J. “Roy Wagner: the invention of culture”. *Rain*, vol. 13, 1976, p. 10; and Blacking, J. “Wagner, Roy. The invention of culture”. *Man*, vol. 11, no. 4, New Series, 1976, pp. 607-8.

4 Sahlins, M. *Culture and practical reason*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 121.

5 Geertz, C. *The interpretation of cultures*. Nova York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 359.

6 Sahlins, op. cit., pp. 122-3.

7 As James Wafer has written with humor, we can miss “the lost paradise of anthropology, when it was

possible to distinguish twitches from winks, and real winks from burlesqued ones" (The taste of blood: spirit possession in Brazilian candomblé. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, p. 117).

8 In truth, both Geertz (born 1926 died 2006) and Sahlins (born 1930) are older than Wagner, who was born in 1938.

9 Clifford, James and Marcus, George (orgs.). *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 2.

10 Achebe, Chinua. *Home and exile*. New York, Anchor Books, 2000, p. 33.

11 As Michel Foucault wrote, anthropology therefore, "has its roots, in fact, in a possibility that properly belongs to the history of our culture, even more to its fundamental relation with the whole of history, and enables it to link itself to other cultures in a mode of pure theory" (*Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: PUF, 1966, p. 388).

12 Asad, Talal. "From the history of colonial anthropology to the anthropology of western hegemony". In: Stocking Jr., George W. (org.). *Post-Colonial situations: essays in the contextualization of ethnographic knowledge*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 314-24, p. 315.

13 Idem (org.). *Anthropology and the colonial encounter*. Nova York: Humanities, 1973.

14 Wagner, R. "The theater of fact and its critics". *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 59, no 2, 1986, pp. 97-9, p. 99.

15 Deleuze, G. e Guattari, F. *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* Paris: Minuit, 1991, pp. 8-10.

16 For a careful study regarding the possible relations between the thought of Wagner (as well as Marilyn Strathern and Bruno Latour), on one hand, and Deleuze and Guattari, on the other, see Viveiros de Castro, E. "Filiação intensiva e aliança demoníaca". *Novos Estudos Cebrap*, vol. 77, 2007, pp. 91-126.

17 Deleuze and Guattari. *Mille plateaux*. Paris: Minuit, 1980, p. 457.

18 Strathern, M. *The gender of the gift: problems with women and problems with society in Melanesia*.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 18-19, passim.

19 Malinowski, B. *Coral gardens and their magic*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1935, vol. 1, p. 317.

20 Latour, B. *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches*. Paris: Synthélabo, 1996, p. 101.

21 As Marilyn Strathern has written, "ethnographies are the analytical constructions of scholars; the peoples they study are not. It is part of the anthropological exercise to acknowledge how much larger is their creativity than any particular analysis can encompass" (op. cit., p. XII).

22 "The dullness that we find in mission schools, refugee camps, and sometimes in 'acculturated' villages is symptomatic not of the absence of 'Culture,' but of the absence of its very antithesis - that 'magic,' that very swaggering image of boldness and invention that makes culture, precipitating its regularities by failing in some final sense to overcome them" (p. 146). In other words, what is missing in these places is life, and the anthropologist should speak in terms of devitalization instead of acculturation.

23 Which, as we know, corresponds to a style based solely on the effort of rigorously maintaining the rules and the techniques of the schools of formation. Any similarity with contemporary anthropology is not mere coincidence (see p. 228).

24 See Strathern, "The nice thing about culture is that everyone has it". In: *Shifting contexts: transformations in anthropological knowledge*. London, Routledge, pp. 153-76, 1995.

25 The alternative would be silence or self-contemplation. As Strathern has claimed, "the fact that there is no place outside a culture except in other cultures" raises a technical problem: "how to create an awareness of different social worlds when all at one's disposal is terms which belong to one's own."

26 Schneider, D. *American kinship: a cultural account*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

27 P. Griffiths. "Improvisation". In: D. Arnold, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la musique*. Paris: Robert Lafont, 1988.

28 As Strathern has written, "interpretation must hold objects of reflection stable long enough to be of use"

("Cutting the network". *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 2, no 3, 1996, pp. 517-35, p. 522).

29 "In this situation, anthropology cannot permit itself the role of Grand Inquisitor" (p. 236).

30 Barthes, R. "De um lado e do outro". In: *Crítica e Verdade*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1970 [1961], pp. 139-47, pp. 139-40.

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