

Book Symposium

What kind of “is” is Sahlins’ “is”?

Comment on SAHLINS, Marshall. 2013. *What kinship is—and is not*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Maurice BLOCH, *London School of Economics*

Marshall Sahlins’ book wants to tell us what kinship is. This implies that kinship is something which exists over and beyond what is found in this and that account, whether these be ethnographic or historical accounts. As an attempt to discover and understand a phenomenon in the world Sahlins’ book is a contribution to science. This is an enterprise totally different to that of the book by David Schneider, which simply wanted to examine what anthropologists had meant when they had used the word *kinship*; only to reach the sad conclusion that they had meant nothing in particular.

A scientific enterprise of discovery requires that there are good reasons to hypothesise that there is something out there to be found and also it must propose a method which leads to discovery. Sahlins is to be congratulated for doing both these things, reviving fundamental discussions about what kinship *is*. Like him, I believe that asking about the character of kinship has always been a privileged way for understanding the complex character of human beings. Humans are uniquely caught up in a unified evolutionary and historical process. However, as will be clear even from the previous sentence and even more from what follows, my point of view is very different to that of Sahlins. I am, nonetheless, entirely with him in his refusal of the theoretical timidity characteristic of our anthropological times.

My first difficulty concerns the status of what Sahlins is looking for. What is meant by the “is” of his title? Discovering the existence of a scientific fact involves placing it within a known universe of other proposed facts, which themselves, in turn, link to other facts and so on. The existence of a fact cannot be left floating in mid-air because then we don’t know what we are talking about. However, as will become clear, I am not sure I know the *kind of thing* Sahlins’ is looking for. This uncertainty is made all the more difficult in that, right from the first, the only hint Sahlins gives us is negative. He rules out the most obvious contender for what kinship is: something to do with human biology.

Sahlins’ discovery procedure involves looking at a large number of ethnographies in which, according to the authors of these ethnographies, certain phenomena seem to have to do with kinship. He then looks for what these accounts have in common. According to him this highest common factor is “mutuality of being,” and so . . . that is kinship.

I begin with a consideration of this way of going about things.

There are two familiar linked difficulties created by any highest common denominator arguments based on ethnographic recurrences. Emile Durkheim's theory of religion is an often discussed example of these problems, but these difficulties also apply to Sahlins' discovery procedure.

Firstly, the highest common denominator one finds in a list of cases depends on what one has chosen to include or exclude from the list one examines. Sahlins uses many examples of what ethnographers have called "kinship." However, since all these writers use, what one might label, the modern anthropological dialect of English and that, in that dialect, relationships which do not in some way involve "mutuality of being" could not be labeled as kinship by a competent speaker and thus be candidates for inclusion in the list, it is not surprising that Sahlins finds that kinship involves "mutuality of being."

Secondly, if one agrees that all the cases listed by Sahlins are cases where mutuality of being is involved this need not characterize kinship exclusively since mutuality of being is not limited to the cases which have been labeled kinship. In an article published some time back, I show that our species' characteristic capacity for reading each other's minds leads all interacting human beings to participate intrinsically in each other's existence and thus to be "members of one another" (Bloch 2007). There are also many other general psychological mechanisms which cause the feelings in question. Foremost among these is empathy which normal human beings feel for each other as they come in contact. This is present whether those concerned can be considered kin or not. The default existence of empathy has been demonstrated by a mass of psychological work which, of course, also recognizes that it can be easily overridden (Decety and Jackson 2004). Finally, Sahlins' own appeal to the work of developmental psychologists such as Michael Tomasello shows well that what is being referred to does not define kinship *as such* since what Tomasello is talking about is a *general* predisposition in human infants. These types of supra-individual participations occur largely below the level of consciousness but they may, even if indirectly, be sometimes expressed at the conscious and explicit level. Thus the feelings of bodily involvement and unity of military units in combat, of religious groups in ritual activities, or even of members of a choir are well documented. Members of such group may well say, though not exactly in these words, that they do, or at least should, participate in each other's existence and be members one of another.

Then there is another difficulty in what Sahlins proposes. It is far from obvious that the evidence he musters is as straightforwardly relevant to his argument as he assumes. This problem can be illustrated by what we find right at the beginning of his book. In his preface, Sahlins (2013: xi) tells us that "kinsfolk are persons who participate intrinsically in each other's existence; they are members of one another . . . " Then, in the first chapter (3), he cites as evidence for his view Karen Middleton's ethnography of the Karembola, and again on page 23. (This ethnography is of a similar type to the many other examples he uses.) The problem with using this example to demonstrate the presence of mutuality of being is that the aspects of Middleton's ethnography that Sahlins highlights are based on what the Karembola say *about* kinship; indeed, Middleton quotes them directly. Statements of this sort are very different kinds of things to the cognition of mutuality of being or the feeling of being "members of one another." What Sahlins is proposing concerns the knowledge

and the sentiments of people according to which they act, not necessarily what they are conscious of or explicit about. After all, the Karembola Middleton quotes are not professional anthropologists in the business of explaining the exact content of their knowledge and sentiments to anthropology students. In normal life, the knowledge we live by and the feelings that guide us need not be made explicit and usually are not. Thus, in an ethnography of a nearby people to the Karembola, Rita Astuti is able to show that the occasional explicit statements *about* kinship made by people are best understood, not as ontological proposals of what is, but rather as declarations of what *should* be. These utterances are best treated like the Christian injunctions that one should love one's neighbour or that in Christ we are all brothers (Astuti 2009).

These points are, perhaps, boring objections but they throw us back to a much more fundamental problem. What kind of thing is Sahlins looking for?

Sahlins is well aware, as was Schneider and all serious professional anthropologists, that the kind of phenomena which have been called kinship in the anthropological literature are very varied indeed. This is so because specific configurations are unique by definition, but, more particularly and more interestingly, because we are dealing with people and it is a key characteristic of the human species that every person is in a unique place in the unpredictable and complex flow of history.

Should the uniqueness of every case make us then, like Schneider, abandon the enterprise? Like me, Sahlins does not want to do this because he feels, and in this he is like all the honest anthropologists I know, that somehow behind all the variation there really is something to be considered.

Sahlins assumes that in spite of ethnographic variation there is a fixed, rock like, element that is found in all the various ethnographies—mutualities of being. Instead I would argue that we should not be looking for stable fixed bits and that, in any case, these type of things cannot be legitimately found in ethnographies. We should rather think of ethnographies as still snapshots of ongoing processes. The particular pattern found in an immobile snapshot is an artefact of photography, but it is irrelevant to that which is being photographed since that is in continual movement. In other words, ethnographies should be reconstructing processes and should not attempt to discover static irreducible elements as though anything in culture or society could exist in a fixed form outside process.

The processes that ethnographies seek to evoke are part of the general process that is our species, in which all sorts of factors are involved. These factors are themselves processes. They can be labeled as evolution, reproduction, individual development, ecology, and history. What is important to stress is that in reality all these factors are flowing together.

Several of these processes Sahlins would label "biology" and therefore ban them. However to exclude these from our consideration of the general process cannot be justified. Sahlins seeks to dismiss them for reasons which, I believe, have to do with the history of the discipline of anthropology (Bloch 2012: ch. 2–4) but which are not relevant here. In one sense Sahlins is right, of course, to state that kinship is "not biology," though I am not sure who would argue that it is. It is obviously not like the academic subject "biology." It is also right that phenomena that have been called

kinship always involve much much more than the simple recognition of genetic links. This does not, however, mean that kinship has *nothing to do* with biology in the sense of biology as understood as the processes of organic reproduction involved in birth and sex.

To be clear about which aspects we should consider it is important to refine the use of the word kinship. In what follows I, therefore, distinguish kinship as a biological phenomenon from “kinships.” These are the kinds of things which various ethnographers have chosen to label in this way. I shall retain the inverted commas for this second type of the use of the word.

We can posit that kinship, like mountains, is one of those processes that exists with reasonable confidence, but we can only do so when we define it as a matter of relations of closeness created by parenthood and sex. In this sense, daisies have kinship, so do chimpanzees and humans. It is totally irrelevant to this kinship whether any particular group of people have ideas which resemble western folk notions of “kinship,” have words which seem close to the English word “kinship,” whether there are some people somewhere in the world who behave in the same way towards people who are not kin as they do to people who are, whether they designate these people by the same term or not, whether those people are interested in genealogy or not, whether they mix up genealogy with all sorts of other things or do not. To say that kinship in that sense is not involved in all aspects of what ethnographers record, whether these have been labeled kinship or not, is simply wrong and I do not think Sahlins would argue this.

But then, what of the possibility that kinship is not a factor in that aspect of the general human process that are the representations, feelings, and emotions that people live within? Or, to rephrase the question Sahlins seems to be asking: “What, if any, are the implications of kinship for ‘kinships,’ or for other recorded ethnographic facts however labeled?” It seems that Sahlins answers this question by “none.” That is surely unlikely for two reasons. Firstly, it would mean that there would be cultures which, in their “kinships,” could simply ignore kinship in spite of the fact that sex and birth must have a large role in social behavior, practice, and cognition. Secondly, it would mean that, in sharp contrast to all other living things, the bodies and the minds of our species would not have been predisposed by evolution to organize and regulate reproduction in some way. How else can we explain the very general ethnographic family resemblances that Sahlins recognizes and which lead him to ask the question of “what is kinship?”¹

Of course we can’t deduce and specify, simply from an awareness of the constitutive processes of human history, what the role of kinship in “kinships” will be in any particular place or time. That is so for a good reason. As noted above, human beings are animals that are caught up in a unified process involving very different factors with very different dynamics. One of these factors can be glossed as particularistic history but it is always simultaneously *together* with other factors: ecological factors, evolutionary factors, individual developmental factors, and the processes of mental and bodily reproduction. This multifactorial causation is also what continually creates indirectly our representations and ways of being. This is so since these must be sufficiently related to the realities of our existence in order to operate our continuing existence. These representations and ways of being will thus involve biologically

inflected representations and ways of being. These representations and ways of being, too, are continually in the process of creation, recreation, and transformation. It may be that kinship, sometime in the future, will become irrelevant in that process but, quite honestly, this seems unlikely and far from what we know. It is only by getting caught up in the misleading chase for static essential pure kinship that we might be tempted by such a prediction.

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Department of Anthropology
London School of Economics
6th Floor, Old Building, Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
Edinburgh, EH8 9LD
United Kingdom
M.E.Bloch@lse.ac.uk

[1.](#) The argument here is somewhat similar to that presented by Dan Sperber and myself (Bloch and Sperber 2002).