

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Fredrik Barth, Andre Gingrich, Robert Parkin, Sydel Silverman. *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. x + 406 pp. \$52.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-03828-5; \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-03829-2.

Reviewed by Ludovic Coupaye (Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia)  
Published on H-AfrArts (August, 2006)



Is there such a thing as a national tradition of anthropology, asks Sydel Silverman in the concluding section of this most welcome volume (p. 345). There is no easy answer, as the authors themselves demonstrate, even if the structure of the book initially leads us to think that each of the four countries has retained distinct and coherent trends. As a young academic of French origin, partially trained in Britain, with an eye on what is going on across the Atlantic, I would agree that the recent tendencies shown in all four sections seem indeed to indicate the “loss of distinctiveness,” asserted by Fredrik Barth for the British case (p. 56). In this context, then, a mapping of the historical foundations of our discipline that lays out the different traditions is not useless. It serves to provide a clearer idea of where the contemporary academic and theoretical landscape originates from, and upon which philosophical traditions and historical struggles it has built its premises.

As Chris Hann recalls in his foreword, the four sections of the book came from a series of lectures given on the occasion of the inauguration of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale), in June 2002. The lectures were presented to take stock of the discipline at a time of increasing internationalization of research, academic careers and the wider diffusion of ideas and materials. Thus, the volume recalls the basic settings and debates that have helped configure anthropology in each country. Each section is composed of five chapters that correspond respectively to a lecture delivered at the Halle. As the reader can deduce from Barth’s introduction to the first section dedicated to British anthropology (p. 3), the history of an academic discipline such as anthropology has to combine three components:

the history of ideas, theories and debates; the history of academic institutions, “schools,” influential university departments and associations of researchers; and the history of individuals and their interpersonal relationships, within their historical and professional contexts. The angle chosen by each author gives a different weight to each of these three factors.

Barth is given the difficult task of writing yet another history of British anthropology, following authors such as George Stocking Jr. or Adam Kuper.[1] He has chosen to keep his section rather short, compared to the three others. Each chapter, bounded by clear chronological cuts rather than theoretical progressions, outlines the main trends and figures of the period, while giving equal room to inter-departmental relationships. Barth establishes the general tone of the book, managing to balance clear descriptions of theoretical and academic developments with a portrayal of political and religious backgrounds. But, in my opinion, it is from the author’s personal notes and reflections that the section benefits the most, setting the discussion apart from more textbook-like accounts. One will appreciate how the author prefers pointing out the publication of Bronislaw Malinowski’s personal field diary as a first step in the demystification of ethnographic practices, rather than an opportunity to highlight the man’s flaws.[2] Barth’s own insights into the contemporary period allow him to present a personal diagnostic of the consequences of the internationalization of research for the British academic landscape, outlining the merging of methods and premises, within a global Anglophone network. Though this has diminished the influence of historical “strongholds,” it has allowed the proliferation of ideas and projects.

The German tradition described by Andre Gingrich is perhaps the most enlightening of the four, and, to my knowledge, the first portrayal of the German anthropological tradition in English spanning the time period from the eighteenth century to the present day. Following Stocking, Gingrich chooses a “presentist” approach that critically examines the different trends and their contribution to the current state of the discipline in Germany (p. 61). The author thus follows theoretical trends, notably the notion of *Kultur* from its early development in the late eighteenth century to the postwar period, allowing him to describe the complexity of this concept within German-speaking academic and political history. While Gingrich points out the entanglement of the notion of “culture” with nineteenth-century nationalism, he takes great care to distinguish between what was an international theoretical interest and what was later integrated into Nazi rhetoric. This author also notes the parallel development of specific schools and institutions (in Vienna and Frankfurt notably). With neither complaisance nor vindication, he gives us an uncompromising portrait of how the Nazi period created a fragmented academic landscape, riven with competition, ambiguous positions and persecution. This uncompromising portrait sheds light on how, despite its humanist foundations and its focus on colonized minorities, the discipline of anthropology had no better role in this dark period than the other humanities. More relevant to the current climate of the discipline, however, is Gingrich’s outline of the postwar German situation and the subsequent isolation of German anthropology from the international framework. He depicts a situation in which institutional heaviness, a complex history, and linguistic isolation have impinged on the development of the discipline.

In describing the French tradition, Robert Parkin takes a different approach, stressing the works and theories of individuals. His five chapters are a succession of theoretical presentations with, not surprisingly, a great deal of space given to internationally influential and renowned sociologists and philosophers, such as Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. While this allows him to skillfully summarize major trends, it does not allow him to give much coverage to less theoretically famous, but nonetheless active and productive directions in French anthropology. Such trends might appear “minor” in comparison to the “fame” of French intellectuals, but cultural technology, cognitive anthropology, anthropology of landscape and environment, anthropology of the body, or historiography are in-

ternationalist currents that have engaged French anthropologists with the work of English-speaking colleagues, but have received less publicity.

I would agree with Parkin’s diagnosis of the division of labor between ethnographers and theorists resulting in the particular nature of French international influence. However, we might ask what other factors could have contributed to the rather specific and limited range of French influence. There may be some obvious ones, such as the sheer demography of the discipline practitioners, the mass of Anglophone literature (as Barth himself remarks in his account of British tradition [p.57]), or the poverty of translations of French literature. But one could also examine these different reasons in relation to the local institutional context, such as the encasing of French *ethnologie* within sociology, and perhaps even more relevant today, the contemporary debates over *la recherche publique*. During the last decades, France has had increasing discussions about the relative efficiency of its researchers, who are civil servants with secure and permanent positions. This is often perceived (although not always voiced) as contrasting with an ideal “Anglo-American model,” where access to private funding, mobility, competition and auditing is seen as securing both the quality and the quantity of academic output, and its financial sustainability. These simplified oppositions, at the core of the debates about public research institutions with shrinking budgets, also shed a light on the current state of international influence from contemporary French anthropology. Even though the fundamental impact of theorists overshadows current ethnographic practices, one would have liked Parkin’s account to unpack and demystify more about what one could almost describe as an international doxa of the discipline *vis-à-vis* the French tradition—its intellectualist reputation—and a closer examination of its administrative and political context.

Sydel Silverman does the best job of depicting the interlacement of individual theories and institutional histories in his coverage of anthropology in the United States. This is no doubt facilitated by the comparatively short history of the discipline in North America. The choice to avoid a strict chronological development enables the author to weave through the development of more recent trends in anthropology with analytical clarity. This is particularly visible in the last three chapters where Silverman engages with the emergence of post-colonial interests in gender, identity, migration and globalization. Concurrently, he traces enduring theoretical trends—particularly the tension between the materialist and the men-

talist poles, and the fate of the concept of culture, harking back to the German tradition via the seminal influence of Franz Boas. His self-reflective clarity does not exclude the side effects of this internationalization. Rather he points out how the “United States became hegemonic in Anglophone anthropology” (p. 346). Finally, Silverman also demonstrates the U.S. academic’s capacity for digesting outside influences (German, British and French), along with the dynamism inherent in the institutional structure of North American academia.

This volume seeks to sort out the different disciplinary heritages of the four countries, while tracking how each contributed to the present global academic and theoretical landscape. I found most appealing the occasional personal reflections of the authors, avoiding a too-authoritarian attitude, and openly implicating themselves in the picture, using personal tones, anecdotes and comments. This approach, which some might find a trifle conversational, makes the whole volume read more like an interesting mixture of diagnosis, accounts and portrayals than a pure textbook, and gives personal comments more the weight of testimonies rather than judgments. One might regret the sparse attention paid to the role played within each “tradition” by museums, exhibitions, world’s fairs, and the use of material culture generally in the development of anthropology. All of these have served not only to illustrate and diffuse research, but also in the elaboration of the discipline’s paradigms.[3] For example, the debate surrounding the new Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, dedicated to the Arts and Civilisations of Africa, Oceania, Asia and the Americas, has highlighted many relevant political, scientific and conceptual tensions—the representations of colonial pasts, institutional struggles, the perception of “otherness,” as well as the current focus on globalization and the consumption of cultural heritage.

The book suffers from not having a concluding chapter to build on the conclusions of the four authors about the contemporary landscape of each tradition, and to develop certain themes briefly mentioned by Chris Hann in his foreword. Most notable are the hegemonic nature of the anthropology of these four countries, overshadowing research done by Eastern or Northern European anthropologists, as well as by those in Asia; the consequences of internationalization; and the isolation of certain trends.

As Silverman points out, American readers might find the main interest of the book in the little-known Ger-

man tradition or the personal tone of the lectures. European readers, however, might find Gingrich’s and Silverman’s sections most useful. Gingrich’s account portrays a tradition often overlooked outside the German-speaking world, while Silverman’s clarifies the rich and complex American landscape through its institutional history.

This is perhaps one of the main lessons taught by this book, whichever “tradition” the reader belongs to. The movement of ideas and people—a tendency that accelerates with the development of travels and electronic communication—shows the history of anthropology as a shifting pattern of trends and approaches that spans countries and continents. At the same time, it remains interwoven with political, academic and personal debate at the local level. As Silverman demonstrates in his last chapter, while the internationalization of research concerns might marginalize some trends, it also multiplies the viewpoints, breaks down old boundaries and transcends anthropology itself. If anywhere, this is where a “loss of distinctiveness” might be perceived. However, the book invites us to reconsider how the institutional and administrative context of academia—the relationships between departments, and the political struggle to establish “schools”—has also framed each “tradition,” and still defines national specificities. Modes of evaluation and training, sources of funding, the establishment of anthropology as a professional domain, the creation and role of national and international associations enable us to perceive how the development of a “tradition” in an academic discipline is not only about theories, but also about institutional frameworks.

#### Notes

[1]. George W. Stocking Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987); and *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888-1951* (London: Althone Press, 1996); and Adam Kuper, *Anthropology and Anthropologist* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[2]. Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (London: Althone, 1967; reprint, 1989).

[3]. See Chris Gosden, *Anthropology and Archaeology: A Changing Relationship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); and George W. Stocking Jr., ed., *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, History of Anthropology, vol. 3 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-afarts>

**Citation:** Ludovic Coupaye. Review of Barth, Fredrik; Gingrich, Andre; Parkin, Robert; Silverman, Sydel, *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12160>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).