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# The two faces of mutuality: contemporary themes in anthropology<sup>1</sup>

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The theme of *mutuality* has lately emerged in anthropology by the hand of two of our most influential contemporary thinkers. Yet they explore it in apparently unrelated guises: by the hand of Johannes Fabian, mutuality emerges as a methodological preoccupation in discussions about *fieldwork ethics* referring to the way in which anthropologist and informant are engaged in processes of co-responsibility (2001, 2007); by the hand of Marshall Sahlins, mutuality is a constitutive principle in personal ontology that allows for a theoretical re-founding of *kinship studies* (2011). Are the

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two meanings simply unconnected or do they share something in common which may turn out to be of theoretical relevance for contemporary anthropology? In this essay, I aim to show that both meanings are indeed relevantly interrelated but, in order to do so, I find it necessary to explore further Marilyn Strathern's proposals concerning the intrinsic plurality of persons. Mutuality would be the movement between singularity produced out of plurality and plurality produced out of singularity – and that is why it implies “co-presence” to use Sahlins' term or “participation” to use Lévy-Bruhl's.

### **Fabian's ethnographic mutuality**

In his well-known essay “Ethnographic Misunderstanding and the Perils of Context,” Johannes Fabian defines ethnographic mutuality as “the promise of nontrivial understanding that is produced by researcher and researched together.” (1995: 47) In short, an unavoidable aspect of all fieldwork interaction would be the occurrence of a feeling of *shared revelation*. In our present world of almost instantaneous globalization, even more so than in the past, the ethnographer's presence in the field, as well as what she eventually comes to write about it, has an impact on the field but, more than that, it corresponds to processes of joint discovery.

In that sense, the typical preoccupation of the young ethnographer at being lied at by the informants soon gives way, in the more seasoned ethnographer, to what one might call a Rashomon fascination: the awareness that there is no end to interpretation and that we will ever be working on processes where absolutes play no role. Ambiguity will ever persist, as the ethnographic moment is part of the broader process of

human communication and, thus, it is subject to what Donald Davidson calls the *indeterminacy of interpretation* (2001).

More than that, however, the traditional propensity of anthropology towards semiotic models of interaction, where conscious meaning is treated as the be-and-all of communication, must give way in the years to follow to more sophisticated understandings of the fieldwork context. We have to find ways of approaching analytically the *ethnographic gesture* that do not disembodied it; that preserve its physicality in a world where what we understand is as much communicated by others as it is understood with others. We participate jointly in environments that are historically inscribed with sociality. As Evans-Pritchard used to put it, the ethnographer should attempt to learn to use, at least rudimentarily, the tools that centrally mark a native's life, failing which he will never understand the meaning of their world (1976).

Let us take as an example a classical essay that most anthropologists have read: Victor Turner's article on Muchona, his favoured informant, that he wrote for Joseph Casagrande's time-setting volume *In the company of man* (1964, re-edited in *A Forest of Symbols*, 1967). There Turner describes how he was walking along a dusty road in what is now north-western Zambia in the company of his research assistant when he noticed a parasitical growth on a tree that he had been told had special curative powers. He tried to identify it, but clearly he was not getting it right. Suddenly, from behind them, another traveller of whom they had not been aware entered their conversation: Muchona, a strange little man who turned out to be a true erudite about such matters. Over the following months, Turner and Windson, his Christian assistant, underwent a process of shared revelation with Muchona that eventually gave rise to some of the most famous books in mid-century anthropology (1962, 1967, 1968, 1969).

Turner's way of approaching the topic is quite explicit: (a) the presence of the tree and the nature of the road where they first met and the inhabited spaces where, later on, they had their heated evening conversations was of the essence for the interaction; (b) language was constantly failing them – Turner's Ndembu was not very good, his assistant found it difficult to represent what was being told by Muchona in terms of his own urban Christian vocabulary, and, to top it all, Muchona's speech was a world of ambiguities and innuendos not always helped by a tendency to drink too much (1967: 139); finally, (c) everyone present had their reasons for being interested in the interaction – these reasons diverged but they also came together in a mutual fascination with the cosmological implications of traditional methods of cure.

As the linguistic philosopher H. Paul Grice has taught us quite a while ago, the intentions of a speaker frequently differ from the standard meaning of the words (e.g. Medina 2005: 30). This may be due both to irony and metaphor as, further still, because the meaning is dependent upon a series of presuppositions about the world that would not be present in the meaning of each of those words and each of those sentences if we were to enquire about them in a disembodied fashion (as one might say, their dictionary meaning). In short, the communicative intentions of the speaker are an integral part of the interpretative process and the listener constantly hypothesises concerning what she hears. Thus, often enough, other's speech is punctuated by grants, gestures, comments and questions that aim at specifying, directing, intervening in what one is hearing.

What this means is that, behind each communicative act, there is the presumption of a kind of cooperation. The communicative act is reflexive from the word go; it depends on a disposition on the part of the both speakers that Donald Davidson calls "interpretive charity" (2001) – the

implicit acceptance that the gestures of the person who is in front of me can be endowed with meaning.

Primatologists, however, go a step further when they claim that human communication differs from that of other primates in that it is fundamentally grounded on a proclivity towards *perceptually co-present joint attention*. For Michael Tomasello, this notion can be encapsulated in the sentence, “I want you to know that I want you to attend to something, but that *I want us to know this together.*” (2008: 91) What this implies is that the simplest occurrence of ostension already involves active co-presence. My communicative intention is communicated at the same time and jointly with the actual communication. If then we do not limit our attention in studying human social life to verbal expression but take in the whole of the context of communication, we realize that mutuality is constitutive and not the product of the intentional act of communication.

Ethnography is an activity that is centrally dependent on intersubjectivity (cf. Duranti 2007), which means that perceptually co-present joint attention is also part of it. Thus, the ethnographic gesture involves a form of cooperation that is constitutive of the partners because it presumes joint attention. The ethnographer imparts information as much as she gathers it. This is the case even when she is so struck by the contrast in worldviews or so keen on emphasising it that she fails to see that mutuality is a condition of possibility of her ethnography. We often presume that the worlds that come into confrontation during the ethnographic encounter are radically separate and will remain so thereafter. This, however, is neither true about the ethnographer nor about her informants (particularly those who, like Muchona and all those that are written about in Casagrande’s book, develop close links with the ethnographer, often over long and formative periods).

Moreover, we tend to think of ethnography in the past as a gesture that left no traces behind, as if the beaches of the Trobriand Islands, the sand tracks of Sudan, or the dirt roads in the Cooper Belt were places frozen in time; as if the ethnographer's presence were not part of the historical process of modernity. Gluckman and his students, for one, knew only too well (as part of their political engagement) that there was no going back in history. One of the reasons for that is that human communication is mutually constitutive.

Ethnography is constitutive both at the moment of the encounter and in the echoes that it produces in time. Who would fail to see the relevance that Junod's presence in southern Mozambique and the Transvaal from the 1890's to the 1920's came to have to the history of southern Africa? Who would fail to understand the link between Eduardo Mondlane's youth in Junod's mission and the path that would lead him to becoming the father of a new nation? In turn, Patrick Harries, studying the background that led to Junod's ethnography insists that Switzerland's own confrontation with the "primitiveness" of its rural citizens through folklore studies was the fertilizer that produced Swiss missionary ethnography in Africa (2007).

As such, when we come to discuss the ethnographic gesture, we must overcome the traditional binarist view. We cannot exhaust our analysis of ethnographic mutuality if we persist in closing it into a relationship of bilateral reciprocity (I give, you give). The ethnographer entices and, in turn, is provoked. As Tomasello insists, "in mutualistic collaborative activities the difference between requesting help and offering help by informing is minimal." (2008: 196) The ethnographer and the informant are not only exchanging information, they are jointly attentive to the world. Being jointly attentive, however, is a gesture that goes beyond

communication, as it is formative of the worldview of those involved. The desire to help mutual understanding is part and parcel of the ethnographic process. The ethnographer affects his informants in their future life choices quite as much as their concerns and fascinations affect his work, his personality and the worldviews of his future students. Fabian alerts us to the fact that this is not something that ends the moment the ethnographer leaves the field: “Others are not consumed, as it were, by either ethnology or history; they remain present and confront us.” (2001: 77) Muchona’s concern with the oncoming of modernity and his attempt to negotiate it are part of Turner’s story.

But, of course, as I start to write my notes – immediately in the field – I start opening myself to other communicative intentions, those that mark academic writing. And those, of course, may enter into contradiction with the local context. Yet, there is nothing surprising about that, since that is an intrinsic aspect of the human condition. As Joan Bestard and I have argued a long time ago, all interests are perforce limited, both because of the complexity of our engagement with the world and because of the crossing of different perspectives in our own persons (Pina-Cabral 2003: 47-54; 2010a). Our simultaneous engagement with different persons and different groups implies a mutualistic plurality of interests.

In order to understand the people I study, I must necessarily enter into a mutualistic game of interpretation of their intentions and of our joint contexts, I cannot by any means depend exclusively on language. This is the occasion, therefore, to criticise a certain logocentrism that has become a methodological commonplace in anthropology.<sup>2</sup> More than just a political

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as A. Duranti has suggested, “Even in the case of highly codified semiotic systems such as historical-natural languages, we should not assume that the ‘directionality’ or ‘aboutness’ of talk is always



or ethical implication of our present globalized condition, ethnographic mutuality is a condition of possibility of the *ethnographic gesture*.

### **Sahlins's kinship as mutuality of being**

It is here that Sahlins' recent disquisitions concerning "mutuality of being" become relevant (2011). The force of his argument lies in the observation, that some of us have been exploring already for some time<sup>3</sup> that persons are mutually implied and plurally constituted. He quotes appositely a passage of one of Monica Wilson's classical works where she reports that, for the Nyakyusa of Lake Nyassa, "kinsmen are members of one another." (2011:11)

His central idea is that we can overcome the culturalist excesses of Schneider and his followers – thus refounding the comparative study of kinship on new bases – if we go beyond the mind/body polarity that was implied in the earlier modes of relating "social" kinship with "biological" kinship. We must acknowledge that persons are interdependent; they are partible in the sense of being "members of one another."

Sahlins, thus, sustains that "the capacities of partibility and hierarchy (the encompassment of others) are general conditions of humans in language." (2011. 13)<sup>4</sup> He argues that this notion of partibility is better used to generalize the condition of humans in general, whilst "dividuality" should

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identifiable in terms of a linguistically encoded concept or a linguistic category of action, such as a speech act." (2006: 36)

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Toren 1999, Pina-Cabral 2009, 2010b and 2010c.

<sup>4</sup> But, here, we should be wary of the logocentric pitfalls of overstressing spoken language, for we must include in this category all forms of communication (and, most essentially, gestural communication, from which spoken language derives). I owe this insight to Tomasello (2008) but Donald Davidson had long ago warned us about the dangers of this sort of logocentric deviation (2001).

be applied to kinship phenomena in particular. According to him, the latter “is a differentiated sub-class consisting of partibility plus co-presence.” (2011: 13-14)

Thus, “for understanding kinship much is gained by privileging intersubjective being over the singular person as the composite site of multiple others.” (2011: 14) Kinsmen share a common substance. Whether this is communicated by means of metaphors of blood, commensality, co-residence, or others is a matter of ethnographic detail. He correctly insists that there is no question of seeing these as “cultural” as opposed to “natural” features, since “human birth is not a pre-discursive fact.” (2011: 3) Kinship, therefore, (and particularly, I would add, the constitution of collectivities) entails “the incorporation of others in the one person, making her or him a composite being in a participatory sense.” (2011: 13) Finally, joining a tradition implicit in a long line of anthropological thinkers, he comes to define a *kinship system* as “a manifold of intersubjective participations, founded on mutualities of being.” (2011: 10)

We must ask, therefore, whether this mutuality of being, as in kinship, is of the same nature as Fabian’s ethnographic mutuality. As I read Sahlins’ argument, he is proposing that both types of mutuality are implicit in personal partibility, namely that our disposition to attend to others by processes of shared intentionality leads to our personal co-construction in contexts of sociality. By qualifying kinship mutuality as a mutuality *of being*, however, Sahlins seems to be proposing that kinship is a sub-category of that general feature that is characterised by co-presence. If this is the case, whilst his proposal of a universalisation of the notion of mutuality seems highly relevant, one must wonder (a) whether his reading of the concepts of dividuality and partibility is correct and (b) whether he is not, in fact, striving to save sociocentric theorizing. As it happens, he claims he is doing just that (2011: 13), and it is not up to us to take him as joking or as failing to

understand the meaning of the terms. In any case, if we are to use a concept such as that of mutuality to our own satisfaction in our ethnographic analyses, we are bound to try to make sense of our own ideas on such a deeply relevant topic. We should, therefore, focus upon the *locus classicus* of the attack on sociocentrism since, at the same time, it is also the most profound analysis of the notion of the person in terms of dividuality. This is Marilyn Strathern's initial passage concerning the opposition between society and individual in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988: 11-15 and 348-9 n7).

### **Dividuality and Partibility<sup>5</sup>**

It is interesting that Strathern should start this passage by declaring frankly "I have made an easy living through setting up negativities, showing that this or that set of concepts does not apply to the ethnographic material I know best..." (1988: 11). She feels she needs to go beyond the deconstruction of classical anthropological concepts that she quite correctly identifies with Leach and Needham (1988: 348 n6).

She famously proposes: "We must stop thinking that at the heart of these cultures is an antinomy between 'society' and 'the individual'." (1988: 12) The way she achieves this is by pitting Melanesian "ideas about the nature of social life," with which she has come to be familiar through fieldwork, with "ideas presented as Western orthodoxy." (ibid.) What follows is one of the most profound explorations of the nature of personhood that has ever come out of the hand of any anthropologist since Lévy-Bruhl's late personal notes (1949).

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Christina Toren for her help in reading these passages. What I make of them, of course, should not be held as representative of her views.

Time, however, has taught us that the polarization between Melanesian society and Euro-Americaness/Westernness on which she relies (what she calls “setting up negativities”) to help her undertake the critique of anthropological thinking on personhood, turns out to be more complex than it seemed at first. This, in fact, was one of the recurrent discomforts that Lévy-Bruhl too addressed in his prophetic late notes and we should have given greater attention to his critical struggles instead of simply criticising him for his earlier views (e.g. 1949: 48, 130, 165 or 184). The features that Strathern identifies as Melanesian are, in fact, far more universal.

As it happens, a number of us have recently been discovering (and Sahlins too, of course) that her attack on sociocentrism has deeply universal relevance.<sup>6</sup> The existence of “ideas presented as Western orthodoxy” (ibid.) is a fact, but it does not mean that these are the correct ideas to describe those whom we (erroneously) call “Western.” Why erroneously? Because by calling them so, we are already imposing upon them the orthodoxy that we should be wishing to deconstruct? It is, and excuse the poor taste of the metaphor, like saying that the best way to write about Germans in the 1930’s is by describing them in racialist terms. More than anything else, the relatively recent field of “new reproduction technologies” has brought this aspect to our attention both in matters concerning kinship and concerning the relation between science and society.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. a recent number of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2), 2010.

<sup>7</sup> In the essay where he summarizes his research group’s findings concerning the morality of kinship and the new reproduction technologies, Joan Bestard stresses that, since “it installs uncertainty into the process of biological construction of a kinship relation,” “assisted nature can hardly become the foundation of the social. It is manipulated in the laboratory, installed in the body and appropriated as a relation of identity.” (2004: 67)

Strathern, therefore, proposes that we should go beyond the society/individual pair, “because [these terms] invite us to imagine that sociality is a question of collectivity (...).” “‘Society’ is seen to be what connects individuals to one another, the relationships between them.” (ibid.) To the contrary, ever since Malinowski, our ethnographies have been showing that this polarisation between unitary entities of different levels of abstraction (individual v. group) is not a satisfactory mode of describing how sociality operates. And we should not have been so surprised with our ethnographies, since philosophers have long been warning us against this view of identity that pits it to alterity in a symmetric relation (cf. Lévinas 1971). We should have been warned that, whilst there are indeed many contexts where collectivities present themselves as being unitary – and much “work” is done among the peoples we describe in our ethnographies in order to achieve precisely that effect – a strange evidence has come to permeate our research that suggests that “the singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm.” (1988: 13)

Long ago, Lévi-Strauss called our attention to an interesting aspect of the ethnographic register. Whilst, biologically speaking, persons are like individual flowers, like specimens of a variety, the fact is that the way societies deal with persons is more akin to the way they deal with species than with individual specimens. Social life, he goes on, “effects a strange transformation in this system, for it encourages each biological individual to develop a personality; and this is a notion no longer recalling specimens within a variety but rather types of varieties or of species [...]” (1966: 214) I submit that what he is observing in the two chapters of *The Savage Mind* that he dedicates to personal naming is not unlike what I myself have encountered in the comparative study of personal naming (cf. Pina-Cabral 2010b, 2010c, 2012): social practices relating to the naming of persons (and domesticated animals) are ambivalently placed before singleness and

plurality. Proper naming works actively at constructing dividuality, affirming the intrinsic plurality of what is identified as single.

Persons present themselves to our ethnographic eye as plurally constituted and interpenetrating with each other in deeply complex patterns of co-presence and co-substantiality. Amazingly, the original source of this insight is to be found in the notes that Lucien Lévy-Bruhl was writing just before his death in March 1939. Having spent a whole lifetime exploring why “primitives” did not seem to think like “us,” he found out not only that the polarity itself was deeply misguided,<sup>8</sup> but also that in fact the argument had to be turned around radically. He had accumulated a gigantic body of ethnographic evidence that people were prone to experiencing “participation” with other persons, with collectivities, with supernatural forces, and even with material aspects of their world (things). How to make sense of this with an Aristotelian-inspired epistemology, he asks himself?

To put it briefly, Lévy-Bruhl first understood that the modes of thinking and being in the world that were evinced by the people anthropologists studied were not compatible with the philosophical theories concerning mind and reason that dominated his epoch. As a professor of philosophy, therefore, he was led to propose that there were two essential modes of thinking: for “primitives” and for “us.” As he went on exploring this insight, however, at a time when the first professional ethnographies were emerging in their wonderful quality (he was progressively exposed to the work of all of the great ethnographers – French, English and American – of the 20’s and 30’s), he came to realize that the problem was perhaps broader. The notion of primitive lost its relevance for him as he explored its implications and, in time, he understood that the individualistic notion of

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<sup>8</sup> “I have to show (but it is pointless to spell it out here, even in resumed fashion) that, today more than ever, I do not believe that there is a *mentalité* which characterises ‘primitives’.” (1949:164-5).

personhood and the Aristotelic notion of reason that made “participation” an absurdity were themselves the very problem that had to be resolved. I presume that his intellectual movement was not unlike that which his colleague Ludwig Wittgenstein carried out between his early work and his latter annotations at roughly the same time.

Lévy-Bruhl’s personal notes, posthumously published in 1949, are an extraordinary document of deep critical honesty, of how a man can struggle with understanding till he is forced to turn around the central presuppositions of his world. Precisely one month before he died, at 82 years of age, as he wrote his last notes, he finally reached a profound insight that remains a major breakthrough in anthropological thinking:

“What turns participation into something that appears to be irreconcilable with the habitual norms of the intellect, is that, without realizing it, we assume that, in primitive *mentalité*, beings are first given and then participate of this or that other person, of this or that supernatural force, etc. – without our being able to understand how this participation can be established, how a being can be at the same time itself and another (...).” (1949: 250)

Having thus phrased the problem, he found himself able to perform a radical inversion of perspective. The solution would be not to presume “that beings are given beforehand and then enter into their participations.” (ibid.) Rather,

“A participation is not simply a mysterious and inexplicable fusion between beings who lose and keep at the same time their identity. It enters into the constitution of these same beings. Without participation they would not have been a given of their own experience: they would not have existed. (...) Participation, therefore, is *immanent* to the individual as he owes what he is to it.” (ibid.)

And he concludes: “it is impossible for the individual to separate in himself what is properly his and that with which he participates in order to exist.” (1949: 251)

Now, in the light of today's theorizing – for people like Sahlins and Strathern –, Lévy-Bruhl's concept of "participation" includes a number of factors that we are prone to treat separately and, as Sahlins in fact indirectly notes, the concept cannot simply be taken on board (2011b). However, Lévy-Bruhl's final insight that we were approaching the matter of personal identity in a deeply misguided perspective, and that "participating" is the condition for being a person and not an adjectival aspect of personhood, remains the groundwork upon which today's notions of mutuality, partibility and dividuality must be understood.

The more direct inspiration for Marilyn Strathern concept of "dividuality" is McKim Marriott's work on India. There he notes, "What goes on *between* actors are the same connected processes of mixing and separation that go on *within* actors."<sup>9</sup> The sociocentric notion of both group *and* individual that has dominated the social sciences of the twentieth century is, thus, undermined. Instead of this, Marriott proposes a notion of dividuality – not only of persons, but also of collectivities:

"persons – single actors – are not thought in South Asia to be 'individual', that is, indivisible, bounded units, as they are in much of Western social and psychological theory as well as in common sense. Instead, it appears that persons are generally thought by South Asians to be 'dividual' or divisible. To exist, dividual persons absorb heterogeneous material influences. They must also give out from themselves particles of their own coded substances – essences, residues, or other active influences – that may then reproduce in others something of the nature of the persons in whom they have originated." (1976: 111)

If, then, we are to adopt a view of sociality that de-essentializes the units of social life, "we shall require a vocabulary that will allow us to talk about sociality in the singular as well as in the plural." (Strathern 1988: 13)

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<sup>9</sup> In Strathern 1988: 349 n7 from Marriott 1976: 109, original emphasis.



Individuality does not simply vanish, she argues; rather, it becomes one of the conditions (or, better still, perspectives) under which one can approach sociality. In as much as collectivities work at “processes of de-pluralization”, so persons “contain a generalized sociality within.” In short, “the bringing together of many persons is just like the bringing together of one.” (1988: 13)

This notion that “persons are intrinsically plural and diverse in origin in their acts” (Strathern 1988: 159) should have warned us against attempting to reconstruct kinship theory from a sociocentric perspective that postulates the unitariness of collectivities (“groups”) and that sees kinship as based in an exchange of women between such groups. Thus, the second part of Sahlins’ essay on kinship as mutuality comes as a bit of a disappointment (2011b). He argues there that, “if the alliance is centred in the solidarity of marital sexuality, by the same token it is also oppositional, insofar as the kin groups united by intermarriage, in giving or taking spouses, have differentially affected their membership and reproduction potential.” (2011b: 235) We seem to be back to what he calls “the primary exogamous group” (ibid.) – a category that is at the root of the problems that confronted structural-functionalist theorising concerning kinship back in the 1960’s, as some of us might still remember.

Abstracted talk of “groupness” uniformizes abusively the evidence provided by the ethnographic record of incredible diversity and complexity in the arrangements that produce collectivity. It counters the evidence that partibility is not effaceable either for persons or for collectivities. In the same way, talk of alliance as dependent on “marriage” (a Eurocentric notion if there is one – Rivière 1971) obscures the famous discovery by Edmund Leach that it was unsafe to universalize on the basis of such a category (1961). Thus, talk of “zero-sum games” associated to “groups” that enter into “marital” alliance (Sahlins 2011b) turns partibility on its head and makes

it something that we have to work at de-constructing in order to make sense of sociality, rather than the other way round. As Sahlins himself very advisedly notes, there are serious risks in placing the burden of our theorizing on ontology (on “being”), since “philosophical notions of ‘being’ have a common tendency to devolve into notions of ‘substance’, even as ‘substance’ conjures a sense of materiality.” (2011b: 227)

Children’s “dual life connections” (“double affiliation”) must not be seen as an instance of “ambivalence” (Sahlins 2011b: 236) but, to the contrary, as the very ground on which sociality is constituted and collectivity instituted – that is the upshot of Lévy-Bruhl’s and Strathern’s prophetic lessons. I propose, therefore, that we should recover Strathern’s original use of the relation between “partibility” and “dividuality,” where the former refers to *mediated* relations (as through things and persons that are conceptualized as parts of other things or persons) and the latter to *unmediated* relations, where “persons are construed as having a direct influence in the minds or bodies of those to whom they are thus related.” (1988: 178)<sup>10</sup> What this means is that partibility results from persons being multiple, whilst dividuality qualifies the singularity that characterises partible persons.

It seems, therefore, that we are not in a condition to accept Sahlins’ suggestion that kinship should be taken, once again, as a specifically separate realm of sociality. Kinship, according to him, would be associated to the dividuality of persons (their “mutuality of being”), whilst partibility would be a generalised condition of sociality. And here again, I cannot see

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<sup>10</sup> And here we meet an issue that I believe is in sore need of further study: the matter of how humans learn what is causality. Since the days in which Lévy-Bruhl struggled with it in characteristically quizzical fashion (1949: 174, 234, 243-4), I believe Rodney Needham was the only one to address it in his no less quizzical essay on “Skulls and causality” (1983: 66-92). The topic, however, is a matter of central contemporary philosophical relevance (e.g. Siegel 2010).

why Needham's arguments as to why kinship cannot be logically separated from other aspects of social life should not have been revisited (1971) – they not only antedate Schneider's by over a decade but, ultimately, they are far more responsible in theoretical terms.

### **The ethnographic gesture**

If, then, we are to salvage the notion of “mutuality” for anthropological use, we have to take into consideration the implications of the dividuality of personhood and to deconstruct the way in which individuality is written into the common meanings we attribute to the word. For instance, the *Oxford Dictionary of English* has this to say about the word “mutual” (s.v.): “Traditionally it has long been held that the only correct use of *mutual* is in describing a reciprocal relationship: *mutual respect*, for example, means that the parties involved feel respect for each other. The other use of *mutual* meaning ‘held in common’, as in *mutual friend*, is regarded as being incorrect. This latter use has a long and respectable history, however. It was first recorded in Shakespeare, and has since appeared in the writing of Sir Walter Scott, George Eliot, and, most famously, as the title of Dickens’ novel *Our Mutual Friend*. It is now generally accepted as part of standard English.”

Indeed, if we were to presume an individualist view of personhood, the second meaning of mutual would be incorrect, a logical confusion. The way this second meaning has imposed itself historically, however, in spite of repeated calls to abandon it, can be taken as a further instance of the way in which dividuality permanently re-emerges. We must avoid, it would seem, any interpretation of dividuality that dissociates it from the more general aspects of the human condition that institute partibility. Mutuality – much like Fortes’ earlier *amity* (1970) – must not be seen as a process that is

qualitatively different from those which ground more general human interaction.

Let us, then, return to our initial question concerning what is common between these two formulations of mutuality. I suggest that what makes Fabian's ethnographic mutuality and Sahlins' kinship mutuality instances of the same category is the fact that anthropology is only possible because ethnographers are human: that is, they have an entry into all possible human worlds. As A. Duranti has recently argued: "there exists a level of intentionality that is pervasive in human action, a level that cannot be denied and at the same time is distinct from the particular conceptualizations offered by a particular language or discourse." (2006: 33) In short, the common ground between the two meanings of mutuality is constituted by the very conditions of possibility of the *ethnographic gesture*, the founding movement of anthropology.

To carry out fieldwork is to undergo a movement of de-contextualization and re-contextualization, which is both physical and intellectual. It is this movement that allows the ethnographer to construct a particular lived world as a *field*, that is, a differentiated social world. In turn, this process of differentiation between distinctly identifiable social worlds is indispensable for the undertaking of what Pitt-Rivers claimed to be the ultimate aim of anthropology: that is, the constant process of de-ethnocentrification.<sup>11</sup> We humans are steeped in history as a source of human creativity. As a human activity, ethnography depends on methodological mutuality as much as on the mutuality associated to the

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<sup>11</sup> "Every moral refuge is an evasion of the situation through which alone one can learn to accept the native standards in place of one's own. Culture shock is, in fact, the process of 'de-ethnocentrification' and the real problem of fieldwork is not to avoid it but to surmount it, accepting its challenge and putting it to moral and intellectual profit, for, through this experience of destruction of one's self-image, one learns to place one's values in abeyance and to adopt theirs." (1992: 142)

early ontogeny of the person because both are aspects of the *human condition*. The task of anthropology will never be exhausted, because de-ethnocentrification is never-ending.

Primatologists have been arguing for some time that humans are genetically endowed with a propensity to adopt what they call a “bird’s eye view”. There is a disposition in humans, it would seem, to include “all participant roles, including [their] own, in the same representational format.” (Tomasello 2008: 266) This disposition, they argue, is essential for the acquisition of language skills as well as all other social skills. In carrying out ethnography, humans depend on this universal human disposition in order to make sense of the *field*, that is, the new world where they are now moving, and to make sense of what they encounter there. Thus, the constitutive mutuality that disposes humans in early ontogeny to adopt the bird’s eye view is also the ground of possibility of ethnographic mutuality.

Ultimately, therefore, the history of anthropology as a universalist discourse of de-ethnocentrification must be seen as an extension of the propensity to adopt the bird’s eye view. Anthropology as a comparative exercise cannot be reduced to ethnography but neither can ethnography be brushed off simply as a handmaiden of anthropology. The relation between universalist comparativism concerning the human condition and the practice of ethnography predates by many centuries the emergence of anthropology and ethnography as academic undertakings in the middle of the nineteenth century. We must not forget that the comparativist disposition to which we are the heirs today is the product of a long history of travellers and missionaries from the far-off days of Herodotus and Ibn Battuta, which emerged centrally as a self-conscious humanist undertaking by the beginning of the Modern Era.

In the works of people like Duarte Barbosa, Bartolomé de las Casas, or Damião de Góis there was a relation between the gathering of evidence

about humanity in general and the direct participation in the life of separate humanities that is the historical root both of today's ethnography and of today's anthropology as academic undertakings. I am inspired in this by Carmelo Lisón-Tolosana's book about Alexandre Valignano, the Jesuit missionary in Japan, where he argues that we must see such people as engaged in a kind of proto-anthropology (2005).

Over the past two centuries of explicit academic engagement, anthropology and ethnography evolved separately, but never very far from each other. And, whilst they are not mutually exclusive, it is my argument that they will never part ways. When humans engage themselves in an attempt to understand their own condition in the most general terms, they will ever be driven to the universality that is written into the most particular processes of personal engagement – that is, mutuality, the process of co-construction that results from the disposition to adopt the bird's eye view. Thus, human interaction in the surrounding world is also a process of co-production of each of the participants as human. Anthropology, even as a scientific enterprise, is grafted onto that.

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*Note* – all translations of passages of books quoted in languages other than English are my own responsibility.

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