
Maurice Bloch, or How to Think Persistence in Religion?

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It is a great honor to comment on Maurice Bloch's writings, as his work has been very inspirational to my youthful ethnography. A Marxist theorist with a Durkheimian style (Gellner 1999), as well as an indefatigable fieldworker, Bloch has been one of the most stimulating thinkers of religious persistence—or ritual persistence, one might say, given the trickiness of the word 'religion' (Bloch 2005). In this short article, I would like to develop what I see as Bloch's contribution to exploring this foundational anthropological theme in a very innovative way.

The question of continuity is as old as anthropology which, as a discipline, has been historically skewed toward documenting the persistence of cultural items and the reproduction of social forms. I concur with Joel Robbins (2007) when he writes that anthropologists have been much more interested in tracking cultural continuities than radical ruptures. Although always apprehending the naturalness of change as a succession of slow modifications occurring *petit à petit* on the scale of *longue durée* (with a very Durkheimian stance), many anthropological traditions have indeed seen change as secondary to permanence.

Issues of persistence have been under particularly obsessive scrutiny in the field of religious studies, starting from Edward Tylor on 'survivals', moving to Pascal Boyer on 'counterintuitive beliefs' and passing by Melville Herskovits on 'acculturation'. Although he is interested in plasticity and change, Bloch's endeavor, at least since *From Blessing to Violence*, can be seen as a series of investigations to better understand why certain practices, mostly rituals, survive across hundreds or thousands of years. The last chapter of *From Blessing to Violence* is intended to lead us toward a theory of the slow transformation of ideology and to "cope with the historical problem," but it eventually ends up with the recognition of the stability of ritual, its "overall lack of change" over a time span of 170 years (Bloch 1986: 177, 165). I do not have the space here to expand on Bloch's fine-grained ethnography but, in a nutshell, he argues that—political and historical changes aside—Merina circumcision ritual is continually perpetuated. Whereas one finds here an incisive perspective on the conservative dimensions of ritual taken as orthopraxy (following Robertson Smith), Bloch goes further and manages to explain ritual stability sociologically. Such perpetuation, or in his terms "this ability not to change in changing politico-economic circumstances," is due to ritual's own internal machinery, which integrates singular events into a "timeless order" (ibid.: 185), and confers an emotional power and individual satisfaction. With a Marxist nod, he suggests that ritual perpetuates something of a dominance unchanged from the pre-colonial past, and expressed in authority roles taken over according to political needs and circumstances.

Undoubtedly, Maurice Bloch has prophetically pushed many contemporary anthropologists of religion toward investigations of persistence, as is the case with my own fieldwork in

Guinea-Conakry (Berliner 2005), which constitutes an example of the durability of religious ideas and status in the absence of ritual performances. Indeed, among the group of coastal rice-cultivators named the Bulongic, masculine initiation rituals vanished in the 1950s, but discourses and songs about elders' secrets and initiation spirits circulate to this day. In this context, beliefs, secrets, and status related to non-Islamic initiation rituals speak louder than ritual actions per se, a subtle mechanism of religious persistence that Bloch's *From Blessing to Violence* helped me to figure out. Not only did it draw my attention to a better understanding of the minimal conditions—that is, the simplest ingredients—necessary to render a ritual practice or a religious idea persistent but it also invited me to develop new perspectives on how and why people decide to stop performing rituals, or how and why some lose belief. In this regard, loss as an anthropological conundrum (and not as an ideology) seems to me as revealing as continuity in the study of religion, whether it is among the Bulongic where people are devout believers in initiation spirits despite the vanishing of ancient ritual actions or among American pastors described by Dennett and LaScola (2010) who have lost faith but continue to preach.

I perceive Bloch's cognitive turn, brought about under the influence of Chomski in the 1970s, to be a continuation of the same theoretical quest, a quest for explaining persistence now framed within the new theoretical apparatus offered by cognition studies (Bloch 1998, Bloch 2005). The pioneer of a perspective that has become a truism for many European anthropologists, Bloch has indeed played a crucial role in drawing our attention toward a fertile collaboration among cognitive scientists, evolutionary psychologists, and cultural anthropologists to build new theories about religion, transmission, and the mind; a fruitful interdisciplinary cooperation promising to enhance our knowledge of the cognitive foundations of cultural practices, yet avoiding the traps of cognitive-only forms of explanation (Berliner and Sarró 2007). Scholars such as Boyer or McCauley and Lawson carve out little or no space for people's lived experience of religion in scientific explanation, but Maurice Bloch has made a strong claim for taking into account phenomenological realities, although these are not always linguistic (Bloch 1998). Perhaps indicating his early interest in pragmatic theories of language, he deploys an approach to religion, which in some way is consistent with the experiences of its practitioners, his latest endeavor being to bridge the gap between the theories of mind produced by cognitive psychologists and those of the Zafimaniry people of Madagascar (Bloch 2006). In the same vein, Bloch has emphasized the crucial importance of notions of 'trust' and 'deference' in rituals, thought of as "orgies of conscious deference" (Bloch 2005: 136), in which participants allow themselves to depend on others (whether these others are indeterminate ancestors or ritual experts). Whereas rituals bring into play complex cognitive mechanisms, he asks how one can account for "the meaning of what is going on for participants" (ibid.: 123) and, in particular, for the fact that they 'seem right' to people, besides the banal observation that 'we do it because it is our tradition'. By so doing, his approach to ritual effectively integrates issues of authority, truth-making, and cognitive processes in the midst of human interactions.

Questions of this kind reveal the potential for anthropology inherent in Bloch's perspective. His plea for a delicate balance among the social, the phenomenological, and the cognitive, as well as between the discovery of cognitive mechanisms and the practice of meaning-oriented ethnographic fieldwork (and the way they can mutually enrich each other), has come as a relief for many of us who did not really see how contemporary cognitive studies of religion could effectively come to grips with the lived and interactive dimensions of religious experience. In his endeavor, Bloch has found a subtle equilibrium between naturalism and

hermeneutics, which opens new avenues for thinking through the social and cognitive underpinnings of what makes 'religion' vivid and persistent.

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