

Fredrik Barth



# Fredrik Barth

An Intellectual Biography

Thomas Hylland Eriksen



**Pluto Press**  
[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)



First published in Norwegian 2013.  
First English language edition published 2015 by Pluto Press  
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)

Copyright © Universitetsforlaget 2013  
English translation © Thomas Hylland Eriksen 2015

The right of Thomas Hylland Eriksen to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3536 0 Hardback  
ISBN 978 0 7453 3535 3 Paperback  
ISBN 978 1 7837 1305 9 PDF eBook  
ISBN 978 1 7837 1307 3 Kindle eBook  
ISBN 978 1 7837 1306 6 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England  
Text design by Melanie Patrick  
Simultaneously printed by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, UK  
and Edwards Bros in the United States of America



# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vi
<i>Series Preface</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	viii
<b>Part 1 A Man of Action</b>	
1. Watching and Wandering	3
2. The Power and the Glory	24
3. Nomadic Freedom	55
4. Entrepreneurship	71
5. The Global Theorist	80
6. Ethnic Groups and Boundaries	97
<b>Part 2 An Anthropology of Knowledge</b>	
7. Baktaman Vibrations	111
8. A New Kind of Complexity	133
9. Turbulent Times	144
10. Cultural Complexity	157
11. The Guru and the Conjurer	173
12. Between Art and Science	196
<i>Notes</i>	207
<i>List of Works by Fredrik Barth</i>	219
<i>List of Other References</i>	231
<i>Index</i>	237

# 1

## Watching and Wandering

As so frequently in social anthropological description, our task is to find out what kind of things there are to know about this society, rather than to attempt a rigorous recording of answers to questions that are already in principle known to the investigator.<sup>1</sup>

The first Barth on Norwegian soil was a mining engineer from Saxony, brought to the then Danish province by the king to assist in the excavation of silver from the mines in Kongsberg. As Fredrik Barth expresses it, he came to the country as a development expert. One of his descendants, Thomas (Tom) Fredrik Weybye Barth (1899–1971), also saw value in rocks. He became a geologist, took his doctoral degree at the age of 27, and travelled to Germany on a scholarship in 1927. During his academic sojourn in Leipzig, his first and only son was born on 22 December 1928, four years after his sister Tone. In accordance with family tradition, the son was christened Thomas Fredrik Weybye Barth like his father, but – presumably to avoid confusion – the tradition also specified that every second male heir should be called Tom and Fredrik, respectively, on an everyday basis.

Fredrik Barth's mother Randi (née Thomassen, 1902–1980) had no academic career, but she had considerable artistic interests. Fredrik was very close to his mother. Throughout his life, he has spoken Norwegian with a mildly rolling 'r', which was at the time usually associated with having been brought up by a governess from the southern coast, but in Fredrik's case it came from a mother and maternal aunts from Kristiansand.

The family did not remain in Germany. Tom Barth soon obtained a new scholarship and later a position at the Carnegie Institution in Washington, and Fredrik was barely six months old when the family moved there, where they remained until he was seven and ready to start school. At the time, his parents wished to return to Norway, so when an academic job opportunity appeared in Oslo, they moved home. Tom Barth became professor of geology the following year. His career was broken off during the Second





1. Barth as research fellow, by Gösta Hammarlund (photo reproduced by permission of Gösta Hammarlund).

World War, when he took part in the resistance movement. After the war, Tom Barth spent three years in Chicago as visiting professor, before returning to the Mineralogical-Geological Museum in Oslo, where he would remain as professor and head until his retirement in 1966.

Tom Barth was a charismatic man with considerable personal authority. He was also known for his extreme self-discipline. Even on nights when the family returned late from a party, he would often go to his study and make corrections to a manuscript he was working on. He came across as powerful rather than severe, and would have been a natural role model for his son.

Fredrik Barth explains that the family at first rented a flat near Holmenkollen in western Oslo, which was confiscated by the Luftwaffe in

April 1940. They were evicted on 20 April and moved to another location in western Oslo, where Fredrik spent his formative years.

In spite of its location in a famously egalitarian society, Oslo is deeply divided by class along an east–west axis. Fredrik Barth grew up, and would later live, in the leafy western parts of the city, in an area inhabited by educated and moderately wealthy people. Finishing primary school at Tåsen, his upper secondary school years were spent at Blindern, where the main university campus is now located. Barth seems to have enjoyed school; he excelled in all subjects and was generally ‘outstanding’, according to his old schoolmate, the renowned criminologist Nils Christie. Among other things, he was an unusually skilled draughtsman.

With the hindsight of more than half a century, Barth recalls the time of the occupation – he was 16 when it ended in 1945 – as a ‘strangely good situation’, where ‘you could be on the side of the majority, on the one hand, and at the same time oppose the powers that be. A time when there was no temptation to join a protest group railing against society, since the excitement was in fighting for that which was legitimate!’

It nevertheless appears that Barth had a rebellious streak. Along with Christie and another schoolmate, Sven Knudsen, Barth founded an extra-curricular study group at his home and an anti-religious student association. In its very formal and ceremoniously signed budget, the latter organisation had an entry, estimated at the value of 3 kroner (a modest sum), described as ‘Confirmation condolences’. The Lutheran confirmation was a rite of passage almost universally participated in by adolescent boys and girls at the time.

Among the most significant of Barth’s experiences during the occupation were the periods when he was sent off to the country, to live with small farmers in Engerdal, in a remote part of southern Norway near the Swedish border. He helped with the collection of lichen and moss for cattle fodder, moving from summer pastures in the hills to autumn pastures in the lowlands. Rural life was still quite traditional, with few mechanical implements, and as a teenager Barth got a taste for it. Only a few years later, he would carry out a minor field study in the same area.

Towards the end of his school years, Barth also spent a short period as an apprentice with the sculptor Stinius Fredriksen, who taught him clay modelling. He remarks, not without a certain pride, that he has contributed the right shoe of Fredriksen’s statue of the painter Lars Hertevig, still on public display in Stavanger. At the time, it was by no means obvious to Barth that he should commit his life to research, and he has retained

a passion for art throughout his life, although this interest is scarcely discernable in his writings.

When, in 1946, Tom Barth was offered a chair at the University of Chicago, his son was given the option of joining him, and seized the opportunity. To use his own term, a change in his opportunity situation seemed to have been decisive for the early choice of the path his life would follow. Had Chicago not emerged as an option, Barth might conceivably have become a sculptor rather than a social anthropologist. However, unlike what might have been expected, given his family background, he did not opt for the natural sciences, but for human sciences with a major in anthropology.

Father and son left for the USA, almost as two bachelors, his mother opting to stay in Oslo. Fredrik's sister Tone married the chemist Terkel Rosenqvist in 1945, and the couple moved to Trondheim, where Rosenqvist got a post at the Norwegian Institute of Technology.<sup>2</sup> The University of Chicago was, then as now, among the finest academic institutions in the country. In the years following the Second World War, American universities were infused with a surplus of vitality, since a whole generation of GIs, who had been obliged to interrupt or postpone their studies in order to do military service, returned with state grants. Thus it came to pass that the young Barth entered into academic life as a precocious teenager, along with students who were years older than himself. In retrospect, he says that becoming an anthropology student at Chicago entailed 'the realization of my highest wish'.<sup>3</sup> Like many curious boys, he had been fascinated by zoology and evolution, and he had followed lectures by the palaeontologist Anatol Heinz on human origins, but shortly after the end of the war he discovered that it was possible to study cultural and social anthropology. This was partly the result of a brief meeting with the American anthropologist Conrad Arensberg, who was travelling through Oslo in May 1945, still in uniform.

Barth was not yet 18 when he began his studies, and by the time he turned 21 he had succeeded in finishing his Master's degree and marrying his fellow student Mary 'Molly' Allee (1926–1998), the daughter of zoology professor Warder Clyde Allee. There are good reasons to believe that Barth's father-in-law, who had devoted much of his career to research on group dynamics in animals, exerted a certain influence on Barth, who would soon go on to develop his own analytical strategies concerning humans in groups. The student from Norway must have made an impression on his teachers, since the archaeology professor Robert Braidwood hired him, in spite of his young age, as a field assistant on

his planned expedition in Iraqi Kurdistan. Barth's plan was to remain in Kurdistan after the departure of the archaeologists, in order to do ethnographic fieldwork.

In the academically dominant countries, anthropology as a discipline grew rapidly in the years following the Second World War. The exception was Germany, where the discipline was in disarray. Many German anthropologists, among them a fair number of Jews, had succeeded in leaving the country in time, while others not only stayed on but compromised themselves by collaborating with the Nazis before and during the war. A number of senior German anthropologists were indeed themselves active Nazis and party members.<sup>4</sup> This is not entirely coincidental. There was no clearly established and universally recognised distinction between biological and cultural explanations in anthropology before the war, and there were many anthropologists, not least in Germany and Central Europe, who viewed cultural variation in relation to assumed racial differences. Besides, many anthropologists shared with the Nazi ideologists a concern about cultural mixing and its possible degenerative effects. The dominant anthropological concept of culture shared its origins with the concept of culture informing nationalist ideology, which developed into an extreme and racist vein by the Nazis. This concept of culture is often traced to the philosopher and theologian Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), in his youth a radical thinker who emphasised that all peoples had their unique *Volksgeist*, or 'folk soul', associated with language, place and custom.<sup>5</sup> Nationalists and cultural relativists have for 200 years built on an understanding of culture rooted in Herder's ideas, emphasising outward boundaries and inward similarities. Transferred from the otherworldly serenity of academic discourse to the political domain, such a concept of culture can easily inspire fighters for purity and fervent border guards. The South African ideology of apartheid was largely developed in the interwar years by the German-born anthropologist Werner Eiselen, professor at the University of Stellenbosch.<sup>6</sup> One justification for the enforced 'apartness' (*apartheid*) of the peoples was that exaggerated contact would be harmful and weaken their vital force, sense of identity and social cohesion. According to this view, cultural mixing would make South Africans of various origins uprooted and alienated.

Several leading anthropologists in the German-speaking world were familiar with and sympathetic to such ideas, and in what has later been described as a major scandal,<sup>7</sup> several kept their academic positions after the war, although their international influence was by now zero. Moreover,

none of these tendencies were taught to Barth. Racial explanations of cultural diversity were out of fashion in the USA when he came into the discipline.

In the remaining areas of global academic influence, the situation was very different from that in Germany. In France, a vibrant intellectual milieu had developed in the interwar years around the seminars conducted by Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), and many in Mauss's circle had field experiences outside Europe. Soon, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) would set a new agenda for kinship studies with his new theory, structuralism, when he published his monumental comparative study of kinship, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* in 1949.<sup>8</sup> When Barth began his studies at Chicago, Lévi-Strauss, 18 years his senior, had just left the library of the New School of Social Research in New York, where he had been working on his big book. However, French anthropology would never be particularly influential on Barth, not even when structuralism became a major intellectual trend a couple of decades later.

British anthropology, meanwhile, positively flourished after the war, and was about to establish itself, for the time being, as theoretically dominant. While the rival founders of twentieth-century British social anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955), were no longer physically present – Malinowski died in the USA during the war, and Radcliffe-Brown retired in 1946 – their students and successors formulated ambitious theoretical programmes, with the aim of turning social anthropology into a fully fledged science. The emphasis was frequently on kinship and politics in small-scale societies. Barth would soon begin to relate himself actively to this tradition, and is often – partly accurately – considered part of it. He was particularly attracted to the practical, tangible approach to social processes which was typical of the British School.

However, no other country came close to the USA as regards the number of anthropologists in the country and the sheer scope of the research they carried out. The discipline had a different history, and a rather different structure, in the USA than in Britain and France. In Europe, anthropology traced its roots to sociology and law (thus the label *social anthropology*). Especially in Great Britain, the main focus of the discipline was social structure, power and politics. American anthropology had a different history. The first American anthropologist of significance was Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881), who – among other things – carried out field studies among the Iroquois in the north-eastern forests near the Canadian border. Morgan was an unsentimental materialist

and systematiser who developed theories about cultural evolution and technological change which would influence Marx's and Engels's late writings about pre-capitalist societies. However, Morgan's intellectual legacy had been dormant, gathering momentum and building compound interest, for almost a century before a group of young researchers finally reclaimed it in the 1950s, by proclaiming an interest in material culture and evolution. The explanation for this massively delayed reception of Morgan's evolutionist materialism can be summarised in one name: Franz Boas.

Boas (1858–1942) was German-born, Jewish and an immigrant, and presided over the anthropology department at Columbia University from 1899 until his death. His own field research took place primarily among Inuit and indigenous peoples on the US north-west coast, and he was the de facto leader of American anthropology for 40 years. He taught several generations of students, from Alfred Kroeber and Edward Sapir to Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, who would define mainstream American anthropology until decades into the postwar era, with repercussions that are acutely felt even today.

It is possible to argue that Boas created modern American anthropology as a German *Geisteswissenschaft* – human, or spiritual, science – in the tradition of Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Wilhelm Dilthey, by contrast to the earthy and pragmatic materialism of a Morgan, who was a native Yankee. From Herder, Boas had inherited a concept of culture which could be used comparatively; the university model developed by Humboldt in the early decades of the nineteenth century emphasised general knowledge accompanied by personal development (*Bildung*) rather than exaggerated specialisation, and the philosopher Dilthey's theory of interpretation offered methodological cues as to how one could study the symbolic universes of other peoples. In the Boasian version, the study of symbols and their significance, that is *cultural* anthropology, became a central preoccupation for the discipline.

Boas is widely considered to be the originator of the cultural relativist method, according to which each culture should be understood on its own terms and not within a pre-ordained evolutionary scheme. However, he also insisted that anthropology had to be taught and learned in its full breadth, which meant in practice that it should encompass four fields, all of which had to be studied: physical anthropology (including human evolution), archaeology, anthropological linguistics and, finally, socio-cultural anthropology. The four-field approach is less influential

today, but most American anthropology majors still have to take basic courses in human evolution and archaeology.

The department at Chicago where Barth enrolled as a student was based on the Boasian four-field model, but in other respects it was the least Boas-influenced unit among the leading departments in American anthropology. There are two immediate explanations for this anomaly. First, the University of Chicago had a lively and intellectually innovative department of sociology, where ethnographic field methods were actively used. Under the leadership of Robert Park, the Chicago sociologists had been producing pioneering work in the burgeoning area of research on ethnic relations ever since the end of the First World War; and they also developed new methodological devices for research into group relations in complex societies.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly enough, Barth – who would later have a huge influence on research on ethnicity – had no contact with this group during his studies. On the other hand, he did make the acquaintance of Erving Goffman (1922–1982). Goffman would in the ensuing years become a sociologist whose work on individual agency and role theory had a decisive influence on Barth's work in the 1960s, and who in turn admired Barth's deft analyses of social situations. At the time they were unlikely to have suspected that they would both carve out such illustrious careers.

In addition to the exuberance of the Chicago sociologists, Radcliffe-Brown also played a part in removing the department somewhat from the Boasian mainstream. Radcliffe-Brown, an adherent of Durkheim's sociology and widely considered the leading theorist in British social anthropology, had spent six years as professor of anthropology at Chicago from 1931 to 1937. Several of Barth's teachers had been students of Radcliffe-Brown, and they had learnt that the study of social relations and social structure was far more fundamental than the study of symbolic meaning.

The year 1946 was one full of promise. The world was slowly shaking off the dust, sweat and despair from six years of dreadful war, energetically building new palaces on the ruins of the old, determined to leave the sins of the past behind and enter the second half of the century with an optimism that can at least partly be attributed to the awareness that evil had been defeated, at least for now. In Paris, Sartre and de Beauvoir smoked unfiltered cigarettes and drank coffee at their regular Montparnasse café while watching passers-by, writing literature, polemicising angrily against

the hegemony, and philosophising about the 'waiter-ness' of the waiter. In Harlem, the African-American renaissance would develop the most sophisticated and technically dazzling popular music to see the light of day since Mozart. The United Nations was founded amid widespread feelings of cosmopolitan bliss, and an international committee was busy at work drafting the International Declaration of Human Rights (despite the protests of the American Anthropological Association, where a committee under the leadership of Boas's student Melville Herskovits criticised it for not incorporating cultural differences in its assessment of human rights). Indians and Indonesians were preparing for independence, and the winds of decolonisation would soon blow across Africa and the Caribbean as well. It was a new world, a new era, and there was no doubt that the precocious teenager Fredrik Barth was, in 1946, the right man in the right place.

Anthropology in Chicago was equally oriented to the natural sciences and to the humanities. In his undergraduate studies, Barth learnt about mathematical models for genetic research, anatomy and physiology; in physical anthropology, his main teacher was the outstanding primatologist Sherwood 'Sherry' Washburn, and his teacher in archaeology was the Mesopotamia expert Robert Braidwood. In cultural and social anthropology, Barth's teachers included Robert Redfield, known for his village studies in Mexico and India, as well as Radcliffe-Brown's students Fred Eggan and Lloyd Warner. Redfield had an interest in scale and comparison, and argued for the need to incorporate the study of 'great traditions' when an anthropologist did research in a small place, or into a 'little tradition'. Barth would inherit Redfield's interest in scale, but only belatedly his passion for the great traditions of the world.

In spite of his intensive studies, Barth found time to take part in a small archaeological excavation in Colorado during the summer of 1947, and when the dig was done he decided to hitch-hike westwards to the Pacific coast. This endeavour was initially unsuccessful. Following weeks in a dusty pit, he must have resembled a seasoned vagrant. Things nevertheless improved immediately when he became acquainted with a hobo who taught him the art of jumping onto freight trains without being found out.<sup>10</sup> In this way, Barth got a month's worth of free train rides in the western USA, from the deserts of Nevada to California's beaches.<sup>11</sup>

This is a typical Barth anecdote. His entire life, he has been driven by curiosity, and when the world finally lay at his feet, he had no intention of letting it remain undisturbed. He has always been adept at seizing



opportunities, at just the right moment, when they offer themselves. On this particular occasion, this ability took him around remote parts of the USA, but it would later benefit him in more tangible and productive ways.

The natural science approach which Barth both brought with him from home and learnt in his interdisciplinary anthropology studies at Chicago doubtless contributed to shaping his methodology and theoretical views. Throughout his life, he has been strongly averse to speculation, flimsy generalisations and over-interpretation. He has insisted on observation as the most significant source of knowledge, and has always been reticent as regards wide-ranging generalisations.

The Chicago years were formative both at a professional and a personal level for Barth. Well into his eighties, he still speaks English with an audible American accent, and although he would later be more deeply attached to British social anthropology, he has retained a strong relationship to American anthropology throughout his life. The last academic position Barth held was as a part-time professor at Boston University until he finally retired in 2008.

The offer from Braidwood mentioned at the start of the Preface came Barth's way before his Master's dissertation had been submitted. An important component of Braidwood's project consisted of dating the domestication of wild sheep and wild goat, and perhaps other animals as well, so Braidwood needed an osteologist capable of classifying animal bones. With Barth's limited but extant background in palaeontology, Braidwood felt that he was the right man for the job. It is not entirely unthinkable that Tom Barth, the geology professor at Chicago, whispered a few words in Braidwood's ear as well. Be this as it may, Braidwood was from the beginning aware that Barth's real motivation for travelling to Iraqi Kurdistan consisted in a desire to carry out anthropological fieldwork there. The plan was, as mentioned in the quoted passage that opens the Preface, to stay on in the Kurdish mountains after the archaeologists had gone home.

The excavations in Iraq were to start only in 1951, and in the meantime Barth went home to Oslo. In the autumn of 1949 he was 20 years old, with a degree in anthropology, just married and out of work. It was around this time that he became acquainted with the 'attic group' at the Ethnographic Museum in Oslo, a handful of young men who studied anthropology with Professor Gutorm Gjessing (1906–1979), and who would later leave their mark on Norwegian and Scandinavian anthropology, albeit somewhat in the shadow of Barth. This group is interesting beyond the local setting in so far as it embodies a shift from an earlier, chiefly Germanic anthropology