

COUNTERINTUITIVE UTOPIAS What modern society can learn from anthropology*

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ABSTRACT. What if the institutions of modern society were not informed by the ideas of Descartes or Adam Smith but by those of Mauss, Viveiros de Castro or their anthropological inspirations? This extrapolation would lead to counterintuitive utopias, to institutions that are always in the making, but that nevertheless offer alternative ways of dealing with xenophobia, capitalism or the environmental crisis. Xenophobia would be countered by the model of the stranger king, the integration of the stranger as a necessity for a complete society. Capitalism would be restricted to the market and subordinated to the principles of gift exchange. An objectifying notion of nature would be complemented by practices of animism that enable a moral relationship with non-humans. The value of otherness and concepts of personhood unite these three approaches.

THE EFFECTS OF ANTHROPOLOGY

If one asks how the modern world came to be what it is, one important answer is: through books. Not just any books, but through a few very specific ones – at least so goes an often-repeated narrative in Euro-American intellectual history. It is due to René Descartes that, though with mixed success, we distinguish nature and culture. Only after Adam Smith did people find it plausible to think of themselves as *homines oeconomici*. The separation of powers, as called for by Montesquieu, has turned into a self-evident feature of nation states. What began as an idea in a book was transformed over the centuries into firmly established social institutions. Of course, it is not quite that simple. Why did precisely these books make their way into social reality while others were forgotten cannot be explained by their ideas alone. They needed connections, amplifiers, a favourable cultural environment, the support of the powerful and a myriad of historical coincidences. Nevertheless, there is no denying that they have worked, and not every idea has what it takes to do so.

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This essay reacts to the current perception of modernity as constant, multi-layered crises. These crises call for substantial reforms in the way global, Western-centric modernity operates. Anthropology, I posit, can play a major role in this. Anthropology provides a record of the enormous range of societies that humans have lived in – and also the enormous range of decisions they made in respect to how these societies should be lived.¹ Anthropology's contribution to society is not restricted to the hands-on manner usually associated with applied or action anthropology. That in itself is a worthwhile, laudable and necessary task, but anthropology can do more than solve problems in the peripheries – and sometimes the centres – of modernist expansion.

This is because anthropology is in itself a specific way of perceiving things, that is, from the vantage point of cultural difference. Cultural difference is not simply about the difference between 'peoples', ethnicities, societies, classes, genders, milieus, or whatever, and their different ways of communicating and interpreting their lives. Cultural difference also implies that anything that is cultural could also be different. Any cultural phenomenon that occurs in real life carries with it the possibilities of endless others that could have become realities in its place. The problem is just that we do not think about them a lot. And maybe this is due to 'our' culture. While 'culture' in the general sense contains infinite potential, each 'culture' in the specific sense also consists of constraints on the imagination. This is also true of our familiar, European-oriented society: it could be different if we were to look at its shortcomings and potentials through the eyes of anthropology.

But even culture in the specific sense never encompasses only what is traditional – it also includes what is possible. Therefore, it is always in flux: culture is practised, and in being practised it changes. Anthropology can also be applied in the same sense, as it belongs to the cultural, being a child of modernity. On the one hand, it is an integral part of an enlightened, secular science that separates knowledge from politics and faith, with all the possibilities and limitations that entails. Moreover, anthropology in its present form would not have come about without colonial expansion and imperialist rule, although this has not made it a stooge of the empire – on the contrary, often enough and today it is to a large extent its critic. On the other hand, however, it is a social institution that takes in the 'Other' of this modern epistemology. Anthropology is a channel through which the other possibilities of being human can be translated into the language of modernity. For the

¹ See Graeber and Wengrow (2021).

distinction between modern and non-modern that guides classical anthropology is not simply a colonial determination. The non-modern is not the not-yet-modern, but the other-than-modern. This notion raises new questions of the possibilities of existing as a cultural being in society.

In this respect, anthropological representations of other-than-modern ideas – or more precisely, ideas that do not conform to the dominant standard ideas of modernity – are not simply distortions of these ideas. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro put it, ‘every non-trivial anthropological theory is a version of an indigenous practice of knowledge’ (2014:42; original emphasis). Such theories have a distorting effect on the knowledge, and possibly the society, into which they are introduced. The Italian pun on the translator’s betrayal – *traduttore, traditore* – may not only denote the betrayal of the language from which one translates, but also of the language into which one is translating. It introduces something new, something at odds with what already exists, something that stubbornly resists and works precisely through its resistance (Viveiros de Castro 2004:5).

In this respect, anthropology is a rather Janus-faced institution. It operates at cultural interfaces that are themselves ‘culturally constructed’, but that nevertheless require mediation. It feeds what it finds into a global knowledge apparatus and is able to change it along the way. Niklas Luhmann puts it as follows: ‘If the communication of a social theory succeeds as communication, it changes the description of its object and thus the object receiving this description’ (1998:15; translation G.S.). Anthropology as part of society changes it by changing itself, and it does so by producing results. Therefore, if our modern world was written into existence by Descartes, Smith or Montesquieu – programmed in its DNA, as it were – the question arises of what a future would look like that is written by anthropologists like Marcel Mauss, Marshall Sahlins, Marilyn Strathern or Eduardo Viveiros de Castro – or, even better, by the Maori, Hawaiians, Hageners or Amerindians to whom these anthropologists have devoted their attention and who are now increasingly making their own voices heard. These would be counter-intuitive utopias, societies based on something other than the self-evident truths of modernity. Utopia is not understood here as the rigid image of a perfect society, but rather as a general development for the better that may take different paths over time. Utopia is always a few steps away from where we are, but it is just becoming visible. It is the answer to the question we should ask ourselves in every socially relevant action: what kind of society do we actually want to live in?

The wealthy countries of the Global North see their world threatened by various crises. Fears of 'foreign infiltration' on the one hand and of racism and exclusion on the other form a tension triggered by global migration movements. Capitalism deepens the gap between rich and poor and reduces people to human resources and consumers. Industrial societies destroy the biosphere, decimate the number of life forms and turn the climate, which should sustain humanity, into its enemy. As such crises call for utopias, I will elaborate on a handful of utopian ideas here.

In the following, I will present three ideas that emerge from the processing of other-than-modern knowledge in anthropology: the stranger as king, gift exchange and animism. It is no coincidence that these concepts, especially the last two, have exerted an enduring fascination on modern audiences. They are not simply discoveries that anthropology has made in remote places. Rather, they are models that serve as mirror images. In a sense, they form the perfect alternatives to the ideas that modernity fosters about itself. In this respect, they prove to be constructs of this very modernity. But they inspire research that instigates the revision of these constructs. At the same time, they encourage attention to what standard modernity all too often misses in its self-description – not simply what is supposedly 'outside' itself, but precisely what has always been there. If we are able to represent the Other intelligibly in our own language – the language of anthropology – it is because the potential of the Other is also present in our own society. This potential may unfold in the future, but perhaps it has always been a reality, albeit marginalized, overlooked or simply underestimated.

The following sections begin with anthropological research results and lead to thought experiments that look for the Other within the Self. Claude Lévi-Strauss's argument against the cliché of the supposed immaturity of the non-moderns always made sense to me: we moderns tend to think of non-moderns as childlike because we find the most prominent traits of their thinking among ourselves primarily in our children. Children still have all the possibilities of thought in embryo before their culture trains them to emphasize and elaborate only a few while discarding most others. The supposedly foreign is the elaboration of other possibilities, but nevertheless is just as adult as we are (Lévi-Strauss 1993:148–165). Whatever developmental psychology may think of this point, it suggests that in the cultural Other we can see possibility as well as difference. Perhaps all cultural differences are at the same time non-actualized potentials.

THE STRANGER AS KING

The idea that a people should govern itself instead of being ordered around by a transcultural clique of nobles was decidedly useful in introducing democracy to modern Europe. This, however, required a definition of a 'people' that was more than the sum of the subjects of a ruler. The answer that prevailed historically was the idea of a 'Volksgeist' or 'culture' introduced by Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, among others. Initially this was an intellectual demarcation intended to counter the claim of a universal civilization in French enlightenment philosophy (Bunzl 1996, Dumont 1994:28–32). Later, however, it became associated, among other things, with the idea of national self-sufficiency. Whereas it still seemed sensible in the 1830s to man the newly installed thrones of Belgium or Greece with international nobility, thereafter the idea prevailed that each nation should produce its own rulers.

At first, there is nothing wrong with this. The idea of self-sufficiency only becomes problematic when it is combined with the allegedly essential nature of the people and the denial of any external dependencies or complementarities. Then the social universe disintegrates not only along the boundaries between Self and Other, but also through the segregation of the culturally or nationally pure from the impure. If, as a growing number of right-wing voices say, a 'homogeneous culture' is desirable, then the path to 'greatness' can only be jeopardized by cultural mixing. In Germany, in particular, as already mentioned, 'culture' usually emerged from a sense of being threatened.²

The disastrous consequences of such nationalisms in Europe are too well known to reiterate here. Today, this is articulated in the aforementioned fears of 'foreign infiltration'. But their export to the (post-)colonial peripheries also brought disaster. As early as the mid-1960s, the anthropologist Francis Lehman (1967) warned of the consequences of a 'nationalization' of ethnic minorities in what was then Burma. The idea that everyone belonged to a 'people' with clear borders, a culture, an ethnonym and an ancestral territory stemmed from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European thinking. In Southeast Asia, in contrast, many people had multiple affiliations that they controlled like roles. As a result cultural boundaries could hardly be drawn, and ethnyonyms only had meaning in certain contexts (Lehman 1967:101–104). The assumption of fixed identities contributed significantly to

² See also Dumont (1991:128–195; 1994).

a postcolonial conflict between the Bamar majority and the country's other cultural groups that continues to this day (Thuzar and Cheong 2019). Fears of the contamination of and threats to the Buddhist majority, especially from Muslim minorities, stoked by the military, cause violence and displacement. Lehman, by contrast, recognized that every identity is at the same time an alterity: one is what one is only in so far as one is not someone else. Identities are conditioned by relationships. Already on the conceptual level, cultural identities cannot exist in isolation.³

In addition, there is considerable internal variation. Every village is different. This applies to Southeast Asia as well as to Germany, at least if Herder's contemporary, Baron Knigge, was correct in this. As early as 1788, in his instruction manual for social mobility, "Vom Umgang mit Menschen" ("On human relations"), he considered Germany to be what today we would call a multicultural region, in which the Lower Saxon is outraged by the refined manners of the Rhinelander, and the Westphalian does not understand the Austrian's dialect (Knigge 1996:19). Who belongs to whom and why is therefore quite difficult to determine and also changes from time to time. To insist on cultural purity under such circumstances is hopeless at best and self-destructive at worst. Those who first draw borders and then want to eliminate all differences within them will, with each further step in purification, ultimately have to exclude the majority of people. Wrapping oneself into an identity that is only true in its purity is thus just as misguided – and more destructive – as an undifferentiated invocation of universal humanity that no longer valorises cultural differences. Cultural life is based on difference, and the difference we call ethnic identity today is only one among many.

Cultural belonging has two aspects. On the one hand, some people share their cultural systems with each other while perceiving differences with others. They have reason to draw boundaries and mark differences; there is an inside and an outside, an 'us' and a 'them'. On the other hand, every sign, every communication, is based on a difference, which is already given by the difference between the signs and that between the senders and recipients of the communication. Culture as communication must therefore always cope with difference. But this, together with the volatile nature of all communication, makes culture incessantly variable and dynamic. Every act of demarcation is therefore contingent and could also be done differently.⁴ A more peaceful global society, riddled with fewer conflicts in the name of

³ See Barth (1969).

⁴ See also Luhmann (1984).

national identity and cultural purity, would thus have to solve this problem: finding a way to draw borders and be open at the same time. This entails acknowledging the otherness of the Other without devaluing either oneself or the Other.

Some societies in Southeast Asia and Oceania have alternatives to offer in this regard. Marshall Sahlins (2008, 2013a) in particular has demonstrated the almost global spread of the idea of the stranger as king. This refers to myths about the emergence of society as much as to the marking of rulers in the present: the man – stranger queens being rare – who made society possible, as lived today, came from the outside. He had powers that no one else could command, and often he married a local woman. It is only through the combination of these opposites, the inside and the outside, that society is able to exist and make life possible. In contrast to Europe, a high value is assigned to the outside. While Otto I, the Bavarian prince on the Greek throne, sought to gain the favour of his subjects by mastering their language excellently, Sultan Hairun of Ternate in eastern Indonesia gained respect by speaking fluent Portuguese (Andaya 1993:35, after Sahlins 2013a:286).

In Southeast Asia, this valorisation of the outside is not restricted to the figure of the ruler. The outside is often the source of superior powers. They may originate in specific, culturally different neighbours – the Rmeet in Laos see the origin of powerful ritual techniques in the Shan of Thailand and Myanmar, the Iu Mien sometimes see it in the Han Chinese (Sprenger 2011:231, 236). Their cultural representations must be integrated into one's own society without denying their foreign origin (Platenkamp 2014). In this way, even fundamental features of a polity can retain their imported character. In particular, the spread of the so-called world religions was favoured by this mechanism of adoption as figures such as Buddha or Christ were welcomed as strangers imbued with superior power. It is not without irony that many among them subsequently distinguished themselves especially by excluding the Other.⁵

Such exclusions have become habitual, and this indicates the direction of the shift in attention I propose for modernity. That we are historically a product of many foreign influences – that we would not be what we are without Near Eastern religion, Arabic arithmetic, Chinese bureaucracy and Roman law – is a commonplace. What is missing is the awareness that these things have not simply been assimilated, but must be continually integrated – integration being understood here as that necessary difference between

⁵ See Rehbein and Sprenger (2016).

the parts that makes it possible to join them into a whole. The external continues to exist within one's own society (Sahlins 2013a).

A society that always keeps this internal difference in mind would not first ruminate whether immigration is even desired and then criticize immigrants for not wanting to assimilate. On the contrary, unease would set in wherever immigrants were missing, the awareness of a lack of difference to learn from would spread, and smaller communities in the countryside would urge the foreigners' authorities in the larger cities to share some of their immigrants with them. Immigrants, and this would not always be pleasant, would see themselves surrounded by locals eager to learn, with whom they attempt to agree on the nature of their otherness. 'Exoticisation' would no longer be a warning and a swear word, but a process of valorisation: the cooperative construction and placement of a cultural Other in that slot of society that is suitable for complementarity and further development.

The concept of cooperation is important here: there is a danger of creating new castes and classes for the foreigners that are just as essentializing as 'pure' national identities. The introduction of difference would enter into tension with modernity's demand for equality, so even a positively valued difference would have to be supplemented by claims of equality. This egalitarianism is shown in the principle of cooperation, in which both sides negotiate their ideas of creative otherness. There is, however, an ongoing risk of misunderstanding each other's placement, as even cases of immigration in eastern Indonesia – a prime example of the valorisation of strangers – have shown (Riyanto 2020).

How such values might take the form of social institutions is not easy to say. Unlike the following topics, experiments and marginalized practices in this direction have so far been difficult to discern. One exception is that laboratory of possibilities that was differentiated in modernity as the functional system of 'art'. Within this system, the foreign can be valorised highly, there is a holistic impetus to innovation, and cultural difference as inspiration is increasingly welcomed. However, art's systemic differentiation has precisely the purpose of protecting social institutions from art's experiments. Otherwise, the idea that the foreign is an asset is present, but existing strategies essentially amount to promoting awareness among the mainstream public of the visibility of migrants and a kind of integration that belittles differences in the name of a shared humanity. There is little to be said against these measures, except for one thing: they are meant to make the foreign bearable, but not necessary. But that would be the goal.

GIFT EXCHANGE

If I were to recommend a single book to someone who has nothing to do with anthropology, “The gift” by Marcel Mauss (2016) would be a good choice. Judging by its age – it was first published in 1925 – it is probably the most influential and most intensively received work in the discipline. In the almost one hundred years since its publication, Mauss’s short book has sparked numerous case studies not only in anthropology and history, but also in the study of modernity. The combination of sketchiness and intellectual subtlety that characterizes “The gift” continues to inspire countless scholars across disciplines today.

In “The gift”, the founder of modern anthropology in France examined a phenomenon that he found in numerous historical and culturally different societies: gifts are given with a gesture of voluntary generosity, but they are also obligatory. This obligation applies to the givers of gifts, but also to their acceptance and their delayed reciprocation by their recipients. These socially determined gifts form the basis of lasting relationships and thus of peaceful coexistence.

Of central importance is the guiding difference Mauss introduced into the comparison of economic forms, that is, the distinction between gifts and commodities. His text may give the false impression that gift exchange is characteristic of what he called ‘archaic societies’, but in its concluding chapter, Mauss called for a reform of his own society in the spirit of the gift. Mauss was a socialist, but one who conscientiously separated his scientific work from his political writings. The final chapter of “The gift” is an exception. Here he emphasizes that the logic of the gift forms a basis for all societies. Mauss thus laid the foundations for a certain romanticization of the gift as an antidote to capitalism. Transfers in the market do not lead to social bonds, since the relationship is concluded with the payment of the commodity. Money is anonymous, can be used by anyone, and bears no personal imprint. The gift, in contrast, one would think, mirrors the people who give and take it; it creates long-term bonds and social obligations. Thus, the gift promotes a more trusting and altruistic coexistence.

However, it is not quite that simple, as Mauss himself noted. The giver often wants to increase his prestige and make the recipient dependent. Whoever succeeds in surpassing the original gift in its return gains the upper hand over the original giver. In this respect, the gift seems little different from the strategies of a rationally maximizing individual in the market-

place – except that giving is less about money and more about social status (Bourdieu 1993:180–221). But, again, this also is a bit too simplistic. Gift exchange is indeed an alternative to the modern market economy, not because it pits altruism against egoism, but because this opposition is not applicable to it. It often depends entirely on one's point of view whether self-interest or generosity emerge as the essential element of the gift.

Long-lasting integration into social relations is also possible in modernity and in fact is not at all unusual. However, institutions corresponding to this do not dominate the self-description of modernity. Rather, they mark themselves as laboriously implemented corrections to the all-round atomization of society. Many studies of the modern gift are in fact quite unconcerned with the question of enduring relationships. “The gift relationship” by Richard Titmuss (1997) examines blood donations as gifts that do not create a bond between giver and receiver. Similarly, studies of development aid (Stirrat and Henkel 1997) or philanthropy (Adloff and Sigmund 2005) ignore these issues.

Taxes, actually a form of redistribution, also show aspects of gift exchange. The exchange of gifts is asymmetrical and cannot be balanced; its value is qualitative and central to the reproduction of society. Taxes do not buy the givers anything because the services of the state they receive in return are supposed to benefit everyone equally – the rule of law, education, security, infrastructure and so on are not supposed to be more available to those who pay a lot of taxes than to those who do not. The asymmetric gift-exchange axis that defines modern society would thus be that between the state and the people (Larsen 2018). The state transforms the material inequality of its taxpayers into equal treatment and nominal equality – both basic values of modernity.

Accordingly, the exchange of gifts forms the basis of society in modernity as well; we have merely become accustomed to ignoring it. This happens so thoroughly that the familiar seems exotic to us when we encounter it in other societies. Therefore, once again, a utopian change of consciousness, a change of perspective on one's own society, is the first step towards re-evaluating or making socially dominant institutions out of what already exists but is underestimated.

First of all, a society that is aware of its basis in gift exchange would not abolish the market. Mauss himself considered markets indispensable and criticized the Bolsheviks in the newly founded Soviet Union for destroying them (2015:188). The difference from capitalism would rather be that the

principles of the market would not be unduly extended beyond the exchange of goods and services for money to other domains of society. Profit maximization, the emphasis on the relationship between human being and object, the increase of possessions at the expense of others, universal money and the like would then not be regarded as cornerstones of human society or as traits of human nature. Rather, they formed the rules of the game for the sphere of the market and had no place outside it. Such distinctions have been made by numerous societies, as argued by both anthropologists and historians (Bohannan 1955, Polanyi 1995).

One measure of the ‘Maussization of modernity’ that is viewed with sympathy by a whole series of authors is the idea of ‘unconditional basic income’ (UBI).⁶ UBI is sometimes conceived as a form of gift (Caillé 2008) and sometimes as a form of sharing (Widlok 2017:154). It defines every recipient as a member of society. It also frees people from the need to define themselves through unproductive and meaningless work. The inevitable abuse, Graeber argues, would remain within tolerable limits (2020:400–401). Of course, one would have to destigmatize useful but unaesthetic work like rubbish collection so they became honourable tasks. Graeber (2020:400), however, also raises a concern: the increase in the power of the state this gift would entail. Those who dislike capitalism because it produces enormous inequalities will at least have to find such centralized power scary. It smells too much like the strictly hierarchical sister of gift exchange and sharing, namely redistribution. UBI would therefore have to be supplemented by decidedly decentralized organizations.

Foundations are models of such a sustainable, institutionalized form of gift-giving. They too are hierarchical, but they always form pluricentralized alternatives to states. Thus, the foundations for the care of the dead pharaohs in ancient Egypt drained the resources of the living ones and wrested away their subjects, thus providing serious alternatives to the state-controlled socialization of goods (Borgolte 2017:34). Foundations can arise through state, entrepreneurial, religious or private initiative. Every social institution that can accumulate resources finds in endowments and foundations a form with which to socialize these resources again. In addition, as a further form of decentralization, there could be local exchange trade systems (LETS) in which services and goods circulate. Countries hit hard by economic crises such as Argentina (Preissing 2009) or Greece have developed the maintenance of such schemes to a high level. The goods circulating within them are often

⁶ Caillé (2008), Graeber (2020), Klocke-Daffa (2017), Widlok (2017)

industrially produced and were initially sold on the market, but their journey through the LETS gives them a longer life – especially if repairs are part of the services circulating there. An economy that aims to supply the population rather than produce ever larger quantities of commodities can only become more efficient as a result.

Any coexistence of different institutions, one might object, would certainly lead to conflicts. But this is probably inherent in every social organization, and instead of trying to suppress conflicts through centralization, it is wiser to get used to constant negotiations. The corresponding methods have long been tried and tested in industrial societies. They often appear as stop-gaps, part utopia part desperate act, mostly in situations that are considered failures in the official economic discourse. This is not least because they are unstable. The LETS that formed in Argentina at the time of the economic crisis in the early 2000s dissolved when, on the one hand, they were used by more free riders than was tolerable, and on the other, the usual market economy regained momentum (Preissing 2009:132–155). One is tempted to blame this development on the seductive power of consumer capitalism or the tragedy of the commons, but I suggest a different point of view. One ingredient is missing from this utopian mixture of basic income, restricted market logics, foundations and local exchange, an ingredient that Mauss already identified and that has been lost from modern gifts, or at least is rarely realized: the spirit of the gift.

Why gifts are reciprocated was a puzzle for Mauss that could not be solved with the patent solution of his uncle Émile Durkheim. For Mauss, the force that compelled reciprocity was not simply a hypostasis of society as a whole. Rather, he outlined an idea that was to prove momentous for gift-exchange theory. With the gift, he argued, one gives away a part of oneself; the gift does not separate from the giver the way a commodity changes hands. This is what makes it so difficult to cut the relationship between giver and taker. The gift has a spirit that wants to return to its origin, albeit transformed in a counter-gift (Mauss 1990:31–36). The spirit of the gift is a person who is in two places at once, present and absent. This is why Mauss could say that self-interest and generosity, meaning egoism and altruism, are so difficult to distinguish in the gift: ego and alter merge in it.

This idea found continuations in the work of McKim Marriott (1976) in India and Marilyn Strathern (1988) in Melanesia. In these regions, gifts are directly related to the constituents of the person: you are what you exchange. Gifts modify those who take them and externalize parts of those who give

them. Persons are not self-contained individuals, but nodes in a network of relationships. This participation in the Other is somewhat at odds with what the majority of modern Western people think of themselves. The concept of the autonomous, self-contained individual reaches the limits of its usefulness here. The individual is easily employed in the market, but is often strangely misplaced in a community. If local exchange trade systems and similarly sensible institutions fail so often, it is not only because of the purported natural laws of the economy, but perhaps also because of the gravitation that the capitalist market exerts on people who think they should act as individuals. A society linked by the consciousness of gift exchange is thus not based solely on the tolerance that a coincidentally well-meaning individual shows to others. Here, persons are interlinked in a way that can sometimes become a burden to each of them. A relational concept of the person, however, creates difficulties for Western modernity. I will come back to this point below.

ANIMISM

When Edward Burnett Tylor introduced the term ‘animism’ in his book “Primitive culture” in 1871, he was not just referring to a supposed archetype of religion. Rather, he was concerned with an assumption that, in his view, underlies all religion: the belief in immaterial entities such as souls, spirits and gods. In this respect, he argued, the great dividing line in the evolution of human culture runs between religion and materialism (Tylor 1958:86). It was only in the course of a theoretical debate that lasted for about sixty years that the meaning of animism shifted. From the 1930s onwards, it was regarded as a collective term for religious ideas and practices that could be described neither as monotheism nor as polytheism and that were predominantly found in supposedly ‘primitive’ societies.

At the same time, the term lost its appeal in anthropology. Although it continued to exist in other disciplines – psychology, for example – it seemed too imprecise for understanding non-modern ideas, and too much tainted with the baggage of evolutionism. It was only in the late 1990s that animism experienced a surprising rebirth. However, this had less to do with the discovery of new animistic peoples or the like. Rather, a new use was found for the word outside the anthropology of religion. Animism has since come to denote an alternative to the modern approach to the environment and non-humans. In some respects, Tylor’s division between modern materialism and

non-modern animism has returned, but with the valuation reversed. The new animism research explores how non-humans can be treated as persons and the non-biological as alive. It initially referred to societies that could fairly cursorily be described as ‘animistic’, for example, in the Amazon and Siberia, or hunting and gathering groups in South or Southeast Asia.⁷ More recently, and as the new usage spreads into other disciplines, it has also been applied to modern societies (Dörrenbacher and Plüm 2016, Yoneyama 2019). Here it refers to sometimes common but often little considered transitions between things and persons or the contextual personification of animals.

Accordingly, animism is no longer understood as the projection of a familiar human world onto an unknown nature, that is, as a categorical error, an illusion of control born of an exaggerated need for predictability. Rather, it appears as one of many ways to relate to non-humans. The habit of secular-scientific modernity to regard humans as actors and non-humans as things is confronted with serious alternatives. These are not as surprising as first appeared because the relevant ethnography had been there for a long time. Now, much of it acquires a new quality and new relevance, even urgency, in the environmental crisis.

Animism constitutes worlds in which it is possible to establish moral relations with the environment. The epistemology of modernity is in a fix in this respect: secular science can only describe human beings as persons, while environmental phenomena appear as predictable processes to be explained by natural laws. On the one hand, this is necessary: it is only by accepting fairly mechanistic rules that we can grasp the consequences of human actions for the rest of the biosphere. In order to recognize and combat climate change, for instance, we need to trust and rely on such calculations. On the other hand, it is a hindrance: if we care not only about the benefit of humans but also the protection of other beings, we must conceive of our relationship with the latter as moral. As it is not easy to maintain moral relationships with clockwork, a perspective that recognizes personhood in the non-human domain would be conducive to such an endeavour. This may be the reason why other-than-modern societies are often romanticized in environmental discourse. Some ethnic minorities have even taken up the cliché that they are better conservationists (Duile forthcoming, Swancutt 2016). Apparently, some of them prefer to be noble savages in the eyes of national majorities rather than just ordinary savages.

⁷ Bird-David (1999), Brightman, Grotti and Ulturgasheva (2012), Howell (2016)

However, there is considerable doubt as to whether such attributions are valid. First of all, the ‘better conservationist’ is hardly more than an upgrade on the ‘savage slot’ of modernity (Trouillot 1991) and is no less exclusionary. Secondly, it is quite unclear whether indigenous practices are sustainable simply because they are indigenous (Ellen 1986). However, such qualifications prevent us from essentializing animism as a feature of certain peoples or as coming with a prefabricated moral quality. Rather, what we call animism for convenience contains a variety of ideas and practices of some use. The personalization of non-humans carries with it an opportunity. Viewing rice fields and mountains as animate, treating animals and plants that feed you as benefactors to whom you owe your life, does have the potential to increase care and responsibility towards them. While secular science condemns such anthropomorphization as an error, it can just as easily be seen as a possibility. The ‘person’ as a being with whom one can maintain responsible relationships is not a given that is discovered ‘out there’, even if the processes leading to its recognition look just like discoveries.⁸ Rather, the person always comes into existence only in the social sphere. Whether a being turns out to be a ‘person’ or not depends not least on the forms of communication with which people approach it.

Ruth Benedict distinguished very early on between ‘person techniques’ and ‘thing techniques’. While ‘primitives’ have developed elaborate techniques of relating to persons, the ‘moderns’ specialized in techniques of relating to things (Benedict 1931). To be sure, Benedict noted that the ‘primitives’ applied ‘person techniques’ even where they were inappropriate, namely with non-humans. But she conceded that the moderns, when they applied ‘thing-techniques’ to people, were just as wrong. Here she proves to be a naturalist in the sense of Philippe Descola (2011), who distinguishes people and things because that is what nature dictates. This point, however, is missing in more recent reflections on animism (Viveiros de Castro 2014). There, the question of whether non-humans are persons or not appears primarily as a question of relationships and categorization. In hunting contexts in regions such as Amazonia or Siberia, animals are considered to be persons by default (Viveiros de Castro 1998, Willerslev 2007). However, counterintuitively from a modern perspective, this does not protect them from being killed. Rather, animals have to be acknowledged as persons in order to be hunted properly. At the same time, this often creates a reciprocal relationship between them and their hunters (Nadasdy 2007).

⁸ See Sprenger (2017).

Yet, the gulf between naturalists, who consider non-humans to be objects, and animists, who consider them to be persons, seems all too deep. What I call Southeast Asian animism, however, is able to build bridges here. In contrast to a somewhat popular view of animism, the cosmology of many Southeast Asian societies does not amount to seeing everything as animate or as a person. It is true that the environment offers ample opportunities to observe the doings of the spirits within it. Nevertheless, people treat such opportunities with caution. For example, it is by no means certain what kind of entity one is dealing with when everyday life is disturbed. Illnesses, omens or dreams can be signs that point to dangerous spirits. But these signs are highly susceptible to interpretation, and only further attempts at communication will shed light on whether it is actually a spirit one has to deal with. Among the Rmeet in northern Laos, spirits are frequently doubted or need consolidation before they become ready to communicate. Beings such as rice spirits stand between person and impersonal life force; for some places or things people disagree whether they are inhabited by spirits or not (Sprenger 2017).

This is quite typical of Southeast Asian cosmologies. Ghosts appear as possibilities whose ontological status is often unstable and ambivalent (Baumann 2022, Johnson 2020:13–14, Remme 2016). They form a potential that can be used or rejected. However, humans do not see themselves as the only forces that determine the existence of ghosts; they consider themselves as responders. As mentioned above, the process of bringing a spirit into being takes the form of investigation and discovery. But in so far as humans are the ones who communicate, they very much exert an influence on the personhood of non-humans. Controlling the process by which persons take shape in communication is the aim of their ritual techniques.

What Southeast Asian animism teaches us, therefore, is not simply that there are persons who are not living human beings, nor that life is not confined to cells. It also shows that the extent to which non-humans enter the social horizon as persons can be a matter of techniques, of context, of forms of communication. In terms of Descola's (2011) scheme of ontologies, this is not easy to grasp: in this scheme, identification – the question of what kind of being a human actor is dealing with – precedes the relationship. In Southeast Asia, in contrast, identification results from relationship. This opens up a field in which several identifications can coexist – one is tempted to say according to need, if that didn't sound too consumerist-postmodern. But the basic idea holds and raises the question why modern epistemology

always has to commit itself to just one identification for each being, as there are other options. The impersonal non-human may find its proper place in the measurements and experiments of science, but that need not dominate its existence beyond the laboratory. Some social contexts will necessitate this identification; but when our collective of humans and non-humans, our global social ecology, is in danger if non-humans are only allowed to be objects, another epistemology can take hold, one in which responsibilities and social attentiveness encompass non-humans as well. This enables what Bruno Latour (2018) has called the ‘terrestrial’: a sense of those relationships between humans and non-humans that are of immediate relevance to us. It means drawing attention to the environment not just in the form of numbers and diagrams, but to the fragile life-world in which we are entwined with other beings (Sprenger 2021).

That such epistemo-ontological shifts are possible is again demonstrated by numerous indigenous people living on the boundary between local and global-secular cosmologies. Māori lawyers have succeeded in having Whanganui River recognized as a legal entity in New Zealand; in doing so, they switched between the scientific and legal codes of the majority society and Māori cosmology (Salmond 2014). The Quechua shaman Nazario Turpo found global warming and the wrath of mountain beings equally plausible explanations for the change in weather in the Andes (Cadena 2015:xxii). Apparently, indigenous people find such changes easier than self-confessed Westerners, who seem somewhat limited in this respect. Establishing such transitions more firmly in the institutions and habits of secular modernity and the Global North as well, and developing them into a cosmo-politics, would make relations between humans and non-humans far more sustainable. To this end, one could imagine a series of perhaps ritualistic measures in everyday life.

From a social point of view, vegetarianism and veganism are welcome forms of protest against the degrading and often torturous existence of industrially exploited animals. However, as an obligation for society in general, veganism would cut most relationships humans have with animals. This would deny the life-and-death relationships that link humans and animals with each other and reduce them to stewardship or leisure. Without the morally tense entanglements that result from the mutual dependence of humans and animals, the distance between them would even increase. The welcome recognition of animals as person-like in the context of veganism would have a double effect. On the one hand it would undermine naturalist identifica-

tions, while on the other removing most animals from their close relationships with humans in more-than-human collectives.

In a counter-intuitive utopia, meat consumption is therefore still possible, but comes with conditions. First, there is much less of it: children are allowed to eat meat without restriction, but adults who consume a lot of it are considered childish, immature and irresponsible. Prayers of thanks are routinely addressed to the animal that sacrificed itself. The animals chosen for consumption are given a comfortable life. Public discourse sees this less as a form of object management and more as a contract whose appropriate reciprocity is routinely doubted – a constant source of self-interrogation and self-doubt in this possible society.

Extensive nature reserves are necessary to safeguard biodiversity, but they should not reinforce the modern separation of nature and culture in spatial terms. In this possible utopia, the interpenetration of habitats makes them far more vivid – and liveable – for humans and non-humans alike. Digitalization and infrastructural reforms lead to the thinning out of urban spaces. This allows animal husbandry even where humans live in their immediate neighbourhood. The animals you would see from your window may end up on your plate one day, so take a close look. Do they seem to be alright? How should we compensate them?

At the same time, the soil and water are also increasingly considered animate. Rituals of propitiation and thanksgiving accompany building projects, thus regarding every tearing up and cultivation of the earth, every diversion of waters, as an intervention in the sovereignty of these entities. This takes place without sacred pathos, but with a mixture of routine, benevolence and scepticism. Doubts about the meaningfulness of these rituals are regularly expressed – after all, none of this is scientific – but they are performed anyway. The indeterminacy that this mixture of practical routine, belief and scepticism entails is animistic by itself (Sprenger forthcoming). But not to care for non-humans, as every child knows, would mean their perishing. In this utopia, people know that they have created their gods themselves, but they also know that they need them.⁹

⁹ Cf. Graeber (2005).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I return to the question raised at the end of the section on gift exchange, regarding the relationship between a gifting sociality and relational personhood. For this issue, animism proves helpful. It is one of the revealing points of the new animism research that the ancestry of the concept has shifted almost unnoticed. My section began with an appreciative nod to the concept's inventor, the evolutionist and rationalist Edward Burnett Tylor. However, we also owe a deep bow to the often denigrated Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1956). This philosopher, who died in 1939, ruined his reputation among the relativistic and anti-evolutionist anthropologists of the mid-twentieth century by attributing 'prelogical thinking' to 'primitives'. But many of the current ideas on ontology, animism and the concept of the person can already be found in his work, as some recent studies (Baumann 2018, Sahlin 2013b) acknowledge. More precisely, Lévy-Bruhl's admittedly imperfect attempts to put into modern terms the basic ideas behind some data that are confusing from a modern point of view were perhaps more telling, that is, more subversive translations than many a later rationalization. Reading beyond such badly chosen terms as 'prelogical', his work appears as a serious attempt to do justice to a form of thought that is alien to Western philosophy and science – a form of thought, however, that modern people also use, but whose importance is obscured by competing forms of thought (Bunzel 1966:vi).

When Mauss spoke of the 'spirit of the gift', he did not quote Lévy-Bruhl, but he had certainly read him. The 'spirit of the gift' is an example of Lévy-Bruhl's principle of participation: the giver shares in the gift, and thus the receiver also shares in the giver. Givers and receivers are not alone; an aspect of them lives in someone or something and has a role in defining this other. The boundaries between them are not 'blurred' – that would sound as if there were no difference between them. Rather, the challenge to thinking is this: there is a difference, but it runs within each of them, giver and receiver. Giving and receiving is part of what makes a person what it is and therefore constitutes a relationship without which it would not exist. In the exchange of gifts, no one can be in the world without having received something from someone else; and that someone has also received from someone else before.

Studies of gift exchange are mainly limited to humans; animism extends this to the relationships between humans and non-humans (Nadasdy

2007, Sprenger 2016). Animism also implies that aspects of the person shift between beings. The gift is itself animated and the nature of the relations between beings is more important than the question of whether it is humans or non-humans who exchange. In both cases, a difference is installed within the person. Animism also renders beings ambivalent and processual: processes of communication make possible beings that are sometimes person and sometimes not, sometimes human and sometimes non-human. This internal multiplication of the person, this presence of non-humans, is now a central theme of posthumanist thought (Haraway 2018). Therein lies the potential to transform the relations between agentive humans and a nature that is passively governed by natural laws into moral relations of complementary exchange.

This difference between Self and Other is repeated in the figure of the stranger king on the level of society. Here, too, an arbitrary difference becomes a complementarity that makes the inside, the Self, what it is in the first place. Often, the strange or external is also non-human – god-like, for instance – and the relationship is established through a complementary exchange, for example, through marriage. Thus, the kind of personhood that emerges from exchanges and the idea of communities being integrated through stranger kings and thus through cultural difference are homologous. This integration, however, succeeds more easily under the sign of difference than under that of identity. Similarities are certainly necessary – for example, in the choice of communication methods – but assumptions of sameness exhaust themselves in the course of history and are constantly being put into question. Difference, on the other hand, is dynamic and inexhaustible. Social institutions and dominant ideas based on an appreciation of difference will ultimately prove to be more inclusive and expansive than those based on sameness. This appreciation goes hand in hand with an attention to the well-being of the Other, who is, after all, a part of one's Self. This point also addresses a serious problem that arises here: de-emphasising assumptions of sameness potentially weakens some desirable core values of global coexistence, such as human rights. The tension between integration through difference and appreciation through equality and sameness is therefore not easily resolved. A stress on contexts that operate in a layered relationship to each other, each having its own propriety, serves as a first step in living with such tensions.

This may all sound contradictory, but every society is built on contradictions. Without fundamental conflicts of value, there would be no social

dynamics. Every society operates on the basis of inner conflicts that it has designed itself in such a way that they cannot be resolved. Therefore, utopias free of conflict are not societies we can strive to realize in the first place. Rather, it is wise to be aware of conflicts and to deal with them in such a way that they do not inhibit or destroy the lives of others, human or non-human.

Humanity has made more attempts in this direction than we know about and found more solutions than we can imagine. Anthropology, rather than laying down universal laws of human action, has chosen to be the study of human possibilities. Many of these lie in the future. To begin with, anthropology shows that humans are never the sole wilful shapers of their world. But it also shows that human decisions, values and goals do play a role in how societies change. The knowledge and theories that a society has about itself recursively shape the future of that society. Anthropology, more than many other disciplines, is ready for developing ideas for what is yet to come.

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