

## The adventurous fieldworker and first-rate theoretical thinker

Review by Prof. Dr. Firouz Gaini

*It Happens Among People – Resonances and Extensions of the Work of Fredrik Barth, 2020*, Edited by Keping Wu and Robert P. Weller. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books

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This collection, counting just above two hundred pages authored by eleven contributors from Norway, Sweden, China, and the United States in twelve independent chapters (including the Introduction and Afterword), presents a mosaic of Fredrik Barth's (1928-2016) original anthropological work as seen through the eyes of a diverse team of fieldworkers and anthropological peers influenced and inspired by different components of the Norwegian master's oeuvre. The editors emphasize in the very first paragraphs of the introduction chapter that the publication's aim is not to "simply celebrate his legacy" (p. 1) or to serve as conventional scholarly biography (as in Thomas Hylland Eriksen's praised book from 2015), because they want to "pass on Barth's humanistic tradition of knowledge" (p. 1) in a reflective forward-looking conversation. The book's subtitle, "Resonances and Extensions of the Work," tells readers that the intention is to illuminate the deep yet too often overlooked imprint of Barth's theoretical and methodological thoughts – much more than the lessons of "Ethnic groups and Boundaries" – on following generations of scholars from an wide range of research fields. This formulation is also a smart way of assembling chapters that have little in common apart from a smaller or larger debt to Barth. Some of the chapters – e.g. the chapters by Barfield, Haaland, and Robbins – present ethnographic studies (as cases, you could say) with very strong "resonance" to Barth's famous monographs based on his extensive fieldwork among the Basseri of Southern Iran (Persia), the Fur of Western Sudan, and the Min in Highland New Guinea. In this part of the volume, the legacy of Barth, through his sophisticated models and rich empirical findings, is comprehensive. The new studies discussed in these chapters are from the same – or adjacent – regions as Barth had put on the anthropological map of the world. Lindholm's chapter (no. 7) on two types of authority in Swat, Pakistan, also resonates with and reinterprets Barth's groundbreaking study of the Swat Pathans. In some of the other chapters of the book – e.g. the chapters by Weller, Wu, and Herzfeld – we move to "new territories" not – or

to a much lesser extent (without the outcome of a classic monograph) – explored by Barth himself. While the thorough discussion on and mapping of Barth's influence on contemporary Chinese studies, especially concerning ethnographic research focusing on themes like ethnic identities and (fluid or plastic) boundaries, demonstrates the contextual expansion of Barth's methodological and analytic transactionalist models (chapters 3 and 4), I felt that a more critical reflection on Barth's theoretical models, for instance with reference to some of the critique of Barth in recent studies, would have strengthened the introduction to the Barthian 'turn' in Chinese anthropology.

One of the book's qualities is its sober and mature approach to the work of Barth. It avoids the pitfall of creating a myth and demigod out of the man who says that he always wants to hold on to "humility in relation to the understanding and insights of other people" (Wikan, p. 39). Wikan's contribution to the book, titled "Humility First," is a beautiful piece dedicated to the man that she shared her life with through forty-four years. Her personal account, combined with Barth's "own words," draws a captivating image of a man making "as little as he could of himself" (p. 21) and who "was playful with theory and liked to try out new perspectives to see where they might bring him" (p. 27). Barth, says Robbins, "realized the disciplinary ideal of being equally a first-rate, adventurous, and indefatigable fieldworker and a searching, first-rate theoretical thinker" (p. 168). Barth was a Nomad. His favourite fieldwork – among all his fieldworks in Europe, Asia and Africa – was among the Basseri nomads of Southern Persia. What made his work so distinctive, says Barfield referring to the Basseri-study, was not only his "profound understanding" of pastoralism, but also his "sympathy for the people" (p. 117). He always focussed on "real people doing real things" (Weller and Wu, p. 2) as part of his methodological framework grounded in a humanistic tradition of knowledge, which also motivated him to become a very active public intellectual.

"It happens among people" represents an interesting collection of chapters aiming to unpack and reexamine Barth in order to grasp his impact on present-day and future research in anthropology. In the conclusion of Haaland's chapter "The Language of Trust and Betrayal," as an example, we are informed that Barth, in Haaland's point of view, "wanted to develop an 'analytic theory' of conceptual tools that might stimulate well-corroborated leaps from fragments of observations to statements that revealed something about the complexity of the human condition wherever we encountered it" (p. 136). Barth is, says Tan, "a more complex and dialectical thinker than many claim. He continually oscillates between interpretation and explanation, between the universally human and the locally particular, which can only be grasped through deep observation and participation" (p. 205). These explanations, together with discussions from all other chapters, portray the image of a legacy that is much more important than what many young scholars might think today. As Hannerz says in the Afterword: Barth's work "is now seen to foreshadow later developments in varied ways: postmodernism, the 'ontological turn,' the importance of trust, infrastructural studies, and others" (p. 209). While Barth might not be the "star author" in fashion in academia today, invisible in many of the scholarly discourses, he is without any doubt a member of the small group of anthropologists who will be a source of inspiration for generations to come. I enjoy reading this book, which has a title indicating that

it is taking Barth seriously – not as a master of abstract thinking up in the Ivory Tower, but as the anthropologist who always want to learn more about “real people” with “real lives.” The Norwegian anthropologist, who was “at home in Norway and in the world” (p. 217), continued to question, the book’s editors emphasize, “throughout his life” (p. 14). I highly recommend this book, especially for readers interested in the future of anthropology and Barth’s place in it. Clearly, Barth keeps fuelling new thoughts and perspectives in the global anthropological community.

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