

Cosmopolitics as Ontological Pluralism

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Cosmopolitics has lately become once more a fashionable concept. Not in the classical Kantian sense of the conditions for a project of world peace, one implying universal rules under which humans, wherever their location on earth, could lead a civilized life. Nor even in the sense made popular by Ulrich Beck, whereby cosmopolitanism becomes the consciousness of a shared destiny uniting peoples everywhere in their exposure to the same risks.¹ Although cosmopolitanism in the Beckian sense rightly implies that sociologists must conduct their studies beyond the confines of the nation-state, it is nevertheless a notion built on an impoverished and normative world, much like the Kantian cosmos: everywhere identical to everyone.

By contrast, in the new cosmopolitics advocated for by the likes of Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, the cosmos is neither the universal one of Kant and Beck nor any particular cosmos as a local tradition may conceive it.² It is rather a project referring to the possibility of setting on an equal footing a multiplicity of worlds, a project that would steer the politics of scientific knowledge in an entirely new direction from the one that it has followed to the present. I use cosmopolitics, however, in an even different sense (which is perhaps more down to earth and certainly more faithful to the etymology of the term), which is as the name for the operators that relate worlds and manage to bring together and to articulate things and beings that otherwise would seem to exist on different ontological planes. Now these operators differ widely according to the principles that organize the variety of assemblages of humans and nonhumans of which the ethnographic and historical record offers us a rich and kaleidoscopic testimony. The view from afar is thus simply the perspective that anthropologists are able to take when they try to make sense of the bewildering diversity of ontological regimes under which all classes of beings

1 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

2 Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Bruno Latour, "Whose Cosmos? Which Cosmopolitics?: Comments on the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck," *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2007): 450-462.

are associated; and cosmopolitics are the forms that these associations take, each of them constituting a world of its own so that they may become viable.

A General Science of Relations

Before developing this idea, however, I would like to say a few introductory words on the nature of and the motives for the general project of a reformulation of anthropological concepts that I have pursued for the past twenty years. One of the chief motivations for this theoretical enterprise is to deepen the labor of the critique and the relativization of the analytical tools used in the social sciences in order to be able to propound others that would be more faithful to the diverse realities that these tools are supposed to apprehend, qualify, and organize within a comparative framework. The key notions of these disciplines—such as culture, nature, society, history, economics, politics, religion, art, and even class, gender, and race—have allowed us to elucidate the collective condition of Europeans and to put words on realities that began to acquire a perceptible autonomy between the beginning of the 18th and the end of the 19th centuries, a crucial period that forged the main concepts that allowed Europe to define itself reflexively as a collective grounded in historical processes. These concepts are thus anything but transhistorical: they are, on the contrary, the product of an entirely singular social and cultural history. However, although they were intrinsically linked to the sociopolitical destiny of Europe, these concepts were further used by the social sciences to describe and explain non-European societies, as if their descriptive validity was universal. Now this quiet conviction that societies in the West could provide templates by which to qualify any form of association of beings is, in truth, linked to the evolutionist ideology, dominant at that time, which saw all human groups as destined to follow the same stages and perhaps someday to become—with the “help” of colonization—the same kind of “societies” as those found in Europe, with the same kind of analytical divisions between social organization, economics, and politics. Yet in the meantime, those exotic, would-be societies were supposed to remain merely imperfect prefigurations of that future, the blurred forms in which anthropologists could discern their eventual realization as complete societies similar to our own.

We have here a constitutive paradox of modern anthropology: the Eurocentrism of the concepts that it uses indicates an amputation of the principle of relativism deployed by ethnologists since the beginning of the 20th century. The relativism, understood as a method and not as a moral imperative, that the first generation of field ethnographers developed, consisted simply in not taking the values and the institutions of the observer as templates by which to calibrate the values and the institutions of the observed. Ethnologists followed faithfully and efficiently this principle when they described and analyzed kinship systems and types of family groupings, forms of exchange of goods and services, and

theories of the person or modes of categorization of plants and animals. In none of these domains were European institutions taken as anthropological universals, whether it was a question of the monogamous heterosexual family, the capitalist market, the Cartesian conceptions of the body as *res extensa* and of the mind as *res cogitans*, or the Linnaean classification of natural kinds.

Now as Roy Wagner was one of the first to point out, this principle of methodological relativism—so skillfully and efficiently employed in the study of domains such as kinship, the circulation of values, ontogenesis or biological knowledge—was not pursued to its final consequences, that is, to the calling into question of the general framework within which our own values and institutions had taken shape.³ And this general framework is the ontology familiar to us in the West, which I have labelled *naturalism*: an ontology furnished with beings and states of affairs that appear unsurprising to us—society, nature, progress, cultural habits, a clear separation between things and persons, between scientific knowledge and religious belief, between facts and values. But these beings and states of affairs do not exist under this guise in other ontologies, if they exist at all. Thus by taking stock of the historically contingent character of the naturalist ontology, I do not advocate hyperrelativism. My ambition is, rather, the reverse: to elaborate analytical tools that would be less affected by the historical particularisms and biases from which the concepts of the social sciences presently suffer.⁴ Gravitational force, photosynthesis, and the chemical formula of water qualify objects and phenomena whose principles of composition and functioning are everywhere identical on earth; but this does not hold true of notions such as society, culture, or nature, which cut up the texture of the world along structuring patterns that are proper only to specific places and to a specific period— structuring patterns which are thus perfectly relative while being unduly claimed to be just the opposite.

This is why I felt it necessary to push the reflection forward by not contenting myself with the critique of this or that notion from the sociological repertoire and by moving to a deeper level of the making of shared worlds—to wit, to the level of the detection of regularities in our surroundings, regularities which, when they become systematized, render possible forms of collectives, conceptions of the subject, theories of action, epistemic modes, conceptions of duration and spatiality, which are common to large social universes. By proceeding in such a manner, I no longer consider “societies” as already constituted realities, i.e. as assemblages of humans who follow self-imposed sets of conventions; instead, I try to understand how specific collectives come about—only some of which see themselves as “societies.” The ontological approach I adopt amounts to this: it is not a statement about what the world in general is or

3 Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

4 Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Loyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

ought to be but rather an inquiry into the diverse ways according to which humans select certain features from the objects whose existence they infer from their surroundings in order to compose worlds out of this material. And it is because these primary modalities of identification of the world vary that the forms of collectives that humans invent will vary accordingly: they will be immersed in political configurations, types of exchange, and kinds of relations between themselves and with nonhumans that will be quite different and will change over time. My ambition is thus to bring to a more elementary level the critical aim of the social sciences so as to render them better equipped for the task of grasping the general forms of interaction between beings. Obviously, we are not here within the realm of the social sciences alone; our concern is not just with integrated groups of humans. What is at stake is much broader. The interactions to be studied and qualified within these very diverse assemblages unfold between agents with different ontological statuses: humans, to be sure, but also organisms of various kinds, artefacts, representations, physical affordances and effects, deities and spirits, images and material environments, and all the other elements with which worlds are composed. The science that would be in a position to study these kinds of complex objects would, then, be a general science of relations, an ecology in the widest sense of the term, such as that Gregory Bateson had given it: a science yet to come and to which any discipline could contribute inasmuch as it deals with what might be termed interagentivity—that is, the process which brings about emerging properties as a result of the interaction between human and nonhuman agents that possess different dispositions but are capable of being affected by each other.⁵

It should be obvious by now that if I placed this enterprise under the auspices of ontology, it was not to claim an annexation by anthropology of a domain formerly reserved for philosophy; rather, it was mainly to emphasize the fact that the level at which I believe anthropological analysis should situate itself is more elementary than the one where it has operated until now. One cannot explain the systems of differences in the properly human ways of inhabiting the world by conceiving of these differences as the derived product of such and such a type of institution, economic organization, technical infrastructure, regime of values, vision of the world—in short any of the aspects of collectives that the social sciences hypostatize into separate domains in order to bring out causal determinations. Rather, each of these aspects can be seen as the stabilized outcome of more fundamental intuitions and inferences as to what the world contains and as to what kind of relations its human and nonhuman components maintain. The word ontology seemed appropriate for designating this analytical level, which could also be qualified as *prepredicative* in the language of Husserlian phenomenology; and this is the reason why I began to use it, parsimoniously, more than two decades ago. If I have contributed to the so-called “ontological turn”

5 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Chandler Publishing Company, 1972.

(an expression that I never use myself), it thus has been out of a need for conceptual hygiene: one has to look for the roots of the diversity of human behavior at a deeper level than the one that ethnography reveals, at the level the differences in the basic inferences humans make as to what kinds of beings inhabit the world and as to the ways in which these beings are bound together. From there ensue the types of collectives within which life in common and the nature of its composition unfolds; from there ensue too regimes of temporality and forms of figuration—from there ensues, in fact, all the richness of social and cultural life.

Extramodern Cosmopolitics

Let us go back to a crucial question: how are we to treat cosmopolitics in all its diversity without falling into Eurocentric bias? First of all, by admitting that the main difference between extramodern cosmopolitics and modern political institutions stems from the fact that the former are capable of integrating nonhumans into mixed collectives, or of treating nonhumans as political subjects operating in their own collectives, while the latter confine nonhumans to ancillary functions: surrounding humans as their environment, providing resources to them, or offering food for symbolic thought. If we admit that, then we must also admit that the kinds of collectives which constitute the milieu where life unfolds in parts of the world still resisting the front of modernization differ from the ones we recognize in the West, for they associate humans and nonhumans in different ways. For instance, if one looks closely at the components of what anthropologists call a descent group—a clan, a lineage, a sib, a moiety or any similar unit—not as anthropology defines it, that is as a set of humans descending from a common ancestor, but as it is conceived by the peoples where such units exist, then one realizes that they contain much more than humans.

I will take three brief examples from different parts of the world. Among the Wodaabe Peul of Niger, the word *dudal* is ordinarily employed by anthropologists to designate a fraction of a lineage, i.e. the largest segmentary unit functioning as a corporate group. However, as Angelo Bonfiglioli has shown, *dudal* refers in fact both to a line of humans and to a line of zebus that humans have selected over a number of generations; a group of humans and a group of domestic animals—the *dudal*-lineage and the *dudal*-herd—thus form a continuous and imbricated totality referred to by a single term.⁶ The same thing can be said of a notion used by the Tuva herders of Siberia, *aal-kodan*, its meaning being even more encompassing than *dudal*. Charles Stépanoff explains that *aal-kodan* refers at the same time

6 Angelo Bonfiglioli, *Dudal: histoire de famille et histoire de troupeau chez un groupe de Wodaabe du Niger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

to an encampment, to its human inhabitants, to its dogs and cattle, to its yurts, to its enclosures, and to its neighboring pastures, with the result that humans, nonhumans, and land are all incorporated in this notion.⁷ The solidarity of all members of this ontologically mixed collective is rendered evident in times of crisis. When cattle are plagued by disease, for example, humans have nightmares, a sure indication that the *aal-kodan* is being attacked by malevolent spirits. As a consequence, it is the whole *aal-kodan* that must be treated by a shaman. The Mongols have a similar notion, *khot-ail*.⁸ What is called an *ayllu* in the Andes is very similar. The Quichua term *ayllu* is traditionally defined in the ethnographic literature either as a kinship group, a lineage, or as a territorially-bound native community that engage in collective activities, particularly ritual ones. But when one looks more closely at the ethnography, it becomes obvious that an *ayllu* is more than a human grouping: it includes plants, animals, sacred rocks, local spirits and deities, and many other existents. This is how Justo Oxa, an informant of Marisol de la Cadena in the Cuzco area, defines the *ayllu*: “[*ayllu*] is like a weaving, and all the beings in the world—people, animals, mountains, plants, etc.—are like the threads, we are part of the design. The beings of this world are not alone, just as a thread by itself is not a weaving, a human (*runa*) is always in-ayllu with other beings.”⁹ In other words, in the clan, in the lineage, in the totemic group, in the *dudal*, in the *aal-kodan*, in the *ayllu*, there is always much more than women, men, and children, alive or dead; there are also animals, plants, territories, deities, spirits, sanctuaries, pathogens, elements of knowledge, types of expertise, images, and a thousand other things essential to life. And all these components of the collective are there *ab initio*; they are constitutive of the mixed units that these segments form, not added afterwards as either a suggestive décor for the theater of human actions or mere purveyors of metaphors, as the social sciences have a tendency to view them, that better express the sociality of these actions.

The idea that anthropology’s unit of analysis is provided solely by humans therefore constitutes a blockage that has obfuscated the properly political dimensions of collective life outside of modern societies. There were reasons for this prejudice, and even good ones. The anthropocentrism of modernity has its philosophical roots in the struggle against the organic order of the *ancien régime* and was fueled by the development of individualism, which came to be seen as the foundation of all legitimacy and resulted in the creation or promotion of institutions in frank discontinuity with those prevalent in the previous order. From the point of view of the recomposition of the relations between humans and nonhumans, what exactly happened between the end of the 16th century and the 19th century—first in the British Isles,

7 Charles Stépanoff, *Chamanisme, rituel et cognition chez les Touvas de Sibérie* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2018).

8 Natasha Fijn, *Living with herds: human-animal coexistence in Mongolia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

9 Marisol de la Cadena. *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 44.

and then in the rest of Europe and in North America? The hierarchical segmentation of collectives based on status differences crumbled, giving way to an immense mass of human individuals who became legally equal but continued to be separated by concrete disparities both within the particular communities in which they are distributed as well as within the formal aggregate that they all constitute together in the “concert of nations.” The mixed worlds that each collective had tailored became diluted into an infinite universe that was recognized by all those who, regardless of their position on earth, acknowledged the universality of the nonhuman laws that govern it. Above all, the City of God was fragmented into a multitude of “societies” from which nonhumans were banished—by law, at least, if not in fact. This gave rise to a multiplicity of collectives considered to be of the same nature, “societies,” which were therefore comparable, even if they were long judged unequal according to evolutionary criteria, principally owing to the fact that some of them, those of extramoderns, appeared to be incapable of expelling from the heart of their social life the diverse kinds of nonhumans which they had accommodated there. The representation that the moderns gave to their own mode of political aggregation was then transposed to the analysis of extramodern societies, alongside a number of specificities, such as the divide between nature and culture, or the separation between belief and knowledge, or the idea that a clan or lineage only contains humans. It is from this conception of politics— at once anthropo- and Eurocentric—that I wish to break.

Collectives and Territory

I have started to do this recently by trying to make sense of the variety of relations that humans entertain with the places they inhabit. In order to do so, one needs to divest oneself of a whole bundle of prejudices. In particular, one needs to realize that most of the concepts we use in this domain qualify situations that are basically characteristic of modern societies. I will give only two brief examples. The first refers to the notion of appropriation in general, and more particularly to the appropriation of a territory. Appropriation is a notion that has been widely used by anthropologists, historians, and geographers to define, independently of historical situations and local usages, the relations which a collective entertains with the place it inhabits, although it is typically the product of a juridical and philosophical system proper to the West. Ever since the beginning of the enclosure movements in Britain, Europe and then other parts of the world have constantly transformed into alienable and privately-owned goods an ever-growing part of their living environments. This movement of mercantilization, which has no parallel elsewhere, was rendered possible by a conception of appropriation as the act by which an individual or a community becomes the titular holder of a right to a component of the world, a conception closely linked to modern political philosophy as it developed in the 17th and 18th centuries, notably in Britain,

particularly through what Macpherson called the theory of possessive individualism.

Now this configuration is meaningless for the majority of extramodern collectives in their relation to land, if only because for many of them, particularly non-European kingships, the power of the sovereign concerns the control of humans or of cosmic fecundity, not of the land. Thus the very notion of territory has to be questioned; for in an extramodern context, a territory rarely corresponds to what we have been accustomed, since the emergence of the Westphalian system, to understand by the term, i.e. a portion of space upon which a state exercises its sovereignty and the stable limits of which are recognized by neighboring states. Beyond the sphere of modernity, it is indeed common for a single physical space to be used as territory by different human groups, in the same way that a collective may use different scattered spaces that constitute a discontinuous territory. Furthermore, the use of a territory does not depend only on humans; it is also under the control of a myriad of nonhumans who appear to manifest an autonomous agency—deities, spirits, ancestors, ghosts, plants, animals, mountains, caves, rivers—and with whom humans must reckon and compose.

However, before pursuing the discussion of the notion of territory, I would like to return to another concept that I have used already a number of times here, one that must play a crucial role in the labor of refoundation that remains to be accomplished in order to foster a new cosmopolitics purged from the anthropo- and Eurocentrism that we have inherited from Enlightenment political philosophy. And this is the concept of the collective. In contrast with other categories designating organized sets of beings, the concept of the collective has the great merit of prejudging neither the content of what might be associated nor the modes of the association. In other words, the notion of the collective renders irrelevant the ontological distinction between, on the one hand, associations of humans—societies, nations, lineages, tribes, classes, and the like—and, on the other hand, associations of nonhumans such as species, biotic communities, technical sets, herds, pantheons, and collections. Obviously not all forms of association are identical, but their typology does not rest on the a priori distinction between humans and nonhumans upon which the regime of modernity is predicated.

So how are we to define a collective? I initially borrowed the notion from Bruno Latour, but I use it in a different sense than the one that he gives it. For Latour, a collective is the product of a literal action of collecting, by means of which diverse types of forces and beings are associated; it is thus a process, and even a project, that is indissociable from the actor-network theory of which it constitutes one of the main analytic tools and which consists in assembling heterogeneous entities that have not yet been gathered together so as to put to test the relevance of their assemblage. The operation is experimental and aimed at connecting associations of humans and nonhumans which then would be no longer separated by the “Great Divide” between the domains of nature and society. The Latourian collective

thus designates the dynamic—at once epistemic, metaphysical, and political—by which a common world is progressively composed that blatantly ignores the two usual attractors of modernity. It follows that no initial specification is required as to the nature of the beings that integrate the collective and their relations. In sum, the collective is what justifies the labor of investigation because its nature and its composition are never known in advance. It also follows that the Latourian collective is not a substantive object nor even a process of composition but a process aimed at reproducing within an analysis the process of the recruitment of the set of humans and nonhumans that the analyst has adopted as an object of study—a set which, if all goes well, might become a new form of political existence by expanding to include other human and nonhuman actants.

One has to acknowledge the great potential of such a notion, which accounts for actual assemblages of beings without operating ontological discriminations among them. However, it seems to me that reducing the collective to the process of collecting undertaken by the Moderns in order to overcome their divided condition amounts to depriving oneself of everything that extramoderns might teach us about the matter. For we are quite familiar as anthropologists with situations in which humans and nonhumans are associated in totalities governed by the same principles and norms, or with monospecific assemblages of humans interacting with a variety of monospecific assemblages of nonhumans according to the same rules of sociability, or again with mixed groups of humans and nonhumans cooperating in all spheres of social life while remaining ontologically different from one another. These kinds of collectives are the usual forms under which the extramoderns present themselves to us in the bewildering variety of their institutions. This is why one has to acknowledge that collectives do not acquire their consistency exclusively as the product of a collection operated by an analyst, but that they exist also, and perhaps foremost, under stabilized, even canonical forms: forms that social and cultural anthropology has admittedly described in a fragmentary manner and with an anthropocentric bias, but forms that it is not impossible to restore in all the richness and complexity of their architecture. Furthermore, these stabilized forms of collectivity have not been invented by a few clever anthropologists in order to provide analytical templates to their less gifted colleagues: their principles of composition are quite explicit for the human members of the corresponding collectives, who know very well how to evaluate their merits in light of those that dominate neighboring collectives. Therefore it would be absurd and condescending to reserve the comparative anthropology of collectives for only those scholars who are supposed to have been able to extirpate themselves from the modernization front. In sum, a collective, as I see it, is a stabilized form of association between beings who may be ontologically homogeneous or heterogeneous, and whose principles of composition as well as internal modes of relation are readily specifiable and susceptible to being dealt with reflexively by the human members of these assemblages,

especially when it is a question of qualifying their relations with neighboring collectives where these principles and modes are not found.

It follows that a collective as I understand it does not have the form of a Latourian network. Indeed, if a collective is also for me a set where entities of all kinds are conjoined, it is not organized, properly speaking, as a network, for the borders of a network are impossible to define in principle if one decides to follow all of its ramifications. Those borders thus necessarily depend upon an arbitrary decision of the analyst to circumscribe her object to the data she can muster. Nor is a collective homologous to the usual sociological categories designating human associations and to which one would need add a few nonhumans for the commendable sake of completeness—a society plus its nature, a tribe plus its ancestors, a civilization plus its divinities, a socioprofessional group plus its tools and materials, and so on. One hardly sees what benefit, in terms of intelligibility, would be gained by that, since the nonhumans would continue to be a mere decoration added to a massive anthropocentric block. This is why I have propounded the hypothesis that the principles of the composition of a collective—that is, what defines the nature of the beings it associates as well as the possible links these may entertain—are ultimately grounded in what I have called *modes of identification*.

Modes of Identification and the Composition of Worlds

I will recall in a few words what I mean by modes of identification. The general idea is that we should consider the apparent diversity of cultural habits as the product of differential processes of worlding, that is, of the manners of actualizing the multitude of qualities, phenomena, beings, and relations which may be objectified by humans by means of ontological filters that allow the latter to discriminate between the mass of information that their environment offers to their apprehension. I have called these ontological filters that structure the process of worlding modes of identification, following Marcel Mauss's insight that "man identifies himself with things and identifies things with himself, doing so with a sense of both the differences and the resemblances that he establishes."¹⁰ One should consider these modes of identification as cognitive and sensory-motor schemas, embodied and developed in the course of socialization in a particular physical and social milieu and functioning as devices for the schematization of our practices, intuitions, and perceptions that do not mobilize discursive knowledge. In other words, a modes of identification is a kind of device that allows us to recognize certain things as meaningful and to ignore others, to carry out sequences of action without thinking about what we are doing, to interpret in this or that way events and statements, and to channel our inferences regarding the

¹⁰ Cited in Descola, *Beyond*, 112.

properties of objects in our surroundings. Now in spite of the diversity of qualities that one can detect in existents, or that one can infer from clues offered by their appearance and behavior, it is highly plausible to surmise that the ways according to which these qualities become organized are not infinite. Our judgements of identity—that is, the recognition of similitudes between objects and between events—cannot depend on an endless series of piecemeal analytic comparisons. For reasons of cognitive economy, these judgments of identity have to be produced quickly and in a nonconscious manner, by induction or abduction from shared schemas which are so many devices allowing one to structure perceived qualities and to organize behavior. Using a simple thought experiment which I borrowed from Husserl while taking stock of advances in developmental psychology, I proposed the hypothesis that there are no more than four modes of identification—again ways of systematizing ontological inferences—each of them being based upon the kinds of resemblances and differences that humans discern between themselves and nonhumans on a dual plane, physical and moral. Indeed, when facing an as yet undetermined alter, thus properly speaking an *aliud*, whether human or nonhuman, I can surmise either that this *aliud* is endowed with elements of physicality and interiority identical to mine, which I have called *totemism*; or that its interiority and physicality are quite different but can nevertheless be shown to relate to mine through a process of transitive analogy, which I call *analogism*; or that we have similar interiorities and dissimilar physicalities, which I call *animism*; or that we do not share an interiority but are ruled by the same physical principles, which I call *naturalism*.

I won't expatiate on the details of these modes of identification, which I have done extensively in a number of publications. What I find stimulating now is to test the relevance of these schemas by pursuing their analytical purchase on diverse fields of practice and representation. One of them is the domain of images and the general process of figuration, on which I am now finishing a book that has kept me busy for a number of years. Another domain which I have begun to explore of late corresponds to what is traditionally labelled social and political anthropology, which refers to the variety of ways in which modes of identification condition the forms of association of humans and nonhumans in specific collectives. My aim here is to examine how animism, totemism, naturalism, and analogism become instituted in ontologies that favor one or another of these modes of identification as the principle according to which the regime of existents is organized. Each of those ontologies, in its turn, prefigures a kind of collective that is suited in its own way to assembling within a common destiny the various types of beings that it distinguishes and also to expressing their properties in practical life.

As can be seen, the approach is frankly ontological. By contrast with the Durkheimian approach—still the most common in the social sciences, if only implicitly—I do not seek in the dominant categories of social life the keys for understanding a cosmology, as per the famous dictum, “religion is society transfigured.” Rather, I take the organizing principles of cosmologies, the nature of their inhabitants,

and the relations which the latter entertain as templates for the structuring of those exclusively human assemblages that we moderns call *societies*. Sociology has grossly framed these exclusive assemblages in the fabrics of the world so as to transform them into the models of all collective existence; simply because they defined themselves reflexively by what they excluded, namely nonhumans, these forms of collectivity were more visible than others. To escape the circularity of the classical Durkheimian explanation, according to which an already constituted social morphology is the source of the categories that constitute it, it seems preferable to admit that what generates those assemblages of humans and nonhumans that I call collectives and conditions their characteristics are more elementary principles, analytically prior to social categories. In other words, it is the ontological and cosmological level which determines and explains the sociological level, not the reverse.

Land and Cosmopolitical Operators

How are we to study this? How do we apprehend collectives if we must pay heed to the ways that they are conceptualized and experienced by those who compose them rather than force them into the procrustean bed of the sociology of moderns? By way of empirical studies, to begin with. The sociological question is primarily one of inventory and of what Auguste Comte called social physics, except that it should go beyond humans: what kind of being is associated with what other kind of being, or dissociated from it, and in what way, by what kind of connection, for what motive, and to undertake what kind of action? Obviously, the answer to most of these questions can only come from the human component of collectives. It would be illusory to think that volcanoes, lakes, Pachamama, and llama herds will explain to us how they conceive of their common belonging to a collective, or that tapirs will describe in detail the kind of ritual dances they reputedly perform in their subterranean houses, far from the gaze of native Amazonians. The anthropocentric bias is hardly avoidable as soon as one becomes interested, beyond the ordinary interactions between humans and nonhumans that can be studied with a good measure of symmetry, in understanding the guiding principles of a particular world and the ontological distribution of the beings that compose it. All these elements can be formulated only in the symbolic language proper to humans. However, the semiotic anthropocentrism of extramodern collectives is also mitigated by the fact that one of its consequences is to grant to many nonhumans the dignity of being agents, and sometimes of being subjects, while our own anthropocentrism, ontological and a priori, is on the contrary conceived of as a mechanism of exclusion and compartmentalization.

Yet as indispensable as they may be, empirical studies are by themselves not sufficient to distinguish guidelines in the ways that collectives are composed. As I have already said, the hypothesis I work with is that a collective's principles of composition ultimately depend on modes of identification, and this is

why I have pursued an inquiry concerned with the forms of collectivity in which the different types of ontologies find an expression. However, I very well realize that these forms are extremely diverse when apprehended from the vantage point of the distinctive institutions in which they are embodied, be they forms of authority, kinship systems, networks of exchange, or ritual mediations reputedly necessary to maintain a cosmic balance. This is why I have opted to concern myself exclusively, for the time being, with those mechanisms insuring the control of space, ways of inhabiting places and of using some of their aspects, and types of cohabitation with nonhumans which these places afford; in sum, to the relation to land in its more general sense. Today as yesterday, this is a crucial question since even the most mobile human populations—pastoral herders in the Sahel or in central Asia, sea-nomads in Southeast Asia and hunter-gatherers such as the Nukak in Amazonia or the !Kung in Botswana—nevertheless depend upon the places they move across and upon the links they maintain with the humans and nonhumans who occupy these places. Furthermore, putting an emphasis on manners of inhabiting space allows one to circumvent an overtly anthropocentric bias since, almost all the beings who admittedly can enter into the composition of a collective find themselves in some way attached to more or less circumscribed and identified localities: plants, animals, deities, waterways, mountains, spirits, the dead, totems, and so on are all located in sites, domains, biomes, and geological formations that stabilize them in their relations to the other existents with whom they share a life-supporting milieu. In short, in contrast with other dimensions of the common life in which the components of a collective may be more or less involved, from the point of view of location, humans and nonhumans share one characteristic: they all are situated. Only the Mosaic god, that extraordinary invention of the Near East, is an exception to the rule since he is at the same time nowhere and everywhere, or, according to a well-known formula initially attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, his center is everywhere and his circumference nowhere. But he is unique unto himself and above all transcendent in relation to the collective, in contrast to certain other principles of totalization by means of which communities of beings can be taken hold of from a singular vantage point that nevertheless remains internal to the set being totalized.

Approaching the relations of collectives to land requires a redefinition of politics which would give to the assemblages of humans and nonhumans, and to the conflicts which cut across them, an expression widely different from the current one. As the philosopher Jacques Rancière has shown in *Disagreement*, the deployment of modern politics requires much more than established divisions between humans giving cause to struggles and conflicts; modern politics is actually grounded in the partition of the sensible world into nature and humanity, the consummate division of the modern era or, what amounts to the same thing, the ontology of naturalism. This partition was for a long time organized hierarchically, between those who claimed to have more humanity and less nature—Europeans, men, adults, literati, owners—and those to whom they attributed less humanity, because they were supposed to have more

nature—”savages,” children, women, mad persons, laborers. On account of this partition, it was taken for granted that the former should have political preeminence over the latter. But this repartition also entailed that other worlds that did not conform to this hierarchical division, because they were not organized around a distinction between nature and humanity, had no proper existence (at least on a political level) and should for that reason be civilized by colonization, be it external or internal.

However, another conception of politics is possible; precisely the one that Rancière advocates when he writes: “Politics is not made up of power relationships, it is made up of relationships between worlds.”¹¹ What he means by that is, on the one hand, that relations of power exist everywhere and in all spheres of life, so that one hardly sees why an expression of these relations should belong exclusively to the domain of politics; but what he also means is that “a political subject is not a group which ‘becomes aware’ of itself, finds its voice, imposes its weight on society. It is an operator that connects and disconnects different areas, identities, functions, and capacities existing in the configuration of a given experience.”¹² In that sense, any operator, whether human or nonhuman, is capable of becoming a political subject if it manages to bring together things, issues, and matters of concern which initially have no intrinsic connections, especially if they appear to pertain to very different ontological regimes. An Andean mountain around which a collective rallies to protest a mining project thus becomes a political subject; an Amazonian water spirit disturbed by an industrial gold-washing site becomes such a subject too; and the same goes for a Norwegian Sami herd of reindeers threatened by inadequate grazing regulations, global warming, the Californian water table, and the wetlands of Western France. At a time when the very idea of politics has become so bland as to restrict itself to designating mere techniques for the management of human beings, the examples set by the extramodern collectives studied by anthropologists remind us that other forms of composing worlds are possible, and that it is entirely up to us to account for them and thereby to imagine the new forms of cosmopolitics that the present so urgently demands.

11 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 42.

12 Rancière, *Disagreement*, 40.