

Anthropologists & the People They Study

William D. Buckingham

2022

a review of
The New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity by Marshall Sahlins. Princeton University Press, 2022

The late anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1930–2021) is best known for his claim, first published in 1968, that people living in traditional economies based on hunting and gathering enjoyed lives of relative security, abundance, and leisure.

This argument, made in *Stone Age Economics*, challenged centuries of economic dogma which held that such people must have endured lives of exceptional hardship and scarcity. Rather, Sahlins writes, “[t]he market-industrial system institutes scarcity, in a manner completely unparalleled and to a degree nowhere else approximated.” Sahlins’s incisive style and willingness to turn the conventional wisdom on its head have been hallmarks of his scholarly output over the subsequent half century.

Sahlins’s latest book, published posthumously this year, is no exception. In *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe*, Sahlins takes aim at an academic anthropology that has failed, in his view, to meaningfully represent the ways that people living most human societies, past and present, have understood the world around them and their place in it. These are the “immanentist” cultures in which daily life is shot through with spiritual and divine forces, and in which more-than-human beings, such as animals, plants, forests, mountains, and bodies of water, are living subjects invested with souls, exercising great influence over human affairs.

Such “cultures of immanence” are set against what Sahlins refers to as “axialist” or “transcendentalist” societies, in which divinity is relegated “to a transcendental Other world’ of its own reality, leaving the earth alone to humans, now free to create their own institutions by their own means and lights.”

Academic anthropology, itself embedded within this axialist transcendentalist worldview, has proven incapable of representing immanentist cultures, falling back on a misleading conceptual apparatus composed of nearly equal parts of transcendentalist equivocation and colonialist condescension...[which] reduce[s] the meaningful relations of a culture of immanence to the status of convenient fantasies of the objective reality—of a world actually without such gods—thus making their culture a fictional representation of ours.

Sahlins seeks to understand “how the immanentist societies are actually organized and function in their own cultural terms, their own concepts of what there is.”

The book explores certain attributes ascribed to these immanentist societies, richly illustrated with examples from ethnographic and archaeological research (“the material,” in anthropological parlance).

We learn, for example, that the Manambu of New Guinea understand that certain garden plots are more productive than others, “because the totemic ancestors, who ‘release’ the crops from their distant villages, have selectively favored them.” Thus, the Manambu introduce the concept of “human finitude.”

In contrast to the neoliberal ethic of individual responsibility, human finitude recognizes the obvious limits of human agency in a world of powerful forces beyond our control. Whether in times of hardship or abundance, people are understood to have very little influence over things like the success or failure of hunting and farming,

or illness and health. Rather, powerful more-than-human forces are constantly at work, intimately involved in the world and the lives of its human inhabitants.

Subsequent chapters explore concepts of divinity, “metapersons” (the spirits, animals, and ancestors who behave much like human beings and exert influence over their lives), and “the cosmic polity.” The latter draws comparison between immanentist cosmologies—that is, ideas about the universe and how it works—and modern states in the way that they order human morals and behaviors.

The Montagnai-Naskapi (Innu) of northern Quebec and Labrador, for example, lived in a “classically egalitarian society,” free from coercive economic exploitation, class divisions, and the arbitrary power of rulers. Yet they were entirely beholden to Moose-Fly, “the overlord, or master’ of fishes” who alone controlled the catches of fish on which the Innu depended, enforcing strict rules that the fish be respected and not wasted. The result, presumably, was a sustainable fishery, the fruits of which being distributed equitably among members of the community.

Examples such as these, lead Sahlins to claim that “the state is a universal human institution,” eliding the seemingly categorical differences between such diverse political organizations as those of the ancient Sumerians, the Inuit, and modern nation-states. Sahlins never defines exactly what he means by the term, state, or why he uses it in this way.

This writer, for one, would assume that any useful concept of the state would include, for example, ritual or institutional violence, the concentration of political power, and the economic coercion of workers—all of which the Inuit, for example, managed to do without, despite their hierarchical cosmologies.

The more significant problems with *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe* take shape in the shadows cast by academic anthropology’s racist and colonialist past, a legacy which looms large over contemporary anthropology.

Is it ethical, we might ask, to lump diverse and unique societies into contrived categories such as “immanentism,” in order to support arcane academic arguments and, in the hyper-competitive “publish-or-perish” university system of late capitalism, the careers of the people making those arguments? Are these cultures being treated with the specificity and respect they deserve? The material Sahlins draws on is, after all, the testaments and legacies of real people. What would they have to say about their most sacrosanct religious and cultural convictions being used in this way?

Finally, while it is no longer fashionable among anthropologists to talk about progressive “stages” of cultural evolution, or “primitive” and “complex” societies, Sahlins’s “immanentist” and “axialist/transcendentalist” categories seem to be indebted to that outmoded brand of cultural evolutionism. Throughout the book, Sahlins’s reliance on concepts like “pre-axial” and “the axial revolution” imply that cultures “progress” in predictable ways over time—the same anthropological logic used to justify colonialism and the dispossession and genocide of indigenous peoples.

These concerns notwithstanding, the question at the heart of the matter is whether we choose to take seriously the diverse ways in which people living in different cultures understand the world and their place in it. Or, are we committed exclusively to a world made up of only human agents and inanimate objects to do with as we please, with other views relegated to superstition and ignorance. In the great sweep of human civilization this is a very recent and unusual way of understanding the world, and has led to the global crises we face today.

The transition from immanentism to axialism is not a one-way street. History is full of examples of people abandoning an axial society for an immanentist one. Consider, for example, the many North American colonists who abandoned their fellow Europeans to live among their indigenous neighbors or, more recently, the revival of indigenous and neopagan religions.

Those of us who seek a fundamental change in the way human beings treat each other and the world around us might do well to reconsider some of our axialist/transcendentalist inheritances, to suppose that we might indeed live in a world full of powerful living forces beyond ourselves, and behave accordingly.

William D. Buckingham is a writer and ethnomusicologist based in New Orleans.

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2022

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/412-fall-2022/anthropologists-the-people-they-study>
Fifth Estate #412, Fall, 2022

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