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BOOK REVIEWS

A CAUTIOUS SILENCE: THE POLITICS OF AUSTRALIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Geoffrey Gray

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Reviewed by Sally Babidge

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The primary concern of Geoffrey Gray's *A Cautious Silence* is a history of the establishment and development of the discipline of anthropology in Australia. It is a fascinating and contentious read for an anthropologist who is familiar with many of the works and the characters Gray discusses, but it may not prove so for those more interested in the subjects of Australian anthropology than the anthropologists themselves. Gray's research details the "academic and applied interest" (p. 4) that drove the discipline from its inception in Australia in the 1920s, until the immediate post-War years among Aboriginal people and in Australia's ex-colonies, Papua and New Guinea. Contrary to Jeremy Beckett's view (see p. 13ff), Gray's core thesis is that there was and is "a distinctive anthropology" in Australia and this distinction can be characterised by a certain politics. He argues that among anthropologists, and their readership, there has been an entrenched division between "traditional" and "non-traditional" Aboriginal culture (and a concerted research focus on and validation of the former). This, coupled with the discipline's consistent entanglement with Australian Government policy forms the core of the politics of Australian anthropology. His critique of the discipline is that the "scientific" methodology employed by anthropologists has complex ethical, practical, and theoretical implications. Such are the kinds of implications – that is, the politics – that any researcher working for, among, and hopefully in collaboration with Indigenous peoples should be well aware of in the 21st century.

The author studied anthropologists' papers, letters, and manuscripts from the years prior to the 1960s for the "gossip": the personal and professional relationships among anthropologists and others

in order to deconstruct the knowledge base of the discipline. His "note on archival sources", contained within the bibliography, demonstrates the extent of this research, and is potentially a very useful resource for students and other scholars who wish to study these same collections for their ethnographic content.

The book is divided into three untitled parts, each with a short introduction. All chapters centre on demonstrating anthropology's entanglement in "the colonial project", with Parts 1 and 2 drawing on material from pre-World War II, and Part 3 concerned with issues for the discipline during the War years and immediately afterward. The chapters are not arranged chronologically, however. Rather, they are roughly divided according to their subject matter.

The three Chapters in Part 1 are themed around anthropologists establishing the discipline in Australia as a science. Gray demonstrates the discipline's role in terms of being an explanatory tool for colonial governments and for contributing to European theories of "the human race" more generally. As such, Aboriginal people were "problematised" (Chapter 1), "measured" (Chapter 2), and "saved" (Chapter 3). In Chapter 1, Gray examines the informative engagement between anthropologists and colonial government in Australia, Papua and New Guinea. He shows how anthropology as a discipline situated itself within the scientific discourse and assisted the process of training government officials in matters of culture for the purposes (largely) of assisting assimilation. In Chapter 2 Gray reveals a tension between the work done by the Sydney Department run by Radcliffe-Brown, who was attempting to establish a centre for social anthropology, and the work of the Adelaide Department, who were focussed on museum studies and biological anthropology. This is the first we see of an overwhelming division between theoretical and applied work: where the work of social analysis is depicted as impractical, and the description and observation of social behaviour as of use to policy makers and administrators. It is a false distinction and referred to uncritically (e.g., p. 43). Chapter 3 introduces a critique of the training of researchers for a geographical and political field which was divided according to international funding bodies, which had to be continually convinced that research was valuable and scientific.

In Part 2, Gray turns to consider the Australian National Research Council (ANRC) funded scholars in Papua (Chapter 4), and Australia (Chapters 5-8),

including: Elkin, A.P. Thompson, Caroline Tennant Kelly, Lloyd Warner, C. W. M. Hart, W. E. H. Stanner, Olive Pink and the Berndts (Catherine and Ronald). Each of the chapters examines the situation that researchers faced: in order to gain access to “the field”, to work among Australian Aboriginal people, or in Papua or New Guinea, a researcher needed the say-so not of the people themselves (as is the case with institutions and ethics committees today) but the government officers and missionaries who were the administrators of “the natives” lives. The “cautious silence” of Gray’s title is demonstrated most in these chapters; where the matter of access to remote mission or government settlements and the matter of financial support of projects of investigation were dependent on agents of the state and church both near and far. When the “project” of government and mission was one of assimilation, anthropological research that challenged these goals was bold indeed. These elements of the volume may interest Indigenous educators, whose work is closely tied both to “community” and to the state, and must face difficult questions around one’s funding, one’s support base or employer and one’s politics. However, I fear that the focus on particular characters in the history of the discipline of anthropology will be of interest to anthropologists and those with links to the discipline, but few others.

The third section of the book (Part 3) includes two quite different chapters: the first details anthropologists’ involvement in northern Australian war efforts (or in the case of the Berndts, avoiding direct involvement) and as advisors to government officials about Papua and New Guinea. Given that the pivot of much of Gray’s thesis is on the figure of A.P. Elkin, it is fitting that the final chapter revolves around a story of Elkin’s challenged and then diminished influence on the activities of anthropologists, culminating in his resignation from the Australian Board of missions in 1947 (p. 215) and retreat into “behind the scenes” work from academia (p. 216). I found these chapters the least interesting of Gray’s work, and his introduction to this part of the book conveys a weariness about the whole subject.

Gray’s is not simply a critique of the discipline of anthropology, it is also openly critical, and most prominently so when reviewing the decisions of anthropologists to study “culture”, social organisation, and “traditional life”, rather than conditions imposed on Indigenous peoples under colonial administration and through Australian government policy. However, contrary to this criticism, Gray’s work demonstrates a range of approaches to academic pursuits among anthropologists. The author briefly considers the fact that the political thrust of many anthropologists has been liberal left (even “radical” p. 22), as well as the work that could generally be considered activist, such as Caroline Tennant Kelly’s (p. 127) and aspects of W.E.H. Stanner’s (p. 143ff). Some of the work Gray mentions in his Afterword, despite Elkin’s overseeing

of it, was activist in its substance (while, certainly, “of its time” in its language). The politics of Australian anthropology, then, has always been rather mixed. Like other social sciences, it is largely of its time; but the best works are those that produce a critique which has the capacity to challenge existing knowledge.

Built as it is of his published articles since 1994 (see bibliography, pp. 263–4), most of Gray’s work will come as no surprise to those who have followed the progress of the chapters through Australian journals. I found that the concluding paragraph of the Afterword incorporates some substantially outdated critique of anthropology, and would have found this acceptable if written in past tense. However, Gray writes as though his critique pertains to the present, which fails to really capture the fact that so many anthropologists (not just in Australia, but also in comparable colonial contexts) are now (and have been for some time) incorporating Indigenous peoples’ critiques into their works and are collaborating with Aboriginal peoples for a research that is meaningful for all concerned. Furthermore, the documentary work of anthropologists such as those Gray mentions throughout *A Cautious Silence*, have been used extensively by Indigenous peoples for many different purposes, not least for land and “native title” claims, and certainly for the purposes of cross-cultural education. I am not asserting that anthropologists are without fault: far from it. Rather, I argue that as researchers, in order to examine the politics of the past, we must be quite clear that our politics are of the present.

Thus, I suggest that Gray’s work is of considerable importance in demonstrating the detail of engagements between the discipline of anthropology and Australian government, especially concerning policy formulated “for the benefit of” Indigenous people. It illustrates in useful detail how not to go about doing research with, for and among Indigenous people, but says little about how to read from this a hopeful future for social science in Australia.

THE 1967 REFERENDUM: RACE, POWER AND THE AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION (2ND ED.)

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Words do matter. During the recent debate over the Labor Government’s apology to Stolen Generations