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Modes of Participation

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Abstract:	<p>This paper focuses on the notion of 'participation' as it has been used in the social sciences throughout the twentieth century. It proposes that there are two main traditions of use—an 'individual' and a 'dividual' one—and it argues in favour of the latter. It does this by examining how Simmel and Goffman, on the one hand, and Lévy-Bruhl and Durkheim, on the other, defined participation. Developed by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in the first part of last century, 'participation' in the dividual sense is today being given new life by sociocultural anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins and phenomenologically inclined cognitive scientists such as Shaun Gallagher. The paper addresses the roots of the concept in Scholastic theology and proposes to show how central it can come to be to a sociocultural anthropology that is willing to take on frontally the challenges presently being posed by embodied cognition.</p>

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MODES OF PARTICIPATION¹

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We are *part* of so many things, groups, events, occasions ... you name it. Yet, how is one 'part' of something? At first, this seems a rather inane question; but, if we attend to it a little longer, we soon come to realise that the idea of 'being part' has far greater philosophical and anthropological implications than we might have expected at first; very far from the sort of assumed simplicity that is normally attributed to it, this has been a source of philosophical debate since the days of Plato. In turn, anthropologists came upon the idea of participation at the end of the nineteenth century, and it has challenged them ever since. As this paper highlights, it turns out that the way one understands what it means to 'be part' can affect one's very central assumptions concerning social life.

Recently, the notion of 'participation' has once again come to the forefront of anthropological attention largely due to the role it plays in Marshall Sahlins' attempt to relaunch the study of kinship based on a new approach to personhood (2011a, 2011b). Originally brought to anthropology by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl at the beginning of the twentieth century ([1910] 1951), the concept was enthusiastically adopted by Émile

¹ This paper was first debated at the EHESS, Paris, 01/12/2016. I am grateful to Enric Porqueres i Gené for that opportunity, as well as to Benoît De L'Estoile for a most productive stay as Invited Professor at the Ecole Normale Supérieure at that time.

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3 Durkheim (1915) and Marcel Mauss (e.g. [1926] 1967: 181). Later on,
4 Lévy-Bruhl's use of it was also an important inspiration to Edmund Husserl
5 in his launching of phenomenology (see [1935] 2008).
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9 Over the years, the complex implications of participation have not
10 escaped the attention of a few informed anthropologists. In his Morgan
11 Lectures on magic and religion, Stanley Tambiah revisited them very
12 insightfully (1990: 117–18), and Márcio Goldman (1994) and Frédéric
13 Keck (2008) have provided us with studies of Lévy-Bruhl's thinking where
14 the history of the concept of participation is valuably explored. Finally, of
15 late, due to the impact of phenomenological insights in the study of
16 cognition, philosophers like Evan Thompson (1997), Shaun Gallagher
17 (Bower and Gallagher 2013) or De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007) have been
18 using 'participation' in ways that turn out to connect directly to
19 contemporary anthropological interests (see Pina-Cabral 2017). In this
20 paper, I will explore the implications of the concept of participation for
21 social scientists (and beyond) by reference to its history, showing that we
22 have significant lessons to learn from it.²
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37 In the sense developed by the authors referred above, participation is
38 initially best defined as the ambivalent encounter between the singular and
39 the plural in the formation of the person in the world. For example, when
40 Husserl wrote to Lévy-Bruhl to thank him for his inspiration, he explained:
41 "Saying 'I' and 'we,' [persons] find themselves as members of families,
42 associations, [socialities], as living 'together,' exerting an influence on and
43 suffering from their world—the world that has sense and reality for them,
44 through their intentional life, their experiencing, thinking, [and] valuing."
45 (Husserl 2008 [1935]: 2) During the first year of their lives, in acting and
46 being acted upon together in human company, persons become 'we' at the
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57 ² The present paper continues the discussion of these themes that I developed in Pina-Cabral 2013 and
58 2017.
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3 same time as they become 'I', which means that persons will ever be both 'I'
4 and 'we' ambivalently. For so long as anthropology continues to approach
5 the 'we' as if it were a categorical matter—a matter of 'identity'³—rather
6 than as concerning the presence and action of live persons in dynamic
7 interaction with the world and each other, participation will continue to be
8 a source of theoretical perplexity.
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15 Husserl again explained that, "at the interactional level,
16 intersubjectivity ... implies a kind of perspective-taking that is best
17 characterized with metaphors such as 'trading places' rather than
18 'achieving understanding.'" (Duranti 2010: 14) This approach captures
19 adequately a trend that has come to the forefront over the past decade not
20 only in sociocultural anthropology (e.g. Reyna 2002, Ingold 2010, Duranti
21 2010, Desjarlais and Throop 2011, Toren 2012) but also in studies of
22 cognition (e.g. Thompson 2007, Gallagher 2009, Hutto and Myin 2013). The
23 anthropological (see Toren 1993, 2002), psychological (see Trevarthen
24 1980, 1998) and philosophical evidence (see Hutto and Myin 2013, or
25 Chemero 2009) that we possess at the moment strongly suggests that
26 personhood is better approached not as an automatic ('natural') result of
27 biological humanity, but as an achievement of each one of us who, during
28 our first year of life, become persons by acquiring what the late Peirce
29 called 'symbolic thinking' (see Short 2007).⁴ Throughout one's life, as we
30 enter into further participations, this dynamic of self-constitution in the
31 world does not stop.⁵ Anthropologists, therefore, are called upon to focus
32 on personhood not as a given but as a biographical acquisition of each one
33 of us. As Sir Raymond Firth put it so long ago in *We the Tikopia* (as part of
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55 ³ That is, not taking into account what Husserlians call "pre-reflective constraints on perceptual experience",
56 see Bower and Gallagher 2013, and De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007.

57 ⁴ In the wake of Husserl's phenomenology, philosophers of cognition today are prone to call these modes
58 of thinking which characterise adult persons "propositional", see Hutto 2008 and Hutto and Myin 2013.

59 ⁵ See "Steps of Ontogeny of Person and World" in Pina-Cabral 2017: 110-113.
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3 what we might call today his 'dwelling approach'), the culturally specific
4 dynamics involved in *personal ontogeny* are an essential aspect of
5 understanding how personhood differs in different cultures (1936: 120,
6 277).

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11 The principal aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine and analyse
12 the notion of 'being part' as when it applies to persons in ontogeny. By
13 giving up on individuality and taking seriously the lessons on participation
14 that the older Lévy-Bruhl left us as heritage (1949), we move to a view of
15 personhood that helps us understand better not only the dynamics of
16 personhood but also how these affect some of the more enduring problems
17 that haunt our world today.⁶

26 27 THE TWO TRADITIONS OF USE OF PARTICIPATION

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29 On the whole, in the social sciences over the past century, two broad
30 traditions of use of the concept of participation can be distinctly identified.
31 In this paper, they will be approached both by relation to the history of
32 anthropological thinking and to their possible implications in terms of
33 anthropological theory.

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38 The verb 'to participate' and the expressions 'participating' and
39 'participation' are defined by most English dictionaries as meaning 'to
40 share in something', 'to be involved in something', 'to share in the activities
41 of a group'. The Thesaurus gives us a range of associated words, such as
42 'involvement', 'engagement', 'group action', 'commitment', 'intervention',
43 'intercession', 'to partake'. As a noun, the Latin *particeps* meant "partaker,
44 comrade, fellow soldier"; as an adjective it implied "sharing, partaking". It is
45 said that the verb *participare* found its origins in the Proto Indo-European
46 root *kap, meaning 'to have', 'to grab', 'to share', 'to take'. However, as we

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⁶ For an argument of that point by relation to the matter of addiction and the so-called War on Drugs, see Hari 2005.

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3 will see, rather than its Latin cousin, it is the Ancient Greek word *methexis*
4 (*μέθεξις*—translated by medieval philosophers as *participationem*) that lies
5 at the root of the contemporary uses of the concept in philosophy.
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9 In order to ease the exposition, I propose that there are two principal
10 families of use relating to the words ‘participate’, ‘participation’, ‘partake’,
11 or ‘being part’ (and, by extension, membership⁷) that have been present in
12 the social sciences throughout the twentieth century. I call one of them the
13 *individual version* and the other the *dividual version*, using the distinction
14 that Marilyn Strathern brought to anthropology in her prophetic discussion
15 of modes of personhood in *Gender of the Gift* (1988: 11-14).⁸ Whilst
16 individuality stresses the unitary and bounded nature of entities,
17 dividuality affirms the intrinsic plurality of what is identified as single. By
18 dividuality, therefore, Strathern meant that, in personhood, plurality is
19 anterior to singularity always reimposing itself.
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31 The primary distinction between the two senses of ‘being part’ is that
32 one of them assumes the *individuality* of the participants and, therefore,
33 can only be applied to forms of participation where participants are
34 accounted for as separate entities in terms of natural numbers—their
35 essences do not merge. This is the sense that Georg Simmel explores in his
36 groundbreaking essays (1950 [1908]). It is the meaning that is normally
37 conveyed by the expression ‘being part *of*’ which relies on a notion of a
38 broader entity enclosing a number of smaller entities. In this more
39 individualist usage, there is no implication of transcendence or of a
40 mystical aspect to the relation between the participants.
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55 ⁷ The French word *appartenance*, usually translated in English as ‘membership’, plays such an important
56 role in Lévy-Bruhl’s personal process of unveiling the meaning of participation (1949 [1938-1939]) that
57 it should also be included in this list.

58 ⁸ Sahlins adopts it in 2011a and 2011b. The notion emerged in MacKim Marriott’s treatment of Indian
59 forms of personhood (1976).
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3 To the contrary, the *dividual* tradition of use does not assume the
4 indivisibility of each participant and rather stresses the modes of
5 constitution of participation, focusing on the more transcendent or
6 mystical aspects of the relations that participation describes. It is generally
7 conveyed by the expression 'being part *in*' (or 'participating *in*') and it
8 relies on a notion of things coming together without clearly determined
9 boundaries whilst sharing their essence. In short, dividuality and its related
10 concept of partibility involve a questioning of the very processes of
11 generation of the entities that enter into a relation. Therefore, they see the
12 person in terms of a dynamic of constant emergence, not as a naturally
13 given entity existing once and for all.

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15 As Strathern argued (1988: 14), persons are dividual to the extent that
16 they are fusional but not symmetric; they mobilize anterior alterity, as they
17 place the one and the many in dynamic engagement (see also Sahlins
18 2011b). In fact, already in his 1935 letter to Lévy-Bruhl, Husserl had made
19 it abundantly clear that the anthropologist's propositions concerning
20 participation in 'primitive thinking' bore profound implications for the
21 development of a phenomenology of personhood which he was engaged in
22 at the time (2008). No wonder, then, that the dividual tradition of use has
23 come to be increasingly important in anthropology since the 1980s, as the
24 latter opened itself more explicitly to the influence of phenomenology. This
25 paper concludes not only that the (more common) 'individual' meaning of
26 participation has implicit within it a (more complex) 'dividual' meaning,
27 but also that the implications of this discovery can have a profound impact
28 in how we address the world from the angle of the social sciences.

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30 It seems important to explain from the start that the two modes are
31 not placed here as opposites but in a continuum, to the extent that the
32 dividual account is both more comprehensive and embraces a more
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3 complex set of phenomena than the individual account. In the social
4 sciences, the two traditions of use have interacted from the very beginning,
5 often being used indistinguishably. The first work by an anthropologist to
6 bring specific theoretical attention to the concept was Lévy-Bruhl's *Les*
7 *fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (first edition 1910) and his
8 successive books, where the word 'participation' always carries its individual
9 meaning. As it happens, this was the usage that inspired Durkheim
10 towards the end of his life, as the latter explicitly tells us (Durkheim [1912]
11 1915: 235 n 733). As a matter of fact, in his *Les formes élémentaires de la*
12 *vie religieuse*, Durkheim uses participation in both ways: in the individual
13 sense, as when he says that "a certain number of individuals participate in
14 the same moral life" (ibid.: 232); and in the dividual sense, as when he
15 speaks of 'mystical participation' (Lévy-Bruhl's expression) when
16 observing that Aboriginal "men are believed to participate in the nature of
17 the animal ..." which is their totem (ibid.: 136).

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33 According to Ann Rawls, the evolution of Durkheim's epistemological
34 thinking at the time he wrote his last major treatise (he stopped writing
35 soon after) was centrally marked by the notion of participation: "Durkheim
36 argued that the principles of reason all have their origin in the moral forces
37 experienced while participating in certain enacted practices and that
38 knowledge derived in this way has only limited validity when applied to the
39 natural world." (1996: 461) At the turn of the twentieth century, both
40 Lévy-Bruhl and Durkheim faced the problem of explaining how personal
41 sentiments and experiences coexist with collective ideologies and legalised
42 moralities. However, as Frédéric Keck has noted (2008: 150-151), they
43 diverged in the way they responded to this central challenge.

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55 The Durkheimian approach (especially before the change in tone that
56 *The Elementary Forms* represent) tended to be top-down, emphasizing
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3 more the collective representations and the categories that impose
4 themselves on the individual, and leaving to second plan the human ethical
5 bases of the process of constitution of personhood. For him, the group
6 imposes itself forcefully on the individual in terms of its categories
7 (Durkheim and Mauss 1963 [1903]). To the contrary, Lévy-Bruhl's
8 approach remains ever attached to the level of the person's habits, usages,
9 and sentiments; being concerned with accounting for the activity of the
10 subjects in terms of their feelings and their personal ideas, seeing collective
11 coordination as emerging from progressive habituation. This is what Shaun
12 Gallagher calls *participatory sense-making* (2007), that is, "the
13 coordination of intentional activity in interaction, whereby individual
14 sense-making processes are affected and new domains of social sense-
15 making can be generated that are not available to each individual on their
16 own." (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 497)

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19 This tendency is further stressed as Lévy-Bruhl's thought evolves
20 during the 1920s and 1930s. Deeply influenced by Maurice Leenhardt's
21 ethnographic work on New Caledonia (e.g. Lévy-Bruhl 1949 [1938-1939]:
22 49-ff; Leenhardt 1979 [1947]), the older Lévy-Bruhl is less concerned with
23 category formation and classification, since he finds that mythical thinking
24 is not centrally moved by contradiction, classification or category
25 formation, rather evolving on the bases of the participations of each
26 person. Thus, he remains interested in understanding how the person
27 confronts the social within themselves, how persons come to be collective.
28 Like Durkheim, he sees the collective experience as essentially formative of
29 the person, yet he does this not in terms of collective structures imposing
30 themselves, but of humans constructing themselves as persons within
31 social symbiosis, so to speak. He calls 'participation' to this merging of
32 essences that occurs between people in society.
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3 In short, Durkheim favoured an approach that emphasizes the primacy
4 of groupness, which he explicitly called 'sociocentrism' ([1903] 1963: 51).
5 To the contrary, after Durkheim's death in 1917, Lévy-Bruhl evolved
6 progressively towards a more anthropocentric approach, one that focuses
7 on the person as the primary instance of human sociality. In this way,
8 contrary to standard structural-functionalist understanding, Lévy-Bruhl's
9 latter position⁹ approaches a phenomenological outlook in that it roots the
10 feelings of responsibility of persons in their personal participations, seeing
11 them as emerging separately from the formal structures of collective
12 morality. In this way, Lévy-Bruhl's view of the relation between collective
13 and individual morality is more akin to the personalism of Arnold Van
14 Gennep, who Durkheim so deeply despised. As it happens, this very same
15 approach to co-responsibility is what explains the fascination that Husserl,
16 and later Emmanuel Lévinas, demonstrated for Lévy-Bruhl's work (see
17 Moran and Steinacher 2008, Husserl 2008 [1935], and Lévinas 1957).
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33 In fact, part of the reason why the late Lévy-Bruhl was by and large
34 ignored during the second half of the twentieth century and why most
35 anthropologists have failed to notice how creative and profound was his
36 heuristic use of the category of 'primitive' is associated to the immense
37 force of conviction of the sociocentric consensus that ruled our discipline
38 during all of that time (on both sides of the Atlantic). Curiously, whilst
39 Durkheim's early argument concerning the nature of the categories of the
40 understanding remained solidly rooted in a set of primitivist assumptions,
41 Lévy-Bruhl's thinking about participation evolved significantly over time
42 and, eventually, towards the end of his life, he freed it completely from the
43 primitivist mould (1949 [1938-1939]).
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57 ⁹ And that of Evans-Pritchard too, contrary to what is normally assumed (see 1970 [1934]). See also
58 Lévy-Bruhl's letter to Evans-Pritchard [1934] 1952.
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DIVIDUAL PARTICIPATION

Lévy-Bruhl's initial observation—emergent from his attentive reading of the ethnographic work that was coming out in the decade leading to the First World War—was that participation as a principle of 'primitive mentality' counters the 'laws of contradiction' which shore up modern logic (1910). From the beginning, he qualified this kind of participation as being 'mystical'. But it must be stressed that, for him, the word 'mystical' did not refer to some sort of spiritual event. Rather, it aimed to describe something both he and Mauss repeatedly observed: persons in these 'primitive' societies were not 'individual' in that they participated in other persons and in things in ways that conjoin emotion with transcendence. Transcendence is used here in a Kantian sense to imply a capacity to move beyond physical existence, not in some deist or spiritual sense. As a matter of fact, it can be argued that this was also Mauss' main discovery in his essay *The Gift*, where he observes that a given object takes with it a part of the giver with profoundly emotional and transcendental implications (2016 [1925]).

It seems important, therefore, to note that Lévy-Bruhl's very choice of the word 'participation' was inspired by an old metaphysical tradition that pointed him in this direction. In Ancient Greek theatre, the concept of *μέθεξις* (participation) was originally used to refer to the way in which the audience interacted with the actors, thus affecting the development of a play. With Plato, however, a tradition was started of attributing an ontological meaning to 'participation', that is, one that relates it to the nature of being. For him, in the famous allegory of the cave, participation was the relation between changing things (observable particulars) and the changeless forms (the Ideas) that gave them their being: "we generally postulate a certain form or character—a single form or character, always—

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3 for each plurality of things to which we give the same name.” (*Republic X*,
4 596a) In time, Aristotle criticised this idea, saying that he cannot attribute
5 any meaning to the relation that particulars have with forms (“sharing
6 means nothing”, he says in *Metaphysics VIII*, 6). With him, participation
7 gets to be closer in meaning to causality, by reference to the way effects
8 ‘participate’ in their causes. This is the usage that came to influence St.
9 Augustine and subsequent Christian theology.
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17 More broadly, in etymological terms, “*μ-θεξις* bespeaks plurality,
18 similarity, relation and asymmetry all at once. ... To speak of metaphysical
19 participation is to say that one thing has what it is *with* and indeed *after*
20 and *in pursuit of*, another: it has its reality, in other words, by virtue of
21 something other than itself.” (Schindler 2005: 1) Schindler further clarifies
22 that “a reference to ‘parts’ is not [an] ingredient in the Greek term as it is in
23 the Latin ... We ought not to let this root lead us to envision the
24 *participatum* [the form in which particulars participate] as having discrete
25 parts, which is clearly excluded by the metaphysical use of the concept, i.e.,
26 meaning the sharing in a (metaphysically) simple quality” (ibid.: 1, fn 1).
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37 I do not presume to revisit here the long and extremely complex
38 history of the concept, except to trace the more immediate inspiration for
39 the use of the term by Lévy-Bruhl (and subsequently the late Durkheim).
40 As he uses it in *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, his first
41 book on the topic, Lévy-Bruhl appears to have taken the word from the
42 work of Nicolas Malebranche, a late seventeenth century philosopher-
43 theologian who attempted to merge Neo-Platonist theology (inspired by St.
44 Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas) with Cartesian rationalism. Lévy-Bruhl
45 attributes to Malebranche the expressions ‘participable individuals’
46 ([1910] 1951: I/II, 69) and ‘the living are participated by the dead’ ([1910]
47 1951: III/IV, 86)—notions that would come to have a long and influential
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3 life in twentieth century anthropology, usually unbeknownst to their users.
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5 For Malebranche, participation compounded sharing of essence¹⁰ with
6 causality of being: “God does not derive his being from the creatures;
7 rather it is the creatures that are nothing but imperfect participations of
8 the divine being.” ([1674-75] 1910: 330, my translation) In this way, and
9 following on St. Augustine’s interpretation, to be is a matter of degree, since
10 God is taken to be not only the ultimate cause but the highest instance of
11 being: “Since God is the highest essence (*summa essentia*), that is, he is in
12 the highest degree and thus is immutably, He has given being to the things
13 He has created from nothing, but not Being in the highest degree such as He
14 is.”¹¹
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25 Twentieth century usages of participation in anthropology and
26 phenomenology are, therefore, inspired by Aquinas’ latter doctrine of
27 participation (as exemplified in his commentary on Boethius’ *De*
28 *hebdomadibus*, 2001 [1271-2]), where being, living, and understanding
29 (*esse, vivere et intelligo*) are presented as interconnected. Aquinas
30 differentiates existence (*esse*, the act of being) from essence (*essentia*, the
31 truth of a proposition), but in God this difference disappears. We cannot
32 know God’s existence directly, he claims, since we are its effects; “we know
33 that God is, because we conceive this proposition in our mind from His
34 effects.”¹² An effect participates in its cause, not the other way round. In
35 Neo-Platonist thought, therefore, by identifying sharing of essence with
36 causality of existence, participation acquires a kind of unidirectionality.
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49 It is this same concept of participation that is going to inspire Lévy-
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53 ¹⁰ The word ‘essence’ (the what-ness or quiddity of a thing) is used here in the sense that Thomas
54 Aquinas attributes to it when he says “the essence [*essentia*] is that which is signified by the definition of
55 a thing.” (1997 [1252-53], chap. 2)

56 ¹¹ From St. Augustin’s *De Civitate Dei*, 12:2, as translated by Schultz and Synan—in Aquinas 2001: xxi.

57 ¹² As instantiated in the Ontological Proof of God’s existence (see Pina-Cabral 2017: 52-ff)—from
58 *Quaestio Disputatae De Potentia Dei*, q. 7, a.2, ad1:

59 http://www.logicmuseum.com/wiki/Authors/Thomas_Aquinas/depotentia/Q7#q7a2tit1
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3 Bruhl's reading of the ethnographic literature available at the turn of the
4 twentieth century. Notably exemplified by the Bororos' claim that they are
5 macaws (*arara*), he observes that a person "frequently experiences
6 participations between himself and this or that environing being or object,
7 natural or supernatural, with which he is or comes to be in contact, and (...),
8 quite as frequently, he imagines similar participations between these
9 beings and objects" ([1910] 1951: 77–78).
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17 This leads him to formulate his famous 'law of participation' where the
18 Durkheimian notion of 'collective representation' plays the role of the Neo-
19 Platonist God: "all of these [examples] imply a 'participation' among beings
20 or objects brought together under a collective representation." (ibid.: 76)
21 He identified a similar kind of unidirectionality akin to that of Aquinas'
22 participation in God by His creatures. Thus, there was a sociocentric
23 implication to Lévy-Bruhl's initial notion of participation in that 'Society'
24 (placed now in Comtian fashion in the position where God used to be) both
25 transmitted essence and produced existence: "The very existence of social
26 groups, in their relations with the existence of the individuals who
27 compose them, is most often represented (and felt at the same time as
28 represented) as a participation, a communion, or better still as a complex
29 of participations and communions." (ibid.: 93)
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43 However, over the following three decades, as his thinking
44 progressively dissociated itself from the initial Durkheimian influence—
45 and particularly at the end of his life, inspired by the evidence provided by
46 the great ethnographers of the Classical Period (from the late 1920s to the
47 early 1950s)—Lévy-Bruhl comes to abandon this directionality of
48 participation in favour of a multidirectionality of participation, where
49 beings and objects participate in each other in complex webs of mutual
50 influence and implication. The sociocentric notion that 'society'
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3 (groupness) is both the cause and the essence of the participation is
4 pushed to a second plan in favour of an approach that attributes greater
5 centrality to the constitution of the person in time. This is not to say, as
6 Sahlins notes, that participation cannot also assume the form of “the
7 encompassment of others” in typically hierarchical relations (Sahlins
8 2011a: 13). Indeed, the emergence of the person in early ontogeny is a
9 form of encompassment of others, since it occurs in a context of co-
10 presence where singularity and plurality are jointly operative (see
11 Hattiangadi 2005).

21 In the course of the 1930s, as his thought evolves and as he collects
22 further ethnographic examples, Lévy-Bruhl drops the central notions that
23 had initially launched his project: both that of ‘primitive’ and that of
24 ‘prelogical’.¹³ He never abandons the preoccupation with describing how
25 humans have different outlooks on reality and that these must be studied
26 as different—the founding call of all anthropology, one might say. But he
27 comes to understand that all forms of human thinking are foundationally
28 related among them by some basic disposition of humans to make sense of
29 the world in participation with each other. The concept of participation,
30 thus, comes to assume a central importance in describing how this basic
31 disposition operates, and it comes to play for him a foundational role.

43 He explicitly lets us know that one of the important turning points in
44 his thinking was an essay on “Physics and Reality” that Albert Einstein
45 wrote in 1936, when he was an exile in Paris. There, the physicist argues:

49 One may say ‘the eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility’. ... In
50 speaking here of ‘comprehensibility’, the expression is used in its most modest
51 sense. It implies: the production of some sort of order among sense impressions,

54 ¹³ “Today—and this is surely a progress—I no longer search for a difference between primitive mentality
55 and ours from a logical point of view.” (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949: 71, my translation) Why authors like Ann
56 Rawls fail to register this evolution, preferring to ignore Lévy-Bruhl’s crowning achievements as
57 inscribed in his posthumously published *Notebooks*, is puzzling to me (Rawls 1996: 462). As it happens,
58 this is just the contrary of what she does for Durkheim, whose evolution is her central theme.

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3 this order being produced by the creation of general concepts, and by definite
4 relations of some kind between the concepts and sense experience. It is in this
5 sense that the world of our sense experiences is comprehensible. The fact that it is
6 comprehensible is a miracle. ([1936] 1954: 292)
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11 Lévy-Bruhl is struck by Einstein's argument that this "intelligibility"¹⁴
12 of the world of the senses that science orders and sets to rules is in itself
13 ultimately unintelligible." (1949: 49) Thus, he is led to contemplate that
14 the difference between 'primitive' thought and 'our' thought would be
15 "simply one of degree" (ibid.). By conjoining Einstein's observation with
16 Leenhardt's ethnographic evidence concerning the person in New
17 Caledonia (in the reading of which he was deeply immersed at the time), he
18 abandons his original preoccupation with 'logical meaning'. He now sees
19 that conceptual (propositional) thinking—as in scientific explanation—sits
20 on top of a more basic form of construction of meaning, one that depends
21 centrally on the person's engagement with the world and others in the
22 course of personal ontogeny and that, consequently depends on what he
23 calls *sentiments* (Fr. feelings/affects). In order to describe this
24 participatory sense-making, Lévy-Bruhl takes recourse to the Kantian
25 notion of 'orientation', that is, "the logic of affect [which] corresponds to an
26 action of the body towards things and not an abstract reasoning." (Keck
27 2008: 139)
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45 In this way, Lévy-Bruhl moves beyond the polarisation of 'primitives'
46 and 'us'. His answer is that 'participation' (and its corresponding
47 'orientations') is at the root of all thinking. Persons are surrounded by
48 *appartenances*, that is, things and persons in which they participate and
49 which give sense to their world. He tells us that he can best qualify
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57 ¹⁴ Einstein's original word was *Begreiflichkeit*, for which the translator uses the word 'comprehensibility'
58 when Lévi-Bruhl's 'intelligibility' would seem to do just as well.
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3 'participation' by the etymological meaning of sympathy, a 'feeling with'
4 (1949: 59). We will have to wait for yet another half century before people
5 like Varela (cf. Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991) and Damásio (1999)
6 come to argue that emotion cannot be separated from cognition, thus
7 corroborating Lévy-Bruhl's profound insight.
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13 Lévy-Bruhl goes on to differentiate between conceptual thinking
14 (what philosophers of cognition now call 'propositional thinking', see Hutto
15 2008) and participation: "Participation has no reality other than in being
16 felt by an individual ... It is therefore an event ... localised in space and time
17 or, better said, has its own space and its own time. This means that ... there
18 are no contradictions but only contrasts; events are composed one with the
19 other, or oppose each other more or less strongly; as they are felt in their
20 own space and time, they cannot exclude each other." (1949: 51, my
21 translation) In this way, he moves to abandon his original conception that
22 there would be a "law of participation" that would be the foundation of
23 primitive thinking as the Aristotelian "laws of contradiction" are the
24 foundation of modern logic. Rather, participation becomes for him a
25 general fact of human experience: "What remains is the fact (not law) that
26 the 'primitive' often experiences participations between himself and this or
27 that surrounding being or object, of a natural or supernatural kind, with
28 which he is or enters into contact, and that, just as frequently, he imagines
29 such participations between beings and objects ... " (ibid.: 52). The feeling
30 of participation has a "fundamental character" (ibid.: 69). The
31 participations people experience, therefore, are not experienced as part of
32 rational deliberation but as facts of experience that ground conceptual
33 elaboration, they are more akin to perception than to thought.
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55 As he himself abandoned the sense of metaphysical unidirectionality
56 of participation that he had inherited from Malebranche and the Comtian
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3 tradition, so did most anthropologists that came to use the notion of
4 participation in the second half of the twentieth century. Stanley Tambiah,
5 for example, makes a singularly valuable contribution to this discussion,
6 which is informed already by the reading of Donald Davidson and other
7 philosophers of the period (1990: 117–18). While—much like Sahlins
8 (2011a, 2011b)—he stresses that participation is at the root of kinship,
9 Tambiah shows how it “emphasizes sensory and affective communication
10 and the language of the emotions” (1990: 108). Thus, he claims, it is the
11 basis of religious or magical phenomena. This is how Tambiah redefines
12 Lévy-Bruhl’s concept: “Participation can be represented as occurring when
13 persons, groups, animals, places, and natural phenomena are in a relation
14 of contiguity, and translate that relation into one of existential immediacy
15 and contact and shared affinities” (ibid.: 107). By taking recourse to the
16 word “existential”—which was by then a recognisable concept in general
17 social scientific jargon—Tambiah is attempting to bypass the
18 phenomenological complexity of what he is actually conveying.

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21 Unfortunately, once again, as in the case of Lévy-Bruhl’s editor Bruno
22 Karsenti (1998), Tambiah adopts the characteristic midcentury
23 representationist and sociocentric approach, where both groups and
24 persons are held to hold ‘representations’ and these are considered to be
25 phenomena of the same nature. In light of the critique of this model of mind
26 that the theories of embodied cognition represent (e.g. Chemero 2009), we
27 are faced today with the challenge of matching Lévy-Bruhl’s profound
28 insights concerning participatory sense-making with contemporary
29 approaches to cognition.

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55 INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPATION
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3 Before moving on, however, it seems important to consider the alternative
4 tradition of use of the concept of participation. I trace the principal input
5 towards an individual use to the deep influence of the German sociological
6 school in the English-speaking world at mid-century. For example, if we
7 run through the English translation of Max Weber's *Economy and Society*,
8 we will not find a single instance in which the word 'participation' is used
9 in its individual sense.¹⁵ His holding on to a consistently individualist
10 understanding of what it is to be human is similarly reproduced in Georg
11 Simmel's highly influential works, where personal interaction is
12 understood as a form of coordination among individuals.
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23 The primary instance must surely be Simmel's seminal essay
24 "Quantitative Aspects of the Group" ([1908] 1950: 87-180). From its
25 original translation into English in Chicago in 1950, this essay became a
26 central reference for sociological thinking (and we cannot discount the
27 decisive impact that this ontological background had in American cultural
28 anthropology in the second half of the twentieth century through Talcott
29 Parsons' formative influence on Clifford Geertz and David Schneider¹⁶).
30 The essay's starting premise is the unquestioned unicity of the individual.
31 Whilst Simmel perceives clearly that 'group form' can only be achieved
32 when there are more than three persons involved, this insight is not
33 accompanied by a questioning of the nature of the relation between the
34 singular and the plural. The naturalization of the person as individual
35 prevents him from granting anteriority to alterity and means that he
36 founds his sociology on a form of theoretical individualism. The theme of
37 intersubjectivity does not play a role in his analysis and the properties that
38 intersubjective relations are normally held to possess are treated by him as
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55 ¹⁵ Although there is a curiously undeveloped reference to 'sympathetic participation' (1978: I, 5).

56 ¹⁶ See Sahlins: "Schneider was trained in an era of social science hubris that from its centre in the lesser
57 Cambridge spread its Parsonian doctrine that any differences that could be 'usefully' discerned in the
58 object of anthropological study were legitimate analytic distinctions." (2011: 6)
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3 features of 'small groups'—ones, dyads, and triads—by opposition to larger
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5 groups.
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7 As it happens, however, we find in Simmel's essay the marks of a
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9 struggle with the uncomfortable possibility of personhood being a complex,
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11 constructed process—not being, in fact, fundamentally individual. For
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13 example, he meets with the problem when attempting to resolve the matter
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15 of personal reflexivity (that is, a person's knowledge of him or herself as
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17 person): "Morality", he argues, "develops in the individual through a
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19 second subject that confronts him in himself. By means of the same split
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21 through which the ego says to itself 'I am'—confronting itself, as a knowing
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23 subject, with itself as a known subject—it also says to itself 'I ought to'. The
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25 relation of two subjects that appears as an imperative is repeated within
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27 the individual himself by virtue of the fundamental capacity of our mind to
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29 place itself in contrast to itself, and to view and treat itself as if it were
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31 somebody else." (ibid.: 99) The feat of reflexivity is portrayed here as a
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33 'capacity of the mind' that allows for the constitution of the person, not as a
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35 feature of the whole person in ontogeny. Yet, whilst personhood implies
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37 reflexivity, it is not preceded by it.
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39 Therefore, after this passage, Simmel feels he needs to make a *caveat*:
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41 "I do not here answer the question whether this phenomenon represents a
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43 transference of the empirically prior interindividual relation to the
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45 elements within the individual, or whether it is a purely spontaneous
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47 process originating in these elements." ([1908] 1950: 99) Much as he might
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49 want to avoid it, the matter of what kind of 'elements' we are dealing with,
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51 cannot be avoided. If, indeed, either 'interindividuality' is anterior to
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53 individuality or personhood is composed of elements, then the question is
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55 what are these parts and how do they come to form an 'individual' entity. In
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57 short, what this discussion clarifies is that the questions posed by individual
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3 participation lay dormant within the sense of individual participation that
4 modernist sociology favoured. There is, one is tempted to say, a
5 metaphysical act of faith at the root of Simmel's sociology.
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9 Here, we are not very far from the well-known and much debated
10 metaphysical problems that the 'origin of social facts' posed to persons
11 such as Comte, Durkheim, or Lévi-Strauss (e.g. Badcock 1975: 33). The
12 recourse to the notion of *gestalt* in explaining the individuality of both
13 persons and groups is, after all, a version of the same problem.¹⁷ That is,
14 one would want individuals to form what G.E. Moore called 'external
15 relations', that is, a situation where the entities are not constituted by the
16 relations (1919). But social life provides us constantly with examples of
17 the contrary and, thus, in order to explain the dividuality of the supposedly
18 individual entities, Comte, Simmel or Durkheim were faced to undertake
19 this metaphysical leap.
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31 For example, when considering the commonly encountered example of
32 institutions (such as committees or administrative bodies) being named by
33 the number of their constituent parts, Simmel remarks that "the idea
34 expressed by this sum is the functional interactive togetherness of the
35 group" (1950: 107). Thus, when the institution is known by a name
36 referring to a number, such as 'Six' for a committee composed of six
37 members, this "does not refer to six individual and isolated elements but to
38 their synthesis. 'Six' is not '1 plus 1 plus 1,' etc., but a new *concept* emerging
39 from the synthesis of these elements: it is *not*, so to speak, proportionally
40 present in each of them." (ibid., my emphasis) Note how he pushes the
41 problem aside by talking of a *concept*; yet, the matter was not how an
42 observer *thinks* of an institution, but how the institution actually *acts* as an
43 institution; its features *qua* institution.
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58 ¹⁷ I suppose that Rawls would call this the relation between Durkheim's epistemology and his sociology of
59 knowledge (1996).
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3 Erving Goffman is probably, among all sociologists, the author who
4 prolonged more creatively this line of reasoning. As in Simmel's, in his
5 work, participation assumes implicitly both the pre-existence of the group
6 to the interaction, and the pre-existence of the person (the individual) to
7 the interaction—none of which is the case with Lévy-Bruhl's approach. In
8 Goffman's analyses, the self sits like a dress or a mask upon the person
9 who, conceived as individual, is presented as ultimately natural.
10 Participation is the occurrence of a joint effort on the part of individuals
11 who find themselves involved in social activities that are given to them
12 largely as an option. So Goffman accepts that the 'selves' actually are
13 constituted in the moment, but he does not see them as the essence of what
14 is at stake. The essence lies in the individual who is always taken to be
15 previously existent. For Goffman, individuals do not participate as total
16 persons; selves sit on top of individuals like they were dresses or skins
17 guiding their participation: "during face-to-face encounters individuals may
18 participate officially in more than one capacity" ([1967] 2005: 52).

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35 Goffman's more elaborate treatment of the issue of participation can
36 be found in his long essay "Footing" ([1967] 2005). Here, participation is
37 initially used in its individual sense. However, as is so often the case with
38 Goffman, as his arguments evolve concerning how humans interact
39 linguistically, the individual meaning starts to emerge. Towards the end of
40 the paper, it becomes obvious that the two meanings of 'being part' are
41 essentially interdependent.¹⁸

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The subject of the paper is how humans talk. Goffman starts from the
assumption that the units of 'talk' are individuals—they are natural and
pre-existent. In fact, when he speaks of 'official participants', 'ratified
participants', or 'adventitious participants', he is assuming that these are

¹⁸ For a similar condition, see Goodwin and Goodwin 2004.

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3 individual—that is, fully self-defined, clearly identifiable, and neatly
4 bounded units of social interaction whose bodily boundaries constitute
5 their essential determination. However, soon enough, he realizes that his
6 default approach to human communication—which assumes that the
7 participants in ‘talk’ are clearly determined individual units—misinterprets
8 seriously what actually is going on when humans talk: “the common dyadic
9 model of speaker-hearer specifies sometimes too many, sometimes too few,
10 sometimes the wrong participants.” ([1967] 2005: 145) He shows that, as
11 speakers, “it is not true to say that we always speak our own words and
12 ourself take the position to which these words attest” (ibid.: 146); and, as
13 hearers, we conceal “a complex differentiation of participation statuses”
14 (ibid.). As he puts it, “if language is to be traced back to some primal scene,
15 better it is traced back to the occasional need of a grunted signal to help
16 coordinate action in what is already the shared world of a joint task than to
17 a conversation in and through which a common subjective universe is
18 generated.” ([1967] 2005: 141) In short, when we are dealing with
19 interactions among persons in ontogeny, to be ‘one of many’ and to ‘merge
20 with others’ are activities that seldom can be clearly distinguished, because
21 the nature of the subject is dependent on the interaction and cannot be
22 considered a pre-given.

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25 In human talk, singularity and plurality (the ‘I/me’ and the ‘we’) are
26 constantly shifting and dyadic confrontation always remains unstable (see
27 Strathern 1988:11-14). In sum, Goffman remains bound by an individualist
28 view of personhood, where an individual sense is the default assumption,
29 but he opens up a window towards a more dividual sense of participation,
30 corresponding to a fusional process of sharing of essences. The individual
31 mode of approaching participation turns out to be a subcategory of the
32 dividual (phenomenological) meaning of the expression. The presence of a
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3 more dividual understanding of what it means to participate ultimately
4 imposes itself.
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7 In this way, we make way for something that Goffman, quite as much
8 as Lévy-Bruhl, had identified but struggled to formulate: the possibility of a
9 person being itself *and* another. This, in fact, corresponds to one of more
10 profound insights of the late Lévy-Bruhl:
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13 What turns participation into something that appears to be irreconcilable with the
14 habitual norms of the intellect, is that, without realizing it, we assume that, in
15 primitive *mentalité*, beings are first given and then participate of this or that other
16 person, of this or that supernatural force, etc.—without our being able to
17 understand how this participation can be established, how a being can be at the
18 same time itself and another ... (1949:250).
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27 Thus, he inverts the traditional individualist perspective on personal
28 constitution. Persons are no longer seen as “beings [that] are given
29 beforehand and then enter into their participations” (1949: 250). Rather,
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31 Participation is not simply a mysterious and inexplicable fusion between beings
32 who lose and keep at the same time their identity. It enters into the constitution of
33 these same beings. Without participation *they would not have been a given of*
34 *their own experience*: they would not have existed. ... Participation, therefore, is
35 immanent to the individual as he owes what he is to it. (1949:250, my emphasis)
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43 Thus, he concludes, “it is impossible for the individual to separate in
44 himself what is properly his and that with which he participates in order to
45 exist” (1949: 251). Dividual participation, therefore, is the groundwork
46 upon which everyday social interaction is constituted. All individualist uses
47 of participation—much as they might appear to simplify matters—
48 ultimately meet up with the problem of explaining how the participants are
49 constituted as participants. This is the challenge that both Lévy-Bruhl and
50 Sahlins were led to face.
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CONCLUSION

The notion that sociality is a cover (a role, a mask, a veil) that we place over our essential natural individuality is a deeply engrained background assumption of the social sciences. We are unwitting heirs to a centuries' old heritage that sees human thinking as the operation of the 'soul/spirit' (Givens 2009)—that is, mind is something that occurs inside each one of us in separation from our body (albeit related to it in some usually unfathomable way via the emotions). Although most anthropologists have been for many decades conscious of the need to dispense with categories such as spirit or soul, they have been insufficiently watchful of the fact that their representationist background assumptions depend on such categories (see Spackman and Yanchar 2015, Pina-Cabral 2017).

From the days of Tylor, anthropologists have believed that 'others' are animists, not 'us'; a discussion that has lately been relaunched in interesting new terms (see Descola 2013). Nevertheless, the assumption that 'they' (those whom our predecessors called 'primitives') are animists whilst 'we' are materialists needs to be fundamentally questioned. As it happens, 'we' are the main culprits of animism in that we are the ones that assume that our bodies are inhabited by (conscious, reasonable, ethical) spirits. As I have extensively argued elsewhere (see Pina-Cabral 2017), anthropologists have continued to work unwittingly with notions of thought as representation that have prevent them from exploring as profoundly as is needed the full implications of embodiment. Lévy-Bruhl's notion of participation, in that it connects dynamically personhood with sociality, is a door that allows us to explore creatively new fields of anthropological analysis.

As persons, we are always almost-one (partible) and slightly more

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3 than one (dividual). The anthropological, psychological (see Trevarthen
4 1980, 1998) and philosophical evidence (see Hutto and Myin 2013, or
5 Chemero 2009) that persons are both partible and dividual and that
6 personhood is not an automatic (natural) result of biological humanity is
7 overwhelming since before the days of Lévy-Bruhl (see, for example, Firth's
8 debate on personal ontogeny in his Tikopia ethnography, 1936). The
9 problem, then, is that too many anthropologists have been unwilling to
10 contemplate that the world really does not turn out to be the way our
11 ancestors had conceived it. Anthropologists are loath to admit that there is
12 no essentiality to personhood—individuality remains the default mode.
13 They lack the courage of Lévy-Bruhl and, in fact, they prefer to deride him
14 as somehow 'ethically' culpable!
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19 Yet it turns out that the notion of individuality is as wrong when
20 applied to persons as when it is applied to rats or amoebas (see Lévi-
21 Strauss 2000, Pina-Cabral 2017: 138-142). Live beings are not monads;
22 they are not little pellets of meaning that some demiurge produces out of
23 some ethereal machine. Live beings are emergent properties in the process
24 of life; they are processually constituted and cannot ever be dissociated
25 from life's dynamism, their mind is a function of their embodiment (see
26 Thompson 1997). Sociality, therefore, is not a force that is superimposed
27 on life, as Durkheim depicted it. Rather, sociality—the capacity to address
28 the world with a purpose in order to survive as a species—is the basic
29 condition of life (as Bateson defended a long time ago, 1972). The complex
30 sociality of dolphins and primates is an emergent property within sociality
31 more generally (see Hattiangadi 2005), and so is personhood, a condition
32 that only embodied humans who actively participate in the world with
33 other humans can fulfill.
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