

An Enchanted Universe?

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Historians and cultural anthropologists have no simple task. This becomes especially clear when they are dealing with ancient cultures or indigenous ones that have been relatively untouched by modern industrial societies. In these peoples, the historian or anthropologist confronts ways of living and speaking about the world they inhabit that are utterly foreign to the modern western mind.

How are we to understand people of Tikonia, a Polynesian island, who speak of humans, canoes, temples, or weapons as embodiments or vessels of the gods? Can we understand that gods and the dead descend from the heavens to participate in the feasts of the Arawaté people who live in the rain forest of northern Brazil? Can we take seriously the Netsilik Inuit perception that “Powers that rule the earth and all the animals and the lives of mankind on earth are the great spirits who live in the sea, on land, out in space and in the Land of the Sky”?

These are only three examples from the hundreds discussed in the posthumously published book by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe* (Princeton University Press, 2022). Sahlins acknowledges and draws extensively on the efforts of anthropologists to record faithfully how people in different cultures live, think, and feel. But he is critical of what he sees as a pervasive underlying bias through which many anthropologists tend to take their own view of reality *to be* reality and then interpret the other culture as a “fictional representation of ours,” thereby “maligned the people’s mentality as a mistaken sense of reality” (p. 11). For example:

Anthropologists are prone to use the verb “to believe” — that the people “believe” in something — only when they don’t believe it themselves. Anthropologists don’t say, “the people believe curare poison kills monkeys; but they will say, “The people believe the game father makes monkeys available for hunting.” Anthropologists don’t say, “The people believe that rain is needed for the crops to grow;” but they will say, “the people believe the gods make the rain”... (p. 13)

Sahlins quotes French anthropologist Jean Pouillon: It is “the nonbeliever who believes that the believer believes.” Sahlins goes to great length to show that distinctions we make today, such as between spirit and matter, mental and sensory, divine and mundane, or beings and things, do not conform with the perceptions of indigenous peoples he describes in the book. In fact many of the categories we so easily apply — to name a few: belief, myth, personification, projection, religion, economics, or politics — skew our understanding of their lived experience.

Sahlins wants to create a heightened awareness for the often unreflected biases and assumptions that inform a modern, university-educated person’s view of what is real. At the same time, he wants to characterize the nature of a very different kind of experience that he finds in both ancient and indigenous cultures. A key distinction

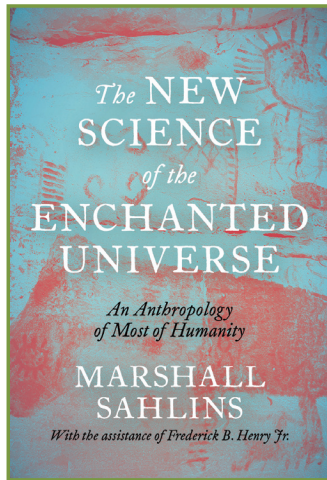
he makes is between what he calls immanent and transcendent perspectives. Looking back in history, he and others see an important (and still ongoing) shift in human consciousness that was set in motion between the eighth and third centuries BCE in cultures around the globe:

The essential change was the translation of divinity from an *immanent* presence in human activity 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. (p. 2)

Before this transition — and there are many indigenous cultures in which no such transition occurred — people were

surrounded by a host of spiritual beings — gods, ancestors, the indwelling souls of plants and animals, and others. These lesser and greater gods effectively create human culture; they are immanent in human existence and for better or worse determined human fate, even unto life and death. (p. 2)

Most of us today see rocks, clouds, rivers, or mountains as inanimate things separate from ourselves. For a Lakota, a rock could be, or have, *wakan* — a word



that can be translated in a variety of ways; I'll call it spirit power. The smoke of a pipe, the steam in a sweat lodge, or the skull of a bison could all be *wakan*. Plants and animals, which we call alive, were experienced as persons. The difficulty for a modern mentality is to take seriously that these were *experiences* of a kind of power or beingness indwelling all things. We speak of animism. We do homage to the integrity of the Lakota when we acknowledge animism as experienced. But we are dismissive when we consider *wakan* to be a projection of human subjectivity. That is the key message of Sahlins' book.

Even though he is often critical of his fellow anthropologists, throughout the book Sahlins quotes colleagues who are clearly doing their best to move beyond their own biases when characterizing the ways of the people they are interacting with. He quotes, for example, the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth, who in reference to the Baktaman people in central Papua New Guinea, expresses surprise at "how *empirical* these spirits are, how they seem to appear as very concrete, observable objects *in* the world, rather than ways of talking *about* the world" (p. 34; emphasis in original).

When Westerners view peoples whose world is filled with spirits and interpret this as mystical, then they are

operating on their own distinctions of the spiritual and the physical or the supernatural and the natural, their own transcendental suppositions. The irony is that these peoples are all-around, complete, world-constituting empiricists. Rather than "superstitious," "deluded," or otherwise taken in by wishful fantasies, their enchantments are effects of a sustained and radical empiricism. (p. 39)

Marshall Sahlins was working on this book and had finished it — except for the acknowledgments — when he died at the age of 90 in 2021. I would love to have asked him: When we come to the realization of the empirical nature of the enchanted universe, does that have consequences for how we experience the world today? Does the world truly have a depth that we are blind to today? If most of us don't experience the universe today as a weaving of powers and beings, might it be possible, from a different starting point, to find ways to get there from here?

Michael Holdrege's new book, *From Mechanism to Organism — Enlivening the Study of Human Biology* (Waldorf Publications, 2022) draws on the author's lived experience in teaching science to adolescents for more than three decades. Written especially to the teacher (or parent) of middle or high schoolers, the 240-page hand-illustrated text succeeds in being both an engaging primer on the wondrous interwoven processes that constitute the human organism *and* a pedagogical advisor for creating curriculum that nurtures active learning and sound judgement. Holdrege's chapter on the cardiovascular system, for instance, not only charts the course of blood flow in the body, but the topic also becomes a means to "help students develop more fluid, dynamic thinking that is not satisfied with easy, quick, one-dimensional judgments." In other chapters, he shows how to present students with concrete phenomena that appear to be riddles; such mysteries often awaken an eagerness to study phenomena in search of answers. With an enlivened, contextual approach to science education, the book schools an independent way of thinking as much as it does the subject of human biology. — *Elaine Khosrova*

