

Review by two

Perspectives on the intersection of biology and society

INGOLD, TIM & GISLI PALSSON (eds). *Biosocial becomings: integrating social and biological anthropology*. viii, 281 pp., figs, illus., tables, bibliogr. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 2013. £55.00 (cloth)

A perspective from social Evolution (Jamshid J. Tehrani)

As colleagues in a department where social and biological (together with other varieties) of anthropology happily coexist, Michael Carrithers and I are fortunate to enjoy frequent opportunities for cross-disciplinary dialogue. Occasionally, these can lead to genuinely new and exciting syntheses. At other times, we discover fundamental and possibly irreconcilable differences, which both instruct us in other ways of seeing, and help us to sharpen our own concepts and understandings. With that in mind, as an evolutionary anthropologist who works on culture, I had hoped that *Biosocial becomings* might build new bridges between social and biological anthropology, or, failing that, at least map out some interesting fault-lines between the two fields. I am sorry to say I was disappointed on both counts.

The fatal weakness in Ingold and Palsson's project is that they try to engage biological anthropology on very narrow and prejudiced terms that would immediately alienate the vast majority of researchers in the subject. 'Neo-Darwinism is dead!', cries Tim Ingold in the very first sentence, before offering a gleeful post-mortem of its self-inflicted demise (a nasty combination of myopia, paranoia, and 'manifest circularity', apparently). But not for the first time, rumours of Darwin's death appear to have been greatly exaggerated. As much as Ingold and Palsson may wish they would go away, the fact is that fields like evolutionary psychology, behavioural ecology, gene-culture co-evolution, and cultural evolution (all of which are lumped together here, despite their distinct and often incompatible perspectives) are in a rude state of health. Far from being in retreat, evolutionary approaches to cognition and behaviour are attracting more funding, more students, and are producing more publications in leading international and mainstream

journals. In the UK alone, there are now more anthropologists working in these fields, spread over more departments, than at any time in our discipline's history.

Besides the negative anti-Darwinian rhetoric, the book attempts to advance a positive agenda for biosocial anthropology, which focuses on 'becomings'. The chapters by Ingold and Palsson attempt to mobilize this concept by linking phenomenological and performative aspects of selfhood and social identity to biological processes of ontogenesis (development and growth) and epigenesis (environmental influences on the genome). Recent research in these areas is presented as effectively overturning everything we thought we knew about heritability. In fact, ontogenetic processes have long been incorporated into the basic framework of evolutionary theory as one of Tinbergen's Four Questions. Tinbergen famously differentiated proximate-level explanations for the development and function of a behaviour/trait (how does it function? how does it grow and change in an individual's lifetime?) from ultimate-level explanations for why it evolved (what adaptive or reproductive problem did it solve?). Natural selection is invoked for the latter type of explanation, not the former – a crucial point which Ingold and Palsson appear to have missed (with Tinbergen – and the large literature surrounding his Four Questions – conspicuously absent in the references). Epigenetics, meanwhile, is unquestionably an exciting development, but the extent of its importance is still unknown, as is the scope of its challenge to orthodox evolutionary theory. To claim otherwise may suit these writers' agenda, but does not reflect the views of the broader scientific community.

While Ingold and Palsson's arguments are frustratingly abstract, Ramirez-Goicoechea's chapter offers a more concrete realization of the relationship between cultural and biological becomings. She demonstrates the long-term and heritable impact of economic, political, and historical conditions on pregnant mothers and their offspring, who literally come to embody social constructs like race and class. Chatjouli's thought-provoking chapter on the diagnosis and lived experience of thalassaemia similarly makes an effort to engage with the interdisciplinary ambitions of the book. The other contributions, interesting though they are in their own right, were not obviously informed by a consistent conception of 'becoming', or sustained engagements with biological theory. They feel like chapters written by social

anthropologists for social anthropologists. Which brings us back to the main flaw of the book – the failure to include biological anthropologists (which is all the more striking considering Ingold's attack on the Royal Society's Culture Evolves event for failing to involve social anthropologists!). The sole exception is the primatologist Augustín Fuentes, whose chapter specifically advocates the plural inheritance framework (which sees genes, social information, and environments as separate but interacting tracks) promoted by cultural evolution and gene-culture coevolutionary theorists, which Ingold and Palsson go to great lengths to repudiate. These inconsistencies and contradictions epitomize the missed opportunity that this book turned out to be.

A perspective from sociocultural anthropology (Michael Carrithers)

Writing as a sociocultural anthropologist, I share some of Jamie Tehrani's frustrations. For my part, I found myself thinking of the book as a sort of complexly and interestingly flavoured fruit, but one protected by a hard and spiky outer hull. This outer hull is set in place by the very first words of Ingold's combative introduction. 'Neo-Darwinism is dead,' he cries, in a way that really calls for one or more exclamation marks. He then goes on (as Tehrani notes), to assert, but not to argue, various reasons why this is so, quite despite the fact, which he acknowledges, that research programmes under the banner of Neo-Darwinism continue robustly, often with lavish funding by public institutions. This introduction sets a tone which invites the reader to treat the contributions to the volume as though their authors march shoulder to shoulder with Ingold into combat – or, perhaps better, cry with him as prophets from the wilderness.

But, as Tehrani also notes, that is not what is actually happening in the rest of the volume. Now it is invidious, a practice hardly to be recommended, to write a review of a book describing how it should have been written, suggesting that the reviewer would never have started from there and certainly would

never have gone down that path. Nevertheless I'm going to do that, at least to the extent of suggesting how differently the volume would read if it had begun instead with Palsson's concluding chapter, 'Retrospect'. For Palsson first lays out in some detail the intellectual, ideological, and institutional setting, whose effect is that there exist two 'tectonic plates' in the study of our species, the biological and the sociocultural. And he then goes on to suggest some of the ways in which anthropologists and allied researchers have already, or could in future, transcend the conceptual ossification of our discipline(s?).

The contributions as a whole, though, would tell a more complex story. They suggest that the figure of 'becoming' has deeper roots in contemporary sociocultural anthropology and can be sourced from a wide variety of quite different literatures. Thus Barbara Götsch cites a literature drawn from Lave and Wenger, as well as from sociolinguistics and cultural psychology, to deliver a vivid understanding of the work in an NGO in Morocco. Aglaia Chatjouli's pellucid chapter on thalassaemics in Greece looks to literatures on the interface between technology and culture, including Haraway, Jasanoff, and Strathern. Noa Vaisman's intriguing chapter on the legal puzzles of shed-DNA testing in Argentina looks largely to the language of Vivieros de Castro. Istvan Praet's ambitious reappraisal of animism admits to no specific forebears, but must surely have been founded to a degree on Descola's magisterial work. And Hayder Al-Mohammad's philosophical chapter develops ideas from Heidegger.

It is striking, though (as Tehrani notes), that the 'bio' dimension of several of the chapters is present more by the editors' assertion than by the arguments and evidence of the authors. The one chapter that does undertake systematically to elaborate Ingold's ideas ethnographically, Vito Laterza *et al.* on a Swazi timber mill, might be thought to be 'bio' only insofar as trees and human beings are both amenable to (someone else's) biological description. The counter to that observation would be, I think, that under the future metaphysics proposed by Ingold, narrowly biological descriptions would be superseded by descriptions knotting formerly biological matter together with formerly sociocultural matter into a seamless fabric of biosociality.

But however that may be, my own opinion as a sociocultural anthropologist is that, just as it stands, this is a splendid volume which is worth

reading for the richness of the ethnography as well as for the interest of the theoretical frame. To the extent that it represents the present state of affairs in sociocultural anthropology, it shows how thoroughly notions of becoming have superseded earlier generations' notions of sociocultural being.

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