
Why Maurice Bloch's Work on 'Religion' Is Nothing Special but Is Central

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After the work of Durkheim and Weber, one of the most important agendas in the social sciences has been to describe, understand, and explain religious practice. Unfortunately, Durkheim's and Weber's heirs have continued to distinguish and oppose two complementary approaches. The first approach focuses on the mode of ritual communication through which 'non physical imagined agents and forces' are inferred and felt as sources of life during groupings, transforming the idiosyncratic, egoistic, and empirical forms of individual consciousness into altruistic and conceptually shared forms (the anchoring of religious domain in human nature).¹ The second approach studies how, in the name of different agents and forces, human representatives of the divine enter into competition for blessing or cursing people, by enacting relationships of power and affiliation, organizing patterns of property rights, legitimating inequalities and promoting specific social networks, movements, or societal systems (the anchoring of religious domain in history and political dynamics).² I argue against Bloch on Bloch that Maurice's work is actually in-between these two positions, and that is why it is indeed so central to anthropology.

Of course this centrality is linked in part more generally to Maurice's familial, institutional, and intellectual background. Durkheim's grand-nephew and Mauss's second cousin, born and educated in France under the cultural influence of the *École Polytechnique*, trained in Cambridge, Berkeley, and the LSE with contemporaries such as Marilyn Strathern, regularly invited to European, American, and Asian universities, conducting fieldwork in a former French colony (Madagascar), Bloch's anthropological reflections are situated at the crossroads of French, English, and American traditions and rely on the crucial contributions of archaeology, history, political economy, linguistics, ethology, and cognitive sciences to the development of social and cultural anthropology. Moreover, his fidelity to the Kantian project of Enlightenment (calling into question why people act as they do here and there but not everywhere) and his advocacy of long-term and recurrent fieldwork alongside academic life (I first met him in a refuge for Malagasy parish priests in 1999) make him one of the most distinguished representative of the Malinowskian tradition, linking ethnographic descriptions and interpretations of actual people's lives to wider theoretical issues and broad comparison.³ The best example of this inductive method is his own elaboration of the "rebounding violence schema" (Bloch 1992) based on what has remained invariant in the practice of Merina circumcision over two centuries, which he carefully reconstituted through archives and participant observation.⁴ His explanatory theory of the core ritual process both develops insights from Van Gennep (1909) and Hocart (1936, 1954) about its tripartite sequence and illustrates its properties through diverse empirical case studies related to Orokaiva initiations, Christian



millenarian cults, Dinka, Greek, and Buid sacrifices, Tibetan ritual marriages, Shona spirit mediumship, and Hindu funerals.

More specifically, I argue that the centrality of Bloch's work is also the result of a theoretical and problematical positioning, which is not totally covered in his presentation and also somewhat misrepresented. Bloch insists indeed on the discrepancy between the Durkheimian naturalists' success in explaining ritual as a basic behavior anchored in the human condition, and the Weberian historicists' understanding of religions as ephemeral and ghostly events that are indistinctly political, economical, aesthetic, legal, cosmological, or domestic. Lévi-Strauss (1962) deconstructed totemism by arguing that this particular set of religious practices was the result of a human capacity for analogical reasoning and categorization applied to similarities and differences between animal and vegetal species on the one hand, and human groups, on the other hand (Species 1 : Species2 :: Group 1 : Group 2). Alternatively, Bloch asserts that religion is a polythetic concept, the genealogy of which is entirely specific to Abrahamic monotheisms. Beyond deceptive appearances, two sets of inherited human capacities would be at stake in the adaptation and evolutionary process of humankind: the propensity for sociality and the ritualization of action. The first one implies the distinctive ability to live in fictional worlds by imagining essentialized social roles, statuses, and groups (Harris 2000);⁵ the second one is a formalized mode of communication relying on goal-demotion and deference to enhance trust and truth commitment between human animals using language (Bloch 1974, 2008; Rappaport 1999).⁶ Thus, as Firth and Leach have also suggested, anthropologists should be attentive to the way different kinds of knowledge are created and activated according to the types of interaction occurring among persons, animals, and artifacts. In cases where the 'transcendental' dimension is preponderant, people act toward each other in terms of essentialized roles, statuses, and imagined communities. But in the 'transactional' version, people act toward each other in terms of short-term Machiavellian strategies based on individual achievements, choices, perceptions, calculus, and everyday empirical monitoring. A Durkheimian approach would be then the best way to grasp how rituals make possible these alternative and transcendental representations of the world by violently transforming 'everyday cognition' about time, life cycle, egoistical interests, and core knowledge into shared and hierarchical cosmologies (the rebounding violence schema).

However, there is a slight problem with this Bloch on Bloch version. This perspective was elaborated after Maurice took his cognitive turn in the 1980s, abandoning the Marxist analyses of ideology he was renewing thanks to his utilization of semantic and pragmatic theories of language. But, as Parry (2007) recently pointed out, if his work tries to demonstrate that ritual is the domain in which ideology is forged, hierarchy legitimated and political domination naturalized in pre-capitalist societies, some of his published texts also tackle two complementary issues. The first one explains the correlation among the 'degree of instituted hierarchy', the level of complexity of social structure, and the 'amount of ideological knowledge and ritual communication' performed. The second issue investigates the learning and functioning of everyday cognition through the "organization of practical activities and daily tasks, especially productive activities" (Bloch 1977, 1998). These investigations and analyses seem necessary to Bloch because of two intriguing facts: on the one hand, capitalist societies produce ideological knowledge through mediums others than rituals; on the other hand, horticultural as well as hunter-gatherer societies produce sometimes more ideological knowledge through their daily practical activities than through rituals.⁷ This is why Bloch (1975) compared Merina irrigated rice cultivators with Zafimaniry swidden farmers from the perspective of their property rights, kinship systems, and technologies of production and

power, and analyzed the respective symbolism of their tombs and houses (the fetishization of lands and tombs being for him a consequence of Merina slavery, irrigation system, and state-building through long-distance commerce).

In other words, before his cognitive turn, Bloch was conjugating a Durkheimian and a Weberian approach: human beings were not only representing to themselves essentialized roles and groups thanks to specific modes of communication. They were also participating in the configuration and performance of relationships and technologies of production, communication, and power whose objective properties informed and constrained the way they could imagine and experiment the transcendental and transactional dimensions of their mutual interactions. Merina elites not only had the charge of supervising rituals: they also controlled lands, guns, slaves, and military forces in the nineteenth century. As Parry (2007: 356) reminds us, the wild power that Vazimba entities represented in Merina circumcision was an allegory of the real dependence of Merina society on slaves raided from neighboring peoples; circumcision became a major state cult at precisely the point at which the Merina army killed, pillaged, and enslaved on a terrifying scale.

Consequently, there is no reason to desist from studying the objectification of the properties of social life related to the morphology and extension of interaction networks, because it is quite difficult to postulate the autonomy of knowledge from political economy and social stratification. Even Bloch (2008) has to recognize that the creation of an apparently separate 'religion' is closely tied to state formation processes and the Bronze Age Revolution, as it has been attested in Mesopotamia, Egypt, or China. Religious rituals manifest themselves in identifiable forms such as religious movements, networks, organizations. Sometimes, during globalization processes, new societal systems emerge as religions where the question of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and leadership are differently dealt with (e.g., what is central or peripheral to the religious tradition, who and what does or does not belong to this religious tradition, who has the authority, what are the sanctions).⁸ Therefore, explaining the spread, transmission, and learning of ideological knowledge through rituals from a complementary Durkheimian and Weberian perspective as Bloch initiated it could consist in developing an anthropology of ritual policies. The aim would be to explain both ritual sequence variations and invariance through history. The variation or invariance of the performance frequency, of the sensory pageantry, of the place delimitation, of the encoding style of exegesis, of the audience and legitimate participants and authorities, of used materials, objects and ornaments, of the sequence of verbal and sensory-motor performances, of the 'relational configurations' enacted inside and outside the cult, would appear as both determined by cognitive and ecological factors. These parameters could be analyzed as an activation of reasoning and memorizing processes influencing, by feedback, their own stabilization or evolution, at the same time as they would be strategically selected by human agents confronted by a mix of religious traditions and the rise and demise of competitive polities and business organizations.

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■ NOTES

1. See, among others, Durkheim (1913), Lévi-Strauss (1971), and Rappaport (1999).

2. See, e.g., Geertz (1968), Gellner (1981), and Weber (1996).
3. See Bloch (2008: 16): "Functionalism enables us to recognize the inseparable totality created by the particularisms of the specificity of human history and the properties of natural being in the natural world. ... Its strength lies in its insistence on the complexity of life in particular places and at particular times, on the fact that in normal practice the many facets of human existence are inextricably together."
4. Bloch (1986) displays how despite fundamental changes in political economy and social stratification over the last two centuries in Malagasy highlands, the same basic structure of Merina circumcision ritual continues to take place. But more important is the fact that some parts of this ritual have been enacted in specific historical periods, parallel to the expansion of definite highland Malagasy polities. These 'ancestral' polities successively took the form of deme and chiefdom during the eighteenth century (Andriamasinavalona's descendants' rules), sacred kingship and early state at the turn of the eighteenth century (Andrianampoinimerina's rule), as well as military, administrative, territorial empire, and modern state before the French conquest and colonization throughout the nineteenth century (Radama and Ranavalona's rules).
5. See Bloch (2008: 2059): "What the transcendental social requires is the ability to live very largely in imagination. We often act towards elders, kings, mothers, etc. not in terms of how they appear to the senses at any particular moment but as if they were something else: essential transcendental beings. Once we realise this omnipresence of the imaginary in the everyday nothing special is left to explain concerning 'religion'. What needs to be explained is the much more general question how it is that we can act so much of the time towards visible people in terms of their invisible halo. The tool for this fundamental operation is the capacity for imagination. It is while searching for neurological evidence for the development of this capacity and of its social implications that we, in passing, will account for religious-like phenomena."
6. Goal-demotion consists of disconnecting actions and means from their usual and ordinary aims. Rituals include a lot of actions and sub-actions whose repetition reinforces goal demotion by creating actions without goal ascription and possible alternatives—a kind of a behavioral tunnel described by Bloch (1974).
7. Bloch (1998: 27) presents a few linked central mental models accounting for the conceptualization and practice of Zafimaniry society. All anchored in practice and material experience, they are the main principles through which Zafimaniry social life seems to flow: (1) the mental model of what people are like and how they mature; (2) the mental model of the differences and similarities between women and men; (3) the mental model of what a good marriage is like; (4) the mental model of what trees and wood are like; and (5) the mental model of what houses are like.
8. See Beyer (2003).

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