

Book Reviews

EXPLAINING HUMAN ORIGINS: MYTH, IMAGINATION, AND CONJECTURE. By Wiktor Stoczkowski. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2002. 234 pp. ISBN 0-521-65730-X. \$23.00 (paper).

As human beings, we like to tell stories—we are story-telling apes. As scientists, however, we tend not to see ourselves as telling stories for, we are led to believe, stories are mere fiction. Yet when faced with answering the question of why or how we became story-telling apes, we are often presented with a series of hypotheses with little empirical evidence to distinguish between them. In many ways, Wiktor Stoczkowski claims that it is because we are story-telling apes, and that because stories often represent cultural accretions, we are having so little success in generating a conclusive narrative about hominization.

Stoczkowski, an archaeologist with l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, offers an examination of the narratives anthropologists have generated to explain the development of human traits such as bipedalism, tool use, and increased brain size. In so doing, he surveys 24 accounts stretching from 1820–1986, and analyzes them using the logicist methodology of Jean-Claude Gardin. Many of the accounts will be familiar to readers of this Journal (e.g., those of Lamarck, Darwin, Coon, Oakley, Washburn, Ardrey, Jolly, Wolpoff, Tanner and Zihlman, Isaac, Lovejoy, and Lumsden and Wilson), while others will be less well-known. In each case, Stoczkowski frames the account as a series of “if-then” statements and demonstrates the similarities between accounts. Throughout it becomes obvious that investigators have remained constrained in the types and forms of explanatory narratives they have offered.

We are offered five reasons why these similarities occur and are accepted over long periods of time (p. 53). Firstly, the ideas are confirmed by empirical data. Secondly, they are the only options “thinkable, since no alternative conception can be envisaged that might challenge them.” Thirdly, they are the only ones that align with the “conceptual constraints” of evolutionary theory. Fourthly, they confirm to an author’s ideology. Fifthly, they “enjoy the status of common-sense ideas which gives them credibility irrespective of the four preceding criteria.” Throughout the book, Stoczkowski provides evidence for the fifth criterion: similar explanations occur because they are rooted in Western thought well before the development of anthropology or, for that matter, science as we now know it. In fact, he suggests that (more often than not) there are remarkably few empirical data to support the hypoth-

eses. As such, Stoczkowski highlights the presence of a form of intellectual inertia within the anthropological community.

Stoczkowski’s thesis would appear to offer comfort for those relativists who, following the rise of “science studies” in the 1970s, argued that scientific theories offer nothing but culturally determined narratives that encompass (unspoken) sociopolitical biases. This is not the case. The author is clear that he does not intend to criticize anthropology, merely to make its practitioners aware of tendencies within the human mind. As he notes (p. 172), “how do we distinguish, among the hypotheses commonly held to be true, between those that maintain a real link with their referential reality and those that belong entirely to the realm of ideas?” Simply put, we need more hard evidence. Scientific hypotheses are, *by their very nature*, imaginative—to act otherwise is to posit an image of the scientist as automaton. Yet these scientific (imaginative) hypotheses are testable against empirical evidence. Unfortunately, the evidence with which one can currently test the various hominization scenarios is notably scant. Rather than undermining the anthropological enterprise, Stoczkowski merely claims that we should be aware of how we restrict our hypothesis formation, while simultaneously acknowledging the paucity of our data.

Stoczkowski’s book is interesting and thought-provoking, though often difficult to follow. Written very much in the style of European thought, the average reader of this Journal is likely to become frustrated with the breadth of his argument, touching as it does Enlightenment social philosophy and postmodern literary theory (fields that receive little attention in most physical anthropological graduate programs), and indeed there is little physical anthropology discussed. The discussion moves smoothly from Greek myth to Levi-Strauss, stopping off at Cicero, Rousseau, Condorcet, Voltaire, Engels, Kant, and Flaubert. Its breadth will humble even the most educated reader. However, this remains an important work for the working anthropologist, if only because it makes us aware (qua scientists) of the intellectual baggage we bring to our studies. As such, the work is particularly recommended for graduate seminars which discuss the nature of anthropological hypothesis formation.

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