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Putting the *anthropos* back in consumer research: Beyond reductionisms

Søren Askegaard, University of Southern Denmark¹

“it’s a very moderate proposal to say it’s a mixture of biology and culture. I’m not saying it’s all about biology, I’m simply saying don’t forget about biology”

Simon Baron-Cohen, clinical psychologist, Cambridge University

“There is no room for biology in there for me”

Cathrine Egeland, gender researcher, Oslo Metropolitan University

Introduction

The purpose of this short article is to open a sorely missing dialogue between marketing scholarship in general and consumer culture theorization specifically with biological anthropology and biology. However, and most importantly, this dialogue should be oriented towards a contemporary and non-reductionist field of biology and *not* with neo-Darwinist evolutionary theory that is already highly cited in consumer research (see Saad 2010 for an overview). Initially inspired by Morin’s (1973; 1980) half-a-century old insistence on the fallacy of the nature-culture dichotomy and his epistemology of complexity, I wanted to open this dialogue through Morin’s conceptualizations, and hence presented the initial ideas at the 2019 ICR workshop in wonderful Lyon. But I quickly realized the extent to which I was myself a victim of a constructivist dismissal of the abovementioned dialogue. Even though there is still much to be learnt from Morin, it also became obvious to me that I had – luckily, I should add – opened a Pandora’s box of perspectives including biologists reinterpreting “life” in terms of semiotic process, so-called biosemiotics (e.g., Hoffmeyer 2008) but also a set of central voices within contemporary anthropology calling for a fundamental rethinking of the nature-culture divide (e.g. Descola 2013b) and for a reconciliation of biological and cultural anthropology (Ingold & Palsson 2011). In other words, I realized the degree of my ignorance - always an important lesson to learn. Nevertheless, these discoveries just made the potential fruitfulness of opening a dialogue even more interesting, so what follows should be read as

¹ I would like to thank Eric Arnould for their valuable comments to an earlier version of this manuscript and for many discussions of these ideas over the years.

a small appetizer – since my resources are currently insufficient for a full menu. It is a short manifesto (cf. Bode & Østergaard 2013) and a program for my own and I hope others' work in the years to come.

The missing dialogue

The opening quotes stem from a popular scientific Norwegian TV program, where they appear in an episode investigating scientific explanations of differences in choice of career among men and women. The fundamental issue behind the journalistic investigation was the paradox that it seems that in the more gender-egalitarian societies like the Nordic countries, the career choices of men and women differ more, not less, than in other societies. While there might be many possible and plausible socio-cultural explanations for this, there is obviously also a potential explanation in terms of sexual as well as gendered differences towards, for example nurturing professions– differences that may be easier to pursue in an egalitarian context. The fundamental question is obviously – does the biological constitution of gender matter at all or is it all socio-cultural construction? The difference between these two standpoints came to the fore of a considerably more globalized public debate recently, when world-famous author J.K Rowling was accused of transphobia based on her insistence that the experience of being a woman cannot be the same for everyone, who defines her/itself as a woman. Paradoxically, this critique relies on the very essentialism the critics ostensibly deplore. However, this is not what I want to address here. For the time being, suffice it to say that we deal here with a central debate in the contemporary cultural climate.

The two quotes illustrate quite well how many, if far from all, cultural researchers in general relate to the idea, that biology might play a significant role in the human universe. A well-known medical researcher from the Danish Institute of Advanced Study specializing in vaccinations told me, that when she is presenting results in public concerning women reacting differently to vaccines than men and relates this to their sex (for a scientific publication, see Aaby et.al 2020), members of the audience accuse her of undermining all feminism's positive results obtained over the last century or more.² The point I am trying to make by bringing attention to these stories is a warning against the sheer refusal to engage in a debate about the issue. In the TV program, no real argument is presented against the results of experiments of the social psychologists, only a general and unspecific refusal of their legitimacy. For all its manifold merits, social constructivism in this

² Christine Benn, personal conversation

interpretation seems to imply that not only is everything human filtered, shaped and expressed through the social, it is socially *determined*. But one determinism is not better than another. What follows represents an attempt to argue that either determinism, biological or social, constitutes a mutilating simplification of the human condition.

As already underlined, this short commentary should be read as an endeavor to open a discussion between the scientific field of CCT with its roots in hermeneutics and other schools of thought in sociology and cultural anthropology and the disciplines of biological anthropology and biology. So far, it is fair to say, there has been no such dialogue. CCT researchers are generally “culturalists”, and rightfully so. But as Morin (and before him for example also Marcel Mauss) would point out, any attempt to isolate the phenomenon of “culture” from the fact that it exists in and of a biological world is suffering from the same type of reductionism as the one, CCT originated in opposing, i.e. reducing the consumer to a bounded rational decision maker operating independently of her/his cultural contexts and existential reflections. Or, rather, since such independence could not really be assumed, at least it was excluded from the core subject of investigation and relegated to a sideline role as additional “influential variables”.

On the other hand, if biology is absent from CCT, it hasn't left the social sciences alone. To the contrary, the recent decades have seen biologically inspired approaches resurrect in many parts of social sciences, in our own world not least through the blatant marketing successes of evolutionary psychology and neuromarketing studies. I write marketing successes both because even certain evolutionary psychologists are “convinced that the line of research that garnered the most attention both within academia and throughout the popular media was wrong in almost every detail” (Buller 2005 p. 3). But also, because most of the insights from neuromarketing studies so far seem to indicate that the consumer is a being governed by affective reactions and cultural habits rather than decision-making based on information-processing. As such, it seems like we can qualify the neuromarketer (so far...) predominantly as someone who has scanned herself to insights well known to the rest of us cultural researchers for several decades. The lure of evolutionary psychology (see below) is therefore deeply embedded in a scientist ideology.

In the 1980s, Elizabeth Hirschman made an attempt to introduce humanistic concepts and methods into marketing and consumer research (Hirschman 1986). *Post festum*, this pioneering endeavor (together with many other contributions from her as well as other pioneering CCT scholars, cf. Askegaard & Scott, 2013) proved successful to an extent that it has profoundly altered the

epistemological landscape of consumer research. Some twenty years later Hirschman produced another call for transdisciplinarity, this time advocating for an evolutionary biological dimension for the illumination of consumers' situatedness (Hirschman 2008). The second time around, she generated considerably less traction among interpretive consumer researchers than the first time, to use a blatant understatement. The lack of traction possibly is linked to the very fact, that this second call for transdisciplinarity was caught in the alluring web of evolutionary and adaptational thinking which perniciously permeated social sciences in the early 20th century in the form of scientific racism, for example. This problem should not lead to a prevailing rejection of "anything biological" in CCT. For consumer research, like for other human sciences (Rose 2013), a new relation is needed with the biological science in order stay vital and pertinent in this "century of biology", as announced by geneticists and the OECD alike (e.g., Venter & Cohen 2004). Researchers of consumption and consumer culture are encouraged to critically acknowledge and engage with insights from biology, maybe most notably genomics and neuroscience, rather than receiving it with the abjuration that seems most commonplace.

The lure of evolutionary psychology

It is thus very fair to say, that a "biological turn" has not appeared within the realm of interpretive consumer research. This is very different from the situation in consumer psychology, where neurological research and not least its intellectual derivative, evolutionary psychology, has produced a highly visible "Darwinization". Consumer psychologists such as Vlad Griskevicius, Gad Saad, and Douglas Kenrick have been some of the leading figures in this movement. These attempts to advance a biological / evolutionary psychology perspective in marketing and consumer research generally remain caught in the implied assumption that all behavior is goal-oriented and are consequences of evolutionary psychological optimization processes. It is largely based on a relatively hard-wired modular mode of conceiving the human brain and its ensuing adaptive functionality that has been strongly refuted by contemporary neuroscience (David 2002).

It is thus easy to criticize research that builds on reductionist applications of Darwin's notion of natural selection, but that is not the same as denying that biology should play any role at all. When Durante and her colleagues (2010) discusses hormonal influences on consumer behavior, we can rightfully criticize the relatively primitive selection model underlying the ovulatory shift hypothesis but dismissing hormonal influences on our behavior altogether is a completely different matter. The logical consequence of such a dismissal would be the relegation of, for example, research on

consequences on existential wellbeing and mood of the contraceptive pill to the (thankfully mostly forgotten!) garbage can of “female hysteria”. When anthropologist Helen Fischer (2004) tries to answer the deeply existential question of “why we love?”, critiques can be raised against the evidence provided by fMRI scans and the usual “areas-that-light-up” interpretative framework of the mereological fallacy (Harré 2012), but dismissing the influence of hormones such as dopamine, testosterone and oxytocine on our experience of sexual attraction is, on the other hand, outright negligent. A similar reflection is justified in terms of attempts to explain the apparent gendered preferences for careers, toys, etc. as indicated. Culture mediates everything, but so does our existence as physical and biological beings. Reductionist evolutionism and adaptationism is an insult to Darwin (Rose & Rose 2001), but abjuration of our biology altogether is an insult to existence.

Basically, there could thus be many (good) reasons behind the fact that the standard response from interpretive consumer researchers has often been to directly attack, laughingly or grudgingly, such attempts at biologization of consumer research. Moreover, there are plenty of sources to consult if one wants a critical stance on evolutionary psychology, both from within the field (Buller 2005) and from sources more familiar to consumer culture researchers (Rose and Rose, 2001; Ingold & Pálsson 2011). The importance of this short discussion is simply to underline, how the ideas presented here differ in a significant way from most contemporary, evolutionary perspectives found in consumer research. Culture, while the single most useful tool for survival - “the human is a cultural animal by nature and a natural animal by culture”, as Morin (1973) argued - cannot be reduced to an evolutionary logic. The simplicity of such an evolutionary process of selection is defied by the myriad of human forms of myth and magic produced in the human social system. Culture, myth and magic must be conceived as ways of filling the increased gap between a reflexive and self-conscious mind and the world’s phenomena as understood and interpreted and acted upon by individuals and societies, and while these cannot – or at least until recently could not! - directly defy evolutionary principles over longer periods of time, they can also not be conceived as mere results of “natural selection”. Instead, we must think “evolution” of humanness through a complex interaction between the human genetic system, the surrounding ecosystem(s), the cerebral system and a given society and its culture, all of which are developing and developed by human praxis.

Moving forward

Essentially, then, Darwin is at risk of undergoing a fate similar to another great 19th century thinker with a big beard. While Marx's legacy has been tainted by simplistic exploitation of the idea of egalitarian revolution, Darwin now faces a similar risk of being jeopardized by a reductionist exploitation of the idea of adaptationist evolution. On the other hand, as Rose (2013) points out there is not one but several boats to be missed if we as representatives of the human sciences do not overcome the problematic history of linkages between biology and sociology, burdened as it is with daft historical ideas such as eugenics, scientific racism, sociobiology, (and let us add Neo-Darwinism) and so on. Ideas, some of which have had disastrous consequences for literally millions of people.

Reducing the social to evolution is bad but reducing our being to the social is comic. Rose ironizes over the fact that the discursive turn on the one hand led to a profound interest in "embodiment" while seemingly denying "any powers to the bloody thing itself" (2013, p.4). The consequences of the "social reductionism" go well beyond the ironically amusing. That is, while the (ab)use of biological principles and models has led to disasters, neglecting our biology may have equally disastrous consequences. It must be underlined how the first part of the 21st century has witnessed the rise of a new awareness of our inscription in nature. The all-too-evident signs of the Anthropocene and the ensuing environmental and climatic crises has left little doubt that we can no longer exert a humanism that positions us outside and beyond the eco-system. To the contrary, our inscription in and dependence upon the biosphere and its intricate balances is becoming increasingly evident, as are the blurred borders between homo sapiens and other species. As Rose argues, "much that is specific about our humanity, our individual existence and collective arrangements can be understood in terms of our characteristics as specific kinds of living beings" (2013 p.8).

The challenge is of course to avoid convenient simplifications and reductionisms. In a passage that is strikingly similar to Morins epistemology of complexity, Rose notes that , for example in terms of the fear of genomic determinism, it is interesting to see how knowledge is not cumulative in an absolute sense but more akin to air in a balloon. The increased wisdom also generates a larger surface to the unknown. "The more we know, the more we don't know. And the more we find ourselves moving away from the idea that the genome is the prime mover, the uncaused cause, and toward a style of thought that sees the genome as much affected and shaped by all around it at the same time as it shapes it" (Rose 2013 p. 18).

It is highly recommendable to start the trajectory of getting beyond the reigning but infertile absolute separation of the biological and the cultural approaches in the studies of cultures of consumption. At the outset, such a goal for Consumer Culture Theory is congruent with the abovementioned aim of saving ourselves from a biological neglect or rejection and instead proposes an invitation to not shy away from the complete existential being of the *anthropos*. In other words, how can interpretive consumer research come to terms with a non-reductionist biology that neither jumps on the bandwagon of neuromania nor fall prey to an attack of *Darwinitis Vulgarensis* (e.g. Tallis 2016)? A non-reductionist biological framing of consumer research with a cultural perspective can advantageously go back to theories of auto-poietic systems Varela and Maturana (1974) and other non-reductionist insights in biology and evolution from notably Monod (1974), Laborit (1976) and Jacob (1981) onwards. Likewise, from the social science perspective, the systems' approach to understanding human mind developed by notably Gregory Bateson (1972) can inform such an elimination of the artificial distinction of the social and the natural. Rather than dealing with these scholars individually, something I must reserve for later efforts, I will let them speak through their influences on Morin and his elaboration of the bio-social nature of the human being.

Morin's bio-social being

In order to connect this form of biological thought with interpretive consumer research, it is, as indicated in the introduction, useful to consider Morin's (1973) insistence on the bio-social nature of mankind as well as his reflections on the complexities of living organisms (Morin 1980) and the weakness of standard assumptions of what separates *homo sapiens* from other species.

So far, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) has not embraced Morin's thinking to any great degree. The most obvious reason for this may be the lack of translations of his key works into English even though his oeuvre hovers around 100 titles, is translated into 28 languages and published in 42 countries. Only a handful or so of his original works are translated, and while these are all good books, it would be an overstatement to say that they represent his most important or most central works. Within CCT, Morin's thoughts have been evoked in the epistemological reflections of Askegaard and Linnet (2011) and Pomiès and Tissier-Debordes (2016) and brief introductions to the relevance of his work for CCT have been provided in general (Askegaard 2018) and concerning his complexity paradigm in particular (Brunel 2015).

Reminiscent of Rose's discussion of the genome which is simultaneously cause and effect of its interactivity with the environment, Morin's (1980) insistence on the complex and dialogic constitution of open biological systems may provide a framework for a non-reductionist biology which lends itself to a fruitful dialogue with the human sciences in general and with understanding the consumer as a bio-social being, as is the particular goal in this context. According to this view, the (rightfully so) dreaded determinism of large parts of evolutionary theory has no place in a biological context because autonomy is built into the systemic organization of the living organism. Drawing on the idea of auto-poiesis, Morin considers all living entities as self-organizing systems which are constantly self-reproducing. The self-reproduction requires energy to retain their autonomy, and they are therefore dependent on the energy of their environment to retain their autonomy. Living organisms are therefore tied to a complex dialogic of autonomy and dependence. The living being, says Morin (1980), is an auto-geno-pheno-re-organizing phenomenon.

Consider for example the notion of the subject. A central concept for centuries, indeed millennia of Western philosophy, it has for a long time been a central concept for distinguishing the human from the animal realm. But this distinction is far less obvious than we might be inclined to think. While there is obviously no reflexive understanding of itself as a subject in a one-celled organism, Morin (1990) argues that in its biological functioning, it must still be able to distinguish that which belongs to itself and that which does not. The interactive processes with the environment with their recursive dialogic of inclusion and exclusion (of surrounding phenomena) generates and is generated by its auto-finality. A distinction of living beings with and without a "subject" is therefore, from Morin's perspective, an erroneous path. The definition of a subject that imposes itself, Morin writes, neither rests on consciousness nor on affection, but on an ego-auto-centeredness and an ego-auto-reference or in other words, on the nature and the organizational logic of the living individual. It is therefore literally a bio-logical definition (Morin 1980, 163. My translation).

Consequently, Morin is forced to introduce a concept of second-degree individuals for poly-cellular organisms. The dialogic between cell and individual expresses another fundamental holographic principle since the cell is now part of a whole but the whole in terms of the genetic code is also present in each cell. Furthermore, the development of specialized cells, the introduction of randomness and variation through sexual reproduction and, beyond plants, not least the development of neural systems and ultimately brains add further complexity to the system and gives

rise to a complementary opposition between (genetic) programming and (cognitive and practical) strategy in the interaction with the environment. Obviously, there is a big difference between insects and mammals, but the difference is one of degree rather than of essence. While these processes of strategic action and cognition cannot be reduced to processes of natural selection and optimized adaptation, since open systems are constantly subject and objects of disorder and error, these strategies are in Morin's view what gives rise to the notion of intelligence. Intelligence is thus an animal virtue which, Morin (1980, 229) notes, has been notably developed among mammals.

A third-degree of subjectivity is introduced when animals organize in societies which complexifies exchanges and causalities even more. And, among societies, the human self-reflexive society is of a specific kind. However, I will stop the account of Morin's argument here and jump to his metaphor of an epistemological customs officer (1980, 416), because what we need to retain for future purposes is captured well by this particular narrative. When you say, "the cat is hungry", the epistemological customs officer may accuse you of unduly introducing a human concept, "hungry", to the cat's world. However, it might as well be reflected the other way around – we are *also* using the concept "hungry" to translate from our biosphere what we share with the cat, that our organisms need food. If you say "the cat obeys its genetic programming" the customs officer may be less likely to stop you, in spite of the fact that also this phrase is projecting a human perspective on the genetic disposition, but if you say "the cat is an individual subject", you may very well be accused of undue anthropomorphism by the customs officer. However, says Morin, what is at stake is not a naïve anthropomorphism imposed on a biological being but the contrary: it is what he terms a "dis-anthropocentrification" of the idea of subject, as well as of strategy, intelligence and so on.

This is a relevant issue also for contemporary debates about animal production. We have repudiated animal sensitivity and intelligence, suffering and pleasure with the label anthropomorphism when in fact, we have inherited and developed intelligence, suffering and pleasure from the other animals, in particular mammals (Morin 2017). In other words, the crux of the matter is an elimination of the border altogether; not to form a bio-anthropology but a *complex* anthropology that includes the fact that we are living beings, or even living becomings, insofar as the core issue at stake for understanding life is not of stable entities but always unfinished projects of "auto-organisation" and "subjectification" (Morin 1980, 417).

Beyond anthropocentrism of cultural sciences: Steps to an ecology of culture

Morin (1980) had no illusions of the receptiveness to these ideas in the academic environments of the late 20th century. And while a lot has been written and thought within biology as well as anthropology since then, the situation is not necessarily fundamentally different, as we have already seen. Maybe one of the reasons is that, as has been argued, there is a legitimizing tradition of “social isolationism” running deep in social theory (see also Ferguson 2006). The Durkheimian legacy stipulating that “social facts have their own kind of novel reality, which can only be understood in terms of other social facts and not in terms of anything – be it psychological, biological or physical – prior to them” (Kohn 2013, p. 50). However, as we have seen, such a sharp separation is untenable – or maybe not only untenable, it is even “life negating in some sense” to put it sharply. (*ibid.*). Consequently, something is wrong with such an analytical separation as a starting point.

Anthropologists, of course, are not alien to the problematic aspects of this separation. In the middle of the 20th century, founding anthropologist Alfred Kroeber asked. “Could it be that the specific subject of anthropology is the interrelation of what is biological in man and what is social and historical in him? The answer is Yes” (quoted in Ingold 1986). But in spite of these good intentions, the fact of the matter is that cultural and/or social anthropology has steadily moved further away from biological anthropology (and vice versa) over the last many years. One of the few to have insisted on the close connection between the two for a long time is Tim Ingold, who reflected on the cultural and evolutionary nature of social relationships decades ago in *Evolution and Social Life* (Ingold 1986). In many ways this book was ahead of its time, but it has been reprinted and reedited in order to gain the role it deserves in a highly contemporary debate.

The collection of articles from the “biosocial becomings” team (see Ingold & Palsson 2011) is witness to this contemporary debate which, according to Ingold himself, first and foremost can take place due to the beginning of a deconstruction of the Neo-Darwinist paradigm which since long “dictated the terms of accommodation between the sciences of life, mind, society and culture” (Ingold 2011, 1). Echoing some of Morin’s reflections on auto-geno-pheno-re-organization as characteristic of the living, he argues for a new view on evolution: “Evolution, in our view, does not live in the mutation, recombination, replication and selection of transmissible traits. It is rather a life process. And at the heart of this process is ontogenesis” (*ibid.*, 6). Challenging the standard evolutionary view that an organism is the product of interaction between genes and environment

(or, if the organism is a society, between memes and environment), Ingold calls for an inversion of the order so that the ontogenetic flows and materials take precedence. Hence, he concludes that it is better to speak of a human *becomings* rather than human beings, indeed, as he says to think of humans as well as “creatures of all other kinds in terms of not what they *are* but what they *do* [...] not as discrete and pre-formed entities but as trajectories of movement and growth” (ibid, 8, italics in original). This is no small change, it is underlined. Not a minor correction and complication of the standard evolutionary picture. It is a profound paradigm shift. Ingold uses the analogy of the replacement of classical mechanics with the theory of relativity (and quantum mechanics one could add) due to the “mechanical” similarities between Newtonian physics and (Neo)-Darwinian evolution (*ibid.*, 9-10).

Similar to Morin, Ingold points out that it is not a matter of putting together two parts, the biological and the social. These are not complementary entities but “one and the same” (*ibid.*, 9). Once again, he brings out an analogy; that of a hempen rope, “twisted from multiple strands, themselves twisted from multiple fibres, each in turn twisted from its cellular and molecular constituents [...] biological all the way up and social all the way down.

While a detailed account of the developments in biology and biological anthropology that opens for this vision is beyond the scope of this paper, I will draw attention to two additional chapters in *Biosocial Becomings* that discuss some of these conditions. Ramirez-Goicoechea (2011) point to the significance of the discovery of epigenesis, which since Monod (1970) points to the directional molecular process of genetic activation, expression, revelation, suppression and regulation” (*op.cit.*, 65). Epigenetics, in other words, is the crucial discovery that the genes in our cells interact with the environment thereby producing inheritable phenotypical traits without altering the DNA sequence. Epigenetic effects have been linked both to medical and food consumption, thereby situating it in the core of consumer research. Most importantly, however, epigenesis is an important element in the challenge to genetic determinism that has been discussed above. The biological anthropologist Fuentes (2011) point to two other significant changes in biological inheritance theory that deserve mentioning, namely niche construction theory and multiple inheritance theory. The former “suggests that humans and their environments are mutually interactive participants in the evolutionary process through ecological inheritance, while the latter “proposes that evolutionarily relevant inheritance can take place at genetic, epigenetic, behavioural and symbolic levels.” (Fuentes, 2011, 53) Once again, these epistemic shifts point to a non-deterministic and interactive

evolutionary process. Fuentes uses these to discuss, for example, the biosocial emergence of cooperation as a constitutive element in human phylogenesis in a way that goes way beyond Dawkins' (1976) "selfish gene" and "I will cooperate to the extent that I benefit"-logic

The challenge of the separation of nature and culture and the seismic paradigmatic rocking of the foundation is echoed by others in contemporary anthropology, where several voices are arguing for a post-anthropocentric anthropology and an ensuing breakdown of the fundamental and fundamentalizing distinction between nature and culture. This has not least been promoted through Latour's (1991) powerful manifesto *We Have Never Been Modern*. Also important in this context is Haraway's anti-dualist thinking (e.g., Haraway 1991; 2007). Hence, this sharp distinction may be a parenthesis in the history of thought. As Descola (2013b) points out, it is not until the end of the 19th century that a basic distinction between nature and culture is established in European thought. This distinction is not least the outcome of a basic epistemological break between sciences of nature and human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) as proposed by Dilthey (2013 [1883]). While this break was both welcome and necessary to avoid the threat from scientist determinism and reductionism on cultural phenomena, it had the unfortunate consequence of establishing an almost insurmountable duality between nature and culture, a duality which has according to Descola (2011) been constitutive of the discipline of anthropology. Descola's (2013a) theorizing of animism, totemism, analogism and naturalism as competing ontologies and cosmologies points exactly in the direction of a post-anthropocentric anthropology. But it also points towards the necessity of acknowledging the intertwinement of nature and social life as well as the discipline of anthropology as particularly well situated as a point of departure for such interdisciplinary reliance "because all the empirical objects that anthropologists study on the other side of the world or closer to home – systems of kinship, marriage and descent, conceptions of personhood and of the body, environmental knowledge and practices, the management of physical and moral sufferings – lie precisely at the juncture of biological and cognitive data" (Descola 2013b, 85)

Anthropology, in other words, should in many ways rethink its subjects and objects of study since "the social and political life of *Anthropos*" is radically transformed by the implications of biotechnology and new genetics on the one hand and on the inclusion of the significance of non-human species, animals, plants and not least microbes on the other, leading to a situation where, as Palsson (2011) concludes "a radical separation between social and biological anthropology seems theoretically indefensible. We should speak then, of anthropology as a one-field project (*op.cit.*, 39)

Biosemiotics – more common ground?

It follows from the discussions concerning an alteration of the dialogue between biology and culture within the discipline, that from the opposite direction, from biology, is an emergence of theorizations and epistemic reconfigurations that are paving the way for a better, non-reductionist interdisciplinary dialogue. In addition to what has been discussed by anthropologists, I would like to briefly mention another path of thinking worth exploring for marketing and consumer researchers, for whom semiotics is and should be a central discipline in terms of unpacking meanings and meaning systems in the marketplace and consumption sphere. This is the perspective or theorization of biosemiotics. According to the biosemiotic perspective, living nature is understood as essentially driven by, or actually consisting of, semiosis, that is to say processes of sign relations and their signification – or function- - in the biological processes of life” (Hoffmeyer 2008, 5)

Hoffmeyer, who goes to great length to avoid that the idea of biosemiotics is (mis)understood as a new kind of vitalism, builds his argumentation largely on the application of Peircean semiotics on biological process, predominantly on the microlevel but extending to the macrolevel by including von Uexküll’s notion of *Umwelt* – “the subjective or phenomenal world of the animal” (Hoffmeyer 2008, 171). But the major part of his argumentation takes place on the cellular levels (Hoffmeyer was a biochemist by training) where he unpacks the processes of informational transfer taking place. The cellular reaction pattern, and here is the decisive point in the application of Peircean semiotics, is not reducible to mere “automatic signaling” because of the fundamental autonomy in the cell – the cell is self-referential and hence must exercise a degree of interpretation of the surrounding environment, just as we saw in Morin’s argumentation. We find here the same ideas as with Morin about a certain subjectification and autonomy as being characteristic of all living beings. Hoffmeyer also talks in terms of strategies and the increasing liberation of the biological semiosphere with increasing complexity.

Today, biosemiotics plays virtually no role in mainstream biology. But a further investigation of the processes of signification on the level of living cells and the processes of signification in cultural contexts is definitely an opportunity for scholars of cross-disciplinary interest in the years to come. I read the arguments as being highly compatible with as well Morin’s complexity paradigm, on the relationship between the living subjects and their surroundings and the call for a non-reductionist

amalgamation of the biological and cultural anthropologies that have been discussed above. For example, Kohn's (2013) post-human anthropology also builds heavily on Peircian semiotics, so there is an immediate mutual platform there. Hoffmeyer himself, unfortunately, cannot take the torch since he passed away in 2019. But the possibilities of biosemiotic technologies, including medical technologies, and not least of a biosemiotic approach to the understanding of ecological environments may lead to a greater respect for the "suffering" of various species who are also "understanding" that their *Umwelt* is deteriorating. I use citation marks here not only to avoid accusations of anthropomorphization but also to refer back to Morin's point that it is more about de-anthropocentrification of our biological concepts as it is about romanticization of nature through anthropomorphic tricks.

Consumption – so what?

Where does this debate lead us? Well, first and foremost, given the contemporary role of reductionist biologically inspired theorization in marketing and consumer research as well as certain academic environments refusal to countenance anything biological as being of relevance for cultural phenomena, the primary purpose is not to be led astray from either reductionism. We should find it of utmost importance that "models of man" (cf. Kover 1967) used in marketing and consumer research do not reflect either of such reductionisms.

Hirschman (2008) concluded that evolutionary biology could provide productive underpinnings of contemporary consumer research into gender and beauty standards, tribalism, sharing and group welfare, persuasion, aesthetics, metaphor and symbolism. It is easy to agree with this list of consumer research topics and equally easy to expand (food, medication, mind and body performance enhancements, to name just a few). Some of these topics, however, are also among those that risk being among the more controversial, cf. the opening discussion. Any discussion should be based on solid ground, theoretically and empirically – something I cannot claim at this point.

It is, however, obvious, maybe more than obvious since forever, that we are biological becomings and that this qualification has serious consequences for our freedom to consume. I am of course referring to the current Covid-19 pandemic and its widespread consequences for a lot of consumption practices we used to take for granted. At the time of writing, much contemporary consumption is either banned altogether or subject to various alterations and limitations in order to

minimize risks of virus spreading. Much political debate goes into the benefits and risks of opening or closing various sectors of consumption and production for the general health of the population, physically, economically, and socially. And it becomes all too evident how physiological and the socio-cultural well-being are deeply intertwined, indeed inseparable. Granted there has been a great deal of interest in contemporary biopolitics and its implication for consumption, but biopolitics addresses first and foremost the level of populations, not the physiological body.

Instead, I would like to briefly share some initial thoughts about a project, initiated with my colleagues Pol Chrysochou and Ankur Kapoor, that can exemplify the application of a biosocial approach to a consumption process. This research aims at understanding the practice of eating with the hands from a biosocial perspective. The experience of eating, hardly surprisingly, is an embodied and polysensorial one. Beyond the obvious sense of taste, gastrophysiologist Ole G. Mouritsen (2016) has explored the experiential importance of the “mouth feeling” and Spence (2015) investigated the auditive significance of taste experience. The hands, according to a sensorial *homunculus* takes up a significant amount of “brain space in terms of treatment of sensory input. An anthropology of the sense does exist (Classen 1997). However, the socio-anthropological insights into the practice of eating with the hands is sparse (see Mann et al. 2011).

While as a practice, it has been confined to certain geographic regions, globally most well-known probably India and neighboring countries (see Hedge et al. 2018), and certain subcultural, oftentimes indigenous population units, but also – in contemporary globalized food cultural settings – to particular types of fast food. As for all food, such practices are deeply engrained in socio-historical sets of culinary norms and values (Fischler 1990). Ergo, it has profound consequences for the relationship between the eater’s cognitive experience, sensory experience, and the material qualities of the eaten (as theorized by Merleau-Ponty 2013 [1945]). While sensory analysis is far from alien to marketing research, the embodied significance of this relationship remains scientifically underanalyzed when it comes to the practice of eating with the hands. Consequently, we aim to open a renewed interest in a physiologically and anthropologically informed understanding of this practice. It is our belief that such an understanding can help to provide new insights also in contemporary food cultures and habits for the experience of eating in different contexts and for a better understanding of the complex relationship between food and health. The hope is thereby to contribute significant knowledge to current food policing policies, that for better and or worse permeate contemporary society.

This is but one example of how a biologically and culturally intertwined approach to human conditions may be fruitful for market and policy development. The real issue, however, is in my humble opinion much larger than indicated by this project, and I would like to conclude with some reflection pertaining to these larger issues.

Conclusion: The politics of it all

It has been suggested that research in for example natural gender differences is fundamentally problematic for the struggle for equality and respect between genders/sexes. However, a disrespect for possible biological differences may be equally threatening to the noble goal of gender equality. Both the search for a respectful gender policy and an acknowledgement of the human role in the contemporary Anthropocene biosphere rests on the dethroning of humanity as a species outside and beyond the biological. On a more situated level, an understanding of the bio-social *anthropos* is, in my view, a precondition for understanding the modes of human desires, seductions and aberrations. The complexity of life and the complexity of the human condition is the starting point for a consumer research and an approach to consumer culture, that is able to cope with the obvious challenges we are facing.

As noted by Descola (2013b), the relationship between humans and nature will be paradigmatic for the challenges of, and the questions imposing themselves in this century. A non-exhaustive list would include “climate change, the erosion of biodiversity, the multiplication of transgenic organisms, the exhaustion of fossil fuels, the pollution of fragile environments and of large urban centers, the accelerating disappearance of tropical forests, all have become an issue of public debate at the global scale and fuel the disquiet of numerous inhabitants” (Descola 2013b, 83). We might also remind ourselves that in each of these problems, there is a significant element of consumer culture behind the processes (natural *and* social in nature!) producing the strains. Add to this the global inequalities in access to consumption resources ranging from the most basic, for example access to clean water to almost anything else, and the dilemma facing consumer culture researchers and their topic of study becomes almost unbearably clear. Asking the question what is natural or what is social about these processes, says Descola (2013b) is bordering on the meaningless.

Consequently, not understanding the human condition, including its particularity both as the locus of a microbial ecosystem and a biosemiotics communication system in itself *and* as a species in a

global ecosystem perpetuates a myopic and mutilating distinction between disciplines. As noted by Palsson et al (2015) and echoing Morin's 45 years old call for considering the human condition as a triad of individual-species-society: "If our species and our societies are to continue to thrive, it is of utmost importance that we identify the ideas and practices that nurture both our species, our societies, and the planet." (op cit. p. 11). As one of the co-authors of the aforementioned article, Sverker Sörlin (2017), notes in a more recent book, we are witnessing a nostalgic reaction and longing back to a classical modern relation to nature, where the human being is free to exploit nature as "God's gift to mankind". A lot of dangers in contemporary society resides in this continued separation between the Earthly and natural and the human. As I see it, a coupling of complex cultural sociological and anthropological analysis with insights from non-reductionist biology can constitute an important element as a foundation for a post-humanist ontology, for example a neo animist ontology (thanks, Eric Arnould, for this expression) the sketch of which has been theorized by Descola (2013a) and exemplified by Kohn (2013). As noted by the latter, "if, as I claim, our distinctively human thoughts stand in continuity with the forest's thoughts insofar as both are in some way or other the products of the semiosis that is intrinsic to life then an anthropology beyond the human must find a way to account for the distinctive qualities of human thought without losing sight of its relation to these more pervasive semiotic logics" (ibid. p.50).

These more pervasive logics, as I see it, are congruent with Morin's (2006) reflection on a planetary ethics that acknowledges that Earth is not contributed through the addition of a physical planet, a biosphere and a humanity but a complex totality of physis-bios-anthropos that are consubstantially organized. Such a paradigm, I will be arguing with Morin, is a necessary condition for a sustainable planetary life for homo sapiens as well as the rest of the biosphere.

As formulated by Danish author Josefine Klougart³, we are living under a collective suppression of the fundamental fact that we are nature. Stating this "fact" represents an absolute or unrestricted view on nature as opposed to a restricted view (nature is "somewhere you can go" or "this behavior is unnatural") (Fink 2008). Such an unrestricted view on nature is also, quite obviously, what underlies Morin's call for abolishing any absolute detachment between nature and culture. It is also foundational to an ecosophic approach to our situation. Ecosophy, a term introduced by Norwegian philosopher of deep ecology Arne Næss (1990) and which was used by French philosopher Félix Guattari as a sort of intellectual epitaph (Guattari 1992), may be the best notion to captivate the

³ In Weekendavisen, August 27 2020

profundity of the paradigm shift Ingold was quoted for above (see also Arnould 2020 for a discussion within Consumer Culture Theory). It is true that the idea of ecosophy has in itself given rise to a variety of quasi-religious movements – something Guattari warned about while endorsing the idea. However, the ending of the collective suppression of the totality of our own “naturalness” and the installation of a highly needed humility concerning our own role in and impact on the earthly biosphere – and so far this is the only one we have! – can hardly find a more beautiful denominator than ecosystemic wisdom – *ecosophia*.

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