Culture and Anomie: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century, by Christopher Herbert. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. ISBN 0–226–32738–8 cloth, ISBN 0–226–32739–6 paper, ix + 364 pp, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, US$48.00; paper, US$16.95.

Culture—as an assertion of a wholeness or interconnectivity among the institutionalized ways of thinking and acting in society—is the central, defining concept of anthropology. In practical terms, it is the intellectual search warrant that allows the anthropologist to enter and ransack the domains of psychology, economics, and every other social science and to range freely in philosophy, law, and art, appropriating theory, method, and substantive findings at will. Naturally, such a powerful writ has also found heavy use in a number of other fields, as well as in everyday discourse.

Despite its importance in modern thought, Christopher Herbert argues in *Culture and Anomie,* culture is an inherently unstable concept fraught with irresolvable logical difficulties. Many, perhaps most, anthropologists today would agree that there are serious problems in this area of theory, and the literature amply demonstrates that debates about the most fundamental assumptions of the culture thesis have continued without resolution since the beginnings of the discipline. Arguably, the instability of its key concept imparts a restless—in fact anomic—character to the whole field of anthropology, but the idea of culture is simply too useful to give up. If we can't clarify it, we can try to understand its origins and history, which might at least help to explain why and how it resists clarification. In this book, Herbert offers a fascinating, if necessarily partial, account of the nineteenth-century origins of the concept of culture, and the historical, literary-rhetorical perspective he brings to the analysis yields valuable insights.

Herbert argues that the idea of culture, together with the research methodology of fieldwork and participant observation, did not originate with certain specific key figures in the history of anthropology—Tylor, Malinowski, and others—as anthropologists would like to believe. Using a model of the origin of innovations in science proposed by Ludwig Fleck, a precursor of Thomas Kuhn in the philosophy of science, Herbert argues that the concept of culture, as a self-referential system of meanings that closely governs the details of life in a society, actually existed in a "larval stage" in Victorian evangelical theology and homiletics. The culture thesis represents a rejection of and reaction against Victorian ideas and values, but it was also profoundly shaped by them.

For Herbert, the science of culture starts from the doctrine of original sin, which postulates that humans possess an inherent animalistic drive for the gratification of desires that know no limits or restraints. John Wesley, the influential nineteenth-century religious reformer and preacher, held that this fact of bestial human nature leads to all kinds of depravity and otherwise unfortunate excesses unless countered by a personal regime—possible through God's grace—of strict moderation in every detail of life. As the dis-

course of untrammeled desire unfolds during the nineteenth century, however, the necessary restraining force of God comes to be replaced by civilization and social rules—conceived as forming a system—and it is the uncivilized savage, not the impious Englishman, who is seen as bestial and out of control. This formulation in turn gives way, in the writings of rebellious Victorian intellectuals, to the contrary idea that the primitive human condition is one of total control by custom and precedent, and only when rigid traditional constraints are broken are progress and innovation possible. This line of thought simultaneously attacks the rigid hypocrisy of Victorian values —which need to be broken free of— and supports the dominion of modern societies over "savage" ones—which also need to be freed of unthinking traditionalism. But the danger of modernity is that as normal social controls break down, aimless, insatiable desire takes hold of the individual. By the end of the century, the lust and gluttony of original sin—terrible but not without a certain evil attraction—have become transmuted into the ineffectual, pitiable disorder of anomie. Herbert shows that the broad based, continuous debate in Western thought about human nature and unlimited desire is important in understanding not only prototypical figures in sociology like Durkheim but also contemporary writers such as Roland Barthes.

The idea of a closed, self-referential system of meaning that governs all aspects of social life is essential to the doctrinal transmutation of original sin to culture, and the system notion can be seen as developing in the writings and debates of the classical political economists. Herbert examines the works of such writers as Adam Smith, Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill, and shows how the unstable but central idea of value in economics is equivalent to the unstable but central idea of culture in anthropology. From this system perspective, the work of the early political economists is seen as prefiguring and preparing the intellectual ground for Saussure's work in structural linguistics, which has been influential in the evolution of the modern culture concept.

Even the specific method of social anthropology—immersionary fieldwork and participant observation in the language and other activities of the study culture—have important Victorian roots that are obscured by "official" accounts of the origins of the discipline. Herbert's discussion of the early ethnographic accounts of missionaries to the South Pacific, such as Thomas Williams in Fiji and William Ellis in Tahiti, as well as the fascinating work of Henry Mayhew among the London poor, provides valuable insights into the current discussion of the ethnographic process in anthropology. For example, the note of unmerciful and relentless self-criticism in the postmodern critique of ethnography echoes the evangelical self-flagellatory posture with regard to original sin.

Throughout the book, Herbert undertakes to incite the reader against the idea of culture. Presumably this is necessary because culture has become such a powerful and taken-for-granted part of modern thought that some rough tactics are necessary to denaturalize it. The author adopts the rhetori-

cal device of identifying the culture thesis with witchcraft, the supernatural, and superstition. From this perspective it appears to be hardly more than a pseudoscience—and probably an evil one at that. Herbert uses words like *mystical, magical, fantastic,* and *uncanny* to describe the supposed operation of cultural processes, which are presided over by "vampire-like spirits" and "ghosts." Interestingly, a number of culture theorists have used similar language—generally to dismiss rival formulations—and Herbert is able to intensify his eerie analytic atmosphere with quotations from Herbert Spencer, Ruth Benedict, Levi-Strauss, and even Clifford Geertz, who alludes to the "dark sciences" that inform some non-Geertzian forms of anthropological interpretation. In this rhetorical context, Adam Smith's familiar "invisible hand" takes on a chilling new meaning.

In this line of attack, Herbert's premise is that culture theorists deal—and even admit dealing—in abstract patterns and relationships that have no observable, physical reality. This practice inherently contradicts anthropology's claim to being carefully empirical in orientation and devoted to plain facts and straightforward description. Worse, they speak of things that have no positive meaning but only meaning in relation to one another in closed, self-referential systems, and this leads to another irresolvable contradiction: relativism. If cultures are closed systems, how can one compare them, or talk about one using the language and concepts of another?

Of course, as Herbert fully acknowledges, this whole entertaining and useful book relies on the concept of culture in every detail of substance and method. He says that Durkheim equates modern sociology with "spiritualism (the pseudoscience of communicating with the dead)" (16). But when Herbert defends his own methods of intellectual history—in which the literary, scientific, and philosophical texts of an era are treated as "indivisible"—as making possible a "sharpened sense of intimate contact with an earlier mentality" (25), the phrase has a ghoulishly Durkheimian ring to it.

Perhaps in order to appear consistent with his criticism of cultural systems as "occult," "invisible," "superstitious," and so on, Herbert tends to use mechanical metaphors in his own invocations of culture. For example, he speaks of the "cultural machinery" (34) of Victorian society. This sort of superficial consistency cannot really work, and the author reveals himself as wholly dependent on the concept he is hacking away at.

Wittgenstein remarks, at the end of his *Tractatus,* that the reader who has grasped the argument will recognize that his book is nonsense by its own definition. Herbert's book poses a similar problem for both writer and reader. It is a postmodernist, deconstructionist, reconstructionist writer's dilemma: how do you cut away the ground from beneath a truly pervasive element of social theory and still leave yourself somewhere to stand and to carry out the excavation from? Whereas Wittgenstein could argue that his *Tractatus* represents a ladder that the reader must pull up after him, Herbert knocks the ladder down first, leaving the reader and himself to levitate by the power of will and fine writ-

ing to the higher state of knowledge represented by the book's conclusions.

The book is a pleasure to read, filled with stimulating insights and impressive scholarship. It offers an explanation for the weaknesses and confusions of the culture concept in social inquiry, but it cannot propose a replacement and reestablish the certainty it disturbs. Presumably this is the postmodern condition.

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A Naturalist in New Guinea, by Bruce M. Beehler. Corrie Herring Hooks Series no. 17. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991. ISBN 0–292–75541–4, 251 pp, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. US$26.95.

Bruce M. Beehler, an ornithologist and behavioral ecologist on the scientific staff of the United States National Museum (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, DC, has written an account of tropical exploration that follows in the tradition of works by Alfred Russell Wallace, William Beebe, and George Schaller. With its lively, personalized narrative, color photographs, and evocative line drawings, *A Naturalist in New Guinea* conveys a sense of wonder that will appeal to a wide readership of amateur naturalists and explorers. Beehler's descriptions of linkages between the mating systems and feeding ecology of New Guinea birds, especially the diverse and exotically ornamented birds of paradise, provide an introduction to his more technical writings on these subjects and will interest professional ecologists and evolutionary biologists. Moreover, his observations of the state of nature in New Guinea, now besieged by accelerating environmental change, may alert the tropical conservation movement to focus more attention on a paradise that is not yet lost.

Since 1975, Beehler has visited New Guinea eight times on extended scientific explorations in both political jurisdictions of this immense island: Papua New Guinea, the eastern half, with its former colonial and continuing ties to Australia; and Irian Jaya, the western half, once a Dutch territory and now part of Indonesia. His longest stay was twenty-nine months, spent in research on birds of paradise. In describing treks (mainly on foot) to various study sites, he details the difficulties in getting from place to place in some of the steepest and wettest country on earth, through all elevational zones in New Guinea proper, and also to rugged Goodenough Island off the southeastern coast in search of an avian mystery —a long-tailed black bird that, according to the local people, dances in the treetops of the mountain forest. He believes this may be a bird of paradise as yet unknown to science. Beehler has not yet found the bird, but considers himself well-rewarded nonetheless. In his view, just being there "is worth all the effort . . . the morning sun burning in rays through the mist of the moss-laden forest; the deep maroon sunsets over the mountains." As a scientist, Beehler provides a perspective on the drama of discovering a new species: "Scientific advances do not usually come in a flash or as easily as taking a new species of bird from a net.