



## The Universal Animal: Reason as the Active Principle of Human Nature

*Martin Albert Persch*

**ABSTRACT:** Since the second half of the 20th century, structuralism has been the dominant theoretical tendency in Amazonian studies. Although since the 1990s, many leading researchers call themselves “post-structuralist,” with Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro at the head of this movement, they retain key presuppositions of structuralism. This paper will focus on Descola’s presentation of classificatory and cosmological systems, the so-called ontologies, which constitute the reality inhabited by the different peoples of the world. The paper argues that Descola’s analysis is limited by his disregard of ecological variables and the productive and reproductive dynamics of the groups that profess these “ontologies.” Descola’s analyses of different cultures are ultimately grounded in a form of individualist psychologism. The present work aims to reconstruct the logic of cultural diversity in terms of the concrete interaction of each human collective with the forces of the environment, i.e. what Ilyenkov had called vital activity. The Dialectics of the Ideal and Dialectical Logic, in which he defines the ideal as a specific relationship between a thinking and non-thinking body, will enable us to clarify the concept of “culture,” which has often been treated in anthropology in an abstract and ambiguous way. While Ilyenkov has nothing explicitly to say about the Amazon and the people who inhabit it, it is the claim of this work that the concept of the ideal and that of activity he developed in his works will broaden our anthropological point of view, enabling us to understand Animism and Totemism not as mere ontologies, but rather as vital activities, that is, as a specific interweaving of social dynamics with the ecosystemic forces.

**KEYWORDS:** Anthropology, Ontology, Amazonia, Vital Activity, The Ideal.

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- *Correspondence:* Martin Persch, Centro de Análisis Intercultural para el Desarrollo.
  - e-mail: [zfrmusik@gmail.com](mailto:zfrmusik@gmail.com)
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## The Anthropology of Interiority and Physicality

In his Magnum Opus, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, anthropologist Philippe Descola offers a development and a rectification of *The Wild Thought* (1973) by his mentor and doctoral thesis advisor, Claude Lévi-Strauss. In *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2012), Descola argues that the dichotomous division of the world into nature and culture constitutes a quasi-exclusive attribute of Western society. Drawing on his experience with the Achuar people, which he had originally set out in his book *In the Society of Nature: A Native Ecology in Amazonia* (1988), he constructs a classificatory system to encompass the full breadth of human intellectual experience.

My argument is that one of the universal features of the cognitive process in which such dispositions are rooted is the awareness of a duality of planes between material processes (which I call “physicality”) and mental states (which I call “interiority”). By using this universal grid, humans were able to emphasise or minimise the continuity and difference between humans and non-humans. The result are contrastive qualities and beings, that is, detected in the human environment and organised into systems that I have labelled ‘animism,’ ‘totemism,’ ‘naturalism’ and ‘analogism,’ thus giving new meanings to widely used anthropological concepts. (Descola 2017, 20)

The four classes resulting from the divergent ascription of *interiority* and *physicality* to different ecosystemic phenomena, and which Descola calls *ontologies*, can be visualised in the following table.

**Table 1.** The four different ontological schemes, resulting from different ascription of Interiority and Physicality

	Dissimilar in Physicality	Similar in Physicality
Similar in Interiority	Animism	Totemism
Dissimilar in Interiority	Analogism	Naturalism

While Descola’s incisive ethnographic studies have undoubtedly enriched and transformed anthropology and Amazonian studies, the present article argues that his use of systems of classification leads to non-dialectical overgeneralisations that needlessly restrict the thick descriptions they try to capture. I will argue that this structuralism is rooted in crude transpositions of Kant’s philosophy which do not capture the fullness of human (and non-human) experience or the ways in which it is produced in concrete life activity.

### Amazon Animism

Animism, as practised mainly by Amazonian and subarctic and arctic societies (both in North America and Siberia), but also by some societies in Oceania and Africa, is essentially characterised by the attribution of a human personality to various natural phenomena, such as animals and plants. Shamanism, which occupies a central place in these cosmologies, allows certain members of these societies to establish communication, often mediated by rituals, with these other, non-human individuals. Why do certain cultures develop and elaborate animistic cosmologies, while other cultures prefer totemic or analogistic systems. At first glance, it appears that geographic and ecological variables should play a significant role in answering this question, since these ontologies, as Descola calls them, are quite uniformly distributed in certain ecosystems, and large geographical, and therefore also ecological, phenomena, such as the Andes, constitute clear dividing lines between cultural areas. We will see that answering this question is of great epistemological importance.

The Amazon basin is one of the most diverse ecosystems on our planet, and indeed all of us are part of this ecosystem. This is not a trivial observation. Humans are animals, and are therefore caught up in the same evolutionary dynamics as all other living beings in an ecosystem, and must also assert themselves in relation to it. Even if our specific *vital activity* differs fundamentally from that of other living beings, as will be explained in more detail below, human dynamics of production and reproduction are by no means something alien or external to nature, even if human activity in turn modifies this nature in a fundamental way.

If we start from the insight that humans are an integral part of their ecosystem, it should not be surprising that in the Amazon basin, an ecosystem with an extremely complex and diverse internal structure consisting of countless sub-ecosystems, we will find an equivalent cultural diversity. And it is not least important to emphasise the dialectical relationship between human collectives and the ecosystems they inhabit.

The Amazon basin is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse regions on earth. This diversity would suggest, at first glance, that we are dealing with a great number of cultures that have little in common. But this appearance is deceptive. Almost 40 years ago, Donald Lathrap showed that practically all of the Amazonian cultures are constructed upon a certain uniform cultural logic, which he called the *tropical forest culture* (2010), that is characterised by extensive small-scale

subsistence agriculture, a dependence on hunting and fishing, and social organization in scattered small-scale associations.

But it really is another circumstance that has preoccupied the anthropological mainstream for the last decades, and that is the fact that all Amazonian societies appear to be carriers of animistic cosmologies, albeit with different characteristics. This animism always goes hand in hand with taxonomic systems in which the various phenomena are defined by individual names and in which there is hardly any formation of what are called *macrocategories*.

The concept of macrocategories was coined by Lévi-Strauss and describes primary categories of a higher degree of abstraction that serve to organise and structure more complex social practice. Societies can then develop more complex category systems based on these macrocategories. The taxonomic systems of animistic societies, on the other hand, assign individual names to the various animals, plants and social phenomena, conforming to an epistemological method that Lévi-Strauss called the *science of the concrete* (1973). We will later try to answer the question of why we do not find macro-categories in these societies.

One could now assume that there must be a connection between the ecosystem and the respective systems of thought, that would most likely be mediated by the reproductive dynamics of the respective cultures. But for Descola it seems:

. . . unlikely [...] that these features [of thinking] are due to adaptation to a particular ecosystem which, because of its inherent properties, has provided the analogous model for thinking about the organization of the world. (Descola 2012, 39)

For Descola it seems less relevant what the respective ecosystem means for the concrete reproductive dynamics of societies, but only for an abstract thought process decoupled from concrete material needs. The Amazon is characterised by a “tremendous diversity of life forms that rarely occur in homogeneous assemblages” (Descola 2012, 36). From this, he now rehabilitates an explanation of Lévi- Strauss for the absence of macrocategories, namely that:

In an environment as diverse as the Amazon rainforest, it was probably inevitable that the perception of relationships between apparently very different individuals gained the upper hand over the construction of stable and mutually exclusive macro-categories (Descola 2012, 37).

Descola rejects the interpretation that the ontological systems of these societies were based on ecosystemic factors because “[of] the existence

of very similar cosmologies elaborated by peoples living in an entirely different environment, well over six thousand kilometres north of the Amazon” (Descola 2012, 39). Descola is referring here to the indigenous peoples of the Taiga, as the Cree and Ojibwa of the subarctic North America and the Buriatos and Evenki of southern Siberia. These peoples are also carriers of animistic cosmologies and use taxonomic systems that are almost devoid of macrocategories. These peoples live in an ecosystem that is not characterised by an “incredible diversity,” but which at first glance stands in stark contrast to the diversity of the Amazon rainforest. “In summary,” says Descola, “the characteristics of the boreal forest are the exact opposite of the characteristics of the Amazon rainforest” (ibid., 40), and so the attempt to derive the underlying logic of these different systems of thought from ecological circumstances could only lead astray.

### The Constraints of Crude Kantism

Having rejected the ecological variable, he must of course now present an alternative description for both the functioning and the genesis of these ontologies. In doing so, Descola takes up the work of Lévi-Strauss again, who tried to establish the uniformity of different systems of thought based on universal *schemas*—*macrocategories*—which he believed to be anchored in our neurophysiological systems. Descola adopts the idea of *schemas* but rejects this neurophysiological grounding. Rather, he suggests they develop out of societal practice. Both Lévi-Strauss and Descola’s explanations of schemas are clearly influenced by Kant’s transcendental *schematism*. Both attempt to explain human cognition based on quasi a priori structures of human thought. The contradiction here is that while Descola’s *schemas of praxis* are said to be the result of social praxis, they function as if *a priori*.

Where do *macrocategories* originate, and why would they allow us to rationally grasp the world? Lévi-Strauss presented his views on this in great detail in his 1972 lecture *Structuralism and Ecology* (1973). There he argues that the logic underlying and structuring our experience derives directly from the structural nature of reality as a whole, and that both the world around us and our minds are built on repetitive patterns, on structures. He claims that “we cannot escape the conclusion that mental laws, similar to those operating in the physical world, compel ideological constructs such as myths to become organised and to get

transformed in accordance with recurring patterns” (Levi-Strauss 1973, 14).

The patterns on which we build our experience and subsequently systematise and catalogue it, and wrap the phenomena of the world in a stringent cosmological and classificatory system, would be adopted by people directly from the phenomenal world itself. However, people would not create these patterns themselves using their experience, but rather it would be the case that a kind of direct correspondence between mind and world would arise because this structural schema is already inscribed in our minds and are therefore *a priori*. The rational correspondence is guaranteed by the fact that both the material world and our mind are structurally organised:

For nature appears increasingly made up of structural properties undoubtedly richer but not different in kind from the structural codes into which the nervous system translates them. Neither from the structural properties developed by the mind to go back, as far as it can, to the original structures of reality. It does not mean being mentalist or idealist to acknowledge that the mind can only understand the world around us because the mind is itself part and product of this same world. Therefore, the mind, when trying to understand it, only applies operations which do not differ in kind from those going on in the natural world itself. (Levi-Strauss 1973, 22)

The mind is thus equated with the nervous system and its neuronal organisation. The structurally organised ideas produced by this brain-mind would correspond directly with the structures of material reality because the mind only absorbs from the external world things whose structural order ‘does not differ in kind.’ Since the properties of nature are ‘undoubtedly richer, even if not different from the structural codes into which the nervous system translates them,’ any endeavour to grasp the phenomenal world would always leave behind the Kantian thing-in-itself.

Even when society develops or becomes more complex (because of contact with new societies from the outside), this underlying categorial framework becomes more complex, but never experiences a fundamental transgression. If, as in the case of Amazonian societies, the classification systems are not explicitly based on these *macrocategories*, it does not mean that these were not fundamentally embedded in the psyche of these people, but rather that the ecological framework conditions have not yet activated them. When the societies now undergo a summatory complexification, the categorial framework does not undergo any dialectical upheavals. The image he uses is that of the kaleidoscope, which

always uses the same elements and the same structure to create a different image with every twist, but basically produces nothing fundamentally new. And so, Lévi-Strauss claims, “the important point here is that the coherence is deemed more essential than the relationship” (Levi-Strauss 1973, 19); more items can be added to the kaleidoscope, but the logical structure will not change at all.

### Descola’s Shematism

We will first present Descola’s theory of schemata before going on to develop an alternative explanation based on Ilyenkov’s work. Descola is critical of Lévi-Strauss’s naturalistic explanation, but instead of critically analysing the thesis of a direct identity of mind and environment, he takes an entirely different approach. He now endeavours to explain the forms of thought entirely without recourse to ecological or material constraints. And for him, too, inner coherence should come before relation. Descola speaks of *elementary schemas of praxis*, i.e. cognitive mechanisms whose order and functionality are derived from the praxis of the collective and which therefore require an explanation based on societal and not ecological dynamics.

How should we imagine these *schemas*, and more importantly, how do they emerge? Descola states that these were dynamics of the cognitive apparatus responsible for “structuring individual and collective experience,” and they do so, employing two activities: *identification* and *relation*. For Descola, the “most general” and most important activity is *identification* because through it:

. . . I establish differences and similarities between some existences and myself by inferring analogies and contrasts between the appearance, behaviour, and characteristics that I attribute to myself and those that I attribute to them. (Descola 2012, 177)

Here, too, it becomes clear that for Descola, apprehension of the world is always a contemplative observation in which the identities of the various objects are established abstractly through analogies. The resulting *identification* would therefore force a fixation, i.e. a determination of the object, and for Descola this determination precedes the *relation*. A subject thus first determines an object and thereby assigns it its place in the ontological whole, so to speak. The concrete relationship that the subject, or society, ultimately enters into with this object is a subsequent process. For Descola, identification is primary, and;

. . . this mechanism of mediation between the I and the non-I seems to me to lie on the logical level before and outside the existence of a certain relation to any other, i.e. to be specifiable in its content through modes of interaction, insofar as the other is not one of the terms of a pair, but an object that exists for me in my general alterity in anticipation of identification: an aliud, then, not an alter. (Descola 2012, 177)

Descola is therefore of the opinion that identification lies “before and outside” the establishment of an interaction between the subject and other (natural) objects, i.e. human ascribes to phenomena (animals, plants or abiotic phenomena) an original identity, and only this identity later determines the relationship the subject can subsequently establish with the objects in question. This original thought process, which would be structured by the *schemas*, thus initially sets the world for a society as it appears to them. Only afterwards is a societal practice set in motion by this initial ontological action. The presentation of the various ontologies is always based on a *quasi a priori fixation*, and no serious attempt is ever made to reconstruct their nature and inner logic with recourse to collective praxis. This is because such a practice would have to be reconstructed ethnographically, i.e. not only logically but also historically for the respective societies, and this is precisely what Descola wants to avoid:

By abandoning the questions of genesis and antecedent causality in favour of a decidedly synchronic procedure, it is then possible to bring to light the structural properties of the assumed combinations and the positive or negative conditions of their transformations. (Descola 2012, 523)

Descola justifies this exclusion of the historical context, or rather the disregard of the genesis, of the “antecedent causality,” of the different forms of thought, with reference to Marx, who would have applied this methodology himself in his studies of capitalism, and which he would have summarised in the famous formula that “the anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape” (Marx, 1974, 8).

But Marx’s meaning is entirely different from what Descola is suggesting here. The fact that Marx prioritises the logical understanding of the capitalist mode of production in the *Critique of Political Economy* in no way means that the question of the genesis of capitalism is simply excluded. The historical reconstruction can itself come to restructure the logical understanding.

The abandoning of the questions of “genesis and antecedent causality” degrades the anthropological analysis to a mere aesthetic, i.e. to a view based on a purely abstract conceptual formalism that does not



make it possible to comprehend the concrete logic of the various cosmologies.

Why do the societies of the Amazon, the taiga and the tundra operate with animistic cosmologies, while their immediate neighbours in the Andes, Central America or Europe do not? Such a logical-historical reconstruction would have to compare the cosmologies, which can be traced back to the subjectivity of a specific vital activity, with the objective conditions of the ecosystem and the resulting constraints on the human lifeform. This should, one would think, be the scientific claim of anthropological research.

For Descola, every culture is initially and fundamentally based on an ontology, i.e. on views and statements about the existing. And this ontology is formulated by each culture in keeping with its own *schemas of praxis*, which are analogous to Kant's *a priori forms of sensuality*. That means viewing and experience are not possible for these societies without recourse to these most intrinsic cognitive schemas. This attempt to square the circle, to present *schemas of praxis* that perform like they were *a priori*, can only be realised by breaking out of the Kantian system.

It is clear that we are confronted here with a circular logic; every cultural practice is structured by an ontology, and this ontology is now based on *cognitive schemas*, which, according to Descola, arise from a cultural praxis in the first place. How or what should we imagine this first, original, cultural praxis to be, from which all cognitive *schemas* arise, which then hold every society under the spell of a specific ontology?

This relativistic conclusion is, of course, not provided for in Kant's system. And so Descola must use the back door of fundamental ontology in his attempt to make Kant's transcendental philosophy fruitful for his hermeneutics of ontologies. As argued earlier, for Descola, thinking is a fundamentally passive act, a contemplative view of an environment that is fundamentally separate from the subject. Since, according to Descola, we should not assume an objective nature in our contemplation, and culture should not be understood as a process of adaptation to certain ecosystems, only a creative thinking process remains for this original praxis. Martin Heidegger had also developed a philosophy based on a supposedly pre-logical and pre-ontological existence beyond being, from which the authenticity of the latter would emerge: "Holding itself back into nothingness, existence is always already beyond being as a whole. We call this going beyond being transcendence" (Heidegger 1998, 38),

and so the transcendence of the Amazonian or arctic ontologies would also spring from an almost mystical social praxis located beyond being, in which the elementary cognitive schemas emerge and then become fossilised “cultural invariants.” It seems Descola too imagines such a primordial situation, by which people are forced into “primordial questioning” and “the idea of logic itself dissolves in the vortex of primordial questioning” (Heidegger 1998, 40).

Anthropologically, of course, such a situation cannot be grasped, and Descola does not attempt to ground it in ethnographic literature; the only suggestion made about this conceptual act of creation is that:

It is thus a mental experience, if you like—and carried out by an abstract subject for whom it is indifferent whether it ever existed—but it produces very concrete effects, because it allows us to understand how indeterminate objects can be specified by attributing to them or denying them an ‘interiority’ and a ‘physicality’ analogous to those we attribute to ourselves. (Descola 2012, 182)

The reality as conceived by the various societies, which would now be structurally framed and shaped by these *schemas of praxis*, would eventually have to fulfil their demands *a posteriori*. The relationships that can be entered into with the various phenomena that first had to be identified are “analytical and not phenomenological because identification imposes from the beginning of a relational correlate with the object to which it provides an identity: by being included in this or that ontological category, it will offer me an opportunity to maintain with it this or that relationship” (Descola 2012, 178). In addition to these relationships, that result from the intrinsic logic of the first determination, the subject can now add to these objects a series of “additional determinations to the primary terms,” i.e. relationships of second rank, “external linkages” (ibid.). Through these secondary relations, one could eventually “be linked to both predation and competition or protection” (ibid.) with an animal that had been given a primary identity.

Because the relationships that indigenous societies or individuals enter into with different animals or plants can also be subject to fluctuations, or because the relationships between animals and different individuals within a group might differ, Descola believes that therefore it is indispensable “to give a logical precedence to modes of identification over modes of relationship” (Descola 2012, 179). And so, the reality as conceived by these societies would now be the result of an intellectual process of an abstract subject, an ontology arising from the abstract attribution of identities and relationships. As already mentioned, Descola

does not describe the emergence and genesis of these schemata at any point, although he lists a whole series of different psychological theories that could describe how they function. However, all these models, starting with Eleanor Rosch's work on 'prototypes' or even Bourdieu's ideas on *habitus*, require precisely the social praxis that they are supposed to explain in the first place, i.e. "comparable situations" that already exists and in relation to which the appropriation of these *schemas* could take place. Descola, too, can only imagine the emergence of new concepts and categories in such a way that new situations are, so to speak, absorbed on the base of already existing *schemas*, perceived as "particular cases of already known situations" (ibid., 171).

And so, in Descola's theory, a logical and practical correspondence between systems of thought and the environment does indeed emerge through the famous kaleidoscope invoked by Lévi-Strauss, but this correspondence always remains abstract and external. And the kaleidoscope itself and its logical arrangement stands for the famous *structure*, which, building on the *schemas*, represents a kind of intermediate instance between practice and praxis. Descola defends the idea of the *structure*, which is never specified in concrete terms, with recourse to a quotation from Lévi-Strauss, namely that

Marxism—if not Marx himself—too often reasoned as if practices derived immediately from praxis [...] we believe that between praxis and practices there is always a mediator, which is the conceptual schema through whose intervention a matter and a form, devoid both of independent existence, are realised as structure, that is, as beings both empirical and intelligible. (Lévi-Strauss in Descola 2012, 156)

Only in relation to this *structure*, that is based on the *cognitive schemas*, could the inner logic of the cosmologies of different societies be logically reconstructed. Even if Descola shares Lévi-Strauss' conviction that there are indeed *innate schemas*, he believes that the critical *schemas* were first created and appropriated independently by a culture. However, this appropriation or creation, in turn, is completely abstract, an intellectual act of an "abstract subject," as we have seen, which, Descola emphasises, above all does not arise from social dynamics; social reality and division of labour should be considered as a sub-area of a much deeper psychology (Descola 2012).

The theoretical construct of the *structure*, that works as the ontological substrate of the reality inhabited by every society, guaranties that there would be always mediation between the ecosystem and the social reality, but never dialectics. There is nothing that can seriously break

this ontological mediated unity of praxis and practices, and societies adhere strictly to their own ontological templates, even if this entails a deterioration of their living conditions because the “schemata are therefore not reformed, but rather reinforced by experience” (Descola 2012, 171) because experience can thus only reproduce what is already inherent in these quasi *a priori* schemata. This is how Descola explains the fact that neither the societies of the Amazon nor those of the Taiga ever domesticated animals, although, according to Descola, these practices would be technically possible. He claims that the societies of the Amazon and the Arctic refuse to do so, since they reject treating other animals as objects, as means to satisfy their own needs, considering that a subject-subject relationship between animals and humans is established by their very own *schemas*. Societies are virtually trapped forever in their conceptual prisons.

### The Individual as Subject

Descola considers the praxis of thinking as executed by an individual subject, a psychological subject. The complex constitution of the *transcendental subject*, which, at least since Kant, could no longer be immediately equated with an empirical individual but rather as a unity of a whole societal experience, is ignored and replaced by a “mediation between the I and the non-I” (Descola 2012, 177). The complex formation of thought of different cultures is reduced to a process of rationalisation of an empirical individual.

Descola’s attempt to trace the epistemological mechanisms of different societies based on existentialist reflections of an individual subject ignores the complex process by which new sensory impressions or discernments are intertwined and confronted with the dominant state of knowledge. And also, how these will then be elevated and integrated through a series of cultural mediations into the corpus of knowledge of a specific group; knowledge that becomes constitutive of each of the particular subjects. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (2020) can be considered an attempt to explain this intricate path of the rise of new categories and concepts, which originate in the “sensible certainty” of particular individuals, until they consolidate, through a complex process of mediation, as universal concepts proper to the *transcendental subject* as the unity of all experience: of the subject as totality. But this is possible only because in Hegel’s philosophy, the individual subject finds itself in

a constant and continuous reciprocal interaction not only with the objects of the environment but also and fundamentally with all the other individuals of the society it inhabits.

The understanding of this complex interrelationship between the *individual subject*, the *transcendental subject* and the surrounding *object world*, is the real hurdle for dialectical thinking to overcome because, as Ilyenkov argues:

. . . social consciousness is not simply the individual consciousness repeated many times over [...] but is, in fact, a historically formed and developing system of “objective notions,” forms of patterns of the “objective spirit” of humanity (or, more directly, of the “people” with its inimitable spiritual culture), all this being quite independent of the individual whims or will. (Ilyenkov 2021, 265)

What Ilyenkov expresses here is not sufficiently problematised in Descola’s approach. Namely, that the individual will and the *ideal* of a particular society do not immediately coincide, and that for this reason we can neither equate the *individual subject* (or psychological subjectivity) with collective (or transcendental) subjectivity, nor derive the latter directly from the former. To understand a culture in its real development means to understand the formation of its collective spirit, of its particular *ideal* through a process of dialogic but also conflictive collaboration. That is to say, a social dynamic in which not all the members of the collective agree immediately and uncritically with the dominant thought, nor do they immediately agree with the social role they are forced to assume, but rather as a continuous interaction both among all the members of the collective, but also the interaction of the latter with the forces of the environment from which ultimately results a specific *vital activity* that always constitutes a temporal commitment.

### Individual Agency and “Common Ground”

Before turning to Ilyenkov’s work, we should say something general about schematism. Of course, Descola is right to say that human thinking is always schematised. This can be explained by the fact that thinking is a social activity. Even if psychology can help to understand individual thinking more specifically, and these psychological insights can in turn have feedback effects on philosophical work, thinking cannot, as Descola believes, be regarded as a mere psychological phenomenon.

That Descola imagines the forms of thought that underlie both animism and the other *ontologies* as the result of the activity of *schemas* is

understandable in the sense that, as he describes, these do not seem to arise directly from the individual thought process. The thinking of the individual subject seems to be determined to a certain degree. But at the same time, however, Descola understands ideas as expression of the *psyche*, the result of the thought process of one individual.

On the grounds of this philosophical fallacy, Descola, like Lévi-Strauss before him, clings to the concept of *structure*. For if material reality is abstractly contrasted with an ideal dimension, which is only understood as the expression of a single mind, then of course a link is needed to explain the fact that the thinking of all members of a society is based on more or less uniform figures of thought.

Ilyenkov's work is especially relevant to clarify this problem, as he insisted more than almost anyone else on "the need to clearly define the category of 'ideality' rather than the undifferentiated and vague notion of 'psyche' in general, which could equally well be interpreted as a wholly corporeal function of the 'soul' interpreted physically" (Ilyenkov 2021, 368). He had already pointed out in the *Dialectics of the Ideal* as well as in *The Ideal* that "the 'ideal' and the 'material' cannot be considered opposites" (ibid., 373), but that these two dimensions of human reality must be understood in their interdependence. Two important consequences for our consideration follow from this insight.

Animism should not be considered a purely cognitive phenomenon, but rather as a *vital activity*, i.e. a social totality, which is of course also reflected in specific figures of thought, but should not be limited to these. Animistic cosmologies are therefore actually *ontologies*, which means that they are logical-ontological totalities that encapsulate the reality of life of these societies. And since it is a totality, we have to deal here with an anthropological consideration of a deeply philosophical nature, in which the concrete materiality must also be included in the consideration. And so, when examining animism, as well as all other vital activities such as totemism and analogism, we can recognise "the principal problem of philosophy," which does not consist in:

. . . distinguishing and contrast all that is «in the consciousness of the individual» with all that is outside this individual consciousness (this is hardly ever difficult to do), but to demarcate the world of collectively recognised notions, i.e. the whole socially organised world of intellectual culture with all its stable and materially established universal patterns, and the real world as it exists outside and apart from its expression in these socially legitimised forms of 'experience.' (Ilyenkov 2021, 375)

And an important part of this “real world” as it exists outside and apart from the “socially legitimised forms of ‘experience’” is precisely the “mute and impersonal nature” that Descola does not want to accept as a variable for anthropological investigation.

I will show very briefly how a socially shared schematic thinking comes about based on a collective practice, i.e. the production and reproduction dynamics of a social collective, for which the consideration of ecosystemic factors is fundamental. To this end, it is essential to start from a fundamental anthropological insight of evolutionary research, namely that humans are fundamentally social beings. Our sociality is not an aggregate, i.e. not a secondary characteristic that only developed late in the course of humanisation, or in the words of Fernando Santisteban (2005, 13): “man is not social because he is human, but on the contrary, the human condition derives from the social nature of the species.” Numerous evolutionary researchers draw a clear parallel between larger group formations and brain growth because these larger groups necessarily drive each individual to more complex cognitive activity (Dunbar 1998). While large primates, such as chimpanzees and bonobos, also live in big group formations and also use collaborative strategies in their production and reproduction dynamics, they do so based on a “group behaviour I-mode,” i.e. a practice in which each participant takes part in rather spontaneous group dynamics for entirely self-related motives” (Tomasello 2014). Depending on the situation, a *common ground* is created, i.e. a *joint intentionality* related to a very specific object that serves as the basis for group dynamics (ibid.).

Modern humans not only live in larger group associations than the great primates, but the dynamics of production and reproduction also constitute a totality organised according to the division of labour. According to Tomasello, we are no longer dealing here with a *joint intentionality* that is dependent on the situation and therefore subject to constant fluctuations, but with a relatively stable *collective intentionality*. And this vital activity organised according to the division of labour ultimately leads to a conventionalisation of cultural practices: “everyone conformed to what everyone else was doing, and expected others to conform as well [...], which created a kind of cultural common ground that could be assumed of all members of the group (but not other groups)” (Tomasello 2014, 138).

We will come back to these *other groups* in a moment. However, on the basis of this description, even if it must necessarily remain very superficial here, it becomes clear to what extent it is precisely the social

reality, which Descola misjudges as only a subordinate moment of cultural reality, i.e. the concrete organisation of the dynamics of production and reproduction, that constitutes the basic dynamics of human cognition. A culture is, of course, much more than just a production and reproduction dynamic, but all other attributes of specifically human culture, such as kinship relations, language, myths, taxonomic systems and much more, can be derived directly from it. Fundamentally, culture is the institutionalisation of a specific division of labour. And if we understand culture as such, then there is no need for a *structure*, however defined, as an intermediary between praxis and practices, in which culture and its underlying thought patterns are uploaded as if in a cloud; culture itself functions as a “structuring structure” that through a specific *ideality* shapes the vital activity of a society and entangles it with the dynamics of the ecosystem. And it is therefore that Ilyenkov states that:

Psychology must necessarily start from the fact that between individual consciousness and objective reality there is the «mediating link» of historically formed culture, which acts as a prerequisite and condition for individual mental activity. (Ilyenkov 2021, 394)

And this collective dependence, this interdependence of each individual with the rest of the group, forms the *common ground*, the *collective intentionality* mentioned by Tomasello, which allows to synchronise the concrete activity of each individual with the vital activity of society.

Larger group associations inevitably require an increasingly complex organisation, i.e. division of labour, and it is precisely this social collaboration that is the driving force behind complex human cognition. However, it must be pointed out at this point that we are not dealing with a purely social phenomenon. The internal logic of any division of labour, the aim of which is to ensure the survival and reproduction of the group, must of course first and foremost be oriented towards the available resources, i.e. the phenomena of the ecosystem that are potentially available as food or instruments. The group’s own dynamics must be synchronised with the dynamics of the animals and plants in the ecosystem, i.e. internal group constraints such as family organisation, caring for and feeding children, making instruments, preparing food, hunting, fishing, etc. must be adapted and organised in relation to the seasonal availability and behaviour of animals and plants. Complex thinking is a direct result of the evolution of our species, being culture our *second nature*, and its various forms and patterns cannot be understood without reference to the overall ecological context in which this evolution takes place.



In Descola's schematism, on the other hand, we have only a self that passively contemplates a non-self, by which thinking becomes a "mechanism of mediation between the I and the non-I," which resembles more the "group behaviour I-mode" that Tomasello identifies for chimpanzees and bonobos. The culture is thus reduced to a merely intellectual fact, realised by a contemplative mind that apprehends disinterestedly, and from afar apprehends the phenomena of the environment to name and classify them. The "abstract subject" described here by Descola resembles Adam, the first man on earth and who found himself in the unattractive situation of first having to name all the animals and plants before being able to enjoy life in paradise.

Because of thispsychologicistic Kantianism, Descola elaborates now four different ontological categories to which we could assign all cosmological systems that exist in the world. In a critical appraisal of Descola's book, Marshall Sahlins already pointed out that in all these systems of thought, sometimes more, sometimes less anthropomorphic motifs are effective for the ordering of the various phenomena (Sahlins 2014). The cosmology that Descola calls "Western ontology," or *naturalism*, is the only one that would completely dispense with anthropomorphic motifs. And in his work, Descola also presents an explanation for this circumstance, which is of course again of a purely psychological nature. According to him, it is due to the arrogance of western society that we are be tempted to prioritize cosmological explanatory patterns that not only grant humans an "ontological privilege" over all other forms of life, but also the Western world in general over all other cultures.

Similar ideas can be found in the works of other representatives of the *Ontological turn*, such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who defending Amerindian cultures against the charge of narcissism, suggests "primitive narcissism is just talk. If you want to find real narcissism, you have to turn to the moderns" (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 52). His immediate reference here is Marx, whose distinction that animals only produce unilaterally while humans produce universally is, according to Viveiros, an expression of his rampant narcissism. "Whatever Marx meant by the phrase that man 'universally produces,' I interpret it as saying that man is a universal animal: an interesting thought" because, as Viveiros believes, "Marx thus claimed that man possessed 'more being' than all other animals" (ibid.).

One does not have to be too familiar with Marx's philosophical writings to question this interpretation. We will need to briefly explain Marx's position, and from there, we will be able to better understand

animism as a specific *vital activity*, which can be understood through the works of Ilyenkov.

### **The Universal Animal**

The remainder of this article will explore Ilyenkov's concept of "*the ideal*" and its potential to offer a more nuanced understanding of animism, moving beyond the limitations of structuralist approaches to provide a dialectical materialist interpretation of indigenous cosmologies.

What does Marx mean when he claims that humans produce universally? Answering this question requires clarification of the distinguishing factor of dialectical philosophy. This is the claim that at the end of the mediation process, an identity between subject and object is established. The philosophical subject, which has to be strictly distinguished, as already said, from the psychological individual, is something general, so to speak, "not the empirical individual, but something that is prior to these empirical individuals" (Adorno 2022, 228). The object, on the other hand, is, in the original sense, that which "opposes" us. Already in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel states that the subject's self-perception always includes a perception of its surroundings, or that the subject only becomes aware of itself through an interaction with the world that surrounds it, and this is no different with materialist dialectics. Objects are perceived precisely because they present resistance to the subject's movement, i.e. of the subject's force, which Hegel calls the "actual force" (Hegel 2020). They are therefore in contradiction with the movement and force of the subject, and for this very reason, as Ilyenkov states, is the contradiction "a very precise criterion of culture and intelligence. Strictly speaking, it is the characteristic of its existence" (Ilyenkov 2021, 21).

Hegel was the first philosopher to place the concept of labour at the very centre of his theory and draw the philosophical consequences of it. Although, as Marx then reproaches him in the *Economical Philosophical Manuscripts* (Marx 2003), he dealt with a purely intellectual concept. When Hegel speaks of labour, he means intellectual labour. But it is already made clear in Hegel's work that perception can only arise through work on the object. In the "Systemfragment" he speaks of the "destruction of the object," and this is not about its physical destruction, but about the overcoming of the object in its simple positivity, and it "is in fact about labour" (Lucaks 1973, 282).

With its destruction, the collective introduces the object into its own production dynamics, i.e. the object begins to become an element of its

reproductive process and thus loses its independent power compared with the subject, i.e. it is no longer in contradiction with it. The object thus acquires a new purposefulness, which is assigned to it by the praxis of the collective, by its *vital activity*:

For it is clear from this context that the breadth and depth of man's knowledge of the causal connections of nature are conditioned by the setting of ends in human labour. [...] This new function of objects and of the forces of nature is, however, according to the Hegelian conception, new and at the same time not new. (Lucaks 1873, 536)

Ilyenkov endorses follows Marx in seeking to place this Hegelian dynamic “on its feet.” As Ilyenkov notes in allusion to Spinoza’s epistemological approach: “Thought is a property, a mode of existence of the body, as are its extensions, i.e. its spatial configuration and its position among other bodies.” (Ilyenkov 2022, 9). This spinozist materialism, rehabilitated first by Marx and then with emphasis by Ilyenkov, is indispensable to any attempt to comprehend the mediation process actually underlying human existence. But Spinoza’s approach falls short because the dialectical mediation is about much more than a purely geometric displacement and rearrangement of bodies in space. It is about a modification and rearrangement of *forces*. And the forces of “man” are not those of an individual person, but of the subject in the modern sense, that is, of the subject as an expression of the horizon of thought and interaction of an entire collective, which expresses itself in its *vital activity*. And each individual can only act as a historical concrete being insofar as it makes itself the carrier of this *vital activity*:

In short, it is not the isolated human individual who is the carrier, i.e. the subject, of one or another universal capacity (the active force), but, on the contrary, this active force, which is alienated from him and becomes more and more alienated, acts as a subject dictating to each individual from outside the ways and forms of his vital activity. (Ilyenkov 2021, 195)

And because the process of perception cannot be separated at all from the interrelation arising between the production and reproduction of collectives and the forces of nature, any ontology, any system of thought, must also be understood in relation to the totality of this interrelation. For this reason, Ilyenkov also criticizes Hegel’s short-sightedness when he attempts to determine this totality solely in relation to its basic logical structure, and therefore grasps the *vital activity* “only insofar as it already becomes a scheme of thought, a logical scheme, a rule according to which man more or less consciously constructs one or another specific

action (be it in the field of language or in another field)” (Ilyenkov 2021, 196). Ilyenkov strongly appeals that a dialectical reconstruction of this process must be based on Marx’s distinction between the vital activity of animals and that which is specifically human: “The animal is immediately identical with its vital activity. It does not differ from it. It is this activity. But man himself makes his vital activity the object of his will and his consciousness. His vital activity is conscious.” (Marx 2003, 112)

Human *vital activity* is characterised precisely by the mediation of the *ideal*, through which the human subject continuously modifies its *praxis* in relation to the natural forces surrounding it, and precisely in such a way, as Lukacs also describes, it establishes constantly modified causal connections between its own and the natural forces. In this way, objects and natural forces, mediated by human labour, acquire new functions that are “new and at the same time not new.” Man is thus the only animal which makes the forces of all other objects, of all animals, plants and abiotic elements, its own, and remodels the totality of objects into potential extensions of its own vital activity. And it is precisely for this reason that Marx characterised human *vital activity* as *universal* in comparison with the vital activity of the animal.

This universal nature is the key to understanding the animism described by Descola, and also the remark added by Sahlins that the anthropomorphism so characteristic of animistic thought can be found in totemism, analogism and naturalism to an ever lower degree (Sahlins 2014).

We have already noted above that complex human cognition develops on the basis of a social *common ground*, namely the production and reproduction dynamics organised according to the division of labour, which in turn is developed in interaction with the forces of the ecosystem. The underlying dynamic of this second nature is therefore that of collaboration, which in modern humans is initially organised based on increasingly complex kinship and ultimately clan relationships. The evolutionary success of *Homo sapiens* is therefore not primarily due to our increased ability to manipulate objects and drive technological progress. These abilities appear to have developed much later, and have always required a social complexity that is not found in simply structured societies, i.e. technological progress is the result and not the driving force of social progress. *Homo sapiens*’ recipe for success is his ability to use social compromise and negotiating skills to involve more and more players in his vital activity based on the division of labour, which

is becoming increasingly complex as a result. And these actors do not necessarily have to be human.

Human vital activity turns into a vortex into which more and more human and non-human actors of the ecosystem are being drawn. And it is precisely this *vital activity* that becomes the *common ground* in relation to which the thinking of the various societies is moulded. If these societies now consciously expand the sphere of influence of their own *vital activity* established via negotiation and compromise, then it is not surprising if they consequently perceive their own reality of life as, in the words of Marcel Mauss (2002), a “total social fact.”

Animism seems to represent a form of reflexivity through which certain societies attempt by negotiation to shift the balance of power between ecosystemic phenomena and those of the group to one’s own advantage. As I have described above, the movement of intra-group collaboration coincides with the movement of labour, i.e. with the attunement of one’s own reproductive dynamics with those of the plants and animals in the environment. The culturally institutionalised and mythologically mediated productive cycle, such as the times of slashing and burning, sowing and harvesting, hunting or fishing times, times for gathering certain plants or animals, etc., is alienated along the reproductive cycles of these animals and plants. Rituals constitute important moments, often timed along a series of astronomical or climatological indicators, in which the collective self-consciousness is reaffirmed in its *vital activity*. The shaman plays an indispensable role in this animistic logic, since he is the one who is qualified and morally authorised to enter into contact with the spirits of other animals, but above all with the “owner of the forest” or “boss of the animals” (Descola 2012; Viveiros de Castro 2004; 2010; 2015; Hallowell 1992; Berkes 2008).

And the shamanic prayer to these spirits is always more or less the same; that the spirits be indulgent to the families of the group, and that they allow the hunters to continue hunting in the forests and catch more game, or that they keep diseases or illnesses away from the group. It would seem then that shamanic practice also seeks to *destroy the object*, in the sense in which we formulated it above, namely to eliminate the object as a social actor. For the shaman seeks to negotiate either directly with the various animals, or to negotiate their fate with their owner or bosses, i.e. to transform the animal subject into a thing and thus give it a function that “is new and not new at the same time.” The collective aims to transform the conditions of the environment. But because it has reached its limits to achieve a transformative intervention through a

modification of the division of labour and does also not have a technological response to the fundamental problem of scarcity of resources, it intends to compensate for the limitation of its own reproductive activity with a social negotiation or collaboration. It is therefore an indispensable predisposition for animals to be carriers of a human personality because without a personality, there would be no communication and therefore no negotiation.

Those animals with which the animistic societies enter into negotiations through the intervention of the shaman are thus potential actors in their own vital activity, and are therefore located on the *common ground*. They participate, at least potentially, in the same *civilisational context*. And this also explains why these societies often attribute a human personality to other animals, while other groups of humans, especially neighbouring and culturally different collectives, are denied precisely this humanity (Descola 2012; Viveiros de Castro 2004; 2010; 2015). These neighbouring societies function on the basis of a vital activity that is incompatible with their own and is even in competition with it, i.e. they are external to and opposed to their own civilisational context. If one's own civilisational context is considered prototypical for human behaviour, then it is not surprising that other societies are denied this humanity, while other plants and animals that are participants in their own *vital activity*, especially hunting game, are conceded this very humanity.

When animistic societies describe and perceive the phenomena of nature as equal to themselves, it is not because of a projection of an abstract humanity onto these phenomena, but because these phenomena actually seem to interact with a will of their own in this civilisational context. Therefore, it is not due to a metaphysical deliberation that animals would become *de facto* human beings, or a human being someone to whom an abstract humanity is attributed. Humans are all those living beings with whom the collective itself maintains a close interrelationship characterised by negotiation, i.e. all phenomena that participate, at least potentially, in the *civilisational context* itself.

There should also be another question answered here, at least briefly: can there really be no distinction between nature and culture in animistic societies?

Animist societies consider the animals of the environment to have a social life equivalent to that of humans, i.e. they also drink manioc beer, live in big houses, dance, converse, and so on. And these animals can potentially share the same *civilising context* as the human group, so the

whole world becomes a *total social fact*. On the other hand, as Descola and other anthropologists recognise, there is a large number of animals that simply do not participate in this complex network of negotiation. So, we have those animals, such as most birds, fish or insects, which are simply irrelevant to the reproductive dynamic itself, as they serve neither as a food source nor as a climatological or meteorological indicator. But we also have those environmental phenomena over which these societies simply exercise effective control, such as a wide variety of forest resources for making artefacts or clothing, building houses, making musical instruments or ornaments, or we could say, objects that have already been *destroyed*.

So, while animist societies find their *total social fact* enlarged by a series of animals and plants, they exclude not only other animals but also certain human groups from it. Would it not then be legitimate to identify this undefined set as that sphere of reality which occupies a function equivalent to what we call nature? A reality which is certainly autonomous, independent of the mutual interaction and negotiation which characterises a genuinely *human* life? A dimension of reality that is, in fact, independent of direct human activity.

Nature is a generic concept for everything that does not participate directly in our *civilisational context*. Culture is thus not the dichotomous opposite of nature, as Descola assumes, but simply a nature humanised through collective labour; our *second nature*. The intellectual situation in which the peoples of the Amazon and the Arctic find themselves seems to resemble that described by Mauss; with respect to the peoples of Polynesia and Melanesia, who execute a complex system of exchange, and who “have no notion of either selling or lending, but nevertheless carry out juridical and economic operations which fulfil the same functions” (Mauss 2002, 42).

The presence of numerous animals and plants outside the civilisational context delimited by mutual obligations, this network of reciprocity that constitutes the second nature of animist societies, presupposes a space outside of it. And only the latent danger of standing outside, of falling outside this network of reciprocity, compels the fulfilment of the various mutual obligations. Although animist societies do not operate with a precise concept for this outer space, the congruence of their cosmology rests entirely on the existence of this *outside*; a congruence clearly visible to us, even though animist ontology does not seem to have appropriated this dialectical interdependence between the *civilisational context* itself and a natural world beyond social interaction. Nature is

that dimension of reality that is characterised by a negative relationship to collective social labour, and like modern societies, animists aspire to an appropriation of it. Since the animistic *vital activity* depends on their capacity to interweave their own reproductive dynamics with a multiplicity of ecosystemic dynamics, i.e. on a division of labour between the human collective and the various ecosystemic agents, it is only logical that this *social fact* be conceived in terms of a social negotiation.

The aim of the humanisation of certain animals by *shamanic thought* is not the creation of an abstract community of solidarity, but to make them commensurable for the social and reproductive dynamics of the collective, i.e. for their integration into the social division of labour. ‘*Shamanic reason*’ is, like ‘*enlightened reason*,’ an intellectual resource that serves the domination of the forces of nature.

Modern and animistic societies are therefore not differentiated by the presence or absence of a dichotomy that divides reality into culture and nature; without the sense of a sphere outside one’s own civilisational context, it would be inconceivable to rationalise one’s own reality of life as a social interaction. That reality itself is conceived as a *social fact*, as a division of labour involving a series of plants and animals, implies the existence of a reality outside this negotiated collaboration. What differentiates animist societies from totemist or modern societies is *where* they draw this dividing line between their own civilisational context and the outside world, and their awareness of the seriousness of this distinction. That the societies themselves are often not aware of this logical operation and have not conceptually fixed it, does not detract from the fact that, for our anthropological analysis, this division is clearly conceivable. Animist societies also silently—or unconsciously—presuppose a sphere of reality that fulfils “the same functions” as that which in our culture is called nature; “they do not know it, but they do it” (Marx 2014, 43).

### **Antropomorphisation of the Environment**

The approach outlined so far allows us foremost to demystify the animism described by Descola and to understand it as a logical consequence of vital activities in which human collectives are forced to subordinate themselves to the reproductive cycles of various elements of an ecosystem, or when societies are unable to exercise control over them. This approach allows us to place these *vital activities* in a larger context of human evolution. This will be illustrated sufficiently through the societies of the Amazon and the Arctic presently. And it appears to be a more



promising approach than Descola's assertion that all cultures, in one way or another, through dreams and trances, have experienced the existence of a purely gestural dimension of reality that is independent of physicality. This may of course be true, but it is not a satisfactory explanation of animism, and especially not of why certain societies develop animistic cosmologies, others totemistic, and again others analogistic ones.

However, it seems that the dialectics of our lifeform makes it impossible to escape the principle of anthropomorphic mirroring that underlies animism, and in all cultures "human beings see the natural world as a reflection of the social organisation that is the dominant reality of their lives" (Levins and Lewontin 2009, 12). And not only Hegel's dialectics, but also materialist dialectics is based on the reciprocal interaction of subject and object, in which both poles ultimately constitute each other. It is therefore fair to say that animism is a universal characteristic of human thought, and that there is simply no escaping the underlying anthropomorphism. Nevertheless, while recognising this continuity of the various expressions of human cognition, it should not be forgotten that this anthropomorphic reflection in modern dialectical philosophy is situated on a substantially different level of abstraction than the immediate or direct animism of the societies of the Amazon or the Taiga. The anthropomorphic reflection always remains in human thought, including modern Western thought, in relation to phenomena that exceed the capacity of control and transformation of a specific vital activity. Humans always try to make the unknown and the uncontrollable commensurable through anthropomorphic projection. So, what causes different cultures, all of whose cognition has an inherent anthropomorphising tendency, to express it in such different ways?

Here again, Ilyenkov encloses this process with its counter-dynamics. The human being is also the *universal animal* because, as he describes, he not only experiences and perceives the world through his working process, but subjects it to his own *vital activity*. The objects and dynamics of the ecosystem are transformed, so to speak, into an extension of its activity. The closure of the mediation-process, through which the identity of subject and object is established, can only come about through the process that Ilyenkov calls the "materialization de lo ideal" (Ilyenkov 2021, 271). Or in other words, through his work, man shapes the world into his own. Only in this way can an actual concrete totality come into being, which in the case of our modern society is capitalism, and in the case of the societies of the Amazon or the Taiga, this totality

is *animism*. And a totality is nothing besides a certain form of organising nature (mind you, a nature we ourselves are a part of).

### Arctic vs. Amazon?

Let us now return to our initial consideration. We tried to explain what the reasons were for the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, and also those of the Taiga, to have developed animistic systems of thought. Descola argues that the very fact that the Amazon rainforest and the Taiga are fundamentally different ecosystems is sufficient evidence that these systems of thought are not determined by ecological factors. However, as we have just seen, it is insufficient to merely align systems of thought and ecosystems, as this would simply not represent the totality of the mediation process of human reason. Systems of thought can only be understood in light of the causal relationships entered into between the forces of the various human societies and those of nature. It is therefore a three-part mediation between the *ideal* and the thinking and non-thinking bodies. The logical bond that holds all this together is *reason*, that is, the ability to make all these relationships understandable as causal connections.

Both Lévi-Strauss and Descola are mistaken if they believe they can explain the various systems of thought based on *schemas* specific to the individual or the collective (without explaining how they come into being). We must not consider these systems of thought in their abstract, purely mental form, for this ideal form “is nothing other than the form of the human social activity as it presents itself in the matter” (Ilyenkov 2021, 202), i.e. the establishment of causal relations between thinking and non-thinking bodies in the vital activity of a society. How then do these different ontological systems come into being? We can say with Ilyenkov that:

. . . all general images, however, without exception, neither sprang from universal schemas of a work of thought nor arose from an act of passive contemplation of nature unsullied by man, but took shape in the course of its practical, objective transformation by man, by society. (Ilyenkov 2022, 214)

And thus the *ideal* form, these different ontologies, are, after all, merely the expression of a very specific material state of affairs. The “materialisation of the ideal” has the consequence that both matter and the *ideal* can only be understood in relation to each other.

The ideal is the subjective image of objective reality, i.e. reflection of the external world in the forms of man's activity, in the form of his consciousness and will. (Ilyenkov 2022, 212)

If we now take a step back and look at the same situation on the basis of a concrete movement of reason, i.e. an operative reason, which develops directly from human *vital activity* and interacts with it, instead of an abstract contemplative reason, then we can see that the difference between the Amazon rainforest and the Arctic taiga turns out to be an error of perspective.

The possibilities for Amazonian societies to achieve significant modifications in the ecosystem they inhabit are virtually nil. Contrary to popular belief, the Amazon is anything but a land of milk and honey, and the ecological limits are extremely high and weigh heavily on these societies. There is a reason why the Amazon is also called the “green desert” or “proteinic desert.” Although recent studies on anthropogenic soils, called *Terra Preta*, have broken the closed and deterministic scheme that the eminence of Amazonian archaeology Betty Meggers had formulated in her ethnohistoric reconstructions of pre-Columbian Amazonian cultures, the title of her famous treatise *Amazonia: Man and Culture in a Counterfeit Paradise* still describes in a very precise way the crude reality that the societies that inhabit this tropical forest have to live in. Poor and acid soils and harsh ecological circumstances that make intensive agriculture impossible, small hunting game dispersed in giant territories and also no animals suitable for domestication. And the situation in the Arctic and the subarctic Taiga is not a different one. The so-called *First Nations* of the Canadian boreal forest also inhabit an ecosystem that makes it almost impossible for them to intervene significantly in the reproductive dynamics of other animals and plants, let alone exercise control over them. Like the Amazon, the taiga “is a region fundamentally unsuitable for agriculture,” so much so that for “a long time it was a physical barrier to national development and the unification of Canada” (Hallowell 1992, 16).

Although societies as the Ojibwa and Cree can rely on larger animals, such as moose and caribou, to hunt, they are also forced to adapt their hunting behaviour to the dynamics of wild animals. The availability of hunting game fluctuates greatly between the seasons. It is especially scarce during the extreme cold and long winters, and the resources of the ecosystem are quickly depleted, which is why these societies, just like those of the Amazon, change their locations at irregular intervals. Like the Amazon rainforest, the Taiga is an ecosystem that

does not allow human groups to impose themselves on the complex and intricate ecological interactions, i.e. it forces human life forms to play a relatively subordinate role. This passivity cannot only be recognised from the outside or in terms of specialised anthropological considerations, but is also reflected in the cosmology of indigenous societies themselves. Firket Berkes, for example, describes for the Cree that:

The hunter always speaks as if the human being is the passive party in this relationship. If the animal decides to make itself available to him, the hunter succeeds. The hunter has no power over the hunt; the animals have the final say on whether they will be taken. (Berkes 2008, 99)

Their habitat is not called the “white forest” or “white desert” for nothing. So, if we consider the concrete *vital activity* of these societies, it is clear that the extremely hostile ecological conditions of the Amazon forest and the arctic Taiga are anything but “entirely different,” as Descola describes them, but that they, on the contrary, show surprising similarities. I am not talking about a similarity of their geographical and climatic features, similarities in flora and fauna, i.e. similarities for sensory perception. I am talking about what the environment means for the *vital activity* of a society, not for the *contemplative* but for the *operative mind*. The similarity is precisely that both ecological spaces force those human collectives that aim to settle in them permanently to be relatively subordinated to the reproductive dynamics of the other ecological factors. One could say that both ecosystems condemn human groups to a certain passivity, since the “destruction of the object,” as Hegel calls it, that is, the integration of natural forces into the production dynamics of human collectives and attributing them new functions, is beyond their capabilities.

This also makes it clear why, as Sahlins shows, anthropomorphism decreases in the various ontologies in the course of cultural evolution (2014). As a result of the interaction between culture and nature, humans are also becoming ever stronger drivers of ecological change through more complex vital activities. The expansion and complexation of societies is achieved by integrating ever more animals and plants in their reproduction dynamics, so that ever more ecological factors start to gain a function “that is new and not new at the same time.” The more cultures are able to incorporate the objects of the environment into their own *vital activity*, i.e. to shape them into an extension of their own activity, the more the ecosystem turns *anthropogenic*. When a culture becomes the driving force in an ecosystem, which thus becomes then more

*anthropogenetic*, it no longer conceives the different ecological phenomena as independent actors on an equal footing, but rather in their simple materiality.

## Conclusions

I will now try to summarise the facts presented here.

Both Lévi-Strauss and Descola's version of structuralist schematism inherit aspects of Kant's schematism which restrict their anthropological investigations. The *schemas* presented require an almost mythical pre-logical and pre-ontological praxis, which, as the recourse to an "abstract subject for whom it is indifferent whether it ever existed" implies, cannot be represented in any concrete ethnographic way.

Animism, totemism and analogism, just like Western modernity (capitalism), should not be considered purely mental phenomena, but as the expression of a specific interaction between vital activity organised according to a specific division of labour and the forces at work in an ecosystem, i.e. an onto-logical totality. Cosmologies are a culturally specific expression of *ideality*, i.e. the mental link between social activity and material reality through causal relationships.

As Sahlins argues, animism, totemism, and analogism are subject to an anthropomorphic projection. This anthropomorphism is not only differently pronounced in the various ontologies, but also provokes their counter-movement, namely the naturalisation of social dynamics. An attempt, such as Descola's, to reconstruct ontologies independently of the concrete ecological framework conditions not only fails in the attempt to depict their logical functioning, but also to provide an answer to the question of why certain ontologies can be found in certain ecosystems, such as animism in the Amazon and Taiga, or totemism in Australia. By comparing the production and reproduction dynamics underlying the ontologies with the dominant forces in certain ecosystems with which these societies see themselves confronted, it is possible to answer this question.

Certain ecosystems, such as the Amazon or the Taiga, are characterised by rather misanthropic conditions that make it difficult or even impossible for societies to control the natural forces and integrate them into their own *vital activity*, or to make human *vital activity* the vanishing point of ecological dynamics. This forces societies to assume a subordinate role in these ecosystems, whereby their own vital activity can only be managed through a series of compromises, i.e. the subordination

and adaptation of human activity to the reproductive cycles of the various animals and plants. Animistic cosmologies are the ideological expression of this logic of production.

Societies that manage to integrate the dynamics of various ecological factors into their own *vital activity* through a more complex division of labour, i.e. gain control over a range of natural phenomena, are now increasingly acting as drivers of ecological change themselves. Ecosystems are thus becoming increasingly anthropogenic, which can be illustrated philosophically with Ilyenkov's formula of the "materialisation of the ideal."

The more a society manages to integrate the elements of the ecosystem into its own *vital activity* through the complexification of its division of labour, the more anthropogenic the ecosystem becomes and the less these society is dependent on finding compromises and thus also on anthropomorphic projection. Instead, the increasingly complex division of labour becomes a challenge, and totemism is an attempt to organise social fragmentation along various ecological elements.

Although Ilyenkov never dealt specifically with these issues, his philosophy, which not only emphasises the social and collective character of ideality, but also places the concrete vital activity of a society at the centre of philosophical considerations, can be helpful in challenging the widespread crude structuralism in contemporary anthropological research.

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## Biography

**Martin Albert Persch** is an Anthropologist specializing in Amazonian Studies and Education and Neurosciences, with a Master in Education with mention in Computer Science and Educational Technology from the Universidad San Martín de Porres. He has worked for more than 10 years with various indigenous organisations in the Peruvian Amazon. He currently teaches Philosophy at the Universidad de Ciencias y Humanidades in Peru and is in charge of the area of formation of the Centro de Análisis Intercultural para el Desarrollo (CANAIID).