



Prof. of Social Anthropology, Fredrik Barth

[Fredrik Barth](#) was internationally known as social anthropologist who had done long fieldworks on different marginal sites around the world—as social anthropologist did—in cultural and linguistic contexts of an exceptional variety. His aim was to build & contribute to his academic discipline.

Social anthropology, as he practiced it, was the comparative study of people and culture, in the tradition of natural history. While his teachers and predecessors were impressed by theories that they brought to the field, his aim was to develop theoretical insights from fieldwork: ground-level up.

This flyer-series aims at a professional account of a personal relationship: I was among the few—maybe the only—he had supervised on a doctoral project: from fieldwork, through thesis-writing to the defence. The series explores his ideas, based on some of his works and our correspondence.



Prof. of Theory and Writing, Theodor Barth
(photo: Victor Boulet=)

As namesakes our relationship was at first a bit confusing. My impression is that we avoided each other a bit: the awkwardness of having to introduce ourselves. So it never happened, till we were brought together by Berit Berge at the Oslo university press for an English-Norwegian translation job.

It was for an anthology of a sample of articles by him, from earlier to later works in his career. For years, I had received spam postage from international research magazines, with his name on it. It was clear to me that he was a big fish in the international pond, even before I became a student.

While translating these major articles from English, I was translating—about the same time—a selection from Pierre Bourdieu in French. Which serves to characterise my own situation: studying anthropology in the British tradition, while lugging a cultural baggage from years in French speaking countries.

The title of the anthology, which appeared in a series called the Blue Library, carried the title [Manifestation and Process](#). An adequate title, since Prof. Barth's idea was to connect observable *forms* of social life, to the underlying processes *generating* them. An idea with roots in *structural geology*.

This became particularly apparent as the translation job moved unto his later works. Fortunately, the translation job was sustained by conversations with him. And as I started working on [Toward a greater naturalism](#)...he expounded the origins of the concept 'disordered systems' in geology.

It was part of a legacy he had from his father—Thomas/Tom Barth—who was a professor of geology. He was to return on this subject a number of times, as it eventually became a centrepiece of my doctoral work: featuring ritual as a *heterostructural*, rather than *functional*, element of a life-form.

Our discussions to place on the backdrop of his seminal work on [ethnic boundaries](#) earlier in his career: this discussion also allowed for understanding his work on [cosmologies in the making](#)—18 years later—in the expanded scope of the boundary, which disordered systems afford.

We also discussed his work on Oman and Bali—on that backdrop—where the diversity of groups ([Oman](#)) and the disparity of worlds ([Bali](#)) could compare if the cross-pressure between endogenous and exogenous factors were scoped as an underlying *generative* process (incl. *boundary crossing*).

I felt privileged in taking part of these conversations in which he, to my surprise, appeared to be exceptionally open to discuss the possibility of developing a unified *model* that would encompass earlier and later parts of his work. However, this discussion hinged on the understanding of 'model'.

A discussion we *never* managed to close was whether a *model* could be integrated into the repertoire of fieldwork as an *ethnographic experiment* (cf, his [Nuffield lecture](#), 1965), and whether recitals of *indigenous* texts could contribute to the repertoire in developing *theoretical* understandings.