Out of Time: History and Evolution in Anthropological Discourse
Nicholas Thomas
New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. ix + 153 pp. $37.50 (cloth)

Reviewer: Elvi Whittaker
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Anthropological writings seem to fall into one of two recognizable general categories. One is to criticize the nature of the discourse itself, its premises and directions. The other is to keep faith with the discipline by accumulating more ethnographic evidence to support its demands. While the work of Nicholas Thomas belongs mainly to the first, he is not content to let Pacific ethnography go uncorrected. His endeavours are directed at developing a "refocused anthropological vision" that would "deal much more extensively with historical events and their consequences" (p. 122). History, he argues, should be more than a mere overture to the task of ethnography as has been the case, but rather should have the same importance as "ethnographic minutiae" and "informant's statements."

Accusations of ahistoricity are not new in social science, but they are seldom argued with such convincing detail. As he himself promises early in the volume, Thomas has indeed "jumbled together epistemological critique, evolutionary theory, substantive revisions of Polynesian anthropology and some discussion of the history of anthropological ideas about the Pacific" (p. 2). He tells us that present canons are not adequate and that we should not condone any representations which lead the reader to assume that, prior to European contact, "traditional" societies existed unchanged through centuries. Nor should we support the arrogance with which anthropologists have relegated observations made by non-professional observers, such as explorers and missionaries, to a secondary and dubious status. He makes his case by providing a critique of the work of the more illustrious pundits of Pacific anthropology. Goldman, Buck, Handy and Sahlins are scrutinized and found wanting in their lack of attention to history and change.

Many of the premises on which Thomas places his argument are easily acceptable. His assertions that implicit theorizing is rampant and that, in particular, evolutionism remains powerful in anthropological thinking are well supported by his evidence. His reminder that theories predetermine data and analyses, while part of the epistemological literacy of the age, is still a point worth making and supporting by example.

There are, however, some unexamined premises in Thomas's own argument that need exploring. He states that social constructionism as an important perspective and expresses sympathy for the hermeneutic orientation. In short, he declares as his main interest the "reading of texts" and the "discourses of anthropological genres and theories, of both ethnography and interpretation" (p. 3). Indeed, his whole volume rests on the assumption that texts are constructed (as is evidence) and that what needs to be examined are the covert, unstated, hidden agendas of these constructions. Yet he departs from these epistemological claims by slipping into unexamined, even old-fashioned, positivism. In his own analysis, for example, he adopts an authoritative stand—one which he surely could not himself approve. He unequivocally accepts such concepts as "actualities," "social realities,"

"bias," "truth," "actual history" and "real history," among others. While he is aware of the problems of glosses and is able to show the kinds of productions they can engender (such as the glosses of "power" and "status"), the reader is seldom clear about how the historical materials he uses for his own critique are actually constructed. There are some problems, therefore, with the lack of reflexivity, or the selective reflexivity, in parts of the book. The work is uninformed by the postmodernist agenda now under consideration. Thus it is without a close awareness of deconstruction, certainly as that appears in the radical Derridean sense, and is innocent of questions of reification.

Such criticism aside, Thomas has forced us to look once more at the epistemological problems of our discipline. He makes a strong case for the inclusion of history in the elucidation of ethnographic issues. His work could be seen as suggesting the virtues of more interdisciplinary attention in the discipline in general. One could ask, equally readily, what anthropological analysis could gain by considering the discourse of economics, of geography, and so on. Works of this genre, therefore, can only continue to be intellectually satisfying.

Cultural Theory
Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky
Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990. xvi + 296 pp. $49.95 (cloth), $16.95 (paper)

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This books (part of Westview's Political Culture Series) is organized into three parts, and is fronted by an introduction which presents the authors' general argument, a spirited defense of functional analysis. They claim that functional analysis is centrally useful to the social sciences but has been applied to the wrong unit of analysis, the society as a whole, a level that abstracts from context, assumes systemic teleology, and ignores sociocultural variability. Suggesting smaller analytical units, the current authors return variability to the social sciences.

The organizing metaphor here is "way of life," the viability of which "is constrained by the need for congruence between social relations and cultural biases" (p. 3). There are five ways of life—hierarchy, egalitarianism, fatalism, individualism and autonomy. Each comes with a set of understandings about the world, including nature. Each is in competition with the others while relying on them in a kind of systemic codependency. Much of *Culture Theory* is the working out of the implications of this pentagonal organizational scheme.

Part One, "The Theory," weaves together the authors' elements of culture (values, symbols and ideologies) and their constituents of social life (social relations, modes of organizing and institutions). Employing a constrained relativism, the authors begin by presenting five myths of nature called: caricious, benign, perverse/tolerant, ephemeral and the hermit's myth. Each, along with its corresponding story about human nature, forms a cultural legitimation for the authors' "ways of life." These typological categories are then applied to brief analyses of peoples'