

Ann Morning

**Eviatar Zerubavel, Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity, and Community. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 240 pp.**

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## Book reviews

### **Eviatar Zerubavel, *Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity, and Community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 240 pp.**

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Several summers ago at a family reunion, I learned that one of my ancestors had attended the university where I was finishing my doctoral degree. Somewhat chagrined at not being the first Princetonian in my family, I did a little sleuthing in the alumni archives, and found out a few things about my Ivy League forebear of the 1780s. First, I was relieved to learn that he never actually graduated, thus preserving that distinction for me; he was expelled for brawling (or more precisely, for some political duel involving caning). Second – and more intriguing to me – was that he had apparently ridden up on horseback from Virginia, accompanied by a male slave.

It goes without saying that my ancestor was white, and his servant black. But because I identify as African-American, in a country where race is all, it took me a while to fully comprehend that I was descended from the white slaveowner and not (as far as I know) from the black slave. In other words, like many other black Americans, my vision of my family tree tends to be limited to one with only other black people on its branches, even if they come in a suspiciously broad array of skin tones, eye colors, and hair textures. It's hard for me to really imagine the slaveowners and their white kin as my relatives, even though they are just as much my ancestors as the African ones.

Such instances, in which our perceptions of relatedness are governed not by biological lineage but rather by social conventions and selective memories, are at the heart of Eviatar Zerubavel's *Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity, and Community*. This slim, wonderfully-engaging volume is devoted to the central claim that relatedness is socially constructed, rather than biologically determined. As Zerubavel sees it, “nature is only one component of our genealogical landscape”:

Culture, too, plays a critical role in the way we theorize as well as measure genealogical relatedness. Not only is the unmistakably social logic of reckoning such relatedness quite distinct from the biological reality it supposedly reflects, it often overrides it, as when certain ancestors obviously count more than others in the way we determine kinship and ethnicity [p. 9].

Genealogical accounts are “narratives of social descent rather than accurate chronicles or maps of genetic relatedness” [p. 64]; they are molded by conventions, norms, and traditions. In other words, genealogies are consummately sociological objects, to which Zerubavel brings a thoroughly sociological imagination – albeit one that is informed by his transdisciplinary explorations into fields from genetics to linguistics. In clear but elegant prose, he lays out the building blocks of a sociology of genealogy, which is also necessarily a sociology of memory: “Rather than mere reflections of nature, ancestral ties are thus products of particular norms of remembrance that basically determine whom we consider our ancestors” [p. 67].

The core of *Ancestors & Relatives* is a careful and thoughtful exposition of key concepts such as lineage and co-descent, with special theoretical attention to “the politics

of descent”; that is, to the many ways we shape our family trees to include some people and exclude others. Zerubavel expands the basic definition of lineage as a matter of parenthood and filiation to one that encompasses the notions of grandparenthood and eventually ancestry, noting some important sociological implications of such extended chains. For one thing, lineages promote “an interpersonal sense of the past...a way of experiencing even distant historical events quasi-autobiographically” [p. 21]. For another, they are channels for the intergenerational transmission of social status (as “pedigree”) and of symbolic and material forms of capital. “Indeed, one of the main functions of genealogies is to solidify, let alone enhance, our social standing” [p. 24]. Zerubavel’s reflections on lineage do not stop there, however; he goes on to demonstrate that there are multiple ways in which we can envision our links to our predecessors and successors, from the cone-like, “ancestor-centric” tree that features one individual and his or her ever-burgeoning generations of descendants, to the fan-like “descendant-centric” display that focuses on one individual and his exponentially-expanding array of ancestors. The two models represent the contrast between traditional and modern forms of genealogical awareness, he argues, the former lending itself to a sense of genealogical community, the latter to a sense of genealogical identity.

I suspect that one of the contributions readers will find most useful is Zerubavel’s comprehensive and original typology of the “rules of genealogical delineation” [p. 71] that we observe when we manipulate our family trees to feature some relatives and downplay others. His is an amusing and persuasive catalogue of actions like “stretching” (extending our pedigrees back in time as far back as we can to make them seem more prestigious), “clipping” (shortening them to avoid association with undesirable distant ancestors), and “pruning” (shearing off embarrassing branches). The arboreal imagery is deliberate, and in keeping with the tree trunks, roots and branches that we so often use to represent families. A similar exploration of our “genealogical engineering” [p. 114] can also be applied to prospective attempts to shape families’ futures, Zerubavel shows; integration and segregation for example are forward-looking moves to erase or create boundaries between our descendants.

*Ancestors & Relatives* rightfully concludes by putting genealogy into its ever-evolving social context. In the last chapter, “The Future of Genealogy,” the author identifies a number of trends that are likely to affect how we view relatedness. Among them are decreasing family size, divorce and remarriage, and new reproductive technologies like surrogacy, embryo freezing, and cloning. The conclusion’s real contribution however comes from its development of the insight that “genealogy has in fact become a general framework, or template, for conceptualizing various forms of relatedness that include, but are by no means confined to, biological ancestry, descent, and consanguinity” [p. 118]. Drawing on a wide range of examples, from “generations” of students (e.g. Zerubavel as a “great-great-grandstudent” of the “founding father” Georg Simmel, through a chain of mentors including Park and Goffman), languages (think “the family of Indo-European languages”), architectural styles, and even television programs (“And so *60 Minutes* begat *20/20*...”), *Ancestors & Relatives* persuasively argues that genealogy is a way of thinking that “has clearly become the predominant framework within which we now think about relatedness in general” [p. 130]. And importantly, “the very same tactics we

use to construct biologically based genealogical narratives also help us construct symbolic ones” [pp. 123-124]. In other words, we can clip and prune pedigrees for languages and musical styles the same way we do for human families. As a result, a sociology of genealogy is not just an inquiry into our conceptualization of kinship, but a path to understanding the much broader notion of what it means to be “related.”

My one quibble with *Ancestors & Relatives* is that despite its sociological mooring, it is written from an overly universalist perspective. That is, there is some ambiguity about whether claims like “we certainly have a tremendous fascination with genealogy” [p. 4] are statements about the contemporary United States, the industrialized world more generally, or the human species. Zerubavel argues up front that “deep obsession with ancestry” [p. 4] is not limited to the West or to modernity, and provides fascinating examples from many places and times to back this claim. But is this panoply of observations sufficient to make the case that “thinking genealogically is one of the distinctive characteristics of human cognition” [p. 131]? As attuned as the author is to the difference between social constructs and the “natural” biological characteristics we often believe constitute them, it is surprising that he closes the book with this universal claim about human ways of thinking. Perhaps the argument would be more persuasive if Zerubavel took a page from Lawrence Hirschfeld, the anthropologist-turned-psychologist who explored the “naturalness” of racial thinking in *Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture and the Child's Construction of Human Kinds* [MIT Press, 1996]. Based on a wealth of psychological research, Hirschfeld advanced the idea that although humans do not “naturally” perceive and categorize races, they do have an innate cognitive faculty for “kind-making” that can easily be adapted to race-sorting in societies that have invented a notion of race. In short, support from the field of psychology would be indispensable before making claims about human cognition.

*Ancestors & Relatives* is nonetheless a masterful treatise on the social construction of an everyday phenomenon that usually seems entirely biological to us. After all, who our ancestors and descendants are seems at first glance like a pretty straightforward question. Not only does this very readable volume give us a series of tools with which to scrutinize such relationships, it pushes us to think harder about the very notion of relationship itself – and to recognize the literally familiar patterns of conceptualizing relatedness that are all around us.

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