

Modern Family: between tradition and new (post-family) narratives

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Abstract

It is possible to be a couple without marriage commitments and even without living together (as happens to LAT couples); the couple can be restricted to the two partners or include wider relationships; one can be a parent without having generated children with natural relationships. In short, everything suggests that today being a couple and being parents are two possibilities that respond to different life projects, they go on their own. History and social evolution have shown how the classic family made up of mother, father and natural or adopted children becomes just one of the many possibilities of being called a family. On the basis of these considerations, the aim of this paper is to reflect on the physiological change in family structures. A culturalist conception of the family seems to be affirming itself from many sides, which understands it as a pure cultural product, rather than as a structure that humanizes people, through a relationality that operates through the symbolic exchange between the sexes and between generations (Donati, 2020). The new narratives lead us to take up the challenge of a possible post-human and technoliquid family (Cantelani, 2020) and in order to do this we need to seriously reflect on the fact that thinking of the family only as a question of love, affection and care, it can be very reductive. Rather, it would be necessary to restore originality to family relationships: family forms are the product of collective processes of morphogenesis of social structures and even choices, although they depend on individual emotions and strategies, are more deeply the expression of dynamics of networks of relationships. In other words, in the age of the anthropocene and of the ‘family warming’, it becomes necessary and fundamental to favor a *sustainable family*, in the sense of giving a new meaning to the elements of its social genome and the ways of connecting them (Donati, 2020).

Key words: Family; digital society; narratives; relationships; interculturalism

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It is not easy to say family

In every daily conversations, in reflections based on common sense, also in the most refined socio-psychological analyzes, we find ourselves increasingly in disagreement on the problem of family identification. We put ourselves to the test, trying to keep our definition of family, when we find ourselves faced with the different concrete ways in which our own family presents itself during its temporal evolution (Vespasiano, 2010).

Therefore, it becomes crucial to have a definition that differentiates the family from the *new forms of family*, which have already obtained or are still seeking recognition similar to those that society has so far recognized in a special way to the family. That is, it is a question of recognizing the specificity and diversity of the family with respect to the new forms of family (civil unions, cohabitation more uxorio, homosexual cohabitation, Lat, etc.) (Donati, 2007, p. 14).

A basic definition, considered by the scientific community to be quite acceptable, because it is sufficiently broad even if with boundaries that are not entirely defined, is that provided by Georges Murdock (1971, p. 9): «The family is a social group characterized by common residence, by economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom [adults] maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, their own or adopted, of adults who cohabit sexually».

This definition accepts some essential points to define the family:

- the presence of a man and a woman who decide to live together and have children (or adopt them);
- the submission of their union to the approval of the community;
- the declaration of commitment to cooperate economically for mutual maintenance.

It is a definition that encompasses numerous family types, even if it creates some problems

in identifying those that are not very widespread and those that recently ask to be socially recognized. On the other hand, it allows us to justify, on the basis of consolidated socio-anthropological research, also the definition used by Istat¹, according to which the family is: the set of people linked by ties of marriage, kinship, affinity, adoption, protection or emotional ties, cohabitants and having habitual residence in the same municipality (even if they are not yet registered in the registry of the resident population). A family can also be constituted by a single person» (Vespasiano, 2010, pp. 16-17).

For Murdock, no society has been able to find an effective substitute for the nuclear family and all its functions (reproductive, economic, educational, etc.): the nuclear family is a sort of 'social atom' that can be combined and become part of the composition of 'molecules', the composite families: polygamous and extended. With the model of the nuclear family, Murdock believed he had identified a constant, an indispensable foundation of every social organization.

Yet few companies exclusively recognize the nuclear model and today it is a hypothesis that is challenged from different points of view. Certainly, the social orientation to the family is generalized and still powerful. Part of its power lies in its emotional, sentimental, affective, sensual nature; another part, in its permanent ability to offer materially shelter, assistance, help, support.

The importance of the family appears indisputable - we repeat: beyond transformations and critical visions - in reproducing society, both biologically and culturally. The function of socialization and cultural orientation is still the prerogative of the family, despite being continually challenged by other socialization and collective orientation agencies (school and mass media, first of all), a situation that often creates strong concerns in parents and determines opportunities for crisis.

¹ See also art. 4 of the DPR 30 May 1989, n. 223 "Approvazione del nuovo regolamento anagrafico della popolazione residente".

But family social capital still significantly influences the adult careers of children and their social position (Prandini, 2003; Rossi & Bramanti, 2007); the reference networks still see the family one as a critical junction from which it is not easy to ignore to build and strengthen one's network of social relations (in some way, we can define it as familism; in some other way, we speak of radicalization; in some other way, it is defined social power). From this point of view, the controlled expression of sexuality, biological reproduction, the care and protection of newborns, the help given to young people for their social integration and economic support to non-productive members, are considered functions of the family (Parsons & Bales, 1956). International regulations clearly state this and sanction infringements.

Family, kinship, parenting: concepts in evolution and intercultural dimension

The conceptions of the family, of kinship, of parenthood have changed somewhat in recent years; kinship, today, is no longer considered only as indicative of blood ties (biological kinship) or alliance, but refers to all those ties based on any type of interpersonal relationship; or marriage, now almost always less chosen in favor of cohabitation instead (Palumbo, 2015); the one-child model begins to spread more and more, with the consequent reduction of the cousin network.

The increase in legal separations and divorces has multiplied the types of families: families of single people, incomplete or single-parent nuclear families, reconstituted families. Thus new forms of family emerge (Palumbo, 2017).

«Anthropologists in a century of studies on human societies have accumulated various knowledge on the vastness of family forms. A practical case of how this knowledge was capitalized and established dates back to 2004 when George W. Bush in America proposed an amendment to the American constitution to “define and protect the marriage of a man and a woman as husband and wife on the basis of the fact that the union between man and

woman is the most enduring human institution, encouraged and honored by all cultures and all religions”. The American Anthropological Association immediately distanced itself from this proposal, arguing that “the family based on heterosexual marital union could not be considered either ‘natural’ or ‘universal’, but that a century of studies had brought to light a wide range of types of families, including homosexual unions” (American Anthropological Association, 2004)» (Favole, 2015, pp. 29-30).

It is evident how the idea of naturalness of the heterosexual family seems to be cracking, in favor of an ever greater “culturality” (Fuccillo, 2019; Palumbo, 2019, Santoro 2018). Francesco Remotti (2010), investigating the anthropological archive on the topic, reviews the cases of African, American, Asian, Oceanian and, last but not least, European societies that deviate significantly from the family model based on marriage and cohabitation between a man, a woman and their children. The idea that the family has experienced a slow, but inexorable transition from extended forms to the nuclear or conjugal form has been largely denied. Rather, it seems now clear that the forms of the family have been continuously transformed in response to pressures of a political, economic, cultural and ideological nature (Salvatore et al, 2018; Mannarini & Salvatore, 2020, Fuccillo, 2019).

As for our country, there is no doubt that the Italian and Western families of the past thirty years are very different from those that preceded them (Barbagli, Saraceno, 1997).

«From the 1960s onwards, in the Western world, separations and divorces have increased, and families have increasingly found themselves exposed to the transformative action of at least 3 factors:

- the process of secularization has weakened the religious strength of the marriage bond; it is no coincidence that even in a country like ours the rate of marriages celebrated with a civil ceremony only has increased (Fuccillo, 2016; Fumagalli Carulli, 2016);
- couples have begun to build their marriage bond on the indispensable presence of

emotional ties alone, neglecting the strength of what had traditionally been the cornerstones of past unions: economic and patrimonial ties;

- the increase in the rate of work of women has shifted the primary objective of women: from the realization of themselves as wives and mothers, to the realization of themselves as workers and professionals (it must be borne in mind that, in these the last 30 years, the level of education of women has increased considerably) (Vespasiano, 2010, p. 23).

The reasons for this profound and silent transformation can be traced, certainly in the introduction of the law on divorce, but also in less striking attitudes and behaviors. «One of these attitudes can be traced to the *obligation of well-being*. This convinced the young people (and their parents) that their duty was to consolidate the economic and financial situation of the couple - before deciding the date of the wedding - and of the family - before deciding the day of conception -. And since children have an economic cost (they have always had it anyway), the same couple plans the number of children they can afford to generate, *provided they maintain a good level of well-being*» (Vespasiano, 2010, p. 27).

The result is a disturbing paradox: the concern to give a future of well-being to their children pushes many couples not to generate them or to reduce their number to a minimum. To ensure an “adequate” level of well-being for children (even those not yet born) it frightens and pushes couples to work harder to earn more, convincing them that in this way they will have the opportunity to “have and maintain” children. In reality, the more time is invested in achieving economic well-being, the longer the time taken for the decision to start a family, the more the vicious circle feeds itself. It is for these reasons that helping families to face the difficulties in which they find themselves and supporting them in the management of their life choices (parenthood, above all) is the duty of governments and states, beyond the ideological and political orientations that are legitimate and unavoidable, but which should in no way

influence family policy decisions (Fuccillo, 2019, Palumbo 2020).

Kinship

In recent years there has been «a renewed interest in kinship studies, attributable on the one hand to the emergence (especially in Europe and Western countries) not only of “new forms of family” but also of “new forms of kinship” made possible by more and more advanced reproductive technologies, and on the other by innovative ways of conceiving and investigating kinship inspired by the so-called ontological turn» (Viazzo, 2015, p. 38). Authors of great depth, such as Janet Carsten and Marshall Sahlins, deal, albeit with different analytical perspectives, to understand how kinship is put into practice in different social contexts and what are the meanings attributed to it.

Both agree on the fact that the construction of kinship is based above all on the social aspect, a focal point that often goes beyond biological ties; the question of the blood bond changes totally: if before by kinship we meant just this, that is all relationships must be based on a blood bond, now it seems that the primordial element on which a relationship is established is, among several others, the exchange of food, nourishment, home, home. Therefore, parenting and the various relational institutions of kinship are phenomena that go beyond the mere biological fact and indeed transcend them completely. Kinship is built entirely in society and culture and biology becomes a sort of metaphor especially in the Western world (Favole, 2015).

For Sahlins, kinship indicates that set of social relations marked by what he defines *mutuality of being*”, that is, relations built through conception, coexistence, “doing together”, characterized by practices of sharing in which the self and the other are closely interconnected. «If loving, caring for, feeding or sharing food, working together, living on the same land, providing mutual aid, sharing the fate in migration and residence, as well as marriage or adoption, are all terrains in which the kinship, it is because everyone knows, like

procreation, the meaning of participating in each other's lives» (Sahlins, 2013, p. 39 of the Italian translation)².

However, the work of Sahlins has met with some resistance in many scholars (particularly anthropologists). The author, in fact, tends to re-propose the well-known distinction between 'West and Rest', not considering the work of those who instead concentrate their analyzes in European or North American contexts. «Jeanette Edwards (2013: 285) complains that contrasting the extraordinary variety of expressions that kinship - or the *mutuality of being* - assumes in a myriad of extra-Western cultures with a monolithic image of the West runs the risk to neglect "a rich ethnographic documentation [on Western societies] and to sacrifice the specificities of kinship [in the West]" to give greater strength to an argument that needs an antagonistic representation to better highlight the characteristics that Sahlins attributes to kinship and to the societies in which it occupies a sociologically and symbolically central position. In reality, for Sahlins in the contemporary West there does not even seem to be a place for kinship, since the very possibility of the existence of a *mutuality of being* would have been swept away by the affirmation of a bourgeois individualism rationally aimed at profit material» (Viazzo, 2015, p. 39).

In other words, Sahlins highlights the historical decline of kinship and its disappearance in modernity. In the useful years, however, this view has been contrasted by those who have brought to light processes of non-linear change and not infrequent periods of growth in the relevance of kinship (Sabeau, Teuscher & Mathieu, 2007; Johnson & Sabeau, 2011).

In a volume by McKinnon & Cannel 2013, it is demonstrated how we can talk about the persistence of kinship in modernity, insisting

on its continuing or even growing importance in the economic-entrepreneurial and political sphere. «It is also evident that a persistent role of kinship - or even its indispensability - is increasingly spoken about also regarding the welfare functions that relatives are called to perform in the post-modern shortage of state assistance. Much questions are being asked about the consequences of socio-demographic changes such as the decline in birth rates and even more the decline or metamorphosis of marriage, which are producing a significant rarefaction of 'bio-legal' relatives. This rarefaction creates space - and perhaps, in fact, necessity - for 'fictitious' and 'performative' forms of kinship» (Viazzo, 2015, p. 40).

More attention should be paid to dynamic creations of fictitious kinships «through processes of doing as much as being» (McKinnon & Cannel, 2013b, p.13) but also to consider the fact that it is not enough to highlight only the functionally positive aspects of kinship as a source of support but it is also necessary to take into account the forms of violence, abuse, hierarchization, conflicts and tensions that kinship generates today in many Western socio-cultural contexts, where the moral obligation to help relatives is felt strongly unexpected.

Although in a concise form, one senses then, that it becomes somewhat difficult to find a way that describes kinship in universal terms. The same Sahlins who titled his book *What Kinship Is-and Is Not* cannot find a real answer. The title of Carsten could be more suitable when she proposes *What kinship does and how*, suggesting the importance not so much of what kinship is, but rather how it is performed and practiced, how it is created and how it is built.

Therefore, these are questions that still remain open and to be legitimized (Viazzo, 2015).

²Thanks to Sahlins and his comparison between conceptions of parenthood and kinship developed by different societies, we have several examples of kinship that have no connection with biology: the Kimeas consider the mother who breastfeeds the child (and it is not always the mother herself); the inhabitants

of the Nebilyer Valley in Papua New Guinea, believe that the kinship is created by the transmission of Kopong (which means fat) which is found in breast milk, sperm, sweet potato and pork. For these then we become relatives both through a sexual act and by eating together.

Towards a post-family society

The observations made above tell us that it is necessary to become aware that in the future society will be less and less ‘familiar’, at least in the sense in which it has been known up to now in human history: a place, that is, where women and men they feel protected, they live their sexuality, they build their future through the intertwining of the spousal relationship and the parental one, they generate the resources to support their old age, they transmit socially shared values and rules (Shorter, 1978).

It is possible to be a couple without marriage commitments, and even without living together (Think of LAT couples)³; the couple can be restricted to the two partners or include wider relationships; one can be a parent without having generated children with natural relationships. In short, everything suggests that today being a couple and being parents are two possibilities that respond to different life projects, they go on their own. As already said in the course of this discussion, the classic family made up of mother, father and natural or adopted children becomes only one of the many possibilities of being called a family.

In other words, a culturalist conception of the family is affirmed, which understands it as a pure cultural product, rather than as a passage from nature to culture, as a structure that humanizes people through a relationality that operates through the symbolic exchange between the sexes and between generations (Donati, 2020, p. 1).

About this, the metaphor that Donati uses to describe the family, a direct expression of the current geological era, the anthropocene, is very suggestive. The author talks about *family warming*, the overheating of the family. The growing hybridization of the family (precisely overheating), artificially or legally, places individuals in front of a plurality of

options that require responsible reflection and that takes into account the consequences. «It is therefore a question of understanding how far it is possible to modify the family genome without losing the foundations of an entire civilization: [...] it is not a question of keeping a fixed and immutable genome, but of ensuring that the genome, as device of transition from nature to culture, can use new technologies - which have always characterized the human being - in such a way as to enhance what is natural in it rather than distorting the human nature of the family relationship. This idea goes hand in hand with human ecology, which today is rightly claimed to promote a sustainable ecosystem. So we could speak of the need to foster a *sustainable family*, in the sense of giving a new meaning to the elements of its social genome and the ways of connecting them» (Donati, 2020, p. 2).

Without wanting to deny the importance of the affections and taking charge of the people we live with, we cannot however imagine reducing the family to a simple set of a few people who live together, whatever their relationships, as long as they are affective and “of care”. It would be a rather fragile, precarious family of the future, unable to face the challenges of life (De Luca Picione, 2017, 2020).

Donati continues: «Thinking about the family as a matter of individual choices is incorrect and misleading, because family forms are the product of collective processes of morphogenesis of social structures, because individuals as such are too weak and fragile to create solid relationships on their own in the absence of support from the public sphere, because the choices, although they depend on individual emotions and strategies, are more profoundly the expression of the dynamics of networks of relationships that dominate the individual, who is driven by the need to belong to those networks . Rather, an

³LAT (living apart together), that is couples linked by a relationship who decide to have separate homes, rather than a common residence. Experts (Roseneil, 2006) seem to consider homosexual couples and LAT couples a valid lifestyle and now an integral part of the

social landscape. However, it is an area that requires further research to determine its long-term social effects. Critics, in fact, raise concerns that this social deconstructionism could alter the unity of the classical family.

authentically relational culture is needed. It is a question of distinguishing between family relationships and other relationships, and social policies should treat them on the basis of criteria of justice and social equity that enhance the contributions that different styles of family life make to society» (Donati, 2020, pp. 2-3).

The new digital families

The context that can be glimpsed, then, is that of a libertarian culture that marries technological innovations, from biomedical ones to informatics-communication and robotic ones. It is the scenario of a growing estrangement from nature, a widespread estrangement from the natural roots of human existence, with all the problems it entails. In this scenario, the family will not disappear, but will be powerfully modified, because it is necessarily called upon to manage the (easy?) Relationship with the ICT society.

Every cultural revolution, every social change is accompanied by new frailties, which affect above all the new generations and which are then reflected in the family, in the school, in the peer group. However, we understand that the frailties of millennials are different from those of baby boomers. We are in two different eras: two different systems of capitalism (biocapitalism), the transition from the society of producers to the current consumer society, more sustainable and, above all, two different models of protagonism and social commitment, of aggregation: today the point of the meeting of protagonism is no longer the agora, but the virtual squares, communities, friends of the web (hundreds, sometimes thousands) that at any time, or for any reason, are deleted from our computers, Ipad and Iphone.

Since Castells (2002) started talking about it, the information society, the society of networks, has completely upset our daily life. And this is a fact. It is now a fact that everyone (natives, immigrants and digital late arrivals) can no longer do without technologies.

For McLuhan (1967), the transition from oral to written culture, to print and electronic media represents a real anthropological

mutation of the human species: the media are extensions of man, an extension of his senses (writing extends memory, the phone extends the voice and hearing, as the car extends the feet). The pressure exerted by the information sphere (info-sphere) appears to be radically changing the ways in which people perceive reality, elaborate fantasies, think and act in their social relationships. All this would explain how anthropo-centric modernity, which considers the person at the center of the everyday scene and technologies as tools at its service, is now increasingly replacing an anthropo-eccentric info-sphere, that is a situation that de-centers the people to the advantage of an increasingly autonomous role of technologies that are no longer and only manageable by people but in some way guide and use them (Donati, 2017).

It becomes necessary then to reflect in what way and to what extent this happens in families.

In fact, even the family was not unscathed by this great technological revolution, which often found parents lacking the tools on how to face the new challenges posed to their children in the face of small and super-efficient doors open to the whole world.

It would be naive to say that the advent of ICT in the family has only created problems; this is not the case because there are many positive aspects:

- communication methods: think of transnational families (*imagined families*) (Stark, 2012) that can easily “reach each other” on a daily basis or allow remote monitoring of their children and their movements (diasporic communities);
- time management: there is not necessarily a decrease in time in quantitative terms. On the other hand, the conception of family boundaries changes (because it is possible to act for the family even at a distance), the functioning in terms of the construction of rules or the way in which decisions are made;
- reversal of roles: erosion of the hierarchy in favor of negotiation in the name of an alleged superiority of children in knowing how to use ICT (adolescents are increasingly involved in family choices regarding, for example, where

to go on vacation, which appliance to buy) (Veer, Pawar & Kolte, 2019; Khandelwal *et alii*, 2020).

However, it is equally true that there are many pitfalls and gray areas that deserve to be addressed with attention and seriousness.

Very illuminating in this direction is the reading of the 2017 CISF Report on the Family in Italy. The merit of the research is to be able to identify four types of families in relation to the use of ICT (marginal, forced, adapted and hybridized). In particular, we want to analyze how the co-evolution of the family and the new digital world generates a family *hybridized* by the use of new technologies. Because we talk about hybridization because on the one hand family life is physicality; on the other hand, ICTs introduce virtuality. A mix is produced. Virtual relationships have their own undeniable dimension of reality. And the result is a hydrated family, expressed by 34.2% of the sample of families interviewed and which are generally characterized by singles/couples of young people, many unmarried cohabitants, LAT, immersed in the world of digital technologies.

The authors of the Report agree in defining the *hybridized* family as a different form of relationality, which does not always strengthen the bonds between family members. This hybridization of families serves to understand the post-media development phase (Eugeni, 2015) in which we find ourselves: the media are no longer bulky tools, they are no longer opaque, but wearable, intrusive, invasive (Rivoltella 2020). In other words, this means that being constantly connected doesn't always mean being in relationship. Therefore, a chiaroscuro reality appears: if on the one hand we are talking about a family that, thanks to hybridization, is kept together (e.g. family Whatsapp group), on the other we observe that families are kept together remaining

alone (Turkle, 2011). The reference to loneliness and isolation is a risk that tends to increase especially in families with minor children, in adolescence. A risk that is linked to the new temporal experience of individuals. It is a time that does not foresee empty spaces. It is not true that young people communicate less today, nor that they do not read and write, indeed they do it more than their peers in the 1980s. Kids today communicate too much, all the time. The lack of silence deprives them of attention to evaluate what is really worth discussing (right to boredom)⁴. Therefore, borrowing some of Luciano Floridi's reflections (2017), thinking about the media and the family means placing oneself on the so-called 'fourth revolution': not a semiosphere that has developed parallel to the real world, in which it is possible to enter and exit, but a migration of technology into our world. Our experience has increased: there is no disappearance of the body, but an amplification of it⁵. Authors such as Tonino Cantelani (2020) also speak of the technoliquid family, which is part of a scenario of maximum fulfillment of the processes of individual, relational, social deconstruction, started in the late 1960s. These processes have been enhanced by technology, thus defining the characteristics of postmodern man in the digital age and the new scenarios of the technoliquid mind. In other words, the digital revolution and the digital transformation of reality intercept, enhance and shape some characteristics of the liquid man: narcissism, speed, ambiguity, the search for emotions and the need for infinite light relationships.

Not just care but relationship

Despite the problems, the difficulties, the crisis, the weaknesses, the family survives. It evolves in form, but still remains that primary vital space in which the grammar of human,

⁴These could be the basis of web-mediated social withdrawal (think of the Hikikomori phenomenon in Japan).

⁵Statistics, at least those concerning our country, confirm that in Italy there is a growing diffusion

and use of ICT, but awareness of what they imply, whether in access or in consequences, is still very deficient (deficit of reflective capacity).

personal and social relationships is learned (Vespasiano *et alii*, 2010).

The new narratives lead us to take up the challenge of a possible post-human family and in order to do so we need to seriously reflect on the fact that thinking of leaving all the work of having to maintain the family and its harmony to love and affection is definitely a desperate hope.

Compared to the animal world, human care is a more complex thing because it is not based on instinct but, at least potentially, on relational reason, reflexivity and the intentionality of consciousness. Intersubjective relationships have properly human causal properties, that is, such as to humanize people, not when they are simply projections of individual desires, emotions, feelings and affects.

The substance of the family, made up of single individuals, is however made up of the relationship between the same individuals. And the dignity of these relationships can certainly be given by an attitude full of affection and by taking care *of* and *for the* Other, but it goes even further: it is more than this, much more⁶.

The dignity of relationships requires that the relationship be morally good, and this happens if it is formed on the basis of the elements that characterize the family *genome*, that is, gift, reciprocity, couple sexuality and the generativity, at least desired, that follows. The ego is relational, but it humanizes itself only with certain relationships and not with others (Donati, 2020).

Therefore, restoring dignity to familiar relationships; the family is the main socializing agent and generating relational goods: responsible motherhood and fatherhood, education in pro-social (and not just individual) virtues which are reflected in acting with justice and generosity towards

one's neighbor, accepting finitization and fragility as part of man's nature, to face the discomfort not simply by climbing over it but by training to stay inside it.

On closer inspection it is all this, it is all this entropy, which then in fact constitutes the vitality of every family unit and therefore of every social fabric.

⁶Instead of defending the naturalness of the structural principles of the nuclear family (the sexual union between a man and a woman and procreation), one could observe with Pier Paolo Viazzo and Francesco Remotti that «if there is a universal need to which these different forms [family] seem to respond, this is the

need to overcome the loneliness of the individual»(Viazzo & Remotti, 2007, p. 65).«It is being together, sharing spaces and resources, promoting cooperation and solidarity that explains the variety of domestic groups to which humanity has given birth» (Favole, 2015, p. 33).

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