

The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity's Search for Meaning

by Jeremy Lent

Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2017. 569 pp. \$17.68 (hardcover)

Reviewed by David Blanks

Arkansas Tech University

Jeremy Lent dedicates his new study of mind, myth and meaning “to future generations.” His hope is that if we work together to change the “root metaphors” through which we view the world, then perhaps we can divert our (now global) civilization from the destructive trajectory that our old root metaphors have put it on. Arguing that culture changes history, and history changes culture, he calls his approach “cognitive history” which, as his preceptor, physicist and systems-thinking guru Fritjof Capra writes in the foreword, indicates that he “traces the human search for meaning through the lens of modern cognitive science, a rich interdisciplinary field that transcends the traditional frameworks of biology, psychology, and epistemology” (p. 14).

Thus (for the most part) Lent analyzes history with reference to the cognitive structures of the human mind. Drawing heavily upon systems theory, he charts the rise of complexity in the brain, in hunter-gatherer societies, and in the earliest agricultural communities, then goes through the emergence of diverse cultural metaphors in the Axial Age as a means of explaining the rise of Europe and how in the modern world we came to “consume the earth.” If we want to understand the world today, the argument goes, then how the mind works matters, and how culture works, matters. Not all change can be reduced to material causes.

At first glance then this looks pretty good: it's interdisciplinary, scientifically-based, analyzes long sweeps of human history on a global scale, advocates social and environmental justice. It's a sort of corrective to the reductionist view of history. Not only is there a causative flow from environment to cognition but there is a reciprocal causative flow

in the other direction, a perpetual, bidirectional feedback loop. Purely materialist approaches to historical change often miss this.

But the devil is in the details, as they say, and *The Patterning Instinct*, which itself is a whole greater than its parts, is filled with details about how the brain works, how patterns of thought arise, how these shared symbols (language, art, religion, science) give rise to cultural metaphors such as “Nature as Machine” and “Conquering Nature,” and how these worldviews in turn lead to historical change. However, different cultures have different metaphors, and it is *our* culture, according to Lent, western (now global) culture, which is largely to blame for the damaging ways in which our root metaphors have manifested themselves on the planet.

Well perhaps we might be okay with that notion too; except that, when you examine the details, and think deeply about the implications of the culture => metaphor => values => actions model, specifically in regards to our discipline, it suggests that, contrary to its best intentions, the underlying cultural metaphors that support much of big history turn out to be the very same cognitive frameworks that have put us on this dangerous social and environmental path to begin with.

“As the book unfolds,” Lent writes, “it reveals an underlying pattern to Western cognition that is responsible for its Scientific and Industrial Revolutions—as well as its devastating destruction of indigenous cultures around the world and our current global rush toward possible catastrophe. In this respect, the book shares much with the postmodern critique of Western civilization,

recognizing those capitalized universal abstractions such as Reason, Progress, and Truth to be culture-specific constructions. In fact, a significant portion of the book is devoted to tracing how these patterns of thought first arose and then infused themselves so deeply into the Western mind-set as to become virtually invisible to those who use them” (p. 19). So whether we are persuaded by the “cognitive history” model or not, this is still something we are going to have to grapple with—and for this reason alone this book is worth reading.

Abstractions such as Reason, Progress and Truth, Lent argues, are not universal but culturally specific. These are the root metaphors upon which big history metaphors such as arrow of time, emergence, complexity, thresholds, and Goldilocks conditions rest, which creates something of a conundrum: Whereas big history wants global citizens to think *more* scientifically in order to guide the planet to a more salutary future, Lent feels that this is misguided. He wants us to reevaluate our values and to shift our cultural metaphors away from Christian and Scientific Revolution ones such as “Dominion Over Nature” and “Nature As Machine” toward eastern ones such as “Nature As Giving Parent” and “Reverent Guests Of Nature.” There is nothing wrong with science—the work under review is scientifically-based—, but we cannot get at everything we want to know though science, Lent says, and therefore we will need room for philosophy too, and some of the more speculative scientific methods, and for art and psychology, and also for intuition.

Now in my estimation, “trying to introduce a new vision of the past” by weaving “many disciplines of human knowledge together into a single, seamless narrative” to see “whether the inhabitants of planet Earth will be able to cooperate in achieving the goal of reaching a more or less sustainable future in reasonable harmony” makes *The Patterning*

Instinct a work of big history in the same manner, say, as Robert Bellah’s *Religion In Human Evolution* (2011).¹ But some big historians won’t see it this way.

And the author does not see it this way. (I asked him.) In fact Lent does not mention big history in this book at all, not even an oblique reference. He does not see it as a work of big history, he said, first, because he does not begin with the big bang and cosmic evolution but with an archaeology of the mind and the emergence of symbolic thought. Second, the author does not see his primary audience as students or academics but rather as educated laypersons perhaps with a social activist bent who, as he puts it, are caught between the incompatible worldviews of monotheism and scientific reductionism: people who “seek alternative explanations for meaning in their lives, which are frequently dismissed by science as incoherent” (p. 271). Lent offers as an alternative the Neo-Confucian tradition which, he says, “provides a coherent framework for systems-based interpretations of age-old Western philosophical issues such as how mind arises from the brain, what the basis of ethics and morality is, and how to live harmoniously and sustainably in the natural world” (p. 272).

At which juncture many readers of this journal will agree with Mr. Lent and say, no, this is not a work of big history, because it moves beyond explanations that are based upon the best available empirical evidence and an agreed-upon method of scientific reasoning narrowly construed. But this is just my point. It does not appear to me that the genie of big history is ever going to be stuffed back into that culturally-specific bottle, and now that it’s out

1 David Christian, Cynthia Stokes Brown, Craig Benjamin, *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* (McGraw Hill: New York, 2014), 2; Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present* (The New Press: New York, 2007), xi; 2; Fred Spier, *Big History and the Future of Humanity* (Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester, West Sussex, UK., 2010), 203.

in the world, for every self-proclaimed big historian who has just placed this book back on the shelf and gone off in search of something by Richard Dawkins, there is another self-proclaimed big historian happily heading towards the check-out line.²

Let's be honest with ourselves. Big history is *not* methodologically or ideologically or even pedagogically unified. There exists a wide range of approaches from the "scientific" (and I choose this term carefully) to the "mystic." Big history is still very much a contested discourse. One of the unanticipated benefits of this book is that it holds a mirror up to our discipline and forces those of us who choose to engage with it to reexamine our assumptions about what it is that we are trying to accomplish and how we are going about it.

Mr. Lent has chosen the venerable Prometheus Books (partnered with Random House since 2013) as publisher, and this hardcover edition it is being made available at a price that future generations will be able to afford, which fits well with Prometheus' philosophy as an "advocacy press" that seeks "to cultivate reason, science, humanistic values, and free inquiry in all areas of human interest." Neither a commercial press aiming to turn a profit, nor a university press that looks solely at scholarly appeal, Prometheus asks primarily whether a book "is meaningful to and readable by the general educated public." This one certainly meets that criterion while at the same time remaining challenging and serious

2 On the differences between Lent and Dawkins, see Jeremy Lent, "The Dangerous Delusions of Richard Dawkins," *Alternet*, August 3, 2017, <https://www.alternet.org/belief/dangerous-delusions-richard-dawkins>; Jerry Coyne, "Response to Lent," *Why Evolution Is True*, August 7, 2017, <https://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2017/08/07/predictably-salon-publishes-a-new-dawkins-hit-piece-and-its-as-dreadful-as-you-d-expect/>; Jeremy Lent, "Beyond Reductionism: An Open Letter in Response to Jerry Coyne," *Patterns of Meaning*, August 10, 2017, <https://patternsofmeaning.com/2017/08/10/beyond-reductionism-an-open-letter-in-response-to-jerry-coyne>.

of purpose.³

Where I take issue with *The Patterning Instinct* is in its characterization of the outcomes of the Axial Age and the subsequent unfolding of modernity. Many historians might find that the narrative is not nuanced enough—and too one-sided ideologically. Not that there is anything wrong with declaring your ideology up front: better that than pretending you don't have one. It's just that here in the thick of things, after a stimulating reflection on language, symbolic thought, what it means to become human, and the cultural metaphors produced by the earliest societies, the author veers off into a potted history of the differences among ancient civilizations and the rise of the West that boils down to a summative evaluation of Greek and Chinese culture. In essence, the Greeks (the West), ascribing to monotheism, mind-body dualism (Plato, Descartes), and abstract thinking got us into this mess; and the Chinese, more down-to-earth, systems thinkers (Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism) can help get us out. It is the Truth vs. the Way.

Now of course this does not do justice to the subtleties of Lent's thinking. You will have to delve into this yourself to fully appreciate his analyses of different patterns of cultural metaphor, but the fact remains that there are some very stark comparisons here between east and west that will not stand up to close scrutiny. To say, for example, in a discussion of the scientific revolution, that whereas Europeans "showed great dexterity in appropriating the new way of thinking as further justification for world domination" (p. 314), the "ultimate objective" for the Chinese cosmological viewpoint "was harmonization: the healthy integration of the individual with society and of humanity with the

3 Paul Kurtz, "Prometheus Books: Spreading Freethought Worldwide," *International Humanist News* (November 2003): 14-15. Kurtz is the founder and publisher of Prometheus Books which, in turn, is a Specialist Member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

natural world” (p. 329), just leaves out too much. There is much more to this story than that. And although Lent does come back around to discuss some of his western culture heroes—Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans, (Thomas Aquinas almost makes it), Da Vinci, Spinoza, Leibniz, the Romantics, Goethe—all of whom understood reality in ways commensurate with eastern thinking, even when he gets to the twentieth century, thinkers like Whitehead, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger are important because: “Like the Neo-Confucians before them, they recognized that intellect alone did not suffice to comprehend the universe, but skillful use of one’s intuition was required for a deeper understanding” (p. 363). Do with this what you will.

The Patterning Instinct is an original and unique historical narrative that combines the scientific with the ethical and the esoteric in ways that remind us that not all science is one, that the divide between science and other branches of knowledge is not as clear cut as we sometimes imagine it to be, and that Enlightenment thinking and Romanticism are not diametrically opposed but are rather entirely bound up with one another in an array of modern cultural metaphors that are shared worldwide. It also reminds us that the way forward is to facilitate dialogue with those whose metaphors might differ from ours as opposed to lowering the gates in the name of methodological purity. We are all in this together.