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PERIG PITROU. *CE QUE LES HUMAINS FONT AVEC LA VIE*. PARIS: PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE FRANCE 2024. 536 P. ISBN: 2130863132

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Perig Pitrou's new book, *Ce que les humains font avec la vie*, is a big and ambitious work of theoretical synthesis that deserves to generate extensive discussion and debate. It is far more than *just* a work of synthesis, however, as I will discuss. The title could be rendered 'What humans make out of life', 'What humans do with life', or, more tendentiously, 'How humans construct life'. The book self-consciously presents itself as *not* proposing yet another new 'turn' that would grant itself an epistemological free pass and that would erase the history of the discipline before some putatively foundational starting point, whenever and wherever that might be placed. On the contrary, Perig Pitrou starts from his conviction that one must build on what has gone before:

> So many contemporary theories that claim to be original seem to make a tabula rasa of the past or just depict the history of the discipline as a catalogue of errors […] For us, the robustness of an anthropological theory is to be found precisely in its ability to establish links with earlier eras and to confront the discoveries of today with those made by our predecessors. (483)

The book is clearly embedded in its French context, but at the same time it exists in an intense dialogue with Anglophone anthropology. On many pages all the references are to British, US, South American, or Scandinavian authors writing in English. You will find many old favourites from Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard to Marilyn Strathern, from Tim Ingold to Anne-Marie Mol, from Descola and Viveiros de Castro to Laura Rival. Eben Kirksey's works are discussed over several pages. Later in the book, Veena Das, Scheper-Hughes, Ortner, Robbins, Bellacasa, Fassin, João Biehl, and many others make an appearance. There is lots of Foucault and Agamben, as one might expect. Descola is a big influence. In different ways Ingold and Sahlins are also important, as discussed below.

In surveying and synthesizing all these diverse authors, Pitrou aims to produce 'big theory', a new approach that, taking his inspiration from Sahlins, he calls cosmobiopolitics. He is not content with the 'everything is what it is and not another thing' position of so much modern anthropology, i.e., the particularist refusal of all theory and generalization. Behind all the diversity and difference that anthropology has documented, there has to be the possibility of a general theory built on the comparison of particular cases (31–2). That theory should be capacious enough to encompass all the classic concerns that anthropologists have had,

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including the analysis of social structure and politics, as well as ritual, religion, kinship, vitality, and non-human others.

In pursuit of this ambitious comparative programme, Pitrou provides a robust defence of collaborative and dialogic working. He also defends *methodological* ecumenism (333ff). Anthropologists are – and should be – the ultimate bricoleurs in the social science academic marketplace. Given that this is such a big and ambitious book, covering so much ground, I feel obliged to mention that it does not have an index – a serious disservice to its readers.

Pitrou begins from the ethnographic context he knows best (from his doctoral research): the sacrifices that the Mixe people in Mexico make in order to tame life and ensure fertility. He then broadens out to study life in all its ramifications, right up to the genetics and new reproductive technologies of contemporary times.

In order to make sense of Pitrou's position, I contrast him with three major anthropologists of our time, all of whom he draws on and defines himself against, to a greater or lesser degree: Sahlins, Bloch, and Ingold.

Pitrou and Sahlins

A big mistake that sociologists often make – a classic case would be Giddens – is to think that all premodern societies are pretty much alike. They tend to characterize such societies as the opposite of whatever their particular description of modernity emphasizes. They know about the anthropological record, but they aren't that interested in it, and do not have a strong sense of its huge variability. This is where Pitrou, and authors that he follows, such as Sahlins, score strongly: they know a lot about the vast differences between different non-modern societies. They know that different non-modern societies really do 'deal with life' very differently.

Pitrou's approach is an example of the new animism. Following Sahlins, he uses the term 'metaperson' to talk about gods and spirits, which he takes from Graeber and Sahlins' *On kings.* Pitrou recognizes Sahlins as a major figure and influence:

> More than a century after the birth of anthropology and several years after the 'ontological turn', [Sahlins'] Copernican revolution constitutes a major synthesis. It recapitulates the efforts of contemporary anthropology to rid itself of the anthropocentric presuppositions of Durkheimian sociology. Instead of seeing nature or religion as projections of society, this model envisages the social through its interactions with non-humans. […]
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> With Sahlins we come to the end of the first phase in the exploration of the anthropology of life. He achieved a double synthesis that integrates into the same model the history of anthropology and the sheer variety of the societies that the discipline has studied. He defines an object – the cosmobiopolitical order – and the method for studying it by means of a universal question: How do humans socialize the powers of life by building intellectual systems, techniques, and institutions all aiming to establish a shared society with metapersons? […]
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> But history doesn't end there. This synthesis remains partial, since it restricts itself to ethnographic works on non-Western societies. Since the end of the last millennium, the history of the discipline has become more complicated. At

> the same time, the relation to the powers of life has been modified. Biotechnologies have extended our power over life while inequalities in the conditions of human life and degradation of the circumstances of life raise multiple questions about the ways we live on our planet. To be faithful to Sahlins' method, we need to go forward by opening both his model and our reading of the ethnographic record of traditional societies to the riches of contemporary works in the anthropology of life. (191–3)

Sahlins' theory is outlined in greater detail in his posthumous *The new science of the enchanted universe: an anthropology of most of humanity*, which appeared too late to feature in Pitrou's book. Sahlins adopts the language of Jasper's Axial Age and gives us specific dates for the first Axial Age (800–300 BCE) and the second Axial Age (15th–18th centuries) (Sahlins 2022: 72). But, in fact, Sahlins goes on to make it clear that nothing has really changed: 'Long after the first Axial Age […] and despite the transcendentalism of the second […], the world is still pretty much full of Jove; as Bruno Latour would say, we have never been modern' (Sahlins 2022: 72). In other words, the Axial Age breaks haven't changed much. In practice all they have done is to furnish us with illusory convictions that prevent us from understanding 'most of humanity' and that mislead us into imposing on reality false distinctions between gods and humans, between nature and culture, religion and science, etc.

Sahlins was, one may say, a typical North Central American in that history is foreshortened: everything between the Neolithic Revolution and 1776 is one large and undifferentiated 'pre-modern' blancmange. Interestingly, Sahlins more or less acknowledges this in *The new science*. He does not really engage with what the difference between immanent and transcendent worldviews are, or what the consequences of transcendentalism are (except to accuse those who fail to understand immanentism of being in thrall to transcendentalism). Pitrou's survey of ways of socializing life may be susceptible to a similar objection: that it does not distinguish radically different ways of relating to life and nature, consequent upon these Axial Age conceptual transformations.

Pitrou and Bloch

Pitrou's project has something in common with Maurice Bloch's short treatise, *Prey into hunter* (1992), with its theory of rebounding violence. There is the same inductive method, starting from a paradigmatic ritual – in Bloch's case the terrifying Orokaiva initiation ritual after which the hunted boys return and are reincorporated as empowered, revitalized adults. In Pitrou's case, it is his Mixe chicken sacrifices that bring life and ensure a good maize crop – a technique – which at the same time enlists a greater power, the power of 'he who gives life', so that religion, ritual, and techniques, are all coordinated and undifferentiated in producing and prolonging life.

Pitrou's theory is much more ambitious, inclusive, and expansive than Bloch's. Compared to Bloch's rather 'take-it-or-leave-it' attitude to his own theory, Pitrou is open-ended and a builder. He issues an invitation to join him on an intellectual journey. Pitrou includes a lot more ethnographic examples than Bloch, and he casts his net much wider. He is much more generous in trying to reach out and incorporate the whole of contemporary anthropology and beyond into his mission, to show how it all points in the same direction. He wants not just to synthesize all past anthropology of traditional societies, but to apply the same approach to STS – science and technology studies – and to the burgeoning anthropology of life transformations: organ transplants, cloning, genetic modification, IVF, etc.

Pitrou's discussion of Bloch, on pp. 185–9, makes it clear that he approves of Bloch's refusal to reduce phenomena to naturalism, 'which would make the social dependent on the vital', or to constructivism, 'which would assert humans' capacity to construct social order without taking into account natural constraints' (188). However, in Bloch's account 'the role of metapersons is relegated to the background'. This is where Pitrou is emphatically on the side of Sahlins.

Animal sacrifice and the human fear of being substituted for the animal both play a big role in Bloch's thesis. Pitrou also discusses Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer religion* and provides an interesting interpretation of the way in which *Nuer religion* complements and enriches the account of social organization in *The Nuer*. Pitrou comments: 'animal sacrifice appears as the biopolitical institution par excellence, a practice that materializes a theory of life by combining several elements.' (162) The same could be said of many other cultures, e.g. Nepal, where goat sacrifices at the domestic level and buffalo sacrifices at the state level are the climax of the biggest annual festival of the year (Gellner 1999).

But what are we to make of those cultures in which blood sacrifice is completely taboo? Bloch, wanting to apply his rigid and monistic theory more broadly, ties himself into knots trying to make 'rebounding violence' fit the Japanese case. The same problem may be identified here, in Pitrou's theory. For all that Pitrou's theory is much more ambitious in scope, it would seem to be susceptible to similar objections. Is there really only one kind of ritual? (Gellner 1999) Cannot ritual be used for multiple purposes? Did Jaspers' Axial Revolution not introduce a new transcendentalist approach into the world, one that does not fit very well with his theories? (Strathern 2019) Like Bloch, Pitrou may be too monistic in his notion of 'life' and not sensitive enough to the various and highly distinct purposes for which ritual can be mobilized.

Pitrou and Ingold

There are several passages in Pitrou's book (150-1, 255-6, 259), some quite trenchant, in which he is keen to distinguish his project from Ingold's. Pitrou concludes:

> […] our procedure is diametrically opposed. If one looks at Ingold's bibliography, it reveals the fragility of a method that has broken with an empirical approach and become philosophical speculation. Despite references to his ethnographic experience and to the investigations of others, Ingold tirelessly articulates a theory of life: his own. (259)

Pitrou is keen to ground his theory in actual cases taken from a broad range of ethnographies, including both classic works and contemporary phenomena. He wants to do justice to the complexity of social life, including politics, 'a dimension that is wholly absent from Ingold's writings for the last twenty years' (151). In Pitrou's reading, politics is also effectively absent from many putatively new approaches in anthropology. Looking back at the anthropological classics, Pitrou also seeks to apply the notion of biopolitics to simple societies, i.e. not to confine it to modern contexts. At the same time, he wants to include a proper consideration of the precarity of life, as exemplified by the kinds of desperate and violent contemporary situations that Veena Das and Didier Fassin have specialized in analyzing.

In sum, Pitrou's book is both a survey and a manifesto for a research programme. Its complexity and its ambition may be off-putting to some, especially in the age of the soundbite and the TikTok video. But for those with a serious interest in anthropological theory, it has a

lot to offer. Given the range of authors engaged with, an English translation is clearly needed at the earliest opportunity.

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