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HOMO DOMESTICATUS? P. J. WILSON'S "THE DOMESTICATION OF THE HUMAN SPECIES"

A methodologically new view on cultural anthropology

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Slightly modified, the present bookreview forms part of a paper on 'Habitat anthropology - a phenomenological approach to culture' prepared for the 14th Int. Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES; July 26-Aug. 1, 1998) at Williamsburg (section 'Architectural Anthropology').

One of the best introductions to habitat anthropology (as well as architectural anthropology) is Peter J. Wilson's book "The Domestication of the Human Species" (1988). Wilson is an anthropologist and uses anthropological methods. Prehistorically, his main thesis is the "revolutionary significance of architecture" for human evolution. He focuses essentially on the elaborated house in the framework of permanent settlements appearing about 15,000 years ago during the Mesolithic period both developing into the main feature with Neolithic agrarian village cultures.

In its basic topic (architecture and settlement), in its globally broad outlook and in some of its methods (ethno-pre-history), Wilson's study is similar to our approach ("architecture and habitat anthropology"). However, there are distinct differences. Following is a short critical review.

Most importantly in relation to our field, Wilson's book shows to what extent the phenomenon of human dwelling and settlement had conventionally been neglected both by prehistory and anthropology. Consequently, Wilson manages to outline a fairly new access to prehistory by focusing on "domesticated society" tracing traits of an evolution from Meso- and Neolithic periods into the history of early and later cities and empires, and even extrapolating certain topics into modern times.

Methodologically too, Wilson is interesting. He opens the narrow historic views of conventional prehistory by widening the horizons into ethnology, using its relatively recent sources on traditional

cultures for insights into the meaning of the house and the settlement. In six chapters he presents materials reaching from primatology (vision important in the environmental interaction among apes), prehistory (distinction of "open societies" of hunter/ gatherers and "domesticated societies" with the development of agrarian village cultures) and ethnology. The latter is quantitatively dominant in his discussions.

Wilson relies mainly on the standard ethnographical reports and ethnological discussions to support his thesis, particularly in regard to social aspects. A further focus important in Wilson's discussions is the early history of cities and empires globally. It is this essentially historical material which provides the weight for his claims.

The wide horizon is the most valuable aspect of this study and constitutes its 'eye-opener' quality. It gives a fairly clear impression of the potential implications of this new focus on architecture and settlement for evolved cultural conditions. The attempt to outline an evolution of higher culture based on the house and the permanent settlement is certainly valid and important. Wilson is fully aware that sensory capacities, in particular vision, are an essential paradigm in regard to the spatial orders created by architecture and that this continuous interaction of human perception and conception with the natural and artificial environment develops spatio-structural complexes. In Wilson's words, "Domesticated society is founded on and dominated by the elementary and original structure, the building, which serves not just as shelter but as a diagram and, more generally as the source for metaphors of structure that make the social construction and reconstruction of reality possible." (153).

However, in regard to several topics and extrapolations his arguments are not convincing. Wilson's "metaphysics of politics", that is his attempt to explain power with the evolutionary impacts of the house (and particularly also "witchcraft" as a dominant characteristic of domesticated societies), are not plausible. Relying on often strongly Eurocentric views of standard ethnology and profiting from the highly idealised terminology of social and psychological anthropology, he loses sight of his most important object: the factual and structural conditions of architecture and settlement.

Further, his definition of the house as an evolved construction and part of a permanent settlement covers up the fact that both the architectural and the habitat component are part of an evolutionary process which has much deeper roots ("constructivity", Yerkes 1929). In cutting himself off from these sources, he misses important parameters inherent in this constructive habitat tradition.

Probably the most important consequence of Wilson's "evolved evolution" is the following. The territorial aspect of architecture does not enter his view. By focussing on the evolved house, he excludes other types of architecture which were equally instrumental for social relations. His most important thesis, namely that settlement and architecture "impose conditions on living that provide a basic spatial structure" is valid also for nestbuilding and the temporary night camps of the great apes (which he only mentions casually!). And, further, it is certainly also valid for 'sacred architecture', but Wilson deals with this fairly superficially. He simply interprets it in the framework of domestic architecture (e. g. Egyptian pyramids as dwellings after death. Egyptian temples are neglected). Thus, Wilson's notion of architecture is limited and conventional. Evidently, anthropology is his home-range. He has not noticed the research developments within architecture itself (e.g. Amos Rapoport is missing in his bibliography!). This anthropological one-sidedness is a weak point which forces him

into farfetched social constructs for some important topics (e. g. "power") which, in fact, can be explained much more plausibly with functional conditions of the architectural phenomena itself. If, for instance, sacred architecture is considered in its semantic and territorial implications, it tells us a lot about spatial orientation, about ritual and cultic dimensions of different societies. We might also understand the modes of territorial control, the motives of territorial expansions and the function of monumental architecture within. And with such processes the formation of social hierarchies and political power becomes very plausible.

A further, and maybe not less important weak point is his lack of reflexion regarding space. Though he hints to the importance of vision, he takes space for granted. This creates paradoxical situations where symbolic meanings of the house are discussed. Suddenly an "imaginative use of the house (and the village)..." appears. Suddenly, in Wilson's evolution, "the house is a human body, "a linear male-female axis" runs through it. Suddenly "the house, the village and the areas within and immediately bordering them, concentrate and miniaturise the universe."

Wilson naturally relies on ethnological and common anthropological reasoning here, which both may lend support to such "imaginary" dialogue from their idealistic Eurocentric backgrounds. But someone familiar with the structural conditions of architecture in the anthropological framework can not be content with this kind of poetic bricolage in relation to the house. Particularly in the case of houses representing the "universe" Wilson's lack of an anthropology of space becomes evident (Bollnow 1963; 'macrocosmic perception is very late achievement of cultural history [Europe:14th century]; 'universal' orders developed in microcosmic settlement conditions). Thus, projecting the modern term "universe" onto a local or regional "order" of things produces tremendous distortions. In addition it blocks the view on something more plausible. That such symbolisms expressed by houses represent evolutionary stages of ontologies in which architectural form was the model of the environmental world. But, this again is primarily a problem of sacred (or semantic) architecture widely omitted by Wilson. Only in secondary ways (by integration of semantic architecture) did 'cosmic symbolism' become integrated into the house.

In spite of these shortcomings, Wilson's book is very important. As we said in the subtitle: a methodologically new view on cultural anthropology. Nota bene: one which requires a new organisation of sources. Prehistorically, it proposes two new "objects" for material culture, the house and the settlement. It does not limit itself historically on finds, but outlines vital meanings of house and habitat with sources from ethnology. Finally it supports this ethno-prehistorical line with the history of early cities and traces established topics of these 'early high cultures' like "power", or "social hierarchy" initially to the Meso-/Neo-lithic house.

With this very important disposition, Wilson's book, in fact, outlines a new branch in the tree of cultural anthropology. Related to man and material culture, it springs off from the concept 'man the toolmaker' and now calls itself - 'man the constructor of his own physical as well as ontological reality'. Man the domesticated species! An important new concept. A new and fruitful term might be coined: *Homo domesticatus*! Taking this term in its originally wider sense of 'domus and domain', that is, including control of a defined environment, we might be able to find Wilson's extrapolations into evolved culture much more plausible.

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