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Palmer Talbutt

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BOOK REVIEWS


This is a remarkable book that will repay close study; it is by no means light bedtime reading. There are two poles to it, or more exactly, the second pole conflates two themes: "cognitive science" and late modernity. This interesting conflation comes off better, to my mind, than do Shore’s heroic bridging efforts between cultural anthropology and recent cognitive science. He seems to attempt a tight-rope spanning of the Grand Canyon between Way Back When and Right Now. He was a Peace Corps member of astute abilities in Samoa, and followed up diligently into other anthropological researches. Then he was a student at Berkeley when the most current and extravagant ideas of psychology and symbolisms were bruited about. The conceptual inventories and polarities he offers toward this theoretical bridging, "cultural models" and so on, are truly impressive. His kinds of "rationality" was one such tour de force, itself worth the price of admission.

Am I being unfair? In all probability I am. If anyone suspects, reasonably enough, that I do not know enough about anthropology and cognitive science to appreciate whether Shore succeeds in solving the "problem of meaning" or not, be my guest and read the book.

But first let me ad seriatim unload my doubts and reservations: I'll try to compact them.

There are two ensconcements of humanity that Shore briefly treats of: the first is anthropological and primitive, pre-historical ensconceinent in Nature. The second is a post-historical ensconceinent in Technology. Humanity is badly swamped in both cases by its circumstances. (Where Sorokin speaks of "over-urbanization," Shore comments on de-personalizing modularities.)

This leaves out the historical, interactive and even "dialectical" aspects of life from the Axial Age through modernity. Our sense of a meaningful life and orderings of meanings is largely given through preferential vectors, either preferential contrasts
with other cultural groups ("You shall have no other gods before Me": monotheism preferred to polytheism) or a preference against something in the past. ("They said unto you..., but I say unto you": new occasions teaching new duties). Without a socio-cultural developmental approach, meanings have no context. Revolutions and creative innovators are surely revered, in political and technological frameworks. Shore seems to fall into the genetic fallacy, with Totemism, the original, yielding Techno-Totemism, which brings him into the post-modernist Heideggerian Wasteland.

Given the variety of epistemologies, and the functional segmentation of methodologies, I am distrustful of "cognitive science," to begin with.

Let me go further: to speak of "meaning-construction" is to suggest something de novo, starting from Ground Zero, as it were. Surely not. The case is more nearly like that of the person asking a New England grande dame: "Where do you get your hats?" and who was crushingly answered "We have our hats." Meanings that we already have through social interactions (and Hillary was right about talking to infants), are extended by contrast and metaphor. Such hats are re-made over and over; their original raw material was James' "booming, buzzing confusion," a limiting notion.

The dialectical, socially interactive context for meaning developments (not constructions, the beginnings of which can be dated) is primary. All of Shore's inventories and dualities are laid out on the hangar floor, like parts from flight 800. That is autop-sial; the darn thing is not in motion.

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Perhaps there are two reasons as to why Women Religious did not appear much earlier. The manuscript collections of the Public Record Office, the British Library, the university libraries, and the various Church of England and private antiquarian archives have