

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion

Adam Kuper

London: Routledge, 1988. vii + 264 pp. \$55.50 (cloth), \$18.95 (paper)

Reviewer: Michael D. Levin

University of Toronto

Provocative and challenging as a history of an anthropological concept, Adam Kuper's *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* starts "from the supremely unrelativist assumption that . . . the theory of primitive society is . . . about something which does not and never has existed." Kuper wishes to set the argument in its context, but also to judge it, rather than "to pretend that it cannot be rejected" (p. 8).

The idea of primitive society became established as thinkers sought a contrast, a form of society antithetical to their rapidly changing modern society. An answer was provided by *traditional society* behind which "they discerned a primitive or primeval society," but "in practice primitive society proved to be their own society . . . seen in a distorting mirror" (pp. 4-5). The persistence of this illusion is explained on material and ideal bases: it created a puzzle-solving discipline, i.e., a field of academic work; it was "'good to think' [about] . . . the state, citizenship, the family," and the notion could be expressed in many variations and subjected to transformations "which could accommodate any special interests" (pp. 9, 241).

Kuper's task—to dismantle the interest in the literature on social relations in social anthropology and to eliminate the concept "primitive society" from scholarly writing—is perhaps too great for a relatively short book. In the effort, however, he addresses important questions and provides valuable interpretations of our scholarly past. Three kinds of evidence make his case. He traces the lines of thought which composed major topics; he describes lives of anthropologists and contexts in which they worked; and he outlines the intellectual motives (agendas) of these writers. Topics addressed include patriarchal theory, totemism, descent theory, and alliance theory. A chapter or more is devoted to three figures, Morgan, Rivers, and Boas, Morgan for the prominence of his *Ancient Society* and Rivers and Boas for their influence as theorists and teachers.

Although his goal is not relativist understanding of earlier anthropological thinking, Kuper's methods rests on the post-modern relativist philosophical notion that one cannot really know the past, another culture, or the Other, because all vision is merely a reflection of one's own history, culture, and self. His goal is to clear the way of these conceptual relics and to indicate their appropriate succession by an anthropology of culture, following Tylor and Frazer. His method, however, must give us pause. If our anthropological progenitors were bound by the perceptions of their own society, was this a special or general case? How can we be certain that our concepts, our ideas, are not mirror images of our concerns? This paradox of self-reflexivity is not a problem only for Kuper; it is central to contemporary debates in anthropology on fundamental questions of the relativism of cultural knowledge and the comparability of cultures.

The brief biographies Kuper uses to provide the context and sources of individual writers' ideas seem to deflect the force of his argument rather than build it. Tylor, for example, is noted as not having attended university, which is true, but we are not told that he was barred for being a nonconformist, a Quaker. Swanton's role in the Boas circle is also treated cynically, but without a supporting citation.

The rewards in this book are to be found in the writing on theory and its interpretations. Although the reader may remain skeptical about Kuper's purpose and conclusion, his chapters on Rivers, and in particular, his interpretation of Boas as a theorist are brilliant and original. As in his earlier *Anthropologists and Anthropology*, Kuper shows his mastery at weaving together the influence of ideas and personalities.

The Dakota of the Canadian Northwest: Lessons for Survival

Peter Douglas Elias

Winnipeg, Manitoba: The University of Manitoba Press, 1988. xvii + 262 pp.

Reviewer: M.E. Stephens

University of Calgary

The book jacket of this work informs the reader that Peter Douglas Elias has worked as a consultant with the Canadian Dakota. Do not ignore this fact. This work is the written equivalent of a commissioned portrait, and the reader should not expect a candid and objective image. Despite the obvious bias, however, it presents a vivid picture of a native group's successful attempts to survive while trapped in a double-bind situation. These refugees from the United States were faced with the liabilities and restrictions placed on Canadian Indian groups but were allowed few of their rights and privileges. They were also confronted with the liabilities and responsibilities of white immigrants but denied the right to homestead or, in some cases, even to purchase land.

Elias records the skill and flexibility exhibited by the Dakota in varying economic environments. His detailed chronicling of each group's economic history is thorough, but such a format becomes mildly repetitious. The use of historic documents is well footnoted but Elias dismisses some documents (p. 146) and, in cases of contradictory evidence, accepts the account which is most positive to the Dakota (p. 162).

What is more frustrating is that there are important aspects of economic history which are not included. The arrival of the Dakota must have affected the Cree, Assiniboine, Ojibwa, and Métis occupying these areas. Elias indicates that these groups reluctantly accepted the presence of the Dakota (pp. 27-29). Some of his information such as the fact that *Tatankanaje*, the leader of one Dakota band, died while attacking the Crow (p. 27) causes one to wonder. How would an ethnohistorian hired by other Canadian Indians describe these relations?

Elias also neglects information about relationships with Dakota in the United States. He mentions that kinship is important—some families moved back to the United States, some families were joined by relatives from the United States—and that some Canadian Dakota subscribed to a Dakota-language newspaper published in the United States. These serve as hints that at least some aspects of Canadian life were influenced by developments south of the border.