

Cultural Anthropology: Global Forces, Local Lives (Noel B. Salazar)

Reviewing a textbook in a fair and just way is not an easy task. I often compare the genre to the one of travel guides: both are heavily researched for comprehensiveness, but always already out-of-date when they are printed; they always contain much more information than you need and can possibly use; and not all the topics you deem important or are interested in are covered. This general argument is particularly valid for cultural anthropology, a discipline marked by a plethora of subfields. While the use of a textbook can greatly facilitate the task of those teaching anthropology by providing a ready-made solution, at the same time it is constraining because the logic and approach of the author is not always the one of the user.

Eller's textbook starts in a very traditional fashion, with explanatory chapters on anthropology (the traditional four fields and beyond), the culture concept, and the history of the discipline. This is followed by typical anthropological topics such as language, personality and gender, identity (race and ethnicity), economics (including consumption), kinship, politics, and religion. The third section of the book contains material on contemporary cultural processes that, according to the author, have forced a reconceptualization of cultural anthropology but are customarily given insufficient attention: cultural dynamics, (post-)colonialism and globalization, political identity, development, and cultural revival. Several of these themes are illustrated by Eller's personal experiences and by other ethnographic examples. Unfortunately, the cultures

presented are spread very unevenly across the globe (see map on pp. xx-xi). Eurasia is poorly covered and Latin America receives relatively little attention too. Besides, anthropologists may be disturbed by the fact that the overview map of “major societies” discussed in the book mixes ethnicities with countries (an example of methodological nationalism).

Throughout the book, Eller introduces and describes old as well as relatively new concepts, all of which are nicely bundled in the comprehensive glossary at the end. It is remarkable, though, that basic notions such as ethnology, globalization, or capitalism do not appear in the list. The author claims that his textbook “covers more topics more deeply than rival texts, and in so doing immerses the reader in the worldview, the history, the literature, and the controversies of cultural anthropology like no other” (p. xvii). With so much ground covered, is there anything missing? Early in the text, Eller writes that “We all live anthropological lives, whether we know it or want it or not” (p. 20). Unfortunately, his book gives the uninformed reader the impression that cultural anthropology remains the study of the Other, located far away in space or time. This neglects the fact that “anthropology at home” is on the rise, including urban anthropology, business anthropology, the anthropology of institutions, and the anthropology of science and technology. Moreover, if “Every encounter with another human being is (or has the potential to be) an anthropological encounter, one in which each participant has to determine what the others mean and how to communicate across the meaning gap” (p. 21), why is tourism, apart from a very short mention (p. 380-1), not properly treated? These and other lacunae are reflected in the bibliography, which contains relatively few monographs written in the last decade.

Strikingly from an epistemological point of view, is that Eller conceives cultural anthropology as “the modern science of human behavioral diversity” (xvi). Of course, the anthropological notion of culture goes far beyond what people “do” (p. 21); it includes not only behaviour but also those ways of cognizing and valuing the world. Moreover, apart from describing cultural diversity (ethnography), the parallel mission of anthropology has always been to look for those cultural universals that make our species uniquely human (ethnology). While the author does briefly mention “world anthropologies” (70), his overall account remains remarkably Western-centric. Apart from illustrating the complexities of other worldviews, it would have been nice to sample also some of the complexities of other anthropological views of the world. Finally, it is misleading to describe a discipline that was institutionalized over a century ago as “a new science” (71).

Despite the weaknesses I pointed out earlier, Eller should certainly be commended for his clear style of writing, making the text very accessible and enjoyable to read for non-specialist users (undergraduate students and others). The multiple illustrations and attractive layout make it an attractive study tool. Furthermore, the companion website (<http://www.culturalanthropology-eller.com/>) offers plenty of learning resources, including study guides for each chapter, testbank materials, a flashcard glossary, and links to other websites. Instructors can access PowerPoint presentations per chapter, a model course, supplementary materials, and assignments and tests. In sum, this textbook is certainly a valuable resource, but teachers planning to use it in an introductory course on cultural anthropology need to take into account its limitations.