

Alberto Acerbi (old website)


cognitive anthropology / cultural evolution /
computational social science

Alberto Acerbi in books, cognitive anthropology, cultural evolution ① February 9, 2016February 9, 2016 ☰ 737 Words

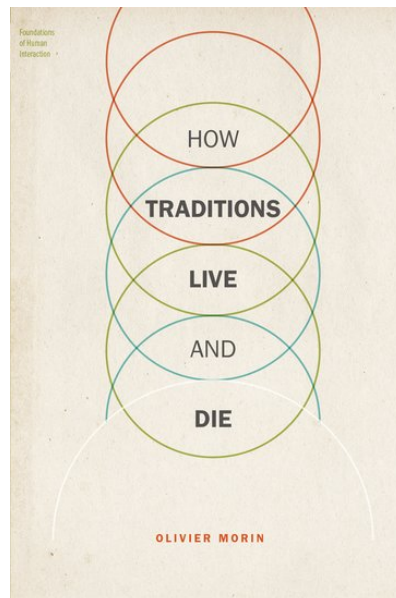
Recent books on Cultural Evolution

A few books very relevant for cultural evolution have been published in the last months.

Tim Lewens' Cultural Evolution (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/cultural-evolution-9780199674183?cc=gb&lang=en&>) (Oxford University Press) is an excellent take on the theoretical background of cultural evolutionary studies. I wrote about some aspects of the book in the blog, and more recently, Philosophy of Science (<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/phos/current>) asked me to write a short review, that should appear soon. While obviously I am not completely convinced by all his arguments (in particular, by his very broad characterisation of cultural evolutionary studies as "kinetic theories", see my blog post [here](https://acerbialberto.wordpress.com/2015/09/11/how-darwinian-is-population-thinking/) (<https://acerbialberto.wordpress.com/2015/09/11/how-darwinian-is-population-thinking/>)), I am convinced by *most* of them (see, for example, another post [here](https://acerbialberto.wordpress.com/2015/11/11/tim-lewens-on-lamarckian-inheritance-in-cultural-evolution/) (<https://acerbialberto.wordpress.com/2015/11/11/tim-lewens-on-lamarckian-inheritance-in-cultural-evolution/>)) on the claims of Lamarckism in cultural evolution). Mainly, whether one agrees or not with his treatment, Lewens has the merit of spelling out clearly several critical aspects of cultural evolutionary theories. I am aware the previous is a template-sentence for book reviews, but I think in this case it is important as, mostly, cultural evolutionists are more involved in the empirical aspects of their work than in the theoretical ones – even though I am not sure this is a bad thing. In sum, a very important reading for anyone seriously interested in cultural evolution.

reconstruction is more important than faithful copying, and in which specific, “attractive”, features of cultural traits are more important for their success than domain-general transmission biases (e.g. copy the majority, copy the successful, etc.). My only comment, for the time being, is that I believe the considerations that Morin put forward are an urgent and necessary integration, more than an alternative, to what is done in standard cultural evolution, and a call to more empirical research, more than a solution to the issues on the table (this is basically the same opinion expressed in [Acerbi and Mesoudi 2015](https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10539-015-9490-2.pdf)  (<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10539-015-9490-2.pdf>) (<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10539-015-9490-2>)). Another interesting point of Morin’s book is that his vision of cultural attraction is different, at least in my perspective, from the very general and all-embracing definition discussed [here](https://acerbialberto.wordpress.com/2014/05/29/if-were-all-cultural-darwinians-whats-the-fuss-about/) (<https://acerbialberto.wordpress.com/2014/05/29/if-were-all-cultural-darwinians-whats-the-fuss-about/>) (and, especially, in the paper with Alex Mesoudi linked above), that does not convince me much. In Morin’s account, when, say, local, idiosyncratic, features are more important than universal, stable, ones, than cultural attraction is *less* important than other forces. Or at least this is how I read it.

I might be biased here – Olivier, differently from Tim Lewens or Joe Henrich, cooked me once a venison (if I remember correctly) stew – but *How Traditions Live and Die* is an absolute must read for everybody interested in the study of culture.



(<https://acerbialberto.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/9780190210502.jpeg>).

I will try in the next weeks to elaborate on these thoughts, and I will write a combined short-ish review of the two books (Henrich’s and Morin’s), which will appear in late spring in [Current Anthropology](http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/ca/current) (<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/ca/current>).

Just to be crystal clear: this post is about *recent* and *general* books about cultural evolution. There are excellent books which are general and not recent (for example Alex Mesoudi’s [Cultural Evolution](http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo8787504.html) (<http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo8787504.html>)), and others which are recent but not general (for example Peter Turchin’s [Ultrasociety](http://peterturchin.com/ultrasociety/) (<http://peterturchin.com/ultrasociety/>)).

Tagged:

anthropology,
attraction,
books,
cognitive anthropology,
cultural evolution,
cultural transmission,
culture,
evolution and human behaviour,
Joe Henrich,
Olivier Morin,
Tim Lewens

4 thoughts on “Recent books on Cultural Evolution”

Olivier Morin says:

February 10, 2016 at 12:15 pm

Thanks for the publicity! I've read the other two and found them both very exciting each in their own way. Now, about cultural attraction, the book is not as clear as it should be. This is partly my own fault, of course, partly also because of a gap between cultural attraction as many readers see it, and cultural attraction as its inventors and proponents see it.

The cultural evolution community usually associates cultural attraction (for those who know it) with the view that cultural change is heavily influenced by a pan-human evolved psychology (let's call it that, for lack of a better word): very general constraints on information processing that are somewhat innate and invariant, and that constrain cultural invention and transmission almost everywhere. In the book, I call this “general cognitive attraction.”

Many readers see “general cognitive attraction” as the core thesis and object of study of Cultural Attraction Theory. In a way, they are right, and (still in the book) I try to explain why general attraction is a topic worth specialising on: not because it is more important or interesting than other phenomena, but simply because that is what people like us do best. (I mean, people who are inclined to make bold generalisations about culture, who have a taste for psychology or biology that other anthropologists may not share, etc.) “Local” attraction, the myriad ways in which peculiar social conjunctures can influence culture this way or that, will always be best studied by local specialists, and there is not much we can say about it once we've acknowledged its existence.

I also claim that “general cognitive attraction” will often be trumped by local, contingent circumstances, and that it may not be the most powerful force in a given society at a given time. (I also think that general attraction is bound to win in the very long run, but that's another point and it would take me too far.)

Having said that, it's important to note that Cultural Attraction as theorised by Sperber and others does not (and never did) coincide with “general cognitive attraction.” Cultural Attraction Theory is much broader than that. It aims to encompass more or less all the things that influence cultural change in a non-random fashion. Recent developments in particular have stressed this point. I don't think it's very useful to argue over definitions, and since cultural attraction has always been

thought, by its inventors, to encompass not just general cognitive attraction, but all the things that foster cultural success (except chance), we should respect this. It then becomes trivially true, of course, that all deterministic cultural change depends on cultural attraction, *lato sensu*.

(ps. Alberto, the automatic translator on your blog turns “lato” into “latte”; Italian WordPress conspiracy?)

□ Reply

Alberto Acerbi says:

February 10, 2016 at 3:17 pm

Hi Olivier,

thanks a lot for your comment. When I receive such good feedbacks, I feel that perhaps the time spent on the blog is not completely wasted!

The important things first: “lato” is an Italian word (meaning “side”), while I fear “latte” is considered now standard English. So this would count more as a Starbucks-Wordpress conspiracy!

Said that, let me just clarify my position, mainly for other readers: so there is one “Cultural Attraction Theory” (what we call in Acerbi & Mesoudi “wide” attraction), and then there are some more specific hypothesis, which are related in some way to it. One is what we called “narrow” attraction, i.e. the idea that the reconstructive aspects of cultural transmission are of fundamental importance, ‘errors’ are not ‘errors’, but non-random modifications that are possibly the crucial aspects to take in consideration when studying cultural dynamics.

Another one is what you call “general cognitive attraction” i.e. the “view that cultural change is heavily influenced by a pan-human evolved psychology (let’s call it that, for lack of a better word): very general constraints on information processing that are somewhat innate and invariant, and that constrain cultural invention and transmission almost everywhere” (I am citing your comment).

In Acerbi & Mesoudi we focused on the first one, mainly because this seems to be the most important aspect highlighted in Claidiere et al. 2014 (which is our main critical target). Personally, anyway, I find even more worth of attention the second view (i.e. “general cognitive attraction”) which is the one you are more concerned, but this does not matter much here. The point is that both hypotheses are testable (they can clearly be wrong, case-by-case) and empirically rich of consequences. I believe I can be (very) interested in both, without the need to subscribe the wide theory of attraction. Do you think this is correct?

Actually, I’d like to be a little more forward: not only I do not need to subscribe the wide theory, but I think that it is way more productive to integrate these ideas in the existing corpus of hypothesis of cultural evolution. It is interesting to understand how “innate and invariant” constraints interact with general-purpose context-biases, and how, for example, this varies in different domains. It is interesting to study how “preservative” technologies (that makes cultural transmission a selective process) impact the reconstructive aspects of cultural transmission. I fear that thinking in terms of “wide” attraction is not a good hypotheses-generation engine. I am sure you do not think this is correct...

□ Reply

Bill Benzon says:

December 19, 2016 at 11:50 am

You might be interested in a recent paper of mine, “Rhythm Changes” Notes on Some Genetic Elements in Musical Culture, published in *Signata: Annals of Semiotics*. It is consistent with the “reconstructive” approach and examines a particular case, from music, in some detail. Here’s the abstract:

An entity known as Rhythm Changes is analyzed as a genetic entity in musical culture. Because it functions to coordinate the activities of musicians who are playing together it can be called a coordinator. It is a complex coordinator in that it is organized on five or six levels, each of which contains coordinators that function in other musical contexts. Musicians do not acquire (that is, learn) such a coordinator through “transfer” from one brain to another. Rather, they learn to construct it from publically available performance materials. This particular entity is derived from George Gershwin’s tune “I Got Rhythm” and is the harmonic trajectory of that tune. But it only attained independent musical status after about two decades of performances. Being a coordinator is thus not intrinsic to the entity itself, but is rather a function of how it comes to be used in the musical system. Recent argument suggests that biological genes are like this as well.

You might also take a look at my book on music, *Beethoven’s Anvil: Music in Mind and Culture* (Basic 2001), where I use Walter Freeman’s approach to complex neurodynamics to establish a (highly speculative) neural foundation. I use that to develop the notion of a collective neural network; when people are coupled together in music-making their actions are so tightly constrained that we may think of them as a single system. (Final drafts of those chapters are available online.) I then go on to argue that musical performances are *attractors* in the collective neuro-space.

Over the last decade and a half there has been a fair amount of work on coupling between the nervous systems of people interacting with one another. We know, for example, that people in conversation are synchronized to the same “clock” at the scale of 10s of microseconds. I’ve got a number of posts about coupling at my blog.

□ Reply

Alberto Acerbi says:

December 19, 2016 at 1:00 pm

Hi Bill,

Thank you for your further readings suggestions!

□ Reply

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