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From Wholes to Collectives
Steps to an Ontology of Social Forms

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As is the case with most of our creeds and opinions, the ambivalent attitude toward the question of holism that this chapter reflects is largely the product of the personal history of its author, both as an anthropologist educated in a specific intellectual tradition and as an ethnographer with fieldwork experience among Amazonian Indians. Although confessions are misplaced in theoretical writings, a few initial words about the context within which I developed some of the ideas that are put forward in this chapter may help to throw a light on its main argument. In the 1970s, during my early training first as a philosopher and then as an anthropologist – both domains, in France, are closely connected – I came to accept without much questioning the idea that society exists as a whole, distinct from, and superior to, the sum of its parts, a transcendent entity that is mainly responsible for most of our behavior through mechanisms that it is the duty of the social sciences to elucidate. Together with the sociological vocabulary that sustained it, this received wisdom had even percolated into the common sense of laypersons in such a way that it was normal for people then, as it still is now, to blame "society" in general (not their boss, their wife, or the ruling class) for their specific predicament, or otherwise to claim that it was "society" that had made them behave the way they did. I will come later to the historical roots of this conception, but suffice to say here that it was reinforced at the time by our enthusiastic endorsement of a version of Marxism wherein the form of the State, the nature of the relations of production, and the movement of history were the products not so much of the individual and collective actions of real people, but rather the outcome of abstract forces and structural contradictions; as for the desired outcome of the revolutionary process that we were fervently attempting to trigger, it took the appearance of this most holistic of wholes, a global classless community of humans wherein each one would be dependent upon everyone else.

And then I went to Amazonia. There, I lived with a bunch of people who had no chiefs, no villages, no descent groups, no history, no religion, and no ritual to speak of; a bundle of individualities who were uncertain as to who they were collectively and not particularly keen to ascertain it, who never acted willingly as a corporate group, and who spent a great deal of their time trying to kill each other. Society, as I had learned to recognize it, was conspicuously absent among the Achuar, as were absent a few other conceptual props that I had brought in my anthropological tool kit: no

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nature and no culture, no economics and no politics, no ancestors and no memory. I found instead what I had not been prepared to deal with as an ethnographer: a scatter of forceful individualists and strong personalities, proud in their bearing and prompt to disagree, lovers of solitude and enemies of authority. I was baffled and not a little disheartened at first, but soon found solace in the challenge of trying to make sense of an aggregate of people who managed perfectly well to interact – and, on the whole, to be happy – within the framework, so to speak, of a Hobbesian state of nature. However, this utter lack of wholeness did not show in my initial writings, largely because of the holistic effect of the ethnographic endeavor, a feature to which I shall return. Also, it soon became clear that there was another, more embracing, kind of wholeness that deserved attention, namely, the process of totalization by the means of which Achuar individuals managed, in spite of their lack of integrative institutions and formal devices of cultural inculcation, to endow their actions with a markedly distinctive style, the effect of which was to present to the observer all the components of a quite homogeneous ethos, and one which became after a while rather predictable. The paradoxical combination that I encountered among the Achuar, between what appeared as a remarkable conformism in behavior (but conformity to what?) and a remarkable paucity of formal structures susceptible to impose conformity, thus led me to explore the processes through which people schematize seemingly in unison their experience of the world without necessarily being aware of how they operate. Before expounding on this topic, however, and in order to throw some light on the shortcomings that we have to supersede, the first part of my chapter will deal with some of the conditions and consequences of anthropological holism.

The Coherence of Experience

A much discussed peculiarity of the ethnographic method, a legacy from the time when it was mainly practiced in societies devoid of written records, is that it draws almost exclusively upon the direct information that can be gathered by a single person, most often in face-to-face encounters. Since that person, barring exceptional circumstances, cannot interact meaningfully with all the members of the group that she observes, she will infer from the behavior and the statements of the few individuals with whom she is best acquainted the norms and practices of the whole community. And since not everything in what she hears and watches seems relevant to her descriptive and interpretive project, she will tend to select, in the massive quantity of observations that she accumulates daily, the events and utterances that appear to be most congruent with what she progressively grasps as being the main fault lines of the group she studies. These "data," already sifted and purified, will form the core material of the description that she writes upon coming home. Although ethnographic fieldwork has become the trademark of anthropology (rather unduly, for anthropology has more to offer than erudite travel accounts and covert autobiographies) and although it has yielded interesting results time and again, it is a bizarre proceeding nevertheless, in that it aims at the most sweeping generalizations out of the most minute observations of a very reduced number of persons. This is achieved thanks to two totalizing devices, seemingly contradictory but quite complementary: expansion by inference and downsizing by reduction in scale.

Expansion is the process thanks to which scattered information, very often gathered informally, acquires progressively the status of a template as it is reorganized in the

mind of the ethnographer so as to provide her with a clearer picture of where she stands in the community that she has chosen to study. In the same manner as one of the first tasks of the ethnographer upon landing in a strange village or neighborhood is to draw a rudimentary map and make a preliminary census, so as to identify who is who and who lives where, the general information gathered by the ethnographer becomes willy-nilly a *vade mecum* that allows her to find her way about in social space and operate as a moderately competent actor in the group she elected. By necessity, then, expansion draws on the unifying character of one's own experience, as fluxes of information and sensations are processed reflectively to provide a framework, not so much for interpretation, at least initially, as for basic actions; a framework that progressively evolves from a series of scripts allowing an efficient handling of situations in a foreign environment ("Who can I trust?" "Who can give me shelter?" "Where can I find food?") to the implicit notion that the small group of people with whom one interacts day after day forms the fractal image of a coherent whole at a wider scale. The only way to escape from this implicit subsumption would be to focus exclusively on the mechanisms thanks to which situations are constructed and speech acts are produced (i.e., paying exclusive attention to the pragmatics of daily life and trying to ignore the wider context). But this is almost impossible: when analyzing an interaction between a group of persons, the observer cannot put into brackets the assumption that some persons act the way they do because they have a vested authority entrusted to them by the ancestors, the State, or the CEO, while others appear to behave submissively because they belong to a minor lineage or to an exploited minority. A reference to the whole (i.e., to the grand picture of institutions, contrasting roles, status differences, and cosmological predicates) always forces its way back into the interpretation because, in our daily lives as in our job as social scientists, we tend to make sense of unexpected situations by subsuming them under more general patterns.

Reduction in scale is the natural outcome of this process when it comes to the writing-up stage: since the great whole cannot be described in its complexity, it is reduced to a scale model wherein some features of the purported prototype will be given prominence while others will be played down or will altogether disappear. What is aimed at here is that the monograph should become a plausible microcosm of the unattainable macrocosm, a vivid picture in which the relative proportions and structure of the whole are faithfully depicted so as to provide an opening into the experience of this whole that the ethnographer has undergone. In that respect, the much heralded mutation in the style of ethnographical accounts over the past two or three decades amounts in fact to very little: in spite of the advocacy for a fragmented, kaleidoscopic ethnography, the whole has not subsided but has moved from the foreground to the background, where it provides the vista upon which the ethnographer opens the window of her soul. True, the whole is not depicted as it was in older, more conventional, monographs; it is suggested by clues interspersed in the ongoing conversations with informants, much as Balzac and Proust used to do when they gave a picture in filigree of the social stage on which their characters evolved. But the massive system of norms, rules, and statuses is there nevertheless, albeit more discreetly, much as the codes of the aristocratic society of the Faubourg Saint Germain are cleverly suggested in all their intricacy in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, to provide the meaningful context within which the main characters evolve.

A paradox of the ethnographic method is that it was invented by the British rather than by the Germans (although Malinowski, by his initial intellectual upbringing, was probably more German than English). For ethnography as participant observation

gives more readily access to culture as defined in the German tradition than to society in the Durkheimian sense that became the standard object of British social anthropology. That each nation, people, or tribe conforms a unique and cohesive assemblage of material and intellectual features, solidified by tradition, typical of a certain mode of life, rooted in the idiosyncratic categories of a language, and responsible for the specificity of the behavior of its members, is an idea which became prominent among some German-speaking authors of the nineteenth century as the core concept leading to national unity and ethnic emancipation. And this idea of culture is better attuned to the kind of experience that an ethnographer grapples with when he is immersed in a foreign system of values, than to the notion of society as an intricate and cohesive mechanism the components of which can be described independently, a notion which came to be seen as the result of the kind of fieldwork advocated by British functionalism. As Jonathan Friedman argues (Chapter 13, this volume), "social functionalism" refers to the interlocking of parts in the definition of the whole, while cultural holism refers to a semantic closure which renders difficult to distinguish the parts. In other words: society is observed, culture is experienced. This is why the processes subsumed under the latter will always appear as more coherent to the observer than the devices making up the former; they will also lend themselves more easily to their perception as a whole the parts of which are difficult to disentangle. It is because the living body of society can be, and has been, decomposed fairly easily on the dissecting tables of monographs (a material basis, a social organization, a system of collective representations) that it was necessary to insist, as a sort of afterthought, upon its organic cohesiveness and functional unity. No such thing can be done with culture, as evidenced by the unsuccessful efforts made in the United States by the cultural materialists to dissociate an ecological and technical infrastructure from the rest of the cultural whole.

However, the experiential holism derived from the practice of ethnography does not constitute the main substrate of holism as a paradigm of the social sciences, merely a phenomenological confirmation. For ethnography is the experience of a cultural whole that, by definition, is irreducible to any other. And anthropology, as the example of Radcliffe-Brown *a contrario* testified, cannot be based upon inductive generalizations from ethnographic particulars (Radcliffe-Brown 1958: ch. 1). True, this form of "butterfly collecting" (to follow Leach's cruel jest; see Leach 1961: 2) has regained favor in the past decades, as the heady rejection of master narratives began to clash with the selfish desire to endow one's own ethnography with a nobler destiny than the propagation of local gossip, resulting in a haphazard mosaic of minor narratives united by superficial resemblances, a tedious combination that has kept the number of readers of books of anthropology steadily falling down. But anthropology, it must be emphasized time and again, *is not* ethnography. The kind of anthropology that ignited my vocation, inspired by the writings and teachings of giants such as Lévi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Bateson, and Dumézil, is not at all descriptive, it is not interpretive, and it is not even holistic properly speaking. It purports to render less obscure the human condition, that is, the manifold relations that *Homo sapiens* entertains with the world. Such an objective cannot be achieved by merely describing the infinitely varied ways in which humans give meaning to their lives in the hope that this addition of specifics will result in fruitful generalizations; it can only be attained by making learned guesses about the properties of specific human institutions and practices, and checking how these hypotheses fit with the human record by experimenting with a few well-chosen case studies that appear to contrast with one another in a systematic way. As Lévi-Strauss aptly put it, "[I]t is not comparison which founds

generalization, but the reverse" (1958: 28). If there is indeed, as George Marcus argues (Chapter 3, this volume), an "aesthetic of ethnographic holism," a disposition to which I yielded myself once as a literary experiment (Descola 1996), it cannot be an aesthetic of the anthropological project as such. For, however entertaining they may be, collage, induction, and free association provide a very impoverished and unconvincing form of "trans-ethnographic" holism. The idea of a whole with a distinct identity from that of its components would never have taken the hold it has over the social sciences if it were merely an outcome of the experiential dimension of ethnography; the latter only confirms and reinforces the deceptive obviousness of the former. So we have to look elsewhere for the persistence of this notion.

A Nostalgia for Ordered Wholes

The holist paradigm is mainly a product of the institution of modern sociology by Comte and Durkheim, itself a distant outcome of the Kantian notion of the state as a *persona moralis*, that is, a nonhuman entity endowed with human attributes – in particular, the ability to freely exercise rights and duties – which distinguished this body politic from a mere thing (Kant 1795: VIII, 344). For Durkheim, society is to be seen as a sort of person, but "qualitatively different from the individual personalities which compose it" (Durkheim 1996 [1924]: 53), the relationship between parts and whole being somewhat metaphysical: each individual hosts a fragment of society internalized through education, and it is this very fragment which makes him or her not so much an individual (since individuation, for Durkheim, results from the possession of a specific material body) but a proper person, that is, a refraction of the "spiritual principle" that serves as the soul of the *collectivité* (Durkheim 1960 [1912]: 380). Paradoxically for what came to be regarded as the moral foundation of a secular republic, this conception of the relation between individual and society appears to draw some of its inspiration from early Christian representations of the sociocosmic polity (Paulinian and Augustinian, in particular) and more generally from the holistic conceptualization of collectives that is typical of what I have called elsewhere "analogist ontologies" (Descola 2005), a theme to which I shall return later. Durkheim's notion of society can thus be seen as a nostalgic echo of a period when the acid of individualism had not yet dissolved the cohesion and solidarity of the social whole, a period when the effervescence of collective rituals fueled the emotional adhesion of all fellow citizens to something greater than themselves.[1] But this notion is also a discreet advocacy for a more enlightened future when, in the midst of a new eruption of "creative effervescence," new ideals will surge to provide humanity afresh with a guidance (Durkheim 1960 [1912]: 548). This messianic prediction, very much in line with the socialist inclinations of the Durkheimians, builds a bridge between the mechanical solidarity of the hierarchical wholes of the past and the true cohesion and integration of the egalitarian wholes to come, a bridge that crosses over the selfishness of possessive individualism, and its translation into the neoclassical economics of Menger, Walras, and Pareto.[2] This is why Tarde was so vilified – and misunderstood – by the Durkheimians: although he shared with Durkheim a superficially Leibnizian conception of the relation between parts and whole, his monadology posits individuals and their ontological differences at the core of the system, not the individual as a refraction of the whole (see, e.g., Tarde 1999 [1893]).

While he had the huge merit of granting the social sciences a domain, a method, and a legitimacy, Durkheim has also rendered hopelessly aporetic the sociological treatment of the relation between parts and whole, impeding as a consequence any original approach of the individual within the confines of his sociology. For Durkheimian sociology is based on the society as a "collective person," from which are deduced the individual persons who are its diffracted emanations, thus stripping them of their agency and capacity for change. Society is given prior to any human presence and individual action, compelling the sociologist to invent a new regime of existence for this transcendent entity, and a new system of forces to explain how it acts upon the individuals and how the individuals manage to sustain it. There is an element of magic in this process, and it comes as no surprise that Durkheim recurs to the magical notion of *mana* to designate this suprapersonal agent that constitutes society and to which all individuals contribute (Durkheim 1960 [1912]: 378–82). Mauss and Lévi-Strauss have retaken this mysterious notion under a different guise, not as a substantial binding force but as a "symbolic function," that is, as a set of differential relations which constitute, notably through language, the social order of culture. As society is, genetically, a prerequisite of social action for Durkheim, symbolism is for Lévi-Strauss a given that, so to speak, predates its actualization by humans as it provides the framework for their actions.[3] Both postulates seem highly unlikely, especially in the light of what we know now about the very gradual nature of the hominization process.

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Although Lévi-Strauss has retained from Durkheim the idea that the expression of culture requires a template that, at least phylogenetically, appears to exist independently from, and previous to, its actual implementation by humans, he has also made a gigantic step toward the elimination of empirical wholes by focusing on the study of structures rather than bounded social groups. As Jean Pouillon neatly sums it, "[S]tructuralism, properly speaking, begins when one admits that different sets can be brought together, not in spite, but *because* of their differences, which are then susceptible to be patterned" (1975: 15–16). This general principle that systematic differences matter more than haphazard resemblances is what is most distinctive in structural anthropology, with the result that the object of study is not anymore a "thing out there," but a constructed combinatory that must account for all the states of a set of phenomena based on the chartering of the ordered differences between its elements. In structural anthropology, wholes are never given or even presupposed. They result from the operation by the virtue of which provisionally isolated entities – be they social groups, cultural features, fragments of myth, ritual sequences, norms, social positions, techniques, or images – are constituted as variants of an analytically constructed totality, which, of course, has no proper empirical existence, no more, say, than a cladogram. Of course, it could be argued that converting into variants within a group of transformation certain phenomena that have been rendered discrete for the sake of analysis constitutes the basis of a distinctively structuralist brand of holism (see, e.g., Jonathan Friedman, Chapter 13, this volume). But it should be pointed out also that such a method in fact dissolves the very idea of a whole as a fixed combination of parts, since there are as many totalities as there are ways of defining the variants and their

salient properties (i.e., the types of contrast between them that are meaningful). For Lévi-Strauss a myth hardly exists in itself, within a coherent whole that it would reflect and of which it would give a partial account; rather, it exists at the point where it meets other myths of other cultures and thus acquires its meaning by opposition. As Marshall Sahlins shows convincingly (in Chapter 7, this volume), this intercultural schismogenesis that is played out on a number of boundaries applies to much more than mythical structure: to political systems, to definitions of identity and status, to the values ascribed to different types of wealth. There is nothing holistic in such an attitude, except if one takes the word as meaning a process of disentanglement from locality, of treating phenomena at the level of contrast where they can be most productive, and of abstracting properties and regularities from the flow of narratives and practices. But rather than label that "holism," it is better to call it by its proper name: science.

One of the main objections that have been made to structural anthropology is that if the model is not a mirror image of a discrete empirical phenomenon (if such a thing exists), then there is no way to ascertain a possible congruence between the model that the anthropologist constructs and the processes and patterns by the means of which peoples tacitly organize their experience and knowledge of the world. In other words we are incapable of tracing how structures could migrate from the plane of the intelligible to the plane of the conditions of their empirical existence. Lévi-Strauss himself devoted little attention to this practical problem, except by surmising that the integration of the intelligible with the empirical must result from the operation of "conceptual schemes," here understood in a Piagetian, and ultimately Kantian, sense (Lévi-Strauss 1962a: 173).

Now this notion of schema has been rejuvenated in the past 20 years thanks to a series of work in cognitive psychology that has given it a sounder experimental basis and has made of it a promising candidate for a nonpropositional structure organizing habitus, guiding inferences, and filtering perception.[4] Schemata are not internalized through formal inculcation; they do not exist in the heaven of ideas, ready to be captured by consciousness; they are progressively constructed within communities of practice by individuals who share comparable experiences. In that respect, schemata help to render less obscure the relation between a structural model and a cultural pattern: one may think that what the former brings to light is the general pattern according to which members of a collective schematize their experience, a pattern which thus becomes the organizing principle of the system of explicit codification to which they adhere. The adequacy between the model and the underlying characteristics that it purportedly reveals would thus accrue from the fact that these characteristics, rather than revealing universal properties of the mind (except at a very abstract level), express the very frames and processes of tacit objectivation thanks to which the actors themselves organize their relations to the world. Midway between praxis and structure, a schema is an interface that is at the same time concrete (it is embodied in individuals and implemented in practices), particularized (it actualizes specific affordances), and quite abstract (it can only be detected through its effects, without being for that the emanation of mysterious entities such as the "symbolic function" or the "collective unconscious"). Two such schemata appear to play a prominent role in the process of totalization by the means of which we structure our relations with the world. One is *predication*, the detection of qualities among existents which generates ontological identifications; the other is *binding*, the unfolding of a dominant pattern of interaction with humans and nonhumans alike. I will examine each of them in turn.

It is implausible to assume that affordances alone are enough to stabilize our judgments about the ontological attributes of objects in our environment: although context and pragmatics are instrumental in passing *specific* judgments of identity (whether what we perceive is an effigy, a living animal, or a spirit), they do not provide as such the patterns that organize the ontological categories to which we refer what we perceive. These are the products of cognitive dispositions which allow us to predicate identities by lumping together, or dissociating, elements of the lived world that appear to have similar or dissimilar qualities. I have argued elsewhere that one of the universal features of the human mind upon which such dispositions rest is the awareness of a duality between material processes (hereby called "physicality") and mental states (hereby called "interiority") (Descola 2005: secs. II–III; for an English summary, see Descola 2006). By using this universal grid, humans are in a position to emphasize or minimize continuity and difference between humans and nonhumans. Thus, on the physicality axis, one view may maintain that all physical bodies are essentially ruled by identical "natural" principles, while the opposing one stresses differences and postulates that what marks out different kinds of entities is, precisely, the bodies they inhabit. Similarly, on the interiority axis, the emphasis may be on continuity (the souls of all beings are the same) or on discontinuities (humans form a race apart because of their soul or mind). These dispositions thus generate four major ontologies, that is, systems of qualities ascribed to things in the world, which I have respectively labeled "animism," "totemism," "naturalism," and "analogism."

Animism is an ontology wherein humans and nonhumans reputedly have the same kind of interiority but are differentiated by the bodies they inhabit. It is most common among native populations of Amazonia, northern North America, northern Siberia, and some parts of Southeast Asia and Melanesia, who maintain that animals, plants, and even inanimate objects have a human-like intentionality, lodged within a mobile bodily clothing which nevertheless determines, because of its anatomical features, the type of world they have access to and how they see it. *Totemism* is taken here not in the sense rendered common by Lévi-Strauss of a universal classificatory device using natural discontinuities to signify social segmentation (Lévi-Strauss 1962b), but rather as an ontology that stresses the continuity between humans and nonhumans both on the physicality axis (common substances) and on the interiority one (common essences). It is best exemplified by Australian Aboriginal cultures where specific plant and animal species are believed to share with particular sets of humans an identical complex of essential qualities, but one that is absolutely different from other similar groupings. The reference for the totemic class is not a specific natural object to which one identifies (Frazer), nor a relation between natural objects used as a template for a relation between human groups (Lévi-Strauss), but a bundle of precisely defined moral and physical qualities usually subsumed under the name of an overarching property that serves as a taxon for naming the totem. *Naturalism* is the mirror opposite of animism and characterizes the modern world and Western thought. It insists on the differences between humans and nonhumans on the interiority axis: humans alone are supposed to have a meaningful selfhood whether individual (mind, capacity for symbolism) or collective (*Volksgeist*, cultures). By contrast, clearly since Descartes, and more neatly even since Darwin, humans and nonhumans are linked by their shared physicality: they belong to a continuum where the same laws of physics, biology, and chemistry apply. Finally, *analogism* assumes discontinuities on both axes, postulating microdifferences among the components of the world at an infra-individual level, but setting up various kinds of correspondences (hence "analogism")

between these heterogeneous elements so as to weave them in a seemingly seamless continuum. Analogism was the dominant ontology in Europe from Antiquity to the Renaissance, and it is still extremely common elsewhere: in China and India, in Western Africa, or among native cultures of Mexico and the Andes.

This fourfold schema should not be taken as a taxonomy of tightly isolated "worldviews," but rather as an unfolding of the phenomenological consequences of four different systems of inferences about the identities of things in the world. According to circumstances, each human is capable of making any of the four inferences, but will most likely pass a judgment of identity according to the ontological context (i.e., the systematization for a group of humans of one of the inferences only) where he or she was socialized. Also, historical processes of internal transformation and diffusion will result very often in a combination between a dominant ontology and a recessive one, so that this typology should be taken as a heuristic device rather than as a method for classifying societies. A useful device, however, as it brings to light the reasons for some of the structural regularities observable in the ways the phenomenological world is instituted (cultural "styles") and for the compatibilities and incompatibilities between such regularities, both of these endeavors being basic anthropological tasks that have been too quickly discarded and thus left open to crude naturalistic approaches.

We can now move to "binding." The four ontological archipelagos become internally differentiated by various elementary patterns of relation that shape interactions between humans and nonhumans alike. These relations can be divided into two main groups: on the one hand, exchange, predation, and gift (wherein a value moves between potentially reversible terms that have an equivalent ontological status), and on the other hand, production, protection, and transmission (wherein the relation is oriented between hierarchical terms). Although this set of relations can be said to form the basic toolkit of the social sciences, they have to be qualified. For instance, by contrast with Mauss' position, I posit that gift must be differentiated from exchange, as the latter operation always calls for a double movement of give and take, while the first one excludes by principle a counterpart (otherwise, it would not be a gift). Similarly, production is in no way the universal process it passes for in Marxist and constructivist approaches: the idea of an intentional agent imposing a form on matter according to a mental blueprint is a model of action that is unknown in most non-European cultures.

These patterns of relations are partly based on cognitive processes such as schematic induction or the analogical transposition between domains, but are not inbuilt categorical imperatives; rather, they should be treated as objectified properties of collective life which come to be embodied in physical and mental dispositions, and are thus stabilized as habitus. Giving (including oneself) to others, taking or receiving from them, exchanging with them, but also appropriating others, protecting them, producing them, or placing oneself in their dependence form the basic set of interpersonal actions that humans have inherited from their phylogeny; it should come as no surprise that they provide a repertory from which each collective will draw a favorite mode of relating to others. However, a dominant ontology may be affected by various patterns of relations, thus causing variations of *ethos* within an apparently homogeneous cosmological framework. This is the case with animism in native Amazonia, for instance: the three main styles of interactions between humans and nonhumans alike which can be found there are exchange, predation, and sharing, each human collective favoring one option to the detriment of others. Within a

cosmological pattern which renders native Amazonia a distinctive cultural area, various sets of relations operate in the shaping of differentiated *ethos*, and thus account for internal diversity (in particular, the contrast between bellicose and more pacific tribes).

We are now in a position to get back to wholes. Although I share with advocates of actor–network theory (e.g., Latour 2005) the premise that the notion of "society" is not an *explicantia* but an *explicandum*, I differ from them in that I am deeply convinced that there are structural constraints to the ways humans and nonhumans assemble. For each ontology in a way prefigures a specific type of collective more appropriate to the gathering within a common destiny of the kinds of being that this ontology distinguishes. By "collective," a concept I borrow from Latour (1991), I mean a way of assembling humans and nonhumans in a network of specific relations, by contrast with the traditional notion of society which is the result of a specific process of filtering, proper to late naturalism, thanks to which sets of humans have been arbitrarily detached from the web of relations they maintain with nonhumans. Far from being a founding prerequisite from which everything else is derived, sociality proceeds rather from the process of collecting and assembling into a common set that each mode of identification predetermines. Thus, the property of being social is not what explains, but what must be explained. And the totalization of experience to which every actor constantly proceeds, and that the analyst tries to decipher, amounts to recapitulating a pattern of distribution of beings into collectives: who or what is assembled with whom or what, in what way, and for what purpose? But each of the "wholes" which result from this patterning process is in every respect different from the others, and none of them is exactly equivalent to the "whole" of Durkheimian sociology. This is why we must now turn to a description of the characteristics of these collectives.

A Typology of Collectives

I shall begin with animism. In such systems, all the classes of beings endowed with an interiority similar to that of humans live in collectives that possess the same kind of structure and properties: they all have chiefs, shamans, rituals, dwellings, techniques, artifacts; they assemble and quarrel, provide for their subsistence, and marry according to rules. But these collectives, that are all integrally social and cultural, are also distinguished from one another by the fact that their members have different morphologies and behavior. Each collective is equivalent to a sort of tribe-species that establishes with other tribes-species relations of sociability of the same type as those that are held legitimate within the given human collective that ascribes its internal organization, its system of values, and its mode of life to the collectives of nonhumans with which it interacts. The so-called natural and supernatural domains are thus peopled by nonhuman collectives with which human collectives maintain relations according to norms that are deemed common to all. For although humans and nonhumans may exchange perspectives (Viveiros de Castro 1996), they also and above all exchange signs, that is, indications that they understand each other in their practical interactions. And these signs can only be interpreted by all parties concerned if they are predicated on common institutions that legitimate them and give them a meaning, thus warranting that the misunderstandings in interspecific communication will be

minimized. This is why all the isomorphous collectives of humans and nonhumans take as their model a specific human collective.

The concept of species which provides a template for animic collectives can hardly be equated with a sociological whole in the Durkheimian sense. It is a collection of exemplars that bear a family resemblance (i.e., a living kind in an inductive sense). The prototypical homogeneity of the members of the species rests on broad morphological and ethological similarities (toucans have distinctive beaks and plumage, have a specific system of communication, and live in couples; Achuar have distinctive facial paintings and feather ornaments, have a specific language, and marry their cross cousins), not on any overarching properties intrinsic to the class that would reverberate or trickle down into its components. There is no superiority of the class over its parts, especially as the specificity of the species is based here on the fact that its members experience themselves as such because the very existence of the other species with whom they interact, be they human or nonhuman, allows them to ascertain that they are different from them, since the members of these other species hold of them a different point of view from the one they hold themselves. In other words, the perspective of the putative classifier must be absorbed by the classified in order for the latter to see himself as entirely specific, an absorption that is often realized quite literally in the animic world, through cannibalism, for instance.

I will not dwell on the sociological formula of naturalism, since it is the one that is most familiar to us and that we deem, mistakenly, to be universal: humans are distributed within collectives differentiated by their languages, beliefs, and institutions – what we call "cultures" – which exclude everything that exists independently from them, namely, nature and artifacts. The paradigm of collectives is here human society, *by contrast* to an anomic nature. Humans associate freely, they elaborate rules and conventions that they can choose to infringe, they transform their environment and share tasks in the procurement of their subsistence, they create signs and values that they exchange – in sum, they do everything that nonhuman animals do not do. And it is against the background of this fundamental difference that the distinctive properties attributed to human collectives stand out; as Hobbes says with his robust concision, "To make Covenant with bruit Beasts, is impossible" (Hobbes 1914 [1651]: ch. 14, p. 71). The idea of a social contract, so central from Grotius to Rousseau as a philosophical artifact to legitimate sovereignty, points to the very limited scope of the whole that is created by the sum of its components when they decided to forfeit a portion of their free will to create something greater, and above all more powerful, than themselves. In early modern political philosophy, collectives are seen properly speaking as collections, mere gatherings of human individuals who pull together their moral assets so as to foster their personal interests. Even Rousseau, familiar though he was with the rustic democracy of his place of birth, did not envision the gathering of fellow-citizens as a society in the conventional sense of Durkheimian sociology, that is, as an autonomous entity animated by a specifically collective interest which would be more than, and qualitatively different from, the sum of particular wills. Durkheim himself stated the difference quite clearly when he compared his own view of collective utility, determined as a function of the social being considered in its organic unity, with common interest conceived by Rousseau as "the interest of the mean individual" (*l'intérêt de l'individu moyen*) finding its way into the general will through the addition of what is useful to everyone (Durkheim 1918: 138–9). It is a paradox of naturalism that a holist conception of society emerged when its collectives were no longer organic wholes but conflictive aggregates of supposedly isonomic individuals, while the contractualist

political philosophers who laid the theoretical foundations of possessive individualism and of an atomistic conception of polities did so at a time when holistic and hierarchically organized collectives, typical of the analogist regime, were in full bloom.

The question of totemic collectives is more complex as its history is fraught with controversies. Traditionally, totemism has been conceptualized as a form of social organization in which humans are distributed in interlocking groups that borrow their characteristics from natural kinds, either because these groups are said to share certain attributes with a set of nonhumans, or because they take as models for patterning their internal differences the contrasts between eponymous species. Now, this broadly sociocentric definition has the disadvantage of introducing an analytical dichotomy between social categories and natural categories that appears to be absent from the ontological premises of those paradigmatic totemists, the Australian Aborigines. There, specific sets of humans and nonhumans grouped within named classes share a core of neatly defined moral and physical attributes owing to the fact that they are issued from the same ontological prototypes – the "Beings of the Dreamtime." These attributes that crosscut species boundaries are not derived from what is improperly called an "eponym entity," since the word designating the totem in many cases is not the name of a species (i.e., a biological taxon) but rather the name of an abstract quality which is present in this species as well as in all the beings subsumed under it in a totemic grouping (von Brandenstein 1982: 54). For instance, the Nungar of southwest Australia had two totemic moieties, respectively called *maarnetj*, that can be translated as "the catcher," and *waardar*, which means "the watcher," these two terms also being used to designate the totems of these moieties, the White Cockatoo and the Crow (von Brandenstein 1977). Here, the names of the totemic classes are terms that denote qualities that are also used to designate the totemic species, and not the reverse, that is, names of zoological taxa from which would be inferred the typical attributes of the totemic classes. These contrasted qualities in turn function as labels for bundles of more precisely defined attributes. To return to the Nungar, humans and nonhumans who belong to the moiety of "the catcher" are lightly colored, rotund, and impulsive, while those of the moiety of "the watcher" are dark, short, massive, and vindictive. Such qualities cannot be directly elicited from the observation of the White Cockatoo or the Crow; they express a repertoire of more abstract, contrasted predicates for which these two emblematic species are the best exemplars.

Rather than defining totemism by the transposition to the social domain of natural differences or natural properties, then, it is more appropriate to view it as a system wherein sets of humans and nonhumans are *jointly* distributed in collectives (the totemic classes) which are isomorphous and complementary, by contrast with animism wherein humans and nonhumans are distributed *separately* in collectives (tribes-species) which are also isomorphous, but which remain autonomous in relation to each other. To return to the example of the Nungar, in the moiety of "the getter" iconically represented by the White Cockatoo, one does find cockatoos, as well as the human half of the Nungar tribe, but one finds also eagles, pelicans, snakes, mosquitoes, and whales, in short an apparently ill-assorted aggregate of species that cannot be matched with any of the groupings of organisms that the environment spontaneously offers to observation. Such a mode of aggregation offers a marked contrast with the norms of composition of animic collectives. For although these differ from one another because of the monospecific recruitment of their members, they are nevertheless homogeneous as regards their principles of organization: for the Makuna of Colombia, the tapir tribe has the same type of leader, shaman, and ritual system as has the peccary tribe, the toucan tribe, and, of course, the Makuna tribe (Århem

1996). This is not so with totemic collectives, which are also all different as regards the composition of their members, but which are furthermore hybrid in their contents and heterogeneous in their principles of assemblage.

This is particularly the case in Australia, where there exists a great variety of totemic groupings (recruitment being defined according to gender, generation, site of conception, descent group, etc.) and where humans can belong simultaneously to several of them. Here again, the contrast is notable with animic collectives which are on the contrary predicated on a species-specific physicality, since the affiliation to each "society" is based on the fact that all its members share the same physical appearance, the same habitat, the same diet, and the same mode of reproduction. It is in animism, not in totemism, that the biological species provides a model for the composition of collectives. And this is so because animic collectives, like biological species, are never integrated into a functional whole at a higher level: above the Achuar tribe-species, the toucan tribe-species, and the peccary tribe-species, there is nothing in common, except this abstract predicate that anthropologists who try to make sense of these arrangements call "culture." No such thing with totemism, where the integrative whole formed by the juxtaposition of the different totemic classes cannot be represented on the basis of the groupings that the natural world proposes: the only available model would be the species, since the genus is a taxonomic fiction, but the species is precisely not liable to be decomposed in contrastive segments that would be analogous to totemic classes. While animism and naturalism take human society as the paradigm of collectives, totemism thus mixes in hybrid sets, humans and nonhumans that use one another in order to produce social linkage, generic identity, and attachment to places. But it does so by fragmenting the constitutive units so that the properties of each of them become complementary and their assemblage dependent upon the differentials that they present.

Finally, in collectives that function under an analogist regime, humans and nonhumans always appear as constitutive elements of a wider set, coextensive with the universe: cosmos and society become indistinguishable, whatever the types of internal segmentation that such a totality requires in order to remain efficient. For the analogist collective is always divided into interdependent constitutive units which are structured according to a logic of segmentary nesting: lineages, moieties, castes, and descent groups prevail here and expand the connections of humans with other beings from the underworld to the heavens. Although the exterior of the collective is not entirely ignored, it remains an "out-world" where disorder reigns, a periphery that may be feared, despised, or predestined to join the central core as a new segment that will fit in the slot that has been allocated to it long before. All analogist collectives, even those that ignore political stratification and disparities of wealth, have in common that their parts are ordered hierarchically, if only at a symbolic level. The hierarchical distribution is often redoubled within each segment, delimitating subsets which are in the same unequal relation one to the other as the encompassing units. The classical illustration is the Hindu caste system as described by Louis Dumont, where the general schema of encompassment is repeated within each of the successive levels of subordination: in the subcastes composing the castes, in the clans composing the subcastes, and in the lineal groups composing the clans (Dumont 1966). This is because hierarchies that encompass too many elements become difficult to manipulate practically, so that devices are required to structure their lineal gradation and to attenuate the range of the discontinuities which fragment them.

It is even highly probable that what Dumont defines as holism, that is, a system of value which subordinates the position of each existent in a hierarchy, and the cohesion

of the latter, to a whole that is transcendent to its parts, is not so much, as he contends, a general criterion which distinguishes nonmodern societies from modern individualism (Dumont 1977), but rather a means employed by the sole analogist ontologies in order to render manageable an enormous accumulation of singularities. In that respect, as Jonathan Friedman argues (Chapter 13, this volume), Dumont's notion of holism is indeed emic in that it uses a model, or perhaps an intuition, provided by a specific culture in order to account for a more general feature of certain social formations. However, and by contrast with Mauss explaining the power of the gift with the vernacular notion of the *hau*, the fact that the idea of holism retains a distinctive Indian flavor has not prevented Dumont from successfully transforming it into a methodological procedure defining a much admired and much contested kind of anthropological orientation (this is the argument put forward by Bruce Kapferer in Chapter 11 of this volume). India was a very efficient springboard for Dumont in his ambition to decolonize European concepts and modes of analysis – more effectively, one should add, than most of what has been done recently under the label of "postcolonial studies" – in that it provided the inspiration for what is certainly his major achievement, to wit, the discovery that many oppositions are implicitly hierarchical, and that the terms which compose them are in a different relation to the whole which encompasses them – Adam is opposed to Eve both as the prototype of the male members of the human species and as the very prototype of this species, thus encompassing Eve in her position as the female prototype.[5] But this concept of hierarchical opposition which is universally used as an intellectual tool to organize internal differences in analogist collectives, or so I surmise, is quite uncommon in the structuring of other types of collectives, be they totemic (components of totemic classes are ontologically equivalent and the classes themselves are not hierarchical), animic (tribes-species are isometric), or, obviously, naturalist. Dumont's holism is thus a rare case of a concept originally identified within a specific civilization, although based on a probably universal feature of the human mind (hierarchical opposition as a classificatory device), but one that is not universally implemented in the structuring and conceptualization of collectives.

By contrast with the egalitarian and monospecific collectives of animism and with the egalitarian and heterogeneous collectives of totemism – collectives that are bound in both cases to enter into relation with others – the analogist collective is unique, divided into hierarchized segments and in almost exclusive relation with itself. It is thus self-sufficient, for it contains within itself all the relations and determinations that are necessary to its existence and adequate functioning; in that respect, it differs from the totemic collective, which is indeed autonomous at the level of its ontological identity, but which requires other collectives of the same kind in order to become functional. For, in an analogist collective, the hierarchy of the parts is contrastive: it is defined exclusively by reciprocal positions. And this is why the segments do not constitute independent collectives as the totemic classes do, since the latter draw from within themselves, from specific sites and prototypical precursors, the physical and moral foundations of their distinctiveness. The segments of an analogist collective are thus thoroughly heteronomical in that they only acquire a meaning and a function by reference to the autonomous whole that they jointly form. One can say that animic collectives also admit a degree of heteronomy, but of an entirely different kind since the external specification obtains through a series of identifications to individual and intersubjective alterities of various origins, not through an overdetermination of the elements by the structure which binds them. The enemy whose alterity I absorb by capturing his head or consuming his body proceeds indeed from

a different collective; however, his capacity to singularize me is not linked to traits that would be specific to his own collective, but simply to his position of exteriority regarding myself. This is why, in the case of animism, there is no predetermination as to the type of collective liable to serve this function of external specification: it may be, according to context, individuals proceeding from one or various tribe-species of animals, from one or various tribe-species of spirits, from one or various tribe-species of humans, or from a combination of all of these. In an analogist collective, by contrast, the members of segment A differentiate themselves collectively from members of segment B in that A and B are elements of the hierarchical structure which encompasses them all; in philosophical language, one would say that their positions and relations are the product of an expressive causality. The dependence of the analogist segments on the collective that defines them is constitutive of their being; with elements that are intrinsically internal to the collective, they must strive to produce an illusion of exteriority.

Conclusion

Aside from its intellectual genealogy and epistemological function in the social sciences, the idea of whole is also a prism by the means of which analogist collectives reflectively apprehend themselves, be it in medieval Europe or in China, in Polynesian kingdoms or in peasant villages of southern Mexico. Such types of collectives have even been branded "totalitarian," with particular references to the Inca Empire and Western Africa.[6] This qualification is probably a way to express the extraordinary imbrications of elements in these holistic but much compartmentalized polities, where the possibility of nonconventional action is quite restricted, and where the control of conformity exercised by the whole on its parts appears to us unbearable. The term "totalitarian" also conveys the idea that nothing is left to chance in the distribution of existents between the various strata and sections of the cosmos, that every being is allocated a situation that corresponds to the role it is expected to play. This is why the ideology of an analogist collective is necessarily functionalism (i.e., the idea that each of its constitutive elements contributes in its specific position to the perpetuation of a stable totality). Without making too much of this, one may even wonder if the vogue of functionalism in British anthropology may not have been partly fostered by the fact that British anthropologists devoted a great part of their time and energy to studying analogist collectives, especially in West Africa and Southeast Asia, with functionalism as a local ideology thus meeting the expectations of functionalism as a method of description and analysis.[7] Be that as it may, and if my previous propositions are to be taken seriously, then we have to admit that ontological predicates determine sociological arrangements in the sense that the specific combinations of humans and nonhumans that ethnologists and historians describe are not best understood by reducing them to projections of human institutions, but by tracing the principles that allow, in each combination, a form of compatibility and interaction between particular kinds of existents that would appear impossible, or ludicrous, in other cases. So, rather than a comparative sociology of wholes, a project which has now exhausted its credibility, what we urgently need is a comparative ontology of parts, that is, an analysis of how the various components of collectives, actual and potential, are jointly and, necessarily, instituted.

Such an endeavor might appear as the sort of experiment that the editors of the present volume have asked us to engage in, at least if "holism" is meant here as an attempt at understanding human life which would be defined by contrast with the kaleidoscopic, inductive, narcissist, and rather parochial kind of ethnographic depiction that has passed for anthropology in some quarters during the past two decades. There is perhaps an even better term with which to qualify the type of holism corresponding to the structural ontology I am trying to develop, a term now so derided that I almost hesitate to write it down: universalism. But the kind of universalism I have in mind is quite distinct from the common version, the one which Bruno Latour has labeled "particular universalism" (Latour 1991: 142) and which maintains that we, Moderns, are the only ones to have reached a true understanding of the natural world of which the nonmodern only have "representations," thus opening a huge playing ground for charitable translations by anthropologists. Rather than being "particular," my own brand of universalism would be "relative" – not out of an immoderate fondness for oxymoron, but because I take relative as that which pertains to a relation. Relative universalism is not grounded in nature and cultures, in substance and mind, in the distinction between primary and secondary qualities; it stems from the multiple relations of continuity and discontinuity, of identity and difference, of resemblance and dissimilarity that humans everywhere discern in their environment thanks to the tools they have inherited from their phylogeny: a body, an intentionality, a capacity to perceive distinctive contrasts, and the ability to establish with a human or nonhuman *alter* relations of attachment or antagonism, of domination or dependence, of exchange or appropriation, of subjectivation or objectivation. Relative universalism does not require a world distributed between a uniform materiality and contingent significations; its only precondition is the acknowledgment of the salience of discontinuity, in things perceived as in the ways they are perceived, and the willingness to admit that there exist a limited number of formulae to deal with this saliency, either by ratifying it or by inhibiting its perception. A modest universalism, then, but one which would help to put anthropology back in business on a grander scale.

Notes

1 There is an influence here of the interpretation of Roman religion by Fustel de Coulanges as mostly secular, that is, composed of rites and representations that do not require faith or beliefs; see Héran (1987).
2 See the general assessment of the theory of utility by Schumpeter (1954: 1033–73).
3 See Lévi-Strauss, "Le langage n'a pu naître que tout d'un coup," in Lévi-Strauss (1950: xlvii).
4 For psychology proper, see Mandler (1984) and Schank and Abelson (1977); for applications in anthropology, see D'Andrade (1995), Shore (1996), and Strauss and Quinn (1997).
5 Houseman (1984) remains the best discussion of this complex issue.
6 The word is used by F. Héritier-Augé in her foreword to a book by Zuidema (1986), and by M. Duval (1986) in his monograph on the Gurunsi of Burkina Faso.
7 By contrast, functionalism was ill equipped to make sense of animic collectives, and this in turn may explain in part why British anthropology almost completely ignored until the end of the 1960s some regions of the world where animism prevails, such as the South American Lowlands or Subarctic Native America.

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