

**Bernard S. Cohn** was an American anthropologist and scholar of British colonialism in India, primarily affiliated with the University of Chicago. Born in Brooklyn, New York, Cohn received a B.A. in history from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1949 and a Ph.D. in anthropology from Cornell University in 1954. From 1952-3 he engaged in field research in India as a Fulbright scholar. In addition to Chicago, he also taught at the University of Rochester and was a research assistant for the US Army at Fort Benning. In 1968, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Cohn's seminal contributions included work on India's caste system, by which he established that caste was solidified as a concept by the British codification of it, as well as the establishment of historical anthropology as a means to link the disciplines of anthropology and history. This work intersected with earlier work about syncretism between these two disciplines by Alfred L. Kroeber, as well as essays by Clifford Geertz. Cohn's works include *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (1996), *An Anthropologist among the Historians* (1987) and *India: The Social Anthropology of a Civilization* (1971). His students, including, Nicholas Dirks, Ronald Inden, and Ritty Lukose have continued in the vein of his work. His work has been closely studied by members of Subaltern Studies, especially Ranajit Guha.

## **HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY: THE STATE OF PLAY**

Bernard S. Cohn

The anthropologist posits a place where the natives are authentic, un- touched and aboriginal, and strives to deny the central historical fact that the people he or she studies are constituted in the historically significant colonial situation, affirming instead that they are somehow out of time and history. This timelessness is reflected in the anthropologist's basic model of change, what I would term the "missionary in the row boat" model. In this model, the missionary, the trader, the labor recruiter or the government official arrives with the bible, the mumu, tobacco, steel axes or other items of Western domination on an island whose society and culture are rocking along in the never land of structural-functionalism, and with the onslaught of the new, the social structure, values and life ways of the "happy" natives crumble. The anthropologist follows in the wake of the impacts caused by the Western agents of change, and then tries to recover what might have been. The anthropologist searches for the elders with the richest memories of days gone by, assiduously records their ethnographic texts, and then puts together between the covers of their monographs a picture of the lives of the natives of Anthropology land. The peoples of Anthropology land, like all God's children got shoes, got structure. In an older mode of anthropological praxis, this structure was social: roles, rights and duties, positions in systems which persons moved through or, better yet, rotated through. These structures the anthropologist finds have always been there, unbeknownst to their passive carriers, functioning to keep the natives in their timeless spaceless paradise.

In the last twenty years another structure has been brought to Anthropology land, a symbolic one. Here even the ebb and flow of life, especially the expressive aspects of cultures-ritual, myth, religion and art-are seen as surface features beyond which the anthropologist must penetrate to see the underlying or deep structure. The analyst of the culturally-symbolically constituted Anthropology land takes a privileged position as the arbiter of the deep structure, as the inhabitants of Anthropology land, it turns out, are somewhat confused and do not know that they are guided by binary oppositions, master symbols, and the systematicness of the underlying cultural logic, let alone that there is an "order of orders" behind their exuberant proliferations of motifs, designs and classificatory systems. The symbolic structuralists share with their social structuralists cross-cousins an even more timeless spaceless view of the natives of Anthropology land.

To study Anthropology land, anthropologists have a sacred method: fieldwork. There comes that moment when, equipped with tape recorder, camera, and notebook, the practitioner is going to learn about what is "on the ground," what the natives are really like. No matter where on the current spectrum of structuralisms and reductionisms anthropologists locate themselves, they have to find the "out there" by entering the land of anthropological "dreaming," the field. The anthropologists Philius Fillagap and Lucy Lacuna, who have dutifully designed their research project to fill a gap or lacuna in our existing ethnographic knowledge of Anthropology land, enter Anthropology land. If their fieldwork is successful, one more hole in the World Ethnographic survey will be filled, and Philius and Lucy will return from the field with "Their People" in their notebooks and on tape and film. They will have added to the growing record of the facts of life in Anthropology land. Fillagap and Lacuna not only must add to the record, they must contribute to whatever debate is currently exercising some subsection of the profession on which they want to make their mark after they have passed through the sacred rite of passage of fieldwork.

Archeology and Ethnography continued to be unified during the thirties through the concept of "culture area," which entails the idea of time depth and persistence of cultural traits in relation to "natural" or ecological zones. Forms of social organization were correlated with particular ecological niches, and it was a short step from correlating ecology with social forms to seeing the ecological as generative of these forms. What started as the archeologists' classifications could now be thought of as an explanation of cultural differences. What was needed to change classifications into a theory was the idea of function. If what existed within a social and cultural system was adaptive to the maintenance of the system, then the idea of needs derived from man's biological makeup could relate cultural differences to ecological conditions and enable the anthropologist to see through differences to the "real reason" for the presence of particular elements in a culture-namely, the function they served as the fulfillment of biologically derived needs. Kinship could be reduced to the need for reproducing members for a society and rituals could be seen as means for redistributing calories and protein to keep people healthy.

## THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Suddenly in 1942 Americans had to confront "the others" on an unprecedented scale, and the concept of culture was drafted to help the war effort. The enemy had to be understood, and for the first time anthropological concepts were applied to nation-states. Exotic languages had to be analyzed so that they could be rapidly taught to those who were to be governors and analysts of hitherto unknown places in the world. Millions of Americans found themselves face to face with the "others" in the Pacific, in India, the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. Populations at home and abroad had to be controlled and made to participate in the all-out effort. For the first time anthropology was seen to be a relevant social science in that anthropologist knew about the "exotics," and appeared to have methods to study them.

## THE DISCOVERY OF NEW HISTORYLANDS

Like anthropologists, historians have created new lands to conquer, with the new lands of hyphenated histories. A generation back one could discuss current trends in historical research using a very simple classificatory grid. Time and place formed the basic axis. Biography and political, diplomatic, institutional, economic, and social (defined as history with the politics left out) history provided the main cross-cutting categories. In the United States this simple grid began to break down in the fifties, primarily under the impact of the discovery by historians of the "non-Western world" (a neat ethnocentrism which defines nine-tenths of the people of the world in a single negative term). As America became increasingly aware of its position as the world power, and was drawn into conflict with the Soviet Union and China, academics with financial encouragement from the foundations and federal government began to "attack" the problem of the non-Western world. This brought historians into close working relations with economists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and language and literature specialists concerned with "exotic" (another ethnocentrism) languages.

## THE FIELD AND THE ARCHIVE

Archives are cultural artifacts which encompass the past and the present. The historian learns that filing systems are codes, and a considerable amount of time has to be spent in learning how the particular documents being used were produced. Documents must be collated and statements of various kinds tested for reliability. The texts found by the historian have to be read not only for "facts" or "indications" but for the meanings intended. This can only be done through understanding the shadings of language and the structure of the text, and through the development of sensitivity to changes in form through time. The work of the historian proceeds outside the archive as well. The famous English economic historian Tawney argued that historians needed "fewer sources and stouter boots." The past exists not only in records of the past, but survives in buildings, objects and landscapes of the present day, the observation of which assist the historian in constructing the context. The anthropological historian therefore should have the working experience of both the field and the archive. There are no shortcuts. No quick packaging of the skills, methods, insights and findings in handbooks can substitute for the act of doing an anthropological history.