Book Reviews

The Transactional Approach in Social Anthropology

Transaction and Meaning. Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior. Papers from a conference, Oxford, England, July 1973. BRUCE KAPFERER, Ed. Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia, 1976. xii, 300 pp. $13.75. ASA Essays in Social Anthropology, vol. 1.

In 1946, a small group of British social anthropologists—motivated by increasing specialization of their own branch of the discipline and by their decreasing interest in parallel developments in prehistoric archeology, physical anthropology, and cultural anthropology—formed the Association of Social Anthropologists of the (British) Commonwealth. By 1962, the membership had increased from the original ten or so founding members to more than 150. (Election normally requires both a teaching or research post in the Commonwealth and an advanced degree or significant publications in social anthropology.) Raymond Firth, then president of the ASA, proposed a conference that would include—for the first time—American social anthropologists. The task of the conference, held in 1963 at Cambridge, was to examine the loosely defined topic of "New Approaches in Social Anthropology." The stricture of inviting papers only from scholars who had entered the discipline since World War II was proposed by Firth as a means of ensuring that "new" approaches would in fact be represented.

The 1963 conference resulted in the inauguration of the ASA Monographs. The original series now numbers a dozen volumes covering such wide-ranging topics as politics, religion, complex societies, mythology, witchcraft, marriage, economics, language, ethnicity, and socialization. Each volume examines major approaches taken by social anthropologists (American as well as British) to the study of the specific topic under consideration.

The decennial conference of the ASA, held at Oxford in 1973, carried a title almost identical to that of the 1963 conference. This time it was "New Directions in Social Anthropology." Bruce Kapferer's volume of ten essays with his own introductory overview is one of six or seven stemming from the 1973 conference. Others include Robin Fox's *Biosocial Anthropology*, Maurice Bloch's *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology*, and Roy Willis's *The Interpretation of Symbolism* (all published in 1975 by Malaby Press, London, as the first three volumes of a new series, ASA Studies in Social Anthropology). *Transaction and Meaning* is the first of a series of ASA Essays in Social Anthropology being published by the Institute for the Study of Human Issues in the United States.

Many of the ASA volumes do not reflect "new" approaches or directions at all, since the topics they consider have been around long enough to be called classical within the relatively young science of anthropology. But if the questions are not always new, the answers at least reflect contemporary thinking about them.

Transaction and Meaning is most directly an attempt to rethink and revise Fredrik Barth's *Model of Social Organization*, which argued that social organization is generated through reciprocal exchanges and transactions. When Barth published his essay in 1966, exchange was certainly no new topic for anthropology. Its relevance had been argued by Durkheim, Mauss, and Malinowski more than 50 years earlier. In more recent developments, exchange (in the specific form of marriage) was a fundamental aspect of Lévi-Strauss's influential work on alliances. What was different about Barth's model in particular was that he emphasized individual decisions to the point of arguing that social organization does not logically precede individual decisions about how to set up a household, how to arrange a marriage, or where to fish. Social organization, argued Barth, stems from consistency in patterns of choice. Add to this another familiar notion—that individuals act so as to maximize gain while minimizing cost—and the essentials of Barth's model are laid out. Documented with ethnographic examples from his own work among Asian and African pastoralists and Norwegian fishermen, Barth's model was a critique of the structural-functional and institutional approaches of British social anthropologists. In particular, Barth opposed the then current view that moral systems are prior to and thus constrain behavior. A view of society as made up of individuals interacting with others so as to maximize personal rewards is the basis of Barthian transactional theory.

Transaction and Meaning examines the relevance of the transactional approach for social anthropology in the 1970's. Kapferer and his collaborators find the approach both useful and in need of some revision. Its major utility is the new insights that an actor-centered as opposed to institution-centered approach provides. Its major drawback—as expressed originally by Barth, at least—was its lack of concern with the viewpoint of the actors. Making the transactional approach both more sensitive to cultural contexts and capable of wider application in social anthropology is the major aim of the book.

A frequently recurring topic is the appropriateness of the assumption of maximization. Kapferer and some of his collaborators would prefer to pose the questions of when and under what conditions people act so as to maximize and just what it is that they are maximizing. A model that begins with an assumption that people act so as to maximize cannot take into account cultural variations in the degree to which people actually behave in this fashion. Of major themes of this collection, that assumption and its appropriateness are perhaps the least satisfactorily treated, in terms of overall success. The statements of the editor and of those of the contributors who handle it directly constitute at best another chapter in the exhausting (but apparently not exhausted) formalist-substantivist debate on the relevance of Western economic theory and assumptions for non-Western societies—a debate that accounted for a significant proportion of the writings on economic anthropology in the 1960's.

Much more successful is the treatment of the creation and management of meaning associated with exchanges and transactions. Two of the essays illustrate this particularly well. Basil Sansom's study of the exchanges of livestock (and nowadays cash) that are associated with the marriages of the Pedi tribespeople of South Africa reveals the ways these people think about marriage transactions and the ways they do not. Outsiders—not fully understanding the way the Pedi think about marriage exchanges and thus act in such transactions—would observe cash replacing cattle in many instances. The lack of congruence between Pedi marriage exchanges and their market transactions is shown by the ways in

which cash actually works (and does not work) when it becomes a part of marriage exchange. Although no Pedi will ever pay bridewealth wholly in cash, it is common for some of the customary animals to be replaced by cash payments. In such transactions, a cow is replaced by a cash payment of £5. Most cows are in fact worth more than that if sold at auction to white buyers. Cash substituted for cattle follows the equivalence rate of £5 per animal; fractions (amounting to "part animals") are ruled out. This equivalence ratio makes "economic nonsense," but it is social meaning rather than economic sense that lies at the base of Pedi marriage exchanges. The Pedi taboo discussions of direct economic equivalence when arranging bridewealth. Indirection ("Does your cow have horns?"; "Does it walk home at night?") is demanded by custom. Maximizing (in a strict economic sense) does not represent the Pedi's own view of what marriage transactions are all about. These are instead transactions first and foremost of social exchange. Economic considerations are, according to Sansom, secondary.

In another essay, A. P. Cohen and J. L. Comaroff focus on the management of meaning in political transactions. An ethnographic account of a broker operating between external government and a local community of Newfoundland fishermen reveals the importance of the broker's strategic management of the impression that his brokerage role is both needed and important. Details of marriage arrangements among the Tswana of southern Africa in the same article show how politics and strategy enter into the interpretation of the kind of marriage that has been effected. In this society where multiple ties of kinship provide many alternatives for interpreting the relationship between bride and groom and their respective families, which of the possible interpretations of the marriage form will be applied is an important issue. The implications of a particular marriage are not based on intrinsic aspects of the contractual relationship, but are attached extrinsically to marriage forms as outcomes of the competition to manage their meaning.

Another significant theme in this collection is the emphasis to be placed on individuals as opposed to groups. Many British anthropologists are uncomfortable when the individual or interactions between individuals become the focus of attention rather than social groups or institutions. Some would ask whether individual decision-making is even a proper subject for anthropology. Is it a reductionistic shift away from the traditional (and thus appropriate) subject matter of social anthropology? Can—and if so should—social behavior be explained as a composite of individual action rather than enduring institutions? For social science in general, these may not seem to be very grand questions. For British social anthropology, whose own history has been characterized more by the constraints of orthodoxy rather than by a predilection for eclecticism, they are indeed new ones.

It was the inability of British social anthropology to deal with change that in part motivated Barth's critique, and in a short section of the book two contributors attempt to deal with change. Barth's focus on the system as generated from individual decisions left room for change in a way the fixedness of institutions and structures in traditional British anthropology did not. When social structure is seen as resulting from rather than determining behavior, then changes in resources, decisions, strategies, and the like can account for changes in social forms. But, as Kapferer points out, the problem for social theorists is not merely accounting for change in society. It is equally problematic to explain the why and how of the persistence of social forms. Actor-oriented transaction theory enables the explanation of both.

The ASA, through its conferences and publications, has provided a significant contribution to anthropology that has no genuine American parallel. Detailed consideration of a timely topic, its relevance to the field, and the approaches utilized by contemporary practitioners is the hallmark of the ASA volumes. The busy schedule of the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, the concurrent panels, often on closely related topics, and the limited time for presentation of papers and discussion of them make us envy our British colleagues who have devised a forum that allows for wide discussion of timely topics in anthropology and for dissemination of the symposia to a much wider audience. *Transaction and Meaning*, itself worthy of attention from social scientists interested in the specific topics mentioned, is perhaps most important as a member of the continuing series of volumes that regularly examines and evaluates various topics and approaches in social anthropology. We Americans, whose professional societies have grown to unmanageable proportions and whose annual meetings have lost the intimacy and depth of analysis the ASA volumes represent, stand to learn from the consideration of substantive issues provided by this series. We might also use the volumes as a model for rethinking the role of a scientific society and its responsibilities to its membership.

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An Adversary View of Sociobiology

The Use and Abuse of Biology. An Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology. MARSHALL SAHLINS. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1976. xvi, 120 pp. Cloth, $8; paper, $3.95.

From antiquity onward philosophers, theologians, and eventually scientists have been concerned with relationships between the physical and biological aspect of mankind and the behavioral and social aspect. In times relatively recent although already extending over generations the discussion has been complicated and obfuscated by extension into other realms, notably those of economics and of politics. Even within more restricted frames of reference obscurity has arisen by adversary approaches based on "either-or" propositions that are almost always inappropriate in that form. Pertinent examples are the premises that human behavior (including social behavior) is either innate or learned and, at another level, that natural selection is either by individuals or by groups.

Discussion of these subjects has recently been stimulated by the publication in 1975 of *Sociobiology* by Edward O. Wilson, an accomplished biologist whose basic objective research is on the behavior of ants. Marshall Sahlins, an accomplished ethnologist whose basic objective research is on the sociology of tribal peoples, now joins the fray. Sahlins's small book is an all-out attack primarily on Wilson, secondarily on others bearing what is in Sahlins's view the sociobiological stigma. The question posed is, "What is the relationship between biology and sociology?" Sahlins has cast this in the "either-or" mold. For him Wilson's view, held to be incorrect, is that the two, biology as evolutionary genetics and sociology as broadly comparative ethnology, are isomorphic, approaching identity. That is an extreme not literally reached by Wilson's own