

A New History of Anthropology

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Edited by Henrika Kuklick

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Introduction

Henrika Kuklick

This collection will appeal to a range of readers, anthropologists and historians prominent among them.¹ For historians, the value of its essays will be their contextualization of anthropological ideas and practices in specific times and places. Anthropologists will find not only discussions of the discipline's major branches but also analyses of portions of its history that rarely feature in its oral tradition – a tradition highly susceptible to “mythicization,” as George Stocking has noted (1995: xviii).

The classic typology of historians of the human sciences is Stocking's, a dichotomous scheme of ideal types: “presentists” and “historicists.” Presentists, usually practitioners of the discipline they describe, frame their accounts in contemporary terms, often seeking lessons from the past for the present: their tone may be celebratory, as they trace the antecedents of ideas and methods now considered commendable, or mournful, regretting the loss of exemplary practices. Historicists, frequently drawn from other disciplines, are not explicitly concerned with contemporary standards and debates; they show that when we read old texts as if they had just been written, we frequently misunderstand their authors' intended meanings (Stocking 1968: 1–12).

But presentist and historicist approaches are complementary, not mutually exclusive. No matter what their professional training and special interests, historians inevitably ask questions that are important in our age. They know that past concerns were different from our own, but they must also know how contemporary practitioners view their enterprise; the past may appear different in the future, but knowledge of a discipline's present has some bearing on understanding its history. Thus, today's anthropologists should be both served by attention to historical matters of contemporary concern and inspired by historicist accounts, which aim to meet anthropology's time-honored goal of sympathetically reporting distinctive ways of life. And to describe episodes in the development of the human sciences also serves to reveal aspects of the general social orders within which they occurred, addressing questions of interest to all manner of historians.