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**INDIVIDUALISTIC AND HOLISTIC MODELS OF COLLECTIVE BELIEFS  
AND  
THE ROLE OF RHETORIC AND ARGUMENTATION.**

*The example of religious and political beliefs.*

in Christopher Adair-Totef (ed.), 2023, *Stephen Turner and the Philosophy of the Social*, Leiden, Brill Rodopi, chapter 6, pp. 110-131.

*Abstract*

The specific problem I address in this paper is the following: as numerous sociologists and anthropologists have noticed (notably Bourdieu), most people, in general, are not very much interested in the specific *content* of the collective beliefs of their group and do not spend much time evaluating the *logical* or *empirical rationality* of, or engaging in discussion about them. These data seem to limit the relevance of any research program focused either on the reconstruction of plausible reasons or on the effective role of reasoning, argumentation and rhetoric in the emergence, transformation and disappearance of collective beliefs (e.g. Raymond Boudon's and Jon Elster's programs). Of course, these latter programs have been adapted in order to grasp the complexity of collective beliefs. However, they remain individualistic: they may introduce relations of interaction (or of interdependence) among individuals as well as system of relations or social structures, but they do not take *groups* in themselves into account (except in cases groups can be viewed as acting as individual units of action).

Currently, new holistic and allegedly holistic models of collective beliefs are the center of many debates, especially in social philosophy but also increasingly in social psychology, political sciences and economics, in continuity, in particular, with the work of Raimo Tuomela, Philip Pettit and Margaret Gilbert. I will argue a) that certain recent allegedly holistic models – distinct from the classical models of interiorized social pressure – provide fruitful hypotheses for the understanding of collective beliefs because they are focused on the specific properties of groups; and b) that they are nevertheless compatible with individualist assumptions in Max Weber's – or Vilfredo Pareto's – sense and that they should be used in conjunction with a range of various individualistic models. I will also argue that all these models make sense as long as one focuses on effective argumentative and rhetoric procedures as Vilfredo Pareto did one century ago.<sup>1</sup>

**I**

**The explanation of collective beliefs and the role of argumentation and rhetoric.**

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<sup>1</sup> Previous versions of this paper were presented in several places [*not mentioned in this anonymous version*]. In this new version which I have prepared for this "Hommage to Stephen Turner", I have focused more on topics recently addressed by him in his remarkable exploration of the main issues raised by the encounter between cognitive et social sciences (Turner, 2018), and still more specifically on how these issues were investigated in Dan Sperber's recent work, which is put forward by Turner in his recent book as typical. I also briefly refer to a few of Turner's very numerous earlier publications, related either to the history of sociology or to the philosophy of the social sciences (in particular Weber and Durkheim). Turner's very impressive expertise in *both* fields - a rare feature within the US academic context - deserves to be noticed.

The explanation of collective beliefs, and more precisely, the explanation of the formation, diffusion, transformation and disappearance of collective beliefs are difficult issues. They have been addressed from many viewpoints in the social sciences with numerous models of explanation having been introduced over the past two centuries since the times of Marx and Tocqueville, Durkheim and Weber, Pareto and Tarde, Malinowski and Boas. Some of these scholars, such as Max Weber and, still more typically, Vilfredo Pareto and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, had raised the issue of the rationality or irrationality of beliefs much more centrally than the others: mainstream anthropology and sociology have been – from then onwards – much more focused on the interiorization of representations’, norms’ and values’ processes irrespective of whether they are rational or not, although some authors, such as Durkheim, were interested on both issues. One of the most typical representatives of the mainstream view remains Pierre Bourdieu (1972, 1980), who brilliantly argued that people do not spend much time in thinking in the content and the rationality of their “beliefs” and that, moreover, the so-called collective “beliefs” are often tacitly incorporated in practices more than fully explicit.

However, as soon as the late thirties, Evans-Pritchard (1937), who wanted to explicitly address Lévy-Bruhl’s (1923 [1922]) and Pareto’s (1935 [1916]) issues more empirically than these two scholars did (as it appears in Evans-Pritchard, 1965), played a significant role in the first re-emergence of the issue of rationality in cultural anthropology at a time when cognitive studies in social science had not arisen yet (see, in particular, for a still relevant survey, Horton, 1982).<sup>2</sup> Later and independently, the historian of sciences, Alexandre Koyre (1970) – one of Thomas Kuhn’s main sources of inspiration (Kuhn, 1970) – supported a view similar to Evans-Pritchard’s regarding alchemy and magic in the medieval age.<sup>3</sup> Both Evans-Pritchard and Koyre dealt with the idea of a contextual rationality of beliefs (close to what Popper (1957) called “situational analysis”): although the collective beliefs of a particular group, past or present, may appear irrational in comparison to ours, their understanding of the world can be considered rational given the *limited* information said group has or had.<sup>4</sup> Still more recently, in the context of strong relativism in epistemology, and of increasing doubts about the heuristic value of structuralism, especially when closely linked to mainstream anthropology and sociology (like in Lévi-Strauss’ work), the importance of Evans-Pritchard’s framework regarding the issue of the rationality of collective beliefs has been rediscovered itself (Hollis and Lukes, 1982).

Strikingly, some of the most recent scholars who have addressed the issue of understanding collective beliefs outside the Durkheimian mainstream (typically Dawkins and Krebs, 1978, Boyer, 1994, Sperber 2001a & b, Atran, 2010, 2014, Mercier & Sperber, 2011, 2017) have not taken their seminal ideas out of the other founders of sociology or of anthropology but out of Darwin’s or neo-Darwinian theories, which however regard *all* the

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<sup>2</sup> Pareto’s main specificity in comparison of Lévy-Bruhl according to Evans-Pritchard (1937) was to state that what Lévy-Bruhl called “pre-logical” thought can be encountered in *every* society. Pareto took a lot of examples in Western culture. In line with Stuart Mill’s *System of Logic*, he anticipated the recognition of the role of cognitive biases in the formation of collective beliefs.

<sup>3</sup> Koyré also referred positively to Lévy-Bruhl.

<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, for Evans-Pritchard (1937), people such as the Azande (a population now living mainly in South Sudan) who believe in magic might be *hyper*-rational in the sense that they want to find specific causes even for occurrences that seem to be completely random from a scientific perspective (with regard to the scientific process). Lévy-Bruhl, initially an historian of philosophy, suggested that Malebranche’s rationalism in the XVII<sup>th</sup> century might also have been a kind of *hyper*-rationalism: like in the Zande world, nothing is random in the Malebranchist world; *every* event is an effect of God’s will.

living beings (and not only the *human* ones), even those who cannot be expected to have any beliefs.<sup>5</sup> They have the daring ambition to fill the gap between our ancestral phylogenetic origins and our contemporary world. This means that they focus on the “distal” mechanisms of our cognitive processes involved in the collective beliefs, at the risk of constructing mere speculative paleontology since we do not have *any* access to the cognitive dispositions of our earlier ancestors (while primatologists have direct access to living chimpanzees and bonobos). Without rejecting this program as such, one may prefer to be more modest and more cautious, think that it is more reasonable to go step after step and, as a consequence, prefer to investigate more “proximal” causes instead of jumping to the oldest ones. This methodologically cautious attitude is typically Elster’s one (as it was Pareto’s too, one century ago while he was already evaluating the heuristic value of evolutionary theories).

Whatever anthropologists and sociologists think of the relevance of the specifically neo-Darwinian programs in their domain, many have re-investigated the issue of the *rationality* or *irrationality* of collective beliefs, especially religious beliefs, after the anti-relativist shift and a few the still more specific issue of the role of argumentation and rhetoric in the formation, transformation and disappearance of collective beliefs, sometimes referring explicitly to Pareto’s tradition and sometimes rediscovering its core ideas unawares. I will take a few examples.

Thus, Raymond Boudon – one of the leading figures of MI in sociology, along with James Coleman and Jon Elster and also one of the precursors of “analytical sociology” Hedström, P. and Bearman, P. (2009a) – referred to Pareto very favorably in several articles and books (see, e.g. Boudon, 1981 [1979]), mainly because Pareto’s *Treatise* includes a lengthy investigation of argumentative, rhetoric and sometimes fallacious procedures involved in the emergence and diffusion of collective beliefs (in religion, ethics, politics and pseudo-science). In later works, Boudon (1994, 2001) turned away from Pareto, whom he did not find sufficiently rationalist, in favor of Weber and Simmel. Actually, Boudon himself might have slightly misjudged the specific approach introduced by Pareto, whose specificity, in comparison of Weber and Simmel, who were rationalist too, was to focus on *effective* argumentation procedures and rhetoric devices used to support religious, political, moral or pseudo-scientific views. Boudon, on the contrary, generally preferred to *reconstruct* plausible reasons like Weber and Simmel often did or suggested to do (Author, 2002, 2007, 2016).<sup>6</sup>

Still more recently, Jon Elster, whose research tradition is the same as Boudon’s (the modeling of mechanisms that generate social facts, see, e.g., Boudon, 1998, and Elster, 1998), has devoted many publications to the detailed study of – effective – deliberations in political life, especially in the writing of Constitutions (see, especially, Elster). And, in this part of his work, Elster has often turned to one of Pareto’s primary influences, Bentham (see, especially: Elster, 2013).

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<sup>5</sup> However, Sperber (1997) has sometimes mentioned Tarde favorably before mentioning Darwinism as his main source of inspiration. Many of the neo-darwinist authors follow the very influent Barkow, Cosmides and Tooby’s (1992) work, which criticized and rejected what they labelled “the Social Sciences Standard Model (SSSM)”, viewed as keeping on the Durkheimian heritage.

<sup>6</sup> Pareto has been alternatively forgotten and re-discovered many times in various ways. Apart from Edward Evans-Pritchard, one should of course, in the same period, mention George Homans (Homans, G. C., & Curtis Ch. P., Jr., 1934) and Talcott Parsons (1937). Among many other more recent re-readings, see: Boudon, R., 1981 [1979], Powers, Ch. H, 1987, Author, A. (ed.), 1999, Femia, J. & Marshall, A. (eds), 2012.

Entirely independently of these methodologically individualist programs, Mercier and Sperber, 2012 and 2017 (preceded by Sperber, 2002), have argued in favor of an “argumentative” theory regarding the phylogenetic origin of reasoning. In a nutshell, they contend that the faculty of reasoning has a “Machiavellian” origin (in the sense of Byrne R.W & Whiten A, 1988)<sup>7</sup> and that this feature is still at work in human interactions: humans argue for winning more than for knowing and in order to aim at that end, they try to manipulate others. Happily, Sperber & Mercier said, a faculty of epistemic vigilance has emerged to counter everyone’s propensity to mislead others. Sperber emphasized this Machiavellian dimension within the framework of a criticism of Alvin Goldman’s (1999) too “rosy” vision of the social world: “I would like to slightly redress the balance and put a touch of grey in Goldman’s rosy picture by considering testimony and argumentation in the light of some evolutionary considerations» (Sperber, 2012). Sperber added: “My main claim will be that a significant proportion of socially acquired beliefs are likely to be false beliefs, and this is not just as a result of the malfunctioning, but also of the proper functioning of social communication. I will argue in particular that the cognitive manipulation of others is one of the effects that makes the practices of testimony and argumentation adaptive.”

Ironically, Goldman already wanted to “redress the balance” (but in the *other* direction, that is *against* the widespread explanations in term of the narrow versions of Rational Choice Theory, according to which people always search to maximize their utilities and of which Sperber’s theory is a supplementary version) and found reasons to think that we have cognitive natural dispositions to truth apart from our propensity to look for our immediate material self-interest, possibly by transmitting wrong information.<sup>8</sup> This is within this context that Goldman quoted Thomas Reid, who argued that such dispositions or principles are necessary, especially for children, to fast acquire knowledge: “The first of these principles is a propensity to speak truth [... The second principle] is a disposition to confide in the veracity of others, and to believe what they tell us (Reid 1970: 238-40)”. Sperber’s comments on these quotations are the following ones: “In stark contrast to this view, Dawkins and Krebs, in their famous article “Animal signals: Information or manipulation” (Dawkins and Krebs 1978) have argued that the prime function of communication is not information but manipulation of others.”

If one sets aside Dan Sperber’s phylogenetic concerns, what remains is the idea that people first argue in order to defend their interest (Mercier and Sperber add: especially their reputation) and to veil their genuine motivations either consciously or unconsciously: “The implicit psychology– the presumption that people’s beliefs and actions are motivated by reasons – is empirically wrong. Giving reasons to justify oneself and reacting to the reasons given by others are first and foremost, a way to establish reputations and coordinate expectations” (Mercier and Sperber 2017 p. 143).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The hypothesis (actually often rather a *thesis*, strongly claimed without being nevertheless supported by epistemologically compelling arguments) of a “Machiavellian” origin of intelligence is the following one: “The intelligence is an adaptation to deal with the complexity of living in semi-permanent groups of conspecifics, a situation that involves the potentially tricky balance of competition and cooperation with the same individuals” (Byrne, 1996, p. 172). This idea was forged initially to explain the behavior of certain apes, which seem able to cheat their conspecifics.

<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Goldman’s concern was not descriptive but normative (his aim was to formulate the dialogical norms of argumentation that could permit us the acquisition and the transmission of reliable information and true knowledge): this was not at all a description – either “rosy” or grey – of reality.

<sup>9</sup> Turner (2018) elaborates on this specific passage (p. 189) as an expression of a typical position in the contemporary social sciences depreciating “comprehensive sociology” in Max Weber’s sense.

This idea is very close to what Pareto (1935 [1916]) expressed at length and in details in his theory of “residues” and “derivations” although Sperber does not seem to be aware of that precedent (which weakens the claim of introducing a really new idea). Moreover, what is often ignored in introductions to Pareto’s sociology is that Pareto, in his general theory of human motivations, always suspected that each propensity is more or less compensated by another (e.g. the strong propensity to self-interest might be compensated by a certain propensity to altruism, the tendency to conservatism by a tendency to innovation, etc.). Besides, Pareto did not consider only emotional tendencies, as it is often assumed, but cognitive tendencies too, such as the propensity to always reason, even “out of fuel” (at the risk of ratiocinating), and the propensity to incessantly find analogies between phenomena (at the risk of finding false analogies), tendencies that are arguably the psychological sources of both myths and sciences. However, Pareto did not mention Thomas Reid’s specific ones. But it seems clear that these Reid-Pareto hypotheses about the cognitive mechanisms would deserve further empirical investigations as much as those on which Sperber and Mercier focus.<sup>10</sup>

What is still more important is that, contrarily to what Mercier and Sperber contend, the empirical observations and experimentations do not *demonstrate* that “the presumption that people’s beliefs and actions are motivated by reasons [...] is empirically wrong”. These observations and experimentations only show that *sometimes* this presumption is wrong. Thus, Mercier and Sperber support a claim much stronger than they epistemologically should, presumably to “attract” reader’s attention – a little cynical strategy given their understanding of the Machiavellian feature of intelligence. Moreover, Mercier and Sperber (2017) use other fallacious rhetorical strategies (such as the use of a “straw man” – see Walton, 1996 and Van Eemeren et al, 2014, p. 550) when they criticized alternative theories.<sup>11</sup> Sperber (1997) used to be more rigorous and much fairer on recognizing the relevance of other theories, in this case of what he called “strong methodological individualism” “combined with “weak cognitivism”, which could be Coleman’s, Boudon’s and Elster’s views, in parallel with “strong cognitivism” combined with “weak methodological individualism” (Sperber’s, Boyer’s and Atran’s views), depending on the social facts or events to explain.<sup>12</sup>

In the following sections, I will not tackle anymore the issue of the relevance of phylogenetic and infra-individualistic programs and start by examining three distinct individualistic models of collective beliefs. The first two models are quite clearly individualistic and also entirely micro-sociological, although the second does make room for interactions, and, more precisely, cognitive interactions. Both date back to Tocqueville and have been reintroduced by several contemporary social scientists and in particular Jon Elster (quite independently, actually, from his reference to Bentham)<sup>13</sup>. The third model is still

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<sup>10</sup> See also, in the entirely distinct – post-Marxist tradition – Habermas (1968).

<sup>11</sup> See Sampson (2009) for similar comments on Barkow, Tooby and Cosmides’s own use of “strawmen” within the same general context of investigation.

<sup>12</sup> Reciprocally, a “weakly cognitivist” methodological individualist could easily accept that certain cognitive categories have an innate and universal origin and that an infra-individualist cognitivist program is fully relevant here – on condition, of course, that it does not use fallacious arguments. My only reservation regarding Turner (2018) is that Stephen Turner does not give explicit room for these weakly cognitivist programs combined with strong individualism. I have tried to show that, within this perspective, one can address the issue of *sub-intentional* phenomena (located at the boundary of what Turner (2017) calls the Weberian “bubble” – the domain of intentional phenomena – which should be therefore understood as “permeable” to a certain extent) (Author, 2018b).

<sup>13</sup> See above.

individualist but it also introduces institutions and social structures, and thus contains meso- or macro-sociological levels of explanation. It dates back to Weber's relatively underappreciated work on American religion, and has been used more or less implicitly by many social scientists, especially James Coleman, who worked to clarify its implications, and even by Pareto and Boudon (Author, 2011, 2020). Finally, the fourth model, which is often considered to be holistic because it takes groups into account, is arguably both holistic *and* individualistic. Although it dates back to Durkheim and Simmel, it has been refined more recently by Margaret Gilbert (1989, 1994, 2000).

I will outline and briefly illustrate these four models, indicating in each case the role they allow for argumentation and rhetoric (as I said, outside of a neo-Darwinian framework such as Sperber's)<sup>14</sup>.

## II

### **Two interactionist-individualist-models of collective beliefs: the Tocqueville-Elster models of collective beliefs.**

In *Political Psychology* (1993), *Explaining Social Behavior* (2007), and other works, Jon Elster frequently emphasized Tocqueville's intuitions. According to Elster, one can find at least two distinct models of collective beliefs in Tocqueville's work: the model of the "culture of hypocrisy" and the model of "pluralistic ignorance" (a label first used by Katz, D., and Allport, F.H., 1931, but a model greatly specified and experimentally tested by Miller and McFarland, 1987). In the first model "everybody publicly professes a certain belief while knowing that nobody actually holds it in private" (Elster, 2007, p. 377), while in the second, "most people do not believe [a certain proposition] but believe that most people do" (p. 377). This second model is more interesting because of its greater subtlety; cognitive interactions play a major role, in that people's beliefs depend on the misrepresentation of others' beliefs, and also because the entire process leads to a self-reinforcing phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance. However, the first model, the culture of hypocrisy model, may be particularly relevant in conjunction with other models, a possibility that I will explore at a later point.

Tocqueville claimed that, when he visited the US in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, most people did not genuinely believe in God or in Christian dogmas. However, as most people also believed that atheists and agnostics were small minorities, and consequently did not want to pay the social price of non-conformity (namely probable ostracism), most professed publicly that they believed in God and behaved as if they were true believers (for example, by regularly attending church or temple). Tocqueville also suggested that some groups might be entirely hypocritical, in the sense that, in these specific social contexts, everybody knew that everybody was no longer a true believer. However, due to the social stigma attached to atheism, conformity to the general norm persisted.

Drawing from Timur Kuran (1995), one could add that, although they were conceived in relation to a liberal society, the first model (the social hypocrisy model) could also account for Russian communism, and the second one (the pluralistic ignorance model) for East German communism, before their respective collapses between 1989 and 1991. In the Russian

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<sup>14</sup> Another limitation of Sperber and Mercier's "argumentative theory" is that it does not provide the scholar with *any* case study demonstrating its heuristic value in the understanding of collective beliefs. This makes another important difference with the theories I will consider here.

case, people were chronically scared and intimidated by policy security agents, but they could trust their friends and relatives. In the German case, on the other hand, people suspected that even certain relatives and certain friends could be secret policy security agents. In the Russian case, people dared to express their intimate opinions in private; in the German case, they dared not and, as a result, everyone was quite possibly mistaken about the nature of the intimate beliefs of everyone else.

Similarly, with regard to contemporary Islamic countries, observers have noticed more and more frequently that the people's relationships to Islam are far more diverse than is often thought. As early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Egyptian winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Naguib Mafouz (1990-2), often compared to Balzac or Dickens for his outstanding ethnographical skills, described the social hypocrisy of many Muslims in Cairo, especially in high society. The same people who professed intransigent Islamic beliefs in public, even before their own families, sometimes would lead entirely different lifestyles with their intimate friends, in a manner similar to that of Western hedonist cynicism. One could probably easily find cases of pluralistic ignorance in other Islamic countries where, like in Egypt, Western culture and scientific worldviews had already deeply penetrated high society, but where political constraints and controls on private life were more invasive.

What could be the role of argumentation in the transformation or disappearance of these collective beliefs? Several scholars (e.g. Elster, 1993, 2007, Bicchieri & Fukui, 1999) have observed that the pluralistic model resembled Andersen's famous tale about the Emperor's clothes, in which a child states the truth: "the king is naked". In this story, the child's statement acts as an argument, or a piece of factual evidence, at everyone's disposal, against the collective belief. But the tale's more important lesson is that reason why it was a child who formulated the (obvious) argument, was because he could not identify the potential danger that such a revelation implied. The tale does not specify whether child's parents were imprisoned or killed, but this is probably what would have happened in a real dictatorship.

In the US and the Islamic cases, the religious collective beliefs have yet not disappeared, although pluralistic ignorance might have plausibly changed into hypocrisy in many contexts. However, in the case of Eastern Germany, there was a sudden collapse of the pluralistic ignorance phenomenon in 1989. Unlike Andersen's story, this did not occur after someone (or a few people) dared to say the truth, like the child. Instead, it was the "Emperor" himself – Gorbachev – who initiated the change, when he declared "Glasnost" (meaning openness and more freedom to express one's own ideas) and clearly stated that Warsaw Pact troops would not enter Eastern Germany even in case of social trouble. People did not react by expressing their intimate opinions through speech, but rather by acting, either by leaving for Hungary or by destroying the Berlin wall. (Threshold effects played a major role in these processes). Arguments, in the form of the myriad criticisms of the communist system, had played a role in the collapse of Eastern Germany, but this occurred much earlier, and they were formulated primarily in Western media – they were seldom discussed and exchanged amongst East Germans themselves.

In conclusion, these first two models, while useful, also have their limits. In particular, the Tocqueville model does not account for the enormous differences in political restrictions between the American, Russian, Eastern European and Islamic contexts: stated simply, the "tyranny of majority" in a democracy is not the equivalent of actual imprisonment and threats



on life. Finally, in all these cases, there is strong evidence of revivals, which sometimes appear genuine. The two following models will account for these two issues.

### III

#### **A structural-individualist model of collective beliefs: the Weber-Coleman model of collective beliefs.**

The pluralistic ignorance model, however sophisticated it may be, is, along with the social hypocrisy model, a typically *individualistic* model of collective beliefs as methodological individualism is generally understood, namely purely micro-sociological. However, one must notice that it is not an “atomistic” model since interactions play a major role in the mechanism of pluralistic ignorance, which rests on beliefs about others’ beliefs. This is why it is better to label it *interactionist-individualist model*.

A less typically individualistic model is the one implicitly introduced by Weber in his analysis of American religious beliefs, as outlined in a small work on what he described as the “sects” in the US (1904b). This model fits in well with the *structural-individualist* model (as R. Wippler, 1978, labeled it) that Boudon (1982) and, still more clearly, Coleman (1991) set up and on which Mario Bunge (1996, 1998) has focused attention.<sup>15</sup> It provides some additional conceptual tools for the explanation of the permanence of collective beliefs in societies where true believers are less and less numerous, whether these beliefs are religious or political.

Like Tocqueville half a century earlier, Weber was struck by how many Americans, especially businessmen, declared to believe in God and behaved ethically as Christians, but nevertheless did not seem to be genuine in their beliefs. Weber claimed that the reason why American businessmen were often affiliated with very demanding “sects” (Weber’s wordings), such as the Baptists, Anabaptists, and Quakers, was that these affiliations were seen as guarantees of trustworthiness, a priceless quality in business. Thus, many members of these sects were arguably not motivated by ethical rationality (what Weber would have called *Wertrationalität*) in their affiliation but by pragmatic or means-end rationality (*Zweckrationalität*). But this is not what I want emphasize here. I would like to show that the implicit model used by Weber in this opusculum was both more complex and more interesting.

When Coleman set up the *structure of opportunity and constraint model* in his *Foundations* (1990), he did not refer to Weber or to religious beliefs (as he did when he was aiming at explaining the relationships between macro-level and micro-level phenomena at the very beginning of the *Foundations*). He introduced this model to account for the choices of voters between distinct political options, but the model also can be applied to Weber’s analysis of religious affiliations in the US. According to Weber, businessmen could choose among *a large variety of religious options* (they were almost certainly hypocritical regarding their genuine beliefs – see the Tocqueville model above), *which acted as a “structure of opportunity and constraints”* in Coleman’s wording.<sup>16</sup> These included a) the more or less

<sup>15</sup> The structural-individualist model is far less recent than Lars Udehn (2001, 2002) seems to think.

<sup>16</sup> In his *Foundations*, Coleman (1990) gave *several* versions of what is now usually called “the Coleman model” (or “Coleman’s boat”, “Coleman’s bathtub” because of the global shape of the diagram illustrating this conceptual model). (Bunge, 1998, prefers to call it “the Boudon-Coleman Model”). Each of them has a distinct meaning. Most scholars often mention only the first version (*Foundations*, p. 28) without seeming

informal social networks which characterized “sects” (with several sub-options: Baptists, Anabaptists, etc.), b) the more institutionalized larger churches (with several sub-options again) and also, of course, c) the absence of affiliation.<sup>17</sup>

This individualist and structural-institutional model is also well suited to certain aspects of Eastern Europe and Russia before the collapse of the Soviet system. Certain people who declared to be communists were not only hypocritical but also pragmatic and opportunistic (under constraint, indeed, because there were *not many other options offered by the “social structure”*): they saw positive economic advantages in declaring that they were communist instead of simply remaining silent on this issue. The relationship to Christianity in Eastern Europe could have been also a matter of both social hypocrisy and opportunity (under constraint) in certain countries. In Poland, when Catholic hierarchy often supported *Solidarnosc*, choosing to maintain affiliation to the Catholic Church - a *macro-social structure* rather than a simple social network in this case – could be justified for pragmatic reasons (means-end rationality). The affiliation, through loose social networks between states, of many leading political figures all over the world, even in Islamic countries, with communism when the USSR was a world political power, also fits in well with this model.

Regarding Islam itself, a similar analysis could probably be applied in a variety of contexts. For a long time, for example, it might have been advantageous for businessmen to profess Islam in countries where Islam had dominated everyday life, whatever their real beliefs actually were. More recently, and more obviously, it is surely also the case of the many smugglers acting in sub-Saharan Africa since the Arabic spring and the Lybian revolution despite claiming to be Islamic.

On the other hand, the constraints in the American case described by Weber were only economic: it was wiser to be affiliated to a “sect” if one wanted to be successful. There were no political risks as there were in Eastern Europe, in Russia or in many Islamic countries, where there were or there are still daily threats on freedom and life.

Argumentation could have played a role in the collapse of these kinds of “collective beliefs” in a variety of ways. For example, argumentation could have been used to prove that a particular affiliation or sect was not sufficiently demanding with regards to morality, that evolution in legislation had made personal trustworthiness far less valuable, or that the structure of opportunity and constraint had changed (e.g. closed clubs such as the Rotary Club have replaced religious affiliations, see Coleman, 1991). However, argumentation could have probably played a role earlier in criticizing religious worldviews with regard to rival worldviews. The same could probably also be said regarding communism and Islam.

#### IV

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even aware of the other versions. A further one (set up in Coleman, 1990, p. 400-1) is much more relevant here.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, I do not contend that the model Weber used in this small and often neglected work on the Protestant *Sects* (Weber, 2002b [1904] ) – beside often confused with his well-known work on the Protestant *Ethic* (Weber, 2002a [1904]) is the only and even the most important model that Weber built. But this one can be easily reconstructed as an illustration of the structural-individualist model which I am setting forth. Turner has devoted one of his first works on Weber (Turner, St. & Factor, R.A, 1994), focusing on the juridical background of Weber’s sociology, a characteristic that greatly enlightens the kind of methodological individualism Weber supported and in particular why he was so suspicious of collective concepts (*Kollektivebegriffen*) such as “the State”, “the nation”, “the people” (das *Volk*) or “the spirit of capitalism”. See also Turner (1986).

### A holistic-model of collective beliefs: the Durkheim-Gilbert model.

The Tocqueville-Elster and Weber-Coleman models of collective beliefs only deal with conformist collective beliefs - albeit in various ways. I would like to focus now on collective beliefs that are plausibly *not* conformist beliefs, but, on the contrary, sincere strong beliefs, such as the revival of Christianity in the US since the eighties (Berger, 1999) or the revival of Islam in many countries since the Iranian revolution in 1979 (e.g. Khosrokhavar, 2002, Atran & Norenzayan, 2014).<sup>18</sup>

My claim is that a fourth model, inspired by Durkheim and often seen as holistic, might be relevant, at least for the Christian and Islamic cases.<sup>19</sup> As it is well known, according to Durkheim, collective beliefs, or rather “collective representations” in his terminology, are distinct from individual beliefs or individual representations – meaning that groups themselves are supposed to have beliefs distinct from those of their members. This thesis is puzzling because, as groups do not have their own brains, it is difficult to think how they can have their own ideas. Many interpretations and reconstructions have been given and could be still given of Durkheim’s intuitions.<sup>20</sup>

A simple individualist reconstruction is that the collective beliefs are beliefs dating back to earlier periods of a society when they were not distinct from individual beliefs; they were subsequently transmitted from individual to individual and from generation to generation without much reflection on their specific content, only being adopted through an unconscious process of interiorization. Even if these beliefs can hardly be said to be genuine beliefs in a strong sense, since “believers” are not really aware of the foundation of their beliefs, they are not hypocritical either.

Margaret Gilbert (1994) provided an entirely different reconstruction of Durkheim’s intuitions, and suggested a return to an author who greatly inspired Durkheim, namely Rousseau. She interprets genuine collective beliefs as the result of a tacit general will or of more or less tacit, although conscious, contracts. In these tacit contracts, which she calls “joint commitments”, certain individuals commit with other individuals to publicly support a common view, even if this is distinct from their own personal views or deals with issues they consider unimportant. In this circumstance, their primary motivation is not individual

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<sup>18</sup> I do not know enough on the communist case under this respect to be able to extend comparisons.

<sup>19</sup> The word « holism » is often reputed to be pejorative within a methodologically individualist framework. However, the real target within this framework, is only what Hayek (1952), in line with Schumpeter (1998 [1908]), called the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”, based on the tendency to think that every concept - especially collective concept, such as nation, social class, capitalism, Protestantism – matches a real entity (see previous footnote too), a cognitive tendency – or what we would now call a “cognitive bias” – examined by Pareto (1935 [1916]) too. Ontological vigilance does not exclude at all the recognition of the specificity of collective entities as such when it has been demonstrated that they were ontologically dependent on individuals (this is what Weber (2002a [1904]), brilliantly illustrated on the case of Protestantism). Thus, from a methodological individualist viewpoint fully understood, one may say that there are both “bad” holism and “good” holism (Author, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Turner (2007) mentions that there has been a re-discovery of Durkheimian intuitions on this matter and refers to Gilbert (1989), among others (see below). Quite rightly he specifies that even before Gilbert, at least one author, Wilfred Sellars, introduced similar ideas. Moreover, on the basis of his amazing erudition, Turner adds that Wilfred’s father, Roy Wood Sellars, an outsider in the US, and an almost unknown scholar in Europe had already similar ideas. See also Olen, P. & Turner, St., 2015 on the *two* Sellars and their common interest in one of Durkheim’s most famous followers, Celestin Bouglé.

pragmatic reasons, but rather simply because they want to feel like members of a group and consequently to aim for a collective goal, possibly whatever this goal may be.

The interiorization model works best with cases where membership is neither recent nor the result of a conscious choice, as is the case for suicide-bombers (Japanese kamikazes during WW II, Palestinians more recently). The joint commitment model best describes other circumstances, particularly for nascent groups lacking institution foundations, including social networks. Certain bombing attacks, such as September 11, 2001 in the US and more recent attacks committed by young Muslims, long uprooted from their social origins and not really connected to other Islamic groups (Khosrokhavar, 2002, Gambetta, 2005), could be characterized as joint commitments among a very small number of individuals acting as members of a new community (a new “Umma” in case of Islamic activists). (Author, 2018b).

Joint commitments are not necessarily related to extremist activities. Christian revivals in the US might also deal with joint commitments among a very limited amount of people wanting to found new communities. The issue is more complicated regarding Russia and Eastern Europe. In the eighties in Eastern Europe, there were apparently still many genuine communists, according to reliable surveys Kuran (1995). These people were able to make a distinction between communist ideals and the reality they knew, and could criticize daily life without abandoning the core principles of their belief. But it seems difficult, at least on the basis of my own knowledge of these cases, to determine to what extent interiorization processes, on the one hand, and new joint commitments, on the other hand, played a major role.<sup>21</sup>

In the case of interiorization, one cannot expect arguments to be effective, since people are even not aware of this unconscious process or of the basis of their beliefs. On the contrary, in the case of joint commitments, argumentation could play a role in the disaggregation of collective beliefs since the joint commitment is common knowledge. However, to be successful, argumentation would have to be applied not to the content of the beliefs, which is unimportant here, but rather to the joint commitment itself. It would, for example, have to persuade members of a given group that the joint commitment has been violated by other members of the group. The disappearance of collective beliefs based on joint commitments occur more plausibly when violations are self-evident. In these cases, they did not need any external argumentation.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to emphasize a few points. First, that argumentation and rhetoric may play a distinct role in every case that I have discussed, although this role is variable and sometimes secondary. Secondly, holistic models, reformulated on clear contractualist bases, and therefore reducible to individualist foundations, are relevant and useful tools for the understanding of collective beliefs.<sup>23</sup> Thirdly, these models have to be used

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<sup>21</sup> On the relevance of Gilbert’s model of joint commitment in other domains, see, e.g., Gold, N. & Sugden, R. (2006) and Carassa, A., Colombetti, M., Morgandi, F. (2008). On other holistic models compatible with methodological individualism, see, e.g., Tuomela (2002), Pettit (2003) and List and Pettit (2011).

<sup>22</sup> A famous case was the German-Soviet Pact of August 1939, which was viewed by many communists of Western Europe as itself violating implicit commitments with them.

<sup>23</sup> I have elaborated much longer on the empirical relevance of Gilbert’s model of collective beliefs (with comparison to alternative models) in papers addressing various kinds of examples: e.g. on religious matters: Author, 2018b; on scientific matters: Author 2004).

in connection with individualist models that leave room for complex cognitive interactions or for the structural role of social institutions (at the meso- and the macro-levels). And lastly, these programs are not based on speculative hypotheses regarding the phylogenetic emergence of rationality, especially on the role of any Machiavellian intention. But, taken as a large set of hypotheses, they seem to have a refined heuristic value in the understanding of collective beliefs.

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