

Relations, Individuals and Presence

A Theoretical Essay.

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Abstract: In this theoretical article, the author examines the rarely discussed but ubiquitous references to relations in anthropology. Research themes, explicatory concepts, work methods: everything seems to pass through relations. But is this not too much? And what about the existence of each human singularity, each individual? Does this not risk being absorbed by this excess of relationism? The author offers a critical evaluation of relationism and invites us to observe human existence, presented as a theme, concept and method associated with anthropological knowledge.

[*Individual, relation, relationism, anthropology, theory, existence, existential, methodology, presence*]

Relations have recently been given much importance in social anthropology, even more than societies, cultures and actions¹. They cut across everything, and are less polemical. Society and culture have always been considered primary theoretical points of departure, and have at the same time been exposed to more or less vigorous challenges and objections. When “society” and “culture” are judged obsolete, “actions” and “individuals” are proposed, but these are quick to draw criticism from their detractors. “Relations” are the ideal compromise, the diplomatic word. They are between society, the individual and the action. One may hesitate to say one has seen a society, but we see relations all the time. Is there any research theme that does not confront issues of relations: migration, religious cults, social hierarchies, artistic creativity, animal breeding, health, etc.?

Relations seem to be the inescapable element in anthropology’s theoretical propositions both past and present. As Alfred Gell notes: “Anthropological theories are distinctive in that they are typically about social relationships”. He continues: “The aim of anthropological theory is to make sense of behavior in the context of social relations” (Gell 1988:11). Marilyn Strathern suggests that we understand “persons as simultaneously containing the potential for relationships and always embedded in a matrix of relations with others” (Strathern 1996:60–66). According to another perspective, Lévi-Strauss explains that anthropology’s objective is to consider social life as “a system of which all the aspects are organically connected” (Lévi-Strauss 1963:365).

¹ This text was translated by Matthew Cunningham. I wish to thank the Centre for Ethnology and Comparative Sociology (CNRS – University of Paris-Nanterre) for its subsidy.

System, structure, relations, interaction, activity and even persons as we have just seen: these terms all speak of relations in their own way. This theoretical context is very tenacious in anthropology (Venkatesan *et al.* 2012).

Is there not the risk of focusing observation more on relations, on the “between”, than on the relata, that is to say on individuals? They are of course engaged in relations, but are they not more than their participation in relations, especially their current relations here and now? It seems to me that it is necessary to subject these ways of conceiving relations to a critical evaluation, in order to better describe the individuals engaged in these relations. I would even say that this is the goal of anthropology, a goal it has turned away from: the existence of human beings.

“The provocation,” Matei Candea writes, “comes in part from the fact that anthropology’s commitment to relationality operates on at least three different levels: ethnographically, *relations* are our subject matter; analytically, the making of *connections* is our method, and *engagement* has come to be the ubiquitous key-word for thinking about anthropological ethics” (Candea 2009). Let us attempt to trace a path through relationism’s various manifestations. I will link authors to each of them, though other authors could have been chosen. I think that the main modalities of thinking with relations are represented here. Beginning as they do with relations, it will be towards the individual that we will be moving each time.

Critiques of relationism

Let us begin with interactionism. The theoretical framework which focuses on “interaction” and whose ‘classical’ proponents are George Herbert Mead (1934) and Erving Goffman (1967) still has a great influence on many studies of activities, actions and speech, in the social sciences and in anthropology as well. The interactionist focus would seem to be placed on the individual engaged in relations. Actions are their externalization, the manifestation of their relational abilities. They are actions manifested by an individual with a view to communicating, informing, negotiating, interacting. From this perspective, considering and examining actions as interactions implies noting all the signs that are relevant, those that others consider meaningful and acceptable enough to serve as a point of departure for their response. Interactionists are interested in looks, gestures, postures and verbal utterances only insofar as they are “external signs of orientation and involvement” (Goffman 1967:1). Gestures and postures provide information about those who execute them, particularly to the other people in the situation, to whom they offer clues as to the identity of their partners, enabling them to evaluate the normality of their acts.

But then the danger of such analyses arises: it resides in the overly strict focus on the concept of roles, since even the distance roles are also interpreted as a role, in a way that is a little too rigid. Furthermore – and this is important – although roles and social positions are of course the basis of relations or various actions, these do not imply

the whole presence of a given individual at moment t of his act. Richard Sennett accurately points out that “in Goffman’s world, people behave but they do not have experience” (Sennett 1977:36). With interactionism, we are faced with a disciplinary habitus, which consists in watching, theorizing and describing that which is shared by actors in the name of the specific relevance of the messages exchanged in the interaction. Individuals are fit for consideration when they express, when they communicate, when they identify, when they perceive as X, and when they are perceived as Y². What interests interactionism are gestures, words, attitudes, a point of view that is expected in the situation, as well as disruptions in a role and the subsequent management of these. This type of discourse underpins a narrow anthropology: a human being expressing, communicating, manipulating, perceiving. Of course, anyone observing modes of human presence can pinpoint a set of expressions, impressions and reciprocal perceptions. But there are also other things, even in large quantities, that must qualify a theory of interaction, particularly gestures, movements, thoughts and states of mind that may be non-relevant to the situation but are not incongruous, namely leftovers, which are not “expressive” and are not seen as such. In fact, all interactionism in the broad sense absorbs the presences of individuals into that which links them together, and also into that which matters – and matters exclusively – in their relations with objects, space or their environment.

What interactionism speaks of is “exorelations”, let us say “exo-actions”. The prefix “exo” clearly indicates that it is a matter of expressions that emerge from individuals, and that these actions addressed to others are forms of their presence. To speak of exo-actions clearly indicates that it refers to individuals’ actions, and therefore to an outcome of relations. These exo-actions are not independent of their carriers since it is they who perform them, but their concrete performance is not absolutely determined by the identity characteristics, roles or statuses of these people, and certainly not solely by those which are relevant in the situation. The exo-actions that are expected in the course of an action are not performed – for the person executing them – without a reserve of other possible actions that may or may not leave traces, sometimes minute, in a moment of presence. I have used the notion of the minor mode to designate this presence of “other things” (Piette, 1996, 2011, 2015a and b).

Furthermore, the interactionist perspective indicates that individual X is, on the one hand, changed by his perceptions and his own actions, which target other individuals or entities in the situation, and by the actions, looks and words of others. On the other hand, he himself can, through his own attitude, change the attitudes of others. Exo-actions are indeed an externalization, an expression of individual entities. They can of course change these entities, but rarely in a total sense. Individuals usually preserve a feeling of continuity and remain recognizable to others. Many of these exo-actions –

² In this sense, the perspectivism of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro is a form of interactionism. See also the critic about Ingold in the introduction of this issue.

those of the individual engaged in them or those of other people who concern him – are not entirely “essential” to his existence from moment to moment. Certainly nothing would really have been the same if these *exo-actions* had not been what they had been, but the differences between before and after would vary widely. These actions never affect the whole volume of being of the person executing them or the person at whom they are directed. They only affect this or that stratum, with very diverse, sometimes very minor consequences. One might say that these *exo-actions* are more or less implicatory, generating changes that have various impacts – passing or lasting, sudden or gradual – on the continuity of the existence of the individuals concerned. Only through detailed observation of a person can one grasp this movement of continuity and change.

Let us look now at the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, according to whom elements considered independently of one another are unintelligible. “They [ancient philosophers] did notice that in a given language certain sequences of sounds were associated with definite meanings, and they earnestly aimed at discovering a reason for the linkage between those *sounds* and that *meaning*. Their attempt, however, was thwarted from the very beginning by the fact that the same sounds were equally present in other languages although the meaning they conveyed was entirely different. The contradiction was surmounted only by the discovery that it is the combination of sounds, not the sounds themselves, which provide the significant data” (Lévi-Strauss 1963:208). This is clearly the structuralist position placing interdependence, the system and the structure at the center of its analysis. In the work of Lévi-Strauss, relational terms can only be understood and described through their interdependence with others within a whole. Empirically, in structural anthropology, it is links and interdependencies that become objects of study.

“Like phonemes, kinship terms are elements of meaning; like phonemes, they acquire meaning only if they are integrated into systems. ‘Kinship systems’ like ‘phonemic systems’, are built by the mind on the level of unconscious thought” (Lévi-Strauss 1963:34). The signification operation therefore does not depend on a special relationship between the sign and reality, but on a specific relationship between signs. Having set aside subjectivities, the structural anthropologist seeks, despite everything, to isolate fundamental distinctive elements and their combination modalities within this or that system of activity. The signification capacity that these details possess, for example a sound in relation to another, the role and position of a father in relation to those of a son, I would place among the internal, “endo-relational” stock of each unity in a system³. This designates the characteristic ability, the potential, to have meaning necessarily in relation to something else. Some of these logical and significative principles

³ The notions of endo-relations and exo-relations are used by L.R. Bryant (in a sense that is slightly different from mine) (Bryant 2011). I should also point out that this opposition between endo-relations and exo-actions (or exorelations) does not encompass that commonly used in philosophy between inner and outer relations.

can become decisive for part of the person's identity, such as being the father or son of... , as well as for some of their actions.

Furthermore, the impact that the structural linguistics project had on Lévi-Strauss is linked to its ambition to move away from the state of conscious linguistic phonemes to discover their unconscious infrastructure. In fact, where it is a matter of humans, or "human elements", Lévi-Strauss adds a structural unconscious, present in each of these, which operates according to a set of logical rules governing exchanges between individuals. This structural unconscious, the ultimate cognitive ability, is in the mind and operates according to a binary logic that contrasts and combines the elements and their own characteristics. We might say that they "relation", that they activate endo-relational potentialities of meaning.

Thus relations, as an inner ability, reside in an ordering, structuring mind that enables individuals to exchange, oppose, and create interdependencies. Ultimately what becomes central is this structural unconscious. And every human being possesses it. The terms, or individuals, are themselves relational and are presented as such. While they are endowed with this relational ability, they are conceived as being relative to a chosen whole, for example a kinship system. Relational ability lies at the heart of the "passivized" individual, whom it causes to act, but this individual is a mutilated one. Because – as is a well-known feature of Lévi-Strauss' theories – it does not matter much that there is a "me", a "spoiled child" who feels, perceives, experiences the possession of these endo-relations or even these cognitive operations. How does the individual do so? Furtively, among many other things, sometimes strongly, in the flow of everyday life... It is of course easy to show that an individual who exists cannot only be described and understood on the basis of relative positions within systems.

Having social relations: in its everyday use, this expression means having a stock, having social-relations capital. From a Bourdieusian perspective, it designates a given individual's social experiences and relational stock, accumulated in the course of his or her existence. It is endo-relations of a different kind, in this case more social than cognitive. They correspond to predispositions that make exo-actions possible in a situation, specifically a set of behaviors, attitudes, ways of thinking and judging. These things are well-known in the social sciences. Behind every confrontation between two human beings, there is a confrontation between "habitus", therefore between endo-relations. These endo-relations expressed in exo-relations are themselves in a relationship of distinction with others. According to the Bourdieusian point of view, each individual only exists relatively. And this does not apply solely to human beings, but also to various things in life that are only intelligible in their relations with one another, in their relationship of difference (for example, Bourdieu 1977).

I believe it is essential to meticulously study the acquisition of, and changes in, endo-relations over the course of days and situations. But in this case, it is individuals that once again become central, in place of the "between" or "relative". Each individual, I might add. Bernard Lahire focuses his analysis on the singular individual, with a view to studying the individual variations of social trajectories that are either acti-

vated or on standby depending on the context, or on the situation and actions in progress (Lahire 2013). But the methodological difficulty is not slight. Of course, it is sometimes easy to draw a link between a gesture, words and an acquired social predisposition. Basically a causality link. This link between an act and this sort of endo-relation activated in the context of a situation is often not obvious to the carrier or the observer, but it exists. The fact that people react differently under identical circumstances does not eliminate the possibility that their reactions are linked to social predispositions that manifest themselves differently depending on the situation. These possibilities of differences could therefore also be attributed to the endo-relational stock. But where is the limit beyond which it is no longer possible or relevant to apply this interpretation to gestural and verbal details? Can all gestures and all speech be inserted into this scheme? I do not believe this is the case. It is enough to subject an individual to detailed examination in a situation to find oneself marveling at his movements, his thoughts, his mental associations, to understand that the whole of his present volume of being cannot be reduced to a sum of acquired social endo-relations.

Let us look at another relationist proposition. Today, Latour's theories are certainly those that most reinforce the primacy of relations and the suspension of the presence of individuals. Bruno Latour places connecting and associating relations at the center of his analysis. The Latourian entity is solely defined by its relations, its action of changing an object or being subjected to the effects of this. It seems to be described as if it existed at every moment, fully activated in connection with other entities. And the least change in an object turns it into a new actor. We are far from what was said above about exo-actions and the subtlety of continuities in an existence. As a target and relay of connections and trajectories, the Latourian individual appears with few qualities except the relevant attention he directs to the network in which he finds himself, to its modes of expression, to intersections with other networks.

Latour's views are radical in their relationist manifestation: "But what about me, the ego? Am I not in the depth of my heart, in the circumvolutions of my brain, in the inner sanctum of my soul, in the vivacity of my spirit, an 'individual'? Of course I am, but only as long as I have been individualized, spiritualized, interiorized" (Latour 2007:212). It is an astonishing semi-structuralist formulation! But specifically: what am I like when I am individualized, internalized, when I do things, when I live, etc.? In *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, Latour sticks to this position, seeking: "networks for the production of 'interiority' and 'psyches' endowed with some materiality, traceability, solidity similar to those of the networks for the production of 'objectivities'" (Latour 2013:185). And he continues: "Instead of situating the origin of an action in a self that would then focus its attention on materials in order to carry out and master an operation of manufacture in view of a goal thought out in advance, it is better to reverse the viewpoint and bring to the surface the encounter with one of those beings that teach you what you are when you are making it one of the future components of subjects (having some competence, knowing how to go about it, possessing a skill). Competence, here again, here as everywhere, follows performance rather than preced-

ing it. In place of *Homo faber*, we would do better to speak of *Homo fabricatus*, daughters and sons of their products and their works” (Latour 2013:230). This is indeed very structuralist! Even if we seem to be in full “ontological turn”, with beings and modes of existence, where are the empirical units? They do not *exist!* We do not see them situated and described. They are solely treated as the effects of utterances and relations.

Latour’s readers circulate within a structuralo-relationist lexicon. It inclines more towards structuralism when the text favors the passive voice and sets the individual aside, something that recalls the “I am acted upon, I am thought” of Lévi-Strauss. Latour proposes to track the creations of interiority, the “psychotropic beings” that change beings, that produce subjectivities and skills, as we have just seen. Individuals are secondary. The text inclines more towards relationism when it emphasizes “having things done”, focuses on the activity, the “between”, translations, trajectories, transfers, attachments, networks. What is important, according to Latour, is that which precedes and that which follows (Latour 2013:285). “Instead of striving to find the proportion of Individual and of Society in each course of action, it is better to follow the organizing act that leaves these distorted, transitory figures behind in its wake” (Latour 2013:402). What could be more Latourian than this proposition: “We shall simply say that Peter and Paul, along with their friends and enemies, find themselves linked, attached, bound, interested” (Latour 2013:428)?

It is quite different to say, on the one hand, as I might say, that human beings have relational abilities and predispositions, that they are independent of one another even if some of their roles are interdependent (husband, father, wife, son, etc.), that in a situation they give concrete expression to their relational predispositions and roles, that these manifestations certainly shape them and contribute to their identity, and also that the volumes of being in a situation are more or less than the directly manifested relations; and on the other hand to say that relations constitute entities, create and determine these, that they are all interconnected and form society, as Latour says.

Let us sum up. The idea of relations led in at least three different directions: relations as interactions – this implying a focus on the interactionally relevant, and concentration on the “between”; individuals as relations (as relational or as constituted by relations, even as “related”), that is to say without other properties; relative individuals in a system. There could, however, be another, very different point of view, as I pointed out at different points in my critique: the singular individual as a volume of being, more than relative and more than a relation. The exo-actions of these individuals are indeed acts, gestures and words that they themselves complete, accomplish, show. To the individuals they are not necessary, but they are implicatory. They are qualifications, characterisations of the individual. There is a risk that, by placing oneself in the middle of situations, between the relata, one will overlook the entirety of each person’s volume of being, and only focus on the dimensions that are relevant in relation to the interaction. Let us instead consider that there are individuals, and that they have actions, which are multiple and changeable – actions that are implicatory, more or less implicatory, also sometimes non-implicatory. There is also that reserve of being which

can leave traces in ways of being present, exo-actions that are not directly relevant to the situation in progress. So I do not accept the reduction of an individual's presence to a "role". Nor do I accept seeing a moment of presence only as a set of exo-actions that are salient and relevant to the situation, or as the effect of a "relating" mind.

Getting close to the individual makes it possible to better observe not only this volume of being engaged in relations and removed from them, but also the always-variable modalities and intensities of engagement and disengagement in the action, as well as the exo-action in which he is engaged, which can itself reach another individual with varying intensity, not to mention the manifestations of other things that may filter in. Getting close also makes it possible to pinpoint the endo-relations that are layers, traces and predispositions that have accumulated in a volume of being. Being a father or husband: these are forms of endo-relation whose expression is sometimes visible and direct in a given situation, sometimes invisible in another, though it might sometimes leave minor traces. Exo-actions actualise endo-relations and melt into them. Are all of these exo-actions an actualisation of incorporated and internalized endo-relations? Probably not, as I have just suggested. It is impossible to measure all of the endo-relations and to draw the links from actions, attitudes and gestures to the stock of endo-relations. And were it possible to draw these links, I repeat, there would be leftovers with regard to social trajectories.

Moving beyond relationism first means opposing this excess of relationism, opposing relations as a research theme (examining roles, relationships, links) and opposing relations as a theoretical interpretation that reduces individuals to trajectories, interdependencies, or salient elements in situations. And next, it means examining the individual in the process of existing, with all of his subtle differences – before, during and after the moment of interaction. From this point of view, ontology takes on a meaning that is sometimes different from what is implied by anthropology's "ontological turn". "Ontos" or "onta" are forms of the present participle of the verb "to be" in classical Greek. Etymologically, "ontology" evokes a focus on situated beings, beings in a situation, rather than on speech, narratives, and conceptual systems. My point of view is opposed to emphasizing alterity and cultural differences, to amplifying differences between worlds, and to viewing anthropology as the science of other people, of other ontologies and metaphysics. From my perspective, ontology designates a theoretical and empirical orientation that consists in observing, describing and comparing beings, presences, individuals, and existences in and through their diverse situations. Therefore, in the sense in which I use the word, ontology is not an anthropological object, but a method of anthropological observation (Piette 2015 b).

Ethnography as methodological relationism

There is a relation that I have not mentioned, the one that the researcher, the ethnographer, develops with the people he observes in the course of his fieldwork. In this case, the relation is central to the method: ethnographic relations, fieldwork, encoun-

ters with people, participation in their activities to the point of becoming one of them. This sort of fieldwork sanctifies the researcher's relationship with the people he observes: the relational influences in his ethnographic position, the importance of empathy or researcher sensitivity.

In fact, social anthropologists very often, and more and more explicitly, assert the importance of the "interactional" interplay in their fieldwork, which is the very foundation of ethnography. They present ethnography exclusively as a matter of relations, as a social encounter (for example Denzin 1970). From this perspective, the ethnographers do not look for an exterior position: they immediately acquire a place in the indigenous social sphere. It is directly on the basis of the researcher's assignment to one place or another that he identifies local classifications and the spacing of positions and relations. He can accept, reject or change these definitions himself and attempt to get others to accept his own definition of his role. The people develop their own idea of the researcher and attribute to him a role which serves as the basis for their reactions. He himself attributes meaning to the verbal and nonverbal actions of others and discovers meaningful categories through a constant process of redefinition. Instead of being a source of distortion to be eliminated, the researcher's way of perceiving things is incorporated into his fieldwork, and is an integral part of the relational interplay. That is ethnography: interactionism in action, methodological relationism. The opposite of this is, on the one hand, the setting aside of the correlationist interplay (without dissociating the subject and the object), and, on the other hand, the independent reality of the object of study, the human being, the individual, these constituting the aim of a non-relationist anthropology.

As we have seen, the critique of relationism implies breaking away from the ethnographic focus on relations and interactions as abstract wholes constructed by the researcher, for example social relations, various exchanges, activities between individuals, etc. It also implies no longer theoretically conceiving of the individual as a relational entity engaged in *one* action or *one* activity. It is rather a matter of favoring a conception of the individual in successive situations, as a singular entity that is never reducible to any one of these situations. From a methodological point of view, this implies shattering the "myth" of participant observation and carrying out the required individual intrusion. More than any other method, even though it asserts the importance of getting close to the experience and aiming for exhaustiveness, ethnography deserves criticism. First of all, contrary to its principles of proximity and exhaustiveness, it constitutes a process of uncontrolled data loss, from the observation phase to the writing phase, with its particularly regrettable selection from field notes. Next it is always getting bogged down in relational problems between the observer and the observed. By being true to its principles of proximity and exhaustivity, it could advantageously turn itself into radical exercises in direct, filmed or photographed observation of existence in the strictest sense: as the continual experience of moments and situations.

And what if the question were changed and became: what are human beings like when they are or are not engaged in relations, with a given set of people and then with

another? Anthropology would then become the close observation of concrete existences and of the details within them. Particular individuals and existences would then constitute analytical choices to keep hold of through every stage of research, particularly from the note-taking stage to the writing of the final text. Following and observing individuals in details are of course very different from the life stories and biographies methods. The anthropologist would then stay out of the individual's activities. But this of course does not prevent him from speaking to him and asking questions.

Separated individuals and phenomenography

As I have explained, a relationist perspective is one that considers that there are only relations, and that everything is explained by relations. A relationist theory focuses on the “between individuals”, and a relationist method places importance on relational interplay for the production of knowledge.

My position is therefore not relationist. It could be called a “human-oriented anthropology”⁴. It considers that there are only individuals in a situation, who are of course able to act and speak to other individuals. It clearly emphasizes the singularity of individuals beyond their relational position, either in an ongoing situation or as a sum of trajectories. This is not to say that individuals' relations, or *exo*-actions, are not described and observed, even subtly in the complexity of their heterogeneous simultaneity at moment *t* and on the basis of their individual existence as it develops over time. What is important is not so much relational complicity and interactional interplay, but rather the observation of the individual. What is this human being really like at moment *t* and afterwards? This is the question of an anthropology that aims for realism. It asserts the existence of a reality to describe, independent of the observer, and does not emphasize a relationist method, as is the case with ethnography. I do not reject this, but I would only make it a point of departure, an exploration of the context. The important thing is to say what this man is really like, at a given moment. Whereas during field studies, the observation work is often circumscribed to a space, event or specific activity, phenomenographic attention (I prefer this word to ethnographic) orients the observer towards a different perspective: following one person throughout his days – this can be one or a few days, even several weeks –, and preserving the continuity of moments in the final text, as close as possible to field notes. The methodology of following exists, and it is called “shadowing”: “The researcher follows a person as his or her shadow, walking in his or her footsteps over a relatively long period of time, throughout his or her different activities, to collect detailed-grained data” (Meunier and Vasquez 2008:168). This method is for instance widely practiced in organizational studies, as indicated in the summary book by Barbara Czarniawska, a

⁴ Echoing object-oriented ontology: see Harman (2009) and Bryant (2011).

management studies specialist (Czarniawska 2007). But the method is still very marginalized in the social sciences, all the more if the shadowing takes place outside of professional or public spaces, entering into individuals' private, domestic spheres. Focusing on an individual is of course possible with a movie camera, even desirable, but certainly only for shorter durations⁵. It is intrusive and uncomfortable to say the least, but anyone who practices it comes away rich in discoveries and available data.

It seems to me that researchers do not give enough consideration to the heuristic power of keeping notes or transcriptions of recorded video in the text, both for obtaining accurate descriptions and for understanding the act of existing. When the focus is placed on the individual (of course in relations), on one individual at a time, the anthropologist will observe: elements linked to that which is relevant in the relations, to that which is directly visible, and also to that which is not relevant (exo-actions), strata that concern traces of past relations, such as social trajectories (endo-relations), as well as strata that give a glimpse of relevant non-relational elements, leftovers and leftovers of leftovers. This observation is based on the focusing on this same individual for varying periods of time, identifying modalities, modulations, modalizations of intensities, of presence, of absence. This focusing is an observation, one that I would say is external, and as accurate as possible. This has something of the nature of realist ontology. The observation's point of departure, the "basic particular", as Strawson would say, is a given individual present in a situation. He is visible and tangible, observable and introspectable. I do not view this sort of observation of an individual as relationist operations, like those we saw in the ethnographic work, which can remain a necessary preliminary, before shadowing, depending on the needs of the chosen research themes.

But what is an individual? I will explain the basic idea behind this methodology. There are individuals, in groups or alone, that anyone could define and designate as such. It is not a question of considering subjectification or individualization to social contexts of "modernity". They are empirical units, "human beings" all over the world. Dissected, so to speak, an individual certainly reveals cultural elements, social trajectories and relational experiences. But his volume, as I have said, reveals other elements. Every individual is different from the other individuals that sociologists designate as belonging to the same shared social group, that ethnologists or social anthropologists attribute to the same shared cultural group, that biologists classify as one species. This singularity is not what is grouped and designated as shared, relevant and solicited by members of the group, activity or interaction, nor is it what is isolated at moment t in the individual's life. Leftovers, I would say, are important. Iris Murcoch's question cannot but speak to me: "Why should attention to detail, or belief in its inexhaustibility,

⁵ I am thinking of the work of François Cooren and his team: for example a video recording of a brief that a manager holds with his team before a meeting (without the manager) and debriefing after the meeting (with the manager), and the analysis of aspects of discourse as they travel through time and space (Cooren et al.: 2007).

necessarily bring paralysis, rather than, say, inducing humility and being an expression of love?" (Murdoch 1997:88).

An individual, who can be defined by a proper name and a demonstrative reference (that person, this person) possesses his own singularity, which is made up of infinite characteristics (that would be impossible to add up), and of course also contains permanent elements such as genes, relatively stable elements like physiological characteristics, social inclinations or psychological tendencies that are gradually formed over years of life. But this singularity is also made up of circumstantial details, unimportant gestures like words spoken here and now. Within this concrete reality, we will therefore not just focus on that which is shared with others or relevant to an activity, or stable in a continuity; we must not exclude the always abundant "accidents". A volume of being detected over the course of a few moments is a complex presence of actions and feelings, of more or less visible traces of trajectories, of various minor thoughts and gestures, all mixed together, changing and qualifying each other.

The individual, the numerical unit, is associated with an identifiable corporeal continuity but also with a mental continuity, and he is able to feel it over time more than anyone else. If he experiences joy, it is he who feels his joy, that specific joy. Someone else could not feel it for him. A central element of this singularity is the transition into death, which no one can undertake for someone else. At most, one can give support to someone else as they die. We are each "numerically one" from birth to death. This is what Martha Nussbaum calls, after Stanley Cavell, the principle of "separateness" (Nussbaum 1990:223). She stresses that each person's consciousness is distinct from others. What X eats will not nourish Y. The hunger or pain felt by a given person reminds him that it is he who is suffering and not someone else. Even in symbiotic relationships, the separation of individuals is not overcome. What is it like to have to be this entity capable of recognizing himself, feeling his own existence?

This is why I cannot associate human beings exclusively with relationality, since in my view, this is always integrated with, or covered by, an existential solitude. What Donald Winnicott has written, from another perspective, on "the capacity to be alone" (Winnicott 1984:29) or "not communicating" seems to me to be very true. It emphasizes the young child's ability to withdraw, to be alone. . . in the presence of his mother, and supports the idea of a kind of essential solitude, "the permanent isolation of the individual". "At the centre of each person is an incommunicado element", he writes. And even this: "Each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating" (Winnicott 1984:187). Moreover, I have always thought that each person's minor gestures, without having anything to do with the concerns of the relation in progress, are the sometimes minute expression of this partial but permanent withdrawal from others, from their concerns.

In this exercise of focusing on one individual, it is not primarily the fear, happiness or attention of person X that interests me, but rather X himself, as a fearful, happy or attentive person, with his states of mind, mixing them together, qualifying and mitigating them, and continuing towards other heres and nows. As far as existence is con-

cerned, it is not only actions or emotions that are at play, but also ways of being present while performing or feeling them, and of subsequently carrying on. Is not there indeed a difference between existence and experience? The experience of refers to a moment, an activity, a relation to. It implies to look for relevant elements of this experience of (sickness, power, music, etc.). Existence modifies the focus on the existent being who lives this experience, and on his entire volume of being. This point of view allows to observe that the human being is more than just this experience at the moment he experiences it, and goes on through other activities after this experience.

Observation alone is therefore not enough. Anthropology of existence, or let us call it existential anthropology (Piette 2015 a and b), also conducts very introspective interviews, with the goal of finding out how the individual was at a given moment, what his thoughts and emotions were, with the aim of getting a close view of his feelings, which may be detached more or less, or not at all. There are various ways of completing this information: particularly the use of diaries, which the researcher could ask to be kept, or which might already exist in all of its possible forms, and be made available to the anthropologist, who is then able to track variations in states of mind. It is also possible for the humans to record themselves in various formats, if the observer has asked them to observe and record each other. When people self-observe in this way, it is important that they then immediately note their feelings and states of mind (Rodriguez and Ryave 2002). Investigating volumes of being is certainly not easy. It is also possible for a person to specify – for example based on photo or film images that constitute an exceptional resource – what states of mind they were in, according to the pace of the situation, according to their gestures, words, and what direction they were looking in.

An artist or teacher, a child or an old man, in Paris or in Tokyo: what are they like, as they exist here, then there, when they are in a given situation, then in a different environment, when they are conscious of, or relate to, this or that thing? Of course, the complicity generated during introspective interviews is obviously a useful resource. But it seems to me that these questions make it possible to go beyond a too exclusively relational perspective focused on the being *in* the world, *in* an environment, and conscious *of*. Let us say it again: what is each person like in a situation with others, when he speaks or when someone speaks to him, when he shares or does not share, adjusts or does not adjust, when he has expectations and obligations, when others have expectations, their own expectations, various obligations that have an effect on him? In short, what is each person like within and alongside relations? Between presence and absence, activity and passivity?

Other complementary methodologies will be increasingly used: various sensors and detectors, embedded cameras. In any case, it is not so much the relationship established with the individual that is important, but rather the results supplied by this equipment. In the film, what is important to me is not so much the relationship between the cameraman and the person, but rather the document that makes it possible to watch and to listen again. This is not to say that there is no need for relational pre-

liminaries prior to filming and photographing, but the knowledge sought does not concern the relationship built between the filmer and the filmed. And as I have said, when the perspective is relationist, it is not unusual for the ethnographic content, with or without any film intermediation, to consist of an account of relations between the ethnographer and the people, saying nothing about the attitudes, words and gestures of this observed people. Refining the observation experiment would require the anthropologist not only to watch the individual over a longer period of time, observing his continuous presence in the interlinking of situations, and to question him of course, but also – and this is very important – to keep all of his notes without selecting and filtering some of them. Being faithful both to real time and to field notes enables the researcher to examine other elements, peripherals, leftovers, to give them a central theoretical place, and to rediscover the presence of human beings in the process of performing actions, or what I would call existing.

What, therefore, is phenomenography? An initial task could consist in an exploration of all that can happen in a situation or context, while also conducting a polyfocal observation that establishes a hierarchy between the concerns of meaning. After, the real observation work begins, with a focus on separated human beings, their actions, gestures and states of mind from situation to situation. As I have already said, this observation takes care not to immediately eliminate secondary, peripheral or irrelevant elements. By the same token, it endeavors to identify as many details as possible in human presences, particularly the presence of an element and of its opposite. Depending on the anthropologist's objectives, the observation may combine the continuity of existence and modes of presence with a detailed focus on particular moments, in order to understand the continuity of situations. The goal is to achieve a balance between closer or more distant perspectives, in order to write a description of the existant, not just of one activity, situation or event. The final text offers a referential presentation that incorporates indications of presences, through images or transcriptions of conversations. An expression that conveys all of these points of view is: continuous, polyfocal, auto-hetero-mono-liminal observation:

- “Liminality” means observation up-close, alongside, at the threshold of the person, with the naked eye, while taking notes, or with film, photographs, or even a webcam
- “Mono” designates one existent person at a time, without ruling out repeating several times, for instance at regular intervals, the exercise with the same person or with other selected persons according to various criteria.
- “Continuous” means focusing on the existence, without stopping on one activity.
- “Polyfocal” designates the change of scale that is needed to capture the action and the leftovers, the continuity and the moments.
- “Auto” indicates an autographic exercise on the part of the researcher, or carried out by the person observed.
- “Hetero” specifies the fact of detailing the action sequences and states of mind.

None of this goes without saying. In social-science ethnography, the rejection of the realist position prevails, as well as an emphasis on acquiring knowledge through the researcher's relationship with the people being studied. As we know, it is often a question of participation, sharing and relations, and this rules out all knowledge independent of the researcher, his presence and the place he occupies. Furthermore, this phenomenographic position, which detects details in a human presence, obviously places a great deal of emphasis on the absence or the passivity in the presence and not only on the action (see Piette 2015 b). This clashes with the politically engaged habitus of many social science researchers. This anthropology ultimately seeks "universals" even though the social sciences attempt to explain diversities and transformations. Finally, the "micro" is taken into consideration in the social sciences, but it does not include individual singularity, even less the details of thought and the inner self. This is immediately denied in the name of access problems, or dismissed as a psychologizing excess, or because the objective is incompatible with the custom of flexible and participant methodologies.

With this focus on unique existences, looms an existential anthropology that can serve as a bridge between the descriptions of psychologists and sociologists, between literature and cognitive science. Anthropology would then be an observation of individuals, and a comparison between them, with transmittable methods, from the observation stage to the writing stage. And what if this were anthropology: an "anthropography" of individuals, to be compared according to various sociocultural characteristics, and of course also according to diverse conceptions of what constitutes a person in different parts of the world, but also according to psychological, generational or other characteristics. In my view, the method would have to play down the role of relational interplay in the data collection process, in favor of observations that are detailed, filmed, recorded on webcam, taking advantage of the latest advances in computer video technology, or even with the naked eye, focused on singular existences and not isolated activities. Anthropology would then be primarily the direct observation of individuals. Beforehand, at the exploration stage, an ethnography would of course sometimes constitute necessary groundwork, and afterward, in order to confirm and situate information, laboratory experiments could become important resources.

My ideal would be this: leave it up to the social sciences (sociology and social anthropology, fundamentally quite similar) to study social and cultural phenomena, and grant existential anthropology the specificity of being the empirical and theoretical science of human beings, separated individuals, their living, existent, present singularities with all their particularities, which are of course also social and cultural, but not only. In order to be general, this anthropology would compare individuals with one another, with other existing entities, themselves also present in the diverse scenes of life, as well as with other species that exist or once existed.

What if by avoiding relationism we were able to get beyond the dichotomy between individuals and relations, and we described individuals as well as possible, engaged in relations, according to varying relational modes and degrees, either activated and in the background, and also described them as they are or are not, feel or do not feel, related!

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