

**MICHEL VERDON. TOWARDS AN OPERATIONAL SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY**  
VOLUME 1: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL HISTORY OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY.  
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Verdon states that kinship is the core of anthropology. Researchers' assumptions and projections of their conceptions of what it means to be human (ontology) and their assumptions about their 'ways of knowing' (epistemology) have been issues that haunt the discipline (12-13). Verdon skilfully argues that, by reassessing the foundations of anthropology, we can find a solution to produce an operational anthropology by parting from a singular conception of ontology. In this first volume, we delve into the theoretical foundations of kinship studies – descent, corporations, alliances, exchange, Marxist, and transactionalist theories – to understand anthropological praxis up to the beginning of the 1980s. This volume serves as a prelude to a second volume that will directly discuss how to produce an operational social anthropology.

Within the preface, we learn that this book series is, in essence, a translated and republished version of Verdon's original book, *Contre la culture*, in two volumes. Additionally, he mentions that *Contre la culture* is a rework of a series of articles he wrote in the 1980s and 1990s (1). Volume 1 showcases Verdon's mastery over foundational texts and their impact in the discipline up to the 1980s. However, the use of language such as 'contemporary' for works written in the 1980s suggests that some further revision and referencing of more recent debates could strengthen the connections between the critical and much-needed historical insight Verdon provides, and current anthropological discussions.

As a standalone volume focused purely on providing a critical account of the epistemological history of anthropology up to the 1980s, it does a fantastic job. While he does not situate his findings in conversation with contemporary works, his solution of parting ways from a singular ontology/cosmology deeply resonates with the concept of epistemological pluralism, as coined by Boghossian (2006). This concept is contemporarily discussed by interdisciplinary academics surrounding, within and outside anthropology (Arantes 2023, Gatt, 2023, Basu 2024, Escobar 2020). It would be interesting to see how Verdon could use his mastery of dissecting and tracing the transformation of ideas over time to understand the epistemological history behind 21<sup>st</sup>-century ways of knowing in anthropology.

Focusing on the contents of this first volume, first, he moves from Maine to McLennan with his work, *Primitive marriages* (20). Verdon highlights McLennan's misunderstandings and refusal of Maine's arguments regarding descent (22). Then he examines the impact of

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McLennan on academics, such as Morgan, in *The League of Iroquois*. According to Verdon, the epistemological assumptions that taint the discipline originate from this period, marked by the spread of evolutionist ideas that create incompatible binaries between groups, including interpersonal relations, domestic and political spheres, and structures of descent with territoriality. As Verdon discusses, these theoretical binaries would be reconciled in Rivers' work, *Social organisation* (31), where Rivers mediates Morgan's and Maine's ideas into descent theory (27) through the distinction between domestic and political levels (30). Afterwards, Malinowski, according to Verdon, in *The Argonauts* and *Crime and customs in savage society* (29), gave space for academics to reconcile this so-called incompatibility by using participatory observation.

After this, Verdon introduces mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century ideas, beginning with Lévi-Strauss' structuralist ideas, as presented in his work *Structures élémentaires*. Verdon describes the influence of Mauss' *Gift exchange* (69) on Lévi-Strauss' work, noting that his arguments regarding incest and alliance theory, specifically the exchange of women, are deeply rooted in Mauss' functionalist ideas of exchange (76). While Verdon presents an overall well-structured argument, his versatility with Lévi-Strauss' work is not as clear as it is with Maine, McLennan, Rivers, and Morgan. While his analysis of Lévi-Strauss' theories is deeply rich, this could have been streamlined more effectively to focus on aspects that directly advance the epistemological history of anthropology, as he can be at times too descriptive. Nonetheless, he compensates for this by contrasting and tracing how evolutionist thoughts and positivist agendas continued to impact the epistemologies of anthropologists around this time, particularly among French academics.

Regarding Marxism in the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Verdon dissects ethnographic examples of how Marxism is used in kinship studies (70) - for example, the work of Bloch and Meillassoux. Regarding Meillassoux, Verdon tracks the impact of the evolutionist paradigm (85) in *Femmes, greniers et capitaux*. In this work, Meillassoux, as analysed by Verdon, projects his evolutionary assumptions about the need to replace maternal filiation with paternal filiation under the pretext of a higher production-based argument. Verdon explains that Marxism falls ill with the same Western patterns and definitions of kinship (93), only that it repeats, albeit in a different rhetoric' (94). While Anglo-Saxons would argue based on morality, Marxists would argue in terms of production; however, the root of their epistemic failures stems from the same place – the assumption of a singular ontology that limits openness to other ways of learning.

In terms of transactionalism, Verdon presents a somewhat love-hate relationship. He traces the ancestry of transactionalism as far back as Malinowski's work (99), where a practical break from the lack of recognition of the individual in what was previously poorly termed 'primitive people' is evident. Transactionalism would present itself as an alternative to descent theory (128). Nonetheless, Verdon explains this would also have been taken to the extreme, where collective-based arguments were discarded, and individuals' de-personalising arguments would be singled out as correct.

In conclusion, this work demonstrates Verdon's strengths in his deep knowledge of the historical roots of anthropology, as evidenced by his critical, concise, and structured writing style. However, streamlining arguments by revising contemporary discussions could strengthen his arguments and support his aim of building a living operational social anthropology. In this first volume, he constructed and traced different ways of knowing from the impact of 19<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers such as Maine and McLennan up to Schneider's transactionalism (99). Then, he uses all these findings to start building his argument against a singular ontology and epistemology, which will be followed up in the second volume of his series 'Towards an operational social anthropology'. Overall, this volume lays a critical foundation for a second volume. The impact of this upcoming volume could be further

enriched by explicitly weaving the historical epistemological roots of anthropology with current anthropological and ethnographic debates.

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