

Culture



Fredrik BARTH, *Balinese Worlds*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993; 370 pages

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with very few infelicities but the use of one quotation from Appell is rather mystifying — “that the ritual symbolization of social isolates follows their entification in the jural realm” (49-50). This comment occurs in a discussion of the importance of ancestral rituals for the Ibaloi but we are not better informed as a result of it. While Wiber makes her points succinctly, I cannot help but get the impression that further elaboration of the main argument is necessary. Since the emphasis of Wiber’s discussion is rather specific rather than providing a general ethnography of the Ibaloi, a more detailed account would have been practicable.

Fredrik BARTH, *Balinese Worlds*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993; 370 pages.

By Catherine Tihanyi

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This book couldn’t have come at a more appropriate moment in the history of anthropology. Many of the traditional tenets of the discipline have of late been put through a process of self criticism which is certainly healthy but which has, at the same time, led to a certain amount of negativity. Once the validity of the ethnographic project has been put into question by, among other things, showing that each informant sees and explains things from a differently positioned perspective, and once anthropological theorizing has been shown likewise to be determined by the position of the theorist, can there still be systematic courses of inquiry opened to further the discipline?

Barth’s book goes a long way in taking up this challenge. It is an extremely rich and complex work which, in spite of the engaging clarity of its style, is not easily amenable to a brief summary. Space does not allow for discussion of Barth’s insightful and sensitive ethnographic description (supplemented by many references to the work of Uni Wikan, his wife, with whom he did the field work) which includes several topics of general interest such as factionalism, violence, ritual, sorcery, etc. His findings are at variance with that of many of his predecessors. These differences, argues Barth, stem entirely from the theoretical and methodological approaches used and I shall thus focus on some aspects of these.

A point of entry is this very notion of position. It isn’t that Barth’s own sociocultural background is different from that of the other ethnographers of Bali, but rather that he focuses elsewhere. This elsewhere, first of all, is not made up of things such as artifacts, ideas, symbols, institutions, social roles, etc., but is made up of people in action, of processes of interaction, in other words of practice. In this sense there is a consistency with previous interactional theory but the difference, as I see it, is that the problem of the context, which had perhaps been the main weakness of this theory in the past, has been resolved. Contexts are now not only fully part of the model but in many ways provide its dynamics.

Barth writes that the aim of ethnography is to understand what’s going on from the participants’ points of view and “to build progressively a more workable facsimile of the realities they variously construct and inhabit” (p, 93). Functionalist analysis as well as “thick description” miss the point as they interpret the data according to the concerns of Western anthropologists. Instead, what is of interest is the interpretation given by the actors themselves, not an easy task as not only do different participants to the same event interpret it differently, but also one participant might interpret it differently at various times. Barth resolves this with a very interesting theory of acts where events are turned into acts, or in other words, given meaning through the interpretation of the people involved.

This determines the methods ethnographers should use. Processes of interpretation partake of the cultural context which is made up of an indeterminate number of “streams” from which people draw the interpretative “keys” they use to give meaning to events. It is these keys the ethnographer needs to uncover by focusing on the individual practice of participants instead of using keys provided by anthropological tradition. And, as I understand it, each key used by participants links practice with context. Culture, argues Barth, is only accessible through socially situated practice and not through any formal description of institutions or hermeneutic analysis of symbol systems.

But in spite of the diversity of positioning and interpreting, recognizable patterns do emerge and they reproduce as well as modify cultural streams of knowledge. These patterns emerge from practice as it involves certain reoccurring “concerns”. These concerns are not norms, neither are they “constitutive of Balinese lives” (p.349). Rather they interact in

a sort of feedback loop with available cultural streams which they in turn modify so that the streams come to privilege the patterns so generated. North Balinese concerns are such that they generate a range of common behavior patterns in otherwise widely different communities.

I have some questions regarding this process of generation. Firstly, it seems to me that these traditions or ways of knowing or cultural streams do more than provide means of interpretation, as for instance when the modern state (which is part of one of these streams) coercively privatizes the land previously held communally in a village. The concerns linked with the practice of widely different access to power are not *explicitly* explored in this book. Secondly, I have difficulties understanding the concept of generation of patterns itself, though I can *see* the existence of these patterns and I fully agree with Barth that they must be generated from practice. Could it be that the circle Barth uses to explain his concept is too limited? If I understand it correctly, the process involves several layers internal to the person (after all any process of interpretation entails a conversation with oneself, that is, it is a cognitive process — though this is implied in the book which draws on theories of knowledge), and several layers of external interactions. And then there is yet the anthropologist's internal and external interactions leading to the representation of these patterns.

These criticisms should not, however, detract from the qualities of *Balinese Worlds*. Barth's complex thought appears to be bound for a fruitful future.

Marianne GULLESTAD, *The Art of Social Relations: Essays on Culture, Social Action and Everyday Life in Modern Norway*, Oslo: Scandinavian University Press (Distributed by Oxford University Press), 1992; 251 pages, \$60.95.

By George Park

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This book is, and is more than, a gathering of fugitives. The nine assembled essays represent work published since 1986, discussed at length in an introductory chapter outlining the author's aims and premises. The reader learns at once to expect a single-minded focus. We get snapshots of "society seen crosswise" — the everyday and private lives of mainly urban Norwegians, mainly around home or from a

home base interacting with peers. Methodologically, she is a champion of holism. It is accordingly a pleasure to report that the several essays do comprise a single whole, and one greater than its parts. Some redundancy remains from the preparation of each essay for independent publication, but the amount is modest, and in compensation any chapter can be taken by itself.

The quality of the argument is more reminiscent of Simmel than Goffman, but the old fundamentalism, the global pretensions of a Simmel (e.g. on gender difference or the ontology of individualism) are missing. While sharing the same unremitting concern with manners, Gullestad never tries for Goffman's charming superficiality. The result is not exactly a focus on values, though each essay explicitly revolves about a Norwegian "cultural category" or value. Students of values have never enjoyed Goffman's privileged right to pluck examples from thin air. When you have to prove the prevalence of a human foible, not just realize it in the concrete, it is hardly enough just to frame a likely set of character traits and illustrate. The trouble is that anthropologists in the field are seldom in position to do justice, as Gullestad can for her own culture, to the micro-sociology of everyday existence. Exploring character values, we are taught here, requires not just fieldwork but direct observation of the kind which allows exploration on what Edmund Leach, in a moment of lofty inspiration, called "the ground."

Gullestad's list for the Norwegians she has interviewed and observed can be found in several versions. The problem is getting through the day's voyage from sleep to sleep without capsizing. As with Sumner and his *mores*, the analyst must look for the verbal category which explains an action or moral strategy as self-evidently right. Thus we have a set of conditions any individual is expected to recognize as dangerous, and a corresponding set of safe havens. The home must be kept safe at all costs. A person must have access to peace and quiet. Threats to one's self-sufficiency or independence, to the security of one's domestic arrangements, to one's self-control must be foreseen and avoided. Trouble comes of careless involvements with others, of expecting proper treatment from persons socially unlike one's self and one's known social equals. These are themes which allow of endless, quiet exploration, of pointed theorizing well below Merton's middle range; and speculation as to the range of their applicability.