



Maurice Bloch, Maarja Kaaristo

The reluctant anthropologist

An interview with Maurice Bloch

"It may well be that anthropology departments disappear, and that wouldn't bother me very much". "Anti-anthropologist" Maurice Bloch talks in interview about the abuse of anthropological expertise by developmental ecologists; about the contradictions of "collective memory"; and about whether anthropology can address life's "big questions".

Maarja Kaaristo: You are French but were educated in England, at the London School of Economics and at Cambridge University. How did you end up in United Kingdom and when and how did you become interested in anthropology?

Maurice Bloch: I moved to England when I was 11 because my father was killed in the war and my mother remarried an Englishman. How did I come to anthropology? There are number of factors. I was very idealistically involved and I identified very much with the anti-colonial struggle that was taking place at that time in Algeria, Indo-China, and so on. I developed a huge admiration for these peoples in the world. We knew so much about Europe and European civilization; on the other hand, we had no appreciation for the rest of mankind. So I was looking for a discipline that was turned to the other parts of the world to understand these peoples. I originally did history and then moved on to anthropology.

I was also deeply interested in colonial peoples who were fighting against the colonial government at the time. My uncle was in the French army and he had a batman, a military servant, who was Vietnamese and who looked after me a lot. At one point he disappeared and I was told that he had joined the Vietminh to fight against the French. So I identified with him. It was very difficult, because my cousin was in the French army. But that meant a lot to me. And I admired Gandhi and Nehru. Those were the general factors. And then I heard on the radio a lecture given by Max Gluckman that I was very interested in. A number of things led me to anthropology.

MK: So you share both a French and a British anthropological background. What would you say were or are the main differences between the two schools (French and British) and how have you managed to combine them in your work?

MB: I think it's very difficult to answer that in general. Anthropology has never stopped changing. One factor is that French anthropology grew out of two quite different tendencies. One was ethnological, folklore- and museums-focused, and that persisted. To a certain extent, it still does. Another strong influence in France, and I'm talking about before the war, was the so-called Sociology School, founded by Durkheim. Durkheim moved more

and more towards anthropology, especially his later work, and towards and the works of Mauss. The war was a radical break. Afterwards, the Sociology School more or less died out, partly because of the competition with Marxist models. But the main reason was the return from the United States of Lévi–Strauss, who started a kind of American–British influenced anthropology that had nothing to do with either of the earlier schools. That remained the main influence in France until the 1960s.

In England the situation was very different. Anthropology, which had focused very much on what was later called the Third World, became more and more like sociology and turned to the French Sociology School. So ironically, British anthropology to certain extent continued on from Durkheim and Mauss, while in France their approach was no longer prominent. That was the environment in which I began to do anthropology as a student in England and therefore what I got to know was basically the British school. Already then, the British school contained two elements. One was the tradition that is now called structural functionalism, a very interesting and I think undervalued tradition. The other one was a kind of methodological individualism. There was kind of conflict and combination of two that influenced me as a student.

But I was still quite interested in history. I soon became influenced by new French theories, Marxist theories. The history of Marxist theories in France is complicated because for a long time Marxism was very closely linked with the French Communist Party and had become completely sterile and dead. As a result, the academic world had turned away from Marxism. In the 1960s, a revival of anti–Soviet Marxism took place, and I mean quite definitely an anti–Soviet Marxism. Its proponents went back to the works of Marx, which ironically enough were not available in the Soviet Union at that time. And that influenced me to a certain extent. So I combined all those things. Because of my French background I was still very close to France. I knew what was going on there, I was partly influenced by Lévi–Strauss and structuralism and partly by this new French Marxism. But still to a certain extent by structural functionalism in England and by methodological individualism too. So I mixed them all to make the pudding that is my position.

MK: At the beginning of your academic career you were a strong proponent of the Marxist approach in anthropology. Later your interests changed and your topics moved from power, ideology, and politics to the relations between language, ritual, memory, and culture. Do you still consider yourself a Marxist?

MB: First of all, I think there has been much less of a change in my work than many people think. My interest in cognition and language and so on goes back to very early on, to the 1970s. I have always been very interested in theoretical linguistics. I was invited, when I was very young, 30 or so, to teach for year at Berkeley. There I met a linguist and some philosophers linked with linguistics, most interesting people, and that renewed my interest in language and led me directly to cognition. How is that linked with some of these Marxist influences? I began to develop a theory, which I think still guides me now, and which is first of all critique of traditional cultural anthropology; it considers that a lot of cultural anthropology, what anthropologists themselves consider anthropology, is about second–order phenomena.

Anthropologists don't usually talk about the basis of their knowledge because they take it for granted. What they do talk about, and what they tend to use in their representation of the knowledge of the people they study, is a kind of

second level that assumes an earlier level. To a certain extent, I tried to see the second level in terms of Marxist notion of ideology. Similarly, I was interested in how it is that people are not fully taken in by their ideologies, how it is that resistance to ideology is possible. More and more, I began to stress that the basis of our knowledge, the knowledge that we use to making inferences, is based much less on culture than anthropology tends to believe. So many anthropologists began to think of me as an anti-anthropologist.

I am trying to demote culture as a basis for knowledge. I am interested how non-second degree knowledge, non-ideological knowledge, gets formed. A bit like Bourdieu, though unlike Bourdieu I feel that we need to look very deeply into what the sources of knowledge are. Bourdieu talks about "habitus". That seems vague to me. "Habitus" is basically how practice gets into you. One then needs to study how that happens and what that means. It seems to me that Bourdieu's point is right, but that it's a very lazy point. One actually needs to turn to psychology of learning, to understanding how knowledge is stored, how it is formed, rather than just saying that it is a "habitus". Bourdieu points in the right direction without really wanting to go very far.

That's how I became increasingly interested in cognitive psychology. At that point, something important happened. A semantic revolution took place in linguistics, linked with the name of Noam Chomsky. What Chomsky was demonstrating was that the ability to use language was based not on what we've learned, but what we human beings, as a particular species, have developed through natural selection. That is, the ability to use language. In other words, our knowledge is formed not through culture, as anthropologists tend to think, but in terms of the kind of beings we are. In my later work I became interested in child psychology, by the fact that very young children, less than twelve months old, already have understandings of time and space and so on.

MK: What do you think about applied anthropology? Should the anthropologist remain in academia or should they get involved in "real life"? In an interview in 1988 with Gustaaf Houtman in *Anthropology Today* you said that: "I am put off by the international 'development experts' who fill the European bars of Madagascar and the first class seats on airlines as they sterilely swirl about the globe. They are a new form of the old colonial society, a new form of parasitism on the poor". Do you think anything has changed since then or is the applied anthropologist still more or less a tourist or a colonial official?

MB: My view hasn't changed. What has happened is that development people, for example those involved in Madagascar in nature conservation, basically try to control these countries and take them over in terms of their ideology. And they fail in development. What most of the Malagassy people understand by "development" is "getting richer". Development people fail because they know very little about the place in which they work. They are usually ignorant. I'm often struck by the fact that you get development experts trying to teach people things that they already know perfectly well and which they've tried themselves and have seen haven't worked. They greatly underestimate people in Madagascar. These experts know nothing about the country and therefore don't understand what the problems are. One could say that they need an anthropologist who could tell them about those people, so that they could work hand in hand.

But the problem is that what anthropologists usually have to say is terribly complicated. They say that these people have already thought of everything you could think of. And of course, development experts don't want to hear that, because they would lose their jobs if they took it to heart. And so honest anthropologists who work in areas that they know well find it terribly difficult to get on with development experts. Because of this, something very ironic happens. And I've seen that very often in Madagascar. When you get big development projects, the experts say that they want to work with an anthropologist because they need to understand the local people. But then they avoid those anthropologists who know about Madagascar, because if they really did bring in those anthropologists, they would tell them things that were too complicated. The development experts just want to get on with it.

I think they really want anthropologists to tell them that the reason their policies are not working is because the local people have bizarre and exotic superstitions. You as anthropologists will be able to tell us that, they think, and therefore you the anthropologists will give us good excuses for the fact that nearly all development projects fail. But anthropologists who know the place are very unlikely to say such a thing. What they do then, for example, is get in an expert on Borneo for three weeks. If you are working in Madagascar, that's obviously ridiculous.

To that I would add one thing that I think is very important. That is that in Madagascar, the development experts are being replaced by conservationists who wield tremendous power. They are largely motivated by some general kind of ideologies about ecology in the world, about preserving forests or some species, which is obviously a good idea. But what they really want is to have large reserves in places like Madagascar. They want to turn the whole country into a national park. Countries like Madagascar are hugely indebted. And European and North-American countries perform a kind of blackmail, which they call "swapping debt for nature". If you'll have natural parks then we'll drop the debt. And of course, the Malagassy government can't resist. The Malagassy elite are quite happy to have as many natural parks as the wealthy countries like, because the parks bring experts and the experts bring their money. But for the local people, it means that their land is just being taken away. They are not allowed to cultivate their land anymore. And they say, quite rightly, "the land has gone to the Americans". Villagers see their field on the other side of the fence; if they go to their field they will be fined or imprisoned, while they see American or European natural scientists wandering around on it. It's a terrible situation.

Those anthropologists who work there have denounced very strongly what is going on in ecology. But they find that because of the power and self-righteousness of the ecological discourse, it is difficult to get heard.

MK: You have recently worked on how to relate the findings of cognitive psychology to those of anthropology. In 1992, you gave the Edward Westermarck memorial lecture on "Internal and external memory" in Helsinki, where you criticized the way psychologists approach the more social aspects of memory. You said that "the problem with psychologists' approach to memory in the real world comes from their failure to grasp the full complexity of the engagement of the mind in culture and history and in particular their failure to understand that culture and history are not just something created by people but that they are, to a certain extent, that which creates persons." On the other hand, in your recent lecture "How culture squeezes in between social memory and autobiographical memory", you criticised anthropologists for pretty much

the same thing — namely a reluctance to take into account the work of psychologists (for example on different types of memory, neurologically speaking). Is it your intention to show that psychologists and anthropologists do not bother to take into account the other disciplines?

MB: Absolutely. You put it very well. I've slightly changed my mind since the Edward Westermarck lecture, which was a long time ago. But I still think that the basic point is right. What I was talking about back then was how different kinds of cultural systems, or let's say ideological systems, create acceptable public representations of what people are like. That's how I would rephrase what I was talking about. One very sharp difference is in how people imagine history, themselves, or their ancestors in history. People in Yemen imagine their ancestors and indeed themselves in the flow of history in a quite different way to Europeans. It seems to me that anthropologists should take this into account. Because — and this is a key word — "recollection" occurs in public discourses, when people speak and act in public. What I was trying to say is that we should not make a mistake of mistaking "recollection" for memory. It seems to me that remembering things as a psychological process, which the word "memory" means primarily, is quite different from the public and social act of recalling. And there might be very little connection between the two.

For example, public commemoration need have nothing to do with memory as a psychological process. It's easy to say that the commemoration of the Battle of the Boyne has something to do with memory. But nobody would say that play-acting battles has anything to do with individual memory. Memory is about how past is inscribed in us, in our brains. It is affected by social and cultural factors in both direct and indirect ways. And before it can reach the stage of public recollection, what is normally referred to as social or collective memory, all kinds of barriers have to be crossed. The first is that an extraordinary act of transformation has to take place. Memory is not stored in our brains with language. Then, for recalling to occur, there has to be suitable social context. One can't just talk about one's past without there being a proper context for it. Finally, recollection has to use a language or set of actions appropriate to the social context.

There's a tremendous distance between remembering and recalling. Let's take the issue of commemoration for example. I would say that most of the time there is no connection between commemoration and inscribing the past in one's brain. But in some cases there probably is and these are very interesting moments. Moments when the participants in commemoration begin to experience the past in the way that is psychologically similar to their own experience, their inscribed memory. That's something worth studying. But those are exceptional moments and do not straightforwardly imply that commemorations have anything to do with memory.

MK: This brings us back to the main topic of Tallinn Summer School — "How collectivities remember". You said in your lecture that in you do not believe in the concept of "collective memory", at least not in the Halbwachsian sense. At the same time, the term "collective memory" is real enough for lots of researchers. So how *do* collectivities remember?

MB: I am very interested in the connection between the psychological process of inscribing one's individual past and public manifestations or verifications of "the past". That is the interesting question. But if you use the word "remember" for both, it makes it seem that the connection between the two is perfectly straightforward. By denying the public implications of memory, it seems to be

that one can ask much better how there can be a connection between the two levels, without assuming that there is one — because I'd say that most of the time there isn't. That's the first point.

The second point is that when you say that collectivities remember, you are speaking metaphorically. Given the normal meaning of the word "remember", that would require the brain and the neural system. Therefore, collectivities literally cannot remember. That doesn't mean that the metaphor isn't useful or thought provoking. But, like all metaphors, it becomes harmful when we forget that it's a metaphor. When we say that we can study how collectivities remember, while knowing that they can't, is to be contradictory.

MK: In your lecture at the London School of Economics in 2005, entitled "Where did anthropology go?", you said that at the present moment, the state of anthropology could be described as "fragmentation in every direction", that anthropologists refuse to even try to answer general questions about general problems such as is there or is there not a universal human nature. You went on to say that grand theories like evolution or functionalism at least tried to give an answer to general questions, and so non-anthropologists such as Richard Dawkins started to write popular books on issues that the social scientists themselves should have been dealing with. Of course they couldn't have, because in 1980s, with the so-called crisis of representation (Clifford, Marcus, etc.), anthropology began to study itself very intensively and the focus turned even further away from general questions. How do you relate to the crisis of representation? Will these general theories ever return to the anthropological theory or will the discipline remain more or less fragmented?

MB: First, I would like to distinguish between two senses of the word "anthropology". It can refer to institutions inside universities, which are called "anthropology departments". Anthropology departments teach and are coherent insofar as they have a tradition. That's one sense of anthropology — as institution. It's very possible that anthropology departments will disappear, there's no reason why they should continue existing. They only exist insofar as they're useful in terms of teaching and developing a tradition. It may well be that they just disappear; it wouldn't bother me very much. That's why I'm not very interested in the crisis of representation, because I'm not that interested in anthropology as an institutional system.

On the other hand the general questions of anthropology, which exist irrespective of anthropology departments. In fact, I would consider that all human beings are anthropologists: all are concerned with the general theoretical questions about the nature of human beings, about explanations of diversity and similarity. Of course I'm not worried about the continuation of this form of anthropology, it seems to me impossible that it could ever disappear. But a few things could be said about it. First of all, the social sciences, and not only social sciences but all human sciences, have developed certain types of explanations that spontaneously re-occur when people try to ask anthropological questions. Functionalism is a perfect example. People love functionalist explanations so it's very useful to understand what's wrong with them.

One could say, all right, let anthropology departments die, let them spend their time considering themselves to be the most fascinating phenomenon in the universe, and let them get on with fewer and fewer students. Then we could just forget about anthropology and start again. Yet if we did that it would just be repeating the mistakes of the past. To lose the knowledge, both theoretical

and empirical, which has been accumulated — and I fear that is what's happening — because anthropologists have not been addressing those questions that are burning questions for human beings. Other people have done it and have not made use of what anthropologists have learned.

Having said this, there's another thing that has to be said, and that is that when professional anthropologists join the anthropological debate, which they rarely do, it may well be that their role is one of caution. Because we have learned that easy answers don't work. So we anthropologists will always have a negative role and I think that's right. But I think we should engage with the general questions that people are ask, rather than spending our time navel gazing.

MK: And my last question concerns your plans for the future? What subjects are you planning to investigate?

MB: Well, I'm very old, I should be shutting up, but I can't stop myself getting interested in questions. I'm very interested in, let's say, the frontiers of consciousness. I was talking to you earlier about two levels that have been muddled: the level of knowledge we use for making inferences and the kind of knowledge that we declare, that we can formulate in public. But I'm very interested in crossing that boundary. I'll give a non-anthropological example, which has to do with grammar. Since Chomsky, one of the things we're sure about is that most speakers are unaware of the grammar that they use, and therefore how it works below the level of consciousness. And the way they talk about how grammar works is really rather remote from the grammar they actually operate with. But there are moments of crossings and those are the ones that interest me a lot. The moments of crossing in terms of the language are, for example when someone makes a grammar mistake. We're suddenly aware not just that we made a mistake, but of the existence of the grammar that we use. That's what I'd like to look into more.

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