

Why cognitive anthropology needs to understand social interaction and its mediation

I applaud Maurice Bloch's insistence that in some non-trivial respect we are all talking about the same world and his call for productive communications among the disciplines. He's at his most original, however, when he brings cognitive insights to bear on our peculiar methodology: fieldwork is a process of individuals' 'mutual colonisation' (Bloch 2012: 183), something that builds on people's ordinary capacities for social interaction. Bloch's defence of participant-observation against the literal-minded interview should be required reading (along with Charles Briggs's thoroughgoing 1986 volume *Learning How to Ask*). That we 'go in and out of one another' (p. 129) means communities cannot be treated atomistically, merely as populations or aggregations of individual minds.

Yet Bloch's description of how we 'go in and out of one another' invites just that treatment: ideas seem to pass directly from one neurosystem to another, bypassing all those mediations that make the outcome distinctly historical. This omission stems from an oddly provincial view of anthropology, confined to the putative heirs of Durkheim and Boas, or to straw men who bear their names. Some readers will miss Morgan, Marx and Weber, but what is most relevant to Bloch's own concerns is that he ignores a century of work in linguistic anthropology, microsociology, sociolinguistics and, in fact, much psychology. He justly celebrates Malinowski's early stab at pragmatics but then the trail goes cold. His reading of linguistic anthropology stops in the 1930s with Whorf and a disappointingly crude caricature of cultural constructionism. What he calls 'semiotics' (sometimes 'semiology') is nothing of the sort, but just interpretive anthropology. So what's missing?

First, pragmatics: linguistic anthropology has long attacked the identification of words with concepts, the treatment of language as a vehicle for propositions and the reduction of semiosis to the coding and decoding of information. Indeed, semiosis is not 'messages passed between mindless machines' (p. 178) and involves all the cognitive processes Bloch mentions. But it is not just an open phone line between one cognitive apparatus and another. Cognition is part of the story – but not the whole thing. *Pace* Bloch, the object of anthropology cannot be simply 'knowledge'.

Second, form: semiosis cannot be reduced to cognition in part because its operations require some perceptible, hence material, form. What psychologists dub 'Theory of Mind' does not mean people are telepathic. The inferences you draw about another's thoughts or intentions are prompted by your perceptions of the formal

properties of sounds, gestures, etc. Those properties are affected by a range of causal factors, such as the mechanics of speech and the history of technology.

Third, the study of face-to-face interaction reveals patterns not reducible to what happens within single minds. Individual reflexivity is inseparable from the self's interactions with others. Bloch points toward this, saying 'social life is ... built on this continual imagination of the minds of others' (p. 63). But what he does with this insight is limited by his reliance on an epidemiological model that treats social life in terms of populations. Lacking a real sociology, this mentalist approach makes it hard to account for even rudimentary sociolinguistic effects like uneven transmission, unequal knowledge, differential authority or the dynamics of affiliation and schizmogogenesis. More than imagination is at work. Studies of interaction, distributed cognition and the circulation of texts challenge Bloch's claim that meaning can only be found inside individual minds. We have good empirical evidence that meaning is typically co-produced and negotiated over the course of interaction. We see this in something as banal as a friendly conversation that leads to a quarrel, surprising both participants. Meaning takes place in time and space.

So, fourth, time and space: like most anthropologists, Bloch locates our human distinctiveness in being creatures of history. But this history cannot be explained by direct transmission of information from one neurosystem to another or, in his metaphor for selves, from one 'blob' to another. How do the 'public parts of blobs ... go in and out of each others bodies' (pp. 128–9)? The missing link is semiotic mediation. It is signs that connect one moment of time to others, circulate between different contexts, and get reshaped and recombined in the process. It is signs, not individual minds, which directly bear the marks of history.

Why does mediation matter? Bloch is right to observe that the knowledge that informs what people do cannot be accessed directly (p. 171). But this isn't just a research problem; it's something everyone faces when dealing with others. Therefore we need to understand not only their inner cognitions, but also the mediation that allows them to interact with one another. Semiotics is not just another widget. Nor is it the vague fuzzy stuff that Bloch imagines it to be. It is the tough-minded work of putting cognition (along with emotions and all the other bodily products of evolution) into a material and social world that has a history.

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References

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