

On Ambidextrousness, or, What is an Innovative Action?

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**Volume 12 Issue 4 (December 2010) Article 6****Brett Neilson,****"On the Ambiguity of Ambidextrousness, or, What is an Innovative Action?"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/6>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.4 (2010)****Thematic Issue, *Ambiguity in Culture and Literature*****Ed. Paolo Bartoloni and Anthony Stephens**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/>>

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**Abstract:** In his article "On the Ambiguity of Ambidextrousness, or, What is an Innovative Action?" Brett Neilson explores the significance of the fact that the technical equality of the hands is realized above all in the act of manual labor, revisiting an influential essay by Robert Hertz, a student of Emile Durkheim and associate of Marcel Mauss, published in 1909 and entitled "The Pre-Eminence of the Right Hand." In his text, Hertz argued that the basic spatial distinction between the left and right hand acquires the polarity of a social hierarchy owing not to the physiology or psychology of motor asymmetry but owing to a cultural choice rooted in experiences of the sacred and profane. With reference to Marx's discussion of productive and non-productive labor in his *Grundrisse*, the world-making capacity of the hands is analyzed *vis-à-vis* the productive regime of capital and its increasing subordination of human motor control to machines. Finally, following Paolo Virno's observations regarding immaterial labor and cognitive capitalism in his *The Grammar of the Multitude*, Neilson discusses what relevance (if any) the cultural distinction — and ambiguity — between the hands holds in the age of information.

**Brett NEILSON**

### **On Ambidextrousness, or, What is an Innovative Action?**

In 1909, Robert Hertz, a student of Emile Durkheim and associate of Marcel Mauss, published an influential essay entitled "The Pre-Eminence of the Right Hand." Hertz argued that the basic spatial distinction between the left and right hand acquires the polarity of a social hierarchy due not to the physiology or psychology of motor asymmetry but due to a cultural choice rooted in experiences of the sacred and profane: "What resemblance more perfect than that between our two hands!" — he exclaimed — "And yet what a striking inequality there is!" (89). Widely seen as a precedent for the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Hertz's essay makes an important argument for the social determination of spatial distinctions. Rejecting the physiological explanation that we are right-handed because we are left-brained, he suggests we are left-brained because we are right-handed. This would be one of the more extreme examples of the doctrine of the tyranny of culture over biology in the *Année Sociologique* tradition. But Hertz retreats just enough to recognize a slight organic asymmetry between the hands (one that can be overcome with physical training) and to contend that it is society that gives this difference value: "There is no need to deny the existence of organic tendencies toward asymmetry; but apart from some exceptional cases the vague disposition to right-handedness, which seems to be spread throughout the human species, would not be enough to bring about the absolute preponderance of the right hand if this were not reinforced and fixed by influences external to the organism" (91). Implicit in his argument is the proposition that the social causes that lead to the differentiation of the two hands may be permanent, even if, as he ends his essay by declaring, modern society should "strive to develop better the energies dormant in our left side" (113). Hertz accumulates a wealth of evidence to support his case, gathered mostly from the published works of practicing ethnographers (he never conducted fieldwork himself). The tendency of some Indonesian tribes to bind the left arm of children, the notion among the Maori that the left is the "side of death," the belief that certain Christian saints refused the left breast of their mother: all are cited to substantiate the idea that the preponderance of the right hand is a cross-cultural phenomenon, which is "anterior to all individual experience" and "linked to the very structure of social thought" (112-13). For Hertz, the division between the left and right hands is signal of a system of dual symbolic classification that functions across society as such. And this remains the case even if the contribution of the left hand to human labor comes to rival or take the place of the right: "Can it be said that any effort to develop the aptitude of the left hand is doomed to failure in advance? Experience shows the contrary. In the rare cases in which the left hand is properly exercised and trained, because of technical necessity, it is just about as useful as the right; for example, in playing the piano or violin, or in surgery. If an accident deprives a man of his right hand, the left acquires after some time the strength and skill that it lacked" (92).

It is not my purpose to celebrate the influence of Hertz, whose analytical insistence upon religious polarity has now been widely questioned. Beginning in 1933, Mauss began to distance himself from Hertz, noting not only the need to account for other spatial distinctions such as up/down and front/back but also the existence of classification systems based on number or gradation rather than dichotomy. Nonetheless, Mauss referred favorably to Hertz's essay in his text of the following year, "Techniques of the Body," and the influence of "The Pre-Eminence of the Right Hand" can be traced to thinkers as diverse as Louis Dumont and Rodney Needham. What interests me is the unexpected reading given to Hertz's essay by the anthropologist Ernesto de Martino in his posthumously published book *La fine del mondo*. De Martino brings to the fore the central ambiguity of Hertz's argument: that the hands are attributed a symbolic inequality when the technical demands of labor impel humankind toward ambidextrousness. For de Martino, the ability of the hands to shape the world is the minimum technical requirement for the emergence of human cultures. But de Martino also posits a limit to this human ability to shape the world — a threshold beyond which lies a vast no man's land of chaos and nothingness (an overabundance of data unsusceptible to classification). To protect itself from this non-world, humankind constructs the entire mythical-ritualistic domain of culture. The technical work of the hands thus functions, like culture, as a defensive mechanism against the risk of not being able to

be in the world. Here de Martino makes reference to what he calls "cultural apocalypses" — those historically determined moments — madness, mourning, ethnocide, geographical displacement, and migration would be examples — in which the protective world of culture breaks down and humanity is left to confront its own amorphous and ambiguous potentiality. And, he argues, the symbolic distinction between the hands is a means of projecting these differences back on to the human body.

As it stands, de Martino's argument imports existential categories (which have their roots in the Heideggerian notion of *Umwelt*) into Hertz's anthropological analysis. This in itself would not be interesting if de Martino did not wrap his existential concerns around an analysis of manual labor. Not only does he claim that the horizon of the manually operable coincides with the horizon of being as such but also he contends that the opposition being/nothingness conditions every act of manual labor. These moments of his argument cannot be understood in isolation from his engagement with Marx since, earlier in *La fine del mondo*, he devotes an entire chapter to the Marxist conception of labor and its relation to world-making activities. While in general agreement with Marx's analysis of the production of material life, de Martino argues that Marxist anthropology represses an account of the intersubjective valorization that makes possible being-in-the-world-with-others. By emphasizing the subjective process of productive labor (the production of new objects through the organic exchange with nature), Marx neglects to analyze the symbolic-cultural dimensions of human life, which provide the very basis for intersubjective collaboration that makes productive labor possible in the first place. De Martino thus seeks to move beyond the Marxist conception of productive labor to account also for those non-productive — and thus ambiguous — activities that contribute to the making of human lifeworlds. To this extent, his reading of Hertz's thesis on the inequality of the two hands can be referred to Marx's distinction between productive and non-productive labor. If labor is split between world-making activities and those that merely contribute to material production, then Marx's arguments concerning the incompatibility of capital and non-productive labor acquire a special relevance for anthropological inquiry. Consider the passage from the *Grundrisse* where Marx compares the labor of the piano maker to that of the piano player: "Productive labour is only that which produces capital. Is it not crazy ... that the piano maker is a productive worker, but not the piano player, although obviously the piano would be absurd without the piano player? But this is exactly the case. The piano maker reproduces capital, the pianist only exchanges his labour for revenue. But doesn't the pianist produce music and satisfy our musical ear, does he not even to a certain extent produce the latter? He does indeed: his labour produces something; but that does not make it productive labour in the economic sense; no more than the labour of the mad man who produces delusions is productive" (*Grundrisse* 305).

In an essay entitled "Universalism and Belonging in the Logic of Capital," Dipesh Chakrabarty comments that it is "the closest Marx would ever come to showing a Heideggerian intuition about human beings and their relations to tools" (673). In recognizing that the piano player produces our musical ear — that culturally-inflected taste we acquire for particular musical forms — Marx describes the relationship of humans to tools that Heidegger calls "the ready to hand": the everyday, preanalytical, unobjectifying relationships we have to tools, relationships critical to the making of human life worlds. But, in Marx's analysis, "the ready at hand" is subordinated to what Heidegger calls "the present at hand," the objectifying relation implicit in the reproduction of capital. The piano player's labor is likened to a madman's delusions and, with this, the ontological weight of world-producing activities that do not contribute to the production of surplus value is occluded. For Marx, the difference between productive and non-productive labor is equivalent to the difference between what Aristotle calls *poesis* and *praxis*. The first produces a material object, an *opus* that can be separated from action, while the second, which is purely performative, has no end product. Later in his career, however, Marx becomes less sure about this division. Not only does he define labor power as such as *potentia* but, in *Theories of Surplus Value*, he notes: an "actor, for example, or even a clown ... is a productive labourer if he works in the service of a capitalist" (156-57). And, indeed, for theorists of post-Fordist capitalism, it is this kind of labor, labor without a material end product, which becomes the prototype for all wage labor.

Let me follow the account of post-Fordist capitalism developed by *postoperaista* thinkers such as Christian Marazzi in *Il posto dei calzini* or Paolo Virno in *A Grammar of the Multitude*. As creative lin-

guistic relation comes to the center of capitalist productive activity, the means of production are no longer reducible to industrial processes but consist of linguistic-cognitive capacities that are, at once, inseparable from the biological constitution of the human animal and abstracted to the commodity form. This is not to claim that the production of material objects no longer occurs but that, for an ever-increasing number of professional tasks (particularly in the advanced capitalist world), the fulfillment of an action is internal to the action itself. Contemporary production acquires the nature of virtuosic performance. And, for this reason, it is inherently political — political in the sense that it involves a relationship with the presence of others, a mode of linguistic cooperation that moves the anthropogenesis to the center of productive processes.

Virno gives the example of the concert pianist Glen Gould who, in order to remove his virtuosic performance from any kind of public relation, secluded himself in the studio, where he could pass off the production of records as an end product. Unlike Marx's piano player, whose productions equate to the madman's delusions, Gould experienced public performance as a form of servile work. But this only shows the extent to which the world-making activities of creative performance have become equivalent to productive labor and a profound ambiguity has entered the relation of *poesis* to *praxis*. For Virno, the post-Fordist reorganization of labor moves far beyond the Heideggerian concern with technics and world-making: "Forget the Heideggerian chatter about the 'technical era' ... This event does not assuage but radicalizes, instead, the antinomies of economic-social capitalist formation. Nobody is as poor as those who see their own relation to the presence of others, that is to say, their own communicative faculty, their own possession of a language, reduced to wage labor" (*Grammar* 63). As Virno argues in a later book, *Quando il verbo si fa carne*, the advent of post-Fordist capitalism establishes as a permanent condition that state of exception that de Martino called the "cultural apocalypse" (84-88, unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine). The reduction of the intersubjective relation with others to wage labor means the human activity of world-making, which de Martino relates to the technical capacity of the hands, is unable to stave off the crisis, the "end of the world," which strips humanity back to its amorphous precariousness by demanding constant innovation, flexibility, and lifelong learning.

We are by now all familiar with these demands that, in most recent parlance, have assumed the form of an imperative to creativity. What is most valued in the labor market today is not the ability to perform any single task but the ability to adapt, learn, and innovate, to move between a manifold and ever-expanding range of tasks. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue in their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, the contemporary capitalist system interpellates and entices increasingly its subjects through the paradoxical imperative of being autonomous and creative. Accompanying this has been the rise of flexible or precarious labor, which places workers in a state of perpetual uncertainty as regards their employment and livelihood. Interestingly, "creative labor" (or world-making activity) has emerged within recent debates as the exemplary form of such "precarity." For example, Brian Holmes — or the essays published in the 2004 "precariat" issue of *republicart* — illustrate this tendency, but that has been contested by other thinkers and activists, such as those composing the Frassanito network (a group of European migration activists formed after a "border camp" near Bari, Italy, in 2003), who see the undocumented labor migrant as the embodiment of precarity. What remains mystifying in the association of the creative impulse with generic human capacities is the fact that innovative action is not the norm but occurs infrequently and under specific circumstances. The cognitive grammar of Noam Chomsky's linguistics, for instance, asserts that the human capacity for language is "constantly innovative," given its ability to generate a potentially infinite number of enunciations from a finite lexicon and set of combinational rules. And, Chomsky, when pressed (for instance by Michel Foucault in their 1971 dialogue "Human Nature: Justice versus Power") relates his politics to this innate conception of human nature — society must be structured to maximize the possibilities for the expression of human creative powers. But such claims for the constitutive creativity of human nature, which reduce biology to crude neurological data, avoid the need to describe how and why the human animal can modify his/her forms of life, departing from habits and conventions. What are the prerequisites for practice and discourse to take an unforeseen direction? How is an established state of affairs broken? In short, what is an innovative action?

De Martino's notion of cultural apocalypse provides some basis for describing the conditions under which such an escape from prevailing conditions is possible. For him, culture is a kind of defensive mechanism that establishes a secure horizon of being under what he describes as circumstances of "permanent anthropological risk" (or "the risk of not being able to be in any possible cultural world") (*La fine del mondo* 14-15). By cultural apocalypse he does not intend an end in the Hegelian or eschatological sense (he writes of an apocalypse without an *eschaton*) but rather an interruption to everyday life in which human cultures undergo simultaneous dissolution and renewal. Characteristic of this cultural apocalypse is the disruption of the continuum of history by metahistory or the stripping back of cultural defenses to return the human animal to a primal scene of anthropogenesis. It displays two fundamental but contradictory aspects: 1) a semantic excess that is impossible to process or resolve to determinate meanings, and 2) a semantic poverty characterized by glossolalia or a kind of liturgical speech (the mere repetition of sounds that attests to the human capacity for language). Importantly, for de Martino, the cultural apocalypse remains historically determined and transitory. It gives rise to new cultural niches and institutions that occlude the raw openness, vulnerability, and potentiality of the human animal.

In *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, Virno extends De Martino's insights to argue that creativity becomes associated with a kind of state of exception, a decision that cannot be referred to a normative condition or the application of some set of grammatical rules. Rules, as Ludwig Wittgenstein observed in his *Philosophical Investigations*, can never stipulate their application. For example, there is no rule that specifies how high the tennis ball can be thrown during service. To regulate this one needs another rule to infinite regress — the juridical model of precedent implied by the normative constitutional condition and rule of law. The creative action then is not simply one that breaks rules (simultaneously affirming them in an act of transgression) but an action that changes the grammatical system itself, operating in a space where the grammatical rule cannot be distinguished from the empirical event. The parallel here to the political state of exception, explored by thinkers like Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, is intentional. But far from comparing the creative action to the sovereign decision that establishes the state of exception by suspending the law, Virno conceives this action as a kind of non-sovereign decision or, if you like, an exception-from-below. Rather than an affirmation of sovereign power — with all its implications of a contractual passage from the "state of nature" to "civil society" — the creative action is understood precisely as an *exodus* from such power, an act of disobedience that can never be named as civil disobedience since it attests the impossibility of ever fully escaping the "state of nature." As Virno explains, the creative action finds its "overturned equivalent in the state of exception" (*Multitude* 31). In both cases a fundamental ambiguity invests the relation between grammar (the rules of a certain system or community) and empirical fact (the everyday events to which these rules should apply). But only in the latter is this imagined as the result of a monopolized political decision.

A further insight can be gained into this difference if one compares Hobbes to Wittgenstein on the problem of the infinite regress established by any normative system of rule. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that such regression can only be broken by the obligation to obey that announces the exit from the "state of nature" and establishment of a unitary political body. In the common interests of self-preservation and security, each subject must tacitly consent to the proposition "I will not disobey" and recognize the validity of the law even before any concrete law has been laid down. For Wittgenstein, however, such infinite regress raises the problem of the uniform application of rules: "What if one person reacts in one way and another in another to the order and the training? Which one is right?" (206). To break the reference of this question back to an infinite series of norms, Wittgenstein proposes to adjudicate the matter in relation to "the common behaviour of mankind" (206). Instead of arguing, as does Hobbes, that the regress of law requires a sovereign intervention that transcends the "state of nature," he refers this matter back to fundamental (natural or biological) qualities that are immanent to the human animal: the capacity for linguistic communication, adaptation to and alteration of environmental circumstances, and so on. As Virno puts it: "far from anchoring the application of the rules to the exit from the state of nature, Wittgenstein places natural life at the very heart of historically determined institutions" (*Multitude* 34).

That, for the *postoperaista* thinkers, these qualities of natural life are put to work in the contemporary capitalist system, should not obscure the precise political dynamic at play. The impossibility of fully exiting the "state of nature" becomes particularly evident with the twilight of the modern state. On the one hand, there is a kind of permanent exception that opens the world to the contingencies of uncontrolled war. On the other, there are opportunities for decentralized organization that refuse the model of monopolized decision and seek to effect change through networked modes of collaboration that are open to error, chance, and precariousness. Both of these conditions set up an indistinction between questions of law and questions of fact or between grammatical and empirical propositions. Both establish an open and fluid situation, characterized by uncertainty and risk. But they are mirror opposites, inversions, right and left, if you will. The sovereign decision and the innovative action: these two categories converge with and diverge from one another, both creating a set of circumstances that can be identified, with all rigor, as simultaneously natural and cultural/political. Unlike the sovereign decision, however, the innovative action is not predicated on a synthetic unity. It is necessarily an intersubjective action, forged in the complex and unstable relations between brains and bodies. Its model is not the sovereign who decides but the language or form-of-life that changes in a distributed and diffuse manner. The innovative action breaks with both the regularity of habit and the regulation of convention. And thus its creative impulse cannot be reduced to the formal indifference of the market. This is indeed the tendency that, in so many recent discussions of creative classes or creative industries, makes innovation such a dangerous word, really a codename for more of the same rather than a rule-abrogating activity which recasts grammatical propositions and redefines future generative possibilities.

At stake in accounting for the innovative action is a notion of human potentiality that neither reduces culture to biology nor biology to culture, but rather compels us to think beyond or without this imposing distinction. It is no secret that the cognitive sciences (at least since Chomsky) have worked to reduce culture to biology. But it is also questionable that the latest forms of cultural research, which rightly recognize culture as processual and complex rather than defined by habits and conventions, manage to avoid the limits of Hertz's culturalism. Importantly, Hertz was compelled to acknowledge a slight organic asymmetry between the hands, even as he recognized that this could be overcome by practice and training. The acknowledgement is perhaps all the more significant for its slightness. But even when the qualities of human nature are more than slight, they can still be occluded from the anthropological world view. Take an influential study: Ulf Hannerz's 1992 *Cultural Complexity*, a work that begins with a chapter entitled "The Nature of Culture Today." The first sentence of this text recapitulates standard Aristotelian notions about the nature of humankind: "*Homo sapiens* is the creature who 'makes sense'" (Hannerz 3). Shortly after follows a definition of culture: "Culture, in the anthropological view, is the meanings which people create, and which create people, as members of societies" (Hannerz 3). Such a definition of culture is as incontestable as it is overfamiliar. But, as much as Hannerz's work rests at the forefront of anthropological investigations of global cultural complexity, it is necessary to recognize that this is a minimal approach to human nature. The question of human nature is here black boxed. Or rather the engagement with this question is deemed relevant only insofar as it is the nature of humans to produce culture.

But, to what extent, in the contemporary world, can the biological be hived off from the cultural? If productive processes today are inseparable from the linguistic-cognitive capacities that are necessary for communicative relations then the question of the nature of human potentiality (for Marx inseparable from the capacity to labor) must come to the fore. Such assertions are, of course, neither new nor surprising. It has become increasingly evident across a variety of fields, including the important feminist work on genetic and other biotechnologies, that "human nature and the human condition can no longer be distinguished in any definitive manner" (De Carolis 10). Hertz's work on the hands, however, provides something more than an elegant segue to the issues. That important moment of hesitancy, the registration of a slight difference, returns to haunt the scene of creative labor, investing it with political relation even as it becomes generalized across the post-Fordist economy as such.

How to think the relation between this slight difference, which opens up a world of difference, and the impossibility of erecting a contractual barrier between nature and culture, the very border upon

which modern politics is built? To think the question of ambiguity through the phenomenon of ambidextrousness is to go to the heart of the problem, since while right and left mirror each other as opposites, they are also (particularly at the moment in which they are trained to act with equal facility) indistinct. Ambiguity is itself ambiguous as it posits at once difference and identity. Whether one understands this in terms of Hegelian synthesis (the identity of difference and identity) or Derridean play (the difference of difference and identity), the problem remains. Indeed, it is a problem that haunts the very scene of comparison, which, as Peter Osborne reminds us, must posit the "belonging together" of concepts in order to distinguish them (21). Too often we find that either one or the other of these aspects of ambiguity played up. Take, for instance, Aihwa Ong's claim that Giorgio Agamben's "universal division of humanity into those with rights and those without" ignores "the possibility of complex negotiations of claims for those without territorialized citizenship" (23). Here, the moment of opposition between "bare life" and citizenship, *zōē* and *bíos*, is emphasized at the expense of the "zone of indistinction" that Agamben is at pains to describe (*Homo Sacer* 170). The beauty of approaching the question of ambiguity through ambidextrousness and the technical facility of the hands is that it becomes impossible to think this opposition without the imposition of a third term. Roberto Esposito has posed the problem most elegantly: "what, assuming it is even conceivable, is an absolutely natural life? It's even more the case today, when the human body seems to be increasingly challenged and literally crossed by technology. Politics penetrates directly in life and life becomes other from itself. Thus, if a natural life doesn't exist that isn't at the same time technological as well; if the relation between *bíos* and *zōē* needs by now (or has always needed) to include in it a third correlated term, *technē* — then how do we hypothesize an exclusive relation between politics and life?" (15).

In conclusion, Hertz's meditation on the hands implies that the conception of such an exclusive relation is indeed not possible. I like to fantasize that if Hertz had lived (he died in the First World War), he might have rebelled against his masters. That he might even have conducted fieldwork, not necessarily in the Amazon, the Trobriand Islands, or other colonial sites but on the neurological interface of human cognition and affect. To return the question of creative labor to the hands is to ask whether the polarities that Hertz highlights can be inscribed on the very division culture/nature itself. And, in this sense, the challenge to think beyond this divide, to derive a form of materialism that neither reduces culture to biology or biology to culture, cannot be held separate from Hertz's advocacy of a more ambidextrous approach to the world — from a mode of analysis that asks: "What are the titles of nobility of the right hand? And whence comes the servitude of the left?" (Hertz 89).

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