THE CULTURE OF THE ACADEMY – LESSONS FROM DESIGN THINKING



Across on archaeology.org Chris (Witmore) has taken issue with a comment Tim Ingold has made about the notion of a symmetrical archaeology.[Link]

Symmetrical Archaeology? Like many others, Archaeologists regularly do all they can to separate what they do from what they study, their work in the present from the past, past artifacts from the stories that give them life, scientific analysis from historical interpretation, even when there would be no past without their work now, when archaeology is the most interdisciplinary of practices that intimately mixes science and art. The proposition is that we should treat *symmetrically* both sides of the (Cartesian) dualisms that still bedevil archaeology: the separation of past and present, the researcher and the object of interest, real and imagined, the human and non-human worlds, sciences and humanities … . Archaeologists work in the past-present, actively, creatively shaping accounts of the past that orient us now

and for the future.

(Here's something I wrote back in 2007 – [Link])

The work of Tim Ingold was quite influential in giving shape to this agenda. In his more recent work he has laid some firm foundations for understanding human experience in terms of environmental relationships, in a way that connects culture, nature, history, geography.

Ingold doesn't like the geometrical association. Fair enough. Indeed symmetry does assume bifurcation, even in its proposed resolution. But the introduction of the notion of symmetrical treatment of humans and non-humans in the field of science and technology studies (and in archaeology too) was always as much a rhetorical gesture, an intervention in debates about what it is that we study and how we do it, as it was an attempt to solve the problems of Cartesian thinking once and for all. Here is Chris's definition:

> ". . . the notion or principle of symmetry is meant to remind us not to decide in advance what role various entities play in a given situation by imposing arbitrary hierarchies of value or preformed dogmas concerning the nature of the real. Symmetrical archaeology is agnostic. I don't mean this in the smug sense of the skeptical critic who remains aloof from the seemingly wayward beliefs of others. No, I take this in a very analytical sense, in that symmetrical archaeology refuses to delimit a given situation by imposing any predetermined schemes. Rather it strives to allow entities to define, to frame, themselves. Symmetrical archaeology grants dignity to all

participants in a given situation and it does so by placing them on the same footing at the start."

Symmetry is about being open and not defining in advance what it is we are studying.

Ingold's main criticism is that the notion of *ontological* symmetry between humans and nonhumans leaves out other species – plants and animals, key members of the ecological communities that people inhabit. He thinks this is a reversion back to 19th century thinking, which considered humanity as the unique species that had progressed beyond all others. But this is really a red herring when you consider how the concept has been discussed and applied. And Chris points to the extensive discussion around the notion of a symmetrical archaeology that deals with this particular matter of humans and non-humans.

Zero sum scholarship

The issue, for me, is not whether "symmetry" can overcome the debilitating ontologies inherited from Descartes (!). This is about scholarship. Ingold has hardly engaged with the discussion in archaeology around symmetry, never mind science studies, and instead quotes selectively so as to make his own point, so as to strengthen his own position by putting others down. Ingold hasn't done his reading. He sets up a straw man so as to knock it down. In this zero sum thinking one gains when the other loses; sketch out a loss, however cursorily, and you gain.

Let me take a step back to look at this everyday feature of academic life, at least in my experience.

The actual content of critique is typically less important than its *performance*. To be seen to be active in critique is usually enough, for this zero sum game is an abstract one that deals in quantities and not qualities. I know about this: I have been there.



The fortunate republic: From Lorenzetti's murals on "good government" in the Palazzo Pubblico, Siena.

There are two components here of academic culture.

First. The nature of *scholarly critique*. For surely we should dig deep, read around, do our homework as scholars, pursue rich and deep research with care and concern, offering guarded and clear commentary. And surely we would wish that there would be genuine openness of response, so as to move the debate onwards. It is not good scholarship to be cursory in one's research and not to make adequate citation, reference to the depth of others' work.

Second. The status of an *argument*, a case, a proposition. While we might consider that academics should be in some kind of collective and collaborative effort, this is not always true. Full and open debate is quite unusual in the Academy. Scientific labs can be very hierarchical. It's not just that academics don't have as much time as you might think. Much publication, academic discourse more generally, actually aims to *close down* debate. The ideal is to present an impregnable case, to cover every possible criticism, to shut down debate, and, yes, then to move on. The ideal is a complete hermetic case, even if it can be held only

locally. The ideal response to one's writing, for most academics, is (approving) silence, the acknowledgment that there is nothing more to say on the matter. This establishes a hierarchy, where higher position correlates with silence lower down. Moving up the hierarchy entails breaking the silence, giving critical voice, in whatever ways possible, so as to redistribute the silence.

(This might sound cynical. I am exaggerating to make my point – rhetoric again. There is a great deal of talking in the Academy. There is certainly a great deal of what passes for debate. But consider a seminar. A paper is offered for discussion. It is good if there is lively talking. What is best? Some certainly wish to display their skill in demolishing a case. They may think that this does them credit, under the zero sum mentality just mentioned. It is not good, nevertheless, if the paper is indeed poor. It is best, under zero sum scholarship, if the discussion is around points of clarification, or of the scope of application of points raised, of how the work may be profitably extended. Then everyone feels good. Credit goes to individual intellect and research while not formally denying that the Academy works best as a collaborative ecology.

Anecdote. The discussion was not going well for the presenter of the paper. It was indeed a poor piece of work and the audience knew it. The seminar host interrupted the criticism. "We don't kick cripples when they're knocked down.")

There is something of a bureaucratic mentality here, where the ideal is to have everything in its proper place, carefully defined and categorized, in a system that works and moves along according to one's normative goals, that is, one's particular purposes, shared by one's affiliates and organization or institution. A key component of academic discussion is the constitution of the group – it works best among members who gain from affiliation and acknowledging group membership, by playing the game and respecting the rules, the discipline, the institution. Respect and welcome can be extended to outsiders, but only when they present no threat to the bureaucratic order of the institution.

But don't just take my word for all this: the sociology of knowledge, science studies and research into behavior of organizations are almost disciplines in their own right and exist to explore all these social and cultural dynamics of the construction of knowledge. Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault and Bruno Latour are but three of the more well-known names, of course.

Instead of this, I am attached to an old fashioned notion of *collegiality*. Unfortunately I find it less often where it should be – in the Academy.

My friend at IDEO, Tim Brown, was interviewed a couple of weeks ago about the company's creativity and expertise in innovation – [Link]

Tim credited IDEO's success to its *culture*.

> At IDEO we think our culture has been the single most important contributor to our success. Traditional creative organizations can be quite hierarchical, but this is a hard idea to scale, especially if you want to work on a diverse range of projects. We have tried to create an organizational culture where every individual is comfortable taking risks and exploring new ideas, but where they are also fixated on helping improve the quality of each other's ideas.

He mentions the crucial role of pedagogy – always sharing the experience of learning:

> This ideal of doing great work and helping others to do great work has led us to be passionate about teaching, which has been great for learning and recruiting. It has also made us comfortable with teaching our clients how to do what we do and discouraged us from being too proprietary about our knowledge

This is something I have discovered with my work in our d.school, and in running my

lab and studio [Link].

The key is sociality, care and respect for others and their ideas, open and sharing teams, flat, minimum institutionalization [Link] This is

collegiality

I have also outlined how this is a matter of *political constitution* in design thinking [Link] To keep a neutral term and emphasize that this is indeed about the *constitution* of teams, I substitute *res publica* for politics.

IDEO, the d.school, their collegiality, is antipathetical to the moribund world of middle managers, those who populate the world of zero sum hierarchies, following bureaucratic procedures, unable to see any big picture, carping and nit picking, in a culture of intolerance, judging others on the basis of partial pictures, manipulating to achieve a sense of self worth in systems that privilege the corporate and the institutional over the collective.



For three years my lab ran an experimental seminar with Doug Carmichael exploring what could be done to facilitate something very simple – the *conversations* that are the heart of democracy and collegiality – [Link] Lorenzetti's murals for a council room in Sienna, depicting a world of good government and reasoned constitution, and contrasted with the opposite, were inspirational.