MAIS Symposium – October 4, 2013
Research in the Interdisciplinary World

2:45pm – 4:25pm: Session Three
Knowledge systems, representation and power

Abstracts

Leslie Main Johnson
"Working Across Boundaries: Negotiating Research Focus, Triangulation, and Translating Between Knowledge Systems"

Working with Indigenous communities with a focus on traditional knowledge inherently requires working across boundaries. Working together with local collaborators to negotiate the focus and orientation of research serves to avoid imposition of external agendas on local communities and peoples. Collaborative negotiation of both research focus and process is fundamental to ethical research with First Nations or other disempowered local groups. This collaboration must extend to the framing of the research and to analysis and explication of what is learned. Creating analyses that both are true to local realities and concepts, and are also able to inform external perspectives requires negotiation. Triangulation can help to establish the accuracy of analysis and interpretation and aid in translating between knowledge systems. While validation of truth claims must be sought within the frame of reference of each knowledge system, triangulation can aid in the process of finding congruencies between local and external perspectives.

Wendell Kisner
"The Middle Voice of Autopoietic Life: A Hegelian approach to biology and ecological ethics"

By understanding biological life at an ontological level, I develop conceptual criteria drawn from Hegelian philosophy for distinguishing between living phenomena and inanimate matter. Such development shows that the ontological determinacies appropriate to life are rigorously irreducible to mechanico-chemical determinacies whose unsustainability implies a teleological structure that is more appropriately characterized as living. Whereas previous arguments have attempted to either replace or supplement the mechanistic paradigm with something claimed to be more adequate, the Hegelian approach I take shows mechanico-chemical determinacies to be underdeterminations within life determinacy, thereby requiring neither a rejection of mechanism nor the addition to it of vital forces or their successors. Living determinacy has also been characterized as a reflexive medial or "middle voiced" process above and beyond the non-reflexive medial process that is more appropriate to mechanico-chemical determinacies. This is an interpretation I embrace, but as with the previous critiques of mechanism mentioned above, it too has been merely introduced in a supplementary fashion. What I show is that pre-biological determinacies are non-reflexive medial processes and that, as with mechanico-chemical determinacies, such processes are not only unsustainable through their own inherent logic but that the same logic implies a middle-voiced process that reflexively acts upon the

process of its own emergence. In other words the Hegelian account provides a logic of implications which, rather than merely adding a purportedly better account to an inferior one, demonstrates the necessity of that account by systematically deriving it from the very determinacies that are merely rejected or supplemented by other approaches. Drawing upon Patristic thought divested of its religious connotations, I will then characterize biological life as a medial hypostasis whose habitat necessarily belongs to its own ontological structure. Such hypostasis is autopoietic, reproductive, and ultimately cognitive in certain respects. The life determinacy developed in this research in turn suggests ethical implications pertaining to the human relation to nonhuman species and ecosystems. It draws upon philosophical sources as well as contemporary biological theory and research, bringing together ontology, biology, and ethics through both logical analysis and empirical study.

Paul Kellogg
"Vorkuta and the emergence of the contemporary Russian working class"

The Siberian city of Vorkuta, on three occasions in the twentieth-century, emerged as an important centre of collective working class resistance. In the 1930s, Vorkuta was part of the "gulag" system of prison camps devoted to detaining and exterminating opponents of Stalinism. One thousand politicized workers in Vorkuta, before their execution, organized a mass hunger strike which became the stuff of whispered legend in the following decades. By the 1950s Vorkuta was the principal supplier of coal to Leningrad. In 1953, the forced labourers who were the core of the coal-mining workforce, organized a massive strike, contributing to the ending of forced labour in the Soviet Union. In 1989 and into the early 1990s, a series of strikes by the now "free" wage labourers in Vorkuta's mines, accelerated the collapse of "communism" and served as a buttress against the return of the old regime during the attempted coup in 1991. A synthetic analysis of these three moments can help crystallize our understanding of the emergence of the contemporary Russian working class.

Raphael Foshay
Mimēsis in Plato and Aristotle in light of Eric Gans' Generative Anthropology and Heidegger's Reading of Plato

In a significant body of work, spanning over 30 years, Eric Gans offers, in a theoretical model known as Generative Anthropology, an important extrapolation of Girardian cultural theory. Generative Anthropology (GA) places the act of language at the heart of hominization; that is to say, of what marks off human culture from whatever proto-human forms might have preceded it. Gans' posits an "originary scene of representation," as a model scenario in which the core elements and dynamics of culture can be viewed in their most minimal heuristic form. At the centre of Gans' theoretical model is the Girardian principle of "mimetic desire," the tenet that human beings do not have autonomous desires, but generate potential objects of desire from their social interaction, an interaction that arises in its originary impulses from imitation (*mimesis*) of the desires of those around them, and, in particular, from the desires of exemplary models of behaviour (whether these models are chosen or imposed). First, this model posits human beings as, at root, more emulative and interdependent than original and autonomous. And, second, because that emulation is imitative of desire that they come to share in common, conflict inevitably arises over the possession of desired objects. It becomes a condition of

possibility of human survival to find ways of avoiding and mediating violent and destructive conflict, a condition, argue Girard and Gans, that shapes human institutions in their evolution.

In this short paper, I will examine the following observation by Eric Gans regarding a definitive moment of the theory of *mimesis* in Western culture, the shift in ways of conceiving and understanding the role of *mimesis* in the work of Plato and Aristotle, and its historical legacy in cultural theory:

Throughout history, Plato's qualms about the subversive nature of art alternate with the cathartic claims of Aristotle. . . . The relative importance of the Platonic and Aristotelian attitudes depends upon the balance of centrality and decentralization within a given society. But the degree of subversion on the one hand or catharsis on the other cannot be fixed a priori; the controversy is undecidable because the action of deferral is itself undecidable. To defer violence now is to render possible greater violence later; the blame to be cast on one deferral or another is indeterminate. (136).

After briefly drawing out the differences in the Platonic and Aristotelian models of *mimēsis*, I will illustrate how the interpretation of Plato by Heidegger reflects his philosophical, ethical, and ultimately political predispositions in a manner that illustrates the common unease reflected throughout cultural history and cultural theory with the role of *mimēsis* in culture.