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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 PARTICIPATION<sup>1</sup>

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*September 2017*

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>  
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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 <sup>2</sup> The present paper continues the discussion of these themes that I developed in Pina-Cabral 2013 and  
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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'<sup>3</sup>—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).<sup>4</sup> Throughout one's life, as we  
30 enter into further participations, this dynamic of self-constitution in the  
31 world does not stop.<sup>5</sup> 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 <sup>3</sup> 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 <sup>4</sup> 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 <sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

#### 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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39 The verb 'to participate' and the expressions 'participating' and  
40 'participation' are defined by most English dictionaries as meaning 'to  
41 share in something', 'to be involved in something', 'to share in the activities  
42 of a group'. The Thesaurus gives us a range of associated words, such as  
43 'involvement', 'engagement', 'group action', 'commitment', 'intervention',  
44 'intercession', 'to partake'. As a noun, the Latin *particeps* meant "partaker,  
45 comrade, fellow soldier"; as an adjective it implied "sharing, partaking". It is  
46 said that the verb *participare* found its origins in the Proto Indo-European  
47 root \*kap, meaning 'to have', 'to grab', 'to share', 'to take'. However, as we  
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57 <sup>6</sup> For an argument of that point by relation to the matter of addiction and the so-called War on Drugs, see  
58 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, membership<sup>7</sup>) 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).<sup>8</sup> 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 <sup>7</sup> 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 <sup>8</sup> 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 position<sup>9</sup> 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 <sup>9</sup> 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 essence<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup>  
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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.”<sup>12</sup> 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 <sup>10</sup> 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 <sup>11</sup> From St. Augustin’s *De Civitate Dei*, 12:2, as translated by Schultz and Synan—in Aquinas 2001: xxi.

57 <sup>12</sup> 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](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’.<sup>13</sup> 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,

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54 <sup>13</sup> “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"<sup>14</sup>  
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 <sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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 Schneider<sup>16</sup>).  
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 <sup>15</sup> Although there is a curiously undeveloped reference to 'sympathetic participation' (1978: I, 5).

56 <sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 <sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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

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58 <sup>18</sup> 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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27 Yet it turns out that the notion of individuality is as wrong when  
28 applied to persons as when it is applied to rats or amoebas (see Lévi-  
29 Strauss 2000, Pina-Cabral 2017: 138-142). Live beings are not monads;  
30 they are not little pellets of meaning that some demiurge produces out of  
31 some ethereal machine. Live beings are emergent properties in the process  
32 of life; they are processually constituted and cannot ever be dissociated  
33 from life's dynamism, their mind is a function of their embodiment (see  
34 Thompson 1997). Sociality, therefore, is not a force that is superimposed  
35 on life, as Durkheim depicted it. Rather, sociality—the capacity to address  
36 the world with a purpose in order to survive as a species—is the basic  
37 condition of life (as Bateson defended a long time ago, 1972). The complex  
38 sociality of dolphins and primates is an emergent property within sociality  
39 more generally (see Hattiangadi 2005), and so is personhood, a condition  
40 that only embodied humans who actively participate in the world with  
41 other humans can fulfill.  
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