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THE NEW CHALLENGE OF OLD THINGS

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Nicu Gavriluță, *Antropologie socială și culturală* (Social and Cultural Anthropology), Iași: Polirom, 2009 (282 p.)

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At a first sight, the subject of general anthropology is not a new one. The human being was once and has remained until today the same *zoon politikon* endowed with blood, yellow gall and black gall that determines his behavior and his temporary humor (according to Hippocrates). A book simply entitled *Social and Cultural Anthropology*, in the way it is presented, is original through its ambition to address both to students and to specialists. The author, Professor Nicu Gavriluță from Iași, confesses in the Introduction that the intention that animated him in his effort to write this book was that of providing students and the general public with the basic information and also with new interpretations of classic and up-to-date themes of social and cultural anthropology. The structure and content of the book go far beyond the author's intention, the result being a sort of a trip in the field of social and cultural anthropology that starts as a lecture at university, continues with reflections on the concept of culture and the circumstances of the emergence of modern culture, and it ends in a challenging manner by proposing a direct approach to such topics as sexuality, abortion and cloning.

The book is structured into four main parts. The student or the neophyte in the field, who reads for the first time a book of anthropology, will become familiar, in the first part, entitled *Social and Cultural Anthropology. Definitions and Study Subjects*, with the definitions and the classical delimitations (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Frazer, Kroeber). The solid and not at all arid (which is a rare thing) introduction to the field of social and cultural anthropology is problematized from the very beginning by mentioning Umberto Eco's perspective on the circumstances that contributed to the emergence of this discipline. Beyond the academic strictness of definitions and conceptual demarcation inherent to any introduction, the reader finds out that social and cultural anthropology

may be considered an attempt to „heal the remorse of the West as regards the Others and especially as regards the Others who were called wild, societies with no history, primitive peoples”(p. 25). Through Eco’s definition, as an anthropologist, the author assumes the necessary reference to alterity, not as a concept, but rather in its social hypostasis. However, the social hypostases do not appear as gross descriptions but rather as accompanied by stereotypes, which are negative (*the Other* is seen as barbaric, nomadic, tent man, untrained peasant, easterner, wild) or positive (the old Greek, the good wild). For understanding alterity, the author makes use of the concept of “creative hermeneutics” proposed by Mircea Eliade, which describes a correct interpretation (without stereotypes) of the exotic revelations, the odd symbols and the ancient rituals of the non-European human. The author considers that according to this theory (which, undoubtedly presents some difficulties in understanding and application), the European awareness may achieve better knowledge and may lead to better acceptance of the Other. What Mircea Eliade called “The New European Humanism”, the concept of “multiplicity of religious experience” is illustrated in a few chapters, subtly constructed, that focus on *the new inter-religious dialogue* (which may be summarized using Eliade’s words as “his own way, with the help of the Other”), and especially on the *acculturation paganism-Christianity*. The author covers important pages dealing with this last issue, analyzing from an anthropological perspective the interaction between Mithraism, respectively Orphism (on the one hand) and Christianity (on the other hand). Nicu Gavriluță is especially interested in observing those rituals or pre-Christian symbolic expressions that have survived being included in the Christian culture, especially during the manifestations regarding popular religiosity. For the modern researcher, the identification and understanding of the discrete and effective way in which these operate in the social consciousness represents a real challenge even nowadays. Referring to the works of some specialists such as Arthur Weigall (*The Paganism in Our Christianity*, 2003) and Charles Autran (*Mithra Zoroastru and the History of Arian Christianity*, 1995), the author tries to reveal the similitude between Mithraism and Christianity for understanding the way in which Christianity has assimilated rituals, practices and myths that previously appeared. The same goal is also reached when analyzing the relations between Christianity and Orphism, this approach being the one that ends the first part of the book. Following Andre Boulanger (*Orpheus, Connections between Orphism and Christianity*, 1992), Nicu Gavriluță analyzes the hypotheses that convincingly explain the analogies between Orphism and Christianity and the survival of some Orphic elements in the Christian consciousness, sharing the belief that the presence of these elements “becomes a very serious argument for the scientific research of the religious phenomenon regarding the unity and power of creation specific to *homo religious* since prehistoric times until today.”(p.89)

Of course that the hidden presence of some non-Christian motifs in the social consciousness “mainly explains the fascinating and mysterious creativity of the religious spirit” and also “the challenging survival of religious spirituality in time and history” (p.92), but it also runs the risk of hiding the radical new meanings that Christianity offered them. For the specialist, detecting the “unity of the human spirit” (Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa) represents a theoretical success. The problems appear when the challenges of the contemporary world - such as the modern manifestations of sexuality, abortion and cloning, which may very well revive some mythical structures, as Nicu Gavriluță shows in the last part of his book - require an unequivocal ethical positioning and the specialist is forced to opt for a Christian ethics or for a pre- or anti-Christian one, even though in a concise manner.

The second part of the book, entitled *The Major Anthropological Currents*, is constructed at a formal level, in order to facilitate the initiation in the field of anthropology, summarizing currents like Evolutionism, Mutationism, Diffusionism, Structuralism (the founders, the main works and the central theses of each current). Yet, the expository approach is the pretext that the author needed for the critical analysis of the theses of each current, revealing their strengths but also their weaknesses. Each current is seen as a different face of the same hermeneutical effort to understand human development. Starting from this perspective, no current can pretend to be right when entirely explaining the social and cultural realities without receiving criticism. Thus, the presentation of Evolutionism is made along with some comments on the main criticism that this theory attracted, with detailed references to the discovery of the famous evolutionist fakes (such as Ramapithecus, Piltdown man, Nebraska man, Heidelberg man or Neanderthal man, declared “missing links”, but scientifically proved to be fake). At the same time, the author makes a plea for a comparative balanced approach to the two perspectives (evolutionist and creationist) in the educational field and the public one, in order for each individual to create a safe option, away from stereotypes and prejudice uncritically assumed. Diffusionism and the contemporary mythology of mutants are interpreted by the Kuhn-Feyerabend-Eliade-Culianu-Duerr grid; Structuralism also benefits from a brief but very critical presentation analyzed from Mircea Eliade’s and Ioan Petru Culianu’s perspective (both the British branch, with its representatives, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski, and the French branch, represented by Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss are analyzed). Although being prolific as a working hypothesis and as a theory on all social manifestations, Structuralism is guilty, in the author’s opinion, of being in fact a refined version of Neopositivism, which underlines the physical dimension of the world and of which it retains only an algebraic and material combinatorial mythology.

The third part of the book, *The Anthropology of Culture*, may be considered a development of the criticism brought to Structuralism, the author insisting on the intangible meaning of the cultural act, making reference to the doctrine of the Romanian philosopher, Constantin Noica (and his interpretation by Andrei Pleșu in *Minima Moralia*) and also to the classification of the cultural act features offered by Georgeta Marghescu (*Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, 1999). Besides the analysis of the kitsch phenomena, of modern mass culture and of multiculturalism, the chapter also draws attention to the very special conditions that led to the emergence of modern European culture (the reformist censoring of social imaginary, the victory of the Galileo- Carthesiano - Newtonian physics over the Aristotelian qualitative physics, the industrialization phenomenon based on the division of work).

In the last part of the book, and the most challenging one, as the author himself confesses, *Three challenges of (post) - modernity: sexuality, abortion and cloning*, the author indulges himself in interpreting the manifestations of modern sexuality (bisexuality, transsexuality, mercenary mothers, artificial procreation) supported by the surprising, but fertile assumptions proposed by Ioan Petru Culianu and Lipovetsky. Nicu Gavriluță admits that beyond the scientific fertility of the interpretation grids proposed by the same two authors, there is “a limit of the interpretation of the body and of sexuality”, which is pointed out by assuming the values of Christian ethics at least partially (“The body functions as merchandise, as it is no longer understood from the Christian perspective as a temple of the Holy Spirit, in the social post-modern consciousness” - p.213). The new sexual practices (artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilization) generates remarkable social consequences and at same time it tests both the classical concepts of descendants, motherhood, paternity, and the ethical anthropologist’s position. Abortion, as a medical and statistical reality, and the bioethical problem are the subject of an important ‘for and against analysis’; the ‘for abortion’ attitude is represented by the thesis of Judith Jarvis Thomson; the arguments against abortion are those of Christian ethics (the human being is alive even from the very moment of his birth), and also of the Christian doctors that support their attitude with medical arguments (the fetus’s heart beats even from the 18th day). Nicu Gavriluță analyzes the modern bioethics dilemma regarding the right for life (“who is the first that has the right to live: the mother of the child?”) and the problems regarding the organ transplant from the anthropologist’s perspective (“the consequences for our world makes the subject of anthropology, whereas those regarding the life after death makes the subject of theology” - p. 232) noticing that, besides being an individual choice of the mother, acceptable or not, abortion questions the generation transfer, which is a problem of the entire society. Thus, the connection to the last section of the book is made, with cloning as topic and which could be, from a personal point of view,

the most intriguing for a reader who has read the other chapters and who comes to understand that there are mythical – religious structures that are active even in the most recent problems of late modernity. Furthermore, what can be more modern than the controversial topic of cloning, the anthropologist wonders, briefly revealing both the advantages and the disadvantages of the phenomenon, quoting from specialized scientific papers. In a quantitative manner, the author insists more on the disadvantages of cloning, synthesizing medical, cultural, social, juridical, anthropological and theological arguments. However, the most interesting argument is emphasized at the end of the section, based on the news broadcasted on 20 October 2000 by the East European Agency according to which an occult group, self-entitled The Second Coming Project, intended to clone... Jesus Christ. This occult group explains the Scripture in the most literary way, understanding the neo testamentary verse “We shall have our redemption by His blood...” – *Ephesians*, 1.7 – as an *ad litteram* confirmation of the possibility and necessity of our Savior’s cloning, referring to the returning of Christ on Earth, with the help of technology: “In order to save the world from sin, we have to clone Jesus in order to initiate His return” (p. 253). The radical hermeneutics practiced by the project’s members represents, in the anthropologist’s opinion, “a limit we hardly imagine we can overcome” (p. 256) and which caused the reaction of both the Catholic Church and of the scientific community. It shows that social and cultural anthropology is always called to interpret the provocations of modernity that become possible due to latest technologies; these are present under the shape of endless “mind games” (Ioan Petru Culianu) and beyond being unique, they are reinterpretations of old mythical structures.

Nicu Gavriluță’s book captivates both the usual reader and the specialist and proves that a happy combination of the classical data of anthropology with the critical analysis of the problems of postmodernity is possible.