Naturally Identifiable:
Totemism and Organizational Identity.

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Abstract

Organizations in post-industrial society constantly need new ways to understand their identity. Working within the metaphorical and organizational culture tradition, we propose using Lévi-Strauss' ideas of "totemic systems of thought" as a compelling metaphor for the ways in which organizations, as sub-groups within society, develop a self-concept by referencing a putatively "natural" order of differences. Unlike previous concepts of "totemism" which focused on the properties of the specific animal that was totemized, we believe Lévi-Strauss' structuralist approach to totemic systems of thought permits an underlying order of differences and analogies to be discerned in the ways that organizations conceive of themselves. We propose understanding organizational identity as a "totemic system of thought" by which classification schemes of "society" (organizations) and "nature" (the economy) analogize each other. Conceiving of "the economy" as "nature" allows us to see how organizations index their identity with reference to selected natural elements.

Key Words: organizational identity, symbolism, totemism, metaphors

EXAMPLE 1: A LARGE R&D-INTENSIVE MANUFACTURER

A privately-held leader in the global market for innovative packaging solutions, Euforma[1] developed its uniquely-shaped containers immediately after WW II. It has since expanded its line of products over the past 5 decades to include not only different shapes, but also different storage properties, pouring characteristics, sanitary seals, openings, etc. Several factors led to the dominant position the company enjoys: it keeps extraordinarily tight control over its patented technology; it maintains an ongoing, particularly intensive R&D effort; it is a privately held entity, and hence not obliged to reveal its operations and finances; and it has deployed its geographic infrastructure with a highly calculating eye to regional markets.

Interview research with senior members of the company over the past 3 years has shown a recurrent, key, metaphor-like image. In two separate interview cycles, the dominant image was "the fortress guarding the gold." This reflected the company's perception of itself as a powerful, wealthy and dominant presence, at the same time that it's posture was essentially defensive – castles don't attack; they <u>are</u> attacked. Essentially, this organization's identification is shaped by its own conceptions of the commercial and technological markets in which it operates (what "attacks" the castle), as well as by a conception of the competitive advantages it possesses and how it deploys them (what the castle "guards").

INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the dynamic processes of organizational formation and integration in post-industrial society (Bell 1973) we need new ways of understanding how these social groups construct identity (Gioia et al. 2000: 63-4). This need exists not simply within the community of organizational studies specialists, but also in the broader social world of organizations itself.[2] And, in the world of complex changes of globalization, virtualization, and disintermediation in the early 21st century, organizations need to know themselves more than ever. One of the most important assumptions in the literature on organizational identity is that it is tightly connected with the semiotic and hermeneutic concept of "culture" (e.g., Dutton and Dukerich 1991, Fiol et al. 1998, Glynn et al. 2000, Gioia et al. 2000, Hogg et al. 2000), typically defined as the complex, historically- developing systems of signification, representation, and symbolization which structure all aspects of the human world. Much of the literature on organizational identity offers only a brief discussion of culture, but fails to fully

develop interpretive or semiotic implications of a cultural approach. This is compounded by a tendency to analyze culture as a functional, segregated variable, and to make the possibly unwarranted assumption that organizational cultures are discrete, reified wholes.

The purpose of this paper is to move discourse on organizational identity in a different cultural direction, proposing that the notion of the "totemic operator" found in the work of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss provides a useful and heuristic analogy or metaphor[3] for understanding "organizational identity." The explanatory value of this anthropological perspective lies in identifying symbolic patterns in organizational life from which identity is constructed, which are either masked by everyday life, or difficult to assemble because the data may be too narrowly framed. Applying these anthropologically-derived concepts not only furnishes a different way of understanding organizational identity within a complex social and cultural setting, but also emphasizes how identity is constantly being "created" as a symbolic and analogic construct within this milieu. Conceptualizing the 'created,' 'imagined' and 'constructed' dimensions of organizational identity, as well as the differential ways these are realized within organizations, is critical to the work that organizations must do to understand themselves.

Through the concept of "culture," many anthropologists recognize implicitly what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and others (Gibbs 1993, Lakoff 1993, Morgan 1997, Ortony 1993) propose, namely that the analogic processes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, etc. are indwelling and formative properties of the human social condition. Metaphor and analogy, understood broadly, are devices of comparison, whereby something is understood in terms of some other, seemingly unrelated thing. As Schön (to take one of many different scholars as an example) dramatically argues, metaphor is often a device which *generates* a radically new understanding in organizational settings, and which therefore has a crucially practical, constructive role in contemporary human action and interaction (Schön 1963, 1993).[4] Rather than being a defect in thought processes supposed to be "naturally" logical, or a violation of norms of cooperative conversation in communication, or an ornamental linguistic device aesthetically valuable but logically dangerous, analogies and metaphors in fact are often epistemologically constitutive. Thus, the line of argument in this paper connects particularly

4

with the proposal that analogy and metaphor are intrinsic to the way we think about and know organizations (Morgan 1997, Oliver and Roos 2000: Chap.2, Tsoukas 1991).

It is also intended as a corrective, in a way, to the "retreat from society" in many of the social sciences that Friedland and Alford condemn. Taking seriously their criticism that "dominant organizational theories isolate organizations from their institutional or societal contexts" (1993: 235), we are striving instead to contextualize organizational identity more fully. We are asserting simply this: organizations are a type of social group, and the primary moment of organizational analysis has to be to understand them <u>as</u> social groups – whatever their distinguishing rational, administrative, capitalist, technological, or managerial diacritica may be. Several contemporary social science streams relate to this enterprise, including "neoinstitutionalism" (various articles in Powell and DiMaggio 1991) and "embeddedness" (Granovetter 1985, Rao et al. 2000), in addition to those who champion a Postmodernist perspective on organizational identity (Fiol et al. 1998, Gioia et al. 2000, Hatch and Schultz 1997, Schultz et al. 2000). In all of these there is the germinal idea that understanding organizations implies understanding the broad sociocultural context within which they form and operate. As a result, we will not segregate organizational culture to the legal and formal limits of "the organization," believing such a procedure would not constitute a relevant inventory of meanings related to "identity." Instead, we argue that if we are to take the semiotic implications of the culture concept seriously, we should view organizational identity in relation to a wider sociocultural set of classifications and meanings.

Why, then, "totemism" as a vehicle for undertaking this study of context? Most simply, because it is a compelling analogy or metaphor for the ways in which organizations, as sub-groups within wider society, imaginatively integrate a sense of unity called "identity" with reference to a supposedly "natural" order of differences. Moreover, totemic systems of thought, understood in the structuralist sense in which we will be defining them here, are inherently metaphorical means for conceptualising group identity. A structuralist approach to culture presumes that analogic and metaphorical relationships -- patterns among symbols, categories, social codes, institutions, etc. – embody meaning among human beings, so that the meaning of any given part derives from the relationships in which it stands vis-à-vis other parts.[5] In this sense, ideas of totemism applied to organizations are not meant to be

simplistic, isolated images, but richer and more widely heuristic figures – like the notion of "landscape" (Oliver and Roos 2000). Finally, as a concept derived explicitly from anthropology, using "totemic systems of thought" as an analogy allows us to pick up in a more explicit fashion the threads laid down by others in the literature on organizations who stress the culturally "tribal," or "clannish" dimensions of organizations (e.g., Albert et al. 1998).

LÉVI-STRAUSS , TOTEMISM, AND THE TOTEMIC OPERATOR

Nearly 2 decades ago Turner (1983) called for, and tentatively deployed, a self-reported 'Lévi-Strauss ian' structuralist analysis of organizations. With both Lévi-Strauss and Turner, we advocate a structuralist approach to the understanding of organizations. This approach allows us to "widen the frame" beyond the presumed limits of a specific "organization" itself, thus accessing "hidden structure" that links various sets of cultural phenomena (Turner 1983: 189), in order to discern "connections that are part of the underlying order of the phenomena" (1983: 194). Lévi-Strauss ' concept of the "totemic operator" is one such hidden structure, widely found among human societies. As Lévi-Strauss famously put it, certain patterns of symbols like the "totemic operator" are ubiquitous not because they are instrumental or practically useful ("good to eat," "good to use," etc.), but because they are, in a sense, woven into the fabric of human cognition ("good to think") (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 1966).[6]

The notion of "totemic systems of thought" may evoke images of human conditions (isolated preindustrial tribes, for example) that are not deemed comparable to early 21st century post-industrialized society, but these ways of thinking are not as remote as we might initially imagine. Near the beginning of his book Le Totémisme Aujourd'hui (1962), Lévi-Strauss relates a story that serves at once as an illustration of what totemism might look like in a "contemporary" setting, and as a signal reminder of the omni-presence of "totemic"-like behavior throughout human experience. The story comes from the anthropologist Ralph Linton's experiences with the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in Europe in World War I (Linton 1924). Linton had served as part of the 42nd division, arbitrarily named the "Rainbow" division by a commanding officer while it was being assembled and brought into service in the USA because it consisted of individuals from a variety of different regions of the country. Upon arrival in France, Linton noted that members of the division quickly adopted the habit of

referring to themselves as "I'm a Rainbow" when asked what unit they were attached to. What developed subsequently is more interesting still. Half a year after arriving in France, members of the unit would explicitly declare appearances of rainbows to be auspicious for the division. Another 3 months later, members would assert that a rainbow often appeared as the division was going into battle. Later still, the emblem of a rainbow was added to the insignia the division wore, apparently despite the customary understanding that such visual emblems tended to be affixed to the clothing of a division as punishment for a defeat. In sum, these behaviors and interpretations struck Linton, who, as an anthropologist, was aware of similar patterns in non-western, pre-industrial societies, as "totemic" (Linton 1924: 298).

The discussion of what came to be called "totemism" among "tribal" peoples grew in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as large bodies of data on the lifeways of these peoples began to come in from the field.   In many instances, it appeared that these "tribal" societies were subdivided into subgroups often referred to as "clans;" each clan "identified" itself with some element of the natural world, often an animal, but also plants, parts of plants, celestial phenomena, etc.; and the clan had some sort of a quasi-sacred relationship to this "totem."[7] A common social phenomenon like this begged the question that many scholars posed: Why is this pattern so ubiquitous? Answers to the question proliferated, with the Dutch sociologist and ethnologist Van Gennep counting at one point some 41 different theories proposed to explain it (Van Gennep 1920).

Many of these theories, however, presumed that the phenomenon was caused by a simplistic, even childish, psychological response to nature. Thus, since these tribal societies lived in an intimate relationship with nature, their "thinking" (necessarily simplistic because of their "primitive" condition) was necessarily heavily influenced by the nature all around them. The meaning of "totemism," as a result, was felt to be due to a primitive psychological reaction to what one didn't understand: being unable to control or explain (in "scientific" terms) the natural forces, flora, and fauna around them, tribal peoples were thought to experience a state of religious awe of, attachment to, or identification with those elements of nature which bear most directly on their well-being (Figure 1).

Depending on the theorist, this identification was either with what was practical and useful (or its obverse: the inimical), or with what was edible. Thus, as the "good-to-use"

theories went, in some tribes the "shark" was a totem because it was a source of raw material for tools (skin for rasping, polishing; teeth for cutting). (An alternative formulation turned this on its' head: the shark, or any other threatening element of nature, was "totemized" because it was dangerous and inimical to well being – i.e., it ate you.) Or, according to other so-called "good-to-eat" theories, the wallaby was a vital food source, and hence became a totem. Either way, the presumably simple "tribal" peoples were doing nothing more than worshiping what directly impacted their biological well being, but could not control.

The lay understanding of "totemism" therefore tends to see the most important meaning in the "totem" or sacralized element itself, believing that the specific choice of species attempts to magically transfer properties of the species to the human group. Thus, it is often thought, the importance of a "bear" clan is that the members of the clan are appropriating for themselves "bear-like" qualities: ferociousness, aggressiveness, power, etc. Alternatively, this lay understanding consisted of simplistic functionalist psychology: 'because we need/eat salmon, we worship it.' Associated most strongly with functionalists like Malinowksi or structural-functionalists like Radcliffe-Brown, culture, in such thinking, is simply symbolic window-dressing for man's biological needs and his practical relationship with nature.

Lévi-Strauss 's response to the issue of totemism (1962, 1966) was a landmark in what came to be called "structural" approaches to understanding culture. Developed from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and elaborated by the French sociological school of Durkheim, Mauss, and others, structuralism evaluates human cultures as systems of meaning characterized by regular – hence, structural – relationships among their elements. Initially, Lévi-Strauss reviewed the existing set of 'good-to-use' and 'good-to-eat' theories and exposed the manifold contradictions of fact at their core. His exhaustive review of ethnographic information from Australia, Africa, and South and North America shows clearly that the various good-to-use or good-to-eat theories do not hold up in the face of the evidence from "totemic systems." With a welter of examples, he shows repeatedly that the significance of the totemic system likes in the opportunistic use made of almost any group of species as a unitary metaphor for analytical differences among different social groups (Lévi-Strauss , 1962). Then, reframing the object of study as "totemic phenomena," and not "totemism," he

argued that such phenomena had to be understood in *social* and *cultural* terms, namely as regular symbolic patterns or relationships. His question, then, was: What do totemic phenomena "mean" inside of the societies where they are found?

This emphasis on culture as a complex system of signification and communication leads him to locate the "meaning" of totemic phenomena in the *homology* between and among various symbolic relationships, in particular the relationships "among" the clans, and the relationships "among" the totemic identifiers, namely the specific "species." Thus, if a given society was divided into three clans, a Bear clan (Clan A), an Eagle clan (Clan B), and a Snake clan (Clan C), the "meaning" of the totemic practice lay in the analogy between social and natural classificatory schemes used by each society (Figure 2). Thus, the relationships among Clan A, Clan B, and Clan C are *analogic* with the relationships in the "natural world" among bears, snakes, and eagles. As he puts it, "Totemism postulates a logical equivalence between a society of natural species and a world of social groups" (1967: 104). To the degree that his analysis implied a "theory of culture" it could be said that "culture" lay in the highly patterned set of metaphorically transformative relationships, historically and situationally specific in each instance, that structure the field of meanings for human beings. This grand set of relationships between social and natural classification schemes, epitomized in the natural order of differences among "species," he dubbed the "totemic operator": "a sort of conceptual apparatus which filters unity through multiplicity, multiplicity through unity, diversity through identity, and identity through diversity" (1966: 153).

We can reduce this argument to the following idea: differences among primary social groups are meaningful through the various (usually nature-oriented) classificatory schemes used to map these differences; just as differences in nature are meaningful through the various (usually socially-oriented) classificatory schemes used to map them. In other words, images of social relations and images of natural relations are analogies or metaphors of each other; or, they are systems of representation that exist in a dialectical relationship with each other. An implication of this view is that the various classificatory schemes are regarded as sets of symbols, each of which bears on the meaning of all the other symbols and – importantly – plays a constitutive role in the entire cultural scheme.[8]

The key insight in this approach is that the narrow focus on the *individual* clan and its relationship to a "totem" as a source of meaning provides an incomplete, myopic view of the fundamental cultural structures. The focus on totemic phenomena as a sort of psychological effect writ large on society is replaced, in Lévi-Strauss 's work, with a focus on the semiotic dimensions of culture as a system of intelligibilities, structuring both internal social relationships as well as conceptions of the natural world. His particular insight was to "open" the system beyond the clan – totemic object relationship, and extend the analysis to include the broad cultural system within which all *clan formation*, *classificatory schemes,* and *relationships with the natural world* co-occur.[9] With this expansive, encompassing outward movement of social thought, let us turn back to the questions of organizational identity.

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

From its inceptions in the mid 1980's, the concept of organizational identity has grown into a considerable discourse about how and why organizations can be said to have an "identity." A highly open-ended concept, the notion of "organizational identity" has grown considerably from its initial, programmatic statement about the core, enduring, and distinctive elements of an organization (Albert and Whetten 1985). Currently, the "event horizon" of organizational identity discourse is rapidly expanding, with recent contributions to the subject focusing on social identity theory development (Hogg et al. 2000), Foucauldian analysis (Covaleski et al. 1998), stakeholder analysis (Scott et al. 2000), management of multiple identities (Pratt et al. 2000), Post-modernism (Hatch and Schultz 1997), the functional adaptability in the identity-image dialectic (Gioia et al. 2000), etc.

Recently, Gioia (1998) has suggested that much of the work in this concept area uses one of three major "lenses": a functionalist lens, an interpretivist lens, or a postmodern lens. The first of these is based relatively explicitly in a positivist approach to organizational study, and it attempts to use a deductive, hypothesis-testing approach to evaluate elements deemed to play a role in organizational identity formation and maintenance processes. It is assumed that these factors can be objectively identified, and thereby rendered into the control of organizational managers (Gioia 1998: 26-7). One example is Pratt et al. (2000), in which the authors first use social role theory to argue that organizations have "multiple identities," and

then develop a taxonomy of managerial behavior responses for different organizational configurations and situations.

The interpretivist lens, by contrast, is an inductive approach. The "project" of those who use this lens is to seek to construct understandings of the meaning of identity in organizational settings, by trying to access subjective realities of organizational members as they relate to the sense of identity (Gioia 1998: 27). Much of the work that Gioia has published by himself (1986a, 1986b), and with others (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, Gioia and Thomas 1996) exemplifies this approach. The third of these lenses, the Postmodern, takes as its point of departure the idea that any representation in contemporary, media-saturated society is an illusion, and that the traffic in images of organizational identity usually serves to advance specific political agendas (Gioia 1998: 27-8). Hatch (1992), Hatch and Schultz (1997), Schultz and Hatch (1996), and Schultz et al. (2000) are central contributions using this postmodern lens.

One other leitmotif of this literature is renewed recognition of the intimate affinity between the concepts of culture and organizational identity, which is increasingly leading research on the latter into new concept areas and new vocabularies. On the one hand, organizational science is finding itself needing new words to talk about its subject matter, e.g.,"love," "agony," "wisdom" (Albert et al. 1998: 274). On the other hand, new conceptual tools and approaches to help shape the understanding of organizational identity are being sought. Whetten, for example very consciously creates an opening for new transdisciplinary perspectives, stating: "Not only is identity a useful unifying construct within organization science, it also serves a great bridge to other social science disciplines …. [W]e would do well to tap into conversations about identity in sociology, psychology, anthropology, and even geography" (Albert et al. 1998: 276).

Also, there are acknowledgements that there is undeniably something "tribal" or "clannish" at work in questions of organizational identity. Ashcroft (in Albert et al. 1998), speaking of the tension in understanding organizational identity at a micro and a macro level of analysis, asserts that identity has to comprise an element of local co-presence: "When it's all said and done, [identity] must always be locally bounded, because we're tribal. … [I]dentity, to really stick, has got to be something that you enact in a very local, tribal context"

(Albert et al. 1998: 279). I would suggest that it is the 'cultural' dimensions of organizational identity that are leading in this direction; moreover, I assert that in order to understand these cultural dimensions, a structuralist framework is useful.

Consequently, if organizational identity can be understood in terms similar to those which Lévi-Strauss used to shape our understanding of totemism, we have to reformulate the questions we are posing: asking not "What functional relationships (essential characteristics, intrinsic properties, etc.) inside the organization account for its identity?" but rather "What does organizational identity mean in the wider sociocultural setting?" This implies a wide field of analysis, beyond the "boundaries" of the organization, and into the field of meanings and classifications that provide the raw material for constructing identity – in other words, it requires looking at the very broad "institutional" landscape in which organizations come to be identified.

EXAMPLE # 2— LEGO MINDSTORMS

The LEGO company set about creating a radically new business unit in the mid-1990's, in an attempt to radically diversify its globally-recognized and enormously powerful brand into the digital market. Launched in mid-1998 under the name "Mindstorms," this product combined programmable computer chips with the brightly-colored modular plastic bricks with which Lego has created its franchise. Until that time, however, Lego had enjoyed a remarkable 4 decades of growth as a relatively conservative, homogeneous organization dedicated to diversifying its core "low-tech" plastic bricks line. Recognition of the dramatic changes in the world of technology, consumer expectations, and – most importantly – the real life experience of its key market (children 3-13 years old) impelled this new product development, and the general upheaval of what had become a complacent and risk-averse organizational mindset. Not coincidentally, it was also hoped that this "avant-garde" business unit would also comprise a viable and successful model for further evolution of the "mainstream" of the Lego organization, which would, meanwhile, continue to function as it had until the feasibility of the alternative had been either proven.

In order to accomplish this, the Mindstorms project, as it was called, operated partly as a separate business unit, which nonetheless drew on the same set of organizational resources and success criteria of the larger, "mainstream" of the business. The "Mindstorms"

organization, although formally a component of the larger Lego organization, nevertheless developed an organizational identity of its own, in part as a way of conceptualizing the unique tensions that bore on it: on the one hand, be a separate and visionary organization in the "avant-garde" of the larger business, but, on the other hand, remain a element of the larger organizational system of resources and operational measurements. What is most relevant to our argument is the manner in which the Mindstorms group began to identify itself: it saw itself as a "satellite" of the larger Lego organization, and even represented itself graphically as one celestial body orbiting a larger one. Implicit in this identity was the notion of a dynamic balance between the gravitational forces acting on the Mindstorms group to attract and "hold" them in orbit (i.e., resources and systems), and the momentum and velocity energies driving them away from the Lego core (radically different ideas about product development and market). Such a metaphorical image exemplifies the way in which organization's come to understand themselves in terms of a representation that indexes key perceived elements of their "natural" setting – i.e., the parent organization (and the enormous attraction of its inert mass), and the market (and the dynamic velocity it demanded).

EXAMPLE # 3— TUPPERWARE

Long known for its leading position as a direct seller of food storage, preparation and serving items, Tupperware is a multinational with annual sales in excess of $1 billion. Growing from post-WW II innovations in plastics technologies, Tupperware products are a globally-known brand with an solid presence in the industrialized world, and a rapidly growing position in the burgeoning middle classes of the developing world. The firm's founder, Earl Tupper, discovered that his products, deemed valuable by those who knew them, were difficult for the average consumer to understand. This lead him to develop the now-well-known technique of direct selling known as the "Tupperware Party," capitalizing on interpersonal trust and friendship networks at the community level as a means of educating his consumer base and fostering recognition of needs for his product.

Now so well-ensconced as to be part of contemporary everyday folklore, the Tupperware party as a critical organizational sales strategy brings with it a need to nourish a warm, trustworthy, and helpful image in the eyes of its enormous direct sales force, namely the Tupperware Party "hostesses." At the same time as it sustains this uniquely community-

focused image, however, Tupperware must also develop and maintain an image in the capital markets and the financial community as a no-nonsense, profit-oriented, and professionally managed business.

As managers in the company see it, Tupperware is a dynamic lens which focuses and integrates the often opposing needs of these two major constituencies. In company language and imagery, it is like an "hourglass," with the opposing demands and needs of the two groups meeting and synthesizing in the middle where the company sits. In many of the internal organizational discussions of the company, this metaphor is used to illustrate the fact that not only opposing images (warm and playful; serious and financial), but also opposing sets of pressures ("give us community"; "give us money") are brought to bear on it.

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY, THE SOCIOCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT, AND THE TOTEMIC OPERATOR

Several fundamental points, therefore, guide the further development of our argument. First, that in looking to culture as a means of understanding organizational identity, we must be willing to look outside the confines of the organization itself, as defined by its formal membership. This grows from the need to take an open, wide-frame view of organizations as parts of larger cultural systems, and avoid presuming that that the organizational group is a closed, self-referential system. Second, that in framing our understanding of organizational identity in cultural terms, we are seeking symbolic and metaphorical means by which organizations are understood to be differentiated from one another. The second of these points stems from the recognition that all human processes are ultimately meaningful in symbolic terms, including the supposedly instrumental processes whereby organizations distinguish themselves from one another. These two points converge in the third point, which suggests that organizational identity is fundamentally the symbolic process in which organizations analogize their own distinctiveness with reference to other orders of differences. Third, in taking a "structuralist" approach to the subject matter, we are presuming that the "meaning" of any symbolic pattern of "identification" derives from the relationship in which it stands relative to other symbolic patterns. That is, in pursuing the idea that organizational identity is like "totemism," and that, as in Lévi-Strauss 's model of totemic processes, there is a "totemic operator" in the construction of group identity, we propose that

14

the differences between organizations that are called their "identities" are analogized with respect to a "natural" order of differences. Thus, we suggest that organizational identity can best be understood as the set of analogies organizations assemble to represent themselves in the "landscape"[10] of natural conditions in which they exist.

As we signaled briefly earlier, there is considerable precedent for a contextual and social systemic approach to understanding organizations. First, the "institutionalist" or "neoinstitutionalist" approach builds on the idea that institutions construct social realities in which organizations take shape and interact with one another (DiMaggio and Powell 1991a, 1991b, Meyer and Rowan 1991, Zucker 1991, Powell 1991, Friedland and Alford 1991).[11] Second, the notion of "embeddedness" has also begun to generate an extensive literature of its own (Granovetter 1985, Rao et al. 2000). As with the "neoinstitutional" approaches, the notion of embeddedness is also a rich analytical framework, offering scholars a variety of ways in which to evaluate relations between social environments and the entities like organizations that are analyzed within them. Third, additional economic constructs such as "macrocultures" (Abrahamson and Fombrun 1994) have also been proposed, as a means of conceptualizing a corpus of social, economic, and interorganizational effects detected in the operations of individual firms.

In proposing that totemic systems of thought are a useful analogy for understanding organizational identity, therefore, we are not claiming that there is, in fact, a cryptic and submerged code of specific species[12] that characterizes the ways in which organizations are identified. We are claiming that the parallel between organizational identity and "totemic systems of thought and the totemic operator" is that "organizational identity" is never internal properties alone – it is always an identity assembled using complex imagery from the surrounding environment to inform it: it is "identity", in Oliver and Roos' metaphor, in a "landscape" (2000). Beyond that, however, we propose, however, that the "totemic operator" idea can be adapted to the field of organizational identity if we "solve" the equation with a correlate for "nature" in this equation. In general, it will consist of the socio-commercial matrix of large-scale, authorizing institutions within which organizations take shape and evolve (Figure 3). This "natural" world has its own ecology, and provides a classification scheme via ontologically constitutive forms: legal and governmental institutions, the invisible

hand of the market, the law of supply and demand, production and consumption, capital markets, etc. [13] Let's look to some additional examples of how this is done.

EXAMPLE # 4 – USING ADMINISTRATIVE TAXONOMIES

This more synthetic example concerns the considerable body of research from the past decade or so illustrating how various high-level social categories that shape interorganizational fields – widely published rankings (Elsbach and Kramer 1996, Gioia and Thomas 1996), interorganizational macrocultures (Abrahamson and Fombrun 1994), authorizing institutions (Powell and DiMaggio 1991, Douglas 1986, Scott 1995) – play a fundamentally constitutive role in organizational identity. Beyond this body of work, moreover, the Postmodernist group of organizational identity theorists have also helped document the degree to which organizational identity constantly evolves within the broad political and cultural traffic of images in society (Fiol et al. 1998, Gioia et al. 2000, Hatch and Schultz 1997, Schultz et al. 2000).

A still more specific illustration of the intersection between ontologically significant taxonomies and organizational identity occurs in the extensive research on organizational categorization (Abrahamson and Fombrun 1994, Lant and Baum 1995, Porac and Thomas 1990, 1994, Porac et al. 1995, Porac et al. 1999, Reger and Huff 1993). This body of work illustrates how "certain categorizations diffuse through organizational fields in the form of collectively understood organizational taxonomies and classifications" (Porac et al. 1999:113). This is not an irrelevant backdrop for identity, but, in fact an ontologically central component of it, since these "taken-for-granted classifications provide a commonsense nomenclature for describing organizational variation and help to make organizational communities sensible and coherent to the actors involved" (Porac et al 1999: 113). A recent exemplar illustrates how crucial such governmentally institutionalized codings are to organizational life, by evaluating the way in which boards of directors tend to selectively define industry peers in ways that justify compensation provided to CEOs in differing economic circumstances (Porac et al. 1999).

This particularly abstract example stands on an elemental homology between "totemic" systems of thought and the shaping of organizational identity in terms of the encompassing "natural" environment as comprised of institutional forms, organizational

taxonomies, etc. This is in many ways similar to Mary Douglas' observation that institutional arrangements derive legitimacy and primacy in the shaping of a sociocultural order by being "naturalizing analogies"; with this base in a shaping analogy, they become "part of the order of the universe" (1986: 52). In this instance, organizational identity is meaningful in the sense that a variety of ("natural") classificatory schemes are used to map differences among organizations; just as the differences in "nature" are meaningful in the sense that various classificatory schemes (including the schema of organizations) are used to map these differences (Figure 4). Put in other terms, an organization with a specific identity may be a "totemic operator" between the world of "nature" – the encompassing economy and its constitutive institutions – and the social world of the employees who together comprise the organization. In the same fashion as totemic systems of thought unite the social and the natural orders, organizational identity unites a human social world with the "natural order" of economic institutions and the economy in its most general terms.

SUGGESTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Using the framework of "totemic systems of thought" that we have been proposing as a mode of understanding organizational identity carries with it several implications for research. On the one hand, it is possible that testable hypotheses might be developed to guide research in this area. For example: Hypothesis: Members of an organization will represent the organization's identity not only using figurative language, but this language and the (self-)conceptualization it indexes will refer frequently to an encompassing and abstract "natural" order (governmental institutions, "the market," etc.). Such a hypothesis, it should be obvious, would best be evaluated with data gathered with a statistically valid sample from a range of organizational stakeholders.

Another potential suggestion for additional research would be to observe and evaluate the way in which organization's identity is represented in terms similar to those described above, but is developed and deployed in specific, high-order organizational settings, e.g., in strategy meetings, board meetings, shareholder meetings, etc. This would entail close participant observation in such settings, along with accurate and complete documentation of verbal and non-verbal interactions, along with physical, tangible

representations of organizational identity in the form of drawings, models, buildings, constructed exhibits, etc.

Still another research suggestion concerns the value of extensive, in-depth, "thick description" organizational life. Such an ethnographic approach would have the very great benefit of providing access to more subjective and tacit constructions, as well as providing a diachronic, longtitudinal portrait of representations of organizational identity.   It might, for example, help reveal the degree to which aspects of the encompassing "natural" environment are differentially emphasized in different conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

While analogies and metaphors are often presumed to be inimical to the development and implementation of objective scientific approaches, this presumption ignores evidence showing how fundamental and substantive these cognitive devices are to scientific discourse (Boyd 1993, Kuhn 1970, 1993, Schön 1963, 1993). This holds true also for the study of organizations, as a scientific discourse in and of itself: as Morgan, in his influential tour d'horizon of "images of organization," asserts: "we can open the way to different modes of understanding by using different metaphors to bring organizations into focus in different ways. Each metaphor opens a horizon of understanding and enacts a particular view of organizational reality" (1997: 427; and see also Tsoukas 1991). In this spirit, and with this same goal in view – opening a particular view of organizational reality – this paper has tried to suggest that organizational identity can be understood in terms analogous to those of totemic systems of thought. Since all culture is, from one point of view, a set of interreferential systems of meaning, there is a deliberately recursiveness to the formulation proposed here: just as totemic systems of thought are constituted by a set of metaphorical analogies between natural and social orders of difference, so organizational identity is constituted (analogously) by analogies between social and natural orders of difference as well.   Understanding organizational identity as a "totemic operator" is a way of representing the metaphors by which organizations imaginatively construct their own identity – and so, also, of equipping organizations with an additional apparatus for arriving at an understanding of their own identity.

The fact that his is a deliberately exotic model connects to a further conclusion this paper is seeking to draw, inspired by the previously-cited reference by Ashcroft to the "tribal" and "clannish" contexts of organizational identity. It is a commonplace for anthropology that human beings always and everywhere live in universes made meaningful in the way we call 'cultural." As Marshall Sahlins puts it, it is "the anthropological discovery that the creation of meaning is the distinguishing and constituting quality of men … such that by processes of differential valuation and signification, relations among men, as well between themselves and nature, are organized" (1976: 102). The implication of this simple observation, therefore, is that the ways in which we understand organizational identity in post-industrial society should not be segregated from the understanding of the formation of meaning in human society in general.[14] Sahlins famously analyzed the American systems of commodities (especially food and clothing) with penetratingly insight by applying a Lévi-Strauss ian inspired structural anthropology (1976: Chaps 4 and 5). Showing how the supposedly "practical" and "instrumental" forms of reason that are assumed to structure the rationality of the American economy are themselves a superstructure built on an infrastructure of symbolic reasoning, Sahlins too discovered a "totemism" in bourgeois materialism.[15] Importantly, our present argument differs from his in seeing not so much the "totem" in the commodity, but rather the "totemic system of thought" in the identity of social groups that structure the economy – the organizations themselves.

Many of those who use Smircich (1983) as a touchstone of cultural "bona fides" before developing their arguments may be overlooking a crucial observation of hers, namely that "Organizational life is a pattern … between symbolic forms (1983: 164). As such, therefore, the organization as a social form is no different from the social forms in any other human society, and is susceptible of an anthropological approach. However, the value of such a contribution to the discourse on organizational identity, ultimately, has to be its use-value for the discipline of organizational studies, since there is no inherent prerogative to frame the discussion on organizations and their identities in anthropological terms only. But as the discourse on organizational identity continues to seek new ground, the value of anthropology may lie mostly with its ability to see familiar data in a new setting and in a new way – as Clifford Geertz has put it, "by providing out-of-the-way cases, [anthropology] sets

nearby ones in an altered context" (Geertz 1983: 77). It is the expectation of this paper that deploying the exoticness of "the totemic operator", and thereby "altering" the "context" of organizational identity issues with the analogy between organizational identity and totemic systems of thought, not only brings new life to this discourse, but helps those who work in organizations better understand their own world.
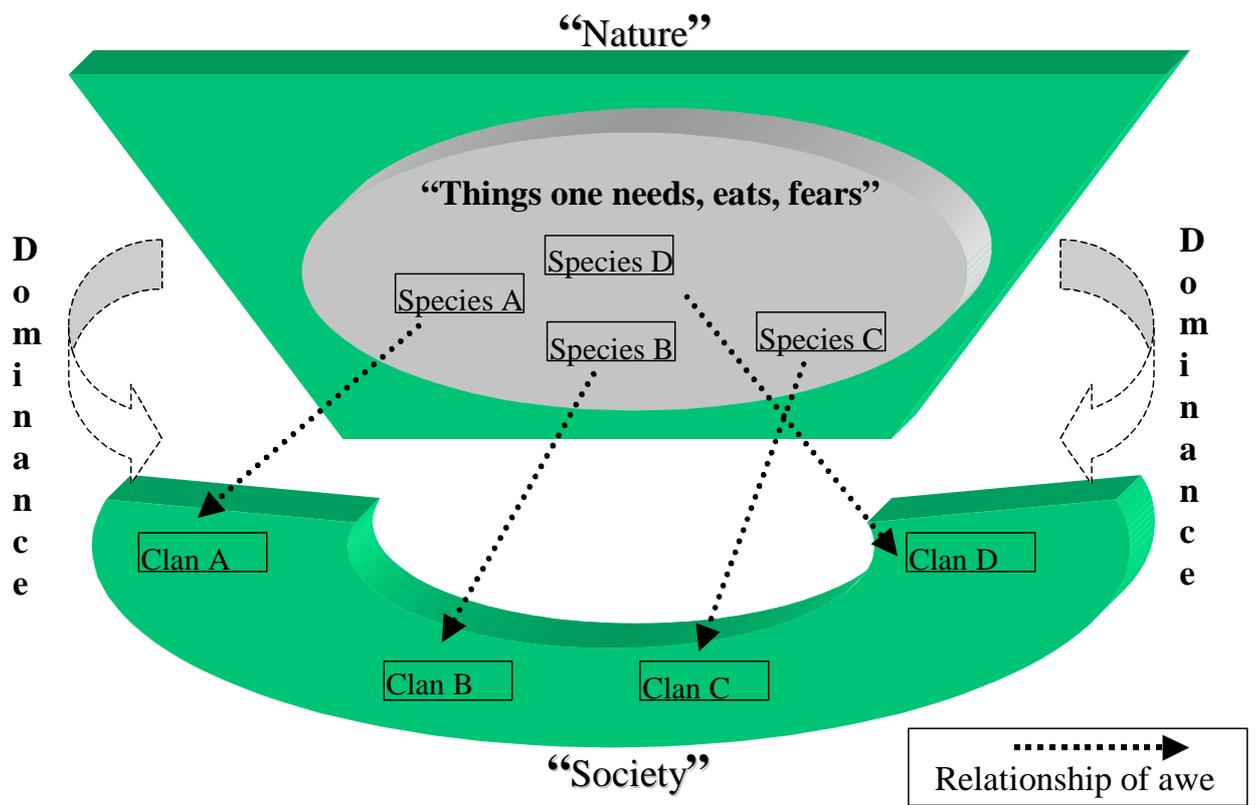
Figure 1: "Good to Eat" Theory of Totemism
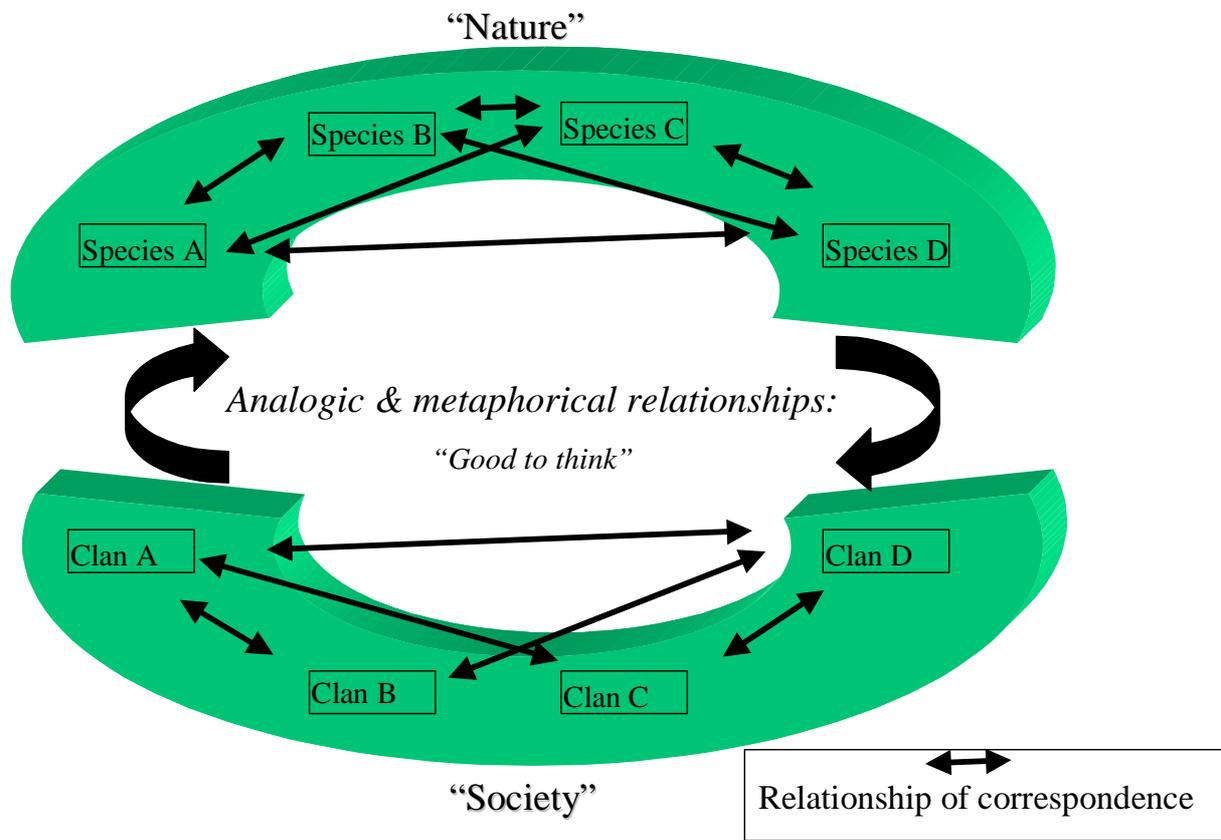
Figure 2: "Good to Think" Theory of Totemism

"Nature" / "The Economy"

"Totem" B   "Totem" C

"Totem" A   "Totem" D

Analogic & metaphorical relationships:

"Good to think"

Org. A   Org. D

Org. B   Org. C

"Society"

Relationship of correspondence
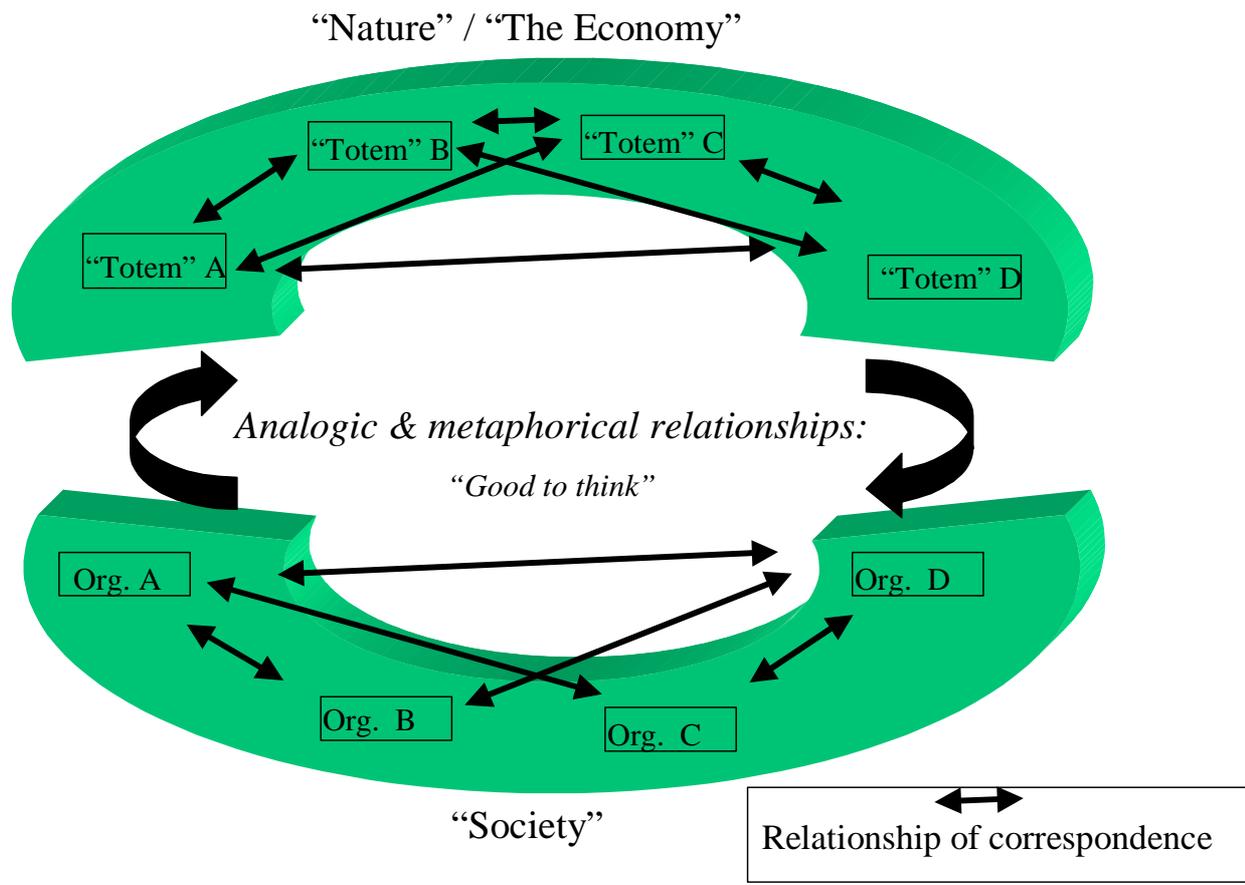
Figure 3: Org. Identity as "Good to Think" Totemism

Supplier relationship Q,
Brand nameABC,
Local employer of
choice, etc.

Industry P, Client base
"x",
Classification 2234,
Constraint "y", etc.

Industry RR, Client
base " oil drilling
companies",
Classification 2454, etc.

"Bottom feeder,"
Core competency in
logistics,
R&D-intensive

"Totem" B   "Totem" C

"Totem" A

"Nature" / "The Economy"
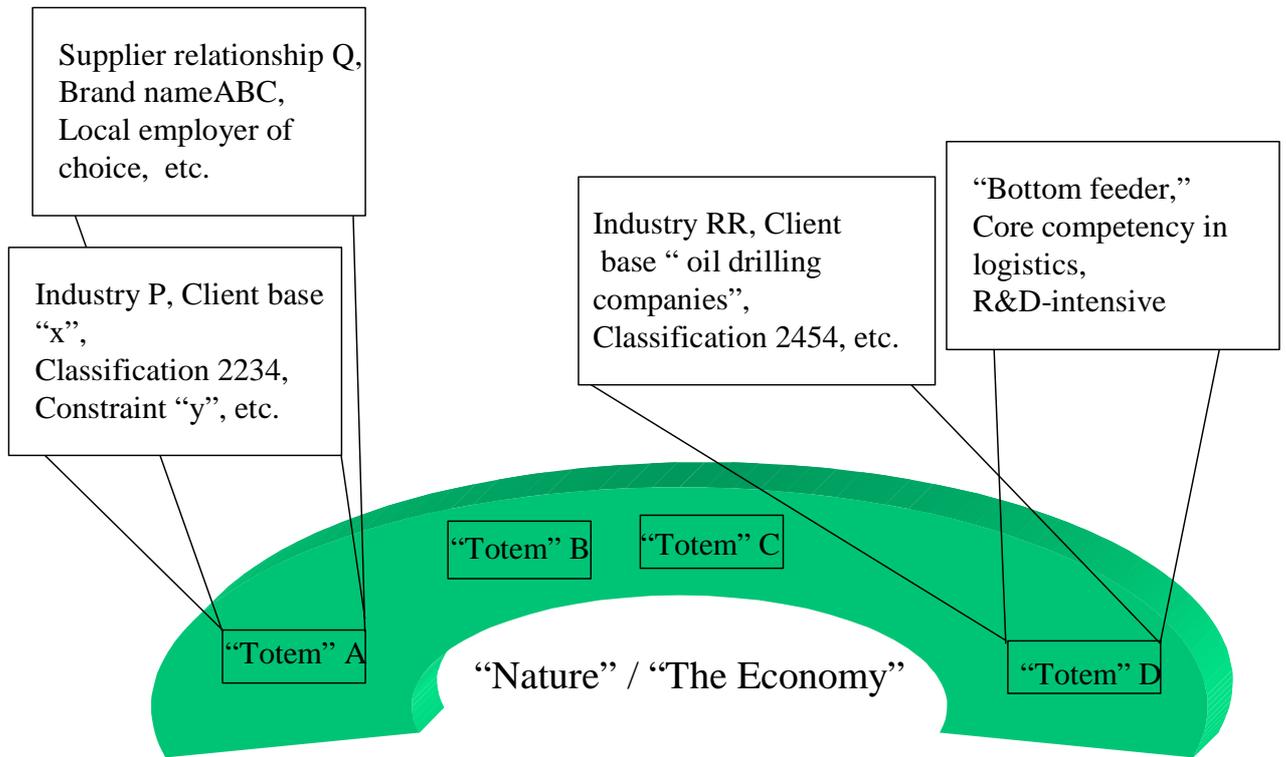
"Totem" D

Figure 4: Possible sets of economy-oriented "totems"

ENDNOTES

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[1] Imaginary company name based on real example.

[2] In this we are following Giddens' proposal that there is a "mutual interpretative interplay between social science and those whose activities compose its subject matter – a 'double hermeneutic.' The theories and findings of the social sciences cannot be kept wholly separate from the universe of meaning and action which they are about. But, for their part, lay actors are social theorists, whose theories help to constitute the activities and institutions that are the object of study of specialized social observers or social scientists" (Giddens 1984: xxxii-xxxiii).

[3] We are using the notion of "metaphor" in a very broad sense, as a phenomenological instrument for making sense of the world (Black 1962, 1993, Boyd 1993).

[4] Thus, a group of product development researchers trying to make an artificial bristle paintbrush that mimicked the properties of natural bristle paintbrushes had been repeatedly stymied until one of their group proposed the metaphor that "a paintbrush is kind of a pump;" this provided a new ways of conceptualizing paint flow in the paintbrush, which led to ultimate success in their development efforts (Schön 1963, 1993).

[5] Such patterns, for Lévi-Strauss in particular, are ultimately traceable to fundamental structures of the human mind, its propensity for symbolizing (cf. White 1949, 1959), and particularly its propensity for dualistic thought in the form of binary oppositions.

[6] Others (e.g. Sahlins 1976) have noted the functionalist implications of this formulation.

[7] Some additional elements of the "totemic complex" which varied significantly from one society to the next include: the membership of each clan was made up of individuals with very specific genealogical relationships to one another; there were often precise stipulations about who either inside or outside of the clan could or should be married; clan members practiced ritual avoidance of the animal or plant which was the group "totem", or avoidance of its products, parts of it, etc.; in some cases clan members would consume, under highly ritualized circumstances, the animal or plant; clan members would use (or avoidance of use) of images of it in any forms of decoration or art; the use (or avoidance of use) of the word for it; etc.

[8] In re "constitutive," compare: "Various scholars throughout history, … beginning with Quintillian, Ramus, and Vico, have argued that a great deal of our conceptualisation of experience, even the foundation of human consciousness, is based on figurative schemes of thought which include not only metaphor, but also metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. These tropes do not merely provide a way for us to talk about how we think, reason, and imagine, they are also *constitutive* of our experience" (Gibbs 1993: 253; italics in original). And see, in particular, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Lakoff (1993).

[9] This framework of group, scheme, and nature (also subject, culture, and object) lies at the root of the approach to social theory we espouse – in that cultural, symbolic schema mediate and constitute the relationships between subject and object. In this we follow especially Sahlins (1976) is seeing culture as the "tertium quid" that mediates the antique dualism that has long structured western philosophical and sociological thought.

[10] E.g., as in Oliver and Roos 2000: Chap. 2.

[11] It is characterized as follows: "The new institutionalism in organization theory and sociology comprises a rejection of rational-actor models, an interest in institutions as independent variables, a turn toward cognitive and cultural explanations, and an interest in properties of supraindividual units of analysis that cannot be reduced to aggregations or direct consequences of individuals attributes or motives" (DiMaggio and Powell 1991a: 8)

[12] It is certainly compelling, as has been noted, that there are vital structural isomorphisms or homologies between the capitalist system and the Darwinian notions of speciation and evolution, a parallelism made explicit in the work of the celebrated Austrian political economist Friedrich Hayek. Marx and Engels are relevant figures in this connection as well. Sahlins cites correspondence between them showing their growing awareness that "the biological explanation of the distinctions between species was modelled on bourgeois society; whereupon, once elaborated, the theory was turned back to explain the human world" (1976: 53).

[13] The way in which the institutional environment acts with all the ontological force of nature is well captured by DiMaggio and Powell, who write: "Institutionalized arrangements are reproduced because individuals often cannot even conceive of appropriate alternatives (or because they regard as unrealistic the alternatives they can imagine). Institutions do not just

constrain options; they establish the very criteria by which people discover their preferences" (DiMaggio and Powell 1991a: 11).

[14] Knorr Cetina's exploration of high-energy physics and molecular biology laboratories illuminates key aspects of "culture" in locations traditionally segregated from the idea. In her Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge, she asserts, we need to pay more attention to the "symbolic makeup of scientific-instrumental reason, of our Western 'rationality.' There is still the tendency in sociology to draw a sharp distinction between symbolic, 'cultural' beliefs and orientations, on the one hand, and technical activities, demands for efficiency, etc. on the other" (Knorr Cetina 1999: 247).

[15] Compare Sahlins' observations on the "totemism" inherent in the capitalist order of production and consumption: " I would not invoke 'the so-called totemism' merely in casual analogy to the *pensée sauvage*. True that Lévi-Strauss writes as if totemism had retreated in our society to a few marginal resorts or occasional practices. And fair enough – in the sense that the 'totemic operator,' articulating differences in the cultural series to differences in natural species, is no longer a main architecture of the cultural system. But one must wonder whether it has not been replaced by species and varieties of manufactured objects, which like totemic categories have the power of making even the demarcation of their individual owners a procedure of social classification" (Sahlins 1976: 176).   What the present paper is attempting to do, however, differs from Sahlins' assertion that "the 'totemic operator' … is no longer a main architecture of the cultural system."   This is indeed true insofar as the experience of "natural species" in contemporary organizational life is radically different from the experience of the same among "tribal peoples."   Nonetheless, we are arguing that a conceptual "mechanism" similar enough to the "totemic operator" is indeed evident in the processes of organizational identity that the comparison with "totemic systems" of thought is warranted.   This argument does not replace Sahlins' notion of the "totemism" of the commodity, but rather supplements it with the idea of the "totemism" of the organization.

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