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Chapter Nine

On the Resilience of Superstition

João de Pina-Cabral



Modernity, like modern science, could live with everything except an attenuated status and a limited, non-proselytizing social role for it.

—Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*

Anthropologists and philosophers have always taken very seriously the concept of ‘belief’ or *croyance*. Nevertheless, it has led to a long series of perplexities that do not seem to be fully resolved even today, nearly forty years after Rodney Needham published his fundamental essay on the topic (Needham 1972). On the other hand, the concept of ‘superstition’ as used by the fathers of anthropology (e.g. Frazer 1909) has simply been discarded as ethnocentric. The first has been pushed aside for its logical uncertainty, the second for its ethical uncertainty.

Yet the two concepts are surprisingly resilient, and they remain related by the fact that belief (as in ‘the so-and-so believe this and that’) is generally used to mean the knowledge of others to which the speaker does not adhere; that is, others’ unfounded beliefs. As most commonly used, therefore, the category of belief implies the suppressed category of superstition, much like the common anthropological category ‘the Other’ – with capital ‘o’ – implies the suppressed category of the ‘primitive’. Furthermore, this association is definitional: superstition is defined as ‘unfounded belief’, but the issue of the foundation of belief is at the centre of the anthropological and philosophical perplexities that have recently haunted epistemological thinking (see Toren and Pina-Cabral 2009; Fabian 2012: 444).

In this chapter, we will engage one of the oldest themes in anthropology: the efficacy of magic. As in previous essays, I will depend on Donald Da-

vidson's epistemological views that amount to a type of minimalist realism and are essentially non-representationalist (Davidson 2001: 138). I will use as examples two instances of magic: one taken from the early work of Joseph Conrad, the other from a news report concerning the common-law wife of the late writer Stieg Larsson.

Unwinding Participation

These examples fully evoke Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's notion of 'participation' as developed in his late personal notes, the *Carnets*, published posthumously in 1949 (Lévy-Bruhl 1998). For Lévy-Bruhl, the word describes the fact that 'the "primitive" frequently experiences participations between himself and this or that enviroing being or object, natural or supernatural, with which he is or comes to be in contact, and that, quite as frequently, he imagines similar participations between these beings and objects' (ibid.: 77–78).¹ He observes, 'individual beings or objects are only represented within a whole of which they are, if not the parts, at least integrating elements, composing elements (*les composants*), or reproductions' (ibid.: 22). Lévy-Bruhl's editor further clarifies by explaining that what Lévy-Bruhl had observed was that, 'the beings and objects which are associated in collective representations only reach representation on the basis of a link that makes them always already participating in one another, so that one can claim that this link is felt even before these objects have been represented and related to each other as represented objects' (Karsenti 1998: xxiv).

Now, many anthropologists today are highly sceptical of the appositeness of the notion of 'representation' (Toren 1999; Pina-Cabral 2010a). Davidson himself was a critic (Davidson 2001: 34), and the issue has been causing much debate of late (e.g. Clark 1996; Mandik and Clark 2002; Chemero 2009; Siegel 2011). Whatever the outcome of these discussions in light of any further scientific evidence that might surface concerning human mental functions, we can be certain that the way anthropologists have been using the notion of representation in the twentieth century (collective and individual) is today a major hindrance to anthropological theorizing (~~see Giddens 1996: 124~~).

In particular, notions like 'representation' and 'belief' operate a kind of silent compacting between personal dispositions (aspects of thought held in the mind of each one of us) and collective dispositions (statistical tendencies observed among the mental dispositions of members of a group). To presume that personal mental processes (representations) and collectively shared dispositions (collective representations) are somehow phenomena of

the same nature is to presume that groups have minds of the same nature as persons – a presupposition that we are hardly entitled to make. Our challenge, then, is to find a way of matching Lévy-Bruhl's profound insights concerning human thinking with contemporary epistemology, where the notion of representation as enshrined in the anthropological tradition is best avoided and where unstated isomorphisms between personal mental processes and collective tendencies are decidedly untenable.

I believe that we can do this by proposing that Lévy-Bruhl's notion of 'participation' synthesizes various aspects of the human condition that we would approach separately today. In this chapter, therefore, I will explore three major aspects of 'participation'.

The first aspect is mutuality of personhood – that is, in Marshall Sahlins's recent formulation (Sahlins 2011a, 2011b), the way in which persons are constituted multiply and relationally, all singularity being approximate and evanescent. Marilyn Strathern's concept of the 'dividual person' helps us understand how plurality is anterior to singularity, always reimposing itself (Strathern 1988; see also Mosko 2010; Pina-Cabral 2010b). Strathern's connected notion of 'partibility' describes objects and persons as mutually constituted and conceptually interconnected (Strathern 1984; cf. Pina-Cabral 2012). In fact, Strathern's thinking is deeply indebted to Maurice Leenhardt's work on Melanesia (Leenhardt 1971), which had similarly affected Lévy-Bruhl's late thinking on personhood.

For the second aspect, we will rely on Rodney Needham's contributions towards the better understanding of the epistemology of everyday life inspired by the late work of Wittgenstein – namely, an approach to category formation that emphasizes the way in which concepts in natural languages are not subject to the rules of non-contradiction and the excluded middle, rather relying on a notion of opposition that remains ever incomplete and approximate, and on unmediated notions of causality.² The way in which cognition is essentially embodied is an aspect of Needham's thought that has come to be fully confirmed, three decades later, by the work of neurophysiologists and philosophers of cognition, such as Clark and Chalmers (1995) and Chemero (2009), or of vision, such as Siegel (2011). In Needham words: 'the principle of opposition is reversible direction; and (directional) opposites are based on the spatial experience of the human body' (Needham 1987: 71–72). His argument concerning notions of causality similarly stresses the relationship between cognition and embodiment (Needham 1983: 66–92). Whilst many of the insights of Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1966) concerning *bricolage* must be taken as an inspiration to all of these discussions, his general structuralist epistemology will have to be abandoned, as indeed Needham had come to realize by the time he wrote

Counterpoints (1987). In fact, category formation will be approached by us in much the same way that fuzzy logic does when it exploits the tolerance for imprecision in dealing with complex problems of engineering (Pina-Cabral 2010a; Ross 2010 [1995]).

The third aspect concerns the nature of human communication. We start from a realist posture that emphasizes the essentially veridical nature of belief: as Quine put it, ‘to believe is to believe true’ (Quine and Ullian 1970: 4). A necessary condition for successful interpretation, therefore, according to Davidson, is that ‘the interpreter must so interpret as to make a speaker or agent largely correct about the world’ (Davidson 2001: 152). However, whilst the constitution of belief is essentially veridical in that it depends formatively on people’s assessment of what might be the case, one of its characteristics is the proneness to favour greater belief coherence. Here again, therefore, we are in a graded situation rather than one dominated by clear-cut binary opposites. Concerning belief, therefore, the rule of the excluded middle also makes no sense. Thus, ostensivity – that is, the association of heard words with things simultaneously observed – is indeed the boundary condition of belief, but it is often sidetracked by the need for belief coherence, giving rise to retentivity – that is, the tendency for beliefs to interconnect with each other, tending towards systematicity (without ever actually fully achieving it). As Quine puts it, ‘We form habits of building beliefs such as we form our other habits; only in habits of building beliefs there is less room for idiosyncrasy’ (Quine and Ullian 1970: 59). Retentivity consolidates over time in processes of collective coherence that, when identified by ethnographers, get called ‘world-views’.

This is one of the conclusions reached by Gustav Jahoda in his extensive study of the category of superstition carried out nearly half a century ago (Jahoda 1970). The experience of meaning is relational and holistic – there is no such thing as an individual belief, as all beliefs are dependent on other beliefs. Humans are prone towards favouring the maximization of meaning, so retentivity and the constitution of world-views are instruments of that.

Now, the two examples that I will discuss are cases where the efficacy of the procedures was independent of what Lévy-Bruhl would have called *croynance* (belief). That is, if asked whether they ‘believed in’ the objective powers of the magic they are practising, most of the participants in these two cases would have denied it. Yet, they all experienced and reported the efficacy of the magic, and they were all emotionally affected by the events. We are, therefore, invited to rethink the category of ‘belief’, separating very clearly between, on the one hand, the propositional attitudes that were being entertained – that is, what Malcolm Ruel (2002 [1982]) would have called ‘believing that’ – and, on the other hand, the adherence to a collective world

implied in the entertaining of such propositional attitudes – that is, ‘believing in’, or fideistic belief, to use Sabbatucci’s favoured expression (Sabbatucci 2000; see also Pompa 2003).

Finally, in order to avoid challenging the Cartesian epistemology that ruled his day, Lévy-Bruhl had to harbour himself within the safe walls of the notion of the ‘primitive’. Much as, later on in life, he added considerable nuance to his position in order to safeguard the essential unity of the human mind (e.g. Lévy-Bruhl 1998: 60), he remained bound by an ‘us/them’ polarity which meant he need not question the essential aspects of the Kantian status quo of his day.⁴ Today, however, the notion that we might be examining some form of culturally specific or non-Western mode of thinking is totally beside the point. In fact, as I hope to show, the examples I have chosen are clear evidence of this. In short, we are led to abandon the primitivist disposition that continues to hide itself behind culturalist fashion in anthropology (Pina-Cabral and Lydell 2009). The phenomena of effectiveness that we observe in these charms have broadly universal reach.

In light of this, therefore, I will suggest below that we might usefully recover the much-maligned anthropological notion of ‘superstition’. This would then be defined not as ‘unfounded belief’ but as the proneness of human beings anywhere to constitute their informal worlds in terms of mutuality of personhood, polythetic thinking and retentiveness of belief.

Conrad’s Magic

Joseph Conrad’s early fiction is situated around the coves and estuaries of the island-strewn coast of Sarawak in Malaysian Borneo (then known as the Eastern Archipelago: see Harrison 1970). It is a region he came to know very well during his maritime days, and for whose inhabitants he came to feel a distinct form of empathy. This is Conrad’s ‘East’, a concept that plays a central part in his emotional economy during the contrastingly sedate days spent in Kent, writing vast quantities of fiction. It is equally important in the reception of his work by the numberless avid readers who, such as myself, find it hard to tear themselves away from Conrad’s fiction. As he puts it vividly at the end of *Youth*: ‘This was the East of the ancient navigators, so old, so mysterious, resplendent and sombre, living and unchanged, full of danger and promise’ (Conrad 2011: 64).

The stories of the early books tend to be mutually linked and, as we read on, we get a sense of meeting the same contexts and characters again and again: gun running against the Dutch; a relation between Europeans and locals that is a mixture of mutual fear and fascination; the tragic ambivalence

of mixed people, mixed love and mixed friendship; the ups and downs of naval companionship; the marvels of British imperial power, and so on. One of the last pieces of Conrad's early period is a short story called 'Karain, A Memory' (Conrad 2012: 13–93), apparently related to a context with which he was very familiar and that, according to him, he repeated unwittingly in another story in the same collection, 'The Lagoon' (ibid.: 314–69). It is about a band of three gun-runners that strike up a friendship with a local potentate: a handsome man of fascinating presence, thoroughly respected in his small domain, whose back is permanently protected by an armed sorcerer. One day, the sorcerer dies of old age and the chieftain falls into terrible disarray. He is paralysed by fear of his ghostly enemies. He is at the point of losing the small kingdom he carved out for himself by means of sheer military prowess. His loving followers are stunned and bereft.

A tropical storm is upon the Europeans' boat, moored in the middle of the cove. They have not managed to see Karain, and this puzzles them, as they had struck up a genuine friendship with the fellow. Having carried out their business, they are preparing to leave but are held back by the brutality of the squall. To their surprise, out of the rain, the chieftain jumps into their boat. He is almost naked and carries nothing but his kris, having swum alone from the shore in cover of darkness. He is terrified and exhausted.

As the storm unfolds, he tells them his story: their family had sent him and his best friend on a revenge mission to kill a woman who had run away with a Dutch man, breaking a marriage agreement that had been agreed to by the elders, thus besmirching their ancestors' honour. Theirs was a long and arduous pilgrimage that took years until they found her. Finally, one morning, when the time had come to kill them, Karain spoiled the act of rightful vengeance by aiming his gun at his friend instead of at the woman's Dutch culprit. During the long and painful years of their search, without even being aware of it, Karain had fallen blindly in love with the image of her. He wanted nothing from her, but her death had become an impossibility for him.

Left alone and having no way back home, Karain is forced to confront the horror of his betrayal, but he finds protection in the magical powers of this sorcerer. Thus, he manages to direct his tremendous energy towards conquering a new home, his little seaside realm. Now that the sorcerer was dead, however, he was again at the mercy of his ghosts or, in any case, of his guilt. He begs to be taken to England, where the ghosts will not follow him as no one in England believes in them. But his European friends know only too well that this is hardly the case, that it will not bring solace; it will only postpone his self-destruction. One of them, called Hollis, suddenly, has an idea. He takes out of the boat's trunk his own personal box and opens it:

There were there a couple of reels of cotton, a packet of needles, a bit of silk ribbon, dark blue; a cabinet photograph, at which Hollis stole a glance before laying it on the table face downwards. A girl's portrait, I could see. There were, amongst a lot of various small objects, a bunch of flowers, a narrow white glove with many buttons, a slim packet of letters carefully tied up. Amulets of white men! Charms and talismans! Charms that keep them straight, that drive them crooked, that have the power to make a young man sigh, an old man smile. Potent things that procure dreams of joy, thoughts of regret; that soften hard hearts, and can temper a soft one to the hardness of steel. Gifts of heaven – things of earth. (ibid.: 79)

Then, as Hollis rummages through his box, Conrad lets us know:

All the ghosts driven out of the unbelieving West by men who pretend to be wise and alone and at peace – all the homeless ghosts of an unbelieving world – appeared suddenly round the figure of Hollis bending over the box ... [T]hey all seemed to come from the inhospitable regions of the earth to crowd into the gloomy cabin, as though it had been a refuge and, in all the unbelieving world, the only place of avenging belief ... It lasted a second – all disappeared. (ibid.)

Hollis picks up a gilt coin (a Jubilee sixpence) with a hole punched near the rim and shows it to Karain, saying: 'the image of the Great Queen [Victoria], and the most powerful thing the white men know', and he tells his companions, 'I shall make him a thing like those Italian peasants wear, you know' (ibid: 83). He cuts a bit of leather out of the narrow white glove that he had cherished for so long that the owner would no longer be waiting for his return; he sews it into a bag and ties it with the blue ribbon that the glove's owner had given him at his already distant departure from some English dock. Finally, he imposed it on Karain, crying out loud a spell: 'Forget, and be at peace!'

Later, as the sun is rising again and all is calm in the beautiful morning air, Karain realizes that he has been freed from the avenging ghost of his dead friend: 'He has departed again – forever!' he exclaims. And the narrator comments: 'The great thing was to impress him powerfully; to suggest absolute safety – the end of all trouble. We did our best; and I hope we affirmed our faith in the power of Hollis's charm efficiently enough to put the matter beyond the shadow of a doubt'.

Karain goes back among his people. 'He stood up in the boat, lifted up both his arms, then pointed to the infallible charm. We cheered again; and the Malays in the boats stared – very much puzzled and impressed. I wondered what they thought; what he thought; ... what the reader thinks?' (ibid.: 88). Now, precisely the matter of the reader's opinion concerning the power

of the charm and of the ghosts seems to be the point of the story. What is, after all, the status of 'the homeless ghosts of an unbelieving world' that had crowded out around Hollis when he opened his box? How had belief avenged itself? The concluding paragraphs of the short story address this matter.

Many years later, the narrator meets by chance the third of his gun-runner companions in Piccadilly. They had not seen each other for more than a decade, and both had abandoned their naval nomadism. Soon after greeting each other, the now retired sailor asks the narrator (Conrad?):

I wonder whether the charm worked – you remember Hollis' charm, of course. If it did ... Never was a sixpence wasted to better advantage! Poor devil! I wonder whether he got rid of that friend of his. Hope so ... Do you know, I sometimes think that [...] whether the thing was so, you know ... whether it really happened to him ... What do you think?' (ibid.: 91)

The narrator tries to distract his old partner's imagination by pointing to the palpable, modern carriage that is passing by them in all of its modern pomp in central London. The old sailor replies: 'Yes; I see it. [...] It is there; it pants, it runs, it rolls; it is strong and alive; it would smash you if you did not look out; but I'll be hanged if it is yet as real to me as ... as the other thing ... say, Karain's story' (ibid.: 93).

Conrad's conclusion – or is it only the narrator's conclusion? – is that the man 'had been too long away from home'. But the comment can only be ironic, never cynical, otherwise why would Conrad have told us this story at all? Further, note that what the old sailor doubts is not the charm's operational validity (indeed, 'Never was a sixpence wasted to better advantage!'), what he seems to doubt is 'Karain's story', 'whether it really happened to him'. That is, the part that puzzles the old sailor and brings out Conrad's ultimate message to his readers is the musing over the frighteningly deadly powers of Karain's childhood friend and their ancestors, who had been relying on the act of vengeance to clear their honour but were wronged.

Note that he tells us, when Hollis opens his box, that it contains the 'Amulets of white men! Charms and talismans! [...] Potent things that procure dreams of joy, thoughts of regret'. Confronted with the imperial breach – represented by the image of the Great Queen, 'the most powerful thing the white men know' – Conrad is enacting a scene of correspondence, a gesture of human universality in the face of human diversity (ibid.: 79).

Firstly, we are shown to be all equally subject to the mutuality of personhood – in Karain's case, he is subjected to his distant ghosts and he is also a plaything of love. The same, however, is the case with Hollis, his healer,

whose ghosts too come to visit the boat in that stormy night, even if only momentarily, when he opens his case. Secondly, we are subject to overlapping modes of thinking. There is difference, all right; but there is sufficient overlap for communication to occur. Even if we are not too certain what goes on in Karain's mind, we too know how to operate with analogies by means of error assessment in modes which are akin to the systems of control based on fuzzy logic. Conrad plays on the way in which Karain's and Hollis's worlds overlap significantly, in all of their difference. But he is so certain of the proximity that he can even joke with the reader, knowing full well what the reader is feeling, thus challenging the reader's predictable surprise. Finally, even though we come from different backgrounds, we recognize the modes of 'participation' among the various parts of our mutual worlds, we can rely on retentivity to act upon us – even if, at the end, we feel obliged to leave behind a kind of ironic disclaimer.

Postmodern Charms

Stieg Larsson, the Danish author of the fabulously successful trilogy *Millennium* (Larsson 2010), died intestate of a sudden disease. Shortly after his death, it became clear that his novels would yield untold riches. His common-law wife, Eva Gabrielsson, who by all accounts had helped him write his novels, was left out of the inheritance, which was claimed exclusively by his father and brother with whom he had a distant relationship. Her anger and the public feeling of injustice led her to write a book about her travails that has been well received (2011). The *Herald Tribune* published an interview with her about the book where it is related that:

Ms Gabrielsson ... talked forthrightly about the oddest passage in her book, a description of an elaborate Viking curse she delivered in New Year's Eve 2004 against all her and Larsson's enemies: the false friends, the cowards 'who let Stieg fight your battles while you raked in the salaries of your cushy jobs', the wearers of 'suits, ties, and wingtips', the evil ones 'who plotted, spied, and stirred up prejudice'. Traditionally such curses were accompanied by the sacrifice of a live horse, but instead Ms Gabrielsson broke a ceramic horse sculpture in two and tossed it into Stockholm's Lake Malaren. Nevertheless, it worked, she insisted. 'I felt immense relief and so did the others who were with me', she said, explaining, 'It's a ritual – we lack rituals for grief, for confusion, for rage; in my case, rage that Stieg's life was cut so short'. She added with satisfaction, that 'all the people who have profited from Stieg in his lifetime – they have not fared well. Bad things happen to them. I don't want to attribute that to the curse, but they are in trouble'.⁵

Again we meet with the same puzzlingly contradictory disclaimer of belief – what would be the point of telling the story, if the curse had not been effective? Furthermore, one might be satisfied with the effect the curse had on those who made it, but we are told in no uncertain terms that it had broader and even dire effects. Ms Gabriellson does not ‘believe in’ the curse, for her world-view would not have allowed her to claim that association, but she does ‘believe that’ the curse is operative since this curse is a central part of her own reconstruction of her world after bereavement.

In fact, the journalist (and, by implication, the *Herald Tribune*) joins her in this ambivalent disclaimer: ‘the oddest passage in her book’ turns out to be the major topic of the interview, the more ‘newsworthy’ aspect of her sorry saga. Again, as with Karain’s story, we are presented with a mediating mechanism that allows distancing. There, it is ‘Italian peasants’, an ambiguous category of primitiveness; here, it is Viking rituals re-enacted in their original locus but at a distance of many centuries.

Again we find the same processes of ‘participation’ we found above. In her capacity to reconstitute herself and harm her enemies, there is creative imagination at work. It depends, firstly, on the partibility of those who, having depended on Stieg Larsson, can now be affected by the curse. Secondly, it uses processes of fuzzy logic that are synthetic and not analytical, and that rely on incomplete oppositions. Finally, it depends on the retentive aspects of belief that integrate contemporary Swedish notions of collective being by making use of the image of Vikings and of the urban lake.

Conclusion: On the Resilience of Superstition

Let us go further back to the origin of this discussion, as we will find that much more hangs on the notion of superstition than the emotional impact of a few quaint charms. In his book *Psyche’s Task: A Discourse Concerning the Influence of Superstition on the Growth of Institutions* (1909), Sir James Frazer writes in defence of superstition: ‘among certain races and at certain stages of evolution some social institutions which we all, or most of us, believe to be beneficial have partially rested on a bases of superstition’ (Frazer 1909: 1). His argument is characteristic of his epoch: basically, for society to exist there has to be a lot of irrationality, and much good can come out of it. ‘Among certain races and at certain stages of evolution’ is a dreadfully ambiguous mode of characterizing this ‘other’ time, which suggests that, indeed, Frazer too, like Lévy-Bruhl, when confronted with the actual evidence, had great difficulty in precisely pinpointing the boundaries of primitiveness. But note how interesting are his chosen examples: government, property, marriage

and the respect for human life – the four basic pillars of bourgeois humanism. If these are essentially ‘superstitions’, then what is not?

Frazer was inspired by Westermarck’s thoughts on superstition (*ibid.*: 27). The latter found that superstition is the very basis of morality, even in modern society:

in serving the cause of avarice and ambition[, superstition] subserved the cause of civilization, by fostering conceptions of the right of property and the sanctity of the marriage tie – conceptions which in time grew strong enough to stand by themselves and to fling away the crutch of superstition which in earlier days had been their sole support. For we shall scarcely err in believing that even in advanced societies the moral sentiments, in so far as they are merely sentiments and are not based on an induction from experience, derive much of their force from an original system of taboo. Thus on the taboo were grafted the golden fruits of law and morality, while the parent stem dwindled slowly into the sour crabs and empty husks of popular superstition on which the swine of modern society are still content to feed. (Westermarck 1908: 59)

Superstition, then, for these already distant ancestors, is unfounded belief – but unfounded in the sense of irrational and incoherent, not in the sense of wrong or inadequate to live by. Their point is precisely that, whilst they feel obliged to distance themselves from the thought processes that characterized ‘primitives’, they cannot but recognize the universal validity of the processes such ‘wrong beliefs’ produced.

Their notion of ‘primitive’ – that is, something that is elementary for human life and, therefore, is simple and anterior – allowed them to contemplate the evidence that Lévy-Bruhl would later also confront: that human behaviour could not satisfactorily be described by adhering to formal logic and rational evidence as it was then seen. Today, we can no longer be satisfied with that strategy, however. We have discovered that we are all dividual persons, whose unchecked processes of everyday thinking follow a kind of fuzzy logic, and who are bound to stray away from strict ostensivity in our judgements concerning truth. Moreover, the focus on the ‘indeterminacy of interpretation’ (Davidson 2001) means that we cannot assume that anyone’s mental processes will be the same as anyone else’s in more than an approximate way. The isomorphism between what the ‘primitive’ (personal) thinks and what the ‘primitive’ (collective) thinks is no longer sustainable.

The implication of this conclusion is that we must abandon primitivism decisively. If that is the case, then, the suppressed category of superstition need no longer be taboo to anthropological mouths. What made it a dirty word was the implication of primitiveness and human inferiority. Once this is abandoned, it can satisfactorily be used to describe the quandaries con-

cerning belief that have not ceased to disturb us to this day. Just over a century ago, Conrad saw himself obliged to engage in irony to report the fact that the processes he was identifying in Karain's story were, in fact, fully applicable to his 'modern' world. Just the other day, Eva Gabriellsson found it useful again to take recourse to very similar processes for very similar reasons. If, instead of being seen as failings, these were seen as processes that permanently characterize our human condition, then we would not be obliged to engage in the sort of denial of belief that characterized both Conrad's and Eva Gabriellsson's narratives.

Finally, the evidence that Frazer and Westermarck unearthed that some of the central institutions of social living depend on processes that Lévy-Bruhl would call 'participation' need not be formulated in primitivist terms. If, then, we are willing to engage frontally with the mutuality of personhood, polythetic modes of thinking and retentivity in belief, we have no reason to avoid speaking of superstition to describe such modes of thinking, and to differentiate them from the modes of analytical thinking that have developed over the years for the purpose of the constitution of scientific and technical knowledge (and which we find almost impossible to apply thoroughly, try as we might, to our everyday engagement with things and people).

Having thoroughly examined the literature available in the mid twentieth century, Gustav Jahoda ends his essay on the psychology of superstition with a critique of those who continued to believe that education and the improvement of science will lead to a decrease in what was then called 'superstition'. He concluded, therefore, 'opinions of this kind are themselves irrational in nature', and 'the propensity can never be eradicated because, paradoxically, it is an integral part of mechanisms without which humanity would be unable to survive' (Jahoda 1970: 142, 147). Jahoda is not all that distant from Frazer and Westermarck, half a century before him, much like Sahlins's discussions concerning 'mutuality of being' are not all that distant from Lévy-Bruhl's 'participation', as Sahlins indeed acknowledges (Sahlins 2011a: 10).

The modes of thinking of scientific knowledge must not, then, be seen as the normal mode of human engagement with the world. Rather, they must be seen as the exception – mediated by a series of methodological technologies that have been developed precisely to help us sustain that exception. Superstition, on the contrary, must be seen as the more frequent mode of engaging our social worlds and constructing ourselves as persons.

Notes

1. All translations from non-English language texts cited in the bibliography are my own.
2. On polythetic categories and causality, see Needham (1983); on opposition, see Needham (1987).
3. Faced with this quote by Quine, readers often want to know why there might be less space for idiosyncrasy in belief than in other habits. I think that, when he wrote this, Quine was thinking of the holism of belief, that is, the way in which all beliefs are related to each other, but processually, not, of course, within a closed whole.
4. Here and there cracks appear in Lévy-Bruhl's argument, as when he notes that the argument concerning unmediated causality in the primitive's approach to the supernatural also applies to Christianity (Lévy-Bruhl 1998: 68–69). We can judge how difficult this issue continues to be for anthropology by the fact that Needham's argument in his essay 'Skulls and Causality' (Needham 1983: 66–92) is still hard reading today.
5. 'A Portrait of Stieg Larsson, By She Who Knew Him Best', *Herald Tribune*, 23 June 2011.

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