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# The Shapes of Modernity: On the Philosophical Roots of Anthropological Doctrines

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Résumé de l'article

Malgré le fait que les anthropologues font de plus en plus de recherches sur et/ou dans les sociétés modernes de l'Occident, peu ont tenté de caractériser la culture moderne en tant que telle. Les philosophies de Descartes et de Leibniz, en particulier, peuvent être lues comme des expressions explicites de façons d'organiser l'expérience qui sont typiques de la modernité. Ces « formes conceptuelles » ont une grande puissance aussi bien dans l'expérience commune que dans les sciences sociales, y compris l'anthropologie. L'exemple présenté est celui de l'anthropologie des émotions ; l'alternative suggérée est celle de la philosophie hétérodoxe de Spinoza.

# The Shapes of Modernity: On the Philosophical Roots of Anthropological Doctrines

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**WARNING**

***The following notes are speculative, exploratory, provisional, and at times polemical. For an anthropologist living in a modern society to attempt to characterize that society in a general way, drawing on philosophy, of all things, can only be foolhardy. My reach cannot but exceed my grasp. There. You have been warned.***

While more and more anthropologists are conducting research on and/or in contemporary Western societies, little attempt has been made to characterize modern Western culture as such. The philosophies of Descartes and Leibniz, in particular, may be read as articulating ways of organizing experience that are typical of modernity. These «thought-forms» are still powerful both in everyday experience and in the social sciences, including anthropology. An example is drawn from the anthropology of the emotions; an alternative is suggested based on the heterodox philosophy of Spinoza.

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## *Introduction*

One of the distinguishing features of anthropology among the human sciences is its abiding concern for grasping specific phenomena within the context of the social and cultural wholes of which they are part.[1] This holism, while taking different forms in different national traditions, remains a distinguishing trait of the field: an anthropologist seeks to understand Nuer sacrifice or Inuit kinship not primarily as isolated occurrences or statistical regularities, but in terms of a broad cultural pattern (North American cultural anthropology), a social organization (British social anthropology), or a multi-levelled structure of homologies (Continental structuralism). The one culture area for which this kind of broad contextualization is the exception rather than the rule is the modern West, the civilization that produced the discipline itself. Here most of such anthropological studies as there are remain on the level of the small-scale phenomenon, rising at most to the level of a nation-state [2], but rarely if ever trying to characterize the civilizational whole. Where such characterization is attempted, it is almost always as a point of comparison for another, more distant whole: examples are Benjamin Lee Whorf's quite stunning analysis of Western

assumptions about time, space, and substance, produced as a counterpoint for his discussion of Hopi categories (Whorf 1956 [1939]), or Louis Dumont's writings on Western egalitarianism and individualism (1977, 1986), developed originally as a contrast to the hierarchy and collectivism of South Asian civilizations (Dumont 1970 [1966]). On the whole, however, the baseline structures of modern Western life and thought continue to be taken for granted in anthropological writings about particular modern phenomena.

The problem may be that modern civilization is too big and complicated to say much that is general about it, or perhaps it only looks that way to us who are inside it (as Lévi-Strauss suggests, 1958:415-416). Such coyness has its limits; now that so many are declaring themselves post-modern, it seems a good time to seek a general understanding of modernity as such, comparable to the understandings we seek to have of Nuer, Inuit, or South Asian societies.

Here, then, I will be arguing for the applicability of fairly classical anthropological models to our own civilization. We have our own "key symbols" (Ortner 1973), our own cultural postulates, on many levels of generality. I will be identifying a small number of "thought-forms", that is, powerful metaphors, sensory images, that seem central both in our common understanding of the world and, in a more distilled, highly saturated, or reduced form (in the sense of a reduced sauce), in the world-models of some modern philosophers[3]. I will be following out a couple of threads, presenting several thought-forms that emerged or, better, came to seem particularly compelling as part of a new way of living in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were articulated and announced in certain very influential philosophical works, and have continued to inform—to haunt—the discourse of the natural and human sciences since then.

In offering some elements of an anthropology of the modern West, I will be drawing primarily on explicit systems of thought, both in their most distilled and general form, usually called philosophies, and in the narrower and more object-specific forms that we call social or human sciences. My argument is that broad assumptions articulated in the philosophies of the seventeenth century continue to set the agenda for the human sciences of the late twentieth century, represented here by social and cultural anthropology.

## *Centuries of Transformation*

Definitions of modernity are problematic. For many, the modern is confined to this century, or even limited to the period since the "high modernism" of the 1920s. For others, it starts much earlier: in the history of philosophy, the "modern" period covers the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Schacht 1984:1); Robert Mandrou's *Introduction à la France moderne* (1974) runs from 1500 to 1640. Certainly, something remarkable happened in (or to) Western Europe during this last period. Except for a few local cases, wrote Karl Marx, "the capitalistic era dates from the sixteenth century" (1967 [1883]:715); according to Bertrand Russell, "the modern world, so far as mental outlook is concerned, begins in the seventeenth century" (1961:512). The seventeenth century saw the establishment of a number of ways of working and thinking that continue to define our lives. A key pattern was set by the basic rules of capitalism, which imply a certain kind of person: a relatively isolated individual cut off from life-long ties of kinship, vassalage, or place of residence, a free controller of his or her active time, which can and must be freely disposed of and sold to the highest bidder for twelve, ten, or eight hours a day. This free disposition of human activity — which is necessarily both physical and mental — is conceptualized as a free disposition of the body, understood to be an object like any other object, bodily strength and skill a commodity like any other. This whole pattern of personhood is profoundly different from the medieval one, in which bodies and souls are bound permanently in fealty in a single vast hierarchy of sacred power; or, for instance, from the Hindu pattern, in which the human person is essentially defined through membership in a larger family, caste, or species, and through constant necessary interaction and fluid interchange with other beings (Leavitt 1989). Despite the general assumption that modern life involves swift and constant change — an assumption that itself seems to be an important part of the ideology of modernity — the basic rules of daily life and the kind of person they imply are still those established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We still understand ourselves to be separate individuals who own our own bodily strength and skill, which we must sell to survive. Given this universe of assumptions, constantly reaffirmed by the daily activities, the conceptual options are fairly limited, and the major thinkers of the seventeenth century, still fresh with the vision of a new kind of

universe — what Descartes called *un nouveau Monde* — seem to have run through them systematically.

I am neither philosopher nor historian of ideas, and I will not attempt a fair characterization of the philosophical positions presented. My concern is not with the detail of these systems, but with their general thrust and, especially, their reception and influence. For this reason, I have not hesitated to cite secondary sources and general surveys.

I will be presenting two seventeenth century models that continue to guide our thinking, and so may be considered "orthodox": the mechanistic explanatory model launched by Descartes and the expressive interpretative model put in place by Leibniz. I will also be discussing an alternative to these, the philosophy of Spinoza, heterodox and odd enough that it is still hard for us to grasp. I will then briefly discuss the role of mechanistic and expressive models in a number of debates in anthropology, focusing particularly on the anthropology of the emotions.

## *Thought-Form 1: The Mechanical Universe*

The legend of René Descartes (1596-1650) is that of a knight, a warrior, who chose, with a soldierly singlemindedness, to seek the truth behind the world's appearances (Koyré 1944:43). The origin of this legend is in Descartes' own writings: in the *Discourse on Method* (1637) and at greater length in the *Meditations* (1642), Descartes tells how he found himself far from home in an isolated room in winter and closed himself up physically, comfortable but free from distractions. In this self-created sensory deprivation situation, he set about the exercise of questioning everything he knew. Anything that might be an illusion he rejected; his goal was to find what was left when everything else had disappeared. This process, resolutely followed, led to a revelation, a foundation for a new vision of the universe. He spent the rest of his life propagating his system, which according to Alexandre Koyré, was represented as "*the method*, that is, *the path*, the only path that can liberate us from error and lead us to knowledge of the truth" (Koyré 1944:31; my translation). Does it sound familiar, this story of a warrior-renouncer who (re)discovered the truth, potentially available to all, that priests and philosophers had obfuscated? Descartes is the Buddha of the West.

The content of Descartes' revelation, however, is very different from that of the Buddha. What he found was that after thinking away all that might not be real, that might be error or illusion or dream, he had eliminated the entire external world, but not the inescapable fact that he was thinking. That thinking was taking place meant that there was someone there to think—cogito ergo sum—and such clear and indisputable facts, facts that were universally available to anyone who cared to pursue such an inquiry, became the basis for a reconstruction of the universe along clear and indisputable lines.

The universe thus rebuilt was a dualistic one, containing the two substances of mind and matter, the latter characterized by the universal functioning of mechanical laws that could be most adequately expressed in mathematical form. This mechanical universe operates on what the philosopher Louis Althusser called "transitive causality", in which A simply and directly causes B, which causes C, and so on in a growing chain (Althusser and Balibar 1970 [1968]:186). The universe and everything in it are networks of this kind of straightforward causal relation—an enormous Rube Goldberg machine.

This mechanistic and deterministic view could not, however, extend to the initial datum of thought itself, or of the thinker as a mind: while bodies, including the human body, are mindless and mechanical, the soul is spiritual and free. For Descartes, however, the mind was essentially a reasoning thing, and reason was always the same: indeed, when we today speak of a Cartesian point of view, we are generally referring to the postulate of a universal and basic rationality. Both mechanical world and reasoning mind were, for Descartes, fully analyzable in terms of general and uniform laws.

> *Descartes, a mathematician above all, sees in diversity merely an apparent form of things through which we must seek to discern homogeneity. Diversity has no value in his eyes: his entire effort is directed toward resolving it into a uniform essence.*
>
> Boutroux 1881:174, note 1; my translation

## *Thought-Form 2: Essence and Expression*

The work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) represents a rejection of Descartes' mechanical universe and its replacement with one that appears to operate mechanically but in fact is made up of a vast number of points of awareness — souls, or, in Leibniz's term, monads — each of which reflects and perceives the entire universe, but each from a different "point of view" (a term that Leibniz first made

philosophically important [Boutroux 1881:170, note 2]). Where, for Descartes, two substances are given — matter and mind — for Leibniz each monad is distinct in its essence and so forms a substance in itself. "Leibniz invites us to view the universe as a 'swarm' of monads, an immense assemblage of immaterial and living atoms" (Cresson 1958:29-30; my translation).

There is, then, a great plurality and diversity of substances, each of which is primarily spiritual, with matter, space, and time all illusions. Thus in contrast to Descartes' desire for uniform laws, Leibniz saw the greatest diversity as the greatest good:

> *Gifted... with an active feeling for reality and beauty, Leibnitz, even while—as a mathematician—he accepts the logical reduction of diversity to homogeneity and obscurity to clarity, attempts—as a metaphysician—a task that is the inverse of this: to show how... the one and the homogeneous must give rise to the multiple, the distinct, the infinite variety of forms... For Leibnitz, if diversity did not exist it would have had to be invented*
>
> (Boutroux 1881:174, note 1; my translation)

The essence of each monad was precisely what made it distinct from all the others. In contrast to transitive causality, this is what Althusser (op. cit.) labelled "expressive causality": perceptible phenomena are the expression of hidden essences; each part somehow resumes or expresses a whole. This is a familiar idea to mystics: "To see a World in a grain of sand, and a Heaven in a wild flower" (Blake, "Auguries of Innocence"). But for Leibniz it remains essential that the grain of sand, while expressing the world as a whole, does so in its own distinctive way, and so also remains that particular grain of sand.

The other aspect of monads that is essential is their self-referential quality. Each monad forms a distinct unit in itself and develops through its own internal qualities, not through taking part in a causal chain: "monads have no windows, through which something could come in or go out"[4]. This total model of entities or units of analysis that form contexts in themselves and that express essences is one that will be picked up again and again in literature, criticism, and the human sciences, and regularly posited as an alternative—as the alternative—to mechanistic models of transitive causality.

## *Philosophical Thought-Forms and Common Experience*

My own intuition is that thought-forms such as these, while always available in the play of speculation, gain and lose pertinence and compelling power as social relations change and with them the common experiences of daily life. In this view, the mechanical universe would represent a distillation of an experience of the universe that had become common with the rise of capitalism, a social transformation that stripped away the social patterns and daily bodily activities of agriculture labor and feudal vassalage which gave immediate sense to the Medieval picture of the universe as a hierarchy, a sacred ranking, and a cosmos, an ordered pattern of repetition. But it was not enough, as has often been maintained, that the old order was breaking down. A new one, with its own patterns of immediate exchange, of generalized competition, was coming into being. In the *nouveau Monde* that we still inhabit, the bulk of the population learns to sell labor power in places that produce using machines and using people as machines: transitive causality as an end in itself marks our working lives and daily justifies the distinction we make between our machine-bodies and our free minds (Osherson and AmaraSingham 1981).

Monads, too, can be seen to have their source in common experience, at least if we follow André Cresson's reconstruction of Leibniz's train of thought:

> *We must then accept, as first elements of reality, atoms, certainly, but non-extended atoms, that is,* ***incorporeal atoms.***
>
> *It remains to be seen whether atoms of this kind can exist, and, in this case, what they must be like.*
>
> *What is specific in Leibniz is to have felt that he had observed this: that the internal experience that we have of ourselves as spiritual beings provides us with a remarkable type of substance, both entirely one and entirely indivisible, in other words a remarkable example of an "incorporeal atom". And in fact this "I" that I feel thinking, feeling, and desiring, this individual "I" that is my spiritual being, how can I doubt its substantiality? Is it not one? Is it not indecomposable? Is it not permanent, in spite of the various modifications that take place in it? Is it not, therefore, a substantial incorporeal unity of the kind we are looking for? This substantial unity Leibniz calls the monad... And he invites us to imagine the entire universe as made up of monads analogous to those which internal experience shows us within ourselves.* Cresson 1958:20-21; my translation.

This very experience of the self as an indivisible and unique essence, as an individual in both of these senses, takes on pertinence in the relatively atomized conditions of capitalist society. Capitalism destroys the old ties that bind people together in feudal society, and this has direct implications for the immediate experience of selfhood. The uniqueness of the individual, a blindingly obvious given for us, is lived very differently in other societies, in which the person is defined not primarily through distinctive traits, but through broader categories — familial, social, religious — of which he or she is part. It has been proposed, for instance, that the traditional Hindu conception of the person is of a "dividual" (Marriott 1980), that is, an entity made up of many parts, some of which are shared on a regular basis with others, some of which are lost and gained on a regular basis[5].

It is this experience and assumption of the uniqueness and indivisibility of each human person, each personality, as the term has come to be, that is distilled in Leibniz's concept of the monad.

## *The Perennity of Thought-Forms*

Since the seventeenth century, both transitive and expressive models have "been there" for Western thinkers, both, for us, "good to think" and available for use on any question. Both offer positions and styles of discourse that are easy to slip into and that will seem reasonable and coherent, regardless of the actual argument being made.

The model of transitive causality has pervaded and inspired the natural sciences since Descartes. Indeed, the application of a transitive-causal method to any phenomenon is what is usually meant by a scientific method: simply to attempt the reconstruction of specific causal chains is to look scientific. The tendency to use a "hard-scientific" transitive-causal style is particularly pronounced in those social sciences that emulate the natural sciences, such as psychology, economics, sociology, and some anthropology. If pure speculation by some sociobiologists or cultural materialists continues to "smell" scientific, if it finds easier acceptance on "Nova" or in the pages of *Scientific American* than, say, a well-founded cultural argument based on detailed data, it is because such speculation is couched in the familiar idiom of transitive causality.

Since the seventeenth century, expressive-causal models have provided the main alternatives to transitive-causal ones. Notions like "personality" and "culture", providing little in the way of causal-chain explanatory power, remain nevertheless part of our common experience and scholarly discourse. We all experience personalities every day, a kind of unifying essence to those whom we meet; and in spite of all the recent and not-so-recent attacks on the culture concept, in spite of the apparent impossibility of pinning down a culture through objective or quantitative methods, we still strongly intuit an overarching form or style to Chinese, Hindu, or Navajo life.

The anthropological concept of culture is historically linked to Leibniz (Dumont 1986), primarily through the mediation of the German Romantic movement, with its interest in deep and distinctive personalities and its characterization of nations, peoples, or civilizations in terms of deep and distinctive identities. For J.G. Herder, each people, each *Volk*, has its own essence that it expresses through custom, dress, literature, and language:

> *Every language, then, being the reflection of a "national mentality", corresponds to the structure and content of this mentality. Herder thus applies to language the same principle which he does to every other form of human culture—the Leibnitzian principle of individuation... Just as each monad represents the universe as seen from its own perspective, so each language, being the supreme expression of a 'national mentality', in fact, identical with it, reflects the universe in its own characteristic way.* Miller 1968:21-22

For Wilhelm von Humboldt, each language was an embodiment of a distinctive world view (R.L. Brown 1967); for G.W. Hegel, each world-civilization, in all its manifestations, expresses a single essence. In each case, something very much like a Leibnizian monad has been extended to characterize a collective entity (Steiner 1975:73-93). Indeed, just as the basic thought-form of Cartesian mechanism can be seen as a line or arrow, Marshall Brown (1979) has argued that the basic thought-form of German Romanticism is a sphere or circle, the key relationship being that between circumference and center.

While the interpretative search for essences dominated German philosophy, historiography, and literary studies in the nineteenth century, the natural sciences continued to be positivistic and mechanistic. This situation led to a strict division between natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*), which seek to explain phenomena in a universal mode, and spiritual sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), which seek to

interpret particulars in all their rich and living individuality. In twentieth-century social science, "interpretive sociology", for instance, has been a major alternative school since Max Weber. In anthropology, Franz Boas, trained in both forms of German science (Stocking 1968), maintained the existence of integrating forces in culture that tended to counteract the centrifugal forces of cultural diffusion (Singer 1984:14-15). The notion of cultures as distinct and independent self-referential universes of meaning comes out clearly in the work of his students, particularly in that of Ruth Benedict (e.g., 1934). Recent symbolic and interpretive anthropology continue to see cultures as systems of meaning to be interpreted, not causally explained. Where a transitive-causal explanation must assume that all contexts are identical empty fields for causality to work in, an expressive-causal interpretation assumes a multiplicity of fields, each of which determines its own internal rules, and each of which expresses a more basic inner core, an essence.

Here it seems necessary to specify that I am not presenting these two thought-forms as a binary opposition. First, each does not, or at least need not, represent a pure opposite, negation, inversion, or antithesis of the other; second, and more importantly, they do not together make up the total possible field of modern thought. There are alternatives, the best-known in scholarly circles being the British empiricist tradition, developed, again in the seventeenth century, by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and John Locke (1632-1704). Here, the central thought-form, if you wish to call it that, was precisely the *refusal* of overarching thought-forms, the insistence on the priority of given data over any models. In philosophy this led to the scepticism of Berkeley and Hume, and such empiricist scepticism comes back into vogue periodically. But the refusal of thought-forms cannot provide very satisfactory, interesting, or useful thought-forms, and in the natural and human sciences empiricism generally provides a warning and a check, a way of keeping researchers honest, rather than conceptual models. These continue to be drawn either from transitive-causal mechanism or rationalism or from expressive-causal interpretation.

## *Thought-Forms in Anthropological Debate*

Transitive and expressive thought-forms are regularly pitted against each other in the discussions that fill anthropological journals and department corridors. Such differences often hinge on commitments to contrasting modes of inquiry, themselves based on contrasting thought-forms. Here are a few examples:

1. The beginnings of contemporary North American anthropology may be seen in the debate held in the early 1880s between the young Franz Boas and a number of well-established American anthropologists over the proper arrangement of museum exhibits (Stocking 1974:1-6). The traditional arrangement had reflected the dominant paradigm of nineteenth-century evolutionism, classically universalistic and mechanistic: one grouped together items of the same kind from anywhere in the world to show how similar causes produce similar effects everywhere. Boas, by contrast, proposed that objects be grouped by their area of origin to give as complete a picture as possible of the life of a particular cultural group. The clear implication was that this would reveal an overall pattern of cultural concerns, a force of integration or "dominant idea" (cited in Stocking 1974:6), so that each culture area would show a distinct pattern of its own that included both material and spiritual aspects. Thus the founding of North American anthropology involved a shift from a universal explanatory model to a monadic interpretative one.

2. Under Boas's direction, Margaret Mead set out to disprove the universality and mechanical necessity of a crisis of adolescence by showing that such a crisis was a cultural artifact, an expression of particular cultural essences. She claimed to find in Samoa a culture patterned in such a way that an adolescent crisis was simply not a part of life (Mead 1928). In his attack on Mead's work, Derek Freeman (1983) found fault with her ethnography and jumped to the conclusion that the whole culturalist paradigm should be scrapped in favor of one based on universal biological causes. Once again, we are being offered the choice between specific realms of meaning and general causal chains.

3. In the 1970s and much of the 1980s, debate raged over cultural materialism (Harris 1974) and sociobiology (Wilson 1975), both of which offered universal law-governed causal explanations of particular cultural elements without reference to any kind of cultural whole. The response of many cultural anthropologists was articulated by Marshall Sahlins (1976, 1978),

always with the use of very detailed and specific data showing how some general causal claim didn't hold in such and such a place because it didn't make sense in the context of that particular culture. Indeed, Sahlins also tried repeatedly to show that the very theories he was criticizing could best be understood as expressions of deeply rooted Western cultural patterns.

4. A recent workshop on culture, cognition, and memory at the annual meeting of the Society for Cultural Anthropology (Boston, 1991) saw a clear cross-room division between some Artificial Intelligence professionals and a couple of existentially-oriented anthropologists. For the former, as one of them put it, the choice was clear: it was between seeing minds as neurons or as souls. It was equally clear that they would opt for the former over the latter, as offering the possibility, at least, of causal explanations. The existential anthropologists, while not using the word "soul", insisted on the legitimacy of a final personal "ground of being", an "irreducible subject" that just could not be analyzed away and had to serve as the basis of interpretation .

In all of these cases, the expressive-causal argument is both particularistic and holistic, with distinct wholes determining the meaning of the elements that make them up; the transitive-causal one is both universalistic and concerned with general causes that directly produce standard effects in an isolated and fragmentary way. While the expressive argument is, and indeed must be, based on detailed specific data, it is the transitive one, based on the most broad and general assumptions, that has the more scientific air about it. When vilification is called for, transitivists call expressivist approaches "fuzzy", "unfalsifiable", "impressionistic"; expressivists call transitive ones "narrow", "mechanical", "positivistic". Neither side can move the other, since each is in fact referring back to a different highly seductive and compelling thought-form, which is constantly verified either through our cultural experience of the world and bodies as mechanisms or our cultural experience of ourselves, other selves, and cultures as monads. Each remains a kind of intellectual monad in itself, hermeneutically sealed — if I may pun — against other possibilities.

## *Thought-Forms in the Anthropology of the Emotions*

Let me give another, more extended, example. Emotions are of particular interest in this context because they are complex experiences that cut across a number of boundaries that are essential parts of the two modern thought-forms we have been discussing: since they are both bodily and mental, involving both feeling and meaning, they violate the boundary between mind and body; since emotions are both extremely personal and usually extremely stereotyped and so collective, they violate the boundary between the individual and the collectivity; and since aspects or elements of emotions can be recognized and shared across cultures, while at the same time specific affective tones are extremely difficult to convey across cultures, emotions violate the boundary between the human universal and the cultural particular.

Their complexity makes emotions theoretically challenging (as, for instance, has been pointed out in Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987); but most anthropological theorizing has sought to deny or explain away that complexity and return to the very divisions that have provided comfortable and familiar alternatives since the seventeenth century.

One widespread view is that emotions are essentially physiological and so universal. This variant of the James-Lange theory in psychology has been argued most forcefully within anthropology by Paul Ekman (e.g., 1982), who claims universal recognizability for certain facial expressions of what he considers basic emotions. This would imply that an expression is the direct result of a physiological cause, the symptom of a universal basic feeling, to which meaning may then be attached as, literally, an afterthought.

This approach reflects the currently dominant assumptions in biology and medicine (Osherson and AmaraSingham 1981) and is in direct continuity with that of Descartes himself, for whom the human body is *la machine du corps*, simply a part of the mechanical world. Descartes himself, however, was a dualist, and his exemption of the thinking human soul from this universe of wires and little levers caused him all kinds of problems when he came to consider the relation between the mind and the body in his last major work, *Les passions de l'âme* (1649). Here Descartes argues that emotions are essentially the effect on a non-mechanical soul of mechanical exter-

nal forces, a clear foreshadowing of the James-Lange theory.

The physiological explanation of emotion has the interesting side effect of giving free rein to cross-cultural empathizing: if we all share basic emotions, then we can immediately perceive and identify with those of our informants. A good deal of the rather innocent empathizing that goes on in ethnographic practice and writing, notably in the otherwise hyper-sophisticated discourse of "post-modernism", represents an avoidance of the culturally specific meaning element of emotion.

Much recent work on emotion in North American anthropology has tended, on the contrary, to reduce the meaning-and-feeling complexity of the phenomenon to the familiar quest for cultural meaning. This tendency can be observed in a number of recent studies on the cultural construction of the emotions (see, for instance, Lutz 1988; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Lynch 1990). Instead of what we could call a real pathetics, a real study of emotions in their complexity, this tendency represents a reduction of the field of study to the familiar one of semantics, from emotions to ideas about emotions.

Both views, then, the mechanistic one and the expressive one, are still very much alive and very orthodox, albeit to opposed camps. This comes out clearly, for instance, in the 1985 volume *Culture and Depression: Studies in the Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Psychiatry of Affect and Disorder*, edited by Arthur Kleinman and Byron Good. Here, as is often the case, the subtitle tells what the book is about: it's a splicing of contradictory points of view, a tartan made up of studies in the cross-cultural psychiatry of disorder, on the one hand, and in the anthropology of affect on the other, each of which continues to function in its own universe of discourse.

## *Thought-Form 3: Wholes and Parts*

I have mentioned the empirical tradition as one "refusenik" alternative to transitive and expressive thought-forms. Another, yet again with its source in the seventeenth century, is that represented in the work of Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677). Spinoza was a heretic in his own time and has continued to play a heretical role In the history of philosophy. I have suggested that both transitive-causal and expressive-causal thought-forms are easy for us to think, forming a bridge between more or less elaborate models of reality and our immediate cultural experience of bodies and mechanisms or of inner experience. Spinoza's thought-forms are more complex, based, if one can judge by his own texts, on an extended meditation on the implications of infinity and eternity, not as abstract notions but as immediate experiences in the still freshly expanded *nouveau Monde* that had just been articulated by Galileo, Newton, and, of course, Descartes. For Spinoza — a lens grinder, that is, an expert on light and visual illusion — the new scientific discoveries pointed neither to a mechanical universe with neatly separable human souls floating around in it, nor to a universe of self-expressing essences, but to a single substance, which could be called God or Nature, *Deus sive Natura*, and of which human beings are simply a part. Where Descartes' world contained two basic substances, mind and matter, defined by their attributes of thought and extension, Spinoza's was only this one substance, which human beings can grasp through material extension and / or through thought, the two attributes of substance that are available to human beings. But these do not exhaust the universe / nature / God: substance in fact has an infinite number of attributes, and while we can grasp it through the two that are available to us, our knowledge of the universe, while not false, will always be limited. Compared to this universe that exists in an infinity of modes most of which are by definition unavailable to us, both Descartes' big machine and Leibniz's universe of personalities look like attempts to salvage a central place for humanity, for our own kind of knowing and thinking, in the suddenly vastly expanded cosmic scheme whose enormity was felt — and continues to be felt — by so many as a terrifying emptiness. Spinoza accepts our limitations as thinking human beings, but also our legitimate place here as a part of this infinity.

The central place of infinity in Spinoza's thought causes him first, like the empiricists, to refuse the constraints of particular thought-forms. But instead of leaving it at that, Spinoza's work points not to an avoidance of thought-forms as such, but to the reverse: a proliferation, an explosion of thought-forms.

> *This plenitude of being, this absolute affirmation of self, that constitutes substance, cannot be the empty form of the One that is only One, or that could only, we might say, be a One (un Un): it is that infinitely diverse reality that includes all the attributes and that expresses itself in their infinity. This reality... is first of all that of an irresistible movement through which the attributes pass and come together in the substance that appropriates them to itself.*

> *There is only one substance, but it includes an infinity of attributes: its unity is incomprehensible outside of this infinite diversity that constitutes it intrinsically. The result of this is that substance has multiplicity within itself and not outside itself.*
>
> Macherey 1979:123; my translation

We may be justified, then, in taking Spinoza as a patron saint of an effort to produce a greater variety of more adequate and less simple thought-forms than those that have been carrying the greatest weight in the natural and human sciences. More specifically, however, the thought-forms that Spinoza himself proposes for conceptualizing such relations as that between substance and its attributes or that between substance and its particular manifestations are neither transitive nor expressive.

Spinoza's aim is to grasp the causality of a whole on its parts — something that transitive causality, with all elements simply connected to one another, cannot do — but to maintain the relative autonomy and distinctiveness of those parts, which are not, as in expressive causality, simply expressions of the essence of the whole. Althusser (1969 [1965]) labels this causality "structural", an unfortunate term given all the implications that word has come to have since the vogue of structuralism . Spinoza himself uses another term. While accepting that what happens in the world is the result of transitive causal chains, "God," he says, "is the immanent, but not the transitive, cause of all things"[6].

Whatever we choose to call it, this kind of causality does not have the neat clear-cut character of the other thought-forms we have been discussing. Yet it offers a model for conceptualizing any number of phenomena that do not seem reducible to transitive or expressive thought-forms. While it does not seem based on a single simple metaphor, it still offers its own more complex kind of coherence.

## *Spinoza's Non-Heritage*

Spinoza did not found a school of thought, but people keep coming back to issues he raised[7], and he may be seen as a forerunner of those who fall neither into straight explanatory nor straight interpretative schools. This may, if we follow Althusser (Althusser and Balibar 1970 [1968]) include the later work of Marx, whose early work is clearly in an essentialist mode (Althusser 1969 [1965]). To my mind, it includes much of linguistics since Saussure: Saussure's notion of a language system (1985 [1916]) challenges on the one hand the attempts to interpret languages as expressions of national essences, and on the other the whole nineteenth-century enterprise of explaining linguistic change through isolated causes and effects. Is a linguistic analysis an explanation or an interpretation? It's both and neither.

The relationship Freud discovers between unconscious patterns and particular dream images (Freud 1953 [1900]), a relationship that he calls overdetermination, which is to say determination through many converging causal chains on an already-patterned background field, makes more sense in terms of Spinoza's immanent causality than in terms of either transitive or expressive thought-forms.

Marx and Freud are, of course, controversial figures, and it is instructive to consider the controversy around them. To a very large extent it is between camps trying to assimilate one or the other into one or the other dominant thought-form that we have been describing. For many Marxists, particularly in traditional Communist parties, Marx's theory has been understood as one of scientific determinism, of straightforward cause and effect; for the opposition humanist Marxists, on the contrary, this is a restrictive and repressive interpretation of a theory that must be defined by its origins in the young Marx, concerned with the identification and liberation of a human essence now alienated, cut off from itself. Similarly, the reading of Freud seems split between those who want to see him as a hermeneut, an interpreter of the expressions of individual essences (Ricoeur 1970 [1965]), and those who see him as a "biologist of the mind" (Sulloway 1979). All of these positions may be seen as attempts to fit anomalous thinkers back into familiar and pervasive thought-forms.

## *Back to the Emotions: Case Histories and Associations*

We can now ask what a Spinozist angle on the emotions might look like. First of all, while Spinoza may be considered a materialist, his matter is (literally) infinitely more complex than Descartes' machine. Similarly, Spinoza sees human beings themselves as bodies — just bodies — but to say this is to transform the very notion of a body. It is no longer Descartes' *machine du corps*, nor is it a mere expression of a spiritual essence. Rather, the body itself is complex to the point of being able to feel and to think.

"No one has so far shown the limits of what the body can do"[8].

Spinoza extends this psychology — or, rather, strictly speaking, this anthropology, this study of human beings who are thinking and feeling bodies — to the emotions. As might be expected, he understands emotions as experiences involving both thought and extension or physicality, both meaning and feeling.

In anthropology, there have been a number of attempts to offer a non-dualistic view of mind and body. Marcel Mauss's work on body techniques, published in the 1930s (Mauss 1950 [1936]), shows the extent to which the body itself is culturally molded; his ideas are recast in Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977 [1972]). Michelle Rosaldo (1984:143) notes that "feeling is forever given shape through thought and... thought is laden with emotional meaning". Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987) have focused attention on the mind/body split as a problem in medical anthropology, proposing the concept of a "mindful body".

One place where people tend to overcome these divisions by forgetting to worry about them is in specific ethnography, life histories, and case studies. Here I am thinking, for instance, of the work of Gananath Obeyesekere (e.g., 1981) and of the whole psychoanalytically inspired movement in case-study anthropology. In going over the psychological, social, and physical traumas and satisfactions of someone's life leading up to a particular situation or event, you can't really sort out the mental or cultural from the bodily or biological or universal. And such sorting-out does not occur to anyone, since the facts of the case usually provide adequate elements for what turns out to be both interpretation and explanation — or, rather, these terms seem inadequate in themselves to grasp what is going on.

Case studies usually assume a theory of associations between, at least, events in the past and current attitudes, but often, more delicately, among a host of memories and definitions, present and past. It is, of course, psychoanalysis as a tradition that provides the richest examples of detailed case studies that link meanings and feelings in particular and well defined situations, and it is not surprising that much case-study anthropology is psychoanalytically inspired.

Here again, we go back to Spinoza. For it was he who developed the theory of the association of ideas — a notion that goes back to Aristotle, at least — to include a theory of emotional associations: if we imagine something as similar to something else that affects us emotionally, "we shall... by virtue of the resemblance alone, love or hate the thing"[9]; such associations may also occur through contiguity rather than resemblance. It is clear from the context that such associations are *bodily* in the Spinozist sense, and not merely mental.

I have argued that body/mind, explanation/interpretation divisions are overcome, or, better, ignored in specific case studies of associations. Such studies are usually of individuals. As soon as one moves to a group, the pressure to mold theory to one thought-form or the other appears to become overwhelming, and there is a quick shift to meaningful interpretations or reliable explanations. But surely it should be possible to extend something like a psychoanalytic approach to collective associations. In earlier work, I have made a modest attempt in this direction regarding a small area in the Kumaon region of the Central Himalayas of northern India, seeking to explain/interpret some Kumaoni rituals and myths and the emotions that they appear to provoke (Leavitt 1984). Rural Kumaonis share certain stereotypical experiences in growing up and share many associations, some conceptual but many of them non-explicit and affective in nature. Certain images tend, in this population, to provoke sad memories and fantasies, others happy ones, and so forth. These memories and fantasies are not just meaningful; they are also *felt*. And they are transindividual: even someone with an unusual upbringing knows what is almost a code of associations, and knows how he or she is *supposed* to feel about sundown, or swinging, or Mother, just as any modern North American, even one who hates Christmas, knows that he or she is *supposed* to feel warm and cozy at that time. These associations may, certainly, be understood as results of biological causes, as they may be understood as expressions of a cultural essence. The fact that they are both suggests that they are neither in any exhaustive way. Here, surely, some alternative conceptual models are called for.

## *A Note on the Post-Modern*

Can such models be found in the movement now known as postmodernism? I cannot begin to discuss this question with any adequacy, but it seems best to say a few words all the same.

The two thought-forms I have presented as typical of modern thought are both highly systematic, that is, they are suitable for bringing together and ordering large amounts of material. But this systematicity itself only represents one pole of a constant tension in modernity between more and less systematic, totalizing modes. As Boas noted in 1928, modern civilzation is in large part defined by such tensions:

> *Notwithstanding the rapid changes in many aspects of our modern life we may observe in other respects a marked stability. Characteristics of our civilization are conflicts between the inertia of conservative tradition and the radicalism which has no respect for the past... Discipline against freedom of control, subordination under the public weal against individual freedom, capitalism against socialism, dogma against freedom of belief, established art forms against aesthetic expression subject only to individual whim, are some of these conflicts.*
>
> Boas 1928:136-137

Looked at chronologically, these tensions take the form of oscillations in style, and one such oscillation has been that between system-building and anti-systemic tendencies, each, driven by the constant and distinctively modern desire for innovation, claiming absolute originality and newness. Postmodernism, in this view, is typically modern. In anthropology, it represents a swing away from system-building back toward the individual, immediate experience, free play; such swings are part and parcel of the history of modern thought. Their great modern exemplar, I have suggested, is empiricism, and many postmodern anthropological texts, with their privileging of immediate data and their rather prissy disapproval of model building, are surprisingly empiricist in tone.

An anti-systemic swing has its limits. One can only critique authoritative voices and totalizing systems for so long before the scholarly desire to make one's own interpretation or explanation of data manifests itself again. In a number of postmodernist texts, at any rate, the model we are left with, once all the scolding has been done, has an eerily familiar look about it. This is true, for instance, of the works that did the most to popularize postmodern positions among anthropologists, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986) and the collection *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Striving to shift the focus away from cultures as things in themselves and insisting on the importance of hybridizations, personal constructions, immediate situations, a multiplicity of voices, these works end up espousing something very much like standard transitive-causal world systems theory, in which cultural differences are reduced to ripples from a single causal center. The other thought-form, but the same point, can be found in the texts cited earlier as defining one position on the anthropology of the emotions. The authors declare their own postmodern affiliations, criticize the culture concept, then proceed to present emotions as "cultural constructions", *interpretanda* of distinctive cultural meaning-systems, in the best expressive-causal tradition. All this is to say that when post-modern anthropologists get past the stage of attacking systems and start proposing explanations or interpretations of their own, they are just as prone as anyone else to drop into the comfortable thought-forms of modernity.

## *Conclusion*

I will not be proposing any new systems here. We are still living in a modern society, that is to say a capitalist society, and the cultural assumptions of modernity — our individualism, our profoundly mechanical view of the world and our bodies, our profoundly sentimental and essentialist view of minds and cultures — are rekindled and reinforced every day through our daily practice: through going to work and getting paid, or not going to work and feeling bad about it; through retreating from work to the apparent safety and intimacy of the home; through going to the doctor or the garage, and the staggering cultural parallelism between these two visits, so that irreparable illness and death seem like aberrations. We, in other words, have a culture like anybody else does, and it's not going to be easy to violate its categories. In some cases, such as that of the emotions, these categories seem particularly arbitrary and misleading. Some help may be found here in cross-cultural comparison. Other societies have different divisions: in South Asia, categories like hot and cold crosscut mind and body, individual and group. Or we may get a clearer sense of our limitations and even find alternatives by looking into the past of our own society; for this, as I have been suggesting, the seventeenth century seems a particularly rich source of models. It is very hard to break out of our mold of thought; but if anyone is called upon to try to do it, it's surely the anthropologist.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented under the title "Meaning and Feeling: The Philosophical Roots of Anthropological Doctrines" in the panel on "The Cultural Construction of Meaning", organized by Ellen Corin, at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Ethnology Society, Ottawa, May 1989. I am grateful to Gilles Bibeau, Ellen Corin, Paul Friedrich, Wlad Godzich, Lynn M. Hart, Laurence Kirmayer, Michael Lambek, and Margaret Lock for comments on earlier avatars of these ideas. I remain solely responsible for the opinions here expressed.
2. The classic examples are, of course, the national culture studies of the 1930s and 1940s. For more recent work on North America, see Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Messerschmidt 1981; Schneider 1969, 1980; Varenne 1986.
3. On the importance of metaphoric images in everyday discourse, see Lakoff and Johnson 1980. On their continuing centrality in philosophical discourse, see Derrida 1978 (1966), 1982 (1971).
4. Les Monades n'ont point de fenêtres, par lesquelles quelque chose y puisse entrer ou sortir *(Monadologie 8.)*
5. For cross-cultural perspectives on the person, see Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985; Marsella, DeVos, and Hsu 1985.
6. Deus est omnium rerum causa immanens, non vero transiens *(Ethics 1.18)*.
7. On Spinoza's often unacknowledged influence on later thinkers, see Yovel 1989.
8. Quid corpus possit, nemo hucusque determinavit *(Ethics 3.2, scholia)*.
9. Ex eo solo, quod rem aliquam aliquid habere imaginamur simile objecto, quod Mentem Laetitia vel Tristitia afficere solet... eam tamen amabimus vel odio habebimus *(Ethics 3.16)*.

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1642 Meditationes de prima philosophia.

1649 Les passions de l'âme.

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1714 La Monadologie.

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1677 Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata.


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