


Book Review: Our Common Denominator: Human Universals Revisited by Christopher Antweiler

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Antweiler, Christoph. *Our Common Denominator: Human Universals Revisited*. Translated by Diane Kerns. New York: Berghahn Books, 2016. xiv + 350 pages. Hardcover, \$120.00.

Dr. Christoph Antweiler, a cultural anthropologist grounded in natural history, has specialties in social reproduction, cultural selection, and the evolution of ‘social evolution’ itself. His analytical tables and exposition are masterful and survive translation in German and English. He distills and synthesizes with precision, and discerns when to ease up on *isms*, back off from absolutes, and avoid absurdity. He pursues *human universals*, or *our common denominator*, with rigor and perceptiveness—visiting the humanities, cultural and social sciences, and natural sciences—with over 700 indexed authors in psychology, philosophy, history, prehistory, linguistics, sociology, ecology, and primatology. Over 1,400 in-text parenthetical citations are tied to the extensive bibliography. Antweiler admits to feeling somewhat of a dabbler (an occupational hazard for a synthesist); however, he scores high as a detective.

Universal features pertain to *societies*, not to individuals or to human beings as members of a species or to humanity in general. Antweiler cautions against putting causal assumptions into definitions and against dichotomizing nature and convention. Rather, he allows for discovery, such as the emergence and function of ultrasociality, that is, humans living in large groupings that last and expand due to group social experiences. Antweiler provisionally lays aside non-Western publications, although his achievements in logical presentation—and ties to economics and politics – demonstrate the feasibility of doing what he proposes to do. Antweiler expresses indebtedness and inspiration to the “masterpiece” of Donald Edward Brown, *Human Universals* (1991) (p. 32). Brown is a mainstream anthropologist who delved into cultural relativism and cultural diversity. His work was also emphatically endorsed by Francis Fukuyama, a world-class political scientist.

Antweiler’s stated goal is an interdisciplinary perspective, designed for persons who make decisions and policies in the public domain as well as others who want a general overview of human universals. Academic users might be graduate students facing comprehensive exams and diverse specialists who interrogate them. Other beneficiaries include persons whose accidental, assigned, or incidental readings have left them intrigued and wishing for coherent arrangement and fingerposts for missing parts. The book presents prodigious quantities of work that have been compressed to seeds. Having the book is like holding the fractal formula for Western cultural anthropology.

Unexpectedly, this hybrid treatise scrupulously catalogs criticisms of universals, including assertions that they do not exist or cannot be found by searching. Doing so raises the value of *Our Common Denominator: Human Universals Revisited* as an up-to-date literature survey through 2016 and as a concise reference volume. Antweiler’s special accomplishments

are the dragonfly-eye view of “universal” and amalgamating consequences of both Darwinian and epigenetic modes of adaptation and evolution. Antweiler also includes descriptions of co-universals as basic norms of sociality and these include: (a) reciprocal trust, (b) truth, and (c) turn-taking dialogue. He further explains that one collateral universal is that linguistic capability permits social manipulation, including rumors, gossip, and deliberate lying. Awareness of this is likewise universal. My compliments to Dr. Antweiler, and also translator Diane Kerns, for their superb organization and elegant succinctness. Just one more list, enumerating the approximately 40 words said to be almost certainly universal, would have been helpful. That list would reinforce other commonalities currently hyperactive in politics and marketing: “A good command of the language is highly valued in all societies” (p. 137).

Yet, implicitly, success at getting to the *human universals*, or *our common denominator*, must yield substance compatible with non-Western findings as well. Hence, many papers can be generated by treating Antweiler’s universals as hypotheses to be tested using non-Western scholarship: “Each and every established universal should be considered at best a hypothesis or, even more cautiously, a suggestion. Research into universals means not just postulating or proving universals, but also exposing supposed universals as false!” (p. 256). The future-forward momentum of Antweiler’s own work will be propelled by his observations and suggestions offered to other researchers. Much promising work is proposed on ultrasociality, production of hybrids utilizing co-productivity or co-evolution across disciplines. Antweiler also points to library stacks loaded with work yet to be done; untouched since the 1960s are leads in Talcott Parsons’ work (then super-eminent among American social scientists), and in the 1990s interest in the intense domestication of human nature was left ready to be unshelved someday.

The design-concept of the book accommodates linear and global reasoners alike. Tables, lists, and exposition are arranged to optimize utility. Systematic analytical methods are displayed with crystal clarity. *In a nutshell*, Antweiler succeeds. He gives persons a gyrocompass to muddle through mazes and conflicts in the post-truth era, namely Anthropocene society as we know it.

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