

Book Review: The Handbook of Sociocultural Anthropology

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The Handbook of Sociocultural Anthropology seeks to present a state of the art overview of the subject – its methodologies, current debates, history and future. It provides a consideration of the general state of the discipline at a time when there is notable uncertainty about its foundations, composition and direction. **James Cuffe** finds much to recommend.



The Handbook of Sociocultural Anthropology. James G. Carrier & Deborah B. Gewertz. Bloomsbury Academic. January 2013.

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The Handbook of Sociocultural Anthropology brings together international names from various branches and activities of all things socio-cultural, including Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Katherine Verdery, Veena Das and Andrés Barrera-González to name only 4 out of 43 contributors. This book warrants praise from the outset as the gargantuan task it represents does exactly what it sets out to do making it both a pleasure to peruse but also a vitally important and erudite addition to an anthropologist's library. The magnitude of their project means this review can only skim the surface but I will endeavour to present a holistic sense of the editors' aim. Yet be aware that this review is focusing on those chapters that deal with the discipline of anthropology as a whole while other sections of the book deal with themes and more traditional concerns.



**THE HANDBOOK OF
SOCIOCULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

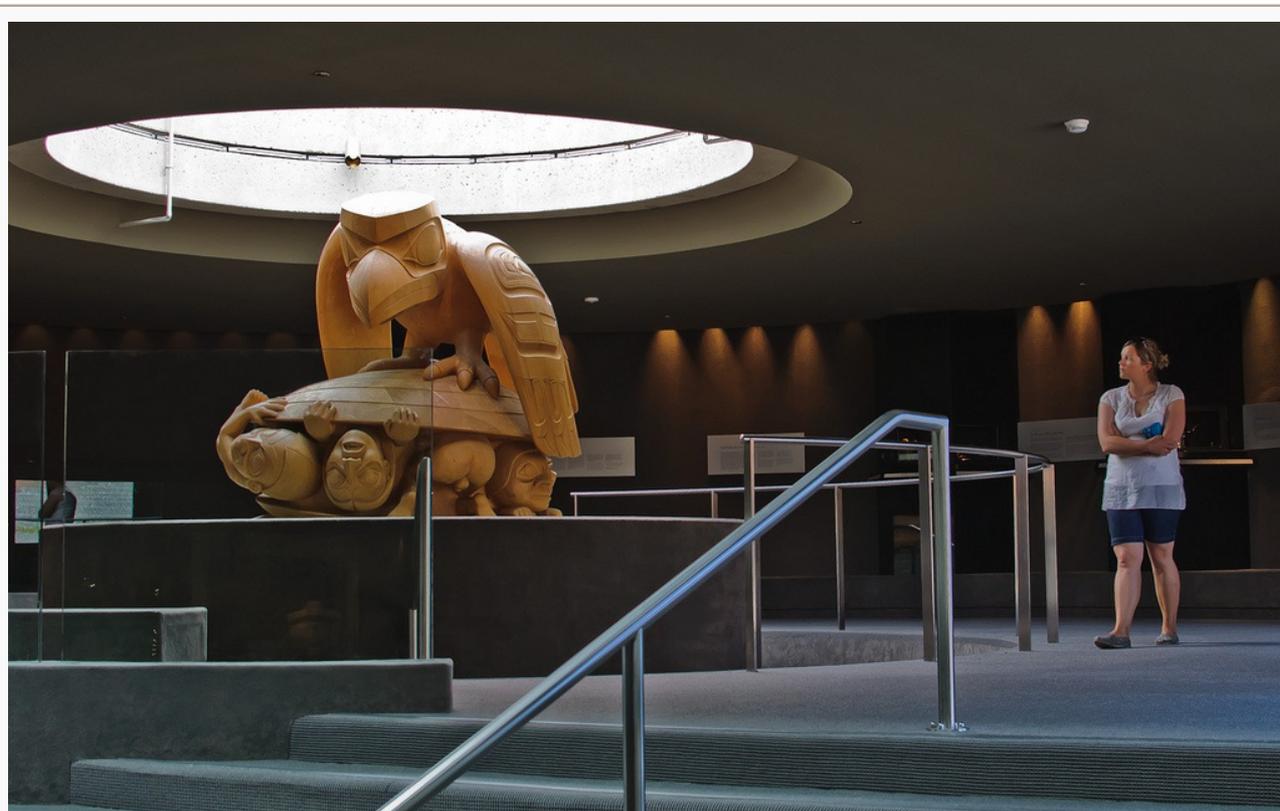
EDITED BY JAMES G. CARRIER
AND DEBORAH B. GEWERTZ

The 29 chapters of this handbook span 5 sections each covering a particular theme or topic under the titles: Orientations; Elements; Issues; Regions; Context. Within each section there is considerable variation amongst the chapters. Throughout the book the authors are taking perspective on two main issues, the development of the discipline since the advent of post-modernism coupled with the changing institutional environment that affects where and how anthropology is practised.

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Crisis can lead to self-reflection and as Carrier points out in the introduction the notion that anthropology is a discipline in crisis is a cornerstone for its mode of reflexivity. This generally leads to 'ought' statements rather than 'is' statements with the resulting orientation in anthropology grasping-forward rather than taking-stock. This serves as the context for the book: Where *is* anthropology today?

Gísli Pálsson opens the dialogue and discusses a number of urgent questions for contemporary anthropology: given new understanding and experiences of the biosocial, techno-social and even techno-biological we must ask as Rabinow (2008:14) asks – 'what *logos* is appropriate for *anthropos*?' (p.25). In addition, if we come to understand knowledge as something we produce rather than something we uncover then how do we validate our research? And – not to forget our discipline's perennial Christmas cracker – what is culture anyway?



Inside the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology. Credit: [InSapphoWeTrust](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

Brenneis *et al* trace out the cultural environment of anthropology at large. When anthropologists seek funding there is a marked consequence in the type of work they can do depending on the stakeholders involved, whether they be commercial, military, philanthropist or political entities. Winslow and Küyük show how the relationship between those who provide resources and the consequent impact-value of anthropological output is problematic, especially considering what kind of impact-value one seeks – academic or military.

Winslow and Küyük further provide an interesting discussion on the peer-review process and funding. Peer-review is a standard requisite in the life of the publishing anthropologist yet it seems without requisite standards. Concerning peer-review Lamont (2009:53-106) finds

that disciplines differ: English professors debated the existence of common standards, historians were typically consensual and anthropologists engaged in what she called “border patrolling,” worrying about the appropriateness as well as the quality of particular research methods. There are few if any useful ways to assess whether “the cream rises” (p.546).

Mills argues: ‘As currently understood within the academy, disciplinarity relies on the institutional legitimation offered by research funding, university posts, and career hierarchies. Without it, contemporary scholars risk a life *sans papiers*, ignored and unread’ (p.572). The editors point out – and Joan Vincent (1990) – academia over-produces and under-consumes written work. The institutional pressure to publish and the increased number of able academics who can publish to ‘standard’ practically ensures a best before date on any handbook exercise such as this. Yet the manner in which this handbook critically engages with its topic ensures it value over and above being merely a history of anthropology or reference book. One might suggest that scholarly projects that take stock may become touchstones for evaluating where we are as a discipline in terms of what we might call legitimate-relevance in place of impact-value.

David Mills highlights the language used in research as another theme that acknowledges the resilience between interdisciplinarity when translations between modes of understanding are fraught with difficulty. Anthropologists are increasingly finding themselves working dispersed across a gamut of institutional entities How will these themes shape anthropology’s disciplinary future where our own language changes depending on our environment as we disperse across different habitats (pardon the metaphoric language).

The terrain covered in this handbook is considerable, from chapters discussing Amazonia to South Asia, environment to sexuality, border politics to methodologies. The price of this tome may prove prohibitive for the majority of students save only those doctoral candidates who may feel they are institutionalised and see value in obtaining a reference book for use during their career. The title is better suited to academic lifers that can distil ready material for use in the classroom, research proposals and for the pleasure in accessing a quality book that provides a window into our own contexts and activities. I wholly recommend this publication to institutions and libraries. Returning with surety to who and where we are as a discipline this volume may be one sign that the anointed term *crisis* may soon hold less traction within anthropology as conscious reflective participation with dis/empowered-brokers develops. And thus, fittingly, the last chapter of the *Handbook of Sociocultural Anthropology* deals with ethics. This book is a dialogue by the discipline with the discipline and one worth engaging.

James Cuffe is an anthropologist with the School of Asian Studies at [University College Cork](#). He lectures on Political Economy of China, Chinese Social Theory and Anthropology of China. His interests lie in Philosophical Anthropology, especially around technology and communication. His publications include a number of review articles within China Studies and articles and chapters in Chinese and English on Sino-Irish economic and cultural relations. He is editor of the *IPA Series on Contemporary Mimetic Revival*. He tries to maintain a profile page at www.jamescuffe.com. [Read reviews by James](#).

