(Not) turning in the Widening Gyre: The (im)possibility of the ontological turn in Eastern Europe

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Abstract
This paper aims to discuss the meanings and scope of the ontological turn in contemporary anthropology. It discusses various other approaches usually labelled as "ontological" and explains the specificities of the ontological turn itself: reflexivity, conceptualisation, and experimentation. According to the primary authors of the ontological turn, Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen, ontology is not the base on which politics, culture, society builds, but the methodological assumptions that centre anthropological knowledge on ethnography as a concept-generating device. Although the ontological turn offers a radical platform for the study of the political, it has not had many followers in regional anthropology. This paper offers a few possible explanations for such a development.

KEYWORDS: ontological turn, anthropology, Eastern Europe

Introduction
The title of this paper is taken from the well-known verse of William Butler Yeats's poem *The Second Coming* that is considered to be one of the most important works in modern English.[1] The verses from the poem have been extensively cited, and their relevance escalated in 2016, when the poem's apocalyptical images became so popular that Ed Ballard (2016) wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that 'Terror, Brexit and U.S. Election Have Made 2016 the Year of Yeats.' Although the situation in anthropology is not that dramatic and, according to the ontological turners, not even that radical (cf. Holbraad & Pedersen 2017), I find it rather provocative to start with the idea of "turning", particularly because the most well-known "second coming" in anthropology is not coming from the ontological turners themselves but from Jean and John Comaroff (2000), who are important interlocutors (and opponents) of the "turn". Taking these dialogues into account, this paper is written in a polemic tone akin to the debates that inspired it and were themselves inspired by the ontological turn (Venkatesan et al. 2010, 2012, 2013). It is punctuated with footnotes that can be read as a

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parallel to the main text.[2] Its aim is not to describe the ontological turn or ontological anthropology more broadly, as that has been done recently by the ontological turners themselves (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017), but rather to open up the debate about the (im)possibilities of the ontological turn in Eastern European and post-Yugoslav anthropologies.[3]

Ontology that is not quite so

The ontological turn has become the latest academic fashion in Western anthropology (including North and South America). Its premise lies in the idea that 'the hegemony of modern ontological assumptions is undergoing a crisis' (Blaser 2013: 547) and that 'ontological conflicts' (involving different ideas about that 'which exists') are becoming increasingly visible (ibid.). Some authors use the phrase 'the ontological turn' as an all-encompassing term for various approaches that explore 'diverse experiences and understandings of the nature of being itself' (Scott 2013: 859). However, there is a difference between ontological anthropology in a broader sense and the ontological turn in the narrower sense. Ontological anthropology in a wider sense encompasses various posthumanist approaches concerned with the question of being such as "perspectivism", the study of personhood and sociality, phenomenological anthropology and 'the new animism'[4] (see Scott 2013: 859). The ontological turn, which is sometimes put under the larger rubric of ontological anthropology, was initially associated with Cambridge-based scholars (ibid.: 868) as well as Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, the editors of *Thinking through things: Theorising artefacts ethnographically* (Henare et al. 2007a). The term *ontological turn* was used for the first time in the *Introduction* to the volume (Henare et al. 2007b), and it is ascribed to Holbraad.[5] It differs from various other ontological approaches including "deep ontologies" of Phillipe Descola (2013). Descola's ontological programme aims to 'push anthropological analysis to the deepest level at which differences between human lifeways can be registered,'

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[2] Here, I take my inspiration from Annemarie Mol's (2002) seminal "ontological book" *The Body Multiple: The Ontology in Medical Practice*, albeit in a far more modest scope. The main text can be read as the loud voice of the ontological turners and the footnotes as background noise of some important themes and authors echoed by the debates surrounding the turn.

[3] In that sense, the choice of the language (BHS, Slovenian or English) was a careful one and in line with the paradoxes addressed by the ontological turn. My idea to open up the arena for a post-Yugoslav discussion on the ontological turn coincided with the wish to deparochialise the debate and enable more Eastern European scholars to participate, which resulted in the paper being written in English.

[4] The new animism as represented by Haravey (2005) is the case in point for the connections between those various approaches. The ideas of new animism owe quite a lot to the debates between Viveiros de Castro, Philippe Descola and Tim Ingold (see Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

[5] In various interviews and public talks, Holbraad ironically explains that the radical tone of the book's introduction comes from their youthful post-PhD age in the combative British academic arena, where they wanted to promote themselves as the leaders of the new path. His humility may be understood as an ironic (or double) take on his own writing and the ontological turn itself. He wrote a postscript entitled 'Humility' in his foundational book on Ifa's divination in Cuba (2012) that inspired most of the further theoretical ideas of the turn. The postscript is conceptualised as an answer to Viveiros de Castro's review that at the same time prizes and ironises Holbraad's book as a 'latter day Critique of Anthropological Reason' (Holbraad 2012: 260). Holbraad's answer is that his main argument is rather 'contra Kant'. For Holbraad, anthropological thinking is presupposing ethnographic contingency and its unsettling effect, which makes this kind of thought recursive and 'always on the move' (ibid.).' Ethnographic contingency of anthropological knowledge disables the possibility of anthropological reasoning in general, which Holbraad describes as 'constitutive humility' of anthropological reasoning (ibid.: 261).

that is 'the level of ontology' (Holbraad & Pedersen 2013: 62). Thus, for Descola, the idea of the ontological turn makes little sense, as 'ontology is always the core and elementary subject matter of good anthropology' (cited in Kelly 2014: 260). Descola's main attempt is to reconceptualise the ontological foundations of human behaviour in a way that is purposefully non-reflexive: contingencies of ethnographic material are subjected to the organising power of anthropological thought (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017: 64), which is exactly the opposite of what the ontological turn proposes. Descola's philosophical anthropology is based on an ontological foundationalism that should provide a basis for a 'communal house that would be more accommodating to non-modern cosmologies' (cited in Holbraad & Pedersen 2017: 67–68), while in the ontological turn, the very word *ontology* is used mostly as an adjective that 'does not refer to some kind of substantive level or field of phenomena' (ibid.: 10).[6] Given that, the difference between the turn and other ontological anthropologies lies in the difference between the ways in which they deploy the idea of ontology. According to the leading authors of the turn, the best way to understand the ontological turn is 'strictly methodological' (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017), i.e., as a 'technology of ethnographic description' that should enhance the main concerns of contemporary anthropological analysis: reflexivity, conceptualisation and experimentation. Ontology is not the basis on which culture or society builds, but the way to 'focus reflexively on the conditions of possibility of anthropological knowledge' (ibid.: 10–11) through the engagement with ethnography as a concept generating device.[7] In that sense, the ontological turn is rather a theory or a theoretical approach, which stems from the specific engagement with the core disciplinary methodology, than a metaphysical or philosophical paradigm.[8]

[6] There is no room to go into details of Descola's writings here, but it is necessary to emphasise that it plays an important role in French philosophical anthropology. However, it is not confined to French academia and Levi-Straussian anthropological legacy of anthropology, but rather promotes philosophical engagement with anthropology (and not only the anthropological engagement with philosophy as the usual hierarchy imposes, see, for example, discussion by G. E. R. Lloyd 2017). It also spurred an important debate on 'non-dualism' in anthropological theory (see Venkatesan et al. 2013). Theories of non-dualism proved to be important for Science and Technology Studies and Internet Studies. Thus, Boellstorff (2016), for example, building on the ontological turn premises, writes that the 'broader end is responding to a key sticking point in contemporary theories of technology: the false opposition of the digital and the real. This fundamentally misrepresents the relationship between the physical and those phenomena referred to by terms like "digital", "online", or "virtual"' (p. 387). Consequently, instead of rendering anthropology irrelevant, as assumed by some critics, the ontological turn made anthropology relevant for other academic disciplines after several decades of its absences from the wider academic debates (see Palecek & Risjord 2012).

[7] In that sense, the ontological turn is not (only) turning away from the epistemological turn epitomised by the Writing Culture movement (Clifford and Marcuse 1986), but rather an attempt to 'further the lines of inquiry associated with the 'crisis of representation' (Boellstorff 2016: 389). In that context, reflexivity is considered as 'the conditions of possibility of anthropological knowledge' (ibid.) that should be anchored in ethnography. That means radicalising the premises of the Writing Culture movement (or rather turning it on its head) by thinking (and doing) anthropology beyond representation.

[8] That does not mean that the ontological turn does not have philosophical consequences. Anthropology may not be 'philosophy with people in it,' as Tim Ingold (1992: 696), yet another ontological anthropologist (albeit from the branch different from the turn) famously proclaimed, but it has philosophical relevance (see footnote 7, 11). Still, I would like to stress that I do not believe that the aim of anthropology should be to become relevant for philosophy in particular (why not for sociology, or archaeology, as well?). However, I want to point out some interdisciplinary boundaries that have opened up (and closed) with the turn.

Concept generating ethnographies

Although the reflexive turn never intended to erase ethnography (or fieldwork) as the central point of an anthropological enquiry, it undoubtedly enabled certain post-fieldwork climate that penetrates various regional anthropologies (Serbian including).[9] The ontological turn turns back to ethnography as its central endeavour treating it as a concept generating machine that should alter 'and transform all things, concepts and theories pretending to be absolute, by strategically exposing them to ethnographically generated challenges and paradoxes that can systematically undermine them' (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017: 287). Obviously, this is a take on the central anthropological problem of ethnocentrism, but with an important twist – the question is not how best to see things, but rather what is there to be seen in the first place. This radical turn alters our understanding of ethnography from the sources of the concepts to be explained, to the sources of the concepts to explain from – ethnography becomes the source of the concepts that explain things. Thus, what tints our academic glasses is not our 'political, social, cultural or other prepositions,' as the representational theories of anthropology would have it, but the very idea of '*what things are*, *and what they could be* (including things like society, culture, politics and power)' (ibid.: 5). Epistemological question is turned into an ontological one. The idea is to elevate the contingency (the alternative, the difference) of the ethnographic material to the platform 'from which to radicalize the activity of anthropology in a spirit of biding empirical, methodological and theoretical experimentation' (ibid.: 7). That allows the ethnographer to be grasped by "the native's point of view", rather than the other way around, making the anthropological theory and its concepts dependent on ethnography itself. The ontological turn thus asks for the systematic rethinking of anthropological concepts.

Ethnography is 'not a source of concepts to be borrowed,' as 'it forces a systematic rethinking on the part of the anthropologist' touching on 'fundamental matters of category' (Palecek & Risjrod 2012: 10). [10] This way of conceptualisation – from ethnography to theory – is visible in the work of people who are usually considered to be the founding members of the turn – Roy Wagener and Marylyn Strathern[11] one hand, and

[9] The Writing Culture authors never intended to throw out the baby of ethnography with the bathwater of representation. The uneasiness of this development is expressed by George Marcus himself, who argues that we should aim to 'push the spirit of [Writing Culture] experiment back toward the conditions of producing ethnography in fieldwork' (Marcus 2007: 1127).

[10] From here, Palecek and Risjord (2012: 10) conclude, 'ethnography is more than the collection of different worldviews; ethnography is akin to philosophy.' Without going further into debate, it is worth mentioning that these authors first reject the idea that the ontological turn's premise to 'be prepared to learn theoretical lessons from the concepts used by the groups studied and to adopt (perhaps modified) local concepts into anthropological theory' (ibid.: 6) is of any special philosophical interest. Yet, they clearly claim that ethnography is the source of the most important philosophical consequence of the ontological turn – non-representationalist theory, which is according to the authors 'one of the important projects of 20th-century philosophy' (ibid.: 7).

[11] Although Marline Strathern's work is usually incorporated in the turn's genealogy, she wrote critically if not directly, about it (cf. Lebner 2017), while also actively engaging in debates with Viveiros de Castro and even proclaiming the death of the debate (Strathern 2017). Still, her engagement is as imaginative and telling as ever, since she has been using her own dreams as an evocation of a Levi-Straussian analysis of myth in order to advance her long standing discussion with the ontological turn (ibid.).

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1992, 1998) on the other. Roy Wagner's work with Daribi (1972) led to his reconceptualisation of the anthropological concept of culture (Wagner 1981), while Marylyn Strathern's (1980, 1988) work in Melanesia reconceptualises the concept of person. However, the work of Viveiros de Castro is one that attracted the most critical attention and was the most misunderstood.[12] Building mainly on Levi-Strauss's analysis of Amerindian myths and transforming the philosophical concepts taken from Deleuze and Guattari, Viveiros de Castro (1992) argues that these societies cannot be explained by our current concepts of *cultural relativism*, but rather through '(ontological) perspectivism' (also "multilateralism") that is its exact opposite – 'a representational or phenomenological unity which is purely pronominal or deictic,[13] indifferently applied to a radically objective diversity' (ibid.). (Multi)cultural relativism 'supposed a diversity of subjective and partial representations, each striving to grasp an external and unified nature, which remains perfectly indifferent to those representations' (ibid.: 478), while 'Amerindian thought'[14] poses exactly the opposite – 'culture, or the subject would be the form of the universal, whilst nature or the object would be the form of the particular' (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470). From here, Viveiros de Castro makes his oft-cited (and misunderstood) statement that perspectivism is multinaturalism – one single "culture", multiple "natures" (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2004).[15] For the ontological turners, the question is how to account for such views without reducing them simply to "others' points of view", "culture" or "perspective". Moreover, in order to do so, we need to reconceptualise the very concepts with which we are working – in this case, those of nature and culture.

This approach – to take seriously 'what Western intellectuals cannot … take seriously …' (Viveiros de Castro 2011 quoted in Holbraad & Pedersen 2017: 185) – made Holbraad invent a recursive [anthropological] analysis that 'allows the contingency of ethnographic alterity to transmute itself to the level of analysis' (Holbraad 2012: 263). In his analysis of Ifa divination in Cuba, inspired by Viveiros de Castro, Holbraad states that rather than taking 'the failure of divinatory truth to comply with standards of intellectual argumentation as a sign of its epistemic deficiency, we should take it as a clue to its basic alterity' (p. 242). In Holbraad's work, 'ethnography is not a source of concepts to be borrowed' (Palacek & Risjord 2012: 10), but it forces a systematic rethinking of anthro-

[12] It is hard to say why the majority of critique loosely addressed to "ontological anthropology" is directed to Viveiros de Castro. Part of the answer may lie in his academic style and polemical tone and part in the sociological banality of the academic hierarchy. His background is in Brazilian academy – marginal to the mainly Anglophone world of the ontological turn and its critics. Furthermore, because of his interest in Levi-Strauss and a dialogue with Descola, he is usually connected with 'French theory'. Still, Viveiros de Castro's work has been labelled as a philosophical 'bomb' by some of the most prominent scholars of today (albeit French, see Latour 2009).

[13] The term is derived from the linguistic term 'deixis', which refers to 'those language situations in which the meaning of a term relies absolutely on the context in which it is uttered' (Pedersen 2011: 63). Viveiros de Castro (1998) claims that in certain Amerindian societies, 'concepts that are not commonly thought of as deictic in the West, such as 'person' and 'human' are radically indexical' (ibid.).

[14] Amerindian denotes indigenous peoples of Americas.

[15] These various natures are literally incorporated in the body. But some of the Viveiros de Castro's critics (e.g., Ramos 2012) forget that these entities are not 'bodies' in the sense of 'fixed physiological forms', but assemblages of 'artefacts, dispositions or capacities which render body of each species unique' (Pedersen 2011: 62, see Viveiros de Castro 1998).

pological concepts. Therefore, taking the abovementioned alterity seriously is to reassess anthropological claims to truth that seem as symmetrically opposite of Ifa's understanding of it. In Holbraad's own words, 'recursively transgressing representationist assumptions [of anthropological understanding of truth]' is 'to arrive at a different concept of truth altogether' (ibid.: 53).[16] This move has profound significance for other important anthropological questions, such as the relationship between ethnography and theory, the possibility of critique and ethical and political concerns, and I shall discuss some of them in the following sections.

Ontology of politics/politics of ontology in/out of the postsocialist world

The ontological turn and its political and theoretical project have not had many followers in Eastern Europe and the former Yugoslavia,[17] although the topic of politics and various branches of political anthropology had been thriving in this part of the world. There could be several reasons for that. First, to my knowledge, posthumanist approaches are not very prominent in this part of the world. Apart from a few attempts in science and technology studies and Actor-Network theory, most studies of material culture – one of the strongholds of posthumanist approaches – have been done either in Bourdieuan or Foucauldian paradigms (especially in museum studies, see for example Simić 2006), while multispecies ethnographies and works on indigenous knowledge, dwelling, and materiality are yet to be written in the ontological turn paradigm. I believe that the reason for such development lies in a strong sense that the ontological turn brings radical alterity, pertinent to the "real anthropological others",[18] which at the same time confirms the difference between colonial (or in other ways superior) selves and the researched others.

[16] In more familiar settings, Mol (2002) writes that 'attending to enactment rather than knowledge [e.g., different perspectives on the body and its diseases] has an important effect: what we think of as a single object may appear to be more than one' (p. vii). This is a move away from epistemology and the concern with reference that 'asks whether representations of reality are accurate' (ibid.). When we focus on enactments, we focus on the question of 'what is' and how those enactments are coordinated. In practice, that means 'the body and its diseases are more than one, but this does not mean that they are fragmented into being many' (ibid.). This answers Heywood's (2012) critique of ontological anthropology as being based on meta-ontology that produces "multiple worlds" (or the reality of "bloated universe" as it is half-mockingly called by analytical philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine) that are mutually incommensurable. But, when the authors of the ontological turn talk about multiple worlds that does not mean reduction of each culture or people to an encapsulated reality, but, on the contrary, the explosion of potential concepts and worlds in a given ethnographic material, or combination (comparison) of such materials) (Pedersen 2012).

[17] There are some notable exceptions dealing with the explanation and analysis of the turn (Bajič 2017; Baskar 2017; Bartole 2017; Bošković 2015; Golež Kaučič 2017; Petrović-Šteger 2017; Telban 2017). There are also some ethnographically based studies (Muršič 2017), as well as philosophical engagements (Palecek & Risjord 2012). There was also conference at the University of Pécs, Hungary (http://szociologia.btk.pte.hu/consequences-ontological-turn), while Martin Holbraad was a guest lecturer at the University of Warsaw (http://en.uw.edu.pl/three-ontological-turn-ons/).

[18] There is some important work on alertly outside the ontological turn circle, notably that of Taussig (1993) who is said to have set the tone for the movement from "deconstructivism" towards ontological anthropology (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017; see also Pedersen's debate with Taussig's idea of "epistemic murk" of shamanism in Pedersen 2011: 211-213).

Furthermore, there is a fear that the application of these ideas in the local context will push us back to the collective (and personal) pre-modernity. However, I suggest that Serbian (and other regional anthropologies) would benefit from engaging in a serious dialogue with this paradigm, even if only to debunk its theoretical and political premises. In that way, regional anthropologies would be able to enter the global academic arena with the significant locally driven contribution beating the ontological turn on its ground (if indeed it needs such a "beating").

The ontological turn uplifts the ethnography to the starting point of theorisation as it is the only way to be not only academically but also politically relevant. Consequently, although the ontological turn is sometimes deemed to be apolitical, this is far from the truth. First, it deals explicitly and implicitly with *politics* in a Western sense of the term[19] with some of its most important studies done in current and former socialist countries (Pedersen 2011; Holbraad 2012). Second, its political project, as it flows from its methodological and theoretical programme, aims to shift political anthropology towards the 'figuration of the future in its very enactment' (Holbraad 2014). As the champion of the turn, Viveiros de Castro proclaims this 'should be more disruptive than dulled critiques of empire, capitalism, or the state,' as it is capable of 'indefinitely sustaining the possible, the could be' (Holbraad, Pedersen, & Viveiros de Castro 2014). In such ways, as Bessier and Bond (2014) put it 'ontological anthropology claims to provincialize forms of power within the modern project while co-creating vital alternatives to them. To be radical, contra Marx, is not to grasp the thing by the root but to tend to a different plant altogether' (ibid.: 441). This can be done only through the active engagement with ethnography and what Viveiros de Castro (2004) calls "controlled equivocation".

Controlled equivocation is the method that Viveiros de Castro proposes as an ultimate anthropological tool for "taking other people seriously". According to him, equivocation is happening every time we translate[20] between 'native' and 'anthropological' conceptual regimes – 'understood in terms of their internal relation in the economy of anthropological inquiry' (quoted in Holbraad & Pedersen 2017: 185). It aims to transform 'anthropological assumptions, to bring them into line with a body of ethnographic materials that initially contradicts them' (ibid.: 186). This allows for different accounts of various anthropological and native concepts, such as the above examples of truth, illness, but also politics or revolution. One of those concepts – that of the gift – is used by Holbraad and Pedersen both as an example of 'the conceptual mismatch the anthropologist diagnoses as a misunderstanding' (2017: 186) and of anthropological ability to generate new concepts (Holbraad 2017).

[19] Tellingly, Martin Holbraad is the leader of the research group called Comparative Anthropologies of Revolutionary Politics at University College London. Their aim is to 'deepen our understanding of revolutions by charting the dynamics of revolutionary "anthropologies" in the original theological sense of the term, examining revolutionary politics in relation to varying conceptions of what it is to be human' (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/revolution). The work of the authors active in the group in the best way shows the ontology of politics.

[20] "Translating" may be a rather tricky word for the ontological turn, since ontology is not equated with language (or with systems of belief, conceptualisation, etc.), and ethnography is not 'a kind of translation from one world view to another' (Palecek & Risjord 2012: 12). This idea emerges from the antirepresentational framework that replaces "relativism" with perspectivism as explained previously.

The anthropological debate about the difference between gift and commodity is probably one of the oldest in the discipline, starting with the Mauss's (1954) famous essay on the gift, first published in 1925. To this day, there has been an enormous amount of literature dealing with this issue. Their basic premises may be summarised through the words of David Clarke (2003) who argues that monetary exchange fundamentally alters the relationship between the people involved in the exchange. As he explains,

> in contradiction to the situation underpinned by a bond of kinship, economic exchange defines parties and objects in wholly abstract ways: fungible commodities, free individuals, a rational measure of value and (marginal) utility. Under such circumstances, the personalities of the seller (or moneylender) and the buyer (or would-be-borrower) are more or less dissoluble from the commodity being transacted and the roles being played in conducting the transaction (Clarke 2003: 37).

Concepts of commodity and gift regained their prominence in anthropological literature after the fall of socialism. Radical economic changes enabled various new forms of exchange that go beyond the dualism of gift and commodity. One of the most famous works on the topic has been Alena Ledeneva's (1998) study on "economies of favours" in Russia during the 1990s. As Henig and Makovicky (2017, 2) explain in their introduction to a recent volume that revisits and re-evaluates Ledeneva's work, the very term *economies of favours* has become 'academic shorthand for those actions which appear to mix instrumental and affective relations, goal-oriented and gift exchanges, and "formal" and "informal" institutional ties.' 'This focus on transaction and exchange has often led scholars to overlook the fact that such favours are mediated by the rhetoric of friendship and mutuality, making them less "an economy" and more a system of sociality and a moral aesthetic of action' (ibid.). However, as Makovicky (2017) explains, 'the difference between gestures and their social significance might best be approached as idiomatic, rather than as systemic or typological: the meaning of an act emerges from the momentary entanglement of words and deeds in everyday life' (ibid.: 209). If we take ethnography to be a 'concept-generating machine,' we may start to think about favour as 'a sui generis mode of acting' (Henig & Makovicky 2017, Humphrey 2017) that should elevate favours to the 'list of economic universals' (Henig & Makovicky 2017).

Holbraad (2017: 225) comes to a similar conclusion in his afterword to the collection. He writes that favours are:

> 'characteristically paradoxical, since they are in some sense at once gratuitous and calculated; and … involve an element of geniality that makes them carry a certain "social warmth".' This "warmth" (a certain "fuzzy feeling") is owed mostly to the heat produced by the "favour paradox" – 'the way in which favours render the contrast between calculated transactions and genial relations – economy and sociality – fuzzy too ("paradox")' (ibid.: 225).

Not only does the paradoxical nature of favours 'obviate or disregard the distinction between interest and disinterest, like Maussian gifts do' (in Mauss's analysis gifts' combination of interest and disinterest is inherently free of paradox), but it exceeds the in-

tricate 'way in which they play themselves out within the coordinates that very distinction sets up' (ibid.: 229). In other words, it could be said that while a gift is only ambivalent from the "outside", from the perspective of the Western distinction between (economic) rationality that splits the universe of transactions into interested and disinterested, favours and connections are ambivalent from "the inside" – from their "indigenous experience". Unlike Eastern European favours, the gift exchange described by Mauss remains indifferent to such a distinction, as it is a '"total phenomenon, it is at the same time 'interested and disinterested, necessary and spontaneous, calculated and gratuitous' (ibid.: 228). In that sense, favours and gifts do not share the same "inside" (inherent). Holbraad argues that taking out the consequences of this contrast 'may be an important step on the way to establishing favours not just as an object of anthropological inquiry, but also as a fully articulated category of anthropological thinking' (ibid.: 226, 229).

According to Holbraad, this can put 'favours in the orbit of recent discussions of sovereignty in political philosophy,' especially in the light of Agamben's reworking of Carl Schmitt's notion of the power of exception (2017: 230). Favours 'operate at the interstices of institutional power' constituting a 'mini-exception' to state '(or other institutional) sovereignty that is sustainable, perhaps, by virtue of its diminished scale – "just this once", "for you only" – the larger realm of sovereignty is rescinded in favour, so to speak, of a more restricted sphere of influence in which the favour can (nevertheless) be granted' (ibid.: 230). Holbraad further explains that favours are liminal phenomena in Victor Turner's term, 'a form of social miracle' (ibid.) that produce pleasure 'from enacting a world in which the rules as we know them are temporarily subverted, if not ever entirely lifted, and things can be done differently, albeit just for us, exceptionally (though that's the point and part of the pleasure of it)' (ibid.: 230). However, it seems to me that there is a further paradox here – although it is true that favours are liminal phenomena and we know that the exception of favour is exactly that – an exception, but we also know that that exception is the rule, albeit usually not a desired one (cf. Demant Frederiksen 2015; Pine 2015; Simić 2016).[21] This reversal of "exception" into rules cancels the "miraculous" effect of the expectation thus cancelling the "favour's character" of favours. Similarly, both Ledeneva (2017) and Makovicky (2017) stress this "inside ambivalence" of favours that according to Ledeneva (2017: 25) 'stems from the fact that the "favour" arises from doing something which deviates from the "normal" rules of obligation and reciprocity, while also sustaining the norms – making an exception that only proves the rule.' Although this does not make Holbraad's argument obsolete, it seriously undermines its main premises.

Holbraad further argues that favours constitute 'a counter-claim to state (or other institutional) sovereignty' that is sustainable probably because of its reduced scale, while the 'larger realm of sovereignty is rescinded in favour, so to speak, of a more restricted sphere of influence in which the favour can (nevertheless) be granted' (ibid.: 230). However, as some other authors have shown, both favours and connections are seen as the way

[21] Favours are closely connected with 'connections', but the conflation of connections and favours in a singular term of 'favour' does not shed light on social practices in the former Yugoslav countries that clearly distinguish between those two phenomena (Brković 2017).

state power operates in the postsocialist world (see Brković 2017).[22] This does not cancel its paradoxical character. Rather, it makes it more complex. In that sense, the anthropology of Eastern Europe can make a significant contribution to the production of important anthropological concepts *sui generis* alongside gift, barter and honour.

A similar approach to postsocialist transformation that 'attempts to extend post-plurally the form of the object of analysis to the form of the analysis itself' (Pedersen 2011, 221) could be found in Morten Pedersen's study of yet another postsocialist "paradox". Particularly, the fact that in post-socialist Mongolia, there is plenty of shamanism but hardly any shamans, which he called shamanism without shamans. Writing about these "half-shamans" among the Darhad people of Shishged, Pedersen argues that

> the analogies that people drew between shamanism and postsocialism were not about projecting symbolic meaning from one domain of life onto another (the spirits as metaphor of market), but about perceiving an isomorphism of form between the two dimensions of the world: the spirits and the market were both variations on one immanent set of transition (ibid.: 35).

In other words, 'shamanism is not so much a symbolic projection of one type of content ("politics" or "economic") onto another type of content ("religion") in someone's ideological and/or existential interest' (ibid.: 30). Instead, Darhad shamanism in its particular variations of 'half-shamans' is an ontological condition in its own right (ibid.: 40). That further means that shamanism in Northern Mongolia '*is* not an occult economy' of 'postsocialist transition"'(Pedersen 2011, 40), but rather that 'occult agency and political efficacy, shamanism and postsocialism, were mutually imbricated' (ibid.: 222).[23] The post-socialist transition is 'what shamanism is (as opposed to is *about*)' (ibid.: 41).

Pedersen's book successfully captures paradoxes of postsocialist transition using the ontological turn as a 'self-reflexive, stance towards what ethnographic data might be' and 'what such data and their conceptual yield might do to common senses of what reality is' (Pedersen 2012).[24] This goes back to other, previously mentioned, ethnographic work on post-socialism that continuously builds on '*oughts* and *ares* in human life – that is, between social norms and individual actions, and between the moral groundings of society and the contingency of practice' (Pedersen 2017: 5). This is especially the case

[22] It is important to say that the main reason may not be socialism, but its aftermath. Thus, Brković (2017) argues that new forms of (neoliberal) government created new space for personalised ways of 'doing things' that fit the categories of favours and connections. However, there is also a continuity between favours and connections in socialism and the period after it (Pine 2015), albeit in rather different circumstances.

[23] This is of course, an important take on Comaroffs' (1999) influential ideas about occult economies, suggesting once again their importance to the ontological turn – the fact I attempted to evoke in the introduction.

[24] Replying to Laidlaw's (2012) critique of his book, Pederson (2012) admits that his use of the term ontology oscillates between two different and apparently contradictory meanings. Namely ontology in the sense of essence (what there is) and ontology in the sense of "theory" or "model" (of what there is). Without going further into the debate, it is sufficient to say that Pedersen (2012) argues that his concept of ontology 'denotes a single yet infinitely differentiated object of ethnographic study' that does not confuse "essence" and "model", or "reality" and its "representations", but allows for "Methodological monism" – the strategic bracketing of any assumption – on behalf of the ethnographer and the people studied – that the object of anthropological analysis is comprised by separate, bounded and extensive units (ibid).

with the paradoxical character of favours that need to be analysed through that what they *are,* rather than that what they might represent in a singular explanation through "one lens" – be it economic, political, cultural, or whichever you find endearing" (Pedersen 2012). This seems to me to be the best shield against various "one-lens-they- don't-know-what-you-are-doing" academic approaches about post-socialism that thrived in Eastern European scholarships, especially immediately after the fall of socialism. Turning back to the power of ethnography, as proposed by the ontological turn, does not mean writing non-theoretical works, but rather establishing a new focus on the anthropological theory that can provide ground for truly non-Western-centric anthropology. For such a task, anthropologies from Eastern Europe should be more than welcome.

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Povzetek

Namen tega članka je razprava o pomenu in obsegu ontološkega obrata v sodobni antropologiji. Razpravlja o različnih drugih pristopih, ki so običajno označeni kot "ontološki" in pojasnjuje posebnosti samega ontološkega obrata: refleksivnost, konceptualizacijo in eksperimentiranje. Po mnenju glavnih avtorjev ontološkega obrata, Martina Holbraada in Mortena Pedersena, ontologija ni osnova, na kateri se gradijo politika, kultura in družba, temveč metodološka predpostavka, ki antropološko znanje vzpostavlja na etnografiji kot sredstvu za proizvajanje konceptov. Čeprav ontološki obrat ponuja radikalno platformo za preučevanje političnega, v regionalni antropologiji nima veliko privržencev. Članek ponuja nekaj možnih pojasnil takšnega razvoja.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: ontološki obrat, antropologija vzhodne Evrope, antropologija o vzhodni Evropi

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