

## **Foucault's analysis of 'man' in recent economics: perspectives on the transformation of 'man' as an object of scientific inquiry**

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### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, there has been an upsurge of interest in interdisciplinarity in Economics. The idea that it is possible to combine different disciplines to enlarge the knowledge and applicability of economic issues and tools is, however, hindered by the fact that the existing behavioral disciplines model human behavior in different and incompatible ways. This paper aims to discuss the difficulties of the project of unifying the behavioral sciences – specifically sociology, economics and anthropology – based on a common view of human behavior. Underneath the different conceptions of human behavior lies a twofold debate: one regarding the extent and the ways this behavior is pervious to social and biological influences and another concerning the relative importance of those influences in solving economic problems.

I will argue in this paper that Gintis's (2006) current proposal of unifying the behavioral sciences is dependant on a convergence of epistemological and ontological precepts of the aforementioned disciplines. Implied in the argument is the idea that in this process of unification, some anthropological and sociological views on human behavior and its relation to society are left behind, either because they are deemed non-scientific or old-fashioned. What is left is an object of scientific investigation, which has little resemblance to "man" as he was conceived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The methodological framework used to analyze this process will be foucauldian, meaning that we will focus mainly on a wide range of authors of different disciplines that deal with the theme of individual human behavior. I will not focus on a specific author to scrutinize what he or she said about the importance of the individual or human behavior for Economics. For a foucauldian analysis it is better to analyze how it is possible to identify in many different disciplines the implicit rules that allow the investigator to relate different objects, concepts, themes, theories and

types of enunciation to produce knowledge (see Machado, 2006, pp. 146-8). I will also make use of the interpretation that Foucault gives of the origin of the philosophical and problematic concept of man (and its variants) that the human sciences use in their practice.

In order to map out some different notions of “human behavior” in Economics and Anthropology, and how this behavior is influenced both by biological and social factors, I chose some representative authors of what may be termed an “alternative” thought in the social sciences, as opposed to the thought of the mainstream economics (or standard neoclassical economics). As I intend to show, some of them have produced ideas whose basis radically cuts them off the mainstream of economic science (or, in that regard, mainstream sociological science or anthropological science), while others can have some aspects of their theories incorporated into it. To understand how this network of different pieces of knowledge concerning human behavior and its link to society and biology is structured (by means of incorporation and disposal of different ideas) is the objective of the paper.

The structure of the paper is as follows: In the first part, I will present Foucault’s ideas of “man” as a possible object of research for the human sciences, as exposed in his 1966’s “The Order of Things”. I am confident that his views on “man” can help us explain the ways (and the debates) permeating the role of the individual and society in Economics and other human sciences. In the second part, I will outline Gintis’s proposal of the unification of behavioral sciences. In the third part, I will show how anthropology has dealt with the idea of “man”, and how “man” is seen under social and biological influences. A fourth part concludes the paper.

## **2. “Man’s” birth and death according to Foucault**

In the book that made him famous, 1966’s “The Order of Things” (“As Palavras e as Coisas”, in Portuguese), Foucault tried to show how it was possible for western thought to develop “human sciences” like anthropology, sociology, economics and psychology (that

did not exist prior to the 19th century), all of them having “man” as a scientific object of study.<sup>1</sup>

Foucault’s first point is that it was impossible to have human sciences before the 19<sup>th</sup> century because the foundations of the scientific method laid down by Descartes collapsed the notions of representation and thought. But what do we mean here by representation? Different from the period of the Renaissance, where to know meant to compare the similarities between things trying to grasp the language of God underlying them,<sup>2</sup> to know in Descartes period meant to be capable of designing a mental model of the object of inquiry.<sup>3</sup> At his time, there was no need to think *about* the one who represents, because to think *is* to represent; there is no separation between thought and representation. Man, in this sense, is out of the picture of what can be known, since the act of thinking guarantees his existence – we do not need to ask what man is or question his existence, in as much as it is obvious that man is the rational being who is able to represent objects of thought (that is, to think).<sup>4</sup> That is the reason why Descartes can say that “I think, therefore I am”. This configuration changes drastically when Kant starts asking about the necessary conditions for our minds to be able to know. This means that it is not obvious anymore that to think is just to represent objects of the mind, hence producing knowledge. With Kant it is possible that knowledge be rooted in something other than representation – more specifically, in the universal transcendental subject.<sup>5</sup> Man’s condition of possessing a pure mind that uses a transparent language to infer knowledge from the empirical objects of the

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, this does not mean that there were no thinkers considering the appropriate way to approach human behavior – let us just remember how Machiavelli political ideas changed the way the Scholastic philosophers dealt with the problem of human nature. What is lacking before the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the idea that “man” is, at the same time, subject *and* object of scientific investigation.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., by comparing the shape of a type of leaf with that of the human heart, and thus, interpreting that God made both the leaf and heart have similar characteristics. For Foucault’s own examples of the many types of similarity that the Renaissance thought engendered, as well as the examples he gives, see Foucault (1999 [1966]), pp. 24-35.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., by saying that a well, a pipe or a glass can be conceived as cylinders, and from that conception, to show how those different objects were similar and different, creating a hierarchy of similarities and differences. For Foucault’s interpretation of Descartes’ criticisms of the Renaissance thought, see Foucault (1999 [1966]), pp. 63-105.

<sup>4</sup> To understand what Descartes views as “good knowledge” (*scientia*) (as opposed to *persuasio*), see his *Meditations* (and the *Replies* to it) and his *Discourse on Method*, available at <http://www.wright.edu/cola/descartes/> and <http://www.literature.org/authors/descartes-rene/reason-discourse/>.

<sup>5</sup> This universal subject would lay behind, for Kant, all consciousness and biological or social influences. Though not suggested by Kant, the dualism present in the “subject” might be seen to give birth to an equally empirical (what is man materially) and transcendental (what are the conditions for us to study man) research on “man”.

world is lost, because we now know that there are constraints to the operation of the mind. The consequences of Kant's turn is that the human sciences can now flourish – that is, sciences that will explore the economic, historical, cultural, biological and social constraints that condition what we, as scientists, understand as “man”.

This movement of western thought is paradoxical for Foucault, and makes room for what he calls the possibility of an “imminent death of man”<sup>6</sup>. Why is it paradoxical? Because, as an empirical object, man can be understood either by being reduced to its physical, chemical and biological components or to the social, cultural and historical factors that constrain and mold him (it is what he calls the empirical side of “man”). The problem is that, in this case, we are not aware of the conditions that allow the transcendental subject to think what he thinks about man. What if man is more than the being who has the ability to represent objects rationally in a pure way, as it was for Descartes? How can we be sure of the knowledge that we acquire about the self, if the knowledge produced by the self that thinks is conditioned by the same self? It seems then that we have no certainty of any knowledge acquired this way; that is, despite the fact that we may discover a lot of things, we can only be sure of the knowledge thus acquired if we know the limits of the workings of the mind. In this case, we should investigate exactly what allows us to think.<sup>7</sup> But the problem then is that we lose man as an empirical object of study: even if we are able to spot precisely the limitations that prevent us from building solid knowledge about man, we will always know that the man who thinks is beyond (or is more than) the limits to knowledge in which he is inscribed. In fact, we might even have doubts about the certainty of the limitations to man's thinking that we discovered, given that there would always be some part of man that is strange to the thinker. If that is the case, we do not know anymore what exactly man as an empirical object is.

We are not going to look into the tactic used by Kant to solve this conundrum. Suffice it to say that for him, the *a priori* structures present in everybody's mind (like time,

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<sup>6</sup> See Foucault (1999 [1966], p. 473. To better understand my interpretation of Foucault, see pp. 439-453 and pp. 470-473.

<sup>7</sup> Which does not mean that Kant asserted that we could know something about the structure and operation of the mind (he did not say that). What I mean with this sentence is that it is possible for us to wonder about the structure and operation of the human mind once Kant completes his “Copernican move” in philosophy. Likewise, Kant himself does not suggest that a “cognitive science” should be established, even though his ideas on the human mind allowed others to create that discipline.

space and causality), together with the knowledge obtained from the senses, are responsible for the construction of the objects of knowledge. This attempt to link the Cartesian rationalism and Baconian empiricism carried out by Kant comes to a halt, though, when it boils down to the problem of man: limited by the *a priori* structures present in our minds, what we can know about man is no more than what these structures allow us to. As a result, we are never sure about the knowledge of man we have – either because of the multiple influences man receives from the physical, biological and social world, or because our minds have limitations regarding the knowledge of man. So we always seem to be taking turns on two sides of a philosophical seesaw, up and down from the empirical to the transcendental and back.

I believe that the analysis roughly presented above is valid nowadays, and that the human sciences, which we will analyze in the next chapters, attempt to cope with this duality in different ways. I will use the broader philosophical perspective supplied by Foucault to try to understand how economists, anthropologists and sociologists grapple with the problem of linking the behavior of individual human beings to society. It is important to perceive that this perspective on the problems of intelligibility and practical issues related to the idea of man can be illuminating for the social sciences, particularly Economics. Economics is at present going through a transformation that is redefining the ways it models economic agents and their relation to society, and the analysis above can help understand these changes.

### **3. Gintis's Current Proposal of The Unification of Behavioral Sciences**

When Gintis (2006) says that he is proposing a model to unify all behavioral sciences, he is not implying that we should do away with all behavioral disciplines to erect just one that could explain everything about human behavior. What he says is that, although different disciplines have different perspectives on their object study, they should make use of the same scientific tools *when their areas of investigation overlap*. For example, it would be impossible to analyze problems like inequality or crime without making reference to both economics, sociology and, maybe, psychology. If those disciplines model human behavior differently, different policy recommendations might arise.

Economics has often been said to be the “queen of social sciences” because it is more amenable to formalization, which, in turn, would make it resemble the hard sciences, increasing its credibility as rigorous knowledge. So, the need to formalize the behavioral sciences means not only the use of the tools deployed by economists, but also a certain perspective on what dimensions of human behavior should be considered in the analysis. It is possible to list a tentative set of principles that could base Gintis’s proposal:

1. **Evolutionary Perspective:** because *homo sapiens* is a species like any other, biological principles should inform the behavioral sciences (just like physics inform the natural sciences);
2. **The Brain as a Decision Making Organ:** The capacity to improve the fitness when deciding among many possible outcomes renders the organisms which possess a central nervous system (CNS) fitter, that is, more able to survive. So, based on biological principles, it is the capacity to decide that characterizes all organisms who detain a CNS.
3. **The BPC model:** Both in biology and economics organisms can be modeled as agents who maximize a preference function subject to material and informational constraints.
4. **Gene-Culture Co evolution:** This means that the preference an individual has evolves through time following both genetic and cultural influences. We can only understand the process by which people make decisions by referring to their biological endowment and cultural environment. As a consequence, humans not only internalize social and cultural norms, but also have visceral emotions that shape their preferences.
5. **Evolutionary Game Theory:** It is possible to model the strategic interaction between different individuals using a model where the agents choose best responses to each other’s actions dynamically. That would be evolutionary game theory.

It is very important to notice that these principles partially undermine the idea that Economics is concerned only with human action that is rational and isolated from the social environment. In Gintis’s model, the idea that social interactions are important, and that

humans are rule-followers who also make decisions based on emotions is present. This marks a partial departure from the idea of the “Economic Man” which is still prevalent in the so-called “standard neoclassical economics”. Evidently, the modifications incorporated by Gintis in the traditional “rational economic man” model are results of permanent criticisms raised by other human sciences during the last decades.

However, it is interesting to notice that Gintis’s move involves an appeal to the biological foundations of animal behavior that would underlie our behavior as a species. This move is also identifiable in prominent economists like Alfred Marshall (1982 [1890]), and biologists like Edward Wilson (1998), though we have never had until recently an effective model based on ideas derived from biology to base the economic behavior of humans. On the other hand, the emphasis on culture and the influence of society also denote that sociology and anthropology made an impact on economic thinking in the last decades. But can this new model deal with all the insights provided by anthropology since its beginnings? Can we use this model to study anthropology? And, more importantly, what modifications in the idea of “man” as an object of science do those influences entail?

#### **4. Anthropological Views**

The classical (and already old-fashioned) debate of Economic Anthropology between formalists (those who believe principles of economic theory can be applied to non-market societies) and substantivists (those who do not believe so) is useful to understand how anthropology could be absorbed in the project of unification of the behavioral sciences. Kaplan (1974) discusses the controversy formalism versus substantivism by dint of a dialog with Cook (1966). According to him, the main criticisms raised against the substantivists can be summed in three main points: 1. there would be an emphasis of the substantivists on the idea that man would not behave in a self-interested and selfish way of *homo economicus*, but, on the contrary, that human beings would be altruistic; 2. There would be a misconception of the notion of science by the substantivists, which led them to state propositions, which would be metaphysical (that is, non-verifiable); and 3. Non-market societies would be disappearing contemporarily, and so, the study of human behavior in those societies would likewise disappear, making it of little interest.

Kaplan's article sounds outdated mainly because many of the criticisms raised against the substantivists were incorporated by modern economic theory. For example, many authors nowadays<sup>8</sup> work with the idea that preferences are generated endogenously by the social milieu, and that, because of that, economic actors have other-regarding (that is, dependant on other people's actions) and process-regarding (that depend on the process that generated a certain economic outcome) preferences. The area of experimental economics came to remedy the criticism that traditional (micro) economic theory is mainly deductive and has no basis in empirical reality. And, in fact, it is true that many "primitive" societies are becoming more and more modern, in the sense that the access to both customs and economic practices of western societies.

So since the assimilation of the substantivist criticisms is made, leaving the area clean for the use of economic tools in anthropology. An example of the mix between anthropology and economics can be seen in a collective paper (2005)<sup>9</sup> written together by economists, anthropologists and other behavioral scientists. The main point of the paper is to prove that the hypothesis of the traditional self-interested and isolated "Economic Man" is not upheld by empirical evidence. Notice that, in accordance with what was presented in part 1 of this paper, this would mean a turn towards a solution of the problem of human action by appealing to the empirical in the shape of models or games that could be formalized. We can question what exactly "empirical" means here. For the purpose of the paper, it meant to perform a series of games (like the "ultimatum game" and the "public goods game") in many different places of the world and with many different peoples. The result was that, in fact, in none of the societies contemplated within the study the hypotheses of "Economic Man" worked.

As it would be reasonable to expect from the foucauldian framework detailed in the previous chapter, some criticisms regarding the nature of this "empirical project" might surface. And, indeed, Ariel Rubinstein (2005)<sup>10</sup> did just that when he pointed out that many behavioral economics articles report experiments that do not add much realism to Economics, questioning much of the evidence they present and the conclusions they reach.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Bowles (1998, 2004), Bowles et al. (2005) and Gintis (2006), but the literature is growing overwhelmingly in the past few years.

<sup>9</sup> See Bowles et al. (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Available: <http://eswc2005.econ.ucl.ac.uk/papers/comments/ESWC/2005/2722/behavioral-economics.pdf>.

He also comments on the existence of “multiple selves” (a theme well developed by John Elster (1987), and, more recently, by John Davis (2003, 2006)) and how it complicates the analysis of welfare in economic theory. In Rubinstein’s words:

*“If an agent is a collection of selves then why should the utility of the first self be the basis for welfare considerations? If an agent’s utility is also affected by disappointment or envy, why should a utility function devoid of psychological effects serve as the welfare measure?”*

If Economics, at least as seen in its predominant and contemporary individualist perspective, is supposed to develop analytical tools to help understand how a society might get the greatest possible amount of “happiness” or “utility” for each of its members, then it seems that the existence of multiple selves severs the link between behavior (which is observable) and welfare (which is not, and must be judged in terms of the individual (but by which self?) or society (which would be the sum of the welfare of all individuals in society)).

The appeal to psychology and the question of how to search into the many selves that each individual possesses is an expected turn of our philosophical seesaw. Or, putting in other words: to be sure of the efficacy in terms of welfare of our experimental results we should know learn more about the psychological structure of the individual. But that would mean a creation of mental models of all the selves that one might have, meaning that we are then moving away from the observable and empirical reality analyzed by science.<sup>11</sup>

Are there alternatives ways to criticize the idea of the “Economic Man” in Economic anthropology? Apparently yes, and I will now analyze some of the anthropologists that could be linked to the substantivist school and their treatment of the problems touched on above.

#### **4.1 The Substantivist View**

In “Stone Age Economics” (1972), Marshall Sahlins, developing Polanyi’s (2000 [1944]) ideas, presents evidence showing that the idea of a rational, maximizing Economic

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<sup>11</sup> Or, as the same Rubinstein states, to have models that specify specific functional forms that link behavior and welfare. Anyway, the question lingers: How do we know that these functions are the most appropriate in the sense of correctly specifying this relation?

Man is a product of a very specific social and cultural context. In fact, only in advanced capitalist societies it would make sense to talk about Economic Man proper. To drive his point home, Sahlins comments on a tribe of Yahgan Indian hunters:

“The hunter, one is tempted to say, is ‘uneconomic man’. At least as concerns nonsubsistence goods, he is the reverse of that standard caricature immortalized in any *General Principles of Economics*, page one. His wants are scarce and his means (in relation) plentiful. Consequently, he is ‘comparatively free of material pressures’, has ‘no sense of possession’, shows ‘an undeveloped sense of property’, is ‘completely indifferent to any material pressures’, manifests a ‘lack of interest’ in developing his technological equipment.” (p. 20)

Sahlins further exposes this point in “Culture and Practical Reason” (2003 [1976]). That book makes a strong case against both the utilitarian principles that guide traditional economic science and the Marxian tenet that material and economic forces animate the life even of the advanced capitalist countries. What is crucial to understand is the cultural and symbolic order that underlies the production, exchange and distribution of goods and services in all societies. Utilitarianism, in his perspective, would not be a universal principle that can explain human action.

In an area closely related to Economics, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood also follow Sahlins’s path in their “World of Goods” (2004 [1979]), studying the “Anthropology of Consumption” and insisting on a broad comprehension of the cultural environment before we can think of something like “Economic Man”. There are strong criticisms against individualist theories of knowledge and behavior (p. 108), and the hypothesis that goods are better analyzed if considered objects that give visibility to the categories of a given culture, and not simply objects that satisfy our wants (p. 105).

A nice overview of the contradictions that economists come up against while researching practical economic matters is given by Godbout and Caillé (1999) and Caillé (2002). Based on the rituals of exchange of “primitive societies”, like the *kula*, analyzed by Malinowski, the *potlatch*, studied by Franz Boas, they show how the idea of a “gift economy” (as opposed to the market economy) is present in modern societies. According to them, social activities like the formation of groups like the Anonymous Alcoholics, the act of donating organs and the art market are all examples that defy the traditional economic reasoning by being mainly existing social interactions that could not be adequately

analyzed through the perspective of selfish, maximizing economic agents. Their study is supported by the Maussian idea that the exchange of gifts is a “total social fact”, that is, a fact where economic, social, cultural, psychological factors come *together*, and can only be understood if investigated *together*. Again, we can only understand economic individual behavior, if paying attention to the whole cultural and social milieu in which that behavior is embedded.<sup>12</sup>

What is being stressed by all these anthropologists is a decentralization of the analysis on the object of “man” combined to an attempt to clarify human behavior by appealing to the broader notions of culture and society. Two consequences spring from this decentralization: First, they avoid the conundrums of scientific reasoning based on the idea of man, presented in chapter 1; and second, their analyses have difficulty gaining the status of serious science. Let us analyze these implications more carefully.

The focus on culture or society for the anthropologists listed above seems to consider that they ooze into the individuals that are part of them, so that their actions can only be understood as part of a larger context. However, to be considered properly scientific, we should be able to describe as precisely as possible the mechanisms that link the empirical analysis of human behavior to the workings of a culture or society.

One needs to remark, however, what “scientific method” one is using to say that a description of a phenomenon is or is not “scientific”. Despite the many criticisms and conceptual changes that scientific activity has been undergoing during the last decades (see, for example, Morin (2000), Lyotard (1998 [1979]) and all the work of sociologists of science like Bruno Latour and David Bloor), there is a “traditional scientific method”, which still underlies much of the research in human sciences nowadays.<sup>13</sup> This traditional method would find it difficult to accept as scientific statements that do not explicitly define

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<sup>12</sup> As we shall see in the next chapters of this paper, economists are dealing with the idea of a “gift economy”, but the conclusions they arrive at really demonstrate the differences between a Maussian analysis and another one based on a utilitarian approach.

<sup>13</sup> This representative method, which is popperian in its present form, has the characteristics described by Hacking (apud Dow (1985), p. 25). Among them, we can cite that “the logical basis for justifying acceptance of a theory can be distinguished from the circumstances in which the theory was formulated”; that “scientific terms have fixed meanings”; and that “there is one scientific method, so that, in principle all sciences are part of a single scientific nature”. Needless to say that much of what the literature of sociology of science proposes counters the idea of a “unique method” for science, as well as the supposed fixed nature of scientific terms. For a logical-positivist perspective on the philosophy of science and a theory of knowledge of empirical content – which seems to be prevalent in today’s economics departments – see Hollis and Nell (1975, p. 10).

what “society” and “culture” are, and have difficulties in translating those terms in formal (mathematical) content. In the words of Godbout (1999, p. 116), the very term “decision” – largely used by economists in their models – is inadequate because it begins with an individual action, which, in his view, is mainly social and not amenable to formal treatment.

The apparent confusion between different actions (e.g., “*the three moments of the cycle [of the gift] – to give, to receive, to requite – many times intermingle: from the point of view of the agent, to give is to requite, and inversely*”, p. 116), also contributes to make things possibly unclear to someone interested in formalizing social interactions. Mirowski (2004, p. 398) goes one step further when he states (following Derrida) that “gifts are an attempt to be both intentional and disinterested, simultaneously a-rational and rational, friendly and hostile”. In fact, the very definition of gift put forth by Mauss encompasses this contradiction when he says (*apud* Godbout, p. 28) that “interest and disinterest explain this form of circulation [of goods]”). Godbout is quick to point where traditional economic theory fails: it assumes that all people act so as to receive as much as possible and give as little as possible. This assumption, however, is inaccurate. The goods and services even in modern capitalist societies follow a cycle of giving, receiving and requital, the three being equally important. To assume that the receiving of goods basically compels human action is to isolate one part of the cycle in an abstract way, losing the dynamics that fuel the circulation of goods and services in our societies.

As we shall see, Gintis’s (2006) proposal does take account of the “giving” side of the cycle described above by Godbout and others. The main difference is that in Gintis’s model it is possible to formalize the act of “giving” based on optimizing a preference function subject to informational and material constraints. Gintis would probably discard notions of the gift being “simultaneously friendly and hostile” and the like, as they would appear to be mumble-jumble.

Maybe it would be sensible to pause for a while and reflect on the role of this apparently contradictory language used by the anthropologists when they try to produce knowledge today. Should we discard it straightaway, once it seems to go against the very basic logical principle of non-contradiction, or can we learn something from it? Why do respected anthropologists use it, if it seems to be obviously confusing and non-scientific?

It is worth remembering that, along with the birth of man, the 19<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed the “return of language” (see Foucault, (1999 [1966]), pp. 417-423). This means that, from that point on, language is no longer the transparent vehicle that, through words, transmits the knowledge that our ideas convey, like in Descartes’ time. Nietzsche (mainly in his “On The Genealogy of Morality”) is the philosopher who first reflects deeply over language, and how the meanings it carries is dependent on who (and also when, where and how) speaks it. It is also in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the discipline of philology is born, trying to gather and impose limits on the multiple meanings that words might carry once they can be used not only to represent mental objects of knowledge, but also to create a reality of its own.<sup>14</sup> So how can we protect science from the possibility of crumbling away in the multiplicity of language? Foucault explicitly suggests (op. cit., p. 420) that

*“many projects [appear] (...), the themes of a universal formalization of all discourse, or the themes of an integral exegesis of the world which would be, at the same\_time, its perfect demystification; or the themes of a general theory of the signs (...)”*

I think that is the reason why economists usually try to make an “integral exegesis” of the human world that would, in the end, demystify it as best as it could (that is, to build models that would explain economic outcomes with as little error as possible). It is necessary to do that to prevent it from drowning in the many ways words can be used to produce different actions and knowledge. On the other hand, many anthropologists are aware of the fact that language can be used to do things, to build a worldview, not only to explain a static world that can be separated from human thoughts and actions. In other words, they are aware of the use of language as discourse.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I am not going to investigate how the discipline of philosophy of language was born, because that would be beyond the main objective of this paper. However, it is interesting to notice the importance that language acquires in the study of philosophy during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For economics, it is of particular interest the research program of the “rhetoric of Economics”, kicked off by D. McCloskey (1983). In fact, the discipline of cultural studies and post-modern philosophers (for example, Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Levy, Marshall McLuhan, Jean-François Lyotard, among many others) are very much attentive to how language and the information technologies alter our perception of the world and the way we produce knowledge.

<sup>15</sup> There are many ways to define discourse, but I prefer a simple definition given by Stuart Hall (1997): Discourse is a way of building meanings that influences and organizes our actions and also our conception of who we are and what the world around us is.

## 5. Conclusion:

How far away are Economics and Anthropology nowadays? Are they merging together, and, if so, how? Mirowski (2000) suggests that Economics and Anthropology are like two

“next-door neighbors, strangers who nod noncommittally to one another as they walk to the mailbox (and collect their day’s allotment of symbols!), jealous of their prerogatives, yet who have never really gotten around to getting acquainted, yet as alike as two peas in a pod.”

In fact, some aspects of Sahlin’s strong criticism of a research program in Economics based on a selfish and utilitarian individual is shared by the Santa Fe behavioral scientists, to which Gintis belongs. The point is how to conceive new ways of bridging the gap between an old model of economic agent and the new one; what concepts do we need to reformulate, and how do they change what we take for granted as knowledge? Does it mean that the “old substantivists” criticisms have already been incorporated in a larger area of “behavioral science”?

In cultural anthropology, this gap is being bridged by breaking the distinction between “Primitive and Civilized ((Us and Them), “observed” and “observer”), Part and Whole (“micro” and “macro”) and Nature and Culture (or the “one” and the “many”, “reality” and “representation”). A similar movement can be seen in Economics, with the so-called “Complexity Economics” advanced by Eric D. Beinhocker (2006). In my view, however, the way Economics breaks this distinction is by conflating the “micro” and “macro” (in the notion of the network), “reality” and “representation” in the simulations performed by computers and the language of game theory, and subsuming culture in nature, by referring the explanation of cultural facts to Darwinian notions of fitness and survival of both groups, individuals and traits.

But this is not the methodological change that many anthropologists<sup>16</sup> meant to achieve when they started to identify the crisis of anthropological thought and started to

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<sup>16</sup> Like Roy Wagner in the 70’s, Marilyn Strathern in the 80’s and sociologists of science like Bruno Latour in the 90’s.

deconstruct the ideas of “primitive” and “civilized” or “individual” and society”.<sup>17</sup> Anthropology researchers in the Abaeté Network, drawing on the suggestions of the aforementioned anthropologists question the very notion of “representative science”. They try not to subsume other cultures in an all-encompassing biological/social model of utility maximization under material and informational constraints. On the contrary, they propose to make an experiment of seeing what “knowledge” would be like if we could think like other peoples do. Could we, as a culture, at least try to see the world through other peoples’ eyes and not fall into the trappings that our own way of thought conveys?

With this observation, I believe we have come full circle: using Foucault’s framework, the “human sciences” that deal with man can either become as empirical as possible, trying to subsume scientific knowledge about human behavior under a few assumptions (and controlling what is not amenable to knowledge as error, or exceptions to the models). In this case, we do not know exactly what separates the behavior of man from other animals’. The alternative to that is to give up a single notion of scientific knowledge, together with the notion of man. In this case, the risk is of losing rigor of thought by using too confusing a language, and we might not know what the difference from science or literature is. Either way, the idea that we have perfectly demarcated “human sciences” that supposedly should study “man” sees its boundaries blur. In other words, Foucault’s intuitions about the directions of human sciences seems to be vindicated 40 years after they were first vented.

The gist of the paper is, then, that Economic Anthropology can, in fact, be incorporated in the project of unification of the behavioral sciences in the sense proposed by Gintis, as long as it shares with Economics a concept of “agent” who has the same characteristics of the new “economic agents” of “complexity economics”. For example, in the work of Clifford Geertz (1992 [1978]) and the Anthropologists associated with the “Norms and Preferences network”<sup>18</sup>, we can recognize a similar language as that of the “complexity” economists: the focus is mainly on the individual (even if she is a socialized individual who is boundedly rational) and on the scarcity of information necessary to make

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<sup>17</sup> See [http://abaete.wikia.com/wiki/Simetria%2C\\_Reversibilidade\\_e\\_Reflexividade](http://abaete.wikia.com/wiki/Simetria%2C_Reversibilidade_e_Reflexividade). This Wiki page is a collective page maintained by the cultural anthropology group of studies of Museu Nacional (National Museum) of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.umass.edu/preferen/>.

exchanges happen. Thanks to the similarity of problems, it is possible to incorporate studies about the “origins of human sociality” into the framework of the behavioral sciences.

This focus on the individual, her psychology and the cultural influences that mold her creates, of course, an “economic agent” who is quite different from that of traditional neoclassical economics. However, what we seem to lose in terms of knowledge is the ability to view the world in different ways, through other peoples’ eyes. If one tries this experiment, one runs the risk of losing the prestigious label of performing a serious, rigorous and scientific activity. What is produced, instead, is art or literature (at best) or plain nonsense (at worst).

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