

COSMIC ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with human societies before and beyond the transcendental revolution, where, to paraphrase a golden line of Giambattista Vico: “in the early stages of humanity, what men did, the gods were doing”. In this discussion are presented abbreviated characterizations of some main features of the enchanted universe and its economic and political aspects. These are presented merely in the way of a general form. In the same vein, the brief ethnographic notices that here accompany the main theses are meant to be paradigmatic: they stand for an array of analogous reports from immanentist regimes the world around. This paper should not be taken as an exercise in cultural comparison, however; it is an undisciplined attempt at generalization.

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INTRODUCTION. THE WORLD-HISTORICAL CULTURAL REVOLUTION

In the early days of the Christian evangelization of the Fiji Islands, when an admiring chief said to the English missionary, “your ships are true, your guns are true, so your god must be true”, he didn’t mean what the current average social scientist would understand him to mean: that the notion of “god”, as of “religion” in general, is a reflex of the real-political order, a functional ideology designed to legitimate the secular powers-that-be. In this case, the apparent acknowledgment of the English god’s existence would be an expression, in the form of a religious imaginary, of the material force of the guns and ships. But the chief was saying something of the opposite, that the English ships and guns were material expressions of the god’s power – “mana” is the Fijian term – to which the foreigners evidently

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had some privileged access. Indeed, the Fijian for “true” (*dina*) is a predicate of mana, as in the common envoy of ritual invocations, “Mana, it is true”. What the chief said is that, as divinely endowed with mana, the English ships and guns were realizations of the potency of the English god.

The incident epitomizes the larger context and continuing motivation of this work: the radical transformation in cultural order that began some 2500 years ago, with effects still unfolding on a global scale. The axial civilizations that spread from their origins in Greece the Near East, Northern India, and China introduced a cultural revolution of world-historical proportions. The essential change was the translation of divinity to a transcendental “other world” of its own reality, leaving the earth alone to humans, now free to create their own institutions by their own means and lights. Until then people were surrounded by a host of spiritual beings – gods, ancestors, the in-dwelling souls of plants and animals, and others – who effectively created human culture, were imminent in human existence, and for better or worse determined the human fate. Although generally called “spirits”, these beings themselves had the essential attributes of persons, a core of the same mental, temperamental, and volitional capacities. Accordingly, they are often designated in these pages as “metapersons” or “metahumans”, and when alternatively referred to as “spirits”, it is always explicitly or implicitly under quotation marks, given their quality as non-human persons. By this same quality, they interacted with human persons to form one big society of cosmic dimensions – of which the humans were a small and dependent part.

This dependent position in a universe of more powerful metahuman beings has been the condition of humanity for much the greater of its history. All the world before and around the axial civilizations has been a zone of immanence. Here the myriad of metahuman powers were not only present in people’s experience, they were the decisive agents of people’s social action – the sources of their success or the lack thereof in all variety of endeavors from agriculture and hunting to sexual reproduction and political ambition. As Alan Strathern put the matter in an illuminating recent work on the transformation from “immanentism” to “transcendentalism”, the “basic immanentist assumption is that the capacity to achieve any worthwhile objective is dependent on the intervention of supernatural forces and metapersons. These constitute the fundamental origin of the ability to produce food, survive ill health, become wealthy, give birth, and wage war” (2019: 36-37). We begin to see what is at stake, institutionally and structurally, in the immanent/transcendent divide. With apologies to Marx and modern academics of similar economic convictions, all implicitly grounded in the assumptions of a transcendentalist world, the immanentist cultures were subject to “determination by the religious

basis” – that is, until religion went from an immanent infrastructure to a transcendent superstructure.

It probably goes without saying, but I had better say it anyway: what is at issue is how the immanentist societies are actually organized and function in their own cultural terms, their own concepts of what there is, not as matters “really” are in our native scheme of things. It will become all too evident that our native transcendentalist notions, insofar as they have been embedded in common ethnographic vocabularies, have distorted the immanentist cultures they purport to describe. Take the familiar distinction between the “spiritual” and the “material”, for example: it is not pertinent to societies that know all sorts of so-called “things”, let alone all sentient beings, as animated by indwelling spirit-persons. That this difference makes a fundamental difference of cultural order is the point of the book. In particular what passes for an “economics” or “politics” embedded in an enchanted universe is radically different from the concepts and stratagems that that people are free to pursue when the gods are far away and not directly involved. In immanentist orders, the ritual invocation of spirit-beings and their powers is the customary prerequisite of all varieties of cultural practice. Compounded with the human techniques of livelihood, reproduction, social order, and political authority as the necessary condition of their efficacy, the cosmic host of beings and forces comprise an all-around substrate of human action. The multitude of spirit-persons is synthesized with social action like an element in a chemical compound or a bound morpheme in a natural language. Or as said of certain New Guinea peoples, “nothing is undertaken without recourse to enchantments” (Lévy-Bruhl 1927: 343).

By contrast, there is the famous Weberian characterization of modernity as the disenchantment of the world. A large cottage industry of scholarly commentary has followed upon Karl Jaspers’ first formulations of an ancient “Axial Age” in the mid-twentieth century, but the consensus remains as the sinologist Benjamin Schwartz (1975: 3) expressed it early-on: “If there is nonetheless some common underlying impulse in these ‘axial’ movements, it must be called the strain toward transcendence” Henri Frankfort’s [1978 (1948): 34] reference to the “austere transcendentalism” of the ancient Hebrew God comes close to an ideal-typical description: “The absolute transcendence of God is the foundation of Hebrew religious thought”. He is “ineffable, transcending every phenomenon”. The spirits having left, humans now inherited an earth which had become a subjectless “nature”. The effect, as I said, was a veritable cultural revolution; or a S.N. Eisenstadt (1986: 1) said, a series of revolutions that “had to do with the emergence, conceptualization, and institutionalization of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders”. The sense of a drawn-

out, progressive development fits better with the recurrent persistence of immanent elements in all such transcendental regimes. Immanence continues in many forms, from “folk beliefs” in hinterland regions, or descents of divinity from heaven to earth in saintly apparitions and miraculous interventions, to ascents of humanity from earth to heaven in shamanistic seances and prophetic aspirations. There are still faith-healers and witches in our midst – even pure animists. Before I had completed this essay, *The New York Times* (20 October 2010: C20), citing a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center, reported that “60 percent of Americans believe one or more of the following: psychics, astrology, the presence of spiritual energy in inanimate objects (like mountains or trees), or reincarnation”. Yet for all the rear-guard resistance of immanentism, the evacuation of the high gods from the earthly city for the first time put culture under human control.

The revolution initiated by the human takeover of the culture has amounted to a total reordering, producing the differentiated spheres of “economy”, “civil society”, “government”, and “religion”. In culture as now constituted, these semi-autonomous domains are articulated with each other mimetically, metaphorically, and functionally. Note that as compared to the cultures of immanence, religion has migrated from the infrastructure to the superstructure, making it possible for “determination by the economic basis” to become the normal science of everyone from traditional historical materialists to neo-liberal economists – not to mention the rest of the American population. Indeed, David Graeber (2011) observed that the origins of the axial civilizations coincided with the development of coinage, even as coinage was itself associated with the wide spread of markets for provisioning the chronic warfare between the petty principalities that occupied the areas of axial formation. Such markets themselves would differentiate certain times and spaces as “economic”. But even more critical, the useful things that in immanent conditions had been created under the aegis of distinctive divine powers, that may have indeed embodied their own particular “spirits”, now become commonly comparable as “goods” on the basis of their monetary value. The same value might even be attributable to the “labor” – as distinct from ritual – that produced them. So does a human “economy” replace a system of prosperity by divinity.

Also specifically transcendental and as much taken for granted is a suite of familiar binary oppositions of ontological proportions: not only between the spiritual and the material, but also between culture and nature, natural and supernatural, subject and object, people and spirits. None of these distinctions would appropriately describe immanentist regimes. Here all significant material “things” are spiritual inasmuch as they embody animating powers with the characteristics of persons, hence the so-called “supernatural” is not distinguished from what we call “natural”, even as

“objects” are subjects, and people are spirits. Notice that in thus explicating immanentism by the oppositions of transcendentalism, I am guilty myself of the aforementioned scholarly disposition to subject the cultures of immanence to a vocabulary founded on inappropriate ontological premises. I am in something of the same predicament as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2019: 22) when, *faute de mieux*, he found it necessary to adopt the “very crude technique” of employing such binary oppositions as nature/culture and subject/object in discussing Amazonian cosmologies. For all its apparent intelligibility, this procedure, he wrote, “carries the obvious risk of distortion, since it is unlikely that any non-modern cosmology can be adequately described either by means of such conceptual practices or as a simple negation of these (as if the only point of existence were to stand in opposition to our oppositions)”. Probably the best precaution is to follow the Arthur M. Hocart’s anthropological golden rule: Do not separate what Others join; do not join what Others separate. Or to formulate it positively into something like the ethnographer’s credo: Do unto Others as the Others do unto themselves.

Not that the axial civilization literature has been too enlightening on what the transition from immanentism to transcendentalism actually entailed. Some are tempted to suppose a priori that whatever they take to be the salient characteristics of the axial civilizations, the pre- and non-axial societies must be characterized by the opposite. So, for example, since the axial religions distinctively focus on the ethical behavior and life-after-death of the individual – a kind of soteriological individualism – the immanentist societies are distinctively “social”, concerned with group prosperity in this world as opposed to individual salvation in the next. Even ignoring the common reports of individual competition for status, as among Melanesian big-men or Southeast Asian headhunters, or the Amerindian vision quests that determine an adolescent’s lifelong fate, there is the universal practice of individual persons invoking the meta-person powers-that-be for success in hunting, agriculture, love-making, war, curing, birthing, trading, esoteric knowledge, or whatever else life-giving may be wanted. In this connection, it is difficult to imagine a more inappropriate label for the pre-axial condition than “mundane”, which so many axial scholars favor. Apparently they have in mind a heavenly/earthly opposition, ignoring that it also entails a spiritual/secular one – which would leave the “mundane” immanentist peoples bereft of the meta-person powers on whom their existence depends. For people living in an immanentist regime, where nothing is undertaken without enchantments, existence is anything but mundane. If you Google “mundane”, the consensus definition – including verbatim that of the Cambridge English Dictionary – is: “1. Lacking interest or excitement, dull; 2. of the earthly world rather than the heavenly or spiritual

one". And as an example of current usage: "Superman hid his heroic feats by passing as his mundane alter ego, Clark Kent". The immanentist society is boring as well as godless, while immanent in the transcendentalist society is a powerful god, Superman.

On the other hand, in addition to Alan Strathern's recent work on the subject, there have been some exemplary appreciations of the immanent-to-transcendental transition, though not necessarily by historians or sociologists in the mainstream of the axial scholarship. Benedict Anderson for one, writing independently of the axial literature on the transformation worked by Islam on traditional Javanese cosmologies. Anderson [2006 (1990)] explicitly recognized and effectively described the dominance of an immanentist world-view even under the important pre-Islamic Indic kingdoms of Mataram, Kediri, and Madjapahit. "Since Javanese cosmology made no sharp division between the terrestrial and transcendental world", he wrote, "there was no extramural referent by which to judge men's actions" (p. 70). Here was a system in which "divinity was immanent in the world" (p. 70), a "Power" endemic in the human habitat, even as it was concentrated in human society as the source of "fertility, prosperity, stability, and glory" (p. 32). "Manifest in every aspect of the natural world", the Power was present in "stones, trees, clouds, and fire, but expressed quintessentially in the central mysteries of life, in the processes of generation and regeneration". In this way it provided the "basic link between the 'animism' of Javanese villagers and the highly metaphysical pantheon of the urban centers" (p. 1). Enter then a "modernist Islamic cosmology" which reduces the immanentist sense of a Power suffusing the universe to "a divinity sharply separated from the works of His hand. Between God and man there is an immensurable distance ... The power is, in a sense, removed from the world since it lies with God, who is not of this world, but above and antecedent to it. Furthermore, since the gulf between God and man is vast and God's power is absolute, all men are seen as insignificant before His majesty..." (p. 70). It is rather in the immanentist condition that humans can approach and even appropriate divinity – in acts of hubris that, as will be seen presently, construct a society in which people are not reduced to insignificance by an unreachable Deity but empowered by their differential relations to the godly beings all about them.

The beginnings of the liberation of human from divine authority is one of the themes of a remarkable article by Peter Brown (1975) about the transcendental revolution, all the more remarkable because it was not about axial origins but the development of the High Middle Ages of Western Christendom in the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD. The setting is testimony to the uneven development of transcendentalism – a condition also common elsewhere – where for all the worship of a Deity who created

this world out of nothing, it remained populated for many centuries by a sometimes immanent God, as well as a panoply of saints, ghosts, witches, and “nature spirits”. Also by monks who were not technically human in so far as they lived the life of angels. As for angels, Peter Brown exemplifies “the intimacy and adjacency of the holy” in the early Middle Ages by the requirement that priests serving at the altar, if they needed to spit, had to do so on one side or behind them, “for at the altar the angels are standing” (p. 141). The presence of “the non-human in the midst of society”, Brown comments, “is available for all purposes” (p. 141). In Canterbury Cathedral in the year 1050 it was possible to use the same pool of water on the same day to baptize an infant as a Christian and immerse an adult to solicit a divine verdict in a judicial case. Starting from the condition wherein “if ever there was an area where the sacred penetrated into the chunks of the profane and vice versa, it was the ordeal” (p. 135), Brown takes the subsequent fate of the ordeal as emblematic of the displacement of divinity from the earthly city in Latin Christianity. In 1205, the Lateran Council undermined the ordeal by forbidding the use of the liturgical blessing that had sanctioned such sacrilegious acts of “tempting God. “Finally it was abandoned when it came under heavy clerical criticism as an ancient, vulgar, and lower class custom that had only been tolerated for centuries “as a concession by the Church to the hard hearts of the German barbarians” (p. 136).

As is often told, beginning in the eleventh century, Western Europe experienced radical demographic and institutional changes, ranging from major increases in population and agricultural productivity to new forms of community, the revival of Roman law, heightened royal authority, the advent of chivalry, vernacular literature, and much more. Not to neglect the new learning acquired from Arab and ancient Greek scholars: the latter, notably works of Aristotle, mainly transmitted through the former via Muslim Spain and Sicily. The effect was a philosophical upheaval affecting a variety of institutional fields. “The method of logical argument and analysis, and still more, the habits of thought associated with the study of logic, penetrated the studies of law, politics, grammar, and rhetoric, to mention only a few of the fields which were affected” (Southern 1984: 181-82)”. Of special interest for the present discussion is the potential impact of Aristotle’s *Categories* on an early medieval world in which the divine in various forms was still present and available to humankind. The *Categories*, R.W. Southern tells us, exercised an extraordinary fascination during the tenth and eleventh centuries. In principle, the nine Aristotelian categories could reconfigure the medieval ontology, inasmuch as Quantity, Quality, Relation, Position, Place, Time, State, Action, and Affection “were thought to exhaust the various ways any particular object can be regarded” (*ibid.*: 180). Note, however, that a fundamental category of the previous era is missing

from Aristotle's scheme of what can be said about any object: personhood, the indwelling soul or person that autonomously animates any such thing. The new age of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as Brown observed, saw "the emergence of significantly new attitudes toward the universe. Though very different from the modern view, it was 'modern' in being no longer shot through with human reference. Previously, a thunderstorm had shown either the anger of God or the envy of demons, both directed at human beings" (p. 141).

I am giving considerable space to Peter Brown's study because, in analyzing the transition to transcendence, he brilliantly exposes key characteristics of the immanentist condition, beginning in this issue of subject and object. As Brown observes, in the early Middle Ages, the intermingling of the sacred and the profane, in making non-human persons the inner quality of material things, blurred the borderline between the objective and the subjective at every turn. "it was", as Brown put it, 'a strangely subjective objectivity' (Brown 1975: 141). Rather than a relation of persons to things, the human relation to the world was largely one of person-to-person. Otherwise put, rather than a sense of objectivity, it was a condition of intersubjectivity. By comparison, the structural changes of the twelfth century dramatically altered the relations between the subjective and the objective. As Brown describes the transformation, by ridding human activities of their subjective, supernatural sources, matters such as reasoning, law, and the exploitation of nature take on "an opacity, an impersonal objectivity, and a value of their own which had been lacking in previous centuries" (p. 143). The point is well taken. It speaks to a critical structural complement of the transcendental revolution: the emergence of humanized institutions, once the divine is removed to an other-worldly reality. The human order becomes self-fashioning. "Political power was increasingly wielded without religious trappings. Government was what government did; rulers... settled down to exercise the power they actually possessed..." (p. 135).

This paper is concerned with human societies before and beyond this transcendental revolution, where, to paraphrase a golden line of Giambattista Vico: "in the early stages of humanity, what men did, the gods were doing". To follow in this [introductory] discussion are abbreviated characterizations of some main features of the enchanted universe and its economic and political aspects. These are presented merely in the way of a general form (Aristotelian sense). In the same vein, the brief ethnographic notices that here accompany the main theses are meant to be paradigmatic: they stand for an array of analogous reports from immanentist regimes the world around. This paper should not be taken as an exercise in cultural comparison, however; it is an undisciplined attempt at generalization.

1. THE ENCHANTED UNIVERSE

A Universe of Persons. Everything is, or could be, a person. Trees, winds, blowpipes, stars, animals, canoes, rivers, fire, shadows, centipedes, stones, rice, the sun: virtually anything humans encounter, even things they make themselves, have essentially and internally the same qualities of personhood as they do. The Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka) of Northwest America know a world “where people, animals, spirits, sneezes, twitches, oaths, ghosts, and even flatulence speak, and sometimes forbode” (Walens 1991: 9). This is not simply that everything is alive or animate. Common anthropological report has it that everything has a “soul”, although usually what is meant is an all around human subjectivity: these beings have many or all the cognitive, communicative, and volitional capacities of human persons. Conscious, intentional, willful beings, they are not only persons in their own right, they are their own persons. This metaperson multitude, moreover, far outnumbers the human population. The human community is a fraction of a society of cosmic dimensions, populated by a variety of other species of peoples with whom humans interact for better or for worse. Old school anthropologists used to talk of “the psychic unity of mankind”, but the societies they studied knew a psychic unity of the whole universe. Like the Katu of the Vietnam Highlands, inhabitants of a world where “subjectivity not physicality is the common ground of existence. Instead of physical laws, there are intersubjectivity and person-to-person relations. Instead of nature, there is society transcending the human/nonhuman divide, a sentient ecology positing a universe of communicating and interacting subjects” (Arhem 2016: 9) – except that they did not actually transcend the human/nonhuman divide, since there never was one.

Humans and Spirits co-exist in the Same Reality. Moving from his own Western, transcendentalist world to the Baktmen of the Mountain Ok region of New Guinea was for Fredrik Barth an existential revelation: “The striking thing is how empirical the spirits are, how they appear as very concrete observable objects in the world rather than ways of talking about the world” (Barth 1975: 129). This is the essence of immanence. There is no other world. Human persons and metapersons are co-present in the same world. They interact in daily life: “a woman sits in a corner of the house, whispering to a dead relative; a man addresses a clump of trees ... a father or a neighbor will break knotted strips of cordyline leaf, talking to the spirits to find out which one is causing trouble and why” (Keesing 1982: 33). Recording many such incidents in the life of this Solomon Islands people, Roger Keesing makes good on his ethnographic aim “to describe Kwaio

religion in a way that captures the phenomenological reality of a world where one's group includes the living and the dead, where conversations with spirits and signs of their presence and acts are part of everyday life" (*ibid.*: 2-3). The one reality encompasses both waking and dreaming, and the invisible as well as the visible. Too often ethnographers suppose that because the sprits are usually invisible they inhabit another reality – but by what ontological necessity other than our own? if something is invisible, it could still be there. (Most of what I know, like Timbuktu I have never seen; a lot, also, like the Civil War and George Washington. I could never see.) In any case, if the invisibility of spirits means they have their own reality, then humans are also part of it. By people's own invisible souls they are likewise endowed with powers of cognition, volition, and action: the very means by which they enter into relationships – as of exchange, aid in war, even marriage – with metaperson beings likewise so constituted. Dreams are for many peoples an important stuff their lives are made of, a privileged means of person to metaperson relations, soul to soul. Although the current revival of interest in animism is focused on the person-qualities of spirits, it should not be overlooked that humans have the same composition as animistic sprits: consisting, that is, of an invisible soul animating a physical body. Even as spirits are human, so are humans spirits – which is a condition of their existence in a universe of spirit-persons, and of some successes in dealing with it.

The Cosmic Polity. Human society is heteronomous. Of itself, it is neither complete, sufficient, nor self-determining. Humans are surrounded above, below and on earth by a myriad of metahuman beings – as before said, the in-dwelling persons of animals, plants, and natural features, gods, exalted ancestors, recent ghosts, masters of species, myriad demons, etc. – who, taken together, command the people's vitality, mortality, and prosperity. For their own part, the metahuman powers-that-be are organized in a more or less systematic hierarchy of higher and lower beings of greater and more limited potencies. The highest gods typically encompass the lesser spirits, both temporally, as they have been present from the creation, and geographically, as they occupy inclusive celestial, wild, or oceanic space. Yet since the lesser spirits such as the ghosts of recently dead relatives have the most intense contact with the population, it is often observed that the greater gods are by comparison of little import in peoples lives. Just as often, however, it appears that the report of a *deus otiosis* is misleading. Dinka of the East African Sudan say, "Divinity is one", where the term *Nhialic* or "Divinity" applies to the whole range of metapersons, from the highest power or "God" to the ancestors and totems of clans and lineages, down to individual animic beings. God is a distributed person: lesser spir-

its are instances of him, even as are also their own distinctive persons. All these metapersons, moreover, exercise the same divine power, also Nhialic, if over a progressively decreasing social range. Lesser spirits act with the referred potency of the highest one, the God, who as the fount of all powers is the most remote and the most present of spirits, even if the least often approached by the people He most powerfully affects. In its totality, the cosmic polity has the character of what Raymond Firth dubbed a “spiritual bureaucracy” (Firth 1970: 75).

The Political State is a Human Universal. Set on the scale of the cosmos, the society in which human populations everywhere participate has the essential attributes of the political state – even though amongst themselves the people may know nothing of the kind. Situated above and beyond the human civil society is a differentiated cosmic order of governing authorities, imposing and enforcing rules with punitive powers ranging unto death. Like the goddess Sedna, described by Franz Boas (1901: 189) as “the principal deity of the Central Eskimo. She has supreme sway over the destinies of mankind, and almost all the observances of these tribes are for the purpose of retaining her good will or of propitiating her if she has been offended”. Note that Inuit people themselves live in small groups of shifting membership without chiefs or any such institutional authorities – whom they would not in any case tolerate. Hobbes notwithstanding, the state of nature has the nature of the state. Among the corollary conditions, it follows that: There is No Such Thing as an Egalitarian Human Society. Even those peoples commonly so characterized have a profound experience of rule by metahuman authorities with powers of life and death over them. Inequality begins in cosmology. Hierarchy is prefigured in the cosmos before it is established in society. It also follows that contrary to the normal social science of religion as the mirror image of the political order, There is No Necessary Correspondence in Structure or Powers Between the Cosmic and the Human Polity. There are kingly beings in heaven where there are no chiefs on earth.

The Metaperson Infrastructure. An intensive quantitative study of the agriculture of the Achuar people of the Upper Amazon left Philippe Descola (1986) surprised to find that even the most skilled cultivators, who never failed to harvest a bountiful crop, were all the same impelled, at every stage of the process, to intone the secretly-acquired anent or ritual songs by which their souls enlisted the goddess Nunkui to make the gardens of her manioc children flourish. It was the exact opposite of the received anthropological theory that people invoke the spirit-powers when the undertaking is hazardous or the outcome is uncertain – as a preliminary to battle, for

example. This was certainly not true for the Achuar, but far beyond that, Descola discovered they engaged the spirits by these spells for just about everything of importance. The soul-to-soul enlistment of the relevant spirits was the prerequisite of virtually all significant cultural endeavors – an all-around cultural praxis. “The anent repertory is immense, Descola relates, “since there are series [of invocations] for every imaginable circumstance of public and private life” (*ibid.*: 198). Anent are necessary means of making war, hunting, fishing gardening, trading, training hunting dogs – who use anent themselves in the chase – attracting lovers, binding spouses, making pottery, making curare poison, and so on and on. If the theory were true that the spirits come into play where the human effort is vulnerable to failure, it is a wonder how a people so hapless as Achuar could have survived to become the prophets of this religion. Nor are the Achuar unique. As a matter of routine, “nothing is undertaken without enchantments” in other cultures of immanence, if by other means. In the New Guinea Highlands, it is sacrifice. “Sacrifice is the source of power, of the ability to beget children and to multiply, of vitality, health and peace. Agriculture, trade, the economy, the various cults – in short, all important practices – are centered on the offering of sacrifices” (Strauss 1990: 4). Here, then, is another commonplace theory that runs aground of practice in the cultures of immanence: rather than an ideal afterthought of social realities, “religion” is the precondition thereof.

1.1. *The Economics of the Enchanted Universe*

To probably put too fine a point on it, in speaking here of “economic” action, I refer the material provisioning of society, not a separately instituted “the economy”, and still less a distinctive form of rational utilitarian behavior, “economizing”.

The Spiritual Efficacy of Instrumental Action. The gods empower human powers – or if not, if they hold back, the yams will not grow. “Without the magical ritual, no native garden is made”, Reo Fortune writes of Dobu Islanders. “It is believed most strongly that without certain rites and forms of words, the seed yams will not multiply and grow ... Technology and mundane means are by no means despised, for they are often essential and are recognized as such, but it is uniformly believed that agricultural technology alone will never grow yams” (1933: 106, 198). Not that the ritual is the necessary condition of human technical skills as those involved in yam cultivation – the skills are easily learned and widely known – but that the metahuman powers are the condition of their efficacy. The ritual potentiates the technology. To allude again to the great

Vico, what men do, the gods are doing. This is the cardinal principle of cultures of immanence.

A Radical Synthesis: Ritual is “Work”. Garia people of New Guinea, Peter Lawrence (1984: 17-18) insists, “do not distinguish between physical labor and religion”. Before each stage of cultivation, the garden leaders “must perform rites to guarantee the success of purely physical work... [W]ork is composed of secular and religious techniques”. In cultures of immanence, human techniques and metahuman rites are inseparable. Neither in concept nor in category is “work” distinguished from rite – let alone differentiated and transactable as “labor”. In his famous study of Trobriand coral gardens, Malinowski wrote: “There is no word for ‘work’ in Kiriwinian. The distinction between technical or practical activity and magical activity cannot be made by the use of two mutually exclusive terms” [2002 (1935) vol. 8: 132]. But then, in an immanent regime, there are no “things” either.

Economics Without Things. There are no “things” as such. There are bodies, of course, but these are the external forms of the internal souls or persons which are the agents of bodily actions. Franz Boas [1964 (1888): 591] wrote of Central Inuit: “everything has its owner (*inua*) – or more literally, as *inua* means ‘the person of’ the entity to which it is appended, everything has its person. But then, in a universe of persons, the provisioning of society is an economics essentially without things. It has become almost commonplace to observe that immanent cultures lack the classic Cartesian opposition of subject and object, inasmuch as the significant non-human entities with which people are engaged are persons themselves. And besides, as the plants, animals, and materials at issue are under the control of greater persons with whom people must negotiate, so human life and livelihood are organized by intersubjective, person-to-person relations. Their economics is a sociology.

There is no “Production”. Again, not as such. From Simon Harrison’s brilliant ethnography of Manambu of the Middle Sepik, New Guinea: “What we would call ‘production’ are the spells by which the totemic ancestors are called from their villages by clan magicians to make yams abundant, fish increase, and crocodiles available for hunting; (1990: 47). More generally Philippe Descola (2013) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2019) have argued, apparently independently, that “production” in the Western sense of creative action (*poesis*) on the part of an heroic individual imposing his will on inert matter would have no meaning where the other of human praxis is likewise human. Here people are not the primary agents: they

do not create of the means of their existence, but receive them from their metaperson sources. Notwithstanding Marx's famous three-card monte of production, exchange, and consumption – which one has the priority? – in *A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy*, production is not the starting point of the economic process. It is rather a moment of exchange, observes Viveiros de Castro: exchange is the starting point, a transaction with the metahuman sources of human livelihood. As the New Guinea Highlanders say, if we sacrifice pigs to them, “they will make our gardens for us”, “they will and raise our pigs for us” (Vicedom and Tischner 1943-1948). For the spirits own the means of production.

The Spirits “Own” the Means of “Production”. Marcel Mauss put the general principle: the ancestors and the gods “are the real owners of things and goods of the world. With them that it was most necessary to exchange and most dangerous not to exchange ... It is from the gods that one must purchase and that the gods know how to repay the price of things” [2016 (1925): 79-80; 1956: 168]. Indeed, venality probably originated with divinity, as did inequality. Then again, in the matter of original proprietors it is widely reported in just such terms that humans are squatters on the domains of metaperson “owners”; or else that they hold their lands in usufruct or in fief from such powers. “The human ownership is decorative”, Valerio Valeri (2000: 307) wrote of Huaulu people of Indonesian Ceram. “The real owners are occult, ultimately beyond the grasp of human agency... Humans are always squatters... They never achieve total and unchallenged ownership of their land because that is possible only where the social order is conceptually isolated as a fully autonomous order of reality”. While such ethnographic notices explicitly speak of the spirits’ “ownership”, the concept as usually described is both more intimate socially and more expansive politically: more intimate, insofar the metahuman owner is typically the father or mother of the creatures and resources under its possession; more expansive in that its possession tantamount to dominion over the inhabitants of its realm – the spirits are rulers. Aspects of both are implied in Joanna Overing's (1983-1984: 342) discussion of the relations of Piaroa people of lowland South America to the cosmic owners of their environs: “Today, Masters of land and water own the domains of water and jungle... both of whom acquired their control over these habitations at the end of mythical times. The two spirits guard their respective domains, protect them, make fertile their inhabitants, and punish those who endanger their life forces. They also cooperate as guardians of garden food. The relevant point is obviously that the inhabitants of land and water are not owned by men”. However, gardening and hunting or fishing must then require some negotiation, not to mention deference, on the people's part – lest they become trespass and cannibalism.

Humanity v. Divinity. When Inuit people follow the numerous rules for respectfully treating the goddess Sedna's sea mammal children, she willingly affords them these critical means of their polar life. But if even one person breeches the taboos, Sedna has been known to withdraw the animals, threatening the whole community with starvation – unless a great shaman braves the perilous journey to her undersea home and cajoles her into releasing the seals, walruses, and the rest. At other times the shaman may have to harpoon her, like hunting a seal through the ice, to call off the ghosts of mistreated animals and humans who are tormenting the community. Such is the Inuit version of the existential predicament of an enchanted economics: not that resources are scarce, but that they are persons, typically the protected persons of greater persons, and accordingly in order to live, humans become cannibals. The great peril of Inuit life, it was explained to Knud Rasmussen, is that their food consists entirely of souls. “All these creatures that we have to kill and eat... have souls like we have souls, souls which do not perish with the body, and which therefore must be propitiated lest they should revenge themselves on us for taking away their bodies” (1930: 56). For all the techniques of mitigating the problem, of which the Amerindian reincarnation of animal souls is only one, cannibalism is a widespread condition of human existence, at one time a universal condition, even among peoples who profess to abhor it when it comes to eating other people. Add the issue of humans invading the domains of greater metaperson “owners”, killing and eating their animal creatures or mutilating the land to make their gardens. “Every act of hunting or gardening carries some risk”, relates Joel Robbins of the New Guinea Urapmin, for even the spirit owners of non-taboo ground or species will punish people who have “bothered” them by disobeying their version of “the laws” (Robbins 2004: 211). By “laws” Robbins means the many taboos governing people's relations to the land and its creatures. “Urapmin sum up the sense of taboos when they say people get into trouble because everything has a ‘father,’ using father (*alap*) in the sense of owner” (1995: 214). As with other Mountain peoples, the risk of eating the spirit owners' children is that, on the principle of *lex talionis*, they will see their own infants and pregnant women eaten away unto death by illnesses inflicted by the vengeful owners (Gardener 1987; cf. Valeri 2000).

Material Praxis is Largely Organized by the Differential Relations of Persons to the Metaperson Sources of Human Welfare. This is a general rule of an enchanted economics. Human practical activity is socially ordered by the spiritual values of persons and the material means of their existence. Of another Mountain Ok people, the Tifalmin, it is reported: “Each kind of food has mentally associated with it as one of its intrinsic

properties that categorical set of persons who may and may not eat it” (Wheatcroft 1976: 177). The effect is that 70 percent of all foods are taboo to some persons or other. Probably more than 70 percent of able-bodied young Iban men are away from their Kalimantan (Borneo) home for most of the growing period of the staple rice crop (Freeman 1970). In traditional times they were hunting the enemy heads that made crops and women fertile, and accordingly entitled the young men to marry. The slaves kept by Maori of New Zealand were prohibited from working in the important sweet potato gardens, for as the lowliest of persons they were inimical to the taboo of the field – which was itself is the goddess Pane, inseminated with seed tubers by her divine husband Rongomaraeroa [Johansen 2015 (1954)]. The principle that runs through the various economic contexts, the differential relations of persons to the metaperson powers, applies also to the politics of the enchanted universe, some notices of which are pertinent here.

1.2. *The Politics of the Enchanted Universe*

Human Political Power Is the Appropriation of Divine Power. In current academic theory, power ascends from earth to heaven, divinity being a celestial representation of human real-political authority. In the immanentist cultures, however, power descends from heaven to earth, human real-political authority being a terrestrial instantiation of divinity. The existence people aspire to control, their own welfare, they will have to gain from its metahuman sources; and those who are able to do so are, by virtue such powers, elevated among their fellows. Human political power is necessarily and quintessentially hubris, the appropriation of divinity in one form or another – including the human incarnations of immortal ancestral spirits in the Kimberley Desert of Western Australia. There the ethnographer Helmet Petri [2011 (1954): 99] met an old “medicine man” who was widely regarded in as the ancient Dreamtime hero, Kaluna, the source of the seasonal rains which made the people’s foraging existence possible. The old man was “an immortal and [an] incarnation of Kaluna;” he had always existed and would never die. Among a nearby people, Petri’s colleague Andreas Lommel [1997 (1952): 18] met similar elders who were in the habit of speaking of the ancestral heroes (*wonjina*) in the first person: “When I came in primeval times and left my image behind on the stone” – referring to painted image whose annual renewal brings about the rains. This repainting was the privilege of the oldest living man of the area, the closest to the ancient heroes, whom he personated when doing the work: “I am now going to refresh and invigorate myself. I am now repainting myself so that there will be rain”. The African divine kings of Frazerian fame who,

by incarnating the god, could exercise control over nature, particularly over rain, had nothing in this regard over the old men endowed with sacred knowledge and ancestral being who did as much for Australian hunters and gatherers.

Political Leaders are “Cosmic Persons”. Peter Lawrence (1984) in speaking of Garia of New Guinea coined the phrase “cosmic persons”; Robert Brumbaugh (1987) writing of Feranmin also of New Guinea formulated the appropriate principle, that “men defend society through their ability to control or embody the forces that lie beyond” (1987: 31); and William Thalbitzer (1909) provided the exemplary account of the Greenland Inuit shamans who “after a long period of training and initiation have acquired a special capacity to enter into communication with the gods... and the whole spiritual world”. The greatest of Greenland shamans, the one “who approaches nearest to the divine powers and hence reflects their authority... is in fact the greatest man in his own district” (1909: 448). Human power is a referred divine power. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim argued that any positive ritual is a veritable sacrilege, “for a man cannot hold commerce with the sacred beings without crossing the barrier which should ordinarily keep them apart” [1995 (1912): 338]. Leave aside the sacred/secular opposition, which is hardly an elementary form but rather a transcendentalist doctrine, not acceptable here if only because by their souls people themselves have spiritual standing. But take the implication that people in effect usurp divine power and thereby gain authority in society. Shamans and initiated elders in native Australia, Montagnais hunters, New Guinea clan leaders and big-men, providers of feasts of merit in Southeast Asian hinterlands, successful Toraja headhunters, Dinka Masters of the Fishing Spear, Kachin and Fijian chiefs, African kings: all these and other such elites are distinguished by the intimations of divinity that are the grounds of their authority.

Wealth Follows Power, Not Power Wealth. So observes Benedict Anderson [2006 (1990): 53] in regard to the great Javanese kingdoms of old. “The vast wealth that the great rulers of the Javanese past are described as possessing is always an attribute of Power, not the means of acquiring it”. The principle holds whether issue is the accumulation of wealth, its strategic distribution, or its conspicuous consumption. True that anthropologists (myself included) have often thought otherwise. It was a settled opinion of the last century that in “tribal” societies generally, the redistribution of accumulated wealth by crafty or chiefly men created their so-called “prestige”. Maybe the failure to comprehend that it actually worked the other way around was because, as Andrew Strathern suggested of Hagen

(New Guinea) big-men he knew, the people had already lost to Christian missionization “a multitude of sacred and magical appurtenances which played an important part, from the people’s own perspective, in giving them the very access to wealth on which their power depended” (1993: 147). At least equally likely, however, the problem has consisted in our own transcendentalist perspectives, anthropocentric to the core, always prepared to take spiritual origins of wealth as the people’s fantasy – however “indubitably real for the actors themselves” (*ibid.*: 149). Ironically it was the early German missionaries who were able to report that for Hageners the rich were ‘men who have intercourse with spirits’” (Vicedom and Tischner 1943-1949: 766). Nor was the attribution of spiritual power an after-the-fact validation of the big-men’s material achievements. As in other Melanesian societies, to become a rich big-man required a serious preliminary study of the necessary “multitude of sacred and magical appurtenances”. Consider the young Kwaio man, Maenaa’adi, of whom Roger Keesing relates that he was learning genealogies, ancestral lore, and magical powers, thereby “acquiring not only an intellectual command of his culture, but powerful instruments in pursuing secular activities as a feast-giver and leader as well”. It is no surprise, Keesing notes, that Maenaa’adi “has begun to be a formidable political presence in his neighborhood cluster of descent groups” (1992: 206). Of course, accumulating and distributing goods and giving feasts are not the only human political accomplishments that the gods are doing. To return to Anderson on Java: “power is not the product of organization, wealth, weapons or anything else – indeed [it] precedes all of this and makes then what they are” (2006: 23).

The politics of Knowledge. Not that rational, empirical, instrumental knowledge is lacking – just that it is commonplace and by itself insufficient to grow crops, make children, kill enemies, or otherwise sustain people or prosper them. Instrumental knowledge is devalued by comparison to the spells, names, traditions, etc., which give access to the metahuman sources of people’s welfare. This esoteric spiritual knowledge, moreover, is differentially acquired and closely guarded, as it is the means of political authority. “Within the total complex of knowledge claimed [by Garia] to have been derived from the deities, they regard sacred knowledge as paramount... Purely secular techniques represent a low level of intellectual achievement that is expected of virtually everybody without any particular effort” (Lawrence 1984, p. 149). Those who have had training in this esoteric knowledge are “‘men who know’... they will understand how to get heaven and supernatural beings to co-operate for the common good” (*ibid.*: 241). As in the case of Inuit shamans or Hagen big-men, they will get the social credit.

Epistemological inequality is political inequality. Apart perhaps from familial relations, it is the original inequality.

The Centralization of Hubris; The Chief. The Kachin chief of the Burma Highlands “is a person apart... His presence makes tangible to all the mythic reality of the totem and ancestors. He is ‘their presence’” (Leach 1954: 174, 108). Chiefs in the imminent zone are persons apart by virtue of their privileged or exclusive relations to the godly sources of spiritual powers. Accordingly, they are the singular conduit of divine benefits and terrors to the collectivity – lineage, clan, village, territorial realm – over which they are installed. Chieftainship is the centralization of hubris, at least as concerns human appropriations of the highest metahuman powers. Through a series of ancestors of the same name, the Kwakiutl chief inherits the divine powers (*nawalak*) bestowed on the founder of the lineage (*numaym*) by an original animal-person deity. Thereupon, armed by ancestral *nawalak*, the chief enters into a competitive politics of amassing more. In exploits of war and marriage he attempts to capture the names of rival chiefs and the ceremonial and material benefits they confer. Among the life-giving effects are more salmon. “The chiefs are the assemblers, the concentrators and managers of supernatural powers. The first ancestor began the task and each generation repeats it... The human chiefs go out into alien realms to assemble *nawalak* and to concentrate it in the ceremonial house. Once they become centers of *nawalak* the salmon come to them” (Goldman 1975: 198-199).

The chief recreates, in and as a determinate human collectivity, a meta-human hierarchy of life-giving and death-dealing powers.

The Chief’s Many Bodies. If medieval European kings were restricted by monotheism to merely two bodies, the Kwakiutl chief and his counterparts elsewhere have many more. Incarnating their chiefly predecessors, especially the founder of the line, as well as the body politic, Kwakiutl, Fijian, or Maori rulers could recount the historic doings of them all in the first person singular. A Maori chief of the Ngatiwatua tribe tells how he (a.k.a. the tribe) took over the land of Hokianga, formerly that of an enemy people: These people murdered “my ancestor, Taureka”. At that time “my home” was the land of Muriwhenua, but “I” left because of this murder. Later “I tried to revenger myself and Hokianga’s people were defeated and I took possession of the country... and I lived in the country because all the people had been killed” (Johansen 1954: 36). All these doings of the narrator took place before he was born – in effect, then, after he had died, often. The chief is a multiple and eternal individual.

There will be more to say about the politics of the enchanted universe, but some general conclusions about the anthropology of it are already possible. For one, under an immanentist regime, culture is not specifically a human thing; it is a cosmic universal. The same mode of life, more or less elaborated, is distributed among the various species of persons throughout the cosmos. In any case, humans are not the authors of their culture; it is created and controlled by the gods and other meta-human beings. But more generally, these other denizens of the universe live by the same cultural means as people. In their own spaces, animals, the dead, the gods, and other metapersons are often known to have such as houses, chiefs, and kinship, to hunt or cultivate, in short to live as humans live. In Siberia, shadows on the cave wall have their own houses and hunt for a living (Bogaras 1904-1909). Yet even where it is not specifically reported that non-human persons have the institutional repertory of humans, they interact with people on common cultural premises. Yams in Trobriand gardens may not have their own chiefs, but they listen to the garden magicians' incantations and act appropriately – not as a conditioned response, a matter of training, but of understanding speech as humans do. People are thus engaged with all kinds of spirits in a variety of ways based on their shared cultural understandings. It is only when divinity been exiled to an “other world” do humans presume to make and have culture on their own – in principle. Only when the gods are no longer making what the people make, do people on their own create “the economy” by relations of utility, even as they create “government” by rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and “religion” by rendering unto God what is God's.

Lastly, a word on anthropological methods. It should be clear enough that, though I have not always succeeded, I have tried to explicate the cultures at issue by their own immanentist premises – what used to be known as “the natives' point of view” and sometimes now as “reverse anthropology”. I have tried to unfold the people's cultural practices by means of their own onto-logic. Implied is a criticism of a lot of received ethnography for a misleading conceptual apparatus composed of nearly equal parts of transcendentalist equivocation and colonialist condescension. The effect is an anthropology which disfigures both the discipline and the culture so described by maligning the people's mentality as a mistaken sense of reality. Not that our field-workers are badly intentioned. On the contrary, the great majority are committed to the welfare of the people they study – virtually by vocation; it comes with the intellectual territory. But a too common effect of even the best work is to reduce the meaningful relations of a culture of immanence to the status of convenient fantasies of the objective real-

ity – of a world actually without such gods – thus making of their culture a fictional representation of ours.

Sir Raymond Firth, for example. The corpus of his work on the Polynesian island of Tikopia is one of great all-time achievements of anthropology. By its explicit comments on Tikopian illusions of the presence of the gods in humans, canoes, temples, weapons, and tools – as the embodiments (*fakatino*) or vessels (*waka*) of the god, among similar expressions – Firth’s work is notable also for its repeated exposure of the islanders’ culture for what it really is – by our lights. Consider the contradictions of this description of an important rite having to do with net-fishing: “Then came the symbolism so characteristic of the Tikopia religion: the fiction that certain persons were for the time being deities in the flesh”. The so-called symbolism concerned two women whose role was to carry the baskets that received the fish tributes due to two important goddesses named *Pufinema*. As Firth continues: “When darkness fell the two women went down to the beach and there personified the goddesses, receiving the tribute that was their due from the fishermen”. He then quotes a Tikopian on this characteristic “fiction” ““They have become *Pufinema*, these who have gone with the baskets”” (1967: 400). Similarly, of a group of women preparing a sacred oven during the semi-annual renewal rites, the Work of the Gods, “It is believed by the Tikopia that these women are under the protection of the *Akua Fafine*, the female deity who is the tutelary genus of women”. But in shifting from “believed” and “under the protection” of the goddess, Firth also says “in fact, they are actually identified with her”. And in confirmation, the Tikopian explanation: ““They who are doing the work there, it is she”” (*ibid.*: 143). On other important ritual occasions Firth had it from the god’s mouth to his ear. As the time when, by Firth’s description, the principal Tikopia chief “is believed to be the god in person”, and the chief then explains to him, “I who sit there am him [the god]: he has come to sit in me” (*ibid.* p. 157). All these identity-subtracting expressions – they are “believed” to be the goddesses; he is the “symbol” of the god, the “representation” of the god, “under the protection” of the god, and the like: all these are so many transcendental equivocations of simply, the god – “I who sit there am him” (cf. Hocart 1970: 74).

We need a considerable rectification of ethnographic terms. “Belief” for a prominent one. Wyatt MacGaffrey (1986: 1) recalls Jean Pouillon’s bon mot, “It’s the non-believer who believes that the believer believes”. The ethnographic “believe” is often an ethnocentric reality-check on what the people actually know. Ian Cunnison so indicated many decades ago about

the East African Luapula people: “The important thing is that what the Luapula people say about the past is what they know actually happened in the past. Simply to say they believe it happened in the past is too weak, for they do not doubt it” (1959: 33). Anthropologists are prone to use the verb “to believe” – that the people “believe” in something – only when they don’t believe it themselves. Anthropologists don’t say “the people believe curare poison kills monkeys”; but they will say “the people believe the game father makes monkeys available for hunting”. Anthropologists don’t say, “the people believe that rain is needed for the crops to grow”, but they will say, “the people believe the gods make the rain” – in New Guinea by urinating on them. Another good candidate for oblivion is “myth”, referring to the narratives people regard as sacred truth and standard European languages thus devalue as fiction. Malinowski’s oft-repeated “mythical charter”, succeeds in rendering the constitutional doctrine of the clan or tribe unbelievable. Then there is all the folkling of indigenous peoples: their “folk medicine”, their “folk art”, their “folk biology” – the implication being that folk biology is to biology as military music is to music. Not to mention “folk music”.

The condescension is untenable. For all our self-fashioning in a natural world we share the same existential predicament as those who solve the problem by knowing the world as so many powerful others of their kind, with whom they might negotiate their fate. People are not the authors of their life and death, the forces of their propagation, growth and decline, their illness and their health, the plants and animals upon which they subsist, the weather upon which their prosperity depends. If people were such gods themselves, they would not want or sicken, and they would never die. The common predicament is human finitude.

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