Anthropology is a discipline very conscious of its history, and Alan Barnard has written a clear, balanced, and judicious textbook that surveys the historical contexts of the great debates in the discipline, tracing the genealogies of theories and schools of thought and considering the problems involved in assessing these theories. The book covers the precursors of anthropology; evolutionism in all its guises; diffusionism and culture area theories, functionalism and structural-functionalism; action-centred theories; processual and Marxist perspectives; the many faces of relativism, structuralism and post-structuralism; and recent interpretive and postmodernist viewpoints.

History and Theory in Anthropology

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For Joy
Contents

List of figures viii
List of tables ix
Preface xi

1 Visions of anthropology 1
2 Precursors of the anthropological tradition 15
3 Changing perspectives on evolution 27
4 Diffusionist and culture-area theories 47
5 Functionalism and structural-functionalism 61
6 Action-centred, processual, and Marxist perspectives 80
7 From relativism to cognitive science 99
8 Structuralism, from linguistics to anthropology 120
9 Poststructuralists, feminists, and (other) mavericks 139
10 Interpretive and postmodernist approaches 158
11 Conclusions 178

Appendix 1: Dates of birth and death of individuals mentioned in the text 185
Appendix 2: Glossary 192

References 215
Index 236
Figures

5.1 The organic analogy: society is like an organism 63
5.2 Relations between kinship terminology and social facts 74
6.1 The liminal phase as both ‘A’ and ‘not A’ 87
6.2 Marital alliance between Kachin lineages 93
6.3 Relations between Kachin and their ancestral spirits 94
8.1 Influences on Lévi-Strauss until about 1960 126
8.2 Lévi-Strauss’ classification of kinship systems 129
8.3 The culinary triangle 131
8.4 Kin relations among characters in the Oedipus myth 133
9.1 The grid and group axes 153
9.2 The grid and group boxes 154
11.1 Three traditions 179
# Tables

1.1 Diachronic, synchronic, and interactive perspectives  
1.2 Perspectives on society and on culture  
3.1 Evolution (Maine, Morgan, and others) versus revolution (Rousseau, Freud, Knight, and others.)  
5.1 Malinowski’s seven basic needs and their cultural responses  
7.1 Approximate correspondences between words for ‘tree’, ‘woods’, and ‘forest’ in Danish, German, and French  
7.2 Two componential analyses of English consanguineal kin term usage  
8.1 English voiced and unvoiced stops  
8.2 Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of the Oedipus myth  
9.1 Bateson’s solution to a problem of national character
Preface

This book began life as a set of lecture notes for a course in anthropological theory, but it has evolved into something very different. In struggling through several drafts, I have toyed with arguments for regarding anthropological theory in terms of the history of ideas, the development of national traditions and schools of thought, and the impact of individuals and the new perspectives they have introduced to the discipline. I have ended up with what I believe is a unique but eclectic approach, and the one which makes best sense of anthropological theory in all its variety.

My goal is to present the development of anthropological ideas against a background of the converging and diverging interests of its practitioners, each with their own assumptions and questions. For example, Boas’ consideration of culture as a shared body of knowledge leads to quite different questions from those which engaged Radcliffe-Brown with his interest in society as an interlocking set of relationships. Today’s anthropologists pay homage to both, though our questions and assumptions may be different again. The organization of this book has both thematic and chronological elements, and I have tried to emphasize both the continuity and transformation of anthropological ideas, on the one hand, and the impact of great figures of the past and present, on the other. Where relevant I stress disjunction too, as when anthropologists change their questions or reject their old assumptions or, as has often been the case, when they reject the premises of their immediate predecessors. The personal and social reasons behind these continuities, transformations and disjunctions are topics of great fascination.

For those who do not already have a knowledge of the history of the discipline, I have included suggested reading at the end of each chapter, a glossary, and an appendix of dates of birth and death covering nearly all the writers whose work is touched on in the text. The very few dates of birth which remain shrouded in mist are primarily those of youngish, living anthropologists. I have also taken care to cite the date of original publication in square brackets as well as the date of the edition to be found in the references. Wherever in the text I refer to an essay within a
book, the date in square brackets is that of the original publication of the
essay. In the references, a single date in square brackets is that of the first
publication of a given volume in its original language; a range of dates in
square brackets is that of the original dates of publication of all the essays
in a collection.

A number of people have contributed to the improvement of my text.
Joy Barnard, Iris Jean-Klein, Charles Jędrej, Adam Kuper, Jessica Kuper,
Peter Skalník, Dimitri Tsintjilonis, and three anonymous readers have all
made helpful suggestions. My students have helped too, in asking some of
the best questions and directing my attention to the issues which matter.