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Towards an Anthropology of Action

André-Georges Haudricourt and Technical Efficacy

Carole Ferret

Just look at them! They take themselves so seriously, they adopt a pompous attitude to camouflage their inability to make any progress; they get hung up on established ideas learned in their youth and rail against all innovation. It's the very opposite of research, isn't it! ... Taking oneself seriously! This science that you worship like others worship god, it's just a game! Except that it's an extraordinary game, a game one can no longer choose not to play, because once you've found something, you're driven to keep going. I live for this game, and I'm incapable of doing anything else. I really enjoy trying to understand. And, as you can see, I get paid to enjoy myself!
André-Georges Haudricourt, cited in Condominas (1997, 8).

ANDRÉ-GEORGES HAUDRICOURT (1911–1996) would have been a hundred years old in 2011. As a linguist, botanist, and ethnologist, he was a member of the editorial committee of *L'Homme*, between 1971 and 1986, along with Émile Benveniste, Pierre Gourou, André Leroi-Gourhan, Georges Henri Rivière, and Claude Lévi-Strauss.¹ Many French ethnologists² have been influenced by his teaching and seduced by his audacious hypotheses founded upon an abundant knowledge of languages, plants, and techniques, and upon the unprecedented bridges he built between disciplines, even though he did not acquire a following (Cresswell 1999, 199), and in spite of his having published only a small number of ethnological works.³ Apart from *L'Homme et les plantes cultivées* [*Man and Cultivated Plants*] (with Louis Hédin in 1943) and *L'Homme et la charrue à travers le monde* [*Man and the Plow across the World*] (with Mariel Jean-Brunhes Delamarre in 1955), some of his works on technology have been collected

1. For the biography of A.-G. Haudricourt, see: Haudricourt and Dibia (1987); Condominas (1997); an article by Jean-François Bert entitled “Comment devient-on ethnologue? Le cas Haudricourt [How does one become an Ethnologist? The Haudricourt Case]” (Barbe and Bert 2011: 57–68); as well as number 27 of the journal *Le Portique* recently dedicated to him: *André-Georges Haudricourt. La matière du monde* [*André-Georges Haudricourt: The Matter of the World*], 2011.

2. Cf., for example, Barrau (1973, 2000–2004, 53); Digard (1979, 94–96, 1990, 78–79, 220–221); Descola (2005, 154–157); François Sigaut in his postface to Haudricourt (2010, 217); Bensa (2010); Bahuchet (2011). Among more recent attempts to apply Haudricourt's idea in various domains, we should mention Crague (2006) on the externalization of work in companies, and Hall (2011), on irrigation and the exercise of power in the Andes.

3. The Haudricourt bibliography, compiled by Andrée Dufour (1994), nevertheless includes an impressive list of works in various domains, principally relating to linguistics, technology, and botany.

and published or republished in *La Technologie science humaine* [*Technology as Human Science*] (1987) and *Des gestes aux techniques* [*From Gestures to Techniques*] (2010). But all of the writings on his famous opposition between pastoralists and gardeners come to no more than a hundred pages (Bensa 2010, 224).⁴

As for myself, I was not lucky enough either to study under him or to collect plants with him,⁵ but like many others I was attracted by his attempt to compare the treatment of nature with the treatment of other humans. In 1992, I met Haudricourt at his house in rue d'Assas. I spent just one afternoon with him, but, having read my manuscript,⁶ he said to me that I had understood well; and I felt that I had, so to speak (and even through the word does not sit at all well with him) received his blessing. The following year, I left France to conduct fieldwork in Russia, Siberia, and Central Asia. I only learned of his death, which occurred in 1996, upon my return to France.

Along with a rereading of his work, I propose here to see how it might be possible to understand and make use of his opposition between positive direct action and negative indirect action; and how these two categories might be analyzed, dissected, refined and enriched in order to establish an anthropology of action.

An Inspired Intuition

His 1962 article, “Domestication of animals, cultivation of plants and human relations” (Haudricourt 1969 [1962]) is celebrated, and often cited, but is rarely made use of as it deserves. Above all it is seen to stand for a general and not particularly uncommon idea of a vague correspondence between the treatment of nature and the treatment of other people, or the more precise idea of a dichotomy between pastoralist and gardener peoples. The article has become established as one of the foundational pillars of ethnozoology and ethnobotany.⁷ But it is far more than that. If it is so precious, this is also, and above all, because it gives us

4. Many of his students and collaborators have emphasised the laconic and sibylline character of his writings: see the interview with Jacques Barrau in the film *Le Passe-muraille*; Luc Bouquiaux cited in Condominas (1997, 25); Condominas (1997, 19); Hagège (1989).

5. See Alain Epelboin and Annie Marx's film *A.-G. Haudricourt et ses élèves: leçon d'ethnobotanique dans les bois de Meudon* [*A.-G. Haudricourt and his students: A Lesson in Ethnobotany in the Woods of Meudon*], produced by SMM CNRS-MNHN & LACITO, 2008, 39 mn 14 s.

6. *Dressage des chevaux, éducation des enfants et organisation sociale: réflexions préalables* [*The Training of Horses, the Education of Children, and Social Organisation: Preliminary Reflections*]. Paris: EHESS, DEA thesis in social anthropology and ethnology, 1989.

7. The term “ethnobotany” itself appears for the first time in French in Haudricourt and Louis Hédin in *L'Homme et les plantes cultivées* [*Man and Cultivated Plants*] (1943, 203), the corresponding discipline having been conceived by John W. Harshberger in 1895 (Barrau 1973, 45). Valentin Pelosse recognizes in Haudricourt the merit of having “fully succeeded” in the legitimation of the ethnosciences in the institutional scientific field, while regretting his “great comparatist interpretative machine,” which he qualifies as “anthropology-fiction”; and he judges that “the fundamental intuition of the 1962 essay, [is] the taking account of the interspecific affects that lies at the origin of processes of domestication” (1995, 27), following a heavily restrictive interpretation of this text which I do not follow.

the bases for an anthropology of action, an anthropology anchored in the concrete⁸ and which seeks to understand how people act—not what they are or what they believe, but the way in which they set about doing things.

According to an inspired intuition which he expresses in various writings, in particular in a letter to Mariel Jean-Brunhes Delamarre in 1948, a text written in Hanoi in 1949,⁹ an article published in 1954 in the journal *France-Asie* with Raymond Lafaille under the pseudonym René de Hetrelon,¹⁰ the 1962 article mentioned above, and a second 1964 article on yams, which is perhaps more enlightening still, Haudricourt puts forward the hypothesis that in every society a certain type of action predominates, crossing over into various domains including both the treatment of nature and human relations. Thus, opposing the rearing of sheep in the Mediterranean region and the cultivation of the yam in New Caledonia as the archetypes of two models of action—called respectively “positive direct” and “negative indirect”—he identifies the presence of these same archetypes in the relations between governors and their subjects. For him, action is direct when there is a close and/or permanent contact between man and the domesticated being, with the latter acting upon the body of the former; it is indirect in the contrary case, that is, when humans act not upon the domesticated entity, but upon the milieu that surrounds it and influences it. Action is positive when it imposes a certain path upon the domesticated entity according to an a priori schema, and negative when it does no more than bar it from moving in certain ways, judging the result only a posteriori.

8. Noël Barbe and Jean-François Bert (2011, 6–8) evoke the notion of “concreteness [*concrétude*]” as a characteristic common to the work of Leroi-Gourhan, Haudricourt, and Parain.

9. Cf. “Recherches des bases d’une étude comparative des mentalités extrême-orientales et occidentales [Groundwork for a comparative study of far-eastern and western mentalities],” in Haudricourt (2010, 167–176). See also the summary presentation of this idea at a 1964 Moscow conference, republished in Haudricourt (1987, 299–300). In it Haudricourt opposes two “extreme types” which are, on one hand, Near-Eastern agriculture, “a model of direct, selective and active action,” and on the other, the agriculture of Oceania, “a model of indirect, negative, and collecting action.”

10. The 1954 article was republished in 1995 with a commentary by Haudricourt, and in 2008, with a commentary by Jean-François Bert. See also: Haudricourt (1978); Haudricourt and Dibie (1987, 102 *ff.*). In 1954 and 1962, the same ideas are presented (one hesitates to say developed, given the concision of the treatment), but with many nuances and in a different order. One of the phrases in the 1954 introduction (“It seems to us that differences of mentality between peoples owe more to their social history than to their climate and their race”) finds an echo in a phrase in the 1962 conclusion (“The relations of man and nature are infinitely more important than the shape of his skull or the colour of his skin for explaining his behaviour and his social history”). As Haudricourt recognises, with the same modesty that characterises the epigraph to the present article: “Yes, I rarely change my ideas, I run around in circles.” This modesty is doubtless somewhat feigned since, calling himself pre-Marxist, he continues: “My materialism begins with nature and with the concrete, whereas most materialists are Marxists, that is to say that they reason about abstract relations, which no longer have any relation to reality” (1995, 53).

IV

Direct Positive Action	Indirect Negative Action
<i>In the domain of the treatment of nature</i>	
archetype: rearing of sheep in the Mediterranean region	archetype: cultivation of yam in New Caledonia
direct / indirect	
close contact with the domesticated object	lack of contact with the object
acting very little if at all upon the milieu "preparation of the land can be minimal"	acting upon the milieu "intensively manipulated soil"
brutality destruction, tearing up or cutting, threshing of cereals by trampling	delicate treatment cautious horticulture
permanence "the shepherd is with his flock day and night"	no simultaneousness in time with the domesticated being
direct action of surgery	action at a distance of acupuncture
positive / negative	
forced path "the shepherd leads the flock"; "he chooses the route along which he directs the sheep at every moment"	only barring certain ways "if giant tubers are desired, space for them to develop must be made"; tall poles are planted at a distance from the tubers so that "the growth of the latter will not be constricted"
following an a priori model	result evaluated a posteriori
geometrical pruning of plants in the French garden	limited growth of plants in the Chinese garden
an artificial result "overdomestication"	a result that appears natural
subtractive logic of the breeder	additive logic of the collector
<i>...and in the domain of the treatment of other people</i>	
commandment of the chief "government," the master precisely plans the work of the slave	exemplarity of the sage "the prince does not choose his ministers, he attracts them"
positive merit "he has acquired merit in frontier fighting"	negative merit "he has allowed the number of soldiers to diminish"
paternalism the subject (shepherd) defends the domesticated object (sheep) against predators (wolves)	the domesticated object (buffalo) defends the subject (the child who guards them) against predators (tiger)
xenophobia endogamy of the cereal farmer who "separates the wheat from the rye grass"	xenophilia of the tuber farmer who collects clones and shows an interest in the foreigner "to be cultivated"

Table I — The two models of action as defined by André-Georges Haudricourt

Haudricourt distinguishes between two broad geographical areas (on one hand, the Far East and Oceania, and on the other, the West and the Middle East) characterized respectively by a “horticultural” and a “pastoralist” treatment of animals and people, according to which others are either to be “cultivated” or “governed.” He explains this partitioning partially through the geographical conditions being more favorable to animal husbandry in the West, giving one to think that the presence of livestock would in itself favor the emergence of direct and positive action.

Nevertheless, Haudricourt is careful to indicate that this split does not correspond to the animal or vegetable nature of the domesticated being (1962, 42). It is not the kingdom—animal or vegetable—that is important here, but the species and the demands made by its domestication. If a certain ambiguity remains on this subject in his early writings (2008 [1954], 12–13), the idea is clarified in “Nature et culture dans la civilisation de l’igname: l’origine des clones et des clans [Nature and Culture in the Yam Civilization: The Origin of Clones and Clans]” (Haudricourt 1964), where he opposes tuber plants to cereal plants, whose modes of reproduction imply different treatments from the men who cultivate them. Indeed, grain results from sexual reproduction, which yields different individuals each season, whence the cultivation of lineages offering advantages in variability and adaptability. Inversely, the cultivation of tubers yields clones, defined as “the set of tubers that come, through successive transplants, from the same individual” (Haudricourt 1964, 95). “Every year, the plant that comes from a tuber reforms alongside or a little further along from one or more other tubers, but it is always biologically the same individual” (Haudricourt 1964, 94).

Thus, so as not to put all his eggs in one basket, the cultivator of tubers must have at his disposal a whole range of clones, one more resistant to dryness, another to humidity, and so forth, so as to guard against meteorological uncertainty; whereas the cereal farmer cultivates lineages between which he hardly bothers to distinguish and which, following their sexual reproduction, have roughly the same plasticity as spontaneous vegetation when faced with meteorological anomalies.” (Haudricourt 1964, 95)

These characteristics may explain the Melanesians’ interest in the foreigner “to be cultivated” and, by contrast:

... the endogamy, the xenophobia of the cereal farmer, who every year must “separate the wheat from the rye grass”; who never looks outside of his fields to find something new to cultivate. (Haudricourt 1964, 102)

This is because cereals, which are naturally more variable due to their sexual reproduction, do not require the same kind of effort on the farmer’s part for diversification, the same “xenophilia” as that required of the horticulturalist. On one side, the additive logic of the collector; on the other, the subtractive logic of the breeder.

Many reflections will further nuance this argument.¹¹ Apart from the fact that the endogamy of cereal farmers is not confirmed (Pelosse 1995, 25), one might

11. For a critique of the opposition between agriculture and horticulture, cf. Sigaut (1982). In his contribution to the thematic issue entitled *Tubercules et pouvoir [Tubers and Power]*, François Sigaut remarks

remark that, following this reasoning, cereal plants, by adapting spontaneously to the variations of the climate, would ultimately call for less action on the part of their cultivators and thus, paradoxically, would bring about in them a passivity that would hardly sit well with the Western interventionist mentality.

In fact, indirect and negative action must not be compared to a *laissez-faire* attitude or inaction. Thus, the soil of a Chinese garden is “intensively manipulated”; simply stated, “dwarf plants are obtained not by straightforward pruning [as in French or Italian gardens] but by indirect means” (Haudricourt 1969 [1962], 165). The quantity of work, and the effectiveness and precision of the result are not necessarily any less in the case of indirect and negative action.

This distinction would then tend to be limited to the order of appearance: “Direct action, therefore, *appears* to lead to artifice while indirect action *seems* to be a return to nature” (1969 [1965], 165, emphasis added). The Chinese or English garden seems more “natural” than the French garden, but in reality this is not the case. And yet this distinction is still just as pertinent insofar as we are interested in the process of action, and not solely in the result. None of these gardens is “natural”—they are all manipulated, but manipulated differently.

A Few Clarifications

Other questions remain unanswered. If it is the species and not the kingdom that is important, then does this mean that the nature of the domesticated being dictates the way it is treated? In other words, can one raise sheep like yams and yams like sheep? Here again, Haudricourt’s response is equivocal. Certainly he often uses the verb “to demand [*exiger*]” when speaking of the constraints imposed by the care of a certain natural species. But in speaking of the cultivation of the yam “as practised by the Melanesians of New Caledonia” (1969 [1962], 164), he makes it known that the yam can be cultivated in other ways. Are these variations in the treatment of one plant or animal confined to the same pole of the dichotomy (positive direct action vs. indirect negative action), or could they cross over onto the opposite side?

One example will suffice to prove that the latter possibility should not be excluded. The study of the breeding of Yakut horses in eastern Siberia shows quite clearly that the characteristics of species do not dictate the way they are cared for.

that, “Unlike agriculture, the term horticulture is not neutral,” (Sigaut 1982, 356). According to him, the comparison cannot help but be biased: “If most tuber societies do not have a state (or rather have no well-established relations of authority), this may be for a number of reasons which have nothing to do with the cultivation of tubers,” since they often also have no metals, no animals, no transport, and so forth (Sigaut 1982, 358–359). While remaining suspicious of synchronic comparativism, Sigaut proposes a new opposition, between “botanist” societies where “foodstuffs are based upon large-sized plants, whose production and consumption makes use of relatively complex and not particularly repetitive operations; the spontaneous tendency is the improvement of vegetable matter, through individual care and intense selection, through cloning or otherwise,” and “mechanicist” societies where “the food plants are of small size, the operations more simple, but very repetitive, and consequently it is natural to turn to mechanical innovation in order to lighten the burden of work” (Sigaut 1982, 362–363).

A thousand miles from overprotected Western horses (with their heated stables, anti-fly hats, vitamin treatments, and cooked meals), Yakut horses graze freely all year round, in temperatures below -50°C , without any need for vets, with only episodic supervision, minimal and temporary additional fodder, and with no control of the reproductive cycle (Ferret 2006). These animals are nevertheless members of the same species, a species whose “demands” thus prove quite variable.

More generally, the paramount question remains: what is the nature of the link that unites the treatment of nature and the treatment of other humans? What are the strength and meaning of this link? Haudricourt is not very specific on this subject. By closely examining the terms he uses, we can see that he remains very prudent. He begins by citing the Neolithic revolution, writing that the new relations between man and nature “have something in common” with intrahuman relations, and finishes by asking whether they “have not got something in common.”¹² When he speaks of geographical determinism, it is only to question it or cite other possible explanations, if not deny it outright (1969 [1962], 165, 168, 169).

Throughout the article he seems to grant primacy to the treatment of nature over human relations, and yet he writes: “The behavior of the gardener towards animals was modelled on his behavior towards his fellow-men” (1969 [1962], 171). Thus there is not a unidirectional relation leading from the treatment of nature to the treatment of humans, but instead a reciprocal relation.¹³ The order of causalities or, at least, of influences, appears to be as follows:

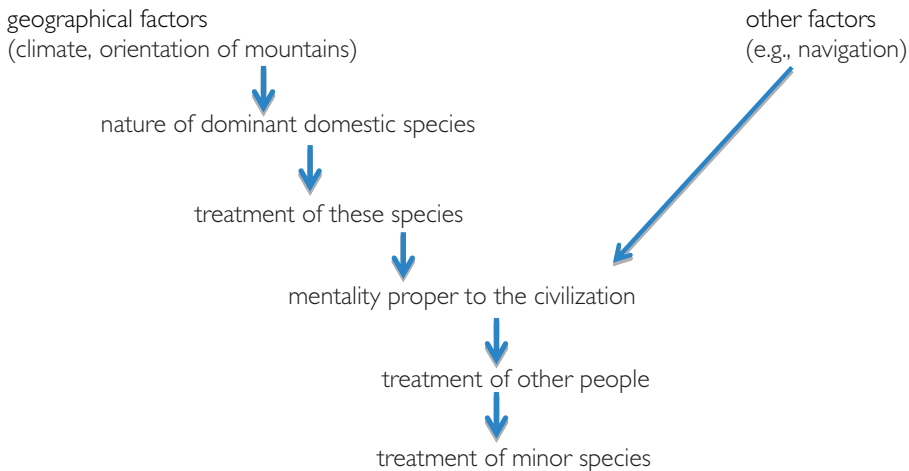


Fig. 1 Reciprocal influences of the treatment of nature and treatment of the other, according to A.-G. Haudricourt

12. The fact that, in the original French text, there is no question mark following the final phrase of this text (“Is it so absurd to ask...”) testifies nonetheless to the rhetorical nature of this question.

13. “In both directions, of course!” said Haudricourt (Lemonnier 2011, 93). For a comparative state of play, at a distance of thirty years, on the question of relations between technics and the social, see Digard (1979), the introduction to Lemonnier (1980), and Lemonnier (2011).

Rather than a linear concatenation, we would therefore instead have a cycle:

VIII

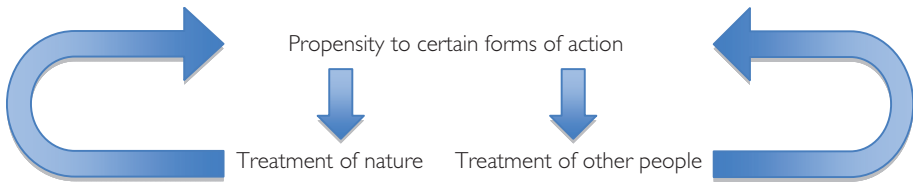


Fig. 2 Forms of action, treatment of nature and treatment of other people

These schemas, intended only as clarifications, aim to summarize Haudricourt's article without claiming to be exhaustive, nor to elucidate the nature of the correlations upon which Haudricourt remains allusive. One can well understand the reasons for his prudence: social reality is too complex to be accounted for by a determinism of culture by nature, whether it stems from a vulgarization of Marxism or from cultural ecology.¹⁴

As Augustin Berque writes, in relation to the Japanese and their vegetable milieu, "even if nature seems determining in the last resort, the causal agent is the relation established by techniques between man and vegetation, and not the vegetation itself" (1986, 121).

A Question of Action

While he is cautious on this previous question, Haudricourt is nonetheless bold in his comparisons and in the bipolarization of the world that he deduces from them. And in dividing up the world in this way, in directly opposing the gardener mentality and the pastoralist mentality, he naturally lays himself open to critique.¹⁵ But Haudricourt is no fool, and himself evokes many counter-examples to nuance the apparently simplistic nature of his binary construction. In no particular order, these include the Flamands, who fertilize their fields with human manure (1995, 33); the philosophy of Leibniz, "which is amazingly reminiscent of Chinese ideas on the harmony that reigns between society and the universe"—as is the Hegelian dialectic of the triad *yangyin/tao* (2008 [1954], 29, see 2010, 175); Japanese sailors (2008 [1954], 18–19, 1969 [1962], 170); the ancient Chinese sheep farmers before the Zhou (2008 [1954], 16, 1969 [1962], 166, 1995, 35);¹⁶ and even India, which he has switched from one side to the other (2008 [1954], 20–21, 1969 [1962], 168).

14. On this essential and recurrent debate in anthropology, see the recent synthesis proposed by Philippe Descola (2011).

15. Cf., for example, Sigaut (1982, 356); Pelosse (1995, 23–25); Haudricourt (2008 [1954], 41, 69).

16. Whence the presence of the radical denoting the ram in a set of Chinese words expressing the moral good and generosity (Gernet 1952).

His position may nevertheless be justified by didactic concerns. His approach is sufficiently innovative and original to deserve to be provided with striking examples. Divided, like all authors, between reductive simplicity and obscure complexity, he obviously elects to fall on the side of the former. But if he had not used such models, if he had handled comparativism with all possible precaution,¹⁷ his article may perhaps have passed unnoticed.

Indeed, we must understand that the models he describes, the models of the yam and the sheep, are extreme types, as he himself states (1969 [1962], 164), and that they must be considered as such. It is quite obvious that the complexity of observable practices cannot be reduced to the dichotomy yam-sheep. But this does not at all invalidate his hypothesis that there is a correspondence between the treatment of nature and the treatment of other people, founded upon a predominance of certain types of actions. And it does not imply that we must stop there. To follow Haudricourt does not condemn us to deciding between yams and sheep, between tubers and cereals, between gardeners and pastoralists, or between East and West.

Much rather than explanations or interpretations, his propositions must be taken as “incitements to verify the facts by exposing them to the contradiction of other more or less analogous facts” (Guille-Escuret 1989, 153), as a foundational *élan* rather than an endpoint; in short, as a salutary provocation. In any case, we should emphasize that the opposition between direct positive action and indirect negative action is not as simple as it may at first appear. Haudricourt’s hypothesis cannot be reduced to the common idea that man adopts a behavior toward animals, either friendly or aggressive, which is analogous to that which he adopts toward his fellows.

Registering their disagreement with the caricature figures of the predator-hunter and the protector-stockbreeder (Mumford 2010 [1934]), numerous studies have shown that hunting is not intrinsically synonymous with a hostile treatment of nature. In Siberia (Lot-Falck 1953) and the Amazon (Descola 1994 [1986]), hunters maintain cordial relations with their prey, which, managed by its “masters,” is understood to offer itself up to them. In testifying to “rituals for the removal of guilt, apologies presented to the animal, denials of murder, the idea of a contract, a concern to get back in favor with the animal, the notion of alliance and the legitimate vengeance of the species” (Testart 1987, 185). Tim Ingold even interprets the transition from hunting to rearing as a passage from trust to domination in the history of the relations between men and animals (2000, 61–76).

According to the first schema presented above, the mediating factor between the treatment of nature and human relations is the existence of a mentality proper to the society under consideration. The two modes of treatment correspond because

17. On the possibility and the conditions of comparativism, see the issue of *Annales*, 2002, 57, no. 1, published following the debate launched by Marcel Detienne in his book *Comparing the Incomparable* (2008 [2000]).

the execution of technical acts and social acts brings into play and involves one and the same “mentality.” The work of certain psychosociologists, in the matter of sheep farming, for example (Salmona and de Vries 1974), has shown that, as one can readily imagine, the repeated practice of certain activities ends up engendering specific mental attitudes in relation to these activities.

But what exactly is covered by this notion of “mentality” inherited from Lévy-Bruhl? It is not altogether clear. Haudricourt does not really decide between the two camps of the *Annales* school of historians, one oriented toward psychology, as defended by Lucien Febvre with the notion of “mental equipment,” and the other directed toward sociology, as incarnated by Marc Bloch (Burguière 1983; Hulak 2007–2008). The fact that the term “mentality” is rarely used now and sounds outdated does not speak in its favor, but this is not what is important. To conserve the notion of mentality does not imply that one accepts its “prelogic.” Without necessarily accepting the arguments of Geoffrey Lloyd, who proposes to “demystify mentalities” (1990), the theoretically indeterminate nature of the notion of mentality, which seeks to be at once descriptive and explicative, invites suspicion. Is it possible to envisage the link between the treatment of nature and that of humans in some other way, without attributing the role of first cause to an equivocal “mentality”?

Questioning the nature of anthropological knowledge, Jean Bazin distinguishes within it a theoretics and a pragmatics:¹⁸ “In one case, it is a matter of knowing what human beings are; in the other, of learning how they act” (2000, 35). Starting from a fact such as: A has with impunity taken a cow from his maternal uncle B, I the anthropologist can deduce the existence of avunculate among the Ns (theoretical knowledge). But I have also learned something: Among the Ns, when one needs a cow, one can go and take it from one’s maternal uncle; this is a way in which things are done (pragmatic knowledge). I know a little more “not so much about human beings and their mores, but about the manner in which people *actually* act.” In the first case, I identify characteristic social behaviors. In the second case, I elucidate actions unfamiliar to me. And in order to do so, I must describe them and make them explicit.

From this perspective, rather than seeking to describe *mentalities*, might one instead seek to consider the detail of *actions*? For it is indeed a question of action here, not of *behavior*, the characteristic of the former being that it is inseparable from intentionality, and thus participates in a rehabilitation of the actor *qua* subject. This is a promising path, even if it is difficult to know whether Haudricourt himself would have deliberately chosen it. His discourse nevertheless evidences a movement in this direction: in 1954, he speaks only of *mentality*, but in 1962 of *action* above all. In the later text some confusion still remains, however. Although in the treatment of nature he does indeed consider practices (that is, actions upon natural objects: ways of cultivating tubers or moving flocks), when he approaches

18. This distinction between theoretical and pragmatic knowledge is inspired by Kant (cf. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, 1797).

human relations he no longer envisages practices properly speaking, but rather representations of beings (analogies between men and plants, for example) or discourses on practices (the precepts of human government). As his commentators have remarked, we can distinguish three separate levels here:

That the cultivation of the yam on one hand and the rearing of sheep on the other induce certain individual behaviors is one thing. Whether or not these behaviors are used metaphorically in the elaboration of ideologies that justify this or that social organization (the good gardener, the good pastoralist), is entirely another. And finally, whether these ideologies have anything to do with the real functioning of the systems they are intended to justify is something else again—something which, it seems to me, is highly arguable. (Sigaut 1982, 359)

Finally, the argument constructed to link the slave MP [mode of production], nautical technics, and pastoralist activities seems uncertain. The objection would be that a confusion is made here between *technology* (in the sense of the history of techniques) and modes of representation of the social in this or that author of Antiquity (Plato, among others). (Pelosse 1995, 23)

It is necessary to make a distinction that Haudricourt did not judge necessary in 1954, between, on one hand, the representation of social relations and, on the other hand, social relations themselves (Bert in Haudricourt 2008 [1954], 68).

The three levels remained intertwined in 1962, but we might allow ourselves to imagine a later version of the text where the distinction would have been clearer.

In order to follow Haudricourt's intuition and take up its orientation while correcting this ambiguity, it would be judicious to remain, at least in a first stage, with the analysis of concrete actions, whether on natural objects or on human beings. Thus I propose to implement an anthropology of action while circumscribing its program within the following constraints:

- to confine ourselves to the analysis of concrete and situated actions, and not to seek analogies in the common sense of the term (indigeneous comparisons between men and plants or men and animals), but only analogies in the Aristotelian sense, namely relations of relations (correspondences between ways of acting vis-à-vis natural objects and vis-à-vis other people) (Ferret 2010);
- to analyze forms of actions, rather than their contents, so as to avoid value judgments and so as to facilitate the application of the same framework of understanding to various domains of human activities;
- to limit the field of comparison, to avoid broad generalizations that caricaturedly oppose East and West;
- to refine the typology of action so as to better account for the complexity of reality.

I have tried to follow this program in my research on horsemen societies of Inner Asia, a civilization that is both pastoralist and oriental—two features which, if we were to follow a simplistic interpretation of Haudricourt's thought, would be incompatible.

Refinement of the Typology

XII

Consulting table 1 on the two models of action defined by Haudricourt shows us that various criteria are mixed together in his typology of actions. First, this distinction does not define two types of action—as it seems to claim—but in fact four: (1) direct and positive actions; (2) indirect and positive; (3) direct and negative; (4) indirect and negative. The association between the direct and positive characters on the one hand, and indirect and negative on the other, is coherent, but not necessary. For it is more difficult to understand as positive an indirect action that acts on the milieu, instead of one that acts directly upon the domesticated being. But the possibility of an indirect positive action must not be excluded, as is shown by the example of “ponying,” a procedure in which one teaches given movements to the horse (positive character), through the use of another horse placed alongside it (indirect character) as a guide which it tends naturally to imitate.

When one tries to apply this framework to a particular case of technical action, one perceives fairly rapidly the insufficiency of the direct-positive vs. indirect-negative dichotomy. For my part, I left for Siberia and Central Asia with the intention of finding out whether, in their techniques of horse rearing, the Yakuts (Sakha) and other Turkic peoples utilized direct, indirect, positive, or negative actions. I spent some years in the field, observing and talking to the herders. And when I came to analyze all of the actions carried out with the animals, I was led to revise this typology.

Action exerted upon a living being, in this case a horse, is not expressed solely in terms of “doing” something to them but also, very often, in terms of “making them do” something, since the patient is also an agent. The human subject exerts an action upon an animal object, which executes a human objective. In terms of semiotics, *manipulation*, the action of humans on other humans, is distinct from *operation*, the action on humans on things (Greimas and Courtés 1982 [1979]).

More precisely, the distinction between operation and manipulation does not correspond exactly to the nature of the object (human or not, living or not), but rather to a possible delegation from subject toward object, whereby the latter realizes the objective of the former in its place; whence a dissociation of action and objective and, consequently, a certain indirectness of action. Manipulation is conceived as “making to do...” while operation is a “doing” or a “making to be.” Livestock breeding actions are sometimes operations (like branding), and sometimes manipulations (like leading a saddle horse).

Next, the limit case of the Yakut horse, a “livestock” that is supposed to fend for itself in regard to its food, protection, and reproduction [Image 1], shows that there are extensive modes of rearing that are singularly noninterventionist, and that one can even act by doing nothing:

Today as in the past, the Yakuts’ care for the herds of horses that are not used for work goes no further than ensuring that they stay together. (Seroševskij 1993 [1896], 164)

The herds are left to move freely, and know perfectly well when it is the right moment to move onto new pastures. Any intervention runs the risk of agitation and unnecessary movement, jeopardizing the fattening of the animals. When the Yakut breeders abstain from feeding or caring for these horses, believing that this allows them to eliminate the weakest animals, they bring natural selection into play. Even during breaking in, it is when tethered up, with nothing particular demanded of it, that the horse learns the most. Tethering is a preventive action, an impedimentary action, which prohibits the horse from moving away, from eating and drinking, an inaction that allows man to take control of the animal. In Inner Asia, tethering represents the key to taming and training (Ferret 2004) [Image 3].

Thus we can identify three types of action, defined as a function of the degree of activity involved, going from *passive* action where the subject abstains from acting, leaving things to run their course, to *interventionist* action, which deliberately interferes in the course of things.

The action of *laissez-faire*, which I call passive, where the subject properly speaking does nothing, is for me a type of acting unto itself. It corresponds to an action of the type “let the dough rise,” which Vincent Descombes calls negative in his analysis of the instructions of a recipe:

What makes the lack of physical interaction between the dough and the cook an intentional action is its place in the general structure of the recipe (Descombes 1995, 166)

Letting the dough rise is an action, insofar as it is situated between kneading and baking. Situated between capture and harnessing, the tethering of the horse is an action of the same type. The trainers leave the animal attached to a fence or to a pole for many hours, saying, “He pulls, he pulls, but in the end he’ll get used to it.” “When a horse is tethered for the first time, he stirs up, he rears up. Then you attach him lower, close to the ground, so that his neck hurts. When he’s hurting, he’ll stop moving” (horseherd from the Ust-Aldansky district, 1994). What is more, after a few days tethered to the fence, a starving horse will put up less resistance. Subsequently, each step of breaking the horse is punctuated by a certain tethered period during which the horse cools down and “digests” the preceding step.

This resting time, when the subject remains passive, is not a pure and simple stagnation, since the object is transformed (the dough rises, the horse is habituated). This transformation can be provoked by the object itself or by an exogenous factor such as time or erosion. An action can therefore be *endogenous* (when the subject acts alone), *exogenous* (when it is aided by an external factor), or *participative* (when the object itself participates actively in the action). Animals change pastures when they feel that the weather is getting cold, that the wind is getting up, or when they are suffering from mosquito bites—without their “guardian” needing to give them any signal to move on.

Nevertheless, some years previously, when the yearlings were two years old, the breeders did indeed intervene in the formation of the herd: they selected

the stallion, chose the mares to be given to him, drove them all into an enclosure so that they could get used to one another; they then let the herd out into certain pastures, apart from the other horses, sometimes introducing a few experienced mares so that they could lead the way for the young. At the beginning, they would have moved the herd as the weather demanded. And then, progressively, it was enough for them to indicate the direction to take, for the horses had assimilated the itinerary and would follow it of their own accord for years to come, always remaining together once the cohesion of the herd had been established.

To control the mobility of the horses, the Yakut breeders carry out *direct* actions upon a minority of animals (working horses, weaned foals and yearlings), actions whose primary objective is to limit their movements—such as tethering, enclosing, or fettering. But above all, on most of the herd they carry out *indirect* actions—which only attain their objective accidentally, via a circuitous route—such as additional fodder, which incites the animals to stay close to the feeding place [Image 2]. These actions are *positive* when they fix the animals in a given place (tethering, enclosing, foddering), *negative* when they prevent flight (fettering) or penetration into a forbidden place: many fences form what I have called “enclosures,” which keep meadows and hay safe from being eaten by the horses.

Rather than leading to the envisaged objective, as positive action does, negative action simply prevents the realization of an alternative objective. A scientific method can also be negative, as is shown by the reconstruction of the *Mien* language by Haudricourt:

In going through twenty-three questionnaires from the École française d’Extrême-Orient filled in by Vietnamese and French on *Miao-Yao* languages, some of the world’s most complex and phoneme-rich languages (especially in consonants and tones). . . [without having] ever learnt to pronounce a single word of these languages. . . Haudricourt explains to us that all of this was easy. The twenty-three questionnaires had been filled in by people (especially the French) who spoke languages very far removed from the *Miao-Yao* family, so they all committed errors, but these errors, not being the same in each case, offset each other; it was “enough” to find out in what way. QED. . . Thus it was necessary to seek out the errors that took place because of their phonological system—Vietnamese or French—and compare them; not to build, as is usually the case, on positive data, but, via recourse to mirror effects, on negative data. (Condominas 1997, 21–22)

To these two poles, positive and negative, I have added a third, called *contrary*, whose definition deserves some explanation. Contrary action must lead to a result that is opposite to that pursued. However, it is not a failed action, nor an irrational one; it may be due to the competition between two contradictory objectives. For example, the Yakuts slaughter the fattest horses for food because they like to eat fatty meat (Ferret 2009, 88–89) but, in doing so, they eliminate them from the reproductive circuit and thus favor the reproduction of leaner animals, going against their breeding objectives. This is a first type of contrary yet rational action, which is easy to understand, and which can be observed everywhere.

When humans act, they constantly try to find optimal compromises between multiple irreconcilable objectives.¹⁹

Contrary action can also be a psychological manipulation that consists in exploiting the object-actor's spirit of contradiction, or in making use of what Jack Brehm calls its "reactance."²⁰ Educators are fluent practitioners of such manipulation, knowing very well that, in order to achieve a certain result, it is sometimes a good idea to ask for the contrary. Certain contrary actions attain their end through reiteration. This is the case with the horseman who incessantly turns right and left in order to teach his horse to walk in a straight line or, more generally, who excites the animal in order to tame it—and thus, in the end, to make it more calm [Image 4].

The polarity of an action should not be taken as a value judgment as to its consequences. An action's being qualified as positive or negative does not imply that it damages the object upon which it is carried out (deleterious action), nor that it improves it by allowing it to maintain itself (care-taking action) or modifying it (transformative action), nor even that it is indifferent for it (neutral action).

The castration of work horses, for example, is an action of deleterious, direct, and positive transformation, which from the outset attains its two objectives: to prohibit the reproduction of animals that have not been selected, and to avoid the problems associated with genetic instinct. It inscribes into the flesh of domestic animals the sexual division of their functions: the function of reproduction for sexuated, male or female individuals; the function of work for neutered, castrated individuals. It is an internal action, since the body of the animal is mutilated.

To the direct/indirect couplet, indicating whether an action leads straight to an objective, or only to an intermediary factor favoring that outcome, we must therefore add the internal/external couplet, which specifies whether this action is exerted upon the object itself or upon an element of its enviroing milieu. This opposition is illustrated by the example presented by Haudricourt of the French garden, with its "continually pruned" plants, and the Chinese garden with its "intensively manipulated" soil. The Melanesian cultivation of yams also consists in external actions (Haudricourt 1969 [1962], 165, 164). Like direct action in relation to indirect action, internal action is not necessarily more effective than external action. Pulling on stems to "help the corn to grow long" yields catastrophic results.²¹

19. On the contradiction of objectives interpreted as a "weakness of will" and its different modalities, see Elster (2007). The case cited here can thus be explained by the primacy of immediate benefit (the eating of fatty meat) over future benefits (obtaining plump foals).

20. Reactance is a tendency to resist any attempts at persuasion. In other words, an individual who feels his freedom of choice restricted will want his choice to bear out the threatened options. For a summary presentation of Brehm's theory, as set out in his book *A Theory of Psychological Reactance* (New York: Academic Press, 1966), see Brehm (1989).

21. Cf. Haudricourt (1969 [1962], 167), citing the works of Mencius (around 370–290 BC) (English translation: *Mencius*, with introduction by D. C. Lau [London: Penguin Classics, 2004]).



1

Largely noninterventionist rearing:
Winter grazing of free Yakut herds.
Yakutia, Verkhoyansk district, March 2011.
(Image: Carole Ferret).

2 **Indirect Action:**
Foddering of the young so as to control their mobility and avoid their dispersion.
Yakutia, Ust-Aldansky district, March 2011.
(Image: Carole Ferret).



3

Passive Action:
Long hours spent tethered up, as the beginning of the breaking process.
Yakutia, Verkhoyansk district, March 2011
(Image: Carole Ferret).





4

Contrary Action:

Exciting the horse so as to calm it during the first attempts at riding. Yakutia, Ust-Aldansky district, March 1994
(Image: Carole Ferret).

5

Discontinuous Action:

The breaking of Yakut horses, not really tamed, but trained rapidly. Here the fences serve at the same time for tethering, as a ladder for the men, and for protection. Yakutia, Ust-Aldansky district, March 1994
(Image: Carole Ferret).



Actions That Do not Seem Like Actions, in a World Turned Upside-Down

Not every action forces the course of things. François Jullien takes Jean-François Billeter to task for envisaging Chinese thought according to the model of action, following a representation that belongs to the West, heir of the Greek tradition:

No, the Sky does not “act” and man raises himself to wisdom insofar as he defends himself from all activism (*wuwei*). The Sky “transforms” (*hua*), exerting an “influence” (*gan*), and it is in this way that it continually “brings things forth” (*cheng*). In the same way, the Sage, by renouncing any intervention by an action which, as such, is always individual, discontinuous and forces the course of things, influences others, the closest and the most distant, like the “wind.” (Jullien 1990, 144–145)

Would it not be legitimate to retain a less restrictive conception of action, in considering that, as we have seen, there can be indirect (oblique) actions, external actions (exerted on the milieu), exogenous actions (with the intervention of a third party), participative actions (where it is the object that realizes the objective) and even passive actions (where the “actor” waits while things take their course)? Even in Greece, *métis*, “cunning intelligence,” allows us to see the efficacy of indirect and opportunistic, sometimes contrary, action (Detienne and Vernant 1991 [1974]).

One can act without having a clear and univocal representation of the aim, and without following any pre-established or systematic method. The opposition between Western efficacy and Oriental strategy described by François Jullien (2004 [1996], 20 *ff*) is also found in the distinction that can be made between, on the one hand, immutable actions, effectuated in virtue of more or less rigid principles, applied systematically to all the objects in a certain category, and composed of a rigorously ordered succession of regularly followed steps (actions I would call a priori), and, on the other hand, opportunistic (or a posteriori) actions, fluctuating according to circumstances²² and which grasp the “potential of the situation” (Jullien 2004 [1996], 23).

Although he does not cite him, François Jullien agrees with and develops Haudricourt’s suggestions. It is indeed a question of the efficacy of indirect action when the former remarks, on the meaning of Chinese texts:

Far from being free, does not the finesse of the roundabout way exert a certain power—all the more coercive in its being discreet? (Jullien 2000 [1995]; see also 2004 [1996], 58, 91 *ff*)

More than mere inaction, does not *wu-wei* correspond to the action that I have called passive?

22. Haudricourt explains that in the West, “[t]he individual does not behave according to a concrete a posteriori morality, determined by external circumstances, but according to an abstract a priori morality determined by categorical imperatives” (2008 [1954], 25). I would add that the expressions a priori and a posteriori must be understood here in their current sense. The methodical character of a priori action may be drawn from experience, and has nothing in common with the Kantian a priori, which is independent of all experience.

Wei meant the application of force, of will-power, the determination that things, animals or even other men, should do what they were ordered to do; but *wu-wei* was the opposite of this, leaving things alone, letting Nature take her course, profiting by going with the grain of things instead of going against it, and *knowing how not to interfere*. (Needham 1969, 210)

Taken as a whole, the formula [*we wei er wu bu wei*: “do nothing and let nothing be left undone,” Lao-Tzu, §37, 48] means not just that non-action does not exclude effectiveness, but even that it is by refraining from action (knowing not to act) that we can best bring about what we desire.” (Jullien 2004 [1996], 86, and 2005, 53–54)

Why continue to render *wou-wei* [*wuwei*] as “nonaction,” an acceptable translation from the literal point of view, but false from the point of view of meaning since the verb *wei* means “to act voluntarily,” and so therefore *wou-wei* is not inaction, as all of the *Huainanzi* shows, but an action that does not force things. (Billeter 2006, 108)

When Haudricourt evokes Western dualism, in terms of “differences between plan and execution, theory and practice” (2008 [1954], 18), as opposed to monism and the “mentality of waiting, fiercely concrete” (2008 [1954], 14), which would explain the absence of technicians in China (2008 [1954], 24), he is close to Needham, taking care to explain “why the Asian ‘bureaucratic feudalism’ at first favored the growth of natural knowledge and its application to technology for human benefit, while later on it inhibited the rise of modern capitalism and of modern science, in contrast with the other form of feudalism in Europe which favored it” (Needham 1969, 197; see also Haudricourt 1969 [1962], 171–172).

He also agrees with Jacques Gernet, for whom “the dualism we find at different levels in western civilizations. .. can be placed in relation with direct modes of action upon nature and upon man” (1955, 1099). Now, the Chinese conceptions go “against the grain” here:

The model emperors are those who did nothing and there are no worse governors than those who want to reform society and nature (Gernet 1955, 1097–1098). A well-administered region is one that governs itself alone. (Gernet 1955, 1101)

The Christian God is an interventionist God. .. The Sky of the Chinese, on the contrary, acts indirectly: its action is silent, unnoticed, continuous. .. The most perfect Chinese sovereigns, promoted to the status of Saints, knew how to imitate the Sky in its invisible and efficacious action. (Gernet 1985 [1982])

Although he judges Haudricourt’s idea “very seductive and very likely,” (Gernet 1982, 206) and although he recalls “the possible influence of pastoralist or agricultural traditions on conceptions of human action,” Gernet links these representations of the world and of action to the specificities of the Chinese language:

It may be that civilizations whose languages mark out clearly, in their morphology, the subject and the object of the verb, and possess active and passive voices have been more likely to develop the opposition between agent and subject of action, to form a more precise idea of the personality and the powers of divine forces, to distinguish spirit from brute matter. (Gernet 1985[1982])

But Haudricourt also anticipates François Jullien, who unveils, in European thought, a “fold” (*pli*) separating theory from practice (2004[1996], 3) and an efficacy of action founded upon a means-end relation (2004[1996], 32 ff; 45, 61 ff), as opposed to a Chinese thought that presents the real as a “regulated and continuous process” (2004[1996], 15), where “the sage *waits*” (2004[1996], 71) to “exploit the circumstances” (2004[1996], 22), by relying on the propensity of things (chapter II), obtaining “great effects” with “very little effort” (2004[1996], 19).

We could add many more parallels. And what is more, many of the critiques addressed to Jullien go equally well for Haudricourt: the idealization of the Chinese model, the exaggeration of the cultural irreducibility separating the two worlds²³ (Billeter 2006, 41, 57, 63, 76 ff; see also Robinet 1994, 464–466). Haudricourt is not the writer that François Jullien is, but what makes him so valuable is his proximity to the concrete. He does not analyze the writings of the scholars so much as scrutinize how things are done in everyday life.²⁴

A Pastoralist Far Removed from the Good Shepherd

Other formal characteristics of actions which are essential in order to analyze them are revealed when tested against the facts. Thus, in analyzing the breaking in of saddle horses, rather than using the common opposition between soft and brutal methods, which stems from a value judgment, we can use the more pertinent point of distinction between the continuous or discontinuous nature of the action.

Describing the equestrian systems present in diverse latitudes, Harold Barclay speaks of “green breaking,” practiced by some American cowboys but also by certain Indians and among the Arabs, where foals are tamed and manipulated from a very young age, progressively habituated to being led, and then mounted, without any paroxysmal moment of breaking (1980, 215, 218, 251). Spread out over a long period of time and formed of many barely perceptible steps, green breaking is characterized by its continuity.

Inversely, the Yakuts capture young adult horses that have always freely pastured, and are not at all used to humans, and they break them in within a few days, in the most discontinuous way possible [Image 5]. Suddenly deprived of their freedom, tethered to a fence, contained by a set of enclosures and ropes, they are bridled and harnessed, and then suddenly set free on bare snow-covered terrain. In this way, the young horse is rapidly transformed into a working horse, ready to pull a sledge or carry a rider (Ferret 2006, 407–589).

23. “For me, the Far East appeared as the world turned upside-down,” Haudricourt tells Pascal Dibie (Haudricourt and Dibie 1987, 94).

24. Cf. in particular, his collection of texts on technology (Haudricourt 1987) and the recent publication of his *Essai sur les techniques dans les sociétés pré-machinistes* [Essay on technics in pre-machine societies], which was not completed in his lifetime (Haudricourt 2010).

Now, the split between suddenness and progressiveness escapes the misleading dichotomy of the soft and the brutal: the Arabs use a severe bit, whereas the Yakuts use very few coercive tools (no whip, no spurs; the bridle is a simple snaffle bit without noseband); they compensate for this lack through recourse to restraints and through the exploitation of exogenous elements such as the snow, which slows down overexcited mounts, impedes their leaping, and softens falls.

Thus we can distinguish continuous from discontinuous actions, according to whether they are exerted in a constant, repeated, regular manner—their efficacy being founded precisely upon their repetition—or whether it is a matter of unique, episodic, irregular, definitive, and sometimes irreversible actions.

The classic figure of the shepherd as described by Haudricourt depicts him occupied with continuous actions of care, of protection, of feeding and watching over the livestock. Yakut horse rearing is, inversely, placed under the sign of discontinuity. All the continuous tasks that seek to protect and maintain the herd (feeding, watering, guarding, and so forth) and which, elsewhere, are the everyday business of the breeder, tend to disappear. The slaughter of foals in their first autumn is an eminently discontinuous action, which can be seen as interventionist—but by economizing on fodder, it makes possible a limitation of the amount of work that needs to be done. What is more, the breeders choose to eliminate the animals that are least resistant to hardship, those that they do not expect to survive, thus bringing together natural and artificial selection.

This discontinuity is often expressed in a contrasting series, composed of several initial, sometimes interventionist, positive and internal, but always punctual actions (castration, the formation of herds), giving way subsequently to *laissez-faire* (Ferret 2006). This is the case with the surveillance of animals: after having formed stable herds and having habituated them to the frequentation of certain pastures, the breeders are almost entirely assured that the horses will look after themselves and will follow, on their own initiative, an itinerary that will optimize the use of natural resources. Rather than a continual surveillance of animals, the Yakuts prefer an episodic search for the herd. Instead of guardians, they are “seekers of horses” (Ferret 2007) and are thus frankly far removed from the figure of the shepherd with the crook furnished by Haudricourt.

A Framework for the Analysis of Actions, and How to Use it

A refined typology of action allows us to paint a more nuanced image that reflects better the richness and complexity of reality. While inspired by the binary opposition between direct positive action and indirect negative action, it clearly detaches itself from this binary, by dissociating several dimensions:

- interventionist/active/passive action
- endogenous/exogenous/participative action
- direct/indirect action
- positive/negative/contrary action
- internal/external action

a priori/a posteriori action
 continuous/discontinuous action, and so forth

XXIV

For example, what is a “direct” action according to Haudricourt might sometimes, in this new classification, be grouped among direct actions, but would most often belong among internal actions; and an “indirect” action in his sense would for me be indirect or external.

	Models of action defined by Haudricourt	Correspondence with my typology		Models of action defined by Haudricourt	Correspondence with my typology	
P O S I T I V E	close contact with the domesticated object	internal action	N E G A T I V E	lack of contact with the object	external action	
	acting very little if at all upon the milieu, “preparation of the land can be minimal”	internal action		acting upon the milieu, “intensively manipulated soil”	external action	
	brutality: destruction, tearing up or cutting, threshing of cereals by trampling	deleterious or transformative action		delicate treatment cautious horticulture	neutral or care-taking action	
	permanence “the shepherd watches his flock day and night”	continuous action		no simultaneousness in time with the domesticated being	discontinuous action	
	“he leads the flock”	direct action		“if giant tubers are desired, space for them to develop must be made”	indirect action	
	D I R E C T	“he chooses the route along which he directs the sheep at every moment”		positive action	tall poles are planted at a distance from the tubers so that “the growth of the latter will not be constricted”	negative action
		direct action of surgery		direct action	action at a distance of acupuncture	indirect action
		A C T I O N		geometrical pruning of plants in the French garden	positive action	limited growth of plants in the Chinese garden
	an artificial result, “overdomestication”			interventionist action	a result that appears natural	action tending to passivity
	“he has acquired merit in frontier fighting”			active and constructive action	“he has allowed the number of soldiers to diminish”	passive and reparatory action
	commandment of the chief, “government,” the master precisely plans the work of the slave			direct, positive, a priori action	exemplarity of the sage, “the prince does not choose his ministers, he attracts them”	indirect and participative action
	Paternalism: the subject (shepherd) defends the domesticated object (sheep) against predators (wolves)			endogenous action	the domesticated object (buffalo) defends the subject (the child who guards them) against predators (tiger)	participative action

Table 2 — Comparison of both frameworks for the analysis of actions

The qualification of an action can only be relative, each action being envisaged in relation to other alternative actions that aim at the same objective. Whatever the constraints may be, there is always more than one way to do something. What is significant is to know what choices are made from among many possible actions, and to see whether these choices manifest any predilection or aversion for certain types of action.

One must be cautious nevertheless of any hasty conclusions that would sacrifice reality to coherence. The many forms of action that such a framework allows us to identify are not, in any case, intended to furnish a readymade typology of the societies in which they are carried out. It goes without saying that each society makes use of a whole range of types of action (direct and indirect, interventionist and passive, continuous and discontinuous, and so forth), and it is not always possible or desirable to deduce from them a general proposition to this or that mode of acting. This framework of analysis is primarily and above all a tool for description and analysis, which may help in understanding the functioning of actions. Making use of it obliges one to enter into the technical details.

More than the idea of a correspondence between the treatment of nature and the treatment of the other, the lesson we should learn from Haudricourt is that of the proximity to the concrete. In order to know a little more about humans, we should observe and describe as closely as possible their ways of acting, their *modus operandi*. In other words, we should build an anthropology of action whose credo would be: “Show me how you do things, and I will tell you who you are.”

If Haudricourt can be considered to be the *inventeur* of an anthropology of action, it is in the juridical sense of the word in French, which designates a finder, a person who has discovered a treasure. And now, it is up to us to mine this vein.

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Carole Ferret, *Towards an Anthropology of Action: André-Georges Haudricourt and Technical Efficacy*. — In writings between 1949 and 1995, André-Georges Haudricourt (1911–1996) formulated the idea of an opposition between pastoralists and gardeners. Several authors have discussed the specific Chinese conception of efficacy. In this paper, my aim is to address and rework Haudricourt's distinction between direct positive action and indirect negative action, in order to found an anthropology of action. The study of horse-herding techniques among the Yakuts in Siberia, an Eastern but nonetheless pastoral civilization, provides an opportunity for developing and enriching this typology by distinguishing between operations and manipulations; passive and interventionist actions; endogenous, exogenous, and participative actions; and continuous and discontinuous actions. By focusing on how human actions actually function, we can compare the ways of handling nature and of handling people through the examination of modes of action.

Carole Ferret, *Vers une anthropologie de l'action : André-Georges Haudricourt et l'efficacité technique*. — Entre 1949 et 1995, André-Georges Haudricourt (1911-1996) a posé dans quelques travaux l'idée d'une opposition entre peuples pasteurs et jardiniers. Plusieurs auteurs soulignent la spécificité de la conception chinoise de l'efficacité. Nous proposons de reprendre et d'affiner la distinction opérée par Haudricourt entre action directe positive et action indirecte négative en vue de fonder une anthropologie de l'action dont il serait l'inventeur. En effet, l'étude des techniques d'élevage du cheval chez les Iakoutes de Sibérie, dans une civilisation à la fois pastorale et orientale, fournit l'occasion d'enrichir sa typologie de l'action, en distinguant notamment opérations et manipulations ; actions passives et actions interventionnistes ; actions endogènes, exogènes et participatives ; actions continues et discontinues. Se focalisant sur le fonctionnement concret des actions humaines, une telle entreprise vise à comparer traitement de la nature et traitement d'autrui en examinant les modes d'agir.