

JUST GROWED STORIES

A review of *What Kinship Is – And Is Not* by Marshall Sahlins. University of Chicago Press (2013), 120 pages. ISBN 978-0-226-92512-7

ROBERT KING*

University College Cork, Ireland

The study of kinship lies at the heart of anthropology. Anthropology is a human science. The titles and subtitles of Sahlins's latest book (*What Kinship Is – And Is Not*, henceforth WKIAIN) therefore make some very strong claims. If, as Sahlins states, kinship is all culture, and, furthermore – culture has nothing to do with biology – then the study of humanity is not the science of biology. Indeed, the attempt to see humans through biological lenses can only systematically mislead. If this were true then we are very curious creatures indeed: Organisms whose alleged essence – culture – has no connection to the rest of nature. Does Sahlins have the evidence to back such strong claims? He does not. Where does culture come from? According to Sahlins, from nowhere. Certainly not from biology. Presumably, it “just grewed”.

Topsy, the orphaned slave girl from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is asked about her origins. She replies, “I spect I grow'd. Don't think nobody never made me” (STOWE 1998). Cut off from family, origins, and any context poor Topsy “just grewed”. Her contrived lack of understanding is a key feature in her enslavement. Since Steven Jay Gould, a lot of innocent, and sometimes not-so-innocent, fun has been made of biological “just so stories”. However, “just so” stories can actually serve to guide and inform research. Some just so accounts deserve to be abandoned – and many have. But a “just grewed” story can offer no grounds for either acceptance or rejection. It is just meaningless.

Saying of a phenomenon, “It's culture” is a hand waving “just grewed” story that makes no predictions, offers no explanations, and, like Topsy is adrift. Where did this or that practice come from? It just grewed. Does the fact that all cultures use the vocabulary of folk biology – geneology and body – to delineate kinship suggest a biological grounding? (FISKE 1992) Not according to WKIAIN. These practices “just grewed”. Examples like, *band of brothers*, *Motherland*, *sisterhood*, *land of my fathers*, the *body politic* and other metaphors of family that enjoin and enshrine groupishness are apparently just accidental. In WKIAIN these things “just grewed”.

At times one wonders whether Sahlins wants his readers to follow him at all. Consider the following:

* Address for correspondence: DR. ROBERT KING, University College Cork, Ireland, e-mail: r.king@ucc.ie

In this connection one may well ask, with EDUARDO VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, whether the constructivist preoccupation with potation – since it singularly problematizes certain relations of consanguinity while assuming no such argument is necessary for the obviously “made” character of affinity – does not subtly perpetuate our own folkloric distinctions of “nature” and “law,” biogenetic substance” and “code for conduct? (CASTRO 2009, 11.)”

Now this is just rude. Sahlins is asking the reader to wade through a 58 word sentence, with four unexplained jargon terms, and a triple negative. I had to reread it a couple of times to find out what it was that I was not being enjoined to not reject (the possibility of). On the Flesch-Kincaid reading ease scale – typically scoring from 0–100 – this single sentence scores a whopping minus 27. This puts it on a par with the worst excesses of Judith Butlersque offences against the reader. In addition, the sentence makes repeated use of scare quotes. These are not used to actually do something so bourgeoisie as to quote, but instead to allow Sahlins to help himself to the mention of a term while not being so unsophisticated as to actually use said term.

The meaning of the sentence is banal – that group membership runs together blood ties with other ties. This is also true of bees and elephants, let alone humans, and is hardly news. The book is filled with similar attempts to dress banalities in sophisticated language.

Anthropology has always had a tendency to be in love with the exotic. However, some of those approvingly quoted in WKIAIN would seem to be strangers in just about any lands. There is an extended approving discussion of GOW (2000), who expresses dismay at ever being able to understand the strangeness of the Piro. A key term allegedly defeating translation is *wamonuwata*. This is what Gow has to say about it:

The term *wamonuwata* can be translated as ‘to grieve, to be sad, to be cute, to be cuddly’. This experiential state elicits, in others, *getwamonuta*, ‘to see the grief, sadness, suffering, cuteness, cuddliness of another.’ The diverse range of states designated by *wamonuwata* have, at least to this English-speaker, little in common. (GOW 2000, 47.)

If that English speaker – Gow – is being serious then it’s no wonder some anthropologists find the world to be a strange and baffling place, devoid of rules and patterns, and requiring magical explanation. To *this* English speaker *wamonuwata* suggests someone who needs an arm round their shoulders. This seemed startlingly obvious to me and every other person I showed the passage to. As I read the description I am pretty sure I got a brief burst of *getwamonuta* – or compassion – as well. This compassion was directed towards the anthropologist who wrote the piece. I just hope they all don’t feel such a sense of generalised alienation from humanity.

In humans, kin altruism is an evolutionarily stable strategy and HAMILTON’S (1964) rule predicts the kinds of altruism that can evolve. Given that, in humans, strangers share over 99% of your genes, these would increase their representation in the next generation by pushing you to help anyone. Alas, natural selection did not know this and provided humans – and others – with a host of proximate rules such

as “don’t mate with those you grew up with” or “help those that look like you” instead. Genes do not seem to be generally able to produce organisms that recognise copies of themselves – although they could in principle (DAWKINS 1979). Kin recognition systems do not have to be of close kin at all and documenting the various ways in which these occur could have been taken to be one of the interesting goals of anthropological comparisons – as evidenced in say HEINRICH, BOYD and RICHERSON (2012). However, this is not what we are offered in WKIAIN.

Kin selection is a deceptively simple concept. Sahlins first revealed that he did not understand it in 1977 and he has evidently not used the intervening years to rectify this. Animals need not be able to calculate relatedness coefficients to produce altruistic behaviour. There is not a gene for altruism, indeed FISHER (1999) once speculated that maybe as many as half of our genes were altruistic – in that they underlay behaviours that could benefit others. Altruism is about effects, not about motives and what WKIAIN describes is the cultural gloss on the expression of such motives and then cuts such description loose from any moorings which might predict or explain patterns.

If these expressions had been linked to local ecologies in a systematic way, then this would have been an interesting work. For example, there is some evidence that males in high mortality environments tend to amortise risk by partible paternity beliefs. Is this systematic? Does it respond to local ecologies in patterned ways? These are interesting questions that would marry the study of culture and biology in ways that were mutually illuminating. What we have in WKIAIN is, instead, unnecessarily divisive and unhelpful.

REFERENCES

- VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, E. (2009): The gift and the given: three nano-essays on kinship and magic. *Kinship and Beyond: Sequence, Transmission, and Essence in Ethnography and Social Theory*, Oxford, Berghahn Books. (Cited in Sahlins, 2013)
- DAWKINS, R. (1979): Twelve misunderstandings of kin selection. *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie*, 51(2), 184–200.
- FISKE, A. P. (1992): The four elementary forms of sociality: framework for a unified theory of social relations. *Psychological Review*, 99(4), 689.
- FISHER, R. A. (1999): *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection: A Complete Variorum Edition*. OUP Oxford.
- GOW, P. G. (2000): *Helpless: The Affective Preconditions of Piro Social Life* (pp. 46–63). Routledge.
- HAMILTON, W. D. (1964): The genetical evolution of social behaviour. I. *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 7(1), 1–16.
- HENRICH, J., BOYD, R. and RICHERSON, P. J. (2012): The puzzle of monogamous marriage. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B-Biological Sciences*, 367, 657–669. doi:10.1098/rstb.2011.0290
- SAHLINS, M. (1977): *The Use and Abuse of Biology; an Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology*. London.
- SAHLINS, M. (2013): *What Kinship is – and is Not*. University of Chicago Press.
- STOWE, H. B. (1998): *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Oxford Paperbacks.