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WHENCE AND WHITHER SOCIOCULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Sociocultural anthropology[1] began by asking big questions about the origins and causes of human nature, society, culture, and history. The intellectual founders of the field (in the ninteenth and early twentiethth centuries) were enchanted by the idea that societies evolve, but they lacked the tools to build up a plausible account of those evolutionary processes and were subsequently castigated by generations of anthropologists for producing theories that were either unverifiable or, if rendered in a testable form, patently false.

The apparent failure of early explanatory ambitions in the field, together with growing anxiety about the association between those ambitions and imperial colonial projects, brought grand theoretical aspirations almost to the brink of extinction. This intellectual retreat *began* with a shift away from *why*-type questions towards *how*-type questions. Instead of asking about causes and origins (Why are societies and cultures the way they are?) anthropologists increasingly restricted themselves to problems of function and structure (How do sociocultural systems fit together?). The French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, among other great anthropologists of the twentieth century, never entirely reconciled himself to this demotion of the explanatory enterprise. As his British colleague Meyer Fortes once wistfully observed, the "lure of the *pourquois*" remained irresistible for Levi-Strauss—albeit tantalizingly out of reach (Fortes 1980, 198). By the close of the last century, however, even generalizing efforts in the study of structure and function appeared to some anthropologists hopelessly unproductive. Many had by then abandoned theory altogether in favor of exclusively humanist agendas, concerned with interpretation, phenomenology, literary artifice, and postmodern critique.[2]

Almost unobserved, however, some of anthropology's neighbours had been making some startling discoveries. After a long period in the theoretical wilderness, largely under the grip of behaviorism, psychology underwent a dramatic revolution. The invention of computers led, by the middle of the twentieth century, to radically new models of

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1. For convenience I shall refer to sociocultural anthropology simply as "anthropology" throughout the remainder of this chapter. (Unless otherwise indicated, my comments do not apply to scientific branches of the discipline such as physical, biological, or cognitive anthropology.)

2. See for instance Marcus and Fischer 1986, Norris 1979, Tyler 1986.

information processing which, taken together with advances in evolutionary biology and the neurosciences, opened up a new window on human psychology and its evolutionary history.

A mass of scientific research now points to the naturalness of various features of human thinking and behavior. To qualify as "natural," such features must emerge in a similar fashion in all normal human beings without the need for deliberate instruction or training (barring pathology—itself often a valuable source of insight into natural cognition) (e.g., Farah and Wallace 1992, Hillis and Caramazza 1991). These aspects of human nature shape and constrain sociocultural systems even if, reciprocally, at least some of those features may also be "tuned" by cultural environments (McCauley, 2011). Whereas many social anthropologists today take it as self-evident, for instance, that any psychological differences between *men and women* must be *exclusively* the effects of varying sociocultural, political, or economic institutions, there is increasingly persuasive scientific evidence that some of the contrasting tendencies we observe in male and female psychology are partly rooted in biology (e.g., varying testosterone levels during fetal brain development) (Baron-Cohen 2003). A key question for the anthropological study of gender must now be both whether and how historically constituted sociocultural environments impact the expression of these biologically based sex differences and vice-versa. The nature of human minds is salient also for an understanding of economic behavior, political strategizing, and systems of kinship, marriage, and descent (to take some of anthropology's traditional heartland subject areas), as well as more fashionable areas of research, such as the study of performance, art, and display or of materiality, discourse, and embodiment.

،Although some anthropologists have finally begun to appreciate the need to integrate their findings with those of neighboring human sciences, this remains largely a minority concern. Pascal Boyer has recently argued cogently that anthropology has become preoccupied with the production of "salient connections," at the expense of erudite scholarship and the systematic testing of scientific theories (Boyer, this volume). What counts as an authoritative body of work, or even an individual authority, is hotly contested by anthropologists. There is no agreed method of assessing the relative worth of competing contributions. There are no standard authoritative textbooks. Intellectual factions continually coalesce around fashion-leaders and then disperse. The privileged mode of research dissemination is the meandering monograph or reader rather than short and pithy articles. And the argument of authority (despite the contested nature of that authority) rules supreme—such that merely alluding to a fashion-leader is treated as equivalent to evidential support.

Boyer's bleak diagnosis is hard to contest. Anthropology began with scientific ambitions and it proceeded to build up an impressive corpus of scholarship on comparative ethnography (for instance in the highly specialized study of systems of kinship, marriage, and descent). Nowadays, however, science and erudition have been pushed to the sidelines. The crucial question, which Boyer's chapter does not directly address, is *why*.

Our sorry predicament stems, I will argue, from the limitations of our folk ontological knowledge and the fact that, as a consequence, social science is really hard to do (or at least to do well). Reasoning about sociocultural phenomena does not come naturally. Or to put it more precisely, we humans lack adequate intuitive machinery for reasoning

about highly elaborated social morphology. As our societies have grown in size and complexity, we have witnessed the emergence of a vast plethora of specialized offices and corporate groups based on a broad range of sorting principles: kinship, descent, rank, caste, ethnicity, nationality, and so on. Categories of office, coalition, and class are no more than idealized models of how the social world is organized, rather than precise descriptions of how it operates on the ground (Firth 1964; Leach 1954), but they provide robust schemas for individual behavior, establishing behavioral patterns over time that serve to perpetuate those schemas. Nevertheless, many of the highly elaborated schemas required to live in a sprawling, stratified society are a relatively modern and potentially dispensable accretion to human thinking, too recent in our evolutionary history to have led to specialized cognitive skills for reasoning about social complexity. The same cannot be said for patterns of thinking in many other ontological domains.

As part of our evolutionary endowment, we possess dedicated intuitive machinery for reasoning about physical properties (such as solidity and gravity) (McCloskey 1983; Povinelli 2000), biological properties (such as essentialized differences between natural kinds) (Carey 1985; Leslie 1994; Bloom 2000), and psychological properties (such as a capacity to empathize with suffering) (Preston and De Waal 2001). Our intuitive physics, intuitive biology, and intuitive psychology may have to be substantially revised in light of the discoveries of *scientific* physics/biology/psychology, but our intuitions often *also* deliver useful reference points and pedagogic tools. For instance, although our intuitions about the discreteness and stability of natural kinds are inconsistent with the diachronic character of evolutionary processes, nevertheless the taxonomies they produce do provide a convenient on-the-hoof framework within which to conceptualize the plants and animals we encounter.

Problems arise, however, when some of our intuitively grounded ontological commitments also serve as markers of identity. In order to function in that way, such commitments must cause us to differ discernibly from other people so as to become a locus of conflict. If you and I share the intuitively grounded explicit belief that certain features of the natural environment are the outcome of intentional design, then we can live in peace with that delusion. If, however, somebody challenges those beliefs with an alternative account (e.g., that the features in question were caused by some other agent or by no agent at all), we have a basis for conflict, especially where competition for resources, either symbolic or material (or both), depends on who comes down on which side of the debate. In this particular case, some evolutionary biologists and their supporters have been drawn into protracted disputes with young earth creationists and proponents of intelligent design. In scientific circles, however, these kinds of battles tend to be somewhat peripheral to the day-to-day business of formulating hypotheses and gathering data to test them. Any competent biologist who has the slightest sympathy for certain variants of intelligent design, would (despite this oddity) be doing the same kind of science as anybody else in that field. Likewise, the fact that an astrophysicist has theistic commitments need not affect one iota the quality of her scientific research on the origins of the universe. Imagine, by contrast, a domain of scholarly enquiry that based its theories on multiple and conflicting intuitions about the basic nature of the phenomena under study. It would struggle to get off the ground because of interminable turf wars among competing coalitions with widely differing foundational assumptions about the nature and

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purpose of scholarly enquiry. Unfortunately, we do not have to imagine it. That is exactly the problem, or at least that has been the problem historically, with anthropology.

Since we lack dedicated cognitive machinery for reasoning about social complexity, we are prone to *borrowing* intuitions proper to *alien* ontological domains. Consequently, social scientists at turns reify institutions, biologize social categories, anthropomorphize offices, and mentalize corporate groups. Consider the following examples in scholarly sociologizing.

Instances of *teleological* reasoning about the social are obviously rampant in functionalist and Marxist traditions in the social sciences. For example, the theory of social functions, as elaborated by several generations of British anthropologists since Malinowski (1922) maintained that every social institution serves to bolster some other institution (or cluster of institutions) so as to contribute to the maintenance of stable social systems (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1940, Radcliffe Brown 1952, Firth 1951). Thus, the ritualized abuse of a monarch in some African kingdom might have the social function of giving public expression to structural tensions running through society (e.g., between commoners in opposition to an exploitative aristocracy and monarchy, or between loyal commoners and the king in opposition to plotting royal heirs, and so on) while publicly affirming in the concluding rites that unification of the kingdom is both necessary and desirable in spite of this (Gluckman 1962). At the core of this mode of social theorizing is the idea that rituals are like tools, with specific functions, and offices (such as the kingship) and social categories (such as commoner clients) are like artifacts that are made and remade through the application of those tools. Marxist scholars have often adopted similar strategies of reasoning, except that the functions of political, legal, and religious institutions are typically said to serve the interests, not of society as a whole, but of a particular sector of society, namely, the ruling class (Bloch 1983).

Just as we are prone to deploy artifact cognition in sociological reasoning, so we are also inclined to treat certain types of persons as natural kinds, based on analogical extension of intuitive knowledge about the biological world. The temptation to biologize the social world grows stronger as societies become larger, more heterogeneous, and the division of labor more elaborate. It is no accident that Emile Durkheim coined the term "organic solidarity" to characterize this type of social morphology. Biologizing the social can lead us also to essentialize institutions, especially where particular offices or membership of social groups and categories are transmittable from parent to offspring. Where that is not the case (for instance, where there is great occupational mobility, where people join and leave clubs and associations at will, where religious affiliations are chosen rather than ascribed, etc.), we may be less likely to essentialize the social. Nevertheless, where people's roles and identities are determined by birth and shared with ancestors, the speciation of social categories is hard to resist.

Despite or perhaps because of the extensive tendency for the man or woman "on the street" to biologize social categories (for instance, in racial stereotyping) this way of reasoning is highly problematic for liberal academics, nowadays at least. The efforts, particularly in the nineteenth century, to carve up humanity into distinct races based on phenotypic characteristics seems to most contemporary social scientists at least as distasteful as it is biologically indefensible (Peers 2007). That is not to say that intuitive biology has ceased to play a role in social theorizing. A particularly widespread, if largely

unexamined anthropological practice is (and probably has always been) to talk about cultural traditions as at least implicitly analogous to biological species, especially when threatened with extinction. There are striking continuities for instance between the ways in which some anthropologists reason about the rights of small-scale societies to preserve their traditional beliefs and practices, and the way conservationists campaign for the protection of endangered species. Even though anthropologists have become increasingly sensitive to the contested nature of cultural traditions and their embedding in wider regional and global processes of economic expansion and political struggle, there remains a widespread intuition that *all* traditions should be respected and preserved, that there is no moral high ground beyond the local cultural universe from which we can justly impose reform. From that relativistic perspective, cultural and linguistic diversity comes to be valued by more or less explicit comparison with the taxonomic richness and diversity of the natural world.

Just as we are tempted to borrow from artifact cognition and intuitive biology when reasoning about complex sociocultural phenomena, we are no less inclined to draw on our *intuitive psychology* for similar purposes. For instance, the so-called "culture and personality" school in American anthropology, inspired by the ideas of Franz Boas and Sigmund Freud, was premised on the idea that variable child-rearing practices lead to the predominance of certain personality types at a population level, allowing us to generalize about tribes and nations rather as we might about the character of an old friend.[3] In France, also, the tendency to anthropomorphize social groups and categories has been a recurrent theme, featuring prominently for instance in the ideas of *L'Année Sociologique* whose members talked freely and enthusiastically about such things as "collective memory" (Halbwachs 1950) and "collective conscience" (Durkheim 1964). Some of these ideas have enjoyed a renaissance in recent years—indeed, around the turn of the millennium it was practically impossible to find a major conference in any of the arts, humanities, or social science disciplines that did not in some way emphasize the theme of memory, and, in particular, its putatively collective or social character as understood by social theorists.

The trouble with grounding our ideas about the sociocultural realm in intuitive thinking borrowed from other domains is not merely that we discover these to be, inevitably, inadequate tools for the job. True, social and cultural institutions are not really artifacts with functions, organisms with essences, or minds with collective personalities or memories. If that were the only problem, however, it would be *relatively* easy to surmount (in comparison with the more intractable problem to which we presently turn). After all, mature sciences are accustomed to explaining that our intuitions—for instance about the cosmos or the natural world or the mind—are only going to take us so far, and then we have to abandon them. It is not that those intuitions then disappear. It may still seem to us that the sun moves across the sky (rather than the Earth round the sun) or that some kind of intentional agent is responsible for selecting the characteristics of biological species (rather than effects of random mutation and ecology on the fitness of organisms). Nevertheless, with sufficient education and intelligence, we can realize and remember, when reasoning

3. Classic studies include Mead 1928, Benedict 1935, and Wallace 1970.

explicitly, that things are not as they seem. Where it gets tricky is when people's *identities* become wrapped up in a particular intuitive construal of the world. This is how Galileo wound up under house arrest as punishment for his heretical claims about the structure of the solar system. Even today some intuitive forms of Biblical literalism are belligerently espoused by Christian fundamentalists. The problem gets worse—much worse—when the same phenomena attract mutually exclusive and competing intuitive claims, on which professional reputations are pinned.

Every time a new school of thought has emerged in anthropology, anchored in borrowed intuitions, it has eventually provoked a backlash of objections from those inspired by alternative intuitions. Often the arguments are less about the issues at stake and more about whose intuitions should prevail. Ultimately, however, all are losers. Functionalism, for instance, is now considered a dirty word in anthropology whereas it once had been a more or less paradigmatic method of ethnographic enquiry (Goldschmidt 1996). Why? Because although we could trace the functions of real tools and artifacts to the intentions of ancestral (and sometime historical) individuals, nobody could explain how institutions came to have the useful properties that functionalists ascribed to them. Of course, there were other causes of embarrassment too: We found that societies were seldom if ever trapped in a state of functionally integrated equilibrium; looking a little closer we always found a writhing morass of contestation and struggle rather than consensus and harmony; looking a little longer we found upheaval and transformation rather than stability and social reproduction. Although often cited as the reason for functionalism's downfall, however, such considerations are less than compelling. There is no reason tendencies toward functional integration should not be possible to demonstrate in principle, and arguably these have been repeatedly demonstrated in practice. So we return to the real nub of the problem: If institutions really do have functions then this cannot be understandable in terms of intuitive teleology. An alternative possibility is considered presently.

Before we can begin to contemplate solutions to this sorry state of affairs, however, we have to attend to an even deeper tragedy. Disillusioned by all attempts to discover a sociological method grounded in stable intuitions, social theorists in the second half of the last century began to look for ideas with increasing desperation almost *anywhere*. The structure of natural language seemed to many to be a promising starting point, not least because of its systemic character. Claude Levi-Strauss's structuralist paradigm was inspired in no small part by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's observation that, not only are most of the sounds of a words discernible only on the basis of arbitrary phonetic differences (*bat* being distinguishable from *mat* by virtue of a small and entirely arbitrary difference between two bilabial consonants), but so, too, are many of the conceptual structures to which those sounds refer (e.g., *river* being distinct from a *stream* in English because the former is larger and wider, while *fleuve* is distinct from *riviere* in French because the former flows into the sea) (Leach 1989). Both the phonetic and semantic properties of words seemed to be determined by arbitrary *systems* of differences, an insight that Levi-Strauss and his followers enthusiastically transferred and extended in the analysis of a wide variety of cultural forms: myths, rituals, kinship, descent, marriage, culinary traditions, and so on. This way of thinking emphasized the relativity of cultural systems, both in terms of directly observable properties (behaviors and artifacts) and interiorized but distributed inner states (meanings and values). Nevertheless, it also greatly exaggerated the importance of binary

logic in both language and culture (Boyer 1993). After all, much of the conceptual content entailed by the concept "river" is held in common with the concept "fleuve," and not all variability across languages/cultures may be said to result from arbitrary differences between signs (e.g., the sounds of speech or the concepts they signify).

Levi-Strauss's structuralism founders ultimately on the narrowness of its account of the cognitive foundations of cultural recurrence and variation. Soon, it, too, was abandoned and replaced by ever-more desperate strategies, such as Clifford Geertz's brand of "interpretivism," which sought to detach sociocultural phenomena from mental activity entirely, arguing, with varying degrees of coherence, that culture occupies an ontological domain of its own, and can only be described and interpreted in terms belonging to that domain.[4] These developments, as well as the rise of many varieties of poststructuralist and postmodernist critique, all have something in common: They take sociocultural phenomena to be fundamentally textlike, allowing interpretive flights of fantasy extending far beyond the dull world in which everyday culture is produced and transmitted. Authors rapidly became distracted by the suggestiveness of their own language through the creation of jargon and stylistic innovations, decorating the limited interpretations of informants with vastly more fanciful and appealing interpretations of their own (Gellner 1992). In this runaway inflation of ideas, almost anything goes, as long as it is new and different. Soon the idea of culture as text is not enough, it must be continuously reconceived (Coombe 2008), for instance as something to be experienced (Hastrup and Hervik 1994), embodied (Pedwell 2010), or, as one leading anthropologist has recently suggested, "enwinded" (Ingold, forthcoming).

We can only escape this descent into absurdity by finding a robust and encompassing scientific framework on which to construct our questions and pursue answers. Such a framework exists in the form of evolutionary theory. Since at least the time of Darwin, evolutionary theory has proven to be an exceptionally robust method of explaining the anatomy, appearance, behavior, psychology, history, and development of our species. Despite some false starts and blind alleys, efforts to explain recurrence and diversity of sociocultural traits within this framework, both in humans and other animals, is generating cumulative and, therefore, increasingly sophisticated bodies of theory based on the formulation of precise and testable hypotheses (Henrich and Henrich 2007; Sosis and Alcorta 2003; Boyd and Richerson 2005).

Through the lens of evolutionary theory, we can conceptualize and explain sociocultural phenomena by answering four major kinds of interrelated and complementary questions, what Niko Tinsbergen called the "four whys": a functional why, concerning the adaptive value of the trait in comparison with others; a causal why, concerning the mechanisms required to produce it; a developmental why, concerning the processes by which the trait emerges in the growth and maturation of the individual; and an evolutionary why, concerning the phylogeny of the trait, its appearance via a succession of preceding forms (Tinbergen 1951). These four whys are intimately interrelated. If, for instance, we discover that groups performing certain kinds of rituals tend to absorb or destroy groups that lack such rituals—making the rituals in question a group-level adaptation and possibly also an in-group adaptation if there is variability in the accrual of individual advan-

4. For a critical discussion, see Strauss and Quinn 1997.

tages—we can only fully explain the emergence and spread of these functional properties by understanding the psychology required to produce the successful pattern of ritualized behavior, its developmental history, and the constraints on cultural innovation set by prior ritual forms on which the current institution has been modeled. In other words, we need to explore the evolutionary history of the cultural trait.

One may suspect that evolutionary explanations of sociocultural phenomena furtively sneak in old arguments and their problematic intuitive assumptions through the back door. The notion, for instance, that a certain kind of institution might help to reproduce the society in which it occurs (in evolutionary formulations a perfectly respectable hypothesis) may seem to be indistinguishable from the kind of outmoded functionalism that anthropology has largely abandoned, and surely founders on the same errors of intuitive teleological reasoning. Recall, however, that the problem with functionalism was that it failed to specify the mechanism by which socially useful traits came into being. The intuitive solution, based on teleological reasoning, leads hopelessly to notions of intentional design and not to Darwinian evolution (Wilson 2002). It is precisely these intuitive errors that need to be avoided. The same may be said of our accounts of proximate causation. Successful accounts fractionate sociocultural phenomena into component features that are explainable in terms of discrete suites of causes rather than luring us back into familiar traps of reification and anthropomorphism.

By way of illustration, consider the discovery (by anthropologists Alan Fiske and Nick Haslam) that recurrent features of cultural rituals closely resemble the symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder (or OCD) (Fiske and Haslam 1997), a correspondence that Pascal Boyer and Pierre Lienard have recently sought to explain in terms of the workings of a specialized cognitive system (dysfunctional in OCD patients) concerned with triggering precautionary responses to potential hazards (Boyer and Lienard 2008). Although this new body of research may significantly advance our understanding of some features of ritualized behavior, it certainly does not (and is not intended to) explain in general terms why people perform rituals, why they vary in frequency and emotionality, why they recruit various ideas about the involvement of supernatural agents, and so on. So easily is this point misunderstood, that authors of the hazard-precaution theory of ritual were tempted to forewarn readers that they were offering, not a theory of ritual, but a theory of "XB29" (a random string of letters or numbers chosen to represent the specific aspects of ritualized behavior picked out by their theory). There is little intuitive (or even culturally familiar) about this procedure. Although that may be a problem in communicating the value of this approach to wider audiences, it is also a great strength if we are dealing with phenomena that conflicting intuitions have led us to argue about so unproductively.

Much of anthropology nowadays is "mindblind," but, more generally, the discipline has developed a kind of evolutionary myopia. The future of anthropology lies in the development of much sharper vision in these areas. Anthropology not only needs to be informed by major discoveries in neighboring fields but it can and should be a major a player in making those discoveries. It remains one of the broadest of all the human sciences—and thus a useful representative of the humanities in general—and its emphasis on cross-cultural comparison based on long-term field research makes it also uniquely informed on questions of cross-cultural recurrence and variability. Despite my reservations about some recent trends in the discipline, at the core of anthropology remains an

enduring commitment to the production of careful and rigorous ethnography. It is also noteworthy that some of the most important developments in the cognitive science of culture have been spearheaded by scientists with an anthropological background (Sperber 1996; Boyer 2001; Atran 2002). Anthropology has made (and continues to make) valuable contributions that will, if we are wise, be put to increasingly effective use in the scientific study of our species' social and cultural achievements.

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