

Winnie Lem and Belinda Leach (eds.), *Culture, Economy, Power: Anthropology as Critique, Anthropology as Praxis*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, viii + 311 pages.

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For Lem, Leach and crew, the anthropological mainstream has been flowing in the wrong direction for the past quarter century. CASCA (the Canadian Anthropology Society/Société Canadien pour Anthropologie) has, for a decade, served as a port-of-call for this loose affiliation of colleagues who harbor discontentment with the post-modernist cloud and neo-liberal storm. On the wind of Marxist inspiration, they set out to a new materialist headland where culture once again can have feet. Their enterprise seeks “the implications...of considering culture as a phenomenon that is not sui generis, but [is] produced and reproduced in relation to political and economic forces” (p. 3). Thus class becomes reinstated as a key concept for capturing relational dynamics under conditions of globalized capitalism.

While eschewing later-day idealist anthropology, the volume is necessarily reflexive; its epistemological “point of departure” is the realization that doing anthropology entails choice-making and is thus “inherently a political act” (p. 3). Knowledge is always formulated on the tides of political-economic forces. Thus, part 1, “Nations and Knowledge” sets its sights on how those forces affect the production of anthropology itself. It opens with a treasure by Thomas Dunk, who trenchantly critiques recent attempts to root the absence of a distinctive Anglo-Canadian anthropology in the lack of a stable, uniform, Canadian national identity. Dunk offers instead a cogent analysis of how that anthropology was formed by “parameters of internal colonial [of First Nations] and neocolonial relationships [with the U.S. and Britain] (p. 31). Susana Narotsky continues the theme of how national and transnational power relations affect knowledge formation and dissemination. Her somewhat discursive contribution, which visits political-economic anthropology in Spain since the late Francoist years, includes a critique of American-centrism in the discipline, and concludes with a critique of works that ignore the “dialectical tension between doing and being that relates to the tension between structure and agency, in history” (p. 45). In another rare glimpse beyond the British/Anglo-American academic community, Guillermo de la Peña links anthropology to state discourses on Mexican nationalism and economic development. The text then returns to the domain of dominant academic powers with a chapter by William Roseberry, on how academic politics have impacted the fate of political economy in the U.S., and another by John Gledhill, on how the British state’s journey to the ideological right is crippling the potential for a politically engaged, critical anthropology.

These fellow travellers do not ask us to go back to the future. There is nothing vulgar or old-fashioned about their materialism. It recognizes the complexities of power, and generally delivers on the promise to present “an interpretively sensitive approach to culture” (p. 3). These qualities are reflected, to one or another degree, in the dozen articles that comprise thematically overlapping parts 2 (“States and Subjects”) and 3 (“Hegemonies and History”).

One of the brightest gems in part 2 (indeed, in the volume) is Steve Striffler’s analysis of how collective memory (of the 1962 worker take-over of Hacienda Tenguel in Ecuador) has been socially constructed, under conditions of state repression that mandate local collusion, to undermine the potential for popular struggle. Another (also on Ecuador) is A. Kim Clark’s examination of how the hegemonic *process* plays out, as groups—including subordinated indigenous ones—manipulate an accepted “language of contention” to further their competing class interests. The part also contains: a less coherent effort by Claudia Vincenzo to use retrospectives, of a downwardly mobile couple in a Spanish village, to show how class and community identity became reconfigured with changes in the project of the Spanish state; Michael Blim’s detailed analysis of the debate on welfare reform within the Italian political left, since the 1991 Communist Party split; and a rhetorically elaborate valorization of the nation-state by Dipankar Gupta.

Part 3 is launched by an essay—much like Striffler’s in cogency and content—by Gastón Gordillo, who shows how Tobas express ambivalence, about the experience of poverty and domination in the Argentinian state, in their reconstructions of pacification and in the contradictory images they hold of their ancestors. Equally fine (despite a truncated discussion of the complexities of gender hegemony) is Winnie Lem’s explanation of how economic modernization created gender shifts in power and material interests that curtailed political activism among women in rural Languedoc. Belinda Leach picks up the important theme of flagging political activism. She connects a decline in militancy, among some Ontario unionists, to the ways they have construed their interests in a restructured economy. Organized labour’s resistance to forces in the new economy is the focus of Pauline Gardiner Barber’s piece on how class activism is expressed through family and community idioms in Cape Breton. The role of collective symbols in history and struggle is focus of a rather loosely integrated piece on economic change in the Bigouden region (of Brittany) by Charles Menzies. In a sense, the collection comes full circle in the closing piece on social identity (of place and work), by Gavin Smith, that discusses how scholars, through a process of selective perception, create and reify categories.

Admittedly, this work does not chart an entirely new course. As readers will have noted, many members of the company are veteran sailors, and they have not been alone. But while the volume may not serve as flagship, it is an effective part of the flotilla.