

# Transactionalism analysis of political processes



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## Political Swat Barth

### Assess Barth's Theory of Transactionalism

In this book, such a paradigm of political experience not only tells us something important about the traditional political situation in Swat, it is also the basis of a trenchant criticism of views prevailing at the time when Barth wrote...It reveals that a quest for personal advantage could flourish in a traditional setting." (Meeker 1980 : 684)

It is important to distinguish, when discussing *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* (1959), between its effectiveness as an ethnographic account, and its role as a work of theory. Barth's later works were written when he had further developed his method with the support of the 'Bergen school', which included other Scandinavian ethnologists and continental authors such as Robert Paine.

F. G. Bailey, in 1960, affirmed in his review for *Man* (p. 188), that "Barth's book is a monograph and not a work of theory". However, Barth's 1959 article *Segmentary Opposition and the Theory of Games: A Study of Pathan Organisation* forms a "case study of unilineal descent and political organisation among Yusufzai Pathans [which] exemplifies a pattern, not previously described in the literature, of deriving corporate political groups from a ramifying unilineal descent charter." (p. 19)

Barth's transactionalism, as a form of methodological individualism, developed in a general movement away from the dominant Durkheimian models of Radcliffe-Brown and Fortes. In a return to more Malinowskian traditions, authors including Bailey, Barth and Paine explored the ways in

which cultural actors manipulate social rules so as to maximise their own profit. In addition, there was a growing need for anthropologists to account for change in societies which were increasingly exposed to a strongly Western, global political social model, rather than remaining static, as some theories would have had them.

In his 1959 ethnography, Barth shows that the strategic choices of individuals significantly determine the political hierarchy, the latter which recognises the contractual right of individuals and thus demands that leaders consistently prove their status-worthiness. “ In this respect the political life of Swat resembles that of Western societies” (Barth 1959 a : 2).

In moving away from the structural functionalist model, Barth took a decisive step in his proposition that the bases of the society were united by a solidarity based on “ individual strategic choices”, rather than by the mechanical solidarity elaborated by Evans-Pritchard and Fortes in Africa.

The authority system...is built up and maintained through the exercise of a continual series of individual choices. (Barth 1959a : 2)

### **Criticism**

It is a saddening, but no doubt common, experience to see one’s analyses made banal and one’s points of view reduced to simple stereotypes. It is perhaps even more distressing to be attributed a web of trivial and fundamental errors and omissions which one has not committed.

(Barth, correspondence in Dupree 1977 : 516)

While much praised, Barth has had his fair share of able critics. In 1972, Talal Asad delivered a class-oriented polemic of Barth's Pathans, insisting that the landlords exploited their tenants consistently, and that the author suffered from the "illusion of consent" in attributing free contractuality to their exchanges. Four years later, Akbar S. Ahmed wrote *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans*, arguing that Barth suffered from a "khan's-eye view", again proclaiming that the reality of Swat society involved far less 'free choice' than Barth would have us believe, people's lives instead being shaped strongly by "a matrix of interacting and largely fixed social patterns" (cited in Dupree 1977 : 514).

As did Asad, Dupree praises Barth as an "indefatigable fieldworker and imaginative theorist" (1977: 514); but Ahmed, he points out, was well qualified to document Barth's 'Norwegian entrepreneur bias', not least since his wife is the grand daughter of the late Wali of Swat. "What Barth observes from the outside, Ahmed explores from the inside" (Charpenter, C. J. correspondence in *ibid*: 516).

Louis Dupree's 1976 article was republished in *Current Anthropology* in 1977, appended by correspondences from Barth and others interested in the debate. They address the issues raised by Dupree, especially that "there is a great distance between Barth's model and the Swati ethnography as he (Ahmed) saw it in 1974" (Pettigrew J., correspondence in Dupree 1977). Pettigrew goes on to make an engaging point, to counter this, that "the issue is instead whether the models we use yield adequate information about societal processes" (*ibid.*).

Somewhat later, in a review of Barth's *Selected Essays* (1981), Ian Prattis is keen to point out Barth's inability adequately to account for social change, and is of the belief that Barth is "opposed to grand conceptual schemes in general and to the direction taken by 1950s social anthropology in particular" (Prattis 1983: 103). *Barthing Up the Wrong Tree* shows that "Barth missed out crucial variables (power, intrinsic value) and claimed too much for the power of transactions to integrate social systems" (ibid. : 108). However, Prattis was concerned with the author's output of two decades, while I am interested more specifically with his initial formulation of transactionalism, especially as exemplified in *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* of 1959.