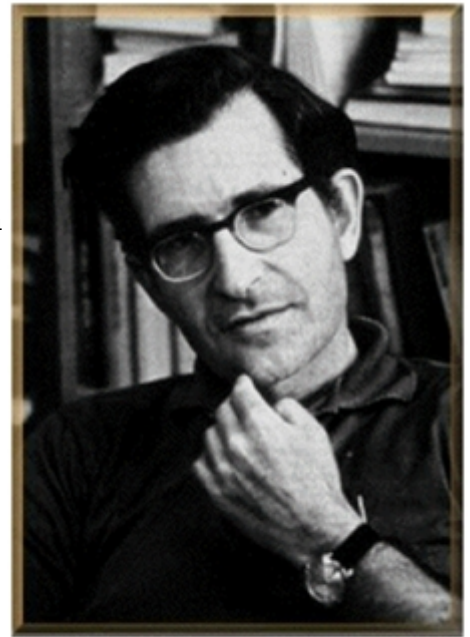


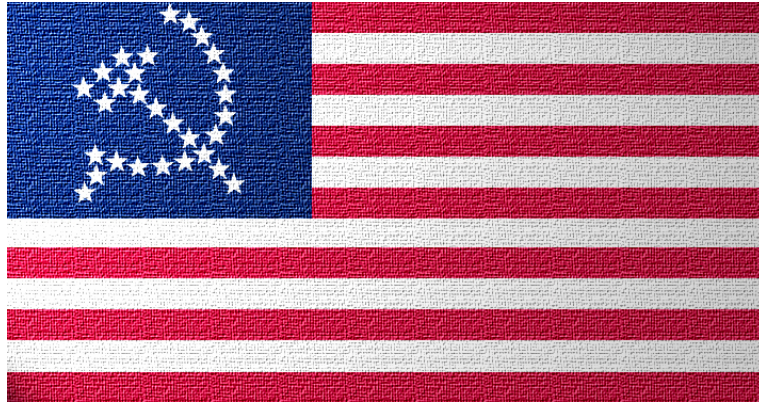
In a previous [post](#), I questioned the relevance of the label “Cognition and Culture” for our institute. Why not ‘Cognition and Society’ instead? Choosing ‘culture’ over ‘society’, I argued, is not arbitrary and implicate that some questions (religion, transmission) are preferred over some others (cooperation, institutions). The same remark holds for the term cognition. Why not cognition and not simply psychology? Why aren’t we part of an International Psychology and Culture Institute? Arguably, we use the term ‘cognition’ because we reckon that we are the heirs of the [Cognitive Revolution](#). But is it really the case? Would the field of ‘Cognition and Culture’ be different if the Cognitive Revolution never happened? My guess is: not so much.



*What if Noam Chomsky... ?*

Let’s imagine an uchronia, a different version of our world in which history diverged from the actual history of the world. But this time, it is not about [the Nazis winning World War II](#), [the Spanish Armada successfully invading England](#) or [the Black Death of the 14th century killing 99% of Europe](#). It is about the Cognitive Revolution. Yes, that’s not the most funky uchronia ever (although some writers have imagined some cognitive related uchronia, the most famous being probably [The difference engine](#) by Gibson and Sterling in which [Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine](#) takes on the roles of modern computers a century in advance). Still, the question remains interesting: What if the Cognitive revolution had never happened?

What would this uchronia look like? Of course, one can imagine that some events never happened: there was no conference at Dartmouth on artificial intelligence, Marvin Minsky was killed during World War II or Noam Chomsky decided to become a full-time political activist. Arguably though, these divergences would not change anything since science rarely needs a particular person to progress. So let’s use a trick. Let’s say that, somehow, the arch-enemy of the cognitive revolution - behaviourism - remains in place until the 80s’ (another -and more spectacular - way is to imagine an alternate history in which a nuclear war devastate North America in the 50’s killing, among other things, the Cognitive Revolution). Would that change anything for us folks in Cognition and Culture? Again, I am not so sure.



Another consequence of a nuclear war in the 50's?

I guess that this position might appear a bit heterodox. But let's have a try. In his book [The Blank Slate](#) (2002), psychologist [Steven Pinker](#) identified five key ideas that made up the cognitive revolution:

"The mental world can be grounded in the physical world by the concepts of information, computation, and feedback." "The mind cannot be a blank slate because blank slates don't do anything." "An infinite range of behavior can be generated by finite combinatorial programs in the mind." "Universal mental mechanisms can underlie superficial variation across cultures." "The mind is a complex system composed of many interacting parts."

My point here is that these key ideas would have emerged even without a Cognitive Revolution. Take for instance the idea that the mind cannot be a blank slate. This idea is totally natural to evolutionary biologists. What about the mind as "a complex system composed of many interacting parts"? Without going back to La Mettrie, Hutcheson or Descartes, one can argue that the idea of modularity is at the core of the research program of neuropsychology since its beginning (the same is true, albeit at a lesser degree, for evolutionary biology). We should not forget as well that, with or without the Cognitive Revolution, brain imaging techniques would have emerged and would have joined neuropsychology and evolutionary biology in decomposing the mind. Add the methodological advances of developmental psychology or social psychology - which were not part of the Cognitive revolution - and you get a pretty big part of today's 'Cognition and Culture'.

Note that I'm not saying that cognitive scientists did not bring anything new in psychology, nor that they were wrong in their criticism of behaviourism for instance. Rather, my point is that there was probably other way to arrive at today's state of knowledge in Cognition and Culture.

I might be biased of course. I am a junior researcher and I might not see the specific heritage of the Cognitive Revolution in the current trends in cognitive science. I might also be biased by the fact that I have worked on morality that is mostly influenced by evolutionary biology, rational choice theory, moral philosophy and social psychology, not very much by cognitive psychology. Arguably, all these fields were independent until cognitive psychology brought them together. However, the very concept that allows this [interdisciplinary integration](#) - the concept of 'moral sense' - was proposed at least three hundred years ago by philosophers like Shaftesbury or Hutcheson (the latter even coined the term 'moral organ').

Things might different, though, for the study of, say, folk biology or linguistics. Or it might not (see for instance my previous [post](#) on language). What do you think? Am I totally wrong? Am I just an ungrateful heir of the Cognitive Revolution?