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Semiosis in History. The Emergence of Alter-Culture

Following up on Merlin Donald's claim that human specificity emerges in history, and not exclusively in evolutionary time, it will be suggested that the diversified means of producing semiosis created by human beings account for the spread of empathy and altruism not only beyond the kin group, but to humankind in general. This amounts to treating other cultures as different from us, but still able to enter into communication with us (as an Alter), as opposed as treating these cultures are part of nature, and thus only susceptible to be communicated about (as an Alius). Starting out from the theory of bio-cultural evolution defended by Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, as well as from the multi-level selection theory of Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, we try to lay bare the way in which semiotic structures play a role for transforming cultural evolution, contrary to biological evolution, into human history. We inquiry into what makes the existence of Alter-culture possible, if, as Sober and Wilson have claimed, armed with game theory, an altruistic society (an Ego-culture in our terms), is only possible in opposition to another group in relation to which group egoism rules (that is, in our terms, an Alius-culture). We will follow Michael Tomasello in arguing for the primacy of games of cooperation, rather than competition, while adding an historical dimension, which serves to explain how such cooperation can be extended beyond the primary group (our Ego-culture). However, we will insist of the importance of multiple semiotic resources for the boot-strapping of empathy and altruism, as well as on the genesis of this process in cultural encounters, as reflected in the spirit of the Enlightenment.