

# On Goody, his critics, and beyond: Social metaphysics for literacy studies

**Manuela Ungureanu**  
University of British Columbia  
Okanagan Campus  
*manuela.ungureanu@ubc.ca*

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## Abstract

I defend Jack Goody's approach to explaining expansive social and intellectual changes by pointing to the contributions of the technologies of communication, and specifically, of the use of writing (Goody 1987, 2000). I argue that conceptually driven approaches to social or human kinds contribute the clarifications needed to alleviate and respond to his critics' concerns surrounding the notion of a literate society (Collins 1995, Finnegan 1999, Sawyer 2002, Bloch 2003). My defense of Goody also identifies and endorses a few main criteria and resources for the success of any satisfactory definition of the related notions of a literate society/literate mind.

**Keywords:** Social Kinds; Social Metaphysics; Literacy Theory; Technological Determinism; Extended Mind Thesis.

## Introduction

Regarded as one of the leading social scientists of his generation, Jack Goody is well-known among fellow cultural anthropologists for his having introduced a new paradigm of large-scale social theory which focuses on the emergence and evolution of the state, among other major institutions (Goody 1986, 1987, Pallares-Burke 2002, Olson and Cole 2006). His account associates the development of the state, and social change more generally, to a cluster of frequently correlated technological and ecological factors that he identifies as the drivers of change at the social, aggregate-level, e.g., intensive forms of agriculture, ensuing accumulation of surplus, urbanization, and the growth of bureaucratic institutions (Goody 2000). It is also with reference to such socio-economic or broader cultural factors that Goody introduces a far-reaching division be-

tween roughly two main types of human societies; namely, the hoe cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, and the plough cultures of Eurasia. As a consequence, in Goody's approach, the state is construed as a cross-cultural invention, derived not from any particular ideological, political or territorial struggles, but rather common to a variety of cultures occupying, by and large, the geographies of Eurasia. Grounded in comparative anthropological research documenting key contrasts between societies of Eurasia and those of Africa, his social theory departs thus from the social scientific paradigm introduced by Max Weber, which stresses the uniqueness of Western religious, political and economic structures (Weber 1962).

Goody's commitment to explaining expansive social facts by pointing to their cultural mechanisms aligns his projects with anthropology's long-standing search for systemic patterns in the history of humanity. Specific to his work is his methodological emphasis on patterns of cultural transmission over long periods of time. He then accounts for such by looking at complex social, technological or intellectual changes he identifies as correlates --for explanatory purposes-- at the level of macro-sociological theory (Goody 1968, 1986, 1991). Goody's position has, however, attracted intense critical responses from fellow anthropologists. My interest here lies in the concerns of those who have taken issue with his placing great weight, in his account of cultural transmission, on the contributions of the technologies of communication to both intellectual and social change (Baines 1983, Street 1984, Finnegan 1988, Besnier 1991, Halverson 1992, Street 1993, Collins 1995, Finnegan 1999, Raven 2001, Sawyer 2002, Bloch 2003, Finnegan 2006). Critics such as Finnegan, Street, and Bloch attack what they call Goody's "literacy thesis," or his construal of the use of writing as a "technology of the mind" with crucial implications for the growth of a society and its intellectual development. Especially when taken together, the critics' arguments provide a remarkable cluster. They also lead to a noticeably radical conclusion: the very distinction that is presupposed by the literacy thesis, i.e., the distinction between oral *versus* literate societies, is scientifically unsound, and by extension, the literacy thesis itself needs to be discarded.

Soon after its launch, the controversy initiated by Goody's opponents concerning his so-called literacy thesis reached a standstill. Goody disregarded for quite some time the uproar he created through his emphasis on the implications of literacy for social or intellectual change. His critics pointed out that he did not engage in the exchanges requesting, at a very minimum, clarifications of his main ideas or concepts (Sawyer 2002b). When he finally provided a response, there was little uptake left for it in cultural anthropology, and broader still, in literacy studies (Goody 2000).

Moreover, Goody's own supporters addressed the critics' attacks mainly by providing caveats to the correlations he identified in his work between, for instance, literate practices and religion, or literacy and the legal institutions of a society (Scribner and Cole 1981, Olson 2001). In addition, philosophers of social science have been largely oblivious to the controversy regarding Goody's literacy thesis, despite the emphasis that his critics have put on conceptual, rather than empirical, reasons for rejecting the distinction between societies with and those without writing. However, similar conceptual concerns surrounding basic distinctions among groups or social kinds introduced for explanatory purposes in macro-sociological theories remained at the forefront of philosophical investigation in gender and race studies, or broader still in the philosophy of social sciences (Ruben 1989, Jackson and Pettit 1992, Hacking 1995, Hacking 1999, Haslanger 2000, Root 2000, Miller 2000, Sawyer 2002a, Sismondo 2003, Saul 2006).

I argue that recent research in social metaphysics on the distinction between natural kinds and social or human kinds, and, specifically, philosophical investigations supporting the special status of the latter, provide much needed conceptual elucidations of the role macro-social concepts play in Goody's work, and, by extension, in the debate surrounding it. Briefly, my view is that a more refined understanding of the metaphysics of social kinds is apt to provide philosophical support for Goody's position. My main aim for this paper, however, is to defend a particular definition, or characterization, of what it is to be a *literate society*, that is consistent with, and informed by, the theoretical developments in the metaphysics of social kinds. In other words, I see my interest in defending Goody against his critics as a stepping stone to the more extensive project of clarifying the prerequisites for a sound construal of the cognate notions of a *literate society* and of a *literate mind*, for the purposes of an interdisciplinary approach to literacy studies.

After I outline Goody's and respectively, the critics' positions in the first two sections, I make a first pass at defining the notion of literate society, and then expand and defend my definition further against his critics' allegations. I use the critics' contentions, once clarified, to set up a series of adequacy conditions that ought to be satisfied by any respectable definition of a literate society either at the metaphysical level (in sections 3.1 and 3.2) or at the methodological level (in sections 4.1 and 4.2). This sequence of arguments will demonstrate, I hope, that a philosophical investigation of the notion of literate society provides the conceptual groundwork, in social metaphysics, to macro-sociological theory of literacy. It also opens the door for related inquiries in the philosophy of social sciences and the philosophy of mind and language, by showing that such a macro-sociological theory remains responsive to other approaches to literate practices and capacities.

### 1. Goody's position under scrutiny: its main elements

To set the stage for the controversy kindled by Goody's macro-theory of literacy, it is helpful to begin by illustrating what critics have come to call his literacy thesis. I have chosen three quotations from different works by Goody. Taken together, they highlight the intricacies of his approach to writing and literacy, and point to the main elements of Goody's view of writing as "a technology of the intellect." More specifically, they illustrate: (a) his wide-ranging interest in documenting the *variety of consequences* that writing practices have for a society's understanding and manipulating of the world, and for its social organization; (b) his construal of writing as a communicative practice that is (cognitively) *different* from speech, and more generally, (c) his search for *complex social correlates* for the purposes of offering what he calls "better explanations of other general theories, statements or categories" (2000, 4).

First, here is a particularly large-scale characterization of the effects which a system of writing can have on a society:

*the introduction of writing helps to [...] make the implicit explicit, and in so doing to extend the possibilities of social action, sometimes by bringing out tacit contradictions and thus leading to new resolutions (and probably new contradictions), but also by creating more precise types of transaction and relationship [...] that give these partnerships the strength to endure in more complex, more anonymous circumstances* (1986, 175).

The generalizing tenor of his remarks here is suggestive of his aim to discover structural *social facts* concerning writing as a technology of communication, i.e., facts which implicate the agents' attitudes while abstracting away from *individual* psychological antecedents (Jackson and Pettit 1992). But, by and large, quotes such as the above are not truly representative of his formulations of the literacy thesis. As we will see, while it is true that sometimes Goody is interested in large-scale generalizations, more typically, he is focused on the consequences of writing for a society's understanding and manipulating of the world, and on its implications for social relations and social organization. His typical analyses are always based on ethnographic comparative research. They abound with illustrations and focus on degrees of differences between sample oral and literate societies, e.g., the religion of a particular literate society may have a less local focus, its legal institutions or economic transactions are more governed by formal procedures, when compared to another particular oral society (Goody 1986, 1987). We can thus find not one, but numerous, specific literacy theses in Goody's work. This in turn suggests that more scrutiny is required to identify what is at stake behind his critics' rejoinders.

Second, and contributing to the need for clarity in the formulation of his multiple literacy theses, Goody rarely distinguishes between the *defining* (even identifying) *features* of a literate society, or a literate mind, and their social or intellectual *consequences*. But in one of his belated responses to the critics, cited below, Goody comes closest to providing an explication of his position, focusing on some core defining features of our use of writing:

*[...] Clearly all societies interpret visual signs, such as footprints, drawing deductions from their presence and their characteristics. Others go further and use the lines on the palms of the hand or the marks made by mice in the sand as a means of prognostication. Divination in its wide range of forms is probably a feature of all human societies [...] It usually involves the interpretation of visual signs, not those made by humans but those specifically independent of them. Other signs, including those on Ojibway birch-bark scrolls, are made by humans and are usually intentional, aiming to communicate to other persons. These serve as mnemonics: they do not systematically represent and develop speech forms in the way that a fully fledged system of writing does, enabling man to express in writing all (and at times more, but also at times less) than he can in speech. Such systems of writing, according to our view, were a major breakthrough that differentiates human cultures in significant ways [...] (2000, 3).*

Here, the emphasis on the core features of literacy practices lies mainly at the end of the excerpt, where it also appears to have a programmatic force -- similar to that of a placeholder for future projects, tasked with identifying the precise ways in which human cultures with writing are different. More importantly, the citation provides a window into Goody's interest in the specific ways in which writing systems help *represent* or *express* the content of mental states, and as a consequence, provide opportunities for new forms of communication and novel cognitive capacities. Goody articulates here most clearly his support for the idea that, at its core, the use of writing is unlike speech, and agents' interpretations of writing involve some mental capacities and/or representations distinct from those involved in communication by means of other symbolic representations, including speech. As we will see in section 4.2, the idea of a dissimilarity between speech and writing as cognitive activities needs further elaboration for the purposes of adjudicating the debate with his critics.

Third, it is also important to note the programmatic, methodological comments Goody makes in his work, when he glosses over the literacy thesis as intended

*to shift some of the weight that has often been placed on the means and relations of production to the means and relations of communication [...] By this I understand not only the techniques but also the technology, including the technology of the intellect it directly permits, the libraries of accu-*

*mulated knowledge as well as the internal cognitive developments, together with the constraints and freedoms that human beings attach to such systems. There has been no intention of confining analysis either to ‘materialist’ or to ‘ideological’ factors [...] Who nowadays would think of the intellectual products of the human hand and mind, such as writing, as being purely internal or external, as relating only to matter or to ideas? (1986, 175-6, emphasis mine).*

As he submits, his interest lies in new explanatory models for macro-sociological generalizations, challenging our presuppositions about the features and locus of mental states and processes. But if writing is located both inside *and* outside the mind, its study at the macro-sociological level brings into question the traditional distinction of the social sciences between the macro and the micro levels of explanations, where only the latter -- but not the former -- deliver explanations of social facts by reference to specific psychological antecedents (Jackson and Pettit 1992). It is thus worth investigating the extent to which the concept of *literacy* provides Goody's large-scale theoretical projects with explanatory models which depart from established anthropological theorizing, in order to explore novel explanatory forms for social categories in general (2000, 2004).

## **2. Framing the debate: Overview of the critics' contentions**

Despite the programmatic nature of Goody's interest in the distinction between oral and literate societies, and his earlier methodological comments, his critics regard his literacy theses as paradigmatic examples of an already established approach to literacy which they call the "autonomous" or "technological" perspective, to be contrasted with their preferred "ideological" construal (Baines 1983, Finnegan 1988, Besnier 1991). More generally, Goody's critics seem to consider only two possible positions on literate societies. The first interprets literacy as an autonomous social phenomenon, leading to social or intellectual changes with almost no political or economic constraints. The second views literacy as impinging on a society only once it is valued within power structures and broader social practices, such as schooling (Street 1984, 1993, Finnegan 1999, 2003).

Later in the 1990s, the critics' proposed dichotomy between the so-called technological and ideological views of literacy merges into a more radical stance. To illustrate, following up on Besnier's rejection of the view (attributed to Goody) that literacy "is a unified phenomenon" (Besnier 1991, 581), Collins submits that *any* division between oral and literate societies is improper, since it must depict literacy as "a uniform set of techniques and uses of language" (1995, 75). But the insistence to abolish the distinction between oral and literate societies appears most clearly in Finnegan's 1999 review of literacy re-

search in the social sciences. In this work, she insists that “practices of reading and writing are as much socially as technologically shaped” and that ethnographic variation in the actual practices of literacy seriously undermines “sweeping generalizations” in this domain. On this basis, she supports bypassing the question whether there is “some potentially generalizable divide between oral and literate cultures (or alternatively between oral and literal minds or oral and literate individuals)” (Finnegan 1999).

While most critics portray the debate as one about divergent ways of construing the very notion of a literate society/literacy, and argue against the idea of a distinction between oral *versus* literate societies/cultures, others, such as Bloch, articulate their concern more narrowly with the mistaken implication, again attributed to Goody, that writing systems as such, rather than individual agents’ attitudes and actions, are deemed causally efficacious (Bloch 2003). Such recent criticisms seem quite focused, in that they lead to straightforward tests of the definition of a literate society, once we are presented with some versions of it. Since Bloch’s concern can only be settled in light of a definition of the notion of a literate society, I will consider it in the concluding part of my response to the critics.

I begin my reply to Goody’s critics by addressing the first cluster of concerns, focused on the very characterization or definition of a literate society, and the presuppositions behind his intended distinction between oral *versus* literate societies. The criticisms related to the injunction against *any* attempt to distinguish between societies with or without writing are not only more frequent in the literature, but also more radical than that of Bloch. Hence, it is imperative to clarify what type of rebuttal they require, and the degree to which Goody’s position provides the resources for such.

The concerns in the first cluster of criticisms also appear in condensed, even opaque, formulations, and thus need detailed examination. To illustrate, there is a sense in which Besnier’s earlier allegation that Goody depicts literacy “as a unitary technology that [is best seen as] [...] a unified phenomenon” can be accommodated quickly (1991, 581). The impressive breath of Goody’s ethnographic work, and his diverse, detailed characterizations of the consequences of literate practices for social change, provide ample textual evidence to the contrary (1968, 1986, 1987). As a consequence, one can reply to Besnier by reiterating the same basic point that the first of the three elements of Goody’s position has always been his identifying and documenting the *variety of consequences* writing practices have for a society’s understanding and manipulating of the world, and for its social organization.

However, Besnier’s allegation is ambiguous. It can be understood not merely as a (misguided) complaint about the lack of ethnographic specifics in Goody’s work, but rather as challenging Goody’s naïve expectation that social scientists can readily identify and define literate practices as such. Like Street and

Finnegan afterwards, Besnier appears to take Goody to task for suggesting that we *can* define, across a multitude of social settings, social facts characteristic of literate practices (Street 1993, Finnegan 1999). Given the skeptical thrust of these allegations, a defense based only on the three elements of Goody's position does not seem to suffice. Rather, what is required, at the very least, is a more concrete definition of a literate society or a characterization of the type of facts that his literacy theses purport to identify, accompanied by an argument for why we ought to think of those facts as being *social* in nature.

We also find a more radical version of Besnier's challenge in Collins' allegations that Goody's literacy theses commit us to a "universalist or autonomous literacy, seen as a general, uniform set of techniques and uses of language." Following Besnier, Collins seems to question Goody's expectation that we may identify cross-cultural invariants of literate practices. But he also rejects what he portrays, rather hastily, as Goody's related commitment to "an essentialist, reified notion of literacy" (1995, 75).

The main thrust of this criticism is clearly directed against certain alleged metaphysical and methodological pitfalls, even inconsistencies, associated with any attempt to define literacy practices in a satisfactory way. It now remains to be seen whether Goody's position has the theoretical resources to deal with such criticisms, once we clarify the family of concerns expressed in Collins' charge of essentialism.

We have seen that Finnegan (1999) also advocates for the outright rejection of *any* distinction between oral and literate societies. In a later work, she also comes closer to rejecting Goody's position for conceptual reasons, when she insists that the categories of any macro-sociological theory of literacy are too close to the common-sense notions of our ordinary talk about literate/illiterate individuals, and hence, inadequate for scientific theorizing (2003, 2006). While Finnegan's later comments do not fully clarify the charge of an essentialist, reified notion of literacy, her criticism highlights most clearly, I think, what motivates the critics' broader skepticism concerning one's identification or definition of a literate society. As her comments imply, the critics' concerns with Goody's work spring from a type of anguish familiar to philosophers of social sciences, namely whether social theorists may use, for theoretical purposes, categories that are already regularly employed in common-sense social talk and, if so, aided by what meta-theoretical considerations. I agree with Finnegan's suggestions that this type of concern needs a thorough treatment, and that Goody's position does not yet provide the required meta-theoretical response head-on. But we can find the starting points for this in social metaphysics, and they seem to be at least consistent with Goody's position, or so I will argue.



In the next section, I question the critics' earlier dichotomy between technological and ideological characterizations of literacy in order to shed light on an alternative definition of a literate society which is consistent with Goody's own view. I argue that the definition that I will sketch provides a way out of a few of the critics' concerns with its humble origins in common-sense categorization. To be clear, I endorse Finnegan's idea that the debate generated by Goody's critics hinges on whether and, if so, how we may utilize folk-categories in social/literacy studies. But I provide a reply to her critique once the first version of the definition is tested against Collins' allegations surrounding Goody's alleged "universalized" or "essentialist" categorization.

### **3.1. What "essence" is reified, if any, by a social theory of literacy?**

For the purposes of our argument, let us presuppose that we may find significant textual evidence in Goody's work for characterizations of literate practices which imply what Collins calls an "essentialist, reified notion of literacy." Exactly what is the worry surrounding essentialism about notions, or characterizations, of literacy here? How is it related to the critics' concern with our common-sensical use of notions like literate or illiterate agents? How does the dichotomy between technological and ideological characterizations of literacy provide relief, if any, to such concerns with common-sense notions of literacy practices?

Let us begin with the essentialism charge voiced by Collins 1995. Typically, individual agents and their properties are the main potential locus of alleged essences (whatever the latter are). It is thus natural to explore the hypothesis that the critics' concern with an essentialist notion of literacy springs from their eschewing *individualistic* characterizations of literate cultures, i.e., which rely on properties of individual agents or objects, rather than those of groups. For our purposes, ontological or metaphysical individualism is the stance that only individual agents exist, i.e., social objects are either eliminable or reducible to combinations of the individual participants and their properties; ontological holism is the opposing view of social entities and properties (Ruben 1982, 1989, Sawyer 2002a). I take Collins' concerns with essentialist views of literacy to mirror the critics' opposition to any definition of literacy which departs from their preferred commitment to holism or collectivism in macro-sociological theory of literacy. Under this reading the charge of essentialism reflects what the critics perceive as Goody's implied commitment to ontological individualism for the purposes of a theory of literate societies, and by extension, his unstable endorsement to holism.

In its radical version, however, the critics take the same charge to suggest that literacy practices could only be defined at the level of individual agents, their (mental) properties, and/or the material objects they imagine, design and cre-

ate. Roughly, the charge is that *any* definition of literate groups would turn out to be reducible to features of individuals, and thus, imply (the undesirable) ontological individualism. One of the reasons that such definitions fall prey to individualism is Goody's uncritical adoption of the related common-sense taxonomy which, arguably, applies naturally to individuals and not to groups. Then, the critics' concern seems to be that, even after a critical analysis of the ordinary categories associated with literate practices, any definition of literate groups remains reductively individualistic. Using this latter diagnosis as one of the premises of their argument, the critics seem to conclude that the definition of a literate society could never be adequately holistic for the purposes of a macro-sociological theory.<sup>8</sup> Briefly, their argument can be outlined as a *modus ponens* as follows:

P1) Any definition of literate practices/groups makes reductive reference to properties identified at the individual level.

P2) If a definition of any group-based properties refers to properties of individual agents, then it is not sufficiently holistic, i.e., not sound for the purposes of macro-sociological theory.

*Hence*, the definition of literate societies is not sound for the purposes of social macro-theory of literacy.

Now, an emphasis on individuals' features is indeed present in the commonsensical use of the classificatory distinction, adopted by Goody, between literate and illiterate agents.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, if and when extrapolated to social groups, this ordinary use of the terms leaves open the distinct possibility that the presumed *social* category *literate society* may be reduced, without much loss, to the set-based description of agents, each having the individual feature

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<sup>8</sup> It is not clear whether Goody's critics are willing to accept that a *nonreductive* individualistic definition of literate groups satisfies their commitment to ontological holism. Sawyer explicitly supports such definitions in macro-sociological theory in general (2002a). His argument here is based on the idea that a social property is multiply realizable at the individual level, and thus none of the individual level states is co-extensive with it. His general argument provides indirect support for a nonreductive individualistic definition of literate groups, and likely, against P2 of the critics' argument outlined above. But Sawyer does not consider the possibility that literacy is a social rather than an individual property. Indeed, in a different work he criticizes Goody for having aspired to identify generalizations specific to literate groups or societies (2002b). Moreover, Sawyer's position stresses what he takes to be *methodological* rather than ontological considerations in support of nonreductive individualism. I believe his methodological considerations are broadly consistent with my proposal, but I focus first on the prospects of a holistic definition at the ontological, metaphysical level, and briefly discuss his methodological argument in section 4.2, footnote 8 below.

<sup>9</sup> There are excerpts from Goody's work which are ambiguous between an interpretation which takes literacy as defined in terms of individuals' propositional attitude states/skills and one defined in terms of properties identified at the group-level, for instance, when he characterizes the relevant intellectual practices as involving individuals' subconscious application of rules of language (Goody 1987, 265-67).

of being literate, just as P1 above implies. Thus any characterization of literacy in terms of individual members' properties also implies that there is nothing beyond a similarity among members' individual features that motivates our associating the property of being literate with the group. If so, the prospects of the desired holistic definition of a literate society are faint, and, by extension, Collins' concern over individualistic characterizations of literacy is a genuine one. But given Goody's default commitment to holism, i.e., to identifying group-based properties specific to literate cultures and societies, not merely to literate agents, the threat of a reductive definition also a serious threat for Goody's project.

In contrast, I argue against P1 above that there is both room and need for interpreting the notion of a literate society as unambiguously holistic or at the level of social groups. I begin here by defending the plausibility of the notion of literate society understood as a social kind, based on a definition which explicitly supports the social scientists' distinctive metaphysical commitments to social entities or kinds. In particular, I define a literate society as follows:

**Def. 1:** L is a literate society *iff* members of L recognize, engage in, assume, and recognize, institutionalized roles and rules governing the production and use of texts, e.g., a social division of labour concerning training and pay for scribes, rules for identifying at the level of the community some individuals as librarians, editors or authors, specific terms and regulations surrounding entitlements and/or obligations implied by such institutionalized relations.<sup>10</sup>

If this is correct, when we are referring to a literate society as a social kind we have in mind specific relations established among individual members, such as Saul's being David's scribe, and the related linguistic practice of identifying or characterizing such relations. But we also have in mind relations among individuals and certain objects they produce, preserve or use, e.g., the manuscript records David's speech, its being on loan to Sara, Jane being its translator, again, together with the linguistic practice identifying and characterizing such relations. Roughly, the first draft of the definition of a literate group explicates the distinction under attack, between literate *versus* oral societies or cultures, as one between different types of *social relations*, social structures or kinds identified linguistically by the agents. More specifically, the definition is holistic by paying attention to the fact that agents use literacy-related language to designate themselves and others in socially significant ways. Agents' use of literacy-specific terms, such as *scribe* or *translator*, signals that they

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<sup>10</sup> This definition is not inconsistent with Sawyer's methodological nonreductive individualism. But it does include features of the literate group which remain uncovered by a nonreductive individualistic definition, as outlined by Sawyer 2002a. Later in section 4.2, I explore briefly the distinction between a nonreductive individualistic definition and one that subscribes to additional holistic features.

satisfy the institutionalized roles and are somewhat aware them in that they use corresponding, particular terms of their public language. The definition suggests thus that literacy is a relational or collecting property of individuals, and thus irreducibly social in nature (Ruben 1989, 19-21).<sup>11</sup>

If starting with an explicitly holistic definition alleviates the concern over reductive individualism (i.e., essentialism), its emphasis on institutionalized social *relations* also makes it doubtful that Goody's literacy theses necessarily commit us to a "universalist [...] literacy, seen as a general, uniform set of techniques and uses of language" (Collins 1995). A similar response can be built on this working definition with regard to the alleged reification implied by Goody's literacy theses. The definition focuses on social structures as the main entities, if any, it identifies. As a consequence, Goody or his supporters do not (need to) "reify" anything other than social relations established among individual members through their linguistic practice, and surrounding some special artefacts. To be more specific, Goody's supporter may reify *types* of relations of these kinds, and define them further as *sets* of (tokens of) such socially significant relations, and thus as social structures.

Now, it is unclear whether the critics' alternative ("ideological") notion of literacy is introduced in opposition to this last general commitment to various *types* of social relations.<sup>12</sup> If their notion is expected to avoid reference to types of social relations, be they political or economic, then it is simply a matter of speculation as to how exactly the critics' construal of literacy as ideological remains faithful to their rejection of individualism in social metaphysics. But by itself, the proposed appeal to sets of social relations cannot weaken the prospects of the definition outlined above. The commitment to types of social relations is a stronghold of social science accounts, since the emergence of sociology with Durkheim's theory of suicide, but also more recently in theories of subordination based on race or gender (Durkheim 2002 (1897), Haslanger 2000, Root 2000, Ruben 1998). At least by analogy with current explanatory practices in the social sciences, the same idea should not be controversial when applied to a macro-sociological theory of literacy.

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<sup>11</sup> Ruben characterizes "a property as 'a collecting property' not just when it is true of some individuals, but only when it is used in a socially significant way to designate those individuals [...]" a collecting property is one that is actually in use in a socially significant way to distinguish some persons from others, and hence as constituting an identifiable group (1989, 12).

<sup>12</sup> Like other supporters of the alternative *ideological* definition of literacy, Sawyer sees literate skills at the social level as correlated only with new ways of subordinating others (2002b). Sawyer also emphasizes that at the individual level literate skills and capacities are no different from those associated with verbal communication (see below section 4.2) and by extension, not associated with novel, collectively held beliefs and/or with specific linguistic practices. In section 4.1 I focus on the need to characterize further the collectively held beliefs specific for literate groups.

I conclude that, without an additional argument against any macro-theory which appeals to *types* of social relations in its explanatory hypotheses, the proposed definition of a literate society does provide the starting point for the desired distinction between oral and literate societies, just as Goody's theses require. In my view the explicit reference to social kinds ought to alleviate the critics' worries concerning the social scientists' metaphysical commitment to an alternative to reductive metaphysical individualism. But at least because the first definition refers to social relations typical to literate practices, and especially to individuals' own characterizations of them through public language, more needs to be said in defense of a social definition of literacy which is cautious about its roots in ordinary literate taxonomies.

### **3.2. Social metaphysics between fiction and revision of word use**

My definition of literacy as an irreducibly social type above implies that members of literate societies categorize and discriminate among themselves based on their understanding and manipulation of texts in various social settings. At first glance, this implication is unproblematic. It is well documented by historical research that categories of literate practices, such as scribe/manuscript, translator/translation, author/publisher/literary work, are of a society's own making. Such categories are invented by its members and depend on certain collectively held bodies of beliefs concerning texts and practices with them, albeit at different levels of skill or awareness (Febvre and Martin 1997 (1976), Stock 1983, Eisenstein 1985, 1986).

We have seen, however, that the close affinity of Goody's view of literacy to intuitive categories deployed by agents with certain commonsensical characterizations of literate people has been turned on its head by his opponents. Collins suggest, for instance, that an essentialist (individualistic) approach to literacy is an expected consequence of common-sense (social) metaphysics since, according to him, the latter is prone to commit, all too quickly, to the existence of individual-based essences (1995). More radical than the criticisms made by Baines or Collins, Finnegan submits that the categories of literacy theory are accompanied by a plethora of unwanted biases, and to such an extent that the use of any literate categorizations as heuristic, even analytic, tools in the social sciences is unwarranted, if not outright objectionable. As she points out, the categories of literate practices are associated with a long-standing interest, among laypersons, in contrasting the worth of different people within the same society or across different cultures. For Finnegan, no meta-theoretical safeguards can prepare the ordinary literate categories for scientific use. She insists that the elitist preconceptions as well as the ethnocentric biases – cultivated particularly by Western Europeans - related to taxonomies of literacy practices cannot be mitigated, likely due to the latter's irreducible link to the agents' discriminatory use of terms such as *illiterate* or

*literate*.<sup>13</sup> Based on this premise, she concludes that these taxonomies point to fictitious social facts, and thus their prospects for scientific use remain zero (2006).

As Finnegan points out, terms such as *illiterate*, *literate*, *scribe* and *author* have acquired a deep political significance; their use has historically been embedded in discriminatory practices in a variety of socio-economic or political settings, leading sometimes to subordination relations. A quick reply to this type of worry is that nothing precludes Goody, or any social scientist, from distancing his or her theoretical use of a term from the unfair discriminatory aspects with which his or her theory may have been contingently associated. Moreover, a critical, revisionary use of the terms can help ascertain the relevant discriminatory practices and request the needed political changes. To illustrate, a politically sensitive theory of race would still be able to document subjects' using the term or the notion of race differently from one historical period to the other, and with different political consequences. It can also mirror and even motivate changes in the subjects' own construal of race, while still using the theoretical notion of race for the purposes of identifying and explaining the relevant social facts (Haslanger 2000, Root 2000, Miller 2000).

But before I shall advocate a revisionary use of *literate* categories, let me address Finnegan's overarching concern with the inevitable impact of our ordinary taxonomies in a social theory of literacy. The starting point of my reply to Finnegan is an examination of the general idea behind her argument, i.e., that terms and concepts with social origins and political import cannot help identify social facts for the purposes of a social macro-theory. As philosophers of social sciences have argued in other areas of social theory, the fact that social taxonomies are at least partly constructed by the persons engaging in the related practices does not entail that the notions involved in the subjects' acts of discriminations are fictitious, and thus eliminable from our social ontology (Searle 1995, Martin and McIntyre 1994, Ruben 1998, Miller 2000, Haslanger 2000). On the contrary, ordinary social classifications among people, such as those based on race, gender, kinship, and ethnic origin can and have been adopted by social scientists, at least as a heuristic prelude to social macro-theory. As illustrated by social theories of race or gender, ordinary social categories can and have been re-drawn for the purposes of capturing systematic correlations and providing explanations of social facts, thus preparing the ground for revisionary uses of the relevant social terms/categories (Haslanger 2000, Saul 2006). If so, there seems to be nothing particularly suspect about Goody's having adopted, in his literacy theory, categories that are already used by agents in *literate* societies, especially if one further refines and thus prepares the ordinary *literate* categories for scientific use.

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<sup>13</sup> See also Bloch 1998 for similar concerns with the alleged ethnocentric bias in literacy studies.

However, in response to Finnegan's main concern that the agents' own literate categorizations shine through even their allegedly 'purified' deployment in social macro-theory, it is important to be specific about the nature of the subjects' own discriminations and the roles they play in social-scientific explanations. I argue that the irreducible inclusion of agents' own discriminations is not as problematic as it may seem, although this result entails some changes to our working definition of a literate society.

As another example, let us look briefly at *race* as a social term/notion. Reference to racial taxonomies is irreducible in a social macro-theory of race, since whether and how people are classified in terms of race within a society is shaped to a significant degree by their self-conceptions and/or whether they, as agents, recognize the category of race, given their non-linguistic or linguistic behaviour. This suggests more generally that social notions, such as kinship, race or gender, are historical and psychological, in the sense that they reflect the agents having adopted a particular body of beliefs and a related linguistic practice over a significant period of time (Searle 1995, Hacking 1995, Haslanger 2000).

But the identification of social facts about races or gender does not hang merely on agents' individual acts of discrimination and/or on their use of the language. To illustrate, at the level of macro-sociological theory, races are identified in terms of social facts depending also on their being forms of organization, institutions which systematically employ and thereby reinforce racial taxonomies, e.g., a slave trade, a segregated school system, discriminatory hiring policies, wide differences in income levels, training and career opportunities, etc. (Searle 1995, Miller 2000). By analogy, a social theory of literacy points out that it is specific to literate cultures that they typically adopt public inscriptions as forms of communication, institute libraries or some system of training or schooling, as well as specialized bureaucracies (Gough 1968, Febvre and Martin 1997 (1976), Stock 1986, Schmandt-Besserat 2007).

There is, then, a clear sense in which ordinary social terms and notions may be socially constructed at both the individual-psychological level and at the institutional level. But if so, it is important that the macro-sociological theory distinguish between the two types of social facts, and thus enable us to look for kinds of evidential support required for ascertaining each of them (Ruben 1982, Searle 2006, Wilson 2007). To mirror the fact that the social theoretical notion of a literate society requires both types of social construction, in the second version of the definition, I construe the notion of a literate society as two-layered:

**Def. 2:** L is a literate society *iff* (i) L members engage in, and recognize, institutionalized roles and rules governing the production and use of texts (however these are defined in material, technological terms), and (ii) individuals discriminate by and among themselves, based on a spe-

cific body of beliefs related to use of texts and reflected in their public language.

This new version of the definition is faithful to Goody's expressed interest in categories which help outline social facts described both inside and outside the mind (1986, 175-6). Albeit through a promissory note, the explicit reference to a specific body of beliefs that are adopted by individual agents stresses the need to identify what mental states or contents rest behind individuals' acts of discrimination characteristic of literate societies. In turn, this should allow us to point out exactly what is irreducible and cross-cultural or, respectively, what can and should be revised, if any, about their beliefs or their use of language, e.g., politically correct or discriminatory use of terms such as *illiterate* or *scribe*.

Let me summarize the reply to Finnegan's concerns. When it comes to the metaphysical pedigree of its related categories (e.g., writing system, illiterate/literate person), a social theory of literacy is (again) in as good a shape as other consecrated areas of social studies. First, the identification of social kinds does not hinge only on agents' individual acts of discrimination, or on their common use of terms such as *black*, *woman*, or *illiterate*. Second, the co-opting of these terms for theoretical purposes does not confine a social scientist to the agents' own understanding of such terms. Both race and gender studies have focused on identifying the relevant social kinds in order to document institutionalized subordination, and have defended a revision of our ordinary use of the terms or concepts as part of a broader corrective social movement. By extension, social theorists of literate practices may also be in a position to dissociate the meaning of the word *illiterate*, for instance, from the history of its abusive deployment, and to encourage deference to literacy theorists for the true reference of the terms *literate* or *illiterate*. Third, the prospects of a revisionary analysis of terms referring to social kinds help address Finnegan's concern with the alleged elitism of a social theory of literacy. Since such revisions require explicit definitions of the relevant social terms, I suggest we need more, not less focus on clarifying the proper definitions of our ordinary taxonomies concerning literate groups, practices or societies, as well as the historical benefits of a literacy-based education.

Based on the two-layered definition introduced above, Goody's supporters are also in a position to challenge the critics' allegation that a social theory of literacy must necessarily amount to a monolithic depiction of literate practices (Baines 1983, Collins 1995, Sawyer 2002). On the contrary, the two-layered definition opens the path for more nuanced characterizations of the individual, micro-level specific cognitive skills based on inter-disciplinary psychological inquiry. For instance, the definition can accommodate cross-linguistic evidence indicating that conventional notions of word are not necessarily employed by adult speakers of all languages and that, function of their different



literacy skills, their performance varies for a range of segmentation tasks along word-boundaries or phonemes (Hoosain 1992, Olson 1996, Homer 2009, Veldhuis & Kurvers 2012). But the definition can also contain further investigations of the macro-level forms of institutionalized manipulations of texts, evidenced in a wide-range of historical research (e.g., norms or conventions for borrowing manuscripts and copying them in Ancient Egypt, Medieval China or Europe, for printing dispensations in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, author rights or schooling policies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gough 1968, Febvre and Martin 1997 (1976), Stock 1983, Eisenstein 1986)).

Again, consistent with Goody's work, our second definition affords the description of a wide range of literate practices and cultures: oral, archaic, pre-literate, proto-literate, restricted, emerging literate or advanced literate societies (Goody 1986). While the inclusion of such a wide range may not assuage all of the critics' qualms about the so-called Western ethnocentric paradigm, the idea that there is a spectrum of literate cultures should at least put to rest their concern that once having distinguished between literate and oral cultures, literate practices can no longer be characterized in the fine-grained manner as evidenced at the ethnographic level (Bloch 1998, Finnegan 1999, Sawyer 2002, Finnegan 2006).

#### **4.1. Which causes/agents for change in literate cultures?**

To complete my argument that there is both room and need for a social macro-theory of literacy, I now turn briefly to the critics' contention that the notion of a literate society is an improper unit of analysis due to the dubious type of explanations which it affords. For example, in his attack against Goody, Bloch is particularly concerned with what he takes to be Goody's suggestion that writing systems can have social or cognitive consequences all by themselves, e.g., as they feature in Goody's explanations of a society's religion or system of law as influenced by its literacy practices (Goody 1968, Bloch 2003). Similar charges of technological determinism are a recurrent theme in the writings of many of Goody's critics who support the alternative "ideological view" of literacy (Baines 1983, Street 1984, Finnegan 1988, Besnier 1991, Raven 2001, Sawyer 2002, Finnegan 2006).

In response to this worry, I shall now argue, albeit briefly, that the two-layered definition introduced above allows us to say that the relevant causes are in fact located in individual agents' body of beliefs and related institutions, and not in the writing systems themselves. *Pace* Finnegan, such explanations can find their home not in our everyday attempts to make sense of other people's lives, but likely inside social scientific accounts of various facts concerning people's culture and history. While a full-blown response the critics'

charge of technological determinism is beyond the scope of this paper, I outline the main criteria and resources for the success of such a reply.

To begin with, it is important to take note, early in the argument, of a significant implicit constraint on the success of a defense against Bloch's allegation. The reference in Goody's preferred type of explanations of social or intellectual change to causes that are specified at the individual-psychological level — so as to eschew the charge of technological determinism— also has to steer one away from methodological individualism, i.e., from introducing as *explanans* psychological properties intrinsic to the agents. To remain consistent with the argument in section 3.1 above, the favored type of explanations rooted in a social notion of a literate society has to bypass the appeal, for explanatory purposes, to causes intrinsic to the agents, for instance to merely innate features. I argue thus that for the cultural anthropologist, the challenge of eschewing technological determinism is a two-fold one: not only to show —as I try to do in this section— that agents themselves and their reasons for action are the intended causes of social explanations involving literate practices, but also that the specific body of beliefs to which these explanations allude does not merely concern individual agents, say, given their biological endowment —the goal of section 4.2.

To begin, let us remind Goody's critics that despite their contention, the notion of a literate society we are considering already includes institutional forces, and thereby allows, just as Goody's empirical studies have shown, that political, economic, and religious influences shape the individuals' use of writing in a variety of ways (Goody 1968, Gough 1968). Second, and more importantly, accounts of large-scale intellectual or social change which typically involve as *explanans* the use of relevant scripts or writing systems are best construed as short-hands for taking certain types of social relations and individuals' related cognitive structures as *explanans*. Or if so, such accounts make irreducible mention of the *agents'* own construal of writing systems, just as Bloch requires (Febvre and Martin 1997 (1976), Stock 1983, Goody 1987).

To illustrate this construal of an explanation in terms of both (i) institutionalized roles and rules and (ii) certain bodies of beliefs that are specific to literate individuals, let us look briefly at an account of the ancient Near-East's artistic output. More specifically, I focus on the dramatic intellectual transition in the ancient Near-East from the holistic, evocative art of the seventh millennium to the narrative, linear compositions exhibited on ceramic pottery, floor or wall paintings, or seals. As archeological studies have stressed, around 3500-3000 B.C. in the art of the Near East, images are presented in clearly identified horizontal registers, with the size and order of these images appearing to be orthographically and semantically structured, e.g., those placed to the right or of bigger sizes are of higher importance, following the boustrophedon direction of the script-based tables, and thus intended to be deciphered with an analyti-

cal, linear eye [Figure 3]. In contrast, the earlier art produced in the sixth to fifth millennium sites (i.e., prior to the introduction of the impressed script-based tables) is highly stylized, with compositions covering the entire circumference of the vessels, and whose effect is delivered as a whole, mainly due to repetitious designs, and usually presented in circular or topsy-turvy patterns, and with no narrative composition [Figures 1 and 2].



Figure 1. Samarra vase 1

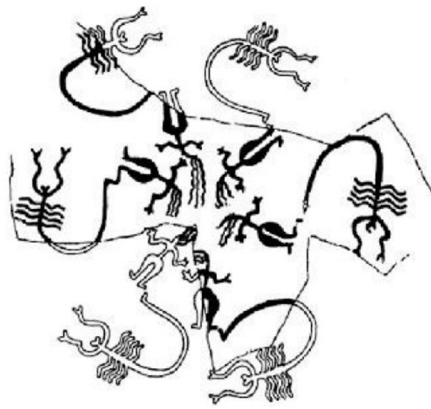


Figure 2. Samarra vase 2

[source: <http://bharatkalyan97.blogspot.ca/2013/04/bronze-age-writing-in-ancient-near-east.html>]

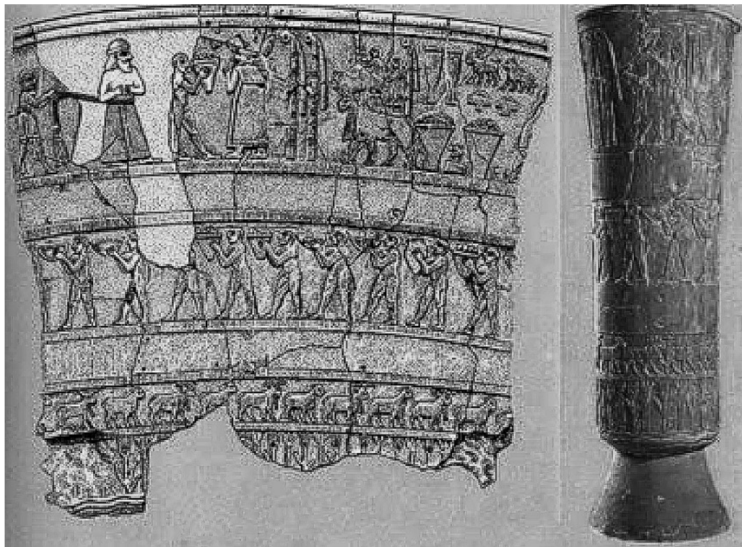


Figure 3. Uruk/Warka vase

[source: <http://www.uned.es>]

What can explain the striking similarities between the composition of paintings on ceramic pottery, floor and wall paintings or the composition of carved seals and vases, on the one hand, and features of writing on the impressed

tables used around 3500-3000 B.C., on the other hand? The archaeologist's hypothesis is that around the time such new type of art is produced "*consciously or unconsciously*, figures in an image were treated according to principles similar to those governing the signs of script" (Schmandt-Besserat 2007, 25, italics mine).

Let us, then, take Schmandt-Besseat's hypothesis at face value, i.e., her claim that that writing influenced the ancient Near East art of the third millennium accounts for the well-founded, fundamental differences between composition patterns documented quite widely and consistently during the relevant period of time. As a hypothesis, the idea that writing influenced art in the ancient Near East is mediated, and realized, by myriad types of social relations *and* individuals' script-related cognitive structures as *explanans*. Specifically, the hypothesis is a place holder for very many individual-level event tokens, such as training a scribe, painting a wall, carving an impressed table for accounting purposes, which collectively are taken to have exerted causal powers in this case. The hypothesis presumes that if and when individuals have script-related skills, they may regard such competencies as a source of economic benefit, social status, aesthetic pleasure, even self-identity or moral edification, and thus take them up (consciously or unconsciously) as part of their reasons for action. While appealing to types or structures of social relations, the account of the emergence of linear, narrative art in the ancient Near East—and more generally, the social macro-theory of literacy—may still consistently take the *agents'* related skills as causally efficacious at the individual (psychological) level, contingent on a matrix of social rewards including status, social disadvantages, and values (Ruben 1998, Rosenberg 2007). Thus, *pace* Bloch, neither social structural explanations, nor the social notion of a literate society which these explanations presuppose entail a commitment to technological determinism.

My reply to the kind of concern expressed by Bloch implies that structural explanations of the type Goody envisages come with an important caveat. Hypotheses such as that of the rise of linear narrative art are empirical claims, i.e., subject to the standard criteria that we use to evaluate social-scientific theories. Just as Goody stresses in later descriptions of his research program, the claim of such structural explanations is simply that, for now, the reference to individuals' competencies specific to literate societies, and the types of social relations which made them possible, provide the best explanation of the transition to linear narrative art in the ancient Near East, as it has indeed been suggested by Schmandt-Besserat (Goody 2004).

Against the background of the arguments in section 3.1 and 3.2 concerning the metaphysical pedigree of various literacy theses, we are also in a position to construe them as working empirical hypotheses, which are judged both individually and collectively. A social macro-theory of literate societies is open to

empirical research in a variety of fields of investigations, from research in other social studies, e.g., race, gender or kinship, to archaeology, history, semiotics, developmental psychology or cognitive neuropsychology, as well as philosophy of mind and language. This openness to cross-disciplinary research in other fields is also suggestive of my final defense of Goody's research program against methodological individualism, which will complete my reply to Bloch.

#### 4.2. Is writing unlike speech?

To remind, I defined the social notion of a literate society in terms of both institutionalized roles and rules governing the production and use of texts, and individuals' acts of discriminations based on a specific body of beliefs related to use of texts. Even so, given my stress on the causal efficacy of individuals' literate skills above, and the imprecise description of the specific body of beliefs, it is still unclear whether the individual competencies that are causally efficacious in the dynamics of a literate society are themselves intrinsic, i.e., innate or at least mostly biologically driven, or whether they are socially determined. Thus, the emphasis placed on the causal efficacy of individuals' body of beliefs for the purposes of my defence of Goody against the charge of technological determinism, makes my position potentially vulnerable to the concern that it eventually succumbs to methodological individualism or essentialism.

My task, then, is to provide an account of literate cognition, or of a literate mind, that does justice to the following constraints: to articulate what is specific, even irreducible, about the cognitive, individual layer of the second definition, but to stress that these cognitive structures are socially constructed, rather than merely innate or biological, and thus to demonstrate that our sample definition of a literate society affords the interpretation of the type of facts identified in literacy theses as *social* facts.

While Goody's work has, for the most part, not been explicitly focused on this aspect of literacy theory, it nevertheless points in a fruitful direction by stressing the important idea that (at the conceptual, cognitive level) writing is different from speech. Unlike some of his critics who emphasize that writing and speech are not different in kind (Sawyer 2002), his approach to writing supports the opposite view, and thereby offers the stepping stone to a fuller characterization of what is irreducible about literate agents' psychology.<sup>14</sup> But empirical evidence for the idea that writing is unlike speech comes from a varie-

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<sup>14</sup> The position on the cognitive status of writing is one of clearest point of discord with his critics, but it is only tackled by Sawyer 2002b, while it remains an important presupposition / ingredient of the opponents' theory.

ty of sources. I will only briefly mention three lines of evidence here, in order to show that all of them are supportive of Goody's position on writing, *and* fully consistent with our definition of a literate society (Harris 1986, Dehaene 2009, Wilson and Clark 2009).

In his account of the origins of scripts, Harris (2002) argues that the introduction of a writing system brings with it the agents' realization that "[s]peaking is only one of the ways in which we can do things with words. [T]o realize that essential limitation of speech is precisely the hallmark of literacy" (2002, 45). In developing or mastering a system of writing, speakers acquire a new stance towards speech as human activity; they come to see it as only one possible realization of linguistic competence, or only one of the ways in which humans communicate through language. Writing seems thus to enable this new perspective on language mastery as multiply realizable, and thus as more abstract than speech. Roughly, as Harris, Schmandt-Besserat or Olson envision it, the core element of the micro-level body of beliefs specific to members of a literate practice is what they call a literate conception of *language* (Harris 1986, Schmandt-Besserat 1996, Olson 2001).

While this is not the place to expand on the idea that writing skills and mental structures are unlike speech in that they involve a new understanding of linguistic content, it is important to note that this idea is not meant to underline the conceptual or cognitive superiority of literate agents, nor the historical teleological status of any writing system in particular (e.g., alphabet-based writing). But the thesis that writing is different from speech in some important aspects can also be further elaborated and supported by empirical psychological research on literacy-related skills, both in developmental psychology and in neuro-psychological accounts of the effects of reading on the brain (Olson 2001, Tolchinsky 2003). As Dehaene stresses, our learning the specific rules for writing a variety of languages is constrained by our brain architecture, and exploits the plasticity of our visual system, through a mechanism he calls neuronal recycling. According to his neuro-psychological account, the evolution of scripts can be interpreted as a long-term cultural effort to make writing "fit" for being able to invade the information-processing capabilities of our visual system (Dehaene 2009). But if so, literate skills have a cultural and neuro-psychological basis that is different in important aspects from the innate language faculty posited to explain the acquisition of our ability to produce and understand speech (Chomsky 1988).

Furthermore, Goody's emphasis on the distinction between writing and speech can also be naturally developed along the lines of the following hypothesis in the philosophy of mind, inspired by the extended cognition model of the mind: tokens of writing systems are not merely among the causes of literate skills, not merely their triggers, but literally constitutive of our literate cognitive skills and practices (Wilson and Clark 2009, Theiner 2011). Accord-

ing to this conceptually driven reasoning, certain cognitive capacities that are made possible by writing are thus by their very nature socio-cultural, i.e., their physical manifestation includes not only mental processes and events inside an individual's head but also a suite of bio-externally located representations, just as Goody intended.

To conclude, equipped with a refined version of the thesis that writing is different from speech, various literacy theorists can address Bloch's concern with technological determinism. Under this approach the supporter of the social definition of the notion of a literate society does not fall prey to the methodological individualism (or biological essentialism), as this is often suggested in literacy studies.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it also refutes Bloch's claim that "tools do not alter [agents'] purposes"(2003, 101).

### Conclusion

To summarize, in the last part of the paper, I have argued that, of the three main elements of Goody's view of writing as "a technology of the intellect," the first two are empirical hypotheses, and should thus be assessed not for their alleged conceptual failings, but rather for issues having to do with their explanatory success and corroboration with other empirical hypotheses.<sup>16</sup> Arguably, since the social definition of the notion of literate society passes the tests implied by his critics' arguments, it can also provide the basis for a sound evaluation of any counter-examples to applied, specific literacy theses, such as that by Schmandt-Besserat outlined above.

My conception of the notion of literate society also suggests that social macro-theory of literacy ought to be informed by research on literate practices in fields which are traditionally not considered relevant to literacy theory proper. Both empirical research on literate skills in fields such as archeology, cognitive psychology, and conceptually driven inquiry in social metaphysics and philosophy of mind and language contribute to the debate. By pursuing this more radically interdisciplinary approach, one can hope to test further Goody's visions for social theory, and those of his critics. However, I have

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<sup>15</sup> In my view, the characterizations of writing-based cognition reviewed in this section imply a stronger approach to the social nature of literacy than the one suggested by Sawyer's methodological nonreductive individualism. As a consequence of our cognitive limitations, and broadly of our human nature, we do not develop literate skills and the accompanying abstract conception of language unless we construct, in a social setting, the technology required for representing core features of our language faculty. At least to reflect this feature of literacy accurately, I would argue that we need an *ontological* position on it, and a *holistic* one to boot.

<sup>16</sup> As outlined in section 2, the first two elements of Goody's position are (a) his theses concerning the *variety of consequences* writing practices have for a society's understanding and manipulating of the world and (b) his construal of writing as a communicative practice (cognitively) *different* from speech.

tried to show that we can safely put to rest the critics' attack against the *social* notion of a literate society Goody's position presupposes.

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