[JCSR 2.1 (2014) 84–88] Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion (print) ISSN 2049-7555
doi:10.1558/jcsr.v2i1.84 Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion (online) ISSN 2049-7563

Anthropology and the Cognitive Challenge by Maurice Bloch. Cambridge University Press, 2012. New Departures in Anthropology. 234pp., hb., $89.99. ISBN-13: 9780521803557; pb., $34.99. ISBN-13: 9780521006156.

Reviewed by Ismael Apud, Universidad de la República, Uruguay, ismaelapud@psico.edu.uy and Istvan Czachesz, Universität Heidelberg, Germany, istvan.czachesz@wts.uni-heidelberg.de

Keywords
anthropology, cognitive sciences, nature/culture wars

Two decades ago the Argentine anthropologist Carlos Reynoso (1992) warned about a possible "death of anthropology." Perhaps the statement was exaggerated, but his real intention was to draw attention to the problems in mainstream postmodern anthropology. Reynoso stressed the importance of an anthropology connected with natural sciences, especially with cognitive sciences and their novel discoveries. It was a wake-up call to Latin American anthropologists regarding the cognitive challenge.

This concern was not new at all. After the "New Ethnography" of the 1960s, cognitive anthropology became a minor academic framework. Since then, some anthropologists have taken up the torch of the cognitive challenge, trying to understand cultural phenomena without disconnecting the discipline from naturalistic and cognitive ideas. Amongst them, one of the most important is the French anthropologist Maurice Bloch. His book *Anthropology and the Cognitive Challenge* is an excellent synthesis of how cultural anthropology can participate in the cognitive debates, and what challenges the discipline must tackle in order to understand the human mind and nature more deeply. The book is a constructive attempt at reconciliation not only between cultural anthropology and cognitive science, but also between social sciences and natural sciences.

The book can be divided into two parts. In the first part—chapters one to four—Bloch examines how social and natural sciences became estranged, and why anthropologists must cooperate and discuss with cognitive scientists. He begins by analyzing why cultural and social anthropologists are hostile to cognitive approaches in what he calls the "nature/culture wars." The general mistrust is related to the evolutionary roots of cognitive approaches to culture and some undisputable mistakes in early evolutionary theorizing about culture—for example, the idea that evolution equals "progress" and history can be understood as a process that is similar to natural selection. After Franz Boas contrasted race with history, anthropology became more and more adverse to naturalist explanations, and ethnography became more and more counteractive to

© Equinox Publishing Ltd., Office 415, The Workstation, 15 Paternoster Row, Sheffield, South Yorkshire S1 2BX

equinoxonline

generalizations of human beings as a biological species. With the emergence of interpretative and symbolic anthropology, and later, with the hegemony of postmodernist approaches, the antagonism deepened even further. The author shows us how this reaction created a self-representation of anthropology as the "champion" of "culture against nature" explanations, with the latter mistakenly reduced to racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and/or colonialism. The result was a discipline studying a self-contained phenomenon: the "cultural" or the "social," strangely in an independent existence from biological human beings.

But from a cognitive point of view—and perhaps, from any scientific point of view that attempts to understand the place of our species in the evolution of life as a whole—this antagonism turned into a serious epistemological obstacle. As Bloch points out, as far as cultural anthropology is concerned, cognitive mechanisms are on the side of "nature." A marginal treatment of the mind appeared in the classical structuralist theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jean Piaget, yet these scholars neither upset the anthropological consensus nor paid attention to emerging cognitive science in the 1960s. Bloch discusses the potential contribution of the cognitive theories of the modularity of mind and the epidemiology of ideas to the study of cultural phenomena. According to Bloch, although the modular mind is a product of natural selection, and culture is a product of history, this does not entail that both systems are totally disconnected. On the contrary, they are interconnected, but without losing their relative independence. For example, the cultural practice of witchcraft can be related to a modular, innate vigilance towards others, while it can manifest itself to different degrees and in specific forms at different times and places. Thus human history is not unpredictable because human beings escaped from biological constraints: although psychological processes introduced novel mechanisms in addition to the effects of genetic transmission, cultural phenomena still depend on both nature and culture. Bloch commends Dan Sperber's model for accounting for the role of evolved cognitive constraints in the spread of beliefs, yet also criticizes it for ignoring the transformation of mental representations in life history, on one hand, and their possible effects on the modular mind, on the other hand. Although Bloch's interpretation of Pinker and Hauser seems to exaggerate the static character of "innateness" in their work, he rightly argues for integrating the contributions of developmental psychology into understanding cognition. In particular, he relies on Susan Carey's and Elizabeth Spelke's work on the modular mind in the context of continuous cognitive change in every individual.

The second part of the book—chapters five to eight—explores more specific issues related to the opposition between nature and culture and their consequent reductionisms in anthropology. Chapter five, "Time and the anthropologists,"

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2014

equinoxonline

deals with the misconceptions of relativist ethnographic perspectives about cognition and time. Bloch suggests that the problem is rooted in the inability of cultural anthropologists to distinguish between the cognitive act of imagining alternative scenarios (imagination and mental "time travel") and the perception of time as a cognitive phenomenon. Further, he argues that the respective differences in anthropologists' and naturalists' accounts are largely due to the two camps addressing different levels of human existence. Anthropologists observe explicit statements and actions in people's everyday lives and take them as reliable representations of people's implicit sense of time. Psychologists, in contrast, rely on implicit tests in laboratories, while bypassing people's explicit statements on time. Moreover, as it has been often noted, the experiments are conducted mainly with Western subjects in artificial laboratory settings. In sum, the two camps make overly generalized claims based on partial information (p. 105). In chapter six, Bloch analyzes the notion of the "self," and the difficulties of cultural anthropologists to accept a "generic human being," but also of naturalistic approaches to include history and context in the understanding of the individual. Bloch proposes the term "blob" to denote a "self" with various interconnected levels: the core self (sense of ownership and location of one's body), the minimal self (sense of continuity in time, use of longer-term memory and self-recognition), and the narrative self (closely linked with autobiographical memory). Cultural anthropologists talk most of the time about the meta-representation of the self, but think of it as the only level of the "self," ignoring the other cognitive layers. Ethnographers usually observe the conscious manifestations of complex human activities, without considering that there are deeper and unconscious levels of the "blob" to access. Finally, we could include one last blob, the social one, related to the interaction between blobs, and the synchronization of minds in social exchange. This last item completes the equation where the nature of human beings is understood in its phylogeny, ontogeny and history.

Chapter seven is about the theories of meaning and representation, and their relation with practice, thinking, language and body. Bloch examines various approaches (classical anthropology, semiotics, pragmatic theories) as well as different cognitive models of concepts. He confronts the culturalist bias of considering only the meta-representational level of cognition, in this specific case, the Boasian idea of culture as being language-like. In the final chapter, Bloch explains how to understand memory avoiding cultural anthropologists' classical mistake of reducing it to second-order meta-representations, by applying an interdisciplinary approach that considers physiological, psychological and historical processes.

Whereas Bloch rightly argues that the cognitive turn does not mean a return to the naïve evolutionary paradigm of some nineteenth-century anthropologists, he

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2014

equinoxonline

seems to underestimate the potential of evolutionary theory to take culture into consideration. First, culture constrains genetic evolution, an effect that becomes even more important as we recognize the potential cultural sophistication of Neanderthals and our homo ancestors. Second, recent theories of cultural selection appreciate its differences from genetic selection and do not confuse adaptation to particular ecological conditions with "progress." Finally, although this is perhaps a minor point, we have to note that the repeated mention of animals lacking social learning and culture is mistaken and understanding human culture against the backdrop of much more modest animal traditions offers a new, interesting perspective. Further, readers with a background in memory studies might wonder why a loosely interpreted version of connectionism, in particular, is favored as an overall solution to integrate social and individual memory. Yet these critical remarks remain essentially marginal and do not concern the strategic goal and achievement of this truly pioneering monograph.

Bloch's analysis of the development of anthropology is pertinent to understanding the contexts and challenges of the cognitive science of religion in its academic environments. Post-modern religious studies (and some schools in biblical studies) accommodated the program of expelling natural science and producing particularistic analyses of isolated traditions, often clad in poetic language. Thus the book also helps us understand the theoretical debates and ideological battles in which the cognitive science of religion is caught up routinely. Further, Bloch's insights about anthropology offer important lessons for envisaging the future of CSR. As Bloch rightly points out, the absurd claims of anthropologists who ignored scientific evidence about human cognition and psychological development provoked simplistic and sometimes arrogant reactions on the part of evolutionary psychologists and cognitive scientists (p. 100). As a result, both parties are missing a chance of overcoming the limitations of their own data and knowledge. To apply this observation to the study of religion, CSR would benefit from exchange with traditional scholarship of religious traditions (including the critical study of biblical literature), as scholars in these fields have tackled many of the problems CSR is addressing currently (or should address at some point) and have in-depth knowledge of relevant materials as well as their historical contexts.

Bloch is one of the most important authors who nowadays are pushing the social sciences to address the cognitive challenge. Thanks to him and others, Howard Gardner's idea (1985) of an anthropology representing an "upper bound" for cognitive sciences is actually happening in more than a few lines of research. Bloch´s book is without a doubt an essential contribution for current and future researchers in the field of the cognitive science of religion.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2014

equinoxonline

References

Gardner, H. 1985. *The Mind's New Science*. New York: Basic Books.
Reynoso, C. 1992. "Antropología: Perspectivas para después de su muerte." *Publicar* 1(1): 13–30.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2014

equinoxonline