

# THEORY *in* SOCIAL *and* CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA | VOLUME TWO



R. JON MCGEE ■ RICHARD L. WARMS EDITORS



## **Editors**

R. Jon McGee  
*Texas State University*

Richard L. Warms  
*Texas State University*

## **Editorial Board**

Regna Darnell  
*University of Western Ontario*

F. Allan Hanson  
*University of Kansas*

J. Stephen Lansing  
*University of Arizona*

Robert Launay  
*Northwestern University*

Herbert S. Lewis  
*University of Wisconsin, Madison*

George E. Marcus  
*Rice University*

Deborah Pellow  
*Syracuse University*

Robert Rotenberg  
*DePaul University*

David Zeitlyn  
*Wolfson College, University of Oxford*

of *sociocultural integration*. He included a chapter on that topic in *Theory of Culture Change*.

Steward always preferred the name *cultural ecology* for his approach, a set of ideas that he complained had been hard to “sell.” That name proved to be the one that endured, and his theoretical ideas began gaining ground after the publication of *Theory of Culture Change*. Steward’s environmental perspective helped stimulate a range of ecological approaches later in the 20th century, including human behavioral ecology, which has drawn adherents from biological anthropology, archaeology, and cultural anthropology. Cultural ecology’s influence on three of the four subfields of American anthropology is undeniable but perhaps not widely appreciated.

Steward has become a figure of controversy among cultural anthropologists and Native scholars for his role in the Indian Claims Commission trials and the way in which he represented Great Basin Indians in his testimony and in his published writings; for his conviction that anthropology was a value-neutral science; and for his notable preoccupation with men’s labor but his near silence about women’s, despite having learned in fieldwork as early as 1935 that women had made the larger contribution to subsistence in much of the Great Basin.

Many archaeologists, among others, continue to find great heuristic value in Steward’s cultural ecology. His founding role in environmental anthropology also continues to receive favorable attention. The Julian Steward Award, launched in 2002 and given periodically by the Anthropology and Environment Section of the American Anthropological Association, recognizes what is judged the best new book in ecological/environmental anthropology.

*Virginia Kerns*

*See also* Columbia University; Cultural Ecology; Harris, Marvin; Human Behavioral Ecology; Kroeber, Alfred L.; White, Leslie; Wolf, Eric

### Further Readings

- Blackhawk, N. (2006). *Violence over the land: Indians and empires in the early American West*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clemmer, R. O. (2009). Pristine aborigines or victims of progress? The Western Shoshones in the anthropological imagination. *Current Anthropology*, 50, 849–881.
- Crum, S. (1999). Julian Steward’s vision of the Great Basin: A critique and response. In R. Clemmer, L. D. Myers, & M. E. Rudden (Eds.), *Julian Steward and the Great Basin: The making of an anthropologist* (pp. 117–127). Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Janetski, J. C. (1999). Julian Steward and Utah archaeology. In R. Clemmer, L. D. Myers, & M. E. Rudden (Eds.), *Julian Steward and the Great Basin: The making of an anthropologist* (pp. 19–34). Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Kerns, V. (1999). Learning the land. In R. Clemmer, L. D. Myers, & M. E. Rudden (Eds.), *Julian Steward and the Great Basin: The making of an anthropologist* (pp. 1–18). Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- . (2003). *Scenes from the high desert: Julian Steward’s life and theory*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- . (2010). *Journeys West: Jane and Julian Steward and their guides*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Pinkoski, M. (2008). Julian Steward, American anthropology, and colonialism. *Histories of Anthropology Annual*, 4, 172–204.
- Steward, J. H. (1938). Basin-plateau aboriginal sociopolitical groups. *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin*, 120, 1–346.
- . (1955). *Theory of culture change: The methodology of multilineal evolution*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

---

## STRATHERN, MARILYN

---

Dame Anne Marilyn Strathern (1941– ) is a British social anthropologist, Melanesianist, and an ethnographer of British society, kinship, reproductive technologies, and intellectual property.

In her 1994 William Wyse inaugural lecture, Marilyn Strathern brought center stage the question of the relations between anthropologists and those whom they study. Anthropology routes its knowledge through persons, she observed, gesturing to the specificity of the anthropological method of fieldwork. It would not be too much to say that Strathern’s pioneering works on the social and cultural dimensions of a range of technological and ethical changes in our times have had a defining, that is routing, role in articulating the stakes of a number of current research projects across the humanities and social sciences. Strathern’s take on analytical categories in ethnography famously tends

to dislocate them, introducing incommensurabilities of time, place, and size between tokens of the same socially current meaning. Her uneasiness with congealed explanations itself partly explains why Strathern has won esteem as one of the most innovative and respected anthropologists of the latter half of the 20th century.

Despite the fact that Strathern's original fieldsite was Melanesia, her intellectual projects equally excavate western Euro-American (i.e., her own) society. She recounts the inception of her interest in the classifications mediating between objects and meaning in her fascination with her father's cabinet of curiosities, a case of drawers holding various butterflies, stones, and minerals. As a schoolgirl at Bromley High School, she became interested in the archaeological ruins of lost civilizations. As a Girton College undergraduate in 1963, Strathern felt her curiosity taking a reflexive turn, away from the sheer phenomenality of the past and toward the problematic of research itself, insofar as research practices necessarily embed epistemological uncertainties and failures of resolution in specific institutional dilemmas. Rather than inquiring what objects might mean, Strathern came to ask, "What does it mean anthropologically to ask after them?" How do attributions of sense, and especially effects of size and scale, lie between cultures and the analytical procedures that reconstruct them? After finishing her doctoral work, Strathern became curator in the ethnographical section of Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and a ready theorist of her own practice. She later returned to Papua, family in tow, and after stints at the Australian National University and 9 years at Cambridge and in California, took up a chair in social anthropology at the University of Manchester in 1985. She subsequently held the William Wyse Professorship of Social Anthropology at Cambridge from 1993 to 2008.

Strathern's Papuan research concerns self-decoration, urbanization and migration, and decision making in both Hagen clans and their overlapping political organizations. In her later research in England, she examined questions of how the English middle classes understand traditional kinship patterns. Her writings also consider different perceptions of the relations between English towns and villages, of gender, of new procreative technologies, and of contemporary legal interventions in intellectual property and patents. Her work further

analyzes how concepts of nature, biology, and genetics constitute contemporary understandings of personality and consumption. Always placing her subjects in cultural and social formations, such as the idea of professional accountability, her most recent writing has displayed a growing preoccupation with bioethics, a topic straddling disciplinary boundaries and especially amenable to interdisciplinary inspection.

Strathern's work is exceptionally innovative in terms of language, ethnography, methodology, and theory. Her inductive reasoning from observed phenomena is frequently counterintuitive, daring, subtle, and demanding. Her most imposing book, *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), offers a foundational account of Melanesian society, exploring how Melanesians represent their gender relations to themselves as fundamental to their sociality. In this work, as elsewhere, gender and feminist identification are not merely givens, or motivating principles for activist political projects, but also objects of serious theoretical investigation. Even while examining the different (and at times incommensurable) power dynamics between men and women, Strathern refuses to rehearse the themes of oppression and domination, preferring rather to understand gender as a multivalent categorization of persons, artifacts, things, events, and sequences. In Melanesia, for instance, a sense of male and female distinctiveness is secured through sexualized imagery. A person's gender identity is specified through his or her management of objects, especially tools, so that the question of gift exchange becomes connected to the form that domination (including patriarchal domination) takes in a certain society. Gender serves as an analytical concept and an aesthetic form, permitting the conceptualization of certain social exchanges, which, in turn, underwrite certain social conceptions and norms. This reconceptualization of gender throws down a challenge to fundamental assumptions in the social sciences. Strathern's implication is that little separates the presuppositions around gender of the Papuan Hagen people and the Western feminist anthropologists who study them. *The Gender of the Gift* is thus doubly admonitory. It first warns anthropologists against restricting their research to certain presumed features (gender, Melanesianness, and Englishness) and then insists on the historical, social, and situational specificities of the constructs they investigate, reminding

readers that these are constructs only. Constructs do things; they are just not already done things to be approached.

Another work, *Partial Connections* (1991), generally acclaimed as an anthropological classic, was received on publication as an equally daring, dauntingly complex text. The book is an experimental treatise on anthropology's epistemological frameworks, setting out with precision what we do when practicing the discipline or thinking of ourselves as its adherents. How does anthropology structure our representation and documentation of others? Reflecting on the premises of anthropology's means of collecting, segmenting, categorizing, and ordering its data, *Partial Connections* works with mainly Melanesian details to construct a nonregionally specific study of meaning making. Besides making use of her own fieldnotes and readings of others' theories, Strathern launches her disciplinary reflections by reading a selection of metaphors put forward by anthropologists as conceptualizations of their research. The Melanesian material is taken out of its context to serve not as *interpretatum* but as *interpretans*—that is, as an analytical tool—throwing into relief Euro-American practices of sense making. Anthropologists, for Strathern, always interpret others according to their own perspectives or prerogatives. “Native” concepts are thrown into relief by the logic of the Western thought that organizes, and then presents, them.

Strathern argues that the ways in which anthropologists organize material cannot then aspire to any kind of status as objective anthropological tools. Methodological themes and principles must remain constructs. Yet “constructs” or “constructed” is not opposed to “objective” or dealing with objects; rather, a measure of methodological self-consciousness sharpens a concern with the form and scale of the artifacts anthropologists use in symbolizing their field sites. In particular, anthropologists must beware of too easy an assumption of the commensurability of image-artifacts across explanatory contexts. A cautionary example for anthropologists of the commendably restrained use of explanatory induction in the use of objects is, for Strathern, provided in much of experimental natural science; and in *Partial Connections*, science becomes a constructive model for the analysis of Melanesians' techniques for understanding their own social forms.

*Partial Connections* is thus simultaneously the document of its own analysis and a palimpsest of postmodern attitudes in the production of what, somewhere, passes as knowledge. Positions that would be broadly accepted by most symbolic anthropologist and actor network theorists, for example, interpretive feminist readings in a plural frame or a postcolonial search for neo-Marxist explanatory totalities in censuring colonial ethnography (i.e., statistical practices of counting or measurement), are understood by Strathern only as variants in the field of constructs. These constructs are further taken ceaselessly to relate to, or articulate with, each other in producing complexity, diversity, and difference. The anthropologist gains her vantage on these complexities (i.e., Strathern's own), she argues, through changes of observation and perspective. While this could mean switching to a more “scientific” idiom, it could also mean seeking a purchase on contemporary society's distinctly managerial relationship to knowledge(s). This differs from noninstrumental anthropological knowledge, which, even if quantified, retains a certain suppositional character, as a kind of *controlled fiction*. Once again, little distinguishes the epistemological bases or validity of anthropological knowledge from the “knowledge” claimed by Melanesians in interpreting their culture. For *Partial Connections*, then, knowledge production is fictional, but these fictions can enable contestatory thought.

Some people find Strathern's writing complex and elliptical. The final effect, though, of her strategic, almost programmatic, emancipation of the language from the habitual terms of academic anthropological discourse is to spur the reader into thought. This is always enriching, if sometimes unsettling. For Strathern, field sites, professional-academic language, and modes of organizing data and even ethnographic descriptions all present themselves as aesthetic forms and potential analytical tools. The effect is to redirect attention both to the meaning of words, images, and acts (as interested symbolic anthropologists) and to their work—which she characteristically describes as what “they set in motion.”

Strathern's thinking and writing keeps the relations between their descriptive and critical concepts in a constant state of flux. Her readers likewise find themselves unsettled by her problematization of the temporal dimension of anthropological writings, as she points out how often the authority of

ethnography is vested in its organizational time scheme, which lays down the writer's own analytical framework and projects the illusion of an "ethnographic present." Yet anthropological analysis evidently "happens" as much during conceptualization and writing up as in data collection. Strathern's insistence on the temporality of research, though, is more than just another version of the critique of ethnocentrism or a reflection on asymmetrical power relations between the studied and the student. In displacing the level of examination, Strathern repositions the anthropologist as bereft of any form of analytical authority other than an awareness of his or her own positionality and the position's resources. At the same time, Strathern's writing does not disavow her own status within the anthropological profession, further tending to make explicit the differences between social fractions. Her analysis of kinship, class, and cultural differences aims at their illumination, not at their dissolution.

Strathern's pioneer work in reframing anthropology so that its objects may include local professional cultures of accountability and professionalism has earned her membership in the British Academy of Science and the honor of damehood. She was awarded the Rivers Memorial Medal in 1976 and the Viking Fund Medal in 2003. Despite her insistence on the context and time frame in which the scholarly work was produced, her writings remain fresh, inspirational pieces of literature and are key texts in the philosophy of contemporary anthropology.

Strathern retired in June 2008 after 14 years of chairing the Department of Social Anthropology in Cambridge. She was also Mistress of Girton College. She still lives in Cambridge and is currently active in writing new studies of bioethics and transdisciplinarity in academic research.

*Maja Petrović-Šteger*

*See also* Cambridge University; Feminist Anthropology; Gift Exchange; Public Sphere; Social Studies of Science

### Further Readings

- Strathern, A., & Strathern, M. (1971). *Self-decoration in Mount Hagen*. London, UK: Duckworth.
- Strathern, M. (1981). *Kinship at the core: An anthropology of Elmdon, Essex*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- . (1988). *The gender of the gift: Problems with women and problems with society in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . (1992). *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- . (1995). *The relation: Issues in complexity and scale* (1994 inaugural lecture by the William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology). Cambridge, UK: Prickly Pear Press.
- . (1999). *Property, substance and effect: Anthropological essays on persons and things* (Collected essays, 1992–1998). London, UK: Athlone Press.
- . (2000). Introduction: New accountabilities; Afterword: Accountability and ethnograph. In Strathern, M. (Ed.), *Audit cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy* (EASA Series in Social Anthropology) (pp. 1–18, 279–304). London, UK: Routledge.
- . (2004). *Commons and borderlands: Working papers on interdisciplinarity, accountability and the flow of knowledge*. Wantage, UK: Sean Kingston.
- . (2005). *Kinship, law and the unexpected: Relatives are always a surprise*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- . (2006). A community of critics? Thoughts on new knowledge. *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, 12, 191–209.