

Small Places, Large Issues

An Introduction to Social
and Cultural Anthropology

FOURTH EDITION

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Series Preface

Anthropology is a discipline based upon in-depth ethnographic works that deal with wider theoretical issues in the context of particular, local conditions – to paraphrase an important volume from the series: *large issues* explored in *small places*. This series has a particular mission: to publish work that moves away from an old-style descriptive ethnography that is strongly area-studies oriented, and offer genuine theoretical arguments that are of interest to a much wider readership, but which are nevertheless located and grounded in solid ethnographic research. If anthropology is to argue itself a place in the contemporary intellectual world, then it must surely be through such research.

We start from the question: ‘What can this ethnographic material tell us about the bigger theoretical issues that concern the social sciences?’ rather than ‘What can these theoretical ideas tell us about the ethnographic context?’ Put this way round, such work becomes *about* large issues, *set* in a (relatively) small place, rather than detailed description of a small place for its own sake. As Clifford Geertz once said, ‘Anthropologists don’t study villages; they study *in* villages.’

By place, we mean not only geographical locale, but also other types of ‘place’ – within political, economic, religious or other social systems. We therefore publish work based on ethnography within political and religious movements, occupational or class groups, among youth, development agencies, and nationalist movements; but also work that is more thematically based – on kinship, landscape, the state, violence, corruption, the self. The series publishes four kinds of volume: ethnographic monographs; comparative texts; edited collections; and shorter, polemical essays.

We publish work from all traditions of anthropology, and all parts of the world, which combines theoretical debate with empirical evidence to demonstrate anthropology’s unique position in contemporary scholarship and the contemporary world.

Professor Vered Amit
Professor Christina Garsten

Preface to the Fourth Edition

This book, now in its fourth, revised and updated edition, is a rather conventional introduction to social and cultural anthropology. As the chapter titles indicate, the book does not represent an attempt to reinvent or revolutionise the subject. What I aim to do is simply to introduce the main tools of the craft, the theoretical discussions, the key figures, the main subject-areas and a representative selection of empirical fields studied by anthropologists. By 'conventional', incidentally, I do not necessarily mean 'boring'. (Innovation is not always a good thing. Who wants to go to an innovative dentist? Or to fly with an innovative pilot keen to explore alternative knowledge systems?)

Today, anthropology is a global discipline, but it is unevenly distributed across the globe. English is the dominant language of anthropological discourse, more so today than in its early days, but important research is also being carried out in other languages, from Russian and Japanese to French and Spanish. It is beyond my abilities to do justice to all these national traditions of anthropology, but I have made some feeble attempts. It remains a fact, though, that this book is written from a vantage-point in Anglophone anthropology. For many years, it was common to distinguish between a British 'social' and an American 'cultural' anthropology. Today, this boundary is blurred, and although the distinction is sometimes highlighted in the text, the book is deliberately subtitled with 'social and cultural anthropology' in a bid to overcome an ultimately unproductive boundary.

The most controversial aspect of this book may be the prominence given to classic anthropological research in several of the chapters. In my view, it is not only a great advantage to be familiar with the classic studies in order to understand later trends and debates, but I also remain convinced that a sound grasp of mid-twentieth-century anthropology is essential for doing good research in the twenty-first century. Since many students no longer systematically read classic monographs and articles, the capsule reviews provided here may also give an understanding of the context of contemporary research – its intellectual origins and theoretical debates on which it elaborates. I do not want to give the impression that contemporary anthropologists are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, but they do stand on the shoulders of anthropologists of very considerable merit, and

their work needs to be known, even if superficially, in order to understand properly what anthropological researchers are doing now. Some of these people were actually quite impressive.

The general development of this book, both at the theoretical and at the empirical level, moves from simple to increasingly complex models and sociocultural environments – from the social person to the global information society. The book is intended as a companion volume to ethnographic monographs, which remain an indispensable part of an anthropologist's training, notwithstanding the summaries a textbook is capable of providing.

This book introduces both the subject-matter of social anthropology and an anthropological way of thinking. It is my conviction that the comparative study of society and culture is a fundamental intellectual activity with important implications for other forms of engagement with the world. Through the study of different societies, we learn something essential not only about other people's worlds, but also about ourselves. In a sense, anthropologists excel in making the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar through comparison and the use of comparative concepts. For this reason, comparisons with modern urban societies are implicit throughout, even when the topic is Melanesian gift-giving, Malagasy ritual or Nuer politics. In fact, the whole book may, perhaps, be read as an exercise in comparative thinking.

In this fourth edition, I have kept the structure and chapter titles unchanged, with one exception – I have added a chapter about engaged anthropology towards the end – but both ethnographic examples and theoretical discussions have been updated and tweaked. Some new areas of research are introduced, but scarcely any of the older ones have been deleted. The increased interdependence of human worlds (often described under the headings of globalisation, transnationalism, etc.), described already in the first edition and elaborated further in the second and third editions, is now taken for granted throughout. Just as no man is an island, one can no longer speak of isolated societies.

Also, the strengths of social and cultural anthropology as ways of knowing are emphasised more explicitly in this edition than in the earlier ones, especially the first (1995) edition. In recent years, anthropology has increasingly been challenged by alternative, highly articulate and publicly visible ways of accounting for the unity and diversity of humanity. On the one hand, humanistic disciplines (sometimes lumped together as 'cultural studies') and, on the other hand, approaches based on natural science (evolutionary psychology, or second-generation sociobiology, being the

most powerful one), propose answers to some of the questions typically raised in social anthropology – concerning, for example, the nature of society, ethnic complexity, kinship, ritual and so on. In this situation, neither antagonistic competition nor the merging of disciplines into a ‘super-discipline’ of sociocultural science comes across as attractive options; instead, I advocate openness, dialogue and interdisciplinarity when feasible. Owing to the prevalence of competing claims, however, I try to state explicitly what it is that the methods, theory and body of research in anthropology have to offer in studies of the contemporary world. I argue that credible accounts of culture and society should have an ethnographic component, and that proper knowledge of traditional or otherwise ‘remote’ societies greatly enhances the understanding of phenomena such as tourism, ethnic violence or migration. If social anthropology does have a bright future, it is not in spite of, but because of global change.

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In a sense, this is the seventh version of this book. The first edition, *Små steder, store spørsmål* in Norwegian, was originally published in 1993. Subsequently, Anne Beech at Pluto Press invited me to make an English version, but it would have to be substantially shorter than the original, which was a large, expensive and lavishly illustrated book. I kept the basic structure and chapter titles, but compressed and adjusted the content to make it suitable for a non-Scandinavian readership. In 1998, a revised and updated version of the Norwegian original was published, and in 2001, the second edition of *Small Places*, similarly revised, appeared. When a third edition was being considered by Pluto, I had already been contacted by Universitetsforlaget, my Norwegian academic publisher, about the book. The editor, Per Robstad, wanted an updated *Små steder, store spørsmål*, but he argued that the 1998 edition was too bulky to fit the current structure of academic teaching in Norway, now based (as in the English-speaking world) on smaller, more clearly focused courses than before the Bologna reforms of 2003. Our conclusion was that making a Norwegian translation of the English edition might solve the problem. By then, I had come full circle with the book, ending the third revision by translating the third edition of the English version into Norwegian (with, as always, a number of minor adjustments). And now, five years later, another revision seemed necessary for a book purporting to give an overview of a discipline embedded in and trying to keep up with a fast-changing world. Naturally, when I began drafting the first chapters in 1992, a reasonably happy young

man just having emerged from his PhD rite of passage, it would never have occurred to me that I should still be working on the book more than two decades later. Having said this, I am pleased to do so, even if this revision serves as a continuous reminder that the young Eriksen had some tendencies that can be quite exasperating for the middle-aged Eriksen. Perhaps it is precisely the conventional structure of the book that has passed the test of time; whatever the case may be, it is a privilege to be allowed once more to develop, and not least to update and try to improve, my vision of anthropology through a fairly comprehensive text like this.

Over the years, I have received many suggestions and comments on the earlier editions of the books from people all over the world, and for this I am grateful. I see the production and dissemination of knowledge as an essentially collective endeavour, as a gift economy of the kind described especially in Chapter 12. This, then, is my belated return gift to my teachers – Harald Eidheim, Eduardo Archetti, Fredrik Barth, Axel Sommerfelt, Arne Martin Klausen and others – to my students, colleagues, translators into other languages and everybody who has cared to read the book and give me their comments and questions. Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Anne Beech at Pluto Press for her unflinching support of my work for quite a few years now.

Oslo, spring 2015