

MARSHALL SAHLINS. *THE NEW SCIENCE OF THE ENCHANTED UNIVERSE: AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF MOST OF HUMANITY.* PRINCETON: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS 2022, 208 P. ISBN: 9780691215921

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The late Professor Marshall Sahlins (1926-2021) leaves a final title, where he set out for nothing less than to ‘revolutionize an obsolete anthropology’ (ix). The development of a malady interrupted his original plans for the book, requiring assistance to complete it. The result is described as ‘a kind of preface to the study of culture’ or a ‘prolegomena to a new science of the enchanted universe’ (ix-x), which appears to be synonymous. Indeed, as the author will later confirm, culture among what he terms *immanentist* societies ‘is not a human thing’ (32), resonating with recent calls for a more-than-human anthropology.

Formally the book comprises four chapters, along with a prologue, an introduction, and an afterword. The central argument revolves around Karl Jaspers’ concept of the ‘Axial Age’, which Sahlins employs to build by contrast the notion of *immanentist cultures*. In fact, while the ‘axial civilizations’ were characterized by their ‘transcendentalism’, or the displacement of the immanent divinity from this world to a distant heavenly realm, Sahlins contends that ‘[a]ll the world before and around [them] was a zone of immanence’ (2). The first two chapters provide a plethora of examples from different societies to support these assertions. Despite displaying certain aspects of evolutionism and what the anthropologist Johannes Fabian terms as a ‘denial of coevalness’ (Engelke 2018: 75), Sahlins strongly advocates for the actuality of a myriad of *metapersons* or *metahumans*, a term he coined to designate the ‘decisive agents of human weal and woe – the sources of their success, or lack thereof’ (2). Moreover, reversing the Durkheimian logic which renders the sacred as an ‘idealized expression of the control [that] society exercises over its members’ (22), Sahlins argues that it was ‘the cosmic host of metahuman beings’ (45) which gave origin to the social. He then presents in the third chapter (‘Metapersons’, 70-123) a comprehensive typology of these metahuman beings, including categories such as the ‘masters of species and space’, the ancestors, and the ‘gods’. The fourth chapter acutely remarks on the hierarchical character of the metapersons’ affairs, condensed in the notion of the ‘Cosmic Polity’.

Throughout his career Sahlins made significant contributions to cultural anthropology, deepening our understanding of humanity. Thus, he remained a prominent figure of anthropology until the second decade of the twenty-first century, encompassing a trajectory of almost 70 years. Despite its irreducibility to any singular analysis due to its vastness, Sahlins’ preceding work does inform this posthumous volume in certain respects. For instance, concepts such as metapersons and the cosmic polity, mentioned earlier, had already surfaced in a recent collaboration on political anthropology with the late David Graeber (*On kings*

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2017). More substantively, *The new science* echoes a move he executed exactly fifty years ago in *Stone Age economics* (1972), where he demonstrated that so-called hunter and gatherer societies were not historically living in abject economic conditions but rather in 'opulence'. In fact, Sahlins argues in this book that immanentist cultures have never been ignorant of the qualities of the divine. Instead, they construct their systems of knowledge from what we might term true knowledge about the world or experiential understanding. On the other hand, while in *How 'natives' think* (1995) Sahlins rejected any essentialist rendering of indigeneity – then represented by the category of the 'native' which he fiercely combatted – almost thirty years later he shows a rather different perspective, building on the opposition between 'immanentist' (or 'pre-axial') and 'transcendentalist' societies.

What Sahlins invoked in 1995 was a call for more rigour in approaching facts. However, what remains uncontested, since it is somehow taken for granted, is the question of what kind of sources and whose voices are deemed legitimate or authoritative for ethnological analysis. In fact, Sahlins appears to make a more or less explicit gesture to underscore this critique by voluntarily indicating the nationality (or 'ethnicity') of each author cited throughout the book (e.g., American, Norwegian, Scandinavian, etc.). Unsurprisingly, the result is that virtually all authors come from a Euro-American background. The only two exceptions are the earlier Omaha ethnologist, Francis La Flesche (1857-1932), and the Nigerian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (1931-2022). To be fair, the ventriloquist vocation is a signature of most anthropology, from Tylor onwards. On the other hand, in *The new science* we find an explicit and resolute call for the 'transcendentalist social science [to] adapt itself to, and take seriously, the cultural praxes of others' (176). However, besides the repetitiveness of these calls 'to take seriously the other' (a commonplace, for instance, of the so-called ontological turn), what exactly does this entail? The purposeful omission of categories such as *indigenous* or *native*, with the historicities they embed, plus the playful reversal invoking them only to refer to Euro-American schemes and science, underscores a lack of attunement with the concerns, aspirations, and trajectories of those implicit in the formula. The unilaterality of these representations renders problematic the author's formulation as it tends, for instance, to naturalize and universalize the (human) state through a comparison between Sumerian ancient civilization and contemporary Inuit society (137-173). Despite these potential limitations, the book constitutes an invaluable testimony to its author's mastery and an excellent starting point for a much-needed conversation within the discipline, regarding nothing less than what it is meant to become in the twenty-first century.

Bibliography

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