Fredrik Barth: in memoriam

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Fredrik Barth

In Memoriam

Fredrik Barth, one of the great anthropologists and the premier ethnographer of our time, died on January 24, 2016, in Oslo, Norway. He was 87. He is survived by his wife, Unni Wikan, their son Kim, and by the children from his first marriage: Tom, Tanja, Jorgen and Elisabet.

Barth was trained in paleontology, archeology and cultural anthropology at the University of Chicago, receiving his MA in 1949. The empirical inductive mode of investigation he absorbed there would always remain with him. He obtained his doctorate from Cambridge in 1957, advised by Edmund Leach, who stimulated Barth’s life-long fascination with social transformation. In 1961 he founded the Anthropology Department at Bergen and later became the head of Oslo’s Museum of Cultural History. Supported by a Norwegian State scholarship, he took a position at Emory in 1985, moved to Boston University in 1997 and retired from teaching in 2008, though he continued his active career as an ethnographer. Barth was the author or co-author of over 20 books and innumerable articles. In 1997, he was selected as a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

As a fieldworker, Barth was remarkable for his empathetic ability to enter deeply into the worlds of others; he lived as they did, regardless of how harsh the conditions. Methodologically, he paid close attention to actions rather than explanations. This strategy allowed him to complete his studies quickly and move easily from the study of Norwegian Gypsies to comparison of villages in Kurdistan, from analysis of political maneuverings in Pakistan’s Swat Valley to the ethnography of the Basseri nomads of Iran. Further research led him to Darfur, Oman, New Guinea, Bali, China and Bhutan, with stops in-between. It has rightly been said that, “there are anthropologists who work in one society, others who work in two, and then there is Fredrik Barth.”

Barth’s fundamental ambition was to describe, as accurately as possible, cultural processes and outcomes. In his earlier studies, he used game theory and transactional analysis to reveal the individual strategies for maximizing benefits. In his later ethnography, he turned instead to investigating underlying values and knowledge systems that motivate action and construct worldviews. These two approaches are complementary aspects of an open-ended generative model that takes account of the interaction of premises, intentions and actual behavior. Barth never assumed the authority or predictability of rational free agents. Rather, he was acutely aware of the various impacts of multiple cultural, historical and ecological factors on actors, and of the constant possibility of innovation.

As a person he was modest, open-minded, humorous, curious, generous, and quick to help his students and colleagues. But he was never a pushover and was always ready and able to make his case. Above all, he respected the dignity and autonomy of individuals.

As one of his students wrote: “It felt as if Barth was from nowhere in particular and from everywhere at the same time.” He will be sorely missed by all who knew him. (Charles Lindholm)