



La lettre du Collège de France

7 | 2015
Collège de France Newsletter n°7

Prof. Philippe Descola: Winner of the 2012 CNRS Golden Medal

Philippe Descola



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/lettre-cdf/2599>
DOI: 10.4000/lettre-cdf.2599
ISSN: 2109-9219

Publisher

Collège de France

Printed version

Number of pages: 23-24
ISSN: 1628-2329

Electronic reference

Philippe Descola, "Prof. Philippe Descola: Winner of the 2012 CNRS Golden Medal", *La lettre du Collège de France* [Online], 7 | 2015, Online since 29 October 2015, connection on 17 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lettre-cdf/2599> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/lettre-cdf.2599>

This text was automatically generated on 17 August 2022.

All rights reserved

Prof. Philippe Descola: Winner of the 2012 CNRS Golden Medal

Philippe Descola

EDITOR'S NOTE

Speech delivered at the award ceremony of the CNRS Golden Medal - 19 December 2012

- 1 **Of the sixty-four gold medals awarded by the CNRS since 1954, in some years to two laureates, only fourteen have rewarded researchers in the humanities and social sciences. It is therefore a very rare honour that is being bestowed upon me this evening.**



© Philippe DESCOLA

- 2 The pluralist anthropology that I advocate does not consider the awareness that other peoples forge of their lifestyles as ideologies, the principles of which have to be revealed, or as alternative cosmologies that ought to be embraced since they are believed to reflect reality more accurately than our own, but rather as the consequences of predicative operations open to all, but which tend to be stabilized selectively in a community of practices in such a way that, within each of the collectives thus constituted by these operations, specific schemes of action and thought emerge, which imbibe life we lead in common with an observable coherence. We can see these operations as a sort of ontological sifting of the qualities of the world that impinges upon many aspects of human experience: the sorting of existing things into categories; the type of agency with which these existing things are credited, and the nature of the relations they maintain; the way in which collectives are constituted and in which they interact with other collectives; the definition of what an agent and a patient is, of how a legitimate or effective action can be deployed; the conditions under which a proposition can be held to be true and knowledge to be authentic; the types of metaphysical and epistemological problems that humans are confronted with and the procedures to solve them. All these basic features of human existence, along with many others, are instituted according to distinct modalities related to the types of quality and relationship that habits acquired in a particular collective have led us to detect or to ignore.
- 3 In this sense, a pluralist anthropology consists not in contrasting an elusive West that cannot be found with an undefined Rest of the world, but in considering these different ways of sorting the world's diversity on an equal footing, by devising a descriptive and analytical language that might enable us to account for widely diverse, but not infinite, forms, to assemble existing things, qualities, processes and relations, and in so doing

making sure not to adopt the tools with which these operations were conceptualized in our own cultural tradition. Even if concepts such as ‘society’, ‘nature’, ‘history’, ‘economy’, ‘religion’ or ‘subject’ played a significant part in reflexive thinking in Europe, in bringing modernity into being and thus in creating an actual space within which the humanities and social sciences could develop, these concepts nevertheless relate to ways of objectifying phenomena characteristic of a historical trajectory that other peoples have not followed. They must therefore be treated not as universals, but as local expressions of a particular form of composing the elements of the world – a particular form of composition that has moreover known very different modalities. I therefore argue for a universalism that is both real and realistic, that is, one that refuses to universalize the relative notions by means of which we think that we can describe, using the terms of the cosmology derived from modernization, those cosmologies that have remained on its fringes; a universalism which aims rather to invent analytical tools that are less dependent on the anthropocentric conception of relations between humans and non-humans that naturalism spawned.

- 4 The paradox of this type of renewed universalism is that it stems from the lessons that anthropologists learned from observing situations that seem to be so singular that it would be impossible to infer generalisations from them. Thus, when I look back on the lessons that I learnt from my ethnographic experience among the Achuar Indians in the upper Ecuadorian Amazon, I realise that each one of them challenges the notions and values that I would previously have considered without question to be universally valid. The first of these lessons, and perhaps the most important one, is that nature does not exist everywhere and for ever; or more exactly, that the radical division that the West has made between the world of nature and that of humans is largely meaningless to other peoples who grant all the attributes of social life to plants and animals, consider them as subjects rather than as objects, and therefore would never banish them to an autonomous sphere governed solely by the procedures of science and techniques. Hence, saying of the Indians that they are “close to nature” makes little sense, since by giving the beings inhabiting it a dignity equal to their own, they do not behave very differently towards them than they do between themselves. To be close to nature, there has to be nature: an exceptional arrangement of which only the Moderns have been capable, and which probably makes our cosmology more enigmatic than all those of the cultures preceding us.
- 5 The Achuar also taught me that one can live one’s destiny without the help of a divine or historical transcendence – the two branches of the alternative between which many contemporary societies still hesitate. For with them the individual in his or her singularity is not determined by a superior and exterior principle, nor driven by collective movements of which he or she is unaware, nor defined by his or her position in a social hierarchy that gives meaning to one’s life according to the place in which one was born. The individual exists only in the ability to assert him- or herself through acts, according to a scale of desirable goals shared by all. Yet another lesson that the Achuar taught me was their way of living a collective identity without burdening themselves with a national conscience. Unlike the people’s emancipation movement which, from the late eighteenth century in Europe, endeavoured to ground demands for political autonomy on the fact of sharing a cultural or linguistic tradition, the Achuar do not see their ethnicity as a catalogue of distinctive features lending substance and eternity to a shared destiny. Their common existence derives its significance from neither language, nor religion nor the past; it feeds on a same way of

living the social bond and their relations with the peoples around them, human and non-human alike. This way of instituting collectives thus offers a valuable testimony of the fact that ethnic nationalisms are less a heritage of non-modern societies than an effect of contamination of former modes of community organization by modern doctrines of state hegemony.

- 6 These lessons, and all of those that anthropologists have learned from their ethnographic studies, are so many alternative experiences brimming with promise. Ceasing the frantic exploitation of nature obtained at the price of devastating the future generations' living conditions; doing away with blind nationalism and the predatory arrogance of large nation states and certain transnational firms; eliminating the unbearable inequalities in access to resources, especially those that should be common goods; ensuring that a form of public representation is given to the various types of non-humans to which our destiny is indissolubly bound: these are all concrete challenges facing our modernity that we would do well to envisage by analogy with the way in which the peoples studied by ethnologists construct their relationship with the world. Not, of course, that we could adapt their customs directly, since historical experiences do not lend themselves to transposition – assuming that this would be desirable. What anthropology is however able to do is to provide evidence that other ways are possible, since some of them, as improbable as they may seem, have been explored elsewhere or in past times, and thus show that the future is not simply a linear continuation of the present. On the contrary, it is filled with incredible potential, the realization of which we have to imagine if we are to build without delay a truly common house, one that lives better and that is less exclusive and more fraternal.

AUTHOR

PHILIPPE DESCOLA

Anthropology of Nature