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Pascal Boyer: Three Lectures in Brno

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On 16th and 17th May 2019, the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University hosted one of the most prominent founders of the cognitive science of religion. Responding to an invitation from LEVYNA (Laboratory for the Experimental Research of Religion), Pascal Boyer, currently a professor at Washington University in St. Louis (Departments of Psychology and Anthropology), arrived in Brno to give three lectures, attracting many students and researchers from various universities and departments in both the Czech and Slovak Republics.

On the first day, Pascal Boyer delivered a lecture titled “Cognitive Attractors in Cultural Evolution: Threat-Detection and Junk Culture”. Under the term “junk culture” – the cultural equivalent of junk DNA –, Boyer includes myths, superstitions, conspiracies, and urban legends, etc., which tend to be extremely widespread despite having low epistemic value. Similarly to junk DNA, junk culture, therefore, does not seem to be good for anything, yet Boyer entertains the possibility that there might just be some adaptive value to it. Challenging the classical and over-reported psychological notion that humans are generally very gullible and easily influenced, Boyer argued that people are actually very wary of being deceived by others. However, there is a psychological loophole which allows junk culture to be so widespread: people tend to pay attention to threat-related information because being more knowledgeable about their environment allows them to avoid dangers more easily; that is, without needing to test the threats themselves. Concomitantly, there is a smaller chance that people will try to test whether claims about such indirect threats are true – it is both easier and safer simply to believe threat-framed information. Still, why do people believe in chemtrails, vaccines causing autism, or the Illuminati? For Boyer, the question is not whether and how much they believe in them, but why people transmit these ideas. The underlying logic here is that the sender of threat-related information simultaneously sends two signals – that he is a good source of information and that he cares about the welfare of the receiver. The puzzle of junk culture, Boyer explains, is then a question of coalitionary psychology. By disseminating threat-related information, people can test who is prepared to be in coalition with the sender and who is a potential foe. The lecture was followed by a discussion that often revolved around contemporary societal issues such as fake news or the rise of populism, illustrating the real-world relevance of Boyer’s thinking.

On the second day of Boyer's visit, two more meetings took place. The first one, under the title "Religions in the Wild: How General Properties of Human Communication Result in Religious Traditions" was framed as a workshop aimed at discussion. Boyer opened by presenting his ideas on informal religious activity (IRA) – that is, spontaneous religious activity performed by shaman-like specialists outside of, at the margins of, or before the very emergence of organized religion. According to Boyer, IRA is not concerned with cosmology, faith, or salvation as contemporary organized religions are, but with practical, day-to-day misfortunes which humans have faced for most of their evolutionary history. Organized religions are almost always at odds with IRA because people, being naturally theologically incorrect, usually do not adhere to the doctrines of organized religions completely. Meanwhile, IRA happens anywhere, often disturbing the doctrines of organized religions, which in response attempt to mitigate IRA. Drawing on this and information from the lecture presented the day before, Boyer then focused his attention on the question of whether there is a market for good sources of information. He proposed that in all ancestral societies, good sources needed to undertake costs to become reliable unless they utilized the above-mentioned threat loophole. Boyer suggested the notion that cultural variants are therefore produced not in a random fashion (in which the process of selection would be the only requirement to see what gets transmitted), but with respect to their relevance to others. The reason for this is that it is in the interest of the producer to offer something with certain properties which might, in turn, increase his or her fitness. The first half of the workshop was then followed by an hour-long discussion touching on various aspects of Boyer's ideas.

The final lecture, the presentation of a collaboration between Boyer and Michael Petersen, shifted the focus slightly towards the field of economics. As the title "Folk Economics Beliefs as Cognition and Culture: Sketch of a Project for a Research Programme" suggested, the focus was on widespread economic beliefs which are in no way influenced by scholarly thinking. Instead of succumbing to the "people just don't understand microeconomics" trope, Boyer argued how various mechanisms of the human mind influence folk evaluations of economic questions and intuitively give rise to mental representations that are not entirely sensible – i.e., folk economic beliefs. On the example of trading between the USA and China, Boyer illustrated one possible algorithm of folk economic thinking by showing how various automatically activated psychological mechanisms predispose and limit people in their perception of economic issues. Commenting on the confusion of the contemporary inter-connected world, Boyer noted that humans, in a somewhat evolutionary-mismatch manner, simply did not evolve in big and anonymous market ecologies but



in small bands of other in-groups who rarely encountered out-group strangers.

Those who met Pascal Boyer for the first time were perhaps surprised to find that Boyer was not a dry scholar who once “founded CSR” but a friendly, humble, easy-going, and funny person. The attendees of his Brno lectures had the chance to experience a convivial event that gathered not only scientists interested in evolutionary theory and the cognitive science (of religion), but also in psychology and anthropology in general.