



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Against the Tranquility of Axioms by Rodney Needham
Ivan Karp

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linguisticist' at MIT made crucial discoveries about the nature of language. Geertz's brilliant intuitions about senses of self and person in Bali and Morocco, too, may evaporate when we learn more about the wondrous creatures to whom meanings are meaningful.

Against the Tranquility of Axioms. RODNEY NEEDHAM. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983. xiv + 182 pp., illustrations, footnotes, references, index. \$22.50 (cloth).

IVAN KARP
Smithsonian Institution

This is the fourth book of collected essays and addresses published by Needham since *Belief, Language and Experience*. Each of these develops the project announced in the earlier account of the philosophical background to the interpretation of collective representations. Needham has been attempting to provide a systematic inventory of the logics through which collective representations are ordered as well as to explore those moments when the constraints of logic and experience are overcome in the imaginative lives of people. This double purpose helps to explain the perplexing and seemingly contradictory topics that Needham addresses in his essays. These range from the principles of classification and the logical status of the concepts of "reversal" and "alternation" to the question of how aspect is a universal in all symbolic systems, all in this volume. In his other collections, *Primordial Characters* (1978), *Reconnaissances* (1980), and *Circumstantial Deliveries* (1981), he examines similar problems, as well as exploring the ethnography of products of the imagination such as the image of the witch, half man-half beast figures, and the relationship of internal states to ethnographic description. This heady brew might seem to constitute a congeries of topics that has little to hold them together. Needham's choice of titles such as *Reconnaissances* and *Circumstantial Deliveries* appears designed to lead readers to ignore the thread that binds them together. The trickster does leave some clues in a series of prefaces that develop an elaborate argument.

What is the argument, and how does Needham relate these topics? Logic represents a fundamental constraint on the construction of cultural idioms. It is the job of the "comparativist" to collate and inventory the fundamental principles of logic found in different systems of representations. This cannot be achieved through intensive fieldwork in only a few cultures. The fundamental tool of comparative analysis is not participant observation but rather those natural, that is, universal, proclivities possessed by all peoples applied to the analysis of representations in a disciplined and critical fashion. What is uncovered is not a psychic unity of mankind but a logical unity displayed amid the cultural diversity. For Needham this is the goal of a project enunciated by Durkheim and Levy-Bruhl but largely ignored since Hertz and Mauss.

But what of the witches and amorphous creatures? Where do they fit with Needham's interests in alternation, opposition, and the status of visual models? The elaborate analytical apparatus developed in the comparativist program is less an end than a means. Logical principles are not the only features of thought to exhibit a tendency to transcend the boundaries of cultures and history. Take, for example, Needham's argument that half man-half beast figures can be related to the experience of a pathological state whereby the body image is so impaired that subjects experience one side of their bodies as missing. A symbolic form with wide distribution is related to a psycho-physiological state whose incidence is independent of the specifics of culture and history.

This argument is easily susceptible to misunderstanding if not read carefully. Needham is a subtle thinker not overly given to writing down to his audience. He combines rigor with a tendency to use words as if an original and primary sense had remained the dominant and popular usage. There are few other anthropologists whom I prefer to read while sitting next to a copy of the unabridged *OED*. His is a style suited to devotees of the Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

The essays are intended to be read separately, but the project can only be grasped by taking them as a developing whole. Needham moves toward what should be called an anthropological poetics of the imagination. Pride of place goes not to those principles of logic he once asserted were the "fundamental capital of social anthropology" but to those "synthetic images" and "evasive fantasies" in which the imagination overthrows the constraints of logic and experience and enjoys a freedom that is not capable of realization in the domains of everyday life.

As a project Needham's goals exhibit an affinity with the works of Gaston Bachelard. In developing his concept of "rupture" or epistemological break to explain discontinuities in the history of science, Bachelard was led to examine the role of the imaginative faculty in the development of scientific theories. This in turn led Bachelard to celebrate what he called "the poetics of reverie" as a mode of experience equal to and interdependent with deductive reasoning. These are the forms of interdependence that Needham educs in his essays. In contrast to Bachelard he distinguishes between the historically and culturally contingent and the formal and universal. He displays little interest in these essays in culturally specific idioms or local conditions. Yet he does not deny the efficacy of collective representations in the interpretation and formulation of experience. This is equally a legitimate goal but one articulated from another aspect. As he says of diagrams as models in his essay on Wittgenstein, "A diagram . . . does not depict a structure: it permits a structure to be conceived . . ." (p. 165). Needham's project is a necessary base for the turn toward pragmatics that has recently emerged in poetics, sociolinguistics, and symbolic anthropology. An interest in the structures that enable thought is certainly not incompatible with analyses directed to the uses and objects of thought. It is also a healthy

corrective to the excessive reaction to the excesses of structuralism.

The seven essays in this volume are devoted to exemplifying what Needham calls "change of aspect" in the study of collective representations. This is defined as the "capacity to discriminate in an object of thought as many connotations and uses as can be discovered or contrived" (p. 2). There is a close relationship between aspect and perspective, aspect directing us toward a more systematic examination of symbolic forms. Thus in these essays Needham shows that systems of symbolic classification are organized polythetically, in terms of overlapping sets that are capable of being conceptually independent. In other essays he examines how a monothetic concept of cause forced erroneous interpretations of headhunting, the logical status of visual models, the significance of naming in argumentation as a form of presenting the world as presenting itself, why the notion of reversal obscures a number of more primary relations, and how alternation is used in the construction of systems of representations. Taken together the essays form a bridge between structure and pragmatics. They do not exhibit the "existential" concerns as much as the earlier essays. In a way they represent a return to the contemplation of form that is so characteristic of structuralism. There is a difference, however, between a concept of structure that isolates itself from practice and Needham's comparativist interests. Needham retains a lively awareness that even universal forms do not think themselves through the medium of the anthropologist. In his work he always leaves a space between the form and its use. In that space we relate the form of thought to its object, the universal to the contingent, the transcultural to the historically specific. Needham's chosen role has been modeled on Locke's description of the underlaborer, "clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge." I am not wholly convinced that his legacy will be more refined comparative studies. Instead, I foresee more sensitive fieldwork that explores the ethnography of the imagination in specific settings as the positive inheritance of his efforts.

Rationality and Relativism. MARTIN HOLLIS and STEVEN LUKES, eds. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984. 312 pp., notes, references, index. \$13.50 (paper)

T. O. BEIDELMAN
New York University

The editors of this collection state that its purpose is to challenge received ideas of explanation, especially as these deal with the interpretation of beliefs and behavior across cultural distances in space and time. The volume consists of a long editorial introduction, which attempts to summarize the key issues raised by the various contributors, and 10 essays by 11 authors. While holding posts in varied faculties, most of the contributors are best known for publishing works of a philosophical bent. Barry

Barnes teaches the philosophy and sociology of science. David Bloor, Jon Elster, Ian Hacking, William Newton-Smith, and Charles Taylor are philosophers (though Taylor holds his appointment in political science). Steven Lukes is a sociologist best known for a biography of Durkheim. Robin Horton is a professor of philosophy who writes on West African societies. Dan Sperber is a trained anthropologist, though his publications are mainly of a general philosophical cast rather than ethnographic. Ernest Gellner was formerly professor of philosophy in London and is now professor of anthropology in Cambridge and has a doctorate in anthropology. I mention the disciplinary backgrounds of the contributors to make three points. (1) This review focuses on what here may be meaningful to anthropologists, even though much of the book is presented in a manner more congenial to philosophers than students of society and culture. (2) The social and cultural aspects of the problems considered here appear to be of crucial importance, even though scholars best fitted to analyze such issues, those in anthropology, sociology, linguistics, social history, and comparative literature, are either underrepresented or ignored entirely. (3) Furthermore, none of the contributors who are associated with anthropology or sociology can be readily described as distinguished for a wide body of publications demonstrating a firm grasp of the craft of translating the beliefs, experiences, and activities of other peoples and cultures into Western terms. Instead, these are critics of the method and problems of translation rather than those who are actually accomplished at doing it.

The contributors are committed in various degrees toward one of two positions: either that there is a universal reality accessible by way of a single, rational scientific understanding most nearly resembling our current Western views; or that humans in different cultures inhabit differing meaningful worlds and that any rational system of understanding, including our own, is profoundly embedded within society and language. It is important, however, to note that those holding this second, relativistic position (at least those writing in this collection) remain committed to attempting to bridge the gaps between these different social and cultural worlds. This latter position is not due to fuzziness of logic nor to naive inconsistency but arises from their profound and vivid awareness of the depth and complexity of cultural and linguistic experiences. As Evans-Pritchard once characterized this difficult position, the only method in cultural anthropology is the comparative method and that is impossible. In this sense, the differences between many of the writers in these two camps do not lead one group to attempt unifying interpretations and the others to spurn such efforts. Rather, differences are reflected in the assertive, positivistic confidence with which the universalists approach their task and the more tentative and existentially troubled stance of the relativists. Neither group abandons the major tasks of seeking to comprehend alien, exotic peoples or of seeking common features of thought and experience shared by all, however difficult and at times doubtful these may appear.

At the risk of oversimplification, one could sort