Book Review

Sahlins, Marshall, *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity*. Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press. 2022. 208 pages.

Juan M. del Nido
University of Cambridge

In the final years of his life, before his death in April 2021, Marshall Sahlins remained unsatisfied with the state of the discipline of anthropology. To address this situation, he set out to write a three-part magnum opus. As he explains in the preface to *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe*, this volume was to be the first in the series, setting out the ontological stakes: most of the planet, he argues, still lives in an immanent "regime" where the divine is intrinsic and constitutive to all human affairs. Yet, with a mix of hubris and condescension, most anthropology today studies those peoples with transcendentalist, disenchanted categories, understanding their cultures as a caricature of Euro-American worlds. Sahlins' project, therefore, was to lay the groundwork for a revolution in the discipline. His intent was to write a second volume on "Enchanted Economics," and a third and final volume on "Cosmic Politics," but he passed away as he was putting the very final touches on the first contribution. His historian son and a former graduate student tidied up the manuscript and brought it to print about a year after his death.

Both the crux of the argument and the methodological key to the book, and presumably to the project that was to be, are laid out in the introduction. Not just in the obvious sense that this is the usual function of an introduction, but also because there is a noticeable difference in tone and style between it and what follows. That is, the introduction is close in style to an argumentative essay, and the rest of the book presents studies that speak to variations on the original and already presented theme. Sahlins argues that, between the eighth and third millennia BCE, the worldwide spread of civilizations from Greece, Northern India, China, and the Near East commenced a still ongoing translation of

divinity, "from an *immanent* presence in human activity to a *transcendental* 'other world' of its own reality, leaving the earth alone to humans, now free to create their own institutions by their own means and lights" (2). In that immanent condition of the divine, Sahlins found no separation between the natural and the supernatural, but rather a condition in which everything is "enspirited" and people are empowered by their differential relations to the godly beings that surround them. This, he argues, is a condition of intersubjectivity (10). Achieving anything is, as such, conditional on the intervention of several of these other nonhuman beings, and on the kinds of relations people entertain with them.

Sahlins argues that most of humanity still lived in cultures of "immanence" as he drafted this volume in the early 2020s. Meanwhile, the transcendental turn relegated God to a supernatural, unreachable realm, and carried on imagining autonomous domains—religion, the economy, politics—whose impersonal objectivity organizes and gives sense and coherence to human social relations. This is the regime anthropology partakes in, dissolving immanent worlds in its transcendental ontology, even at its best. Sahlins advances a corrective to this regime, to recast anthropology by seeking understanding through generalizations of the kind Edmund Leach favoured: inspired guesswork that looks to see patterns emerge in relations across contexts, in a manner that can build possible universal propositions (14).

The book's four chapters expand on the facets of the immanent regime. Each seeks patterns to generalize from an impressive array of ethnographic work and contexts, broad in historical and geographic scope: from work in late nineteenth century to recent ethnographies of the Arctic and Amazon, including also written historical sources from the last 500 years, and even the Bible. Chapter one, entitled "Human Finitude," examines how peoples engage the immanent divine as they are faced with the evident constraints on human existence, from life and death to everything in between, knowing that culture, and indeed any kind of coherent control over their own being, is beyond reach without the divine (32). Chapter two, "Immanence," looks at the concreteness of this immanent divine that is "there" (39), suffusing relations between peoples and all kinds of things that are, in that divine sense, alive. Chapter three, "Metapersons," takes these arguments to the logical conclusion that "personhood is virtually everywhere and in almost everything." And that further still, "the universe is full of persons from whom emanate forces that constitute the world as objectifications of their intentions" (72), whether these "persons" are humans, spirits, ghosts, animals, rocks, or even fleeting feelings.

The fourth and final chapter, "The Cosmic Polity," argues that in immanent regimes one can think of this order of being as if it were a society of persons, which makes it jointly a social and moral order, and, in some sense, prefigures the state as a social-political order (125–127).

This is, in some senses, a strange book. The writing is tight and, at times, hard to follow, but one recognizes Sahlins' style instantly: erudite, encyclopedic, authoritative, and matter-of-fact on the edges, doing anthropological theorizing in ways we do not see much anymore. For example, he contrasts in just a few pages work on the Tallensi (96), the Papua New Guinean in Manus (97), ancient Rome (98), the Thonga of South Africa (99), as well as 1653 writings on the Inca (103). As one could expect given the nature of the argument, Sahlins pays explicit tribute to authors such as Viveiros de Castro, Descola, Pedersen, and others whose work in the last decade or so contributed to a less "unreformed" anthropology in the way that matters to this book.

Aside from those specific authors, however, who are addressed by name, Sahlins does not contend with the ontological and affective "turns"—or indeed the reflexive turn, itself the logical conclusion of the post-structuralist and postmodern turns—as epistemological movements. Nor does he really address these significant intellectual debates in positioning his argument or in the generalizations he develops. Intellectually speaking, the argument is solid without reference to any of these "turns." But both in its original framing, as the opening salvo of a trilogy, and now still in the single posthumous volume we are left to read, Sahlins is seeking to make a discipline-changing intervention that is not worlds apart from the interventions those currents of thought were tilting at, regardless of how successful or theoretically sound they were or are. As a result, for anthropologists trained in the years when and since those turns peaked, there will be a familiarity with the gist of the argument that detracts from the sense of novelty. What could be more interesting to them, and ultimately prove a most enduring contribution in this final work, is the irony that *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe* seeks a very similar intellectual end by working in the exact opposite way. That is, as recent, "turn-y" anthropological theory increasingly enjoins us to discard the general and focus on the particular—on the inner world and the untranslatability of experience—Sahlins' final salvo is to encourage us to look to others to learn broader things about the human condition and about ourselves. This, then, is the kind of anthropology we could do a bit more of in the present.