



The Rebirth of Anthropological Theory

Stanley Barrett

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Innovative and often controversial, Barrett's study ranges over the entire scope of anthropological theory. It provides a fresh interpretation of the history of theory and mounts an alternative perspective, built around dialectics, that is eminently suitable to post-colonial anthropology.

He argues that anthropological theory has failed to be cumulative. It has been characterized by oscillation and repetition - theoretical orientations have appeared and disappeared, only to be discovered once again. Addressing numerous conceptual contradictions which have never been resolved, he introduces novel concepts such as salvage theory and backward theory, and argues that in many respects anthropological theory resembles the structuralists interpretation of myth.

Social life, he asserts, is inherently contradictory, although concealed by numerous mechanisms, most of which reinforce the status quo. Attacking the illusion of simplicity which has dominated positivistic approaches and the out-dated identification of anthropology with non-Western, primitive, and tribal societies, Barrett contends that power and privilege everywhere should be the basic concerns of anthropological inquiry.

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