

Review of Arguments about Aborigines

L.R. Hiatt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1996. xiv 225 pp. \$19.95 (paper).

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9 October 2002

Hiatt's short book carefully examines the roles that Australian Aborigines have played in the history of anthropological thought since the 18th century.

Chapter 1 deals with the history of anthropology – especially British social anthropology – as an academic discipline. It focuses on the impact of Darwin's evolutionary theory on our understanding of human history, and the importance attached to Aborigines in the 19th and 20th centuries as bearers of the world's most elementary material cultures; i.e., as the baseline or starting point for much evolutionary speculation. Unfortunately the powerful intellectual influence exerted on generations of Australianists by Radcliffe-Brown, Elkin and the Berndts is a second major – perhaps equally important - thread in the history of Aboriginal anthropology that is implicit throughout Chapters 2-9 but never receives the kind of detailed scrutiny that Hiatt might have brought to it.

Chapters 2-9 constitute the body of the book and deal with themes or topics in Australian Aboriginal studies that have dominated the discipline for decades or centuries and continue to dominate it today. These chapters are intended to be representative rather than encyclopedic and do not include several important topics.

Chapter 10 briefly examines some of the residual topics that had to be omitted earlier because of space limitations, redundancy, etc.

Each chapter is organized chronologically, allowing arguments for and against each proposition or theme to unfold in their “natural” order. The scheme makes it easy to see the cumulative nature of the discipline and occasionally reveals the pernicious influence of fads and fallacies that have characterized much of its history.

Perhaps most importantly, it clearly displays the key roles played by 19th and early 20th century scholars in determining just which questions should be asked about the Aborigines, just what kinds of methods should be used to address those questions, and just what kinds of answers should be considered acceptable within the unwritten rules of the inquiry. Within narrow limits this framework has stimulated healthy debate and controversy; i.e., it has generated a great deal of hypothesis testing. But almost always that hypothesis testing has been limited and weakened by tacit acceptance of the parameters established by the founding fathers (there were no founding mothers).

A less benign way to view the situation that Hiatt depicts is to say that research concerning Australian Aborigines fossilized early on and has by various means insulated itself from Kuhnian (1962) “paradigm changes”. At the end of almost every chapter, Hiatt brings the reader right up to the current state of the art, skillfully reconciles currently competing views to capitalize on their various strengths, and rightly emphasizes the cumulative nature of the discipline. Thus the material reviewed allows the author to tie the conclusions back to their 19th century origins at the beginning of the chapter.

At the risk of providing ammunition to be used against me by those who are comfortable with the *status quo* that Hiatt depicts, let me ask a rhetorical question. Can you imagine what life on earth would be like today if the most burning questions in physics, chemistry, biology, geology and astronomy were basically the same now as they were in the middle of the 19th century? Such seems to be the case that Hiatt makes for Australian Aboriginal anthropology.

Hiatt explicitly describes some of the blatantly self-sealing, puncture-proof aspects of the discipline with regard to specific topics. For example, one of the simplest recurring stratagems has been to claim that data which support one’s preconceived notions are all right, while those that do not are all wrong. The blame tends to be laid on colonizers and survivals. In Chapter 7, Conception and Misconception, the stratagem appears *passim*, the underlying argument being that Aborigines were ignorant of the role of sexual intercourse in procreation, and any who were not ignorant must have learned about it from the colonizers. The mirror image of this stratagem appears elsewhere in arguments that look backward to survivals from a past stage of cultural evolution, not forward to colonizers bringing new ideas, to explain away awkward data. Such arguments may be correct occasionally, but using them without unequivocal supporting evidence almost never is.

The self-sealing nature of the discipline is more problematic when it is subtle than when it is blatant. Six of the eight central chapters of the book deal with such situations. Again consider Hiatt’s Chapter 7, Conception and Misconception, as an example. Questions about paternity were framed in the 19th century by Andrew Lang and James Frazer. They were debated vigorously in the first half of the 20th century by Malinowski and Ashley-Montague using terms of reference that originated in the 19th century. They were fine tuned *ad infinitum* during the 20th century by Elkin, Thompson, Kaberry, McConnell, Warner, Meggitt, the Berndts, Goodale, Spiro, Leach, Strehlow, Scheffler and many others. Neither the questions nor the answers have changed significantly, and Hiatt concludes by saying “. . . the outcome of a hundred years of research must seem singularly disappointing.” Indeed it does. Being stuck in an infinite loop is not a hallmark of a strong science.

In fairness to the history of the discipline, Hiatt points out that one of the eight topics he analyzes, group marriage, has been laid to rest. He concludes that, after several generations of speculative gnawing, nothing much is left of it. Lewis Henry Morgan’s attempt to understand classificatory kinship terminologies as a product of group marriage seems to have ended with a decision that group marriage, if and when it occurs at all, is a product of classificatory kinship terminologies. The terms of the debate have not changed, but the direction of the causal arrow has. A century and a half seems rather a long time to effect that change.

Hiatt also points out that one of the eight topics he focuses on did not originate in the 19th century. The Woman Question, addressed in Chapter 4, was never raised by male anthropologists in Aboriginal Australia. Instead it began to emerge as a problem only in the 20th century when women joined the anthropological ranks and discovered that their male colleagues had got it all wrong about women's roles in Aboriginal Australia. Kaberry, McConnell, Goodale, K. Berndt and Hamilton made many important contributions with regard to this issue, but Bell's (1983/1993) aggressively feminist interpretation of women's lives at Warrabri Settlement in the 1970s finally broke male anthropologists' control over the ways in which the lives of Aboriginal women were portrayed. Hiatt's book suggests that this may be the only new issue to have emerged since the parameters of anthropological speculation on Aboriginal Australia were laid down in earlier centuries.

But perhaps it would be more accurate to say it is the only new issue to have found a secure place in the discipline. Other issues that have been addressed but do not appear in Chapters 2-9 or even among the residuals in Chapter 10 are keys to understanding the puncture-proof nature of the discipline as a whole.

I cite two related examples, one general, the other specific.

In general, mathematical research is rare in Aboriginal anthropology. Although I have not read every item in Hiatt's References, I am reasonably confident that Birdsell's article on group compositions is the only one among 250+ cited sources that relies on numerical or quantitative data to make its case. It is true of course that using mathematics does not necessarily make anything scientific, but the absence of references to mathematics in a history of Aboriginal anthropology says something potentially important about the discipline as a science.

Australian Aboriginal research has not yielded much mathematical, quantitative or at the very least numerical data, but it has yielded some that could have been significant. For example Birdsell published a number of mathematically oriented papers on Aboriginal Australia that might reasonably be expected to find their way into a history of the discipline, and Rose's book on Groote Eylandt kinship is equally conspicuous by its absence. But the absence of these works from *Arguments about Aborigines* is not a criticism of Hiatt. On the contrary, by omitting them he accurately illustrates that mathematical anthropology in even the loosest sense simply has had no significant impact on Australian Aboriginal anthropology. And indeed that does raise questions about the scientific content of a discipline that purports to be a science.

Next consider a specific attempt that John Atkins, Chad McDaniel and I (1979) made to challenge certain preconceived notions about Central Australian societies. Building in part on Rose's work in Groote Eylandt, I collected a large body of quantitative data that bore directly on the conceptual structure and day-to-day operation of systems of descent, marriage and kinship among the Alyawarra and Aranda. Rather than focusing our analytical and explanatory efforts on normative rules alone as has been traditional in Aboriginal anthropology, we expanded our analysis to deal with age relations between husbands and wives. The result was a radically different age biased model of Alyawarra descent, marriage and kinship that incorporated most features of traditional models of section and subsection systems but went beyond received wisdom to accommodate demographic data that ordinarily has been disregarded in such research.

Our model showed precisely where traditional attempts to deal with those topics had become fossilized in the hands of Radcliffe-Browne and his many followers whose models dealt with a narrow special case but failed to consider a broader general case.

Our paper generated a lot of controversy just after it was published, but was squelched a couple of years later by a respected member of the academic establishment (Scheffler 1982) on grounds that it was methodologically flawed and failed to comply with currently accepted theory. The methodological flaw did not exist and the fact that our work failed to comply with currently accepted theory was an asset not a liability. Likewise, Ursula McConnel's (1939, 1950) much earlier attempts to introduce a similar age biased kinship model for the Wik Munkan of Cape York Peninsula elicited the same kind of hostility and dismissal from her colleagues.

In the hands of mathematical anthropologists with no exclusive allegiance to Australian Aboriginal studies, the data and model we introduced have yielded a generalized model of age biased kinship systems that can accommodate McConnel's as well (Tjon Sie Fat 1983), and has played a role in the quantitative analysis of sided marriage networks within and outside of Aboriginal Australia (Houseman 1997). Yet Keen (1988:93-97) begins his review of mathematical analyses of Aboriginal kinship by noting that "The value of formal and mathematical models of marriage 'exchange' systems [in Australia] . . . is hard to assess," and Hiatt's book indicates that they have had no impact at all on the discipline.

Arguments about Aborigines demonstrates where and how Aboriginal anthropology has enshrined currently accepted theory, how it has rejected research methods that challenge the intellectual inertia intrinsic to currently accepted theory, and how it has either explicitly rejected or simply ignored findings that lie outside traditional ways of viewing Aboriginal anthropology. The end result is a kind of "closed club" approach to Aboriginal research, in which young and innovative scholars either accept the self replicating features of the traditional parameters and spend their careers working within those confines, or drop out of the discipline.

Hiatt offers an excellent historical review of a discipline that he knows intimately. I highly recommend it as a volume that is equally valuable for what it includes and for what it omits.

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