

Journal of Biosocial Science

<http://journals.cambridge.org/JBS>

Additional services for *Journal of Biosocial Science*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



The Myth of the Noble Savage. By Ter Ellingson. Pp. 467. (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 2001.) £15.95, ISBN 0-520-22610-0, paperback.

Alan Dangour

Journal of Biosocial Science / Volume 35 / Issue 01 / January 2003, pp 153 - 160
DOI: DOI:10.1017/S0021932003251531, Published online: 12 December 2002

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021932003251531

How to cite this article:

Alan Dangour (2003). Journal of Biosocial Science, 35, pp 153-160 doi:DOI:10.1017/S0021932003251531

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

Book reviews

Social Anthropology: A Concise Introduction for Students. By Alan Barnard. Pp. 160. (Studymates, Taunton, 2000.) £9.99, ISBN 1-84285-000-8, paperback.

There have been a spate of introductory books on social anthropology for students in recent years, conclusively ending an era when it was sometimes doubted whether the subject should even be taught to undergraduates, let alone be supported by ‘made simple’ books directed to them. Alan Barnard’s introduction takes things a stage further in both its layout and its combination of simplicity and clarity. There are ten chapters on various key areas of anthropology, each starting with a ‘One-minute summary’ which ends in a number of bullet points telling the reader what they should know by the end of the chapter (in accordance with current ‘best practice’ in teaching). This is followed by the substantive discussion, and each chapter ends with a tutorial consisting of ‘Progress questions’, a ‘Seminar discussion’, a ‘Practical assignment’ and ‘Study, revision and exam tips’. The book also contains a useful glossary, a bibliography of other introductory books, and lists of relevant web sites and courses at UK universities. Presentation is generally clear, though the text might have been copy-edited properly.

On the whole, given the constraints, it is all admirable as a slim, easy-to-read volume aimed at the complete beginner, written by someone who is an experienced teacher and practitioner. Naturally, it is possible to quibble, especially as there are some significant omissions, and one or two where one can imagine a student being slightly misled. Thus the focus on four-field anthropology in the introductory Chapter 1 hardly has much meaning for contemporary British anthropology. Similarly, the stress on the similarities between anthropology and other subjects may undermine the sense of its very real distinctiveness: I would certainly have emphasized its differences from subjects like psychology and history more. And although careers are discussed, little attempt is made to argue the specific relevance of anthropology to them.

Some of the discussion of Indian examples, or of Leach’s work in Upper Burma, demonstrates the dangers of drastic simplification. On ethnicity (covered in Chapter 5), the functionalist Abner Cohen might have been mentioned alongside unspecified Marxists in connection with instrumentalist perspectives, while students might have been warned that primordialism as conventionally understood is hardly a respectable academic position any longer. The list of possible definitions of ‘profane’ in Chapter 6 (on religion) might have made reference Durkheim’s frequent focus on the ‘individual against society’ in this connection. There is also a tendency to play down the differences between cultural and social anthropology, which hardly ‘mean roughly the same thing’ (p. 24). If there seems to have been a convergence between the two schools recently, it is because the former has tended to displace the latter rather than because they have become more similar.

Many of Barnard’s own main contributions to anthropology have been in the area of kinship, and his chapter on this is marginally the longest. His bold statement that

'the basis of kinship is biology' is sure to excite the opposition of many of his colleagues, especially as the chapter makes no reference to the Schneiderian cultural approaches that have come to dominate in this area, nor the topicality of the new reproductive technologies. Instead, the debate between descent and alliance theory is virtually all the theory that is covered: significant, but hardly current. Similarly conservative is the attention given to different terminological types, with diagrams to match. Here it is curious that prescriptive or 'cross-cousin marriage' systems, though discussed, have not been thought to warrant diagrams, even though they are the one area where it is possible to show a clearly logical, if ethnographically contingent connection between terminology and social structure.

No doubt this will seem like a counsel of perfection to the author, who, despite the foregoing, has done well in telling new students what anthropology does and, to an extent, what it is. What one misses from virtually all introductory books to date, however, is a feeling for the underlying assumptions and nature of the anthropological endeavour, such as its sceptical challenges to received wisdom, or its willingness to engage with other cultures at a deep level. It is such things that make an anthropologist, and that stand the best chance of inspiring new generations.

ROBERT PARKIN
*Department of Anthropology,
 University of Kent at Canterbury*

Genetic Information. Acquisition, Access, and Control. Edited by Alison K. Thompson & Ruth F. Chadwick. Pp. 348. (Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York, 1999.) \$115, ISBN 0-306-46052-1, hardback.

The papers in this book are based on an international conference of the same name held in December 1997, which was organized by the Centre for Professional Ethics on behalf of the International Association of Bioethics and Euroscreen II.

The book consists of a collection of papers dealing with five areas: the insurance industry, genetic testing, raising public awareness, bioethics and eugenics. A book written by many authors is usually considered to be worse than a book written by just one author. However, a book dealing with such complicated and controversial problems, with so many opinions and arguments – for and against – must not be written by one author. It seems that there has been no previous example in human history of the development of a branch of science in a short time having such an impact on society as that of contemporary genetics. There are several domains of society where genetics could change the accepted laws and ethical rules that govern human inter-relationships.

In my opinion, anybody working in the fields of biotechnology, pharmacology, genetic diagnostics, gene therapy or just 'pure genetics' – especially if teaching other people – should be aware of the problems discussed in this book. No one working in molecular biology or genetics is unaffected by the problem of ethics. Even searching for the most fundamental laws of genomics does not excuse researchers from taking responsibility for their results. Buddha said that man is responsible not only for the reasons for his activity and the way his aim is reached, but also for its consequences.

To be responsible for the consequences we have to be conscious of them. This book highlights many fields and problems we should be aware of when undertaking any activity in contemporary genetics, medicine and education. Our voices in any discourse on such hot topics would be more convincing if we ourselves were aware of the critical issues discussed in this book.

STANISLAW CEBRAT
*Department of Genetics,
Wrocław University*

Evolution in an Anthropological View. By C. Loring Brace. Pp. 407. (AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 2000.) \$26.95, ISBN 0-7425-0263-5, paperback.

Young biological anthropologists beware! According to C. Loring Brace, biological anthropology is not only 'an academic refuge area in which poorly adapted intellectual forms can survive because the competition is not very strong' (p. 151), but we are also embroiled in a discipline in which the most influential thinkers owe more to pre-Darwinian medievalism than to the New Synthesis of Evolution. A shock indeed for someone who was taught that neo-Darwinism is the primary theoretical basis for biological anthropology, and who exists in a field where there are more graduate students than post-doctoral jobs, more research proposals than funding, and ever more demanding peer-reviewers.

Brace's bold statements form part of the central thesis of *Evolution in an Anthropological View*: that the concepts associated with modern evolutionary biology are generally absent from the studies of human evolution undertaken by biological anthropologists. He illustrates the main argument using a collection of his previously published papers, tackling a range of subjects from taxonomy and cladistics (Chapters 3 & 4) to the history and invalidity of the term 'race' (Chapters 9 & 11), as well as the topic for which he is very well-known: the ancestor-descendant relationship of Neanderthals and anatomically modern humans (Chapters 2, 7 & 8). These essays, published between 1963 and 1997, are linked and updated by a number of pro- and epilogues, as well as a final, previously unpublished, chapter called 'The Cultural Ecological Niche'. Much of the book is underpinned by an introductory commentary on the history and development of thought in biological anthropology and related disciplines, and this historical approach provides an unusual and welcome context for the remaining chapters.

Brace recognizes in the foreword to his book that his views are controversial, often regarded by other members of the palaeoanthropological community as 'extreme' (p. 9), and from that perspective, this book certainly does not disappoint. Attacks on palaeoanthropological 'dogma', as well as on a selected number of individuals, provide the focus for much of the work presented in *Evolution in an Anthropological View*, but there is no sense of malice in Brace's writing. This results in a book that is a stimulating read for anyone who is interested in scientific debate. However, in his efforts to highlight either the real or perceived weaknesses of biological anthropology in general, and palaeoanthropology in particular, Brace ignores much of the debate that has characterized the discipline(s) in recent years. For example, contrary to his

argument that palaeoanthropologists use cladistics uncritically, a number of recent pieces of research, undertaken by groups dominated by relatively young palaeoanthropologists, have been concerned with the reliability and validity of hominin cladograms and phylogenies (Collard & Wood, 2000; DeGusta, 2000). In addition, many 21st century biological anthropologists are more interested in examining the context of human evolution and the processes that resulted in contemporary human variation than in describing fossils, naming a new species or classifying 'racial types', and it is unclear from his book (with a reference list dominated by the work of deceased or ageing males) whether Brace includes these 'new' approaches in his general criticism of biological anthropology, or whether he simply fails to consider them.

In sum, although the arguments presented in *Evolution in an Anthropological View* are extreme, sometimes pessimistic, and supported by a highly selective reference list, the book is a stimulating and enjoyable read. From my own academic refuge area, I take on board the general comments, echoed in a recent article by Weiss (2000), that biological anthropologists do not always consider systematically evolutionary processes when forming theories of human evolution. I also appreciate the attention that Brace gives to the history of biological anthropology, a subject on which relatively little has been written, and upon which many biological anthropologists, myself included, are quite badly informed. In turn, however, I implore C. Loring Brace to consider all the positive aspects of biological anthropology that are emerging, and to act on his pledge to initiate a systematic treatment of biological anthropology from an evolutionary perspective by considering the work of the 'new' generation of biological anthropologists.

References

- COLLARD, M. & WOOD, B. (2000) How reliable are human phylogenetic hypotheses? *Proc. natn Acad. Sci.* **97**, 5003–5006.
- DEGUSTA, D. (2000) New methods for evaluating the potential impact of character dependencies on hominid cladograms. *Am. J. phys. Anthropol.* **S30**, 135.
- WEISS, K. M. (2000) A view on the science: physical anthropology at the Millennium. *Am. J. phys. Anthropol.* **111**, 295–299.

SARAH ELTON
*Department of Anthropology,
 University of Kent at Canterbury*

Natural Conflict Resolution. Edited by Filippo Aureli & Frans B. M. de Waal. Pp. 409. (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 2000.) £40.00, ISBN 0-520-21671-7, hardback; £15.95, ISBN 0-520-22346-2, paperback.

This outstanding book provides an excellent series of articles on conflict resolution, which appears to be a natural phenomenon inevitably arising in groups of individuals co-ordinating their activities. This volume focuses on conflicts and their resolution and individuals' behaviour levels, and provides a complementary view on behavioural expression in conflicts and the mechanisms that individuals use to cope with them.

The book includes an introduction, followed by sixteen chapters grouped in five sections, each with a short foreword, and all is summarized in a conclusion. Nearly every review chapter includes shorter contributions (boxes) on specific topics. This makes the volume a clear, comprehensive and accessible synopsis.

In Chapter 1, the editor provides the conceptual background, explains the rationale for the existence of natural conflict resolution, and briefly outlines the reasons and needs for an interdisciplinary approach to the issue. Since the pioneering ethological study on conflict resolution dating back to the 1970s, which was initiated by de Waal and Roosmalen on captive chimpanzees, its study has extended to other disciplines and taxa, including humans.

The first section is devoted to a historical background and gives a broad review of the different areas of investigation. The three chapters grouped in this section review the earliest animal studies, report the discovery of reconciliation and introduce the 'relational model', which is concerned with the way aggressive behaviour functions within social relationships. They focus on human children and trace the development of conflict management skills from toddler to adolescent. In the context of conflict management among adults, Yarn presents the historical and current relationship between law and conciliatory methods.

The second section, in its four chapters, reviews the mechanisms for the control of aggression. Despite difficulties in studying such behaviour because 'these mechanisms aim to prevent the occurrence of an event', two clear examples are given. Thierry presents the variation of conflict management patterns across closely related macaque species within the framework of interspecific differences in dominance style. In the next chapter Judge focuses on the various ways in which human and non-human primates and other animals deal with crowding, leaving us with the conclusion that there is no simple relationship between density and aggression specific to species. A review of feeding situations as conflict-provoking led Koyama to the suggestion that anticipation of future events enables some non-human primates to dissipate tension and thereby avoid a coming conflict. Finally, the co-operative breeding strategy in *Callitrichids* is emphasized as a lifestyle preventing within-group conflicts.

The third section, consisting of four chapters, refers directly to the title of the volume. It takes up variation in the likelihood of reconciliation in the context of its function to repair the bounds between opponents, and discusses the possibility of manipulation of emotions and approaches to spontaneous conflict resolution among children.

Current knowledge and the new fields of research about interventions by third parties during conflict and post-conflict interactions with bystanders is presented in the fourth section. Two chapters provide a review of research on this topic carried out on macaques and the evidence for positive and negative interaction between targets and bystanders. Variation in interaction with third parties is highly related to variation in the kind of social relationships and potential risks and benefits associated with interaction across and within species.

The last section concerns the resolution of conflicts in the larger context of ecology and culture. Van Schaik and Aureli portray a 'natural history of valuable relationship in primates', explaining why animals live in groups and how enduring alliances are formed. In the final chapter in this section, Killen and de Waal consider human

morality as an integrative part of humanity's evolutionary background, and conflict resolution as a key element in understanding the origin of morality.

The last chapter provides the conclusion and re-emphasizes that human conflicts and co-operation should be studied in a wider social context. The volume presents an excellent and wide array of approaches – from law to development psychology, and from anthropology to primatology – and will serve as a comprehensive multidimensional introduction to natural conflict resolution.

ŚLAWOMIR KOZIEŁ
*Institute of Anthropology,
 Polish Academy of Sciences, Wrocław*

The Myth of the Noble Savage. By Ter Ellingson. Pp. 467. (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 2001.) £15.95, ISBN 0-520-22610-0, paperback.

The concept of a Noble Savage, the 'personification of natural goodness by a romantic glorification of savage life', is among the most enduring traditions in anthropological folklore, and its invention appears almost universally to be accredited to Jean-Jacques Rousseau writing in 1755. It is alarming, therefore, that Ter Ellingson begins his book with a clear statement that Rousseau *never* used the term Noble Savage, and that this fact has been documented, but largely ignored, for over 70 years. The concept of the Noble Savage has been built up into an all-pervasive myth, and Ellingson's book focuses on the characters involved, and the reasons behind the creation of this myth.

The first three sections of the book review an extraordinary array of literature in an attempt to find uses of the term 'Noble Savage', and hints to the creation of the myth. These sections include fascinating ethnographic accounts from around the world and also engage in a lively debate on the value of ethnography. The fourth section focuses on the Ethnological Society of London, for it is here that Ellingson locates the creation of a myth around the concept of the Noble Savage. With great skill, Ellingson guides us through the torrid machinations of the Society and two of its major players, James Hunt and John Crawford. Ellingson's thesis rests upon a paper given in 1859, by Crawford, an avowed racist, in which with Barnumesque style, Crawford contrasted 'civilised white' society with all others. By using this vulgar juxtaposition, and considerable emotional coercion, Crawford denied the possibility that good or noble qualities were attributable to non-whites. Crawford had constructed a myth entirely for malicious purposes; the myth of the Noble Savage would now be used as a 'sarcastic emblem of racial inferiority'.

A short final section of the book investigates the place of the Noble Savage at the end of the 20th century. A search on the World Wide Web, using a discriminating search engine, yielded almost 2000 sites featuring the Noble Savage: from numerous entries on university course outlines, to the name of a thoroughbred stallion! Finally, Ellingson casts a critical eye upon a construction of the 1990s, the Ecologically Noble Savage, and using an excellent case history, the Makah whale hunt of 1999, luridly displays how easily a debate on Indigenous Rights can degenerate into a vehicle for racist hatred.

Ellingson has filled the book with extensive quotations, thereby allowing the original writers their own voice, and giving the reader access to some invaluable source material. If I have one complaint it is that the writing style is somewhat uneven: while much of it is written in a page-turningly gripping format, some sections are unnecessarily dense and heavily worded.

In conclusion, this is a fascinating book, full of humour and numerous little gems (see for example the list (p. 257) of over 130 terms of invective used by Hunt in 1866 in just one article!). Ellingson has demonstrated beautifully that certain long-held beliefs will not stand up to objective, critical analysis.

ALAN DANGOUR

London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

The Fate of "Culture": Geertz and Beyond. Edited by Sherry B. Ortner. Pp. 169. (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999.) \$17.95, ISBN 0-520-21601-6, paperback.

Geertz's reputation rests on his interpretive approach to culture. Geertz is not interested in searching for general rules of social behaviour. For him each culture has its own internal logic and we depend on vivid incidents for insight into the common humanity of individuals caught up in diverse cultures.

Since Tooby and Cosmides made Geertz's approach to anthropology the principal target of their attack on the so-called 'Standard Social Science Model', it may seem strange to review a collection of essays on Geertz in this journal. Although Geertz has argued for the co-evolution of brain and culture, he did not accept that the brain is hard-wired so as to produce universal strategies of behaviour. Geertz argued the human brain had evolved to be receptive to the learned patterns of culture that had evolved in parallel with genes.

The Fate of "Culture" presents essays by four anthropologists, a historian, a literary critic and a political scientist. All demonstrate how they and their discipline have been influenced by Geertz's work but (unlike Inglis's recent *Clifford Geertz: Culture, Custom and Ethics*), the essays also have a critical edge.

Geertz has made fun of the way anthropologists repeatedly cite Evans-Pritchard's account of Azande witchcraft, 'those hapless Zande forever taking refuge from the sun under a store house' (*Works and Lives* [1988] pp. 64–5). Two of Geertz's own most vivid examples nonetheless reappear throughout this book: Geertz and his wife fleeing the police raid on a Balinese cockfight, and the struggle of Cohen, the Jewish merchant, to recover his stolen possessions in Morocco.

Although Geertz's earlier *Agricultural Involution* and *Islam Observed* analysed historical trajectories, Sewell notes that Geertz's anecdotes of the cockfight and sheep stealing have a timeless quality. Why, then, have historians found Geertz's method so useful? Sewell concludes it is because historians, like anthropologists, must interpret exotic cultures. Greeblatt asks how we can judge whether Geertz's two famous anecdotes are typical of his field notes, when they are not supported by other excerpts. However, he goes on to show how a single vivid historical moment caught in the records of York Castle can be used to illuminate debate in seventeenth century

England concerning the existence of ghosts, and its political basis in conflict between Catholics and Protestants.

Sewell argues Geertz fails, in his case studies, to document variability within culture, the source of social change. Davis's chapter gives a wonderful example of how historians can document variability. She traces the life histories of a Jewish woman merchant and a rabbi from Hamburg during the seventeenth century. Their rise and fall are every bit as vivid as Geertz's account of the Moroccan merchant. Davis goes on to defend Geertz's detailed historical account of the role of Jewish merchants in Morocco, of which Cohen's autobiography is a small part.

Abu-Lughod takes up Geertz's remark that recording the story of Cohen is not very different to constructing a fictional narrative. She looks at the interplay between Egyptian television drama and the lives of real women in rural Egypt. Zaynab had learned to reflect on her own life both through watching television and observing how academics recorded her culture. Abu-Lughod comments that while anthropologists have moved away from the idea of homogeneous cultures, relatively powerless communities have taken up the concept of culture in their struggle for survival.

Marcus discusses the role of 'complicity' in Geertz's style, starting from his complicity in the Balinese cockfight. How is complicity to be reconciled with the difference in power between the cosmopolitan anthropologist and his local subjects or partners? Like Davis, he traces the way in which Geertz pulled back from his commitment to (complicity in) Third World development in *Agricultural Involution* and *Islam Observed*, to a more relativist position. Ortner's closing chapter gives a moving account of how Sherpas have been exploited by mountaineers in the Himalayas. She argues Geertz has failed to appreciate that the ways we translate meaning can conceal our power over those we study just as much as can Functionalist analyses of social structure. Ortner exemplifies her case by showing how westerners have misrepresented and thus minimized the suffering Sherpas go through on learning of the death of friends and relatives in climbing accidents.

ROBERT LAYTON
Anthropology Department,
University of Durham