

**Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science.** Robert Aunger, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 242 pp.

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“Memes” were coined as elementary units of culture by Richard Dawkins, toward the end of *The Selfish Gene* (1976). They were independently utilized by a few other geneticists and ecologists, hoping to give a rigorous scientific basis to the study of cultural evolution by atomizing and mathematizing, but the interest in them had appropriately fizzled by the early 1990s. Daniel Dennett’s 1995 book, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, gave the concept a new life among cognitive scientists, and the acolytes are now publishing self-congratulatory e-journals and books. The present volume is derived from a 1999 symposium at Cambridge, called “Do Memes Account for Culture?” and has value really only for Adam Kuper’s forthright and deadly contribution and for Maurice Bloch’s more tempered critique.

Memeticists seem gladly to volunteer the fact that they know very little about memes, or about culture, or about cultural evolution, or about previous attempts to study cultural evolution. Of one thing they are certain—what they are doing is profound, original, and Darwinian.

Unfortunately it’s most likely none of those.

Darwinian? It is unlikely that Darwin would recognize much of himself in either the biological or the cultural discussions that pepper this book. Indeed, a more appropriate title for the book would have been *Mendelizing Culture*, which would at least properly situate the biological analogy at the heart of the work. There is nothing necessarily Darwinian about the conceptual reduction of a complex entity to hypothetical monads of information.

Original? Ralph Linton’s satirical 1937 essay “One Hundred Per Cent American” used a straightforwardly memetic approach to culture to lampoon the popular jingoism of the day. I have yet to see a modern example approach it in either depth or wit.

Profound? Depends upon your standards.

It is not clear that there are any in memetics. There is not much in the way of acknowledgment that anyone has ever studied cultural evolution before them, and therefore there is no argument that this approach is superior to its rivals. Discounting the critical contributions to this collection from the anthropologists, the names of Leslie White, Julian Steward, Elman Service, or V. Gordon Childe—much less Spencer or Morgan!—do not crop up. (It might actually have been interesting to compare White’s dream of a superorganic “culturology” with its realization in a suborganic “memetics”!) Henry Plotkin, in his essay “Culture and Psychological Mechanisms,” oddly credits George Peter Murdock with the first “application of universal Darwinism to culture and culture change” in 1956. But he fails to appreciate Murdock’s intellectual lineage through the social Darwinists A. G. Keller and W. G. Sumner and landing squarely at the foot of Herbert Spencer! (And then he goes on to cite and reference Clyde Kluckhohn as “Kluckholm.”)

Where data or argument might be called for in a science, memetics often suffices with decree. Thus, Laland and Odling-Smee (p. 121): “We find compelling the psychological evidence for memes as packages of learned and socially transmitted information, stored as discrete units, chunked and aggregated into higher order knowledge structures, encoded as memory traces in interwoven complexes of neural tissue, and expressed in behaviour” (p. 121). To ask what evidence they find so compelling would merely beg the question of such presumptuous gibberish standing as a dopplergänger of science.

On a good page, pompous fiat may be replaced by sterile conjecture. Says Susan Blackmore, “I propose . . . that the human brain was designed primarily for the benefit of memes” (p. 30). I found myself regularly substituting the word “angels” for “memes” to see if the meaning of a sentence would be significantly changed thereby.

The most extraordinary absence from this literature (and this volume) is archaeology, which not only has the richest database on cultural evolution but also has a school of practitioners (for example, Robert Dunnell and Michael O’Brien) who have long been advocating a “Darwinian” approach to cultural evolution.

All told, this is a considerably depressing read. One gets the feeling of having listened to grocery store checkout clerks discussing particle physics. Interesting as ethnography, perhaps, but that is about it.

The trouble with memes, as set forth even by their exponents, subsume the following:

- they only apply to human behavior (Blackmore), and/or they apply to the behavior of other animals as well (Laland and Odling-Smee)
- memes are phenomenologically independent of genes (Plotkin p. 71), and/or there are specific gene-meme interactions (Laland and Odling-Smee p. 137)
- the transmission of memes through copying or imitation is not well problematized and considerably oversimplified (Plotkin p. 76; Sperber p. 171)
- memes confuse gene and phenotype, or replicator and interactor (Hull p. 57)
- focusing on memes leads to undervaluing agency (Conte p. 87)
- they are tautological as explanations—spreading because they are good and being defined as good because they have spread (Conte p. 88; Kuper p. 180)
- culture is not actually a summation of memes (Laland and Odling-Smee p. 122)
- the analogy to genes is facile (Kuper p. 187)
- culture cannot be atomized in such a way as to make memes useful (Bloch p. 194)
- diffusion is a small part of the picture of cultural acquisition and evolution (Bloch p. 201)
- memes may not exist at all (Aunger p. 206)

What, then, can we say about the value of memes for studying culture? The editor of this collection, Robert Aunger, is cautiously optimistic, hoping that “memetics can produce novel empirical work or insightful interpretations of previous results” (pp. 230–231). I do not see how it can produce results of any empirical utility given the ontological difficulties with which memes are burdened. (Once again, I think of angels—while they may inspire action, they are of little explanatory value as causal agents.) And I find it hard to see how memes can lead to insightful reinterpretations of any previous work, when its students are so woefully ignorant of all previous work. ☹

### References Cited

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