Luther H. Martin and Jesper Sørensen (eds.)


This is the second volume in the Religion, Cognition, and Culture series edited by Jeppe Sinding Jensen and Armin W. Geertz. As noted in the preface, this volume, edited by Luther H. Martin and Jesper Sørensen, emerged from an international symposium on the theme of “Past Minds: Evolution, Cognition, and History,” which was held at the Institute of Cognition and Culture, Queen’s University Belfast in May 2007. The volume is comprised of four sections with four theoretical papers on cognitive historiography in the introductory and concluding sections and nine case studies, drawn from ancient religions, in two sections devoted respectively to the Roman world and various other ancient civilizations. The papers are linked by an overarching interest in the transmission of tradition and the cognitive mechanisms that underwrite that process. Overall, the volume makes a case for the value of cognitive and evolutionary theories for explaining history at different levels of historical analysis.

In the first of the four theoretical chapters, Luther Martin provides a historical overview of the relationship between historiography and evolutionary theorizing in the wake of Darwin’s On the Origin of Species, and of the search for generalizable explanations of historical events. In the second, Christophe Heintz discusses the importance of cultural epidemiology as a theoretical framework that allows historians to analyze and explain the distribution of cultural representations and material cultural forms. In the penultimate chapter, Don Wiebe worries that the Integrated Causal Model advanced in The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture (1992), the edited volume by Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, may not leave room for complementary approaches and makes a case for explanatory pluralism. Sørensen’s concluding essay provides an analysis, first, of three potential ways of conceiving the relationship between history (the attempt to understand the relations between particular events), socio-cultural systems (the modeling of stable modes of social organization and public symbolic representations), and psychology (understood as the modeling of individuals’ neurocognitive systems) and, second, of the role of cognitive theorizing at three different levels of historical inquiry, which he refers to as micro, macro, and meso.

Tooby and Cosmides’s widely-read chapter on “The Psychological Foundations of Culture” (1992); Dan Sperber’s Explaining Culture (1996); and to a lesser but still significant extent, Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson’s Culture and the Evolutionary Process (1985) figure prominently in all four theoretical
chapters, which provide a convenient point of entry into the case studies included in this volume. Our review, therefore, primarily focuses on theoretical issues pertaining to the underlying discussions of evolutionary psychology, cultural epidemiology, and gene-culture co-evolution in the theoretical chapters and more briefly with the individual case studies.

Throughout the volume, we note a lack of clarity with respect to the meaning of the term “culture.” Without that clarity, we think it is virtually impossible to understand the points of agreement and disagreement between Tooby and Cosmides, Sperber, or Boyd and Richerson. For this reason, we begin with Wiebe’s critique of Tooby and Cosmides (1992), which seems to miss their three-fold definition of culture. Thus, although Wiebe acknowledges that “Barlow plainly asserts in his writing (and Tooby and Cosmides come close to that at a variety of points in their major essay on the topic) that his aim is not to replace the social sciences, but only to have them submit to what we might call the boundary conditions that knowledge in the natural sciences sets for knowledge claims in other fields” (p. 169), he does not seem to take them at their word on this point and winds up — in our view — misreading them. The root of the problem lies in a lack of attention to Tooby and Cosmides’s general definition of culture as “any mental, behavioral, or material commonalities shared across individuals, from those that are shared across the entire species down to the limiting case of those shared only by a dyad, regardless of why those commonalities exist” (1992: 117) and their threefold distinction between meta-culture, evoked culture, and reconstructed (also termed “transmitted”) culture. Both meta-culture and evoked culture are thought to be expressions of our universal psychological architecture, which have evolved as responses to recurrent social and non-social past environments. They differ in that the modern-day environmental conditions that give rise to meta-culture are universal, whereas the conditions that give rise to evoked culture are variable and may therefore be present for some groups but not others. In criticizing the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM), Tooby and Cosmides were eager to highlight the universal and local environmental conditions that give rise to meta-culture and evoked culture, respectively; however, they see no contradiction between their approach and that of Sperber and others who have focused on the causal representational chains constituting reconstructed (transmitted) culture (1992: 117–122).

Martin indicates that most of the contributors to the volume acknowledge the significance of evolutionary psychology and of cultural epidemiology. Martin, in our view correctly, considers Sperber’s theory of cultural epidemiology as elaborating on the evolutionary psychology of Tooby and Cosmides as well as providing an alternative to the gene-culture co-evolution model of