

# INTERVIEW WITH MAURICE BLOCH

Professor Maurice Bloch visited Finland in March 2014 as the keynote speaker of the interdisciplinary symposium ‘Ritual Intimacy—Ritual Publicity’ organized by the Collegium for Advanced Studies at the University of Helsinki. As one of the most influential thinkers in contemporary anthropology Professor Bloch has made significant contributions to various research fields such as kinship studies and economic anthropology, but he is probably best known for his groundbreaking work on ritual and religion. In his writings Professor Bloch often draws on his ethnography from Madagascar, where he has carried out fieldwork over a period of several decades. Lately he has also become renowned for developing an approach that seeks to find a common ground between sociocultural anthropology and cognitive science.

Professor Bloch has visited Finland before; he is, for example, among the scholars who have delivered the Edward Westermarck Memorial Lecture (Internal and External Memory: Different Ways of Being in History, 1992). In connection to his most recent visit he granted an interview to *Suomen Antropologi*, in which he discusses some of the central points of his ritual theory and shares his views on past, present and future directions in the study of ritual. The interview was conducted via e-mail in August 2014. In his answers Professor Bloch has kindly provided references to his previous published works where the issues raised in the interview are discussed in greater length and detail.

Timo Kallinen (TK): You have contributed to different fields of anthropology, but the study of ritual seems to have been there ever since the early stages of your career. How did you become originally interested in ritual?

Maurice Bloch (MB): My interest in ritual has been a key concern for a very long part of my career but this has been because I have been able to link it to other central aspects of human life. My main interest has been with the apparent authority of ritual and the nature of this apparent authority. I outlined my position in one of my earliest papers (Bloch 1974). I want to explore how ritual is linked to ideology, that is, to systems which seem to justify and maintain social hierarchy and social continuity (Bloch 1986). The connection of authority to power and inequality is indirect. While authority and hierarchy is experienced as having a permanence that goes without saying, and it has indeed an amazing capacity for survival in changing times, power is experienced as, and is in fact, volatile and much more insecure. The time-denying character of authority and hierarchy seems to need explanation. In order to understand it I have, first of all, looked at the semantics of ritual and at what Rappaport called its ‘obvious aspects’: such manifestations as singing, dancing and formalised language. More recently I have focused on what certain philosophers have called deference; that is, acting or speaking in certain ways for reasons which one does not explain in terms of personal

volition, intention or understanding but in terms of implicit or explicit trust in others who one 'follows' (Bloch 2004). This deference is the central characteristic of the phenomenon that can be indicated by the English word ritual but, by a long way, its occurrence goes way beyond ritual. Asking people the meaning of ritual is thus a misleading question because rituals are not, by definition, created or chosen to be done in the way they are done because of the choice or the understanding of those who perform ritual.

Deference also explains the technical aspects of ritual; the use of material symbols, music, archaic language and above all the difficulty that participants have of satisfactorily explaining why they do what they do and the meaning of acts and symbols. Most importantly the element of deference in ritual illuminates the attraction of rituals and their capacity to continue historically when everything else seems to be changing or even collapsing.

This is because deference, as a general characteristic of the relation of knowledge to action implies doing things in specific ways for reasons which are not one's own but are those of others and who one does not pretend to understand. In the end successful rituals are done in particular ways because one implicitly trusts those who have previously done things in this way. One trusts that they had good reasons for doing so even if they do not understand those reasons. This trust usually implies an infinite regress. Acting on the basis of trust and not on the basis of understanding is an essential aspect of living in a human society. Most of the time we don't explain to either ourselves or others what we do, because we don't have the time as we get on with our life. This is as it should be and it is something modernist education fails to acknowledge. Without a degree of deference in this sense life would involve terrifying uncertain

and anxiety. Ritual is a kind of orgy of ordinary deference and of the submission of individual motivation; it thus becomes a shared celebration of our day to day dependence on deference and our reliance on the knowledge of trusted others. This is the source of the attractiveness of ritual but of course its reactionary implications and its rejection of thinking for oneself is obvious and often undesirable. The discussion of ritual as deference thus brings us to much more general reflection on the nature of society and the character of shared human knowledge.

TK: During the time when you started developing your own ideas some very important books on ritual by prominent anthropologists of the previous generation were published, for example, Douglas' *Purity and Danger* and Turner's *The Ritual Process*. What was your opinion at the time on the direction of the study of ritual in British anthropology?

MB: My feeling about *The Ritual Process* is that it did not move us very much forward. Turner was a superb ethnographer and one of the first British social anthropologists to pay careful attention to the details of rituals. His work on colour symbolism is most thought provoking. However, the notion of anti-structure, for which the book is principally remembered, was borrowed from Gluckman and the twist he gave it by talking of *communitas* seems to me banal and vague. The emphasis on the fact that ritual is a process had been already well established in the work of early anthropologists such as Bachofen and, of course, van Gennep had made much of it. Turner was important in the history of British social anthropology. He contributed somewhat in moving the subject away from the boring, exclusively sociological, turn which it had taken at the time of his writing.

On the other hand *Purity and Danger*, like so many of the contributions of Mary Douglas, is a work of maverick genius. I remember as a student the feeling of liberation in reading the book because here, at last, was a British anthropologist who was asking general questions about what human beings are like and how the historically and culturally specific meshes with the capacities of our mind. This is the basis of her reflection. Mary Douglas was a real anthropologist with a genuinely naturalist approach (Bloch 2012). I don't know if I really believe the explanations she gives for the centrality of notions of purity and pollution in human life but I am sure that the questions she raises about this centrality are of the greatest importance and that we should continue to search for answers to them. I have never stopped thinking about what she focuses on ever since reading the book. Doing what she does in that book is what anthropology should do and does best. No other discipline approaches these general fundamental questions together with the comparative knowledge of other cultures that has characterised our discipline. When reading Mary Douglas one encounters a great, if perhaps undisciplined, anthropological mind.

In fact, however, neither Turner nor Douglas have had much influence on my own work on ritual and that is in spite of my admiration for the contributions of the latter. Much more important for me has been the influence of the work of Leach on ritual to be found in a few scattered papers by him and in *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. This is because Leach resolutely sees anthropology as a science which seeks to understand human beings in general, in the end as a species among other natural species and he does this while avoiding the reductionist traps that others with similar ambition fell into and that we have

become familiar with in, for example, some of the work of such as Malinowski.

TK: Your early work on ritual was marked by interest in the philosophy of language and structural Marxism. How was it received initially?

MB: These dual influences puzzled most of my British colleagues when they first became evident in my work.

In the 1960s and 1970s, unlike the anthropologists trained in the four fields, British social anthropologists knew no linguistics and therefore were quite indifferent to the revolution brought about by the early writings of Chomsky that was happening in American linguistics. For the same reason they were also ignorant of the work of linguistically inclined philosophers such as Searle and others whom I was lucky to hear when I spent a year in the early 1970s in Berkeley. The linguistic influences on Levi-Strauss were dismissed as pretentious nonsense. In Britain the one exception to this general ignorance was Leach who warily flirted with Levi-Straussian ideas and who realised that something important called generative grammar was stirring. It was only later that one or two other British trained anthropologists, especially Tambiah and subsequently Humphrey, all like me influenced by Leach, moved in this direction. Outside Britain my use of linguistics and linguistically influenced philosophy seemed less strange and both Rappaport in the USA and Sperber in France were moving along similar lines.

The Marxist influence also seemed bizarre to many of my colleagues in Britain in the nineteen seventies and eighties. Most were opposed to any form of Marxism for political

reasons but those who were not were only familiar with forms of Marxism, such as those of Gluckman and Worsley in Britain, or of Leslie White or Wolf in the USA, that were very different to the Althusserian tendency which influenced me and which came from France. To my colleagues this new type of Marxism seemed odd and somewhat pretentious. In any case, even the more Althusserian French Marxists also had almost nothing to say about ritual. My putting the study of ritual together with Althusserian Marxism was considered idiosyncratic by Marxists and non-Marxists alike. However, by the time my work was published, some of the more traditional Marxists, such as Eric Wolf, came to understand well the point of what I was up to. This was also true of such Althusserian anthropologists as Emmanuel Terray whose work had a great influence on me, as I hope is evident in the book *From Blessing to Violence*.

TK: In *From Blessing to Violence* you offered a critical discussion on Marxist ideas about ritual and ideology. Marx has remained important in anthropology, but these days mostly in research topics that are regarded as economic or political. What would you say is the most lasting contribution of Marx's thought to the study of ritual?

MB: To answer this question I need to go back to the first question you asked. In many ways the work of Marx and of many Marxists is less about explaining why revolutions happen than why they don't happen. The exploitative character of capitalism and other systems is so obvious that it is difficult to understand why people put up with them or why these systems have the capacity to last so long. Ritual seems to me a part of the explanation though not ritual by itself. Ritual is one of the most important mechanisms for creating what I have called

the transcendental social (Bloch 2008). This is the system of roles and groups which normally we assume to have a straight forward empirical existence but which, in the end, exist fully only in shared imagination. One of the reasons why roles and what the structural-functionalist called corporate groups can only fully exist in the imagination is because they apparently seem to transcend time and thus negate the inevitable fluid changeability of our existence and that of all living things. Thus groups of people such as a clan, which are apparently composed of mortal human beings, can say things like 'We came to this land three hundred years ago'. People who have been made husband and wife by a ritual remain husband and wife irrespective of the fact that they hate each other, have no sexual relation and meet only rarely, if at all. Furthermore these roles and groups are felt to form a coherent system, even though this coherence is an illusion. As a result, what is perceived as a threat to this 'system' comes to be seen as a threat to everything which makes us decent human beings, thus the image of the collapse of the system is terrifying in ways which go quite beyond individual explanation. Ritual is a major factor in creating the subjective reality of the transcendental imaginary system and suggesting the terrible implications of its collapse. Thus in many rituals, such as was the case for the annual rituals of the Merina state (Bloch 1992), the terrifying possibility of the opposite of order is acted out. As discussed above, ritual removes the possibility of its explanation in terms of individually based knowledge. Ritual in many ways denies the relevance of time as it is part and parcel of the creation of the transcendental in imagination and thus ritual and the transcendental have probably co-evolved.

The significance of the transcendental social in imagination is immense. I believe it explains why humans can create societies that

are infinitely larger in size and complexity than those we find among other primates. The development of the capacity for the transcendental is therefore a major step in human evolution. However, the transcendental is at the same time an incredibly powerful conservative force if only because fundamental challenges to it are so mind-boggling. It is by inserting itself as a constituent part of the pseudo-coherent transcendental that oppressive systems legitimate themselves ideologically and this makes them strangely and extraordinarily powerful. Ritual is indissoluble from the transcendental and therefore it becomes a key element in explaining Marx's problem concerning the power of exploitation and why it is so willingly accepted.

TK: Recently you have critically re-examined the concept of religion. There are other anthropologists who have also discussed the problems related to the concept, but I think your approach is original. It differs significantly from, for instance, the sort of genealogical approach adopted by Talal Asad. What originally drew your attention to this question?

MB: Like Talal Asad I agree that what the English word can denote is a highly historically specific phenomenon and tracing the history of what brought it about is a useful enterprise. Personally I would give a somewhat different history to the one proposed by Asad. I agree with him that tracing this history is a useful critique of much contemporary discussions of religion. However, my purpose is quite different to that of Asad because I am engaged in a quite different type of anthropology to him. Asad is mainly criticising the vocabulary that anthropologists and the general public use by showing the historical specificity of what lies

behind that vocabulary. He does this very well and his is an important contribution. I, on the other hand, want to anchor my work ultimately in what is a naturalist understanding of human beings and evolution. I find such anchoring in the work of Marx, Douglas, Leach, Levi-Strauss and many others and this is why I find what they are up to so exiting. They, in the end, and like me, want to understand Homo Sapiens. I do not see how the work of Turner or Asad relates to that general concern of anthropology and that is why I find the work of such authors so much less stimulating. The names I have just mentioned for both types of anthropology are only some of those who could have been included and it may be that I have exaggerated the difference but I believe it is nevertheless fundamental.

My argument about religion overlaps with that of Asad but in the end I want to shift the focus away from religion to a much more fundamental discussion. That is a discussion about the transcendental in general out of which 'religion' developed in a few places and for a very short time in human history. Religion is not for me a characteristic of our species but the transcendental is.

TK: Not long ago I heard about a traditional Ghanaian name-giving ceremony physically arranged here in Finland, but led by elders in Ghana via Skype. Stories like that make one think about the relationship between ritual and technology. At the Helsinki symposium, some of the papers also discussed rituals in the context of the Internet, mass media and overseas migration. Do you think that the development of communication technology is bringing about profound changes in peoples' ritual life or is it more a question of adopting new instruments for old purposes?

MB: Obviously modern communication technology is an important aspect of the ethnography of some contemporary rituals but I do not think it has very fundamental implications. What I value in the kind of anthropology I like is that it takes the long view; an anchoring in a view of what is important for Homo Sapiens for all its 150,000 years of history. This anchoring may not be explicit in all my work but it is there, bearing this long view in mind puts things in perspective. Thus, by all means let us look at modern communication technology but then let us put it within general anthropological theory. Let us not stop at ethnography. I regret that much of the interest of members of the profession allows itself to stop at what happens to be in focus in the popular medias of the moment.

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