

OLIVIER MORIN

“This book is so intelligent it will make your heart beat faster. It will also change the way you think about culture, its place in human history, and yourself as a cultural animal. A major scientific achievement and a great read.”

Dan Sperber, Central European University, Budapest, and Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris

“This book is a rare attempt to put general theory together with genuine ethnography in a non-reductionist way.”

Maurice Bloch, London School of Economics and Political Science

Of all the things we do and say, most will never be repeated or reproduced. Once in a while, however, an idea or a practice generates a chain of transmission that covers more distance through space and time than any individual person ever could.

What makes such transmission chains possible? For two centuries, the dominant view—from psychology to anthropology—was that humans owe their cultural prosperity to their powers of imitation. In this view, modern cultures exist because the people who carry them are gifted at remembering, storing, and reproducing information. In *How Traditions Live and Die*, Olivier Morin proposes an alternative to this standard view.

What makes traditions live is not a general-purpose imitation capacity. Cultural transmission is partial, selective, and often unfaithful. Some traditions live on in spite of this, because they tap into widespread and basic cognitive preferences. These attractive traditions spread, not by being better retained or more accurately transferred, but because they are passed on over and over. Morin's theory is used to shed light on various puzzles of cultural change—from the distribution of bird songs to the staying power of children's stories. It also explores the special relation that links the human species to its culture.

OLIVIER MORIN is a researcher in theoretical anthropology at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. He holds a PhD from the Paris École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. His work focused on the study of cultural transmission. Morin has held research positions at the Central European University in Budapest and the KLI Institute in Klosterneuburg.

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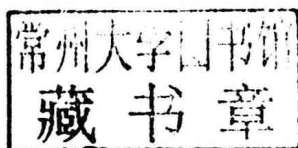
Foundations
of Human
Interaction

MORIN

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LIVE AND DIE**

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FOUNDATIONS OF HUMAN INTERACTION

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This series promotes new interdisciplinary research on the elements of human sociality, in particular as they relate to the activity and experience of communicative interaction and human relationships. Books in this series explore the foundations of human interaction from a wide range of perspectives, using multiple theoretical and methodological tools. A premise of the series is that a proper understanding of human sociality is only possible if we take a truly interdisciplinary approach.

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How Traditions Live and Die

Olivier Morin

FOREWORD

In a way, this book is the third incarnation of my PhD thesis, defended in 2010 and published in French in 2011, as *Comment les traditions naissent et meurent—la transmission culturelle*. While translating that book, I felt it necessary to revise various parts, and the book that you have opened substantially departs from the French version. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 were translated almost as they were, but chapters 3, 5, and 6 have been thoroughly rewritten. A technical appendix now supplements the essay on children's traditions that forms the core of chapter 5. I have made available the relevant data in a database that can be consulted online (<http://sites.google.com/site/sitedoliviermorin/morin-rabelais-online-material.pdf>).

This book, however, is not quite a second edition of the 2011 version. There is no change in the overall claims and arguments worth signaling, and no attempt has been made to update the references with the post-2011 literature on the many topics this book touches on. The literature on cultural evolution is growing at such a pace that an altogether new book would be needed to deal with these developments. On the other hand, I also felt that the present argument could still stand on its own today.

In fact, there are only so many books and articles that I think would have made a huge difference to this book, had it been written now. One of them is Thom Scott-Phillips's *Speaking Our Minds* (2014). Chapters 2 and 6 of the present work dwell on the evolution of ostensive communication on more than one occasion. They echo the view that ostensive communication could have evolved in rather straightforward ways described by the theory of natural selection, and that its cultural exploitation by languages was secondary to its biological evolution. In 2010 arguments to back this claim existed but were scattered among dozens of papers. Now a book exists that makes the case quite elegantly.

Two sections of chapter 2 have been adapted, with many modifications, in a 2014 *Biological Theory* paper: "Is cooperation a maladaptive by-product of

cultural transmission? Simon's Docility Hypothesis reconsidered" (Morin 2014). The part of chapter 5 that dwells on children's peer culture was published (in an early version much amended since) in 2010 under the title "Pourquoi les enfants ont-ils des traditions ?" in *Terrain : revue d'ethnologie de l'Europe* (Morin 2010).

Durkheim is quoted in G. Simpson's translation, Johannes Herder in T. O. Churchill's translation. The version of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* used here was due to C. K. S. Moncrieff. Gabriel Tarde's *Laws of Imitation* is quoted in E. C. Parsons's translation. Additional quotes from these and other francophone authors are translated by me.

SERIES EDITOR PREFACE

Human interaction is the engine room of social reality. It is where minds meet, and thus where minds go public. When we encounter other people, we learn what they do and how they do it, what they have and why. And as Olivier Morin richly explores here, we may find others' actions, ideas, inventions and possessions more or less attractive. If there is enough attraction, we will copy, adopt, or transform the bits of culture that appeal to us, and in this way we drive the spread and possible transformation of traditions. This is how traditions become distributed across minds, places, times, and worlds. They are not just the products of interacting agents; they become contexts for interacting agents. So just as human interaction is a foundation of culture, culture becomes a foundation of human interaction.

N. J. E.
Sydney, July 2015

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The dissertation’s jury, composed of Daniel Andler, Pascal Boyer, Jean Gayon, Bruno Karsenti, and Bernard Thierry, examined my text with tireless, generous thoroughness, and this version owes them a lot. My debt to my supervisor, Dan Sperber, will be apparent to any one who reads this book and his work. It is through Dan that I first came across most of the people cited here, and most of the ideas in this work.

The English version was written while I was a post-doctoral fellow at the KLI Institute in Klosterneuburg. Thanks to Daniel Dennett’s generous invitation, I was fortunate enough to discuss preliminary drafts of this version in

Santa Fe with Susan Blackmore, Robert Boyd, Nicolas Claidière, Peter Godfrey-Smith, Joseph Henrich, Peter Richerson, Dan Sperber, and Kim Sterelny. Their feedback was extremely precious. So were the advice and comments given by Jay Fogelman, Thom Scott-Phillips, Dan Sperber, and Radu Umbres. I also wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for their efforts. This edition benefitted from the technical help of the SOMICS grant (*Constructing Social Minds: Coordination, Communication, and Cultural Transmission*) of the ERC.

HOW TRADITIONS LIVE AND DIE

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