



**HAL**  
open science

# Invisible agents. Framework for a comparative approach to fundamental uncertainties

Laurent Dousset

► **To cite this version:**

Laurent Dousset. Invisible agents. Framework for a comparative approach to fundamental uncertainties. *Revue des Sciences sociales*, 2022. halshs-03529013

**HAL Id: halshs-03529013**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03529013v1>**

Submitted on 17 Jan 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## ***Invisible agents. Framework for a comparative approach to fundamental uncertainties***

The final version of this paper is to be published in:

*Revue des Sciences Sociales*, sometime in 2022

**Laurent Dousset**

Directeur d'Études à l'EHESS

Aix-Marseille Université, CNRS, EHESS - CREDO UMR 7308, Marseille, Labex CORAIL

### **Résumé**

Fondé sur des travaux antérieurs sur l'incertitude en tant qu'outil heuristique, cet article souhaite étendre le cadre théorique et empirique pour inclure l'analyse des agents intangibles. La certitude, qui n'est jamais absolue, est néanmoins une nécessité sociale car elle permet l'anticipation, et donc l'interaction. Elle est fondée sur des régimes de vérité spécifiques. Dans les situations d'incertitude, cependant, les institutions sociales qui auraient dû fournir la capacité à l'anticipation sont considérées comme incomplètes ou inefficaces par les acteurs eux-mêmes. De telles situations peuvent conduire à une reconfiguration des valeurs sociales et des épistèmes. Cet article montre que, dans les cas où des agents intangibles sont impliqués, les principes d'appartenance sociale sont fragilisés, conduisant souvent au fractionnement sociopolitique et au rejet des régimes de vérité dominants.

**Mots-clés** : incertitude, appartenance, épistèmes, sorcellerie, COVID-19

### **Abstract**

Based on previous work on uncertainty as a heuristic tool, this paper wants to extend the theoretical and empirical framework to include the analysis of intangible agents. Certainty, which is never absolute, is nevertheless a social necessity because it allows for anticipation, and thus social interaction. It is founded on specific regimes of truth. In situations of uncertainty, however, the social institutions that should have provided the capacity for anticipation are considered incomplete or inefficient by actors themselves. Such situations may lead to a reconfiguration of social values and epistemes. This paper shows that, in those cases in which intangible agents are involved, the principles of social belonging are made fragile, which often leads to socio-political fragmentation and the rejections of dominant regimes of truth.

**Keywords**: uncertainty, belonging, epistemes, sorcery, COVID-19

During work with Australian and Island Melanesian societies, I have been confronted with situations, some dramatic, others more ordinary, which invited me to investigate the relationship between certainty and uncertainty as social processes and as a heuristic device at the same time<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, under certain conditions, certainty is an expression of trust producing a form of truth. Interestingly perhaps, uncertainty is, on the other hand, not precisely a synonym of untruth, even though it grounds, under certain conditions again, the emergence of mistrust and social fragmentation. Both are intimately related to the dynamics of social belonging and their analysis appears therefore useful in understanding social processes more generally.

This paper is based on previous work on certainty, uncertainty and belonging (Dousset 2018, 2019). The aim here is to go further and to spell out a framework for comparative analyses of the relationship between “regimes of truth” and “social belonging” that is hopefully applicable in other sociohistorical contexts. Indeed, I have formerly suggested to distinguish systemic from existential uncertainties to account for reproductive and transformative processes respectively. However, it appears that such a distinction is of insufficient analytical value in cases in which the proxy of uncertainty is intangible, such as when spirits, deities or indeed viruses are among the suspected agents. It appears that in these situations, the elaboration of epistemes or “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1966, for example) is not only essential, as in all cases of uncertainties, but also the *only* means through which uncertainties can be resolved to produce environments of trust.

After recalling some of the rudiments of an anthropology of uncertainty, the paper will proceed to analyse the rationales of belonging emerging in the context of the advent or confirmation of regimes of truth. While predominantly based on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Australia and Island Melanesia, it will attempt uncontrolled parallels with the European, and more specifically the COVID-19 situation. As we will see, efforts made by actors on the ground to resolve uncertainties with the outcome to reconstitute a form of relative trust proceeds through the re-enactment or redefinition of the criteria and means of belonging. This is rather common in situations of uncertainty. More importantly however, when invisible agents are involved, processes of uncertainty resolution also consider the alteration of the very principles — and not just of the constituents — of social acceptability. Indeed, as Boltanski showed (2009), the means of resolving uncertainties lies in the consensual emergence of a shared moral

---

<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to my doctoral students François-Xavier Fauconau, Aurélien Esgonnière du Thibeuf and David Glory for the discussions we had around the manuscript. My acknowledgements also go to James Leach, Mitchell Low, Deborah Pope, Katie Glaskin, Nick Harney, Maurice Godelier and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

order, of norms and of values. However, those situations involving invisible agents reach further. They contribute to the advent of contesting forms of social belonging or of the fear for the disappearance of the potential for belonging altogether. Here, consensus favours discontent, resistance, division and fragmentation. Before we can move into this terrain, I need to recall and clarify some elementary conceptual and empirical elements positioning the anthropology of uncertainty I propose.

### **Uncertainty, truth and social values**

Some of the principles necessary to analyse situations of uncertainty are, from an anthropological or sociological perspective, rather common place. I feel they nevertheless need to be recalled here to make the argument fully understandable. A preliminary statement, more philosophical than anthropological in nature, is to merely postulate that there is no absolute truth and therefore also no objective certainty. Obviously, this postulate can only be considered valid if a dogma, since if it is dimmed true, then it would also constitute the only possible certainty and point to its intrinsic contradiction. What is thus meant is that expressed or experienced certainty is supported by the existence of contextual and temporary truth with its specific history and legitimacy, that is, “regimes of truth” as per Foucault (1984). There is no need to recall that, at least since Karl Popper (1963), even in the so-called hard sciences the principle is that if you can’t potentially refute a theory, it is not worth considering it as such. The potential for truth to be invalidated is to some extent built into particular regimes of truth. The consequence of this preliminary statement is that truth, and therefore also certainties, are provisional constructs of their time: they are social objects. Also, truth embodies the possibility of its own disavowal by definition.

From a sociological perspective, the existence of certainties, which are never absolute as we just saw, is nevertheless an existential necessity, because truth and certainty enable anticipation, which is itself indispensable for social interaction. Language is among the most elementary example: interlocutors need to be able to anticipate that there is some form of shared understanding of the elementary constituents of a language to be able to engage in communication. Sociality is grounded on the individual capacity to foresee a range of possible, or rather “acceptable” consequences of actions. In some contexts, greeting someone with a “Good morning”, and through this also acknowledging the existence or presence of this other, is expected to receive a similar salute in return.

The anticipation-enabling capacity of certainty I extrapolate from the idea of *idéels*, to use Godelier's (1984, 2015:30) expression – a term that has been badly translated as the “mental” in the English versions of his work. *Idéel* is not simply the mental, but rather designates the nature, the history and the material and immaterial relationality of ideas or social institutions, including their norms and values. It is the anthropological counterpart of Foucault's epistemes. Indeed, both concepts embrace what, in any given historical and sociocultural context, is qualifiable. The principal difference between the two is that particular social institutions may be considered to embody specific *idéels* with different historical trajectories, while an episteme is holistic and embraces and even explains a wide range of institutions at once. It may well be that it is this holistic-embracing nature of the episteme that led Foucault to continually redefine and to finally abandon the concept (i.e. Viltard 2006).

Let me illustrate through a simple example the range involved in the concept of the *idéel*. In front of a bakery, one can, with a high degree of *certainty*, confidence or trust (let us use these as synonyms for the moment), *anticipate* that this is indeed the place where one will be able to buy bread. *Idéel* summarizes the fact that this anticipation is possible without having to reconstruct and make explicit the history of domestication (of wheat, yeast...), the origin and social value of the means of exchange (money for bread), the emergence and nature of social division of labour (agriculture, bakery, banker...), the existence and rationales of spatial organization (a cultivated field, the bakery, its counter...), the customs according to which one is expected to behave in a particular locale (queue and wait for one's turn, “hello, please, thank you”... and not: “could I have a train ticket?”), and so on. In other words, social institutions and their *idéels* constitute the foundation on which certainties can exist, and these are also the grounds on which anticipation is possible. These certainties, which, as we just saw are constituted by a range of acceptable consequences of actions, are “naturalised”, as the old sociological schools wanted it, so that actors that embody these certainties also consider them rational and natural, and are henceforth doubtful in the face of other and unknown *idéels* which may be deemed irrational, exotic, inefficient, immoral, or even wrong and untrue.

To quote a Melanesian example from one of my usual field locations — the island of Malekula in Vanuatu — that will be of importance later in this paper, people feel the need to know with absolute confidence where each member of their family, clan or village are at any one time: in the garden, fishing along such and such reef, in the house, walking to another village to visit family, and so on. People are expected to stop in front of a house when passing by and announce their spatial intentions. It is considered unacceptable to walk past someone and not tell them the reason and destination of one's travel (even though, obviously, people can also not tell the

truth; but such untruth will tend to satisfy the expectations). There is a degree of certainty about each other's whereabouts, which contributes to the capacity to elaborate at any given time a dynamic mental map in which each person is approximately situated. Inversely, there is great astonishment, even distress and frantic interrogation and conversation if someone appears not to be locatable by anyone else. I will return to the possible *idéels* or epistemes these rather normative expectations point to.

Nothing special so far. However, if we consider certainty as a system producing the capacity for anticipation in simplified worlds (d'Andrade, 1992), which is necessary for social life and interaction to take place, we can also move to consider *uncertainty* from another perspective than being solely a moment of hesitation or not-knowing. Indeed, if certainty is the anticipatory capacity enabled by the existence of social institutions, then uncertainties can inversely be considered to be situations or conditions in which anticipation has become difficult or impossible, and thus in which social institutions have not been able to play their role in enabling the anticipatory capacity<sup>2</sup>. While Bronner (1997) advocates that uncertainty is foremost an individual condition, the perspective suggested here socializes it as a diagnostic of the perception, by actors themselves, of their social norms as being incomplete or inefficient; a perception in which people may wish for more or different social control, more or different social rules and norms, more or different organizations and structures, more or a different moral order.

Let's be more precise with respect to the social character of uncertainty. Firstly, because they are the consequence of a form of deficiency of social institutions as perceived by people themselves, situations of uncertainty are *negative social facts*, but social facts nevertheless. They reveal disrupted or inexistent relationships between "objects" and "things" (Marion, 2010) or between "values" and "facts" (Abbott, 2020), that is, between a shared idea or concept and the actual events experienced by actors. Secondly – and this is where the anthropological analysis steps in more specifically –, uncertainties cannot endure and need to be either forgotten, repelled or resolved. Resolution is the process that interests us. One means to regain the capacity for anticipation is to share the condition and interpretation of the state of uncertainty. Resolution is our anthropological anchor point because the sharing and resolving of uncertainties are articulated through consensus-reaching processes that objectify norms and institutions and explicitly point towards the expressed need for change. Moreover, this process

---

<sup>2</sup> A similar idea has been expressed through the notion of "breaching experiment" (Garfinkel, 1967) or "situation of trial" (e.g. Lemieux, 2018: 37ff).

of objectification reveals hierarchies of values, as well as their strength and weaknesses as they are evaluated and perceived by people themselves.

It is at this moment that uncertainties become a heuristic tool, for they allow the decentring of analysis to study people's own *critical* perspective on the values they embody. The idea of value is here understood according to a long tradition since Talcott Parsons, effectively paraphrased by Louis Dumont: "in other words, the human being does not just think, he [she] acts. He [she] not only has ideas, but also values. To adopt a value is to hierarchize, and a certain consensus on values, a certain hierarchy of ideas, things and people is essential to social life" (1966: 34, my translation<sup>3</sup>): the value of values is hierarchy. What the analysis of situations of shared uncertainties adds to this overall statement, is that they constitute empirical opportunities for understanding the process of hierarchization. Moreover, hierarchization also implies the crystallisation of the ideal-typical phenomenology of values, to which actors more or less conform, adhere or resemble and of which they may become exemplars (Robbins, 2018). A hierarchization of values therefore eventually also produces the hierarchization of actors themselves.

To return to the Melanesian example quoted above, what is revealed and discussed in cases in which a person is not locatable by anyone else, generating distress and interrogation, is that such a situation creates a high degree of uncertainty with regard to the potentially malicious intentions the unlocatable person may want to hide. The characteristics of what it means to be a human being (aka an acceptable member of the group) are enumerated and hierarchized as sets of norms and values, such as to have a stable and identifiable body or to be transparent on one's intentions and actions (Dousset, 2016). All that deviates from these values, which may be refined and redefined at each case with great detail, is potentially malicious and the proof of latent acts of sorcery. It reveals that there are agents that may wish to destroy the group, and indeed society as it exists with its values.

### **The process of uncertainty resolution**

In my ethnographic experience, the identification and resolution of these uncertainties generally follow several phases (also see Dewey 1938: 104ff). The first is a moment of actors'

---

<sup>3</sup> « En d'autres termes, l'homme ne fait pas que penser, il agit. Il n'a pas seulement des idées, mais des valeurs. Adopter une valeur, c'est hiérarchiser, et un certain consensus sur les valeurs, une certaine hiérarchie des idées, des choses et des gens est indispensable à la vie sociale ».

self-description (Moore, 2011) and detached-decentred evaluations of the situation and of the roles and means of social institutions: why is this bakery selling train tickets and not bread? Have I misread the shop label, am I dreaming, has something been altered since the last time I came here, is this a joke, have the rules changed...? As much as competences and knowledge allow, depending on social status, the object (the concepts and values) are re-evaluated in the face of the thing (the experiences, the facts): a bakery is the place where food, in particular that based on cereals, is produced and sold, while train tickets are available near train stations at a counter and are not edible... When these uncertainties and resolution-driven reflections are shared, they take the form of elicitations (Dousset, 2018: 95ff) or what Boltanski (2009) calls metapragmatics: rather theoretical and formalized objectifications of social norms and values and of the institutions that they embody.

The second phase consists in the reinterpretation of observation and practice, while extending and redefining the roles and means of social institutions to render explicit the differences between what had been anticipated and what has actually been experienced (between the object and the thing). This leads to either refining existing hierarchies of values, or to reject existing institutions and to the emergence of new ones with possibly new hierarchies and even new values. The former leads to strengthening existing social hierarchies and enhancing their capacity to be durable (reproduced and transmitted), the latter leads to social change and, as we will see, to socio-political fragmentation.

To recall our Melanesian example, and as I already alluded to above, people, while discussing the possible reasons for their incapacity to locate a person, will first attempt to reinterpret their experience and identify missing information. Soon however, they move to explaining why such a behaviour is unacceptable, providing rationalities and reasons, as well as eliciting the definition of ill-intent and enumerate its various perceptible characteristics and signals: jealousy, drive for power, isolation, egoistic attitudes, disliking local food, not sleeping with the spouse, not caring for children, etc. Through such elicitations, which may evolve from one case to the next, the semantic field of a moral order is recalled and transmitted, also adjusted and modified. It involves the definition of what a social human being should look like and how it has to behave, and simultaneously also defines the way the unacceptable can be characterized and identified. As should be clear by now, people who, following this phase of elicitation, are deemed to have transgressed the range of acceptability are in danger of being accused of sorcery and may be made responsible for having caused unexplained deaths, leading sometimes as far as them being expelled or even killed.



In some cases, however, people disagree during the elicitation process on the range of acceptability or on the evidence advanced when applying these characteristics to a particular individual. Such disagreement can lead to more or less durable fragmentation and grouping, partisanship, which makes explicit pre-existing tensions that are revealed and possibly consolidated, but not necessarily caused by the particular situation of uncertainty at hand. This was the case in several sorcery accusations that I analysed in Malekula, where fragmentation resulting from these accusations reflected underlying competing interpretations of local history, and in particular of the validity of some persons claiming a traditional political authority. But, more profoundly, it made explicit opposed visions for the future: one which aimed to engage with the reconstruction of precolonial social organization and to concentrate efforts on “local affairs”, possibly going as far as reaching independence from the Republic of Vanuatu; the other rather aiming at being closely involved with the State apparatus and engaging with the national construction and adhering to new forms of political representation. Both obviously espoused competing sets of values, as well as competing visions of social hierarchy.

In all cases, the means exposed to reach consensus during these elicitations (whether they lead to fragmentation or not), consist in the clarification of what it takes and what it means to belong to a community, and to which community: the idea of social belonging. And social belonging is defined through what one may call principles of being-the-same and of being-together, to which I will return below. Indeed, the re-examination of social institutions by the actors themselves leads to modified, polarized or even new epistemes, which must be embodied to endure. This process is conducive to social and political fragmentation because of the different and competing epistemes that emerge, as described above.

Let me summarize the important points before discussing the notion of belonging, which is, I suggest, central in empirically understanding the relationship between uncertainty and regimes of truth. The sharing, and thus the recognition of a situation of uncertainty leads to the objectification of social institutions because these were (implicitly) expected to have provided the grounds for an anticipation that has become impossible. The notion of social institution is of course not limited to social bodies, but includes modes of living, moral precepts, material culture, tastes and aesthetic values, etc. that are the basis on which daily certainties, and thus interactions, are grounded. Processes of resolution of uncertainties therefore question not only what is considered to have been their immediate cause (the missing person in our Melanesian example, the particular shop that was supposed to be a bakery), but objectify and question

culture and social form more generally (what is it to be a member of the community, what is the definition and role of a bakery). What is usually not necessary to be said or thought is made explicit. In other words, situations of uncertainties that are shared (communicated) and thus socialized inevitably lead to an evaluation of social values, their hierarchies, and the regimes of truth that lie beneath them. Moreover, because different and even competing epistemes may emerge in these contexts, uncertainties often lead to social fragmentation, or at least to their discernibility and consolidation. Such fragmentation is the tangible consequence of specific dynamics that lead people to (re)consider belonging.

### **Belonging: being-the-same and being-together**

We may advance, possibly inaccurately, that the analysis of the means and modes through which shared identities appear and disappear is amongst the most inspiring ambition in which anthropology is to engage. These means and modes are also amongst the most neglected analytical objects, for, in so many cases, the existence of collectives is simply assumed upfront through the black-box of socialisation that is thought to construct entities of belonging. The study of the resolution of uncertainties as discussed above reveals however how fragile these collectives are, and how difficult the emergence of forms of shared identities can be. Rather than talking of collectives, groups or societies, I will here privilege the notion of *belonging*, since, instead of stipulating the existence of more or less bounded and more or less durable social entities, it places the accent on the complexities and the dynamics of (contextually) identifying oneself with some while simultaneously distinguishing from others<sup>4</sup>. In contrast to the idea of truth, for which I have taken an external perspective in order to situate it in its sociohistorical context and consider it as being part of a “regime”, I here adopt the actor’s internal perspective for whom belonging is not lived as an entity, but as processes that attempt to continuously enact it.

One of the most significant and revealing situation of uncertainty I have come across that produced new forms of belonging has, unfortunately, only been a second-hand experience. It has been reconstructed from testimonies and recollections, and as such constitutes in itself a

---

<sup>4</sup> I significantly differ here from Zask (2017), who suggests that privileging the notion of belonging confers the individual too much autonomy in the constitution of their “cultural identity”. I take a different and more pragmatic, also more widespread stance: every individual has multiple and overlapping, sometimes opposing identities. Belonging defines moments and situations in which some of these “identities” overlap with those of others and are thus recognized as being shared. Belonging to a family, a school, a club, a place, a village, a nation... simply implies that certain criteria for inclusion (and exclusion) are expected or have been met. I am thus, in this paper, not dealing with the “politics of belonging” (Antonsich, 2010).

metapragmatic exercise. The explicit nature of its consequences turns it into a textbook case, of which I will recall a few words to illustrate the idea of belonging that emerges during uncertainty resolutions.

The event of interest takes place in the central part of the Australian Western Desert in 1958. This huge area is inhabited by various Aboriginal groups who were defined loosely as constituting “societies” rather than “tribes” (Berndt, 1959), which is rather unusual for Australia. Linguists talk of 40 and more dialectal groups. These hunter-gatherers had no collective names, were organized in small interconnected family groups scattered around large areas of desert, identifying themselves individually to particularly important religious sites and meeting, when environmental conditions allowed, for ceremonies and exchanges. Until 1957, only the fringes of the Western Desert had been in relationship with the colonial powers and the Western World. However, in the context of nuclear testing and the launching of continental missiles, the Weapons Research Establishment controlled by British and Australian authorities decided to found a launch-control and meteorological station half-way on the missiles’ trajectory, that is, in the centre of the Western Desert.

An expedition was organized to decide on a suitable location for the station, and a few months later, graders, trucks and workmen reached the south of the Rawlinson Ranges, an area the authorities thought to be uninhabited. Soon thereafter, however, Aboriginal families converged and remained for months around the construction site, establishing themselves, to the despair of the patrol officers, around the new station. The recently dug well, from which water could be pulled in apparent unlimited quantities, as well as the rubbish and other left-overs of the crew, undoubtedly contributed to people being able to camp for prolonged periods around the site. The discussions I had from the early 1990s onwards over years with people who had experienced this first contact, however, revealed less materialistic reasons for the congregation (Dousset, 2011).

Even though they had heard from distant family members that white men had arrived on the continent, when faced with these beings, their trucks and tools, they were taken by great fear and uncertainty. Different lifeways were suddenly visible, different bodies imaginable; obligations and customs were not identical for all talking creatures. Moreover, these white people did not suffer the consequences expected from misbehaviour and from transgressing religious or social prohibitions, even though they were definitely humans, which they identified through the observation of their habits of sleeping, eating and grooming, in particular that of urinating and defecating.

More importantly, people remember having enjoyed being able to live close to each other for prolonged periods, something that had been uncommon “in the old days” in the desert. They recalled having spent a lot of time observing the white man, discussing his conduct, and describing precisely in what way he differed from them. Elicitations and self-descriptive objectifications seem to have been a regular, if not constant intellectual and social activity. Gradually, the differences crystallized as explicit and enumerable bodies of knowledge, and the idea of “culture” (although not worded as such), embracing and differentiating these corpuses, emerged. Finally, and before being chased or deported by patrol officers to distant stations and missions, people gave themselves a collective name which they would use from now on: Ngaatjatjarra. And Ngaanyatjarra would be the people that had congregated around the Warburton mission to the west, as well as Pitjantjatjarra those at the Docker River government station to the east.

The Western Desert case illustrates the objectification and solidification of the criteria of belonging that emerge in the context of the unknown, producing uncertainties followed by their resolution through elicitation and the subsequent crystallization of particular epistemes. The latter ground specified and enumerable features allowing for inclusion or exclusion into a body of belonging, but more importantly also exemplify the principles of belonging themselves. These can be, at least rhetorically, distinguished into two constituents which I call being-the-same and being-together, the former identifying principles of shared being, or what Pitt-Rivers (1973) described as forms of consubstantiality, the latter identifying the potential for shared action or practice. Commensality (e.g., Bloch 1998) is a notion that has long been used to label the processes in which eating or drinking together with recognizable (and to some extent ritualized) gestures from common receptacles contributes not only to forming identical bodies, but is also a social vector that allows for the extension or contraction of the scope of mutual trust. Indeed, as is also the case in the example of sorcery accusations in Melanesia, eating food prepared by someone else enacts a relationship of confidence in the other’s goodwill and social proximity, because one expresses the confidence in the food being void of poisons, and is accompanied by the identification of shared localities in which collective action can take place and where mutual belonging is made explicit: the family united around the Christmas turkey.

The yellow vest movement<sup>5</sup> in France can be cited as another illustration here: similarity and recognition of bodies by wearing a uniform; spatializing belonging through the occupation of

---

<sup>5</sup> This decentralized populist movement began in November 2018 as a protest against the rise of petrol prices. Principally organized through social networks, it materialized through the occupation of roundabouts, cross-roads

particular roundabouts and the construction of head-quarter huts in their middle; cooking, eating and drinking together shared foods; eliciting rather severe criteria of the conditions for integrating new members and emergence of a strong mistrust towards aspiring participants that prowl around the yellow-vest spaces, etc. At the same time, in a context of a generalized uncertainty in the lower middle-class that was at the origin of the movement but that also accompanied it all along, various contradicting epistemes emerged, each being represented by its own identifiable sub-symbol and having specific conducts and values attached, leading to the fragmentation of the movement into sub-groups that mistrusted each other as much as they suspected outsiders<sup>6</sup>.

One last but crucial methodological question remains. If situations of uncertainties are heuristic opportunities for making visible the processes of hierarchisation of values, of the emergence of epistemes and of the constitution of new forms of belonging, how are we to identify which situations are indeed of an uncertain character and on which we therefore should focus our attention? The answer to this problem is rather straightforward. If one assists moments in which actors switch to a mode of interlocution that is elicitatory and through this attempt to reach consensus in which transformed or new interpretations and epistemes emerge, then we are most likely in front of a negative social fact, that is, in a situation in which the autochthonous perception of a deficiency of social institutions leads to restoration, rejection or transformation. The approach of uncertainty I herewith suggest is one of *pragmatic anthropology*.

### **Invisible agents**

There is hardly any need to underline that I have taken a path departing, at least to some extent, from Mauss and Durkheim, and therefore also from many anthropological approaches that – explicitly or implicitly – are continuations thereof. As Tcherkézoff writes (2012: 313), for Mauss and Durkheim, “in any social group, collective representations – the unconscious materialization of the feeling of belonging to a group that each individual has – create the notion of an external force which is permanent. This offers a guarantee of the fact (indeed, the

---

and other strategic places as well as through weekly manifestations. The request was initially for more economic justice, but it increasingly also incorporated the demand for political reforms.

<sup>6</sup> This summary description of some of the characteristics of the French yellow vest movement is inspired from the work of a student I co-supervised: Planche, V. 2020. *S'unir dans la diversité. Étude des valeurs partagées par les membres du mouvement des Gilets Jaunes à Nîmes*. Marseille: EHESS, Mémoire de M2.

belief) that the group will go on forever [the sacred]. This level is thus far above any individual consciousness”.

In following the idea of the *idéel*, which reflects the shared nature and origin of social institutions (Godelier, 2015: 30), and suggesting that situations of uncertainty are moments in which the fragility of these social institutions is tangible and their historical change possible, we also pull the “sacred” and its potential fragility closer to, and in fact even within individual consciousness, and thus depart from Mauss’ holistic approach. In this perspective — and in these situations — there is no guarantee that the group will go on forever and there is no overarching sacredness, but only forms of action and ritualization, concepts and ideas, symbols and metaphors that aim to reproduce or fabricate a shared semantic field, the adherence to which contributing to produce a sense of belonging.

These moments and situations in which the actor reaches consciousness about the possibly non-permanent nature of belonging, I will call *fundamental uncertainties*. This notion is not be confused with Edgar Morin’s (1993) use of “metaphysical uncertainties” or his “grand philosophical uncertainties”, which, according to the author, should be the aim of human thought<sup>7</sup>. To consider that certain uncertainties are grand or metaphysical for humanity as whole is an ethnocentric, not a scientific position. I therefore define fundamental uncertainties not through their substance or nature, but through the identification of the conditions of their manifestation: the context-driven emergence of a feeling that there is a danger that all forms of belonging may vanish.

There are possibly many kinds of such situations, such as the rising consciousness about the potential of annihilation that may develop during genocides, for example. But there are also less dramatic or less totalizing events in which the limitations of belonging — of the “sacred” in Mauss’ terms — become palpable. These emerge, among others and for very good reasons, in contexts in which intangible or invisible agents are involved, such as in the case of Melanesian sorcery where the fatal agents are always imperceptible. Indeed, the implication of the intangible reminds us of what Marion (2010) labels “negative certainties” or of what Godelier (2015:81, 123ff) calls the “sur-real” or “over-real” (not to be confused with the surreal), that is, objects of thought that don’t need any direct material counterpart (the thing) to

---

<sup>7</sup> Morin does not provide examples of what he thinks are these grand uncertainties, but one can confidently extrapolate that what is insinuated are questions such as what is knowledge, truth, life and death, etc.

be considered true: divinities, spirits, acts of sorcery, and viruses for those that don't have a microscope at hand.

Mentioning the microscope is not just a pun here, but is rather relevant in the current COVID-19 situation. What materializes the sur-real is the belief in the interpretation of specific signs as being the sufficient manifestation of intangible agents: the Melanesian person that has become unlocatable and thus suspicious. However, it is not the belief in the abstract object or concept alone that is needed (belief in sorcery, for example, which in Malekula does always take the form of invisible actions and substances), but the trust in those categories of actors that mediate between the object and the lived experiences: exorcists and shamans, chiefs and other leaders, and, in other contexts, priests, scientists and various kinds of experts that manipulate the material means (instruments, symbols, metaphors, signals) that reveal the sur-real to be more than real because determining reality. Fundamental uncertainties that, as I suggest, involve questioning (aspects of) the sur-real, are not characteristic of mistrust in social institutions alone, but lead to mistrusting the very existence and goodwill of those categories of actors that have, took or received the power to see and define the intangible, and that are supposed to mediate its existence and nature with the non-expert population. Fundamental uncertainties thus not only lead to refining epistemes, but more directly to social tension and crisis.

Denying the existence or reinterpreting the nature of the intangible reflects above all a resistance to, and rejection of the expert or expert community, and of those that control the episteme, that represent what is true and what is not, that were thought to have the legitimacy of defining the truth. Unsurprisingly at least from my perspective, the interviews I held in the first half of 2020 showed that those people that did not believe in the reality of the Coronavirus, or that thought it was purposely created, were also convinced that the earth is flat or that the human being has never stepped on the moon. What is often called "conspiracy theory" assembles various ideas on the most diverse topics, but have usually in common the drive for resistance to established mediators and representatives, the experts, and the political system as a whole: those that are accused to control and manipulate the regime of truth<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> See the various investigations coordinated by the Fondation Jean Jaurès and available on their website: <https://jean-jaures.org/>. For example, only 43% of those individuals believing in at least five of the major conspiracy theories consider that democracy is important.

Beyond the usual conspiracy theories, the uncertainty triggered by COVID-19 leads to other interpretations and elicitations that nonetheless situate the question of power at the core of the discussion about the invisible agent. As an elderly lady told me (working class, retired), for example, “governments don’t like us old people; I know that the virus was created to get rid of us, because they don’t want to use the money to look after us”. Or, yet another example from a lower middle-class man, who explained that “it’s the Russians that created the virus in order to undermine the Chinese economy, but then it got out of control; it’s all about power and money anyway, and we just have to play the game they decide to play; it’s all fake”. As these examples and many others illustrate, the elicitations associated with uncertainties in relation to intangible agents reflect notions of exclusion and inclusion, and thus the fragility of belonging. It is about the emergence or confirmation of a consciousness of people realizing that they are not in a position to reach the status and power of intervening in what should or shouldn’t constitute their criteria of identity. It is a fear of not being able to control belonging and even of losing belonging altogether. It is about a sentiment of disempowerment and of the illusion that the social group would go on forever... or worse, maybe it will go on forever, but without them. When uncertainty rises and intangible or uncontrollable agents are at stake, the sacred that lies beyond individual consciousness, as Mauss wanted it, fades away to make place for what really matters: who decides what is true and with what legitimacy.

### **Last words**

Within the limited space available, this paper was an attempt to portray an overview of the reasons for which analysing situations of uncertainty constitute opportunities — heuristic devices — for understanding social processes more generally. When elicited, and through this shared and possibly resolved and absorbed, uncertainties allow for social values to be made explicit and to be hierarchized, a process that in itself fabricates “truth”, and thus the criteria for social acceptability and belonging. What seems relevant in situations in which the responsible agent is intangible is that, beyond the criteria of belonging, it is the principle of belonging itself that is reconsidered and made fragile. It is the “sacred” as in Mauss’ and Durkheim’s terms that disappears. It is a fundamental uncertainty.



## References cited

- Abbott, A. (2020). *Faits et valeurs*, Paris, Collège de France (Collection Conférences).
- Antonsich, M. (2010), « Searching for Belonging: An Analytical Framework », *Geography Compass*, 4, 6, p. 644–659.
- Berndt, R.M. (1959), « The concept of 'The Tribe' in the Western Desert of Australia », *Oceania*, 30, 2, p. 81-107.
- Bloch, M. (1998), « Commensality and Poisoning », *Social Research*, 66,1, p. 133-149.
- Boltanski, L. (2009), « L'inquiétude sur ce qui est. Pratique, confirmation et critique comme modalités du traitement social de l'incertitude », in C. Severi et J. Bonhomme (eds), *Paroles en Actes*. Paris, L'Herne, p. 163-179.
- Bronner, G. (1997), *L'incertitude*, Paris, PUF, coll. Que sais-je?
- D'Andrade, R.G. (1992), « Cognitive anthropology », in T. Schwartz, G.M. White & C.A. Lutz (eds), *New directions in psychological anthropology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 47-58
- Dewey, J. (1938), *Logic: The theory of inquiry*, New York, Henry Holt.
- Dousset, L. (2011), *Mythes, missiles et cannibales : Le récit d'un premier contact en Australie*, Paris, Société des Océanistes.
- Dousset, L. (2016), « La sorcellerie en Mélanésie : élicitation de l'inacceptable », *L'Homme*, 218, 85-115.
- Dousset, L. (2018), *Pour une anthropologie de l'incertitude*, Paris, CNRS Editions.
- Dousset, L. (2019), « De l'incertitude au risque : un outil heuristique », *Moussons*, 34, 2019-2, p. 11-38.
- Dumont, L. (1966), *Homo hierarchicus. Essai sur le système des castes*, Paris, Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. (1966), *Les mots et les choses : Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris, Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. (1984), *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II – Cours au Collège de France*, Paris, Gallimard, Seuil.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967), *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Englewoods Cliffs, Prentice-Hall.
- Godelier, M. (1984), *L'idéal et le matériel*, Paris, Fayard.
- Godelier, M. (2015), *L'imaginé, l'imaginaire & le symbolique*, Paris, CNRS Éditions.
- Lemieux, C. (2018), *La sociologie pragmatique*, Paris, La Découverte.
- Marion, J-L. (2010), *Certitudes négatives*. Paris, Grasset & Fasquelle.
- Moore, H.L. (2011), « Epistemology and Ethics : Perspectives from Africa », in C. Toren & J. de Pina-Carbal (eds), *The Challenges of Epistemology: Anthropological Perspectives*, New York, Oxford, Berghahn, p. 207-218.
- Morin, E. (1993), « Philosophe de l'incertitude (propos recueilli par François Ewald) », *Magazine littéraire*, 312, p. 18-24.
- Pitt-Rivers, J. (1973), « The kith and the kin », in J.R. Goody (ed.), *The character of kinship*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 89-105.

- Popper, K. (1983 [1963]), *Realism and the Aim of Science: From the Postscript to The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London; New York, Routledge.
- Robbins, J. (2018). « Where in the World are Values? Exemplarity, Morality, and Social Process », in J. Laidlaw, B. Bodenhorn & M. Holbraad (eds), *Recovering the Human Subject: Freedom, Creativity and Decision*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 174-192.
- Viltard, Y. (2006), « L'étrange carrière du concept foucaldien d'épistémè en science politique », *Raisons politiques*, 2006/3, n° 23, p. 193-202.
- Zask, J. (2017), « Contre 'l'identité culturelle' et 'l'appartenance', la question de la culture individuelle », in A. Giovanni & A. Nouss, *Pour une politique hors-sol*, Paris, Éditions Kimé.