

3. Political ontology: What is it?

The potential future is related to what diagnosis we make of the present. In light of multiple modernities, why are other modernities called modern? Societies strive for modern status. A distinction must be made not only between modern and non-modern. But also between variations or hybridities within a supposed common modernity (e.g. French vs. British modernity or British vs. Indian modernity) and distinct other modernities. Ontology here means the presupposition of what kinds of things exist, ontologies perform into worlds, ontologies and worlds are thus synonymous, and finally ontologies manifest as (mythical) stories that have easily grasped presuppositions about what kinds of things and relations constitute a given world. The term "political ontology" connotes two interrelated meanings. It refers to the politics that underlies the practices that shape a particular world or ontology, and it also refers to a field of study that focuses on the conflicts that arise when different worlds or ontologies try to maintain their own existence as they interact and interpenetrate.

Ontological struggles take place through naturalization, where the struggle seems fatal, inevitable, clear that it could not have led otherwise. The naturalistic view here portrays a dominant view that evokes that it contains other ontologies within itself. It evokes the good whatever that means. Individual ontologies distinguish what is in their own way.

Euromodern, and I would argue even more modernist, falls within the spectrum of naturalistic ontologies that divide what is between two large domains, nature and culture, which are sometimes (but not always) in relationship with a third domain, the domain of the superhuman/supernatural, i.e. the domain of God(s).

Animistic ontologies correspond to what many also call relational ontologies, in which each entity (represented in outline by a geometric figure) is related to other entities as nodes in a network.

I have illustrated the analogy using the jing-jang, a rather familiar symbol that quickly conveys the idea that this kind of ontology operates with the notion of a kind of initial dynamic that repeats from micro to macro and permeates the entire cosmos.

Totemism singles out a mixture of humans and non-humans within ontologically distinct groups that descend from a common ancestor. I will not go into the details of these ontologies further, I will only point out that analogism and totemism, like naturalism, tend to imagine hierarchical relationships between entities that inhabit worlds configured by them.

Mario Blaser (2009) Political Ontology, Cultural Studies, 23:5-6, 873-896, DOI:0.1080/09502380903208023

FIGURE 1 The four major ontologies of Descola.

