CULTIVATING DISCONCERTMENT[1]

John Law and Wen-yuan Lin

       Department of Sociology,
       Lancaster University,
       Lancaster LA1 4YN, UK
       (j.law@lancaster.ac.uk)

       Department of General Education,
       Tsing-hua University,
       Hsin-chu, Taiwan
       (wylin1@mx.nthu.edu.tw)

(23rd December 2009; Disconcertment22w.doc)

The Problem

What happens when dominant and subaltern knowledge traditions encounter one another? How do they interact? The postcolonial literatures remind us that much is at stake. The Western Enlightenment tradition may be in its death throes, but as scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Arturo Escobar have shown, it also powerfully conditions the possibilities for subaltern scholarship[2]. How is it possible to know, know well, and know differently, in contexts conditioned for so long by relations of dominance?

Since subaltern worlds are many and varied, there can be no one answer to this question. But then again, the Western legacy carries its own somewhat stable baggage. So what does this look like? Any putative list is long, and since 'the West' is not itself consistent and coherent, caution is needed. Even so, any attempt to characterize what this stands for needs minimally to simultaneously attend to <u>metaphysics</u>, to <u>institutions</u>, and to <u>subjectivities</u>.

- The dominant Western knowledge traditions carry and reproduce a <u>metaphysics</u> that seeks to distinguish the world on the one hand from knowledge of that world on the other. To say it grandly, much too quickly, and to ignore innumerable variations and exceptions, in the Western scheme of things it is generally taken for granted that there is a world out there, a cosmos, that is ordered and structured. It is also assumed that it is possible to gather knowledge about that world, to represent it, to debate the merits of different putative representations, and to arrive at provisional conclusions about its structure. In short dominant western knowledge traditions exhibit what philosophers Ames and Hall characterise as a 'second order' problematic[3].

- Second, Western knowledge traditions rest in and reproduce specific <u>institutional</u> arrangements. These take many forms, and have changed profoundly since pre-Socratic Greece (where some of these structures were first laid down). They are clearly undergoing major transformations in the contemporary world, not least because the links between the academy and academic knowledge on the one hand, and other institutions (including the 'technoscience' of private capital, the law, and politics) appear to be metamorphosing. Even so, for certain purposes the distinction between truth and power is sustained at least in rhetorical form, and this division is embedded in institutions (academic and otherwise) that reproduce and are reproduced by specific but hegemonic truth practices and their metaphysics, career structures, statuses, and systems for circulating knowledge.

- Third, the Western tradition and its institutional arrangements also imply particular <u>subjectivities</u>. Though breaches are legion, the normative expert is often taken to be rational and intellectual subject who expresses truths about the world in symbolic form. In the case of the empirical sciences, this subject is also committed to experimental, observational, or historical inquiry. Competent subjects are thus those that reliably find out about and represent the world. They reproduce and embody both the representational metaphysics and the institutional structures mentioned above. And, though this is a matter for debate and disagreement, as a part of this, in

---

[2] See Chakrabarty (2000) and Escobar (2008).
[3] Hall and Ames (1995). We return to these authors below.

the normative case, the 'personal' emotions and bodily states of such subjects are Othered to the subordinate (and often gendered or racialised) category of 'private life'. In the first instance, the assumption is that messy bodies get in the way of clean thinking.

This is obviously a caricature. More obeyed in the breach than the observance, it has also been persuasively argued that the Western legacy precisely works by artfully combining observances of its normativities with systematic breaches thereof[4]. However, whatever the subtleties, as a scheme it nonetheless retains its power. Indeed, it is surely the partial intersection between the components of this unholy trio that makes it so difficult to think alternatives well. This is because any attempt to rethink knowledge traditions needs to treat with all three simultaneously. It needs to rethink the character of the real, re-order the workings of institutions, and enact alternative knowing subjectivities all at the same time. If these are individually well-embedded, then taken together they are extraordinarily well-entrenched. Small wonder that despite the efforts of post-colonial scholars, the chronic internal crises of the Enlightenment tradition laid bare in disciplines such as STS and cultural studies, and the changing relations between the academy and its environment, overall it is pretty much business as usual in high status Western – and, as we will see, Eastern – knowledge traditions.

In what follows we join the long list of those seeking to chip away at the grip of this hegemonic trio. Our approach, which draws on chosen STS and postcolonial literatures, is empirical and specific. We work by exploring a particular exchange that occurred during a seminar series in Taiwan in the spring of 2009, but before moving to this we want to make two brief explanatory methodological points.

First, our approach is intensive rather than extensive. That is, we work on the assumption that large issues can be detected in specific practices. Leibniz famously wrote that:

> 'Every portion of matter can be thought of as a garden full of plants, or as a pond full of fish. But every branch of the plant, every part of the animal, and every drop of its vital fluids, is another such garden, or another such pond.' (Leibniz: 1998, 277)

Analogous sensibilities inform the work of many more recent writers – Walter Benjamin being a notable example. Thus, though we cannot argue the point here, this means our approach is 'baroque' in the specifically methodological sense of the term[5]. The whole can be found within. This is our assumption: if we can teach ourselves the appropriate skills then the whole world can be found in a small seminar interchange. And in particular, we take it that if we examine these in the right way then large post-colonial knowledge predicaments can be found at work within specific interactions.

Second, however, this means that also run up against the inconvenience of dealing with subjectivities. Though we've just said we need to handle metaphysics, institutions and subjectivities all together, the problem with subjectivities (as again we've noted) is that in western metaphysics important components of these are coded up as 'personal'. Outside the psy-disciplines (which turn these into an object of study in their own right), their appearance in academic writing is taken to be a diversion (or light relief) at best and a sign of self-indulgence at worst. In this way of thinking what is properly interesting is the world

---

[4] As Bruno Latour artfully observes, 'we have never been modern'. See Latour (1993).
[5] The point is monadological. For methodological discussion, Kwa (2002) and Law (2004b).

rather than those describing it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it also turns out that the intellectual tools for thinking subjectivities-and-knowledge together are poorly developed. Foregrounding subjectivities simply doesn't fit with the scheme being reproduced in the hegemonic trio. However, in what follows we need to breach this convention. In particular, we need to follow Helen Verran by suggesting that bodily <u>disconcertment</u> may be understood as an expression of metaphysical disjuncture. To put this slightly differently, we are making a methodological proposal: that discomfited and 'personal' bodily states are crucial potential <u>detectors of difference</u>. But this means that we need to talk about subjectivities, including our own. Unease, as Dipesh Chakrabarty also implies, is a place to go looking for difference[6].

In what follows we first briefly outline the circumstances of the seminars. Next we describe a particular moment of disconcertment. We then make three detours in order to provide a context for that disconcertment or – to use the terminology used above – to find the world that lies within it. The first takes us to the post 1949 story of Taiwanese economic development. In the second we describe features of Taiwanese street Daoism. And in the third we briefly touch on the history of philosophy to draw some contrasts between the Western and the Chinese traditions. Each, we contend, is <u>embedded</u> in the exchange. Each helps to <u>inform</u> the disconcertment. But, and in addition, we suggest that exploring the origins of the disconcertment in these ways is also <u>performative</u>. Our conclusion is that the <u>cultivation of disconcertment</u> is a crucial tool or sensibility that will help us to move beyond the metaphysics, the subjectivities, and less directly the institutional organisation that reproduce the hegemonic Western knowledge traditions. Alterity beckons.

Seminar Disconcertment

In 2009 John Law, was invited by Wen-yuan Lin to speak at a series of seminars and workshops for the opening of a STS centre in the cutting-edge technological National Chiao-Tung University (NCTU) in Hsinchu, Taiwan. The seminar audiences were heterogeneous. They included academic engineers interested in how 'the social' is implicated in the design and consumer purchase of technologies. Important, too, were scholars and students working in science, technology and medicine who (like the engineers) were interested in technological safety and failure[7]. The workshop audiences attracted more specialist STS audiences but these too were heterogeneous. Some attending were interested in technological innovation or other forms of modernisation, some were intellectually and politically critical, and others had specific interests in post-foundational theories of science or knowledge. In the workshops Law first made a presentation, and his talk was followed by comments from Taiwanese scholars and general discussion. The somewhat contradictory aim was to create a space for simultaneously learning about and challenging STS approaches, including those of actor-network theory and its successor projects with which Law is particularly associated.

In the last seminar of the series Law argued that the social world is non-coherent[8]. He suggested, using a case study, that the smooth narratives common in social science (1) fail to catch what is going on, (2) are misleading because they make the world look more

---

[6] For discussion of representation and discomfiture, see Law (2002).
[7] The second lecture was sponsored by the Science, Technology and Medicine centre at the National Cheng Kung University (NCKU), Tainan.
[8] The date was 30th March 2009. Law was talking to an argument developed in (2004a).

coherent than it actually is and (3) tend (though only partially) to <u>perform</u> it as coherent. As an alternative Law argued in favour of methods for describing and enacting <u>non-coherence</u>. He argued, for instance, that there were good reasons for juxtaposing different narratives in ways that resist coherence and instead enact non-coherence or 'mess'. Finally, he suggested (in an argument consistent with much postcolonial writing, though he did not make this explicit) that representing and enacting non-coherence needs to be understood as a political act. This is because marginalised but desirable realities might be strengthened and made more real if social scientists no longer assumed that (1) there is a single coherent reality and (2) this reality is destiny.[9]

An academic seminar is an institutionalised material and discursive knowledge location. It frames and bounds the actions and subjectivities legitimately available to participants. The character of that space has been endlessly debated, but is based in part on the assumption (touched on above and observed in the breach as much as in the rule) that truth can be divorced from status and power. As we have noted, truth depends on appropriately logical and coherent argument and, if the topic is empirical, it depends in addition on representational empirical adequacy. This reproduces the presupposition that what is being described appropriately describes something beyond itself. As we have noted, all of this has a long history within the truth practices of Western knowledge[10].

The audience listened attentively, but was not completely convinced by Law's position. For instance Dawei Fu asked whether there was not:

> '… an issue of preference or of choice here? Whether we want to choose several worlds … , or whether we <u>really</u> want to understand the totality of it, …'. '[S]o …there is an issue here, and it has something to do with our political position and also something to do with … political negotiation.'[11]

Hsin-Hsing Chen pressed the point by telling an empirical story. The day before the seminar, 29th March, was the last day of the major annual touring festival of the Goddess Mazu[12]. This Goddess is popular in Taiwan. She has 400 temples, she protects many people, and she has a huge following. Chen had taken his students to watch the largest religious event in Taiwan – Mazu's pilgrimage to her most important site, the Da-Jia Jenn Lann Temple in Taizung[13]. About a million other people had the same idea. As a result Mazu herself was

---

[9] On ontological politics see Mol (1999). For a book-length version of the argument about mess see Law (2004a).

[10] The Western distinction between truth and power finds its roots in Greek philosophy, but as historians Shapin and Schaffer have shown, it was institutionalised in more or less modern form in post-Restoration England. What counts as adequate argument is ancient too, as is the distinction between the represented and representation. However, like the truth/power distinction, these were similarly institutionalised in roughly their contemporary scientific form in the spaces of witnessing created in post-Restoration England. See, for instance, studies on the laboratory (Shapin: 1984), (Shapin and Lawrence: 1998), (Lynch and Woolgar: 1990), the clinic (Atkinson: 1997; Foucault: 1972), the museum (Bennett: 1995), photography (Daston and Galison: 2007), and fieldwork (Goodwin: 1996; Latour: 2000; Law and Lynch: 1990).

[11] From DVD of Workshop 3, 1:22-3.

[12] Mazu was a fisherman's daughter or, in another version, the daughter of an official. The story is that she originally protected fishermen by standing at the harbour entrance holding a light up to guide vessels back to port. But now her protective powers have spread far beyond fishermen.

[13] See http://www.dajiamazu.org.tw/.

caught up in the crush[14] and Chen and his students got nowhere near either Mazu or her temple[15]. Chen told the seminar that:

> '[T]he whole scene simply defies accurate description of any kind, because it is very fragmented'.

He talked about the performing troupes and groups – two or three hundred of them – that included martial arts, brass bands, classical Chinese bands, rock groups, and puppet theatres[16]. He used a Chinese phrase, 're nao', which translates into English as 'heat and noise':

> 'there were firecrackers, millions of them, exploding behind our ears. It was very difficult to keep a steady line of thought ... at all.'

All in all the experience was overwhelming and difficult to put into words. But what it <u>meant</u> was similarly confused. The students asked Chen about the meaning of the little umbrellas being carried by a group of women with one of the bands. Chen didn't know, and when the students asked the participants they came back with five or six quite different answers. Pressed with other unanswerable questions, Chen eventually told the students: 'It is <u>like</u> this! There <u>is</u> no explanation!'

> '[R]eligion' ('zong jiao') is a theoretical construct, but this isn't a religion. It is a ritual that 'doesn't have a name for itself. … It is just the way we live.' '[T]his [is a] massive event without a straight or coherent narrative for itself.'

Then he added:

> 'I was particularly attuned to the messiness of the whole event yesterday, and from that observation I think I [want] to argue that messy method at this moment here in Taiwan, the struggle against grand narrative in general, is not that productive.'

This is the crucial moment of encounter. Taiwan does not need mess, let alone messy description. Instead it needs some kind of descriptive coherence. Chen and Fu were reminding Law of an STS claim that he had apparently forgotten: that knowledges are situated, his own included.

What to make of this? First note that it is a reversal. This is not orientalism, a matter of 'black skin and white mask'[17]. Instead it is a set of <u>occidental</u> subjectivities and interior incoherences in the Western metaphysical and intellectual project that are being thrown into sharp relief (the subjectivities and metaphysics are nearly indistinguishable). Second, look at the moves. One, Law has said that the world, a single world, can be described. Two, this turns out to be messy. Three, this means that truths are locally situated. Four (this is the point where the rot sets in), he has implied that this is <u>generally</u> the case (for why else

---

[14] By the time they finally caught the 9.00 pm train back to Taipei, Mazu was still two kilometres from her temple. Chen adds that they knew where she was because her sedan chair was wired with GPS and her position was being reported via cell phone.

[15] They'd taken the train and arrived at noon, expecting to see the Goddess return to her home. (Mazu, like many of the other Goddesses and Gods, is carried on special occasions in a sedan chair from one temple to another.) She, the Goddess, was supposed to arrive back after her eight day procession at 3.00 pm so Chen and his students were in plenty of time.

[16] His favorite, he adds, was a puppet of the Goddess dancing to the theme song of last year's Taiwanese blockbuster movie, 'Cape No.7'.

[17] Fanon (1970). See also Said (1991).

would he be talking about this in Taiwan?) Five, this is obviously self-contradictory. And six (here is the post-colonial twist) he has been told that this doesn't work in Taiwan which doesn't have, but desperately needs, coherence. What's interesting here is not so much the contradictions, real though they are, within the Western hegemonic project (these have been widely noted by those critical of relativism, and there are routine ways of handling this). What's more important is that they were being highlighted in a different <u>place</u>. The argument was not so much: 'you are contradicting yourself'. Rather it was: 'this does not work <u>here</u>.'

Now we can introduce the term we mentioned above. This, we want to argue, is <u>a moment of disconcertment</u>. We're going to say that it was disconcerting for Law, but perhaps more interestingly, for members of his Taiwanese audience such as Wu and Chen. As we mentioned earlier, we borrow the term from Helen Verran:

> 'Aboriginal Australian peoples,' she writes, 'generally understand themselves as having a vast repertoire by which the world can be re-imagined, and in being re-imagined be re-made. In English this usually goes under the title of 'the dreaming'. I think a more helpful name for this conceptual resource is 'the ontic/epistemic imaginary' of Aboriginal knowledge systems. It is this imaginary, celebrated, venerated and providing possibilities for rich intellectual exchange amongst all participants in Aboriginal community life, which in part enables the eternal struggle to reconcile the many local knowledges which constitute Aboriginal knowledge systems. Many Aboriginal communities know how to negotiate over ontic categories; they have the epistemic resources for devising a radical form of land title acknowledging disparate ways of knowing land.'[18]

Verran is telling us that imaginaries are sets of metaphors for <u>thinking</u> and <u>enacting</u> the world. At the same time they are embodied metaphysical sensibilities for choreographing experience[19]. Of course others have experienced disconcertment. Famously, Michel Foucault laughed out loud when he collided with the alternative metaphysics implied in Borges' listed entries from a Chinese encyclopaedia – and he went on to explore the modern Western episteme. Perhaps in doing the latter he was 'writing away' his disconcertment[20]. Verran's experience was similar but her response was different: she put the enactment of metaphysics and subjectivities together[21]. Indeed, Law's argument about mess is closely linked to Verran's position (both are insisting on the metaphysical performativity of practice), but Verran makes a crucial additional argument. She says that when radically different metaphysics intersect, their disjunction is experienced as <u>bodily disconcertment</u>[22].

---

[18] Verran (1998, 242).
[19] Verran, personal communication.
[20] Foucault (1972).
[21] This is a <u>self-consciously performative</u> metaphysics. For both Verran, and the Cape York aboriginal people she is describing, the real and knowledge of the real are melded together. Epistemics and ontics cannot be prised apart. But here's her point. In the self-conscious world of aboriginal Australia this is self-evident. In Balanda (or 'white') worlds it is not, even though there are, of course, Western imaginaries. Like Australian aboriginal people Europeans and North Americans also have metaphors for thinking and enacting the world. We touched on this at the beginning of this piece. These are metaphors that treat the world as separate from practice. Reality is habitually taken to be pre-existing, unitary, solid, definite in form, and quite likely in need of discovery and description. And this is how Westerners <u>do</u> their world, in and beyond academic seminars, in a process that Verran characterises as a 'hardening of the categories'.
[22] Verran (1999).

She first encountered this in a Nigerian classroom when students and pupil-teachers needed to find practical ways of handling incongruous differences between Western and Yoruba numbering. Here disconcertment took the form of belly laughter. There isn't much belly laughter in the Taiwanese seminar, but there was certainly disconcertment. Law was disconcerted because he was being told: 'your contexted metaphysics don't work here'. And members of his audience were disconcerted because Law's talk played into chronic tensions in many Taiwanese metaphysics-subjectivities. But how to think about this? To explore this we make the first of the detours mentioned in the Introduction.

Modernization and its paradoxes

Most social scientists in Taiwan do their PhDs in the West returning with, for instance, empirical sociological skills, or with versions of critical theory such as feminism or Marxism. Some are exposed to 'post-theories': post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-modernism or 'after actor-network theory'[23]. Why do they go abroad? The quick answer is that in the paradoxical world of universalism they want to study at the centre rather than the periphery. Perhaps the collective hope is that in due course the Taiwanese academy will become intellectually competitive.

This is a specific academic version of the stories of progress and modernization that have been important in Taiwan for several centuries. Colonialism can be traced to the sixteenth century with the arrival and colonisation of parts of the island by the Portuguese and especially the Dutch. Narratives of modernisation become powerful in the 19th century with the sustained encounter between Qing dynasty China and the imperialism of the British and especially the Japanese, who colonised the island in 1895.[24] With the military defeat of the Japanese in 1945, the Chinese civil war, the withdrawal of the Kuomintang to the Taiwan in 1949, and the subsequent recognition of the Republic by the US, the narratives of modernisation intensified.

These come in various forms. One powerful variant is economic. Taiwan has made astonishing strides since 1949. GDP has grown around 8% per annum over the last three decades, and per capital income in 2009 was around $17,000[25]. This economic narrative of progress is often interwoven with stories and practices that have to do with technological innovation. For instance, it is frequently said that Taiwan is adept at the rapid and highly efficient assembly of (for instance IT) technologies designed in the US, in Japan, or in Europe. At the same time it is also argued that it lags behind because it doesn't itself design state-of-the-art, world-conquering technological products[26].

The general story, then, is one of modernization and progress. As is obvious, this grand ordering narrative is set within and helps to enact a single space substantially defined by a competitive neo-liberal global economy and an analogously competitive global intellectual system. Differences between locations are treated as expressions of position in progressive time: countries are located as leaders or laggards[27]. And, on a smaller scale, this is

---

[23] Lin who studied with Law is one of the latter.
[24] The long story of the Western colonialist encounter with China goes back to the Portuguese arrival in the early years of the sixteenth century. For an account of this, and Sino-Japanese relations, see, for instance, Schirokauer (1991).
[25] Directorate General of Budget Accounting and Statistics (2009).
[26] Executive Yuan (2005).
[27] On the significance of spatial difference as opposed to time see Massey (2005).

happening in the university system where major Taiwanese universities are trying to improve their ratings in the various international-league tables.

What, then of Taiwanese students who do their PhDs at MIT or the LSE? Or the fact that scholars from the West are invited to visit Taiwanese universities? Both phenomena are also expressions of the narratives of modernisation. Here Taiwan is enacting itself as lying somewhat behind the Western cutting edge, but as hoping to learn and catch up[28]. And all this is a powerful imaginary. Whether it is uniquely Western we might debate, but it certainly 'hardens the categories' in the way described by Verran. This is because a single world is being assumed and enacted in which relevant differences have either been Othered as blind alleyways, or been transmuted into different positions on linear scales such as per capita GDP and, as we have seen on a smaller scale, the level of development of Taiwanese academic life and Taiwanese STS.

Put this on hold, and note that 'post-theorists' such as Law are struggling to refuse important parts of these Western narratives and their metaphysics. Is the world a single reality? Post-theory says 'no'. Is the world separable from its representations? Again the answer is 'no'. Are technoscience narratives especially privileged? Once more, the answer is 'no'. Are particular locations epistemically privileged? The answer is: not in any foundational way. Is knowledge located or situated? Yes, of course it is. Are knowledges power-saturated? Yes to this too. Such is the message. But here come the paradoxes. Just as Taiwan starts to play the game of intellectual modernisation seriously it finds it's being told: 'Sorry, but we got this wrong: there is no general intellectual privilege.' The consequence is disconcertment, for as we've suggested, metaphysical difference and embodied confusion are the same thing here. And this is the initial importance of Chen's intervention. Law is disconcerted for the reason we mentioned above: he's being told that his argument doesn't work in Taiwan, and that grand narrative is needed in this location. But Chen and his colleagues are disconcerted too. This is because all the alternative histories that have been Othered in the narratives of progress are being released, and space is being granted to the unruly confusions of events such as Mazu's procession. It is also, however, and very importantly because Law's argument touches on and resonates with chronic tensions that are lived on a daily basis in Taiwan. To understand why his argument is so disconcerting we need, therefore, to learn something about Taiwanese daily life.

Shopping for Gods

Just outside the gates of NCTU there's a small but busy temple. Tu-di Gong is the God of Land. He's a kindly old man with a white beard, but his powers have grown and now he helps students to pass their exams. They come to the temple, offer him a sweet drink, light

---

[28] But this unpacks in other ways too. For instance, when PhD students return to Taiwan they find themselves back on the periphery. And because that periphery is oriented to the centre, the local academic space is also both marginal and fragmented. Quantitative sociologists are likely to work on some aspect of a globally-marginal albeit rather successful country, Taiwan. Critical theorists may get published back in the US, but there's a high probability that they won't be 'international' enough. ('International' usually means North American). 'Post-theorists' encounter the same predicament. STS is alive and kicking in Taiwan, where an East Asian-focused English-language STS journal has recently been established, the East Asian Science, Technology and Society: an International Review but it lies on the margins of 'world STS'. See Fu (2007), the editor in chief of the journal, for reflections on this.

incense, and pray to him[29]. Tu-di Gong is good at answering prayers and has become a popular unofficial NCTU icon.[30]

There's a transactional or market logic at work here. In Taiwan Gods that answer prayers become popular. Those that don't, lose their following. People shop for Gods. Here's an example. A young woman trying to get pregnant writes about this in her blog[31]. She started by unsuccessfully trying intra-uterine insemination (IUI). Then she prayed to the different Gods and Goddesses at Da-Jia Jenn Lann temple, before concentrating on the Goddess of Children, Zhu-Sheng Niang-niang. The results were ambiguous (perhaps the Gods were jealous of one another, perhaps the temple was too crowded). Her sister told her that the Yu-Ji temple in Ping-dong had a good reputation, so she went there to pray to Heaven's Boy, Ten-tong[32]. His advice wasn't clear, so she moved on to the Boy God's temple (he's called San Taizhu). At first he was confusing too, but then he told her gifts were too mean. Once she'd put this right by being more generous, she described the technicalities of IUI and IVF (she was worried he might not understand, and explained these four times). His advice was still unclear. Her family thought he might be fed up with her, but she joked that if she harassed him enough he might help her simply to get rid of her. When she next went to petition him she teased him by asking him for his marbles (he's a small boy, remember) and whether (a common Taiwanese greeting) whether he'd eaten enough. After telling her he hadn't, he changed his mind, and she moved on to the IVF clinic where she decided to have three embryos implanted because the Boy God had given her three marbles.

These transactional stories about Gods illustrate the syncretism of Taiwanese popular Taoism. The logic is empirical and pragmatic: the guiding idea is that it is worth trying anything once. If it works, then good. If it doesn't you move on. The logic is one of accretion. Anything can be absorbed. New divinities can be added (most Taiwanese temples have multiple gods.) The list of Gods is an expandable resource. You ask them for help. You debate with them. You tease them. And if they don't deliver you walk away. But here's the important point. The search for practical success apart, there is no overall ordering story. The woman whose blog we've described is utterly pragmatic. Hi tech intervention? Fine. Intercession by the Gods? Fine too. If the latter are any good they will help with the IVF anyway[33].

This is a way of choreographing the real that does without any overall ordering story. It is simultaneously a contingent set of institutional relations, an assemblage of embodied but utterly tactical subjectivities, and a metaphysics of ontic pragmatism. Where does one go to get help? The institutions are there offering (or failing to offer) help. Temples are like supermarkets. One's being in the world as a person is contingent, tactical, and pragmatic. What there is in the world is more or less variable, conditional and syncretic. Indeed, whether there is 'a world' or a single reality at all is an open question. Certainly the nature

---

[29] The drink is called shan-chao me They do this because a student once dreamed that he, the God, is too old to eat fruit but likes this jelly drink.
[30] In 2008 the graduating students arranged for a company to manufacture a Land God USB stick.
[31] http://blog.yam.com/missingwhy/article/15680333. Last visited on 7 May, 2009.
[32] One of Ten-tong's officials (she writes) 'told me that there were some problems with my body. Then she mentioned my right ovary has a problem. But I remember that the doctor told me that it was the left one has a problem. Does it mean that both have problems?!'
[33] One of the present authors describes the heterogeneous approach to therapy in a different medical context. See Lin (2005).

of the real is vague, fluid and ambiguous. Nothing coheres except pragmatically. This is why it is so easy to add Gods, or to take them away again. Or, for that matter, to combine IVF and divine intervention. And, as we've seen, this is also the source of Chen's unease. 'It is like this!' we quoted him, 'there is no explanation!' There is no story.

This is important to our argument about disconcertment because Taiwanese scholars live in a syncretic world. This is a world of folk religion, but also a world of poorly observed town planning regulations, chaotic traffic management, and proliferating street market stalls. The logics in each of these contexts are specific, make pragmatic sense for those involved, but the overall effect does not add up to an order. 'Re nao', 'heat and noise', events as they unfold are more or less un-narratable. All of which, however, sits ill with the ordering and singular stories of natural science, social science, or town planning. Or with the hegemonic Western metaphysical assumption that there is an underpinning reality whose order can be uncovered if we look for it in the right way. Or the embodied sense it is possible to live an orderly life. And this takes us back to disconcertment. It isn't just that the sceptics in Law's audience don't agree with him (though they don't). It's also that they recognise the place they live in to be an uneasy cohabitation of order and non-coherence. Every day the Taiwanese members in the seminar negotiate the tension between a lived metaphysics of syncretism on the one hand, and the promise of singularity and order held out by the grand narratives of epistemic authority, progress and modernization on the other. Law's talk interferes with this balance. He's undermining the promise of an ordered reality. This is the second refraction. The history of Taiwan and its current tensions are located within – and expressed by – the seminar and its exchanges. But there is another layer to the disconcertment, and to explore this we make our third brief detour.

The singular and the multiple

We briefly mentioned Hall and Ames in the introduction. These are philosophers who have explored the distinction between classical Chinese and European philosophy[34]. Their argument is subtle and we cannot conceivably do it justice here. Indeed, and more deeply, there is no neutral way of comparing and contrasting two such different metaphysical traditions[35]. In practice we're caught within the metaphysics of one or the other. What follows, then, is Western version of the difference. However roughly speaking their argument runs so.

In the Western tradition an originary and potentially continuing chaos is treated as a threat to be repelled by order. Reality becomes a single cosmos, with a specific and coherent form, shape and motion, whilst the stuff of reality, ordered into shape and form, is inert or indeterminate in and of itself [36]. So what is an explanation? The answer is that it is the

---

[34] Hall and Ames (1995).

[35] Any such list is fraught with difficulties. It finds an order, explains specificities by displacing them into that order, and works by finding consistency and coherence whilst eliding inconsistency and non-coherence. It is second problematic thinking applied to (a version of) itself. Hall and Ames appreciate both this and the incongruity of applying second problematic metaphysics to first problematic Chinese philosophy. The latter is predominantly practical rather than theoretical (Gernet (2002, 89-90)), and local or specific in intent.

[36] The sources of second problematic thinking in Europe can be traced to the origin myths of classical antiquity which set a series of metaphysical parameters that have been surprisingly and consistently important for subsequent Western theological, philosophical, scientific and commonsense imaginaries. Indeed it is only in the last 150 years that there has been a sustained attempt to think outside these metaphysics in philosophy – and, of course, in the 'post-theories' mentioned above.

discovery and representation of that underpinning order[37]. To explain is to move away from what is described to the description itself. It is to <u>displace</u>, a characteristic of what Hall and Ames call 'second problematic' knowledge. Some other consequences follow. For instance, history is teleological, driven by underlying causes. Again, since the cosmos has a single pattern explanatory consistency is not only possible: it's also important. Further, since explanation involves explicating underpinning principles, differences are often handled by appealing to explicit meta-level abstractions. The result is that in the Western tradition, clarity and definition are valued. They help to deepen understanding and resolve explanatory differences[38].

As Foucault discovered, the Chinese tradition is quite different. Classical Chinese philosophy imagines an 'acosmotic'[39] world with no foundational cosmogonic order. It makes few assumptions about coherence or unity, attending instead to uniqueness and specificity[40]. The world is taken to be multiple and the 'ten thousand things' of the world are taken to be mobile, transformative, specific and fluid. Change (or becoming) is privileged over rest (or being), and explanation is associative, analogical, correlative, specific, indeterminate, ambivalent, and never exhaustive.[41] Analogies and historical authorities are related together in dynamic but specific processes.[42] Explanatory images come in pairs that simultaneously include one another and are in tension[43], and it is assumed that alternative explanatory patterns arise elsewhere. Explanation is anthropomorphic with many perspectives and no claims to generality. At the same time there is little distinction between representation and what is represented. Both are part of, and express, the disposition of things[44], and it is often inappropriate to distinguish means from ends[45]. History is non-teleological, and becomes an expression of particular multiple constellations. Finally, differences are handled aesthetically rather than analytically. It is the implicit that is valued rather than the implicit.[46]

So there is the contrast. Let's underscore the health warnings. The contrast is a 'second problematic' list. It may be useful but it certainly reproduces the hegemonic metaphysics of the Western tradition. Then again, the two traditions are much more heterogeneous than this way of talking about them makes them appear. Finally, a considerable difficulty, Taiwan

---

[37] The latter, then, is loosely causal (it might be the hand of God, or the laws of physics).

[38] This is one of the reasons why Western thinking often removes itself from the fluidities of common sense. Another reason is the primacy of rest, of stability in matter, of being, over becoming.

[39] 'The Chinese tradition is "acosmotic" in the sense that it does not depend on the belief that the totality of things constitutes a single-ordered world'. Hall and Ames (1995, 11-12).

[40] Hall and Ames (1995, 184-5).

[41] 'Han thinking,' as Hall and Ames put it, 'depends upon the acceptance of "images" and "metaphors" as the primary means of expressing the becoming of things.' Hall and Ames (1995, 40).

[42] Talking of 'shi', of the potential born of disposition, a term that crops up equally in war, calligraphy, politics and the propensities of nature, François Jullien characterises the Daoist version of wisdom so: '… the very disposition of things results in a trend that never falters or deviates and can neither be "chosen" nor "taught." Things "tend" of themselves, infallibly, with no need for "effort"'. Jullien (1995, 39).

[43] Hall and Ames (1995, 260).

[44] For instance, in calligraphy 'the figure produced and the movement producing it are equivalent'. Jullien (1995, 76).

[45] The general is not a hero. 'Efficacy proceeds from an objective determination or, more precisely, a dispositional determination, and success stems from this alone too; the more discreetly it does so, the more infallible it will be.' Jullien (1995, 61).

[46] Hall and Ames (1995, 55).

is not China. It has its own distinctive historical, political, economic, and ethnic specificities. That said, it is also aligned to China in important respects. And it is this thought that leads us to the last part of our account of the seminar disconcertment, for these philosophical differences are also at work in there. First, though the differences between street Daoism (or the activities of street vendors and builders) on the one hand, and classical Chinese philosophy on the other are huge, the lived syncretism of such activities described in the last section resonates in some measure with Chinese first order acosmotic metaphysics. Second, the mirror point, the narratives of progress and explanation embedded in the realities of economic growth and modernisation (and also in organisation of PhD training and the visits of Western scholars), reflect, resonate, and reproduce realities consistent with the cosmogonic metaphysics of Western philosophy. And then, third, the chronic and embodied tension between these two realities described above was amplified by Law's critique of order and his advocacy of non-coherence. We have already quoted Dawei Fu. Is there not, he asked:

> '… an issue of preference or of choice here? Whether we want to choose several worlds … , or whether we really want to understand the totality of it, …'.

We've also cited Hsin-Hsing Chen's observation that the struggle against grand narrative is not productive in Taiwan. But Chen went on to add this potent further comment:

> 'Description of messiness is part of the story. I think that it has a lot to do with the cosmic view of the Chinese, Yin and Yang [are] always together, chaos and order, the multitude and the ruler, … [these are] always paired. So this fits with what ... Law says: that some re-enactments will simply reinforce the powers that be…. But, then, what are we going to have to say? [Do] … we simply accept how people see these kinds of things, represent these kinds of things? [Or do] … we try to [find] another level of interpretation?'

Here he's rendered explicit the philosophical tension implicit in Fu's intervention. In Hall and Ames' terms his question is this. Should we be reproducing Chinese first order aesthetic metaphysics? Or should we rather be adopting a version of the Western analytical and explanatory second order system? Of course we already know his answer. Taiwan is in need of the latter, not the former. And, as we have noted, what is lived is also metaphysical. And vice versa. Subjectivities, metaphysics and institutions are all involved. So Chen's disconcertment simply gave voice to what many were feeling. For Taiwanese academics – and engineers and managers and planners – are struggling, often against the odds, to enact a somewhat orderly cosmos. They struggle to create and reproduce a country, a modern economy, and a set of organisational forms ordered by some kind of coherent structure. They also struggle to produce representations of this reality. That is what they do in their daily lives and their places of work. It is not surprising that Law's post-foundational position was disconcerting.

Conclusion

Though we've talked of individuals – and of Law and Chen in particular – as we indicated in the introduction, our interest is analytical rather than personal or confessional. Building upon the work of Verran, our working hypothesis is that metaphysics, institutions and subjectivities are mixed together and mutually supportive of one another in the generation of knowledge spaces, hegemonic and otherwise. We've also suggested that disconcertment can be understood as an embodied response of the subject to metaphysical disruption.

Carefully understood, disconcertment can thus be treated as a bodily indicator of metaphysical difference. Then, and more specifically, we've argued that the origins of Law's disconcertment in this seminar have to do with place. He's not so much being told that his position is self-contradictory (an argument that is an abstraction that can be played with), but that it is located. Perhaps it works in the UK, but it does not work in Taiwan. Paradoxically, this undoes the lived universalism of hegemonic social science. Differently, we have suggested that Chen's disconcertment arises because Law's argument resonates with and threatens to unbalance the embodied metaphysical tension of being an academic (or a planner or an engineer) in Taiwan. In this reality the world needs to be ordered. It is important to <u>describe</u> that order. Yet this is difficult, for all around there is syncretism and incoherence. The balance is precarious and easily upset.

This leads us to a methodological suggestion. We've noted that while Western knowledge traditions may be insecure are also hegemonic. We have added the further post-colonial commonplace that though subaltern knowledge traditions vary (Ghana is not like Colombia and neither resemble Taiwan[47]), they have in common that they are in part conditioned by the ordering propensities of Western hegemony[48]. That said, however, it is also possible to tinker with the metaphysics of the latter (which are in any case less coherent than these quick suggestions make them sound). In particular, it is possible to work with the subjectivities and embodiments that resonate with and enact those metaphysics.

An outline of the argument runs so. The practices of academic institutions may be understood as <u>techniques for circumscribing disconcertment</u>. They work by seeking to discipline subjects and their responses to the world. There are endless complexities here, but as many feminists have noted, the intellectual subject in Western tradition is unmarked. It is pre-eminently cognitive, rational, discursive, and perhaps experimental or observational in particular and specific ways. It is also, and as a consequence, a subject that is substantially disembodied, devoid of sensations and emotions. The latter are Othered to the 'personal' of private life.

Now here is the tension. There is plenty of room for disagreement in this world, but its character is specific. It takes the form of debate or discussion of empirical findings. Hall and Ames point to the importance of clarification, articulation, and moves towards the meta. To put it differently, disagreement is common but bodily disconcertment is to be avoided. The result is that if the choreography of subjects and institutions is effective then we are sealed into our metaphysics. The world is orderly and the disruptions simply get Othered. The implication, simultaneously methodological and political, is that it is important to attend to and cultivate the capacity for disconcertment. But how? And where? And when? How might a hegemonic project open itself to Otherness?

If we have learned anything it is that questions such as these are not susceptible to general answers. There is no way of avoiding specificities. Even so, the stories we have told – and our experience in writing this paper – suggest a way of thinking about this. Here's the empirical presenting symptom. As time has gone on Law has become more rather than less

---

[47] For a small sample of the possibilities see Kane (2003) on Muslim Nigeria, Hountondji on African philosophy, (1996), Benedict for a Western understanding of Japan (1989), Chakrabarty (2000) on subaltern Bengali histories, Huang (1989) on Chinese history and Escobar (2008) on the <u>redes</u> of post-colonial knowledge traditions in Pacific Colombia.
[48] Rouse (1987).

disconcerted about his exchange with Chen. But why? Our answer is analytical and methodological rather than personal. It is that the exercise of writing this paper can be understood as an exercise in <u>cultivating</u> disconcertment. Such has been the consequence of exploring the three narrative diversions. To contrast the narratives of progress and modernisation with the agglomerative syncretism of street Daoism, and context these with the metaphysics of classical philosophy has been to enact difference.

This, then, is our provisional conclusion. First, even if disconcertments are mostly Othered, there are also techniques for cultivating these within the Western tradition. Second, one powerful way of doing this is to trace stories that narrate and enact differences or seemingly improbable, impossible, or unreal worlds. Third this is not simply an intellectual project but is also a corporal matter of embodied subjectivities. This implies the cultivation of what one might think of as <u>bodily empiricism</u>. And then finally and perhaps surprisingly, as a part of this it turns out be useful to return carefully and perhaps ironically to the large categories that STS scholars have done so much to undermine. Appropriate attention to 'cultural difference' may play a role in the cultivation of embodied disconcertment in quite specific material encounters.

References

Atkinson, Paul (1997), <u>The Clinical Experience: the Construction and Reconstruction of Medical Reality</u>, 2, Brookfield, USA: Ashgate.

Benedict, Ruth Fulton (1989), <u>Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture</u>: Houghton Mifflin.

Bennett, Tony (1995), <u>The Birth Of The Museum</u>, London and New York: Routledge.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2000), <u>Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference</u>, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Daston, Lorraine, and Peter Galison (2007), <u>Objectivity</u>, New York: Zone Books.

Directorate General of Budget Accounting and Statistics (2009), <u>Latest Indicators</u>, Taipei: Executive Yuan, also available at http://www.dgbas.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=14616&CtNode=3566 (accessed 22nd Deceber 2009).

Escobar, Arturo (2008), <u>Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, *Redes*</u>, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Executive Yuan, National Science Council (2005), <u>National Science and Technology Development Plan (2005 to 2008)</u>, Taipei: Executive Yuan, also available at https://nscnt07.nsc.gov.tw/tc/DOC/%E6%A0%B8%E5%AE%9A%E7%89%88_94_97E.PDF (downloaded 22 December 2009).

Fanon, Frantz (1970), <u>Black Skin, White Masks.</u>, London: Paladin.

Foucault, Michel (1972), <u>The Archaeology of Knowledge</u>, London: Tavistock.

Fu, Daiwie (2007), 'How Far Can East Asian STS Go?', <u>East Asian Science, Technology and Society: an International Journal</u>, 1, 1-14.

Gernet, Jacques (2002), <u>A History of Chinese Civilization</u>, translated by J.R.Foster and Charles Hartman, third edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goodwin, Charles (1996), 'Professional Vision', <u>American Anthropologist</u>, 96, 606-633.

Hall, David L., and Roger T. Ames (1995), <u>Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture</u>, Albany: State University of New York.

Hountondji, Paulin J. (1996), <u>African Philosophy: Myth and Reality</u>: Indiana University Press.

Huang, J-Y (1989), <u>Essays on Chinese History by the Riverbank of Hudson</u> (in Chinese), Taipei, Taiwan: China Times Press.

Jullien, François (1995), <u>The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China</u>, translated by Janet Lloyd, New York: Zone Books.

Kane, Ousmane (2003), <u>Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition</u>, Leiden, Boston and Tokyo: Brill Academic Publishers.

Kwa, Chunglin (2002), 'Romantic and Baroque Conceptions of Complex Wholes in the Sciences', pages 23-52 in John Law and Annemarie Mol (eds), <u>Complexities: Social Studies of Knowledge Practices</u>, Durham, N.Ca and London: Duke University Press.

Latour, Bruno (1993), <u>We Have Never Been Modern</u>, Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Latour, Bruno (2000), 'When Things Strike Back: a Possible Contribution of 'Science Studies' to the Social Sciences', <u>British Journal of Sociology</u>, 51, 107-123, also available at http://www.ensmp.fr/~latour/articles/article/078.html.

Law, John (2002), <u>Aircraft Stories: Decentering the Object in Technoscience</u>, Durham, N.Ca.: Duke University Press.

Law, John (2004a), <u>After Method: Mess in Social Science Research</u>, London: Routledge.

Law, John (2004b), 'And if the Global Were Small and Non-Coherent? Method, Complexity and the Baroque', <u>Society and Space</u>, 22, 13-26, also available at http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/sociology/papers/law-and-if-the-global-were-small.pdf.

Law, John, and Michael Lynch (1990), 'Lists, Field Guides, and the Descriptive Organization of Seeing: Birdwatching as an Exemplary Observational Activity', pages 267-300 in Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar (eds), <u>Representation in Scientific Practice</u>: The MIT Press.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm (1998), <u>Philosophical Texts</u>, translated by R.S.Woodhouse and RIchard Franks, Oxford and New York: Oxford.

Lin, Wen-yuan (2005), <u>Bodies in Action: Multivalent Agency in Haemodialysis Practices</u>, Thesis, Lancaster University, Lancaster.

Lynch, Michael, and Steve Woolgar (eds) (1990), <u>Representation in Scientific Practice</u>, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Massey, Doreen (2005), <u>For Space</u>, London and Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Mol, Annemarie (1999), 'Ontological Politics: a Word and Some Questions', pages 74-89 in John Law and John Hassard (eds), <u>Actor Network Theory and After</u>, Oxford and Keele: Blackwell and the Sociological Review.

Rouse, Joseph (1987), <u>Knowledge and Power: Toward a Political Philosophy of Science</u>, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Said, Edward W (1991), <u>Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient</u>, London: Penguin.

Schirokauer, Conrad (1991), <u>A Brief History of Chinese Civilization</u>, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Gap College.

Shapin, Steven (1984), 'Pump and Circumstance: Robert Boyle's Literary Technology', <u>Social Studies of Science</u>, 14, 481-520.

Shapin, Steven, and Christopher Lawrence (1998), 'Introduction: The Body of Knowledge', pages 1-19 in Christopher Lawrence and Steven Shapin (eds), <u>Science incarnate: Historical Embodiments of Natural Knowledge</u>, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, also available at STS:general.

Verran, Helen (1998), 'Re-Imagining Land Ownership in Australia', <u>Postcolonial Studies</u>, 1: (2), 237-254.

Verran, Helen (1999), 'Staying True to the Laughter in Nigerian Classrooms', pages 136-155 in <u>Actor Network and After</u>, Oxford and Keele: Blackwell and the Sociological Review.