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The outcome of an international symposium held in May 2007 at the *Institute of Cognition and Culture*, Queens University, Belfast, this valuable collection of articles confronts cognitive science with cultural histories in multi-levelled, nuanced ways. Four chapters are theory-focused (Luther Martin, Christophe Heintz, Donald Wiebe, and Jesper Sørensen), directly engaging conceptual issues. Of the nine case studies, five deal with ancient Roman religion in particular. Most of the authors are historians of religion; every article in some way adjudicates questions of the relation of cognitive or evolutionary infrastructure to historical particularity and cultural data; several demonstrate the theme of the mechanics of transmission.

Let me start with the three “theory” chapters that extend Martin’s succinct, historical overview of pertinent debates about scientific ways of conducting historical study. Donald Wiebe’s “Beneath the Surface of History?” takes on the big picture of explanation and reductionism. Wiebe opposes what he takes to be the reductionism inherent in the work of the classical evolutionary psychology formulations of John Tooby and Leda Cosmides which gave social history little or no causal effect. Laced with appreciative references to Douglas Hofstadter’s work, and the idea of evolutionary ratchets inventing new structures of collective life that become selective forces in their own right and thus unpredictable by reductionist models, Wiebe advocates an “explanatory pluralism” and complementarity of causal levels. He argues that social and cultural factors constitute emergent levels of reality and can provide explanations of human behaviour that are complementary with evolutionary psychology.

Though in different ways, the essays of Christophe Heintz and Jesper Sørensen make points consistent with Wiebe’s picture. Heintz calls for
an integration of Sperber’s cultural epidemiology approach with studies of enculturation and of situated and distributed cognition. He shows, convincingly I think, that factors of attraction span cognitivist and local/contextual settings and thus can change over time – hence we should not focus solely on unchanging psychological mechanisms. He recognizes that “the multiplicity of factors directing cultural change” does not make the use of cultural evolutionary theory in history hopeless: rather, Heintz says, recognizing those multiplicities “requires relying on historiography as an important source of data” (pp. 24, 25).

Sørensen’s overview chapter has the notable virtue of distinguishing a number of explanatory levels – or “epistemological ground positions” – and their ways of dealing with the relationship of “stable and contingent realities”. For example, micro-histories deal with how actors process information in actual environments; macro or evolutionary histories deal with the larger continuities of gene-culture adaptations; in between, meso-histories address the role of cultural systems and their cognitive, material, and other enculturating mechanisms. So Sørensen is calling for reflexive clarity on the part of historians as to “where” they conduct their work and thus their particular ways of understanding and selecting structured data.

All of the above points strike me as needed and salutary, if not inevitable. Though the authors would likely not put it so starkly, I would conclude: nothing can be excluded as a potential influence on human behaviour; there are cognitive attractors all the way up and all the way down; all perception is prestructured and biased; every individual actor is cut from varying cultural and genetic cloth; every historical generalization is a situated act of selection; context reigns. But is history, then, impossibly inclusive? Perhaps a kind of rogue category?

The historically oriented essays for the most part address the relative value of cognitive and cultural levels of explanation when it comes to selected religious phenomena, typically taking those levels as complementary and needing each other. I cite a few examples here to indicate the range of different genres of historical data under discussion in the book.

Ulrich Berner’s chapter focuses on the notions of scepticism and superstition in the work of the satirist Lucian of Samosata with the idea of showing that standard cognitivist notions about counter-intuitive anthropomorphism as the characteristic religious mode have not taken actual social and conceptual practices enough into account. Much depends, Berner says, on the contextual conceptualizations – such as justice, or reliability – that surround belief in gods and their traits, suggesting the possibility that there are kinds of religious belief without a miraculous or counter-intuitive element per se. Peter Westh also goes to textual sources to argue that cognitivist
ideas about cognitive optimums need to be supplemented, given that there are other ways than individual memory for god-knowledges (my term) to be transmitted. He tests the Cognitive Optimum Theory by analysing the epithets associated with the Babylonian sun-god Šamaš, showing how they apply across different ontological domains, and concludes that “violations of intuitive ontological assumptions do not seem to play the prominent role that the theory predicts” (p. 58). In a parallel vein, Dirk Johannsen tests the domain-violation concept with Norwegian folk narratives about “the hidden people”, finding that “most types of counterintuitivity become meaningful only within their specific narrative context” (p. 81) – a storytelling context that has already constructed value, plot and identity cognitions of its own.

Anders Lisdorf addresses accounts of prodigies or omens in the Roman period, applying different versions of the concept of attention-demanding narratives. He also nicely demonstrates Sperber’s principle of relevance by assessing the actual proximity of prodigy reports to the city of Rome itself. For his chapter, Christian Prager takes up the metarepresentational aspect of tree symbolism, following Sperber’s notion of mental devices and the stability of cultural representations, as well as the ethological idea of “superstimuli”. For human symbols, Prager says, the function is “to focus attention, to elicit representations from memory, and to reify hard-to-process beliefs” (p. 64). Those in the comparative religion tradition with its classical memes about sacred trees should find this material a compelling, complementary hermeneutical upgrade for the subject.

Gabriel Levy, in his “Technology and Past Minds: The Case of Jewish Niche Construction”, presents an argument for why “bottom-up” psychological processes are not enough for understanding religious culture and why the mechanisms of niche-construction and gene-culture co-evolution are important tools for the historian of Judaism. Jewish tradition – “probably the first highly distributed network of people bonded in core beliefs of biological descent and common language” (p. 40) – is an example of such an ecological transmission system with its powerful constraining, heritable traits connected with writing and education, in-house marriage and reproductive success, managerial competencies, and kin or group selection generally. All in all, the chapter offers a persuasive case for how several of Sørensen’s explanatory levels can be successfully and integrally applied to the “past minds” of a particular religious tradition.