**Bernard Kohn**

**Bernard S. Cohn** is Professor Emeritus of History and Anthropology at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*and *India: The Social Anthropology of a Civilization*.

**Bernard S. Cohn** was an American anthropologist and scholar of British colonialism in India, primarily affiliated with the [University of Chicago](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Chicago). Born in [Brooklyn, New York](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brooklyn,_New_York), Cohn received a B.A. in history from the [University of Wisconsin–Madison](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Wisconsin%E2%80%93Madison) in 1949 and a Ph.D. in anthropology from [Cornell University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornell_University) in 1954. From 1952-53 he engaged in field research in India as a [Fulbright scholar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fulbright_scholarship). In addition to Chicago, he also taught at the [University of Rochester](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Rochester) and was a research assistant for the [US Army](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/US_Army) at [Fort Benning](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Benning). In 1968, he was elected to the [American Academy of Arts and Sciences](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Academy_of_Arts_and_Sciences).

Cohn's seminal contributions included work on India's caste system, by which he established that caste was solidified as a concept by the British codification of it, as well as the establishment of [historical anthropology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_anthropology) as a means to link the disciplines of anthropology and history. This work intersected with earlier work about syncretism between these two disciplines by [Alfred L. Kroeber](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_L._Kroeber), as well as essays by [Clifford Geertz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clifford_Geertz). Cohn's works include *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (1996), *An Anthropologist Among the Historians* (1987) and *India: The Social Anthropology of a Civilization* (1971). His students, including, [Nicholas Dirks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholas_Dirks), [Ronald Inden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronald_Inden), and Ritty Lukose have continued in the vein of his work. His work has been closely studied by members of [Subaltern Studies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subaltern_Studies), especially [Ranajit Guha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ranajit_Guha" \o "Ranajit Guha).

Bernard S. Cohn. 1997. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. ISBN: 9780691000435.

Bernard Cohn's interest in the construction of Empire as an intellectual and cultural phenomenon has set the agenda for the academic study of modern Indian culture for over two decades. His earlier publications have shown how dramatic British innovations in India, including revenue and legal systems, led to fundamental structural changes in Indian social relations. This collection of his writings in the last fifteen years discusses areas in which the colonial impact has generally been overlooked. The essays form a multifaceted exploration of the ways in which the British discovery, collection, and codification of information about Indian society contributed to colonial cultural hegemony and political control.   
  
Cohn argues that the British Orientalists' study of Indian languages was important to the colonial project of control and command. He also asserts that an arena of colonial power that seemed most benign and most susceptible to indigenous influences--mostly law--in fact became responsible for the institutional reactivation of peculiarly British notions about how to regulate a colonial society made up of "others." He shows how the very Orientalist imagination that led to brilliant antiquarian collections, archaeological finds, and photographic forays were in fact forms of constructing an India that could be better packaged, inferiorized, and ruled. A final essay on cloth suggests how clothes have been part of the history of both colonialism and anticolonialism.

Bernard S Cohn: Historian of the Future

Author(s): Asha Sarangi Source: Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 39, No. 23 (Jun. 5-11, 2004), pp. 2344-2346

Bernard Cohn was most interested in the historical and anthropological making of the British colonial state in India, especially the modes in which 'colonial' culture and practices were enforced through multiple regulatory mechanisms. His work retains immense relevance even today. In his writings, he ably demonstrated that the colonial state and its historical anthropology was inseparable from the ideology of power and the political character of the state.

Bernard Cohn, affectionately known as Barney to his friends, students and colleagues, died in Chicago on November 25, 2003 at the age of 75. An exceptionally unassuming person and polite in his behaviour, conversation and interaction with students and colleagues, he was endowed with a rare quality of mind, i e, an originality and an ability to distil a system in his ideas and thought structure. In an academia characterized by jargon and imitative ideas, Barney was a solace and hope to turn to. In seminars and classrooms, he would ask the most basic questions related to historical truth or interpretation but embedded in real life observations. Once he got interested in someone's work, and that was so true about his graduate students, he would urge them to explore the unusual facts and indulge in unconventional historical narratives to possibly bring out the least known or understood social facts in the social sciences. Cohn's works influenced and inspired writings not only on south Asia in general but also on south-east Asia, western Europe and Latin America. This is reflected in numerous works that his students at the University of Chicago produced for more than 30 years. His immaculate insights into the colonial forms of power in general and the British empire specifically helped several younger minds in the graduate schools even beyond the US academia. Cohn could cull the most interesting historical records and reports from the archives in India, London and Chicago. The personal collection in his office at Haskell Hall of the department of anthropology consisted some of these rare records, and browsing through them often helped gene- rate interesting ideas leading to PhD theses in their own right among graduate students. At times, in their research assistantships with him, they would be reading his archival notes, queries, incomplete writings and research notes and gradually would start thinking through them for their own research interests. However, for Barney it never posed any sort of intellectual insecurity or collegial competitiveness. Many a times, others used his very own conceptual and historical framework of analysis without recognising his due recognition in the field. Whether it was the seminal essay of "Language of Command and Command of Language" or 'Census and Objectification', he inspired a number of young scholars to write further on these themes. These long and erudite essays (more than 10 of them between 30 and 50 pages, and one of 74 pages long) are no less than books in content and rigour. His essays have generated more enthusiasm and in- terests than some books can possibly do. The iconic titles of these essays have become trendsetters reflecting their effects on similar uses by others, and Ramachandra Guha's An Anthropologist Among the Marxists and Other Essays (read via Cohn' s An Anthropologist among the Historian and Other Essays) is just one such ex- ample. As an essayist and a vigilant author, he knew how to keep the reader fully attuned to his text till the very end. His lucid prose combined with an amazing command over English, vernacular and anglo-vernacular sources and narrative and archive use never escaped the minds of the readers who found it difficult to stop reading the essay half-way through. To tease an argument out with such an alacrity and elasticity of style was no easy task. Cohn would remain true to his ethical calling of a good historian paying utmost attention to the power of facts and narratives without indulging in meta- theorisation. On the other hand, his writings always posed newer challenges to the imported theories of either literary criticism or post-colonialism that came to be used in the area studies over the last two decades. He redefined the field of sociology of knowledge through the 'colonial forms of power and its represen- tation' much before the Foucauldian effect started dawning on the minds of intellectuals of south Asian studies. For years to come, the wide and dispersed international academic community of south Asian studies drew its intellectual vibra- tions and stimulations from several of Barney's writings starting with his seminal essay in an edited volume with Milton Singer. Whether it is an essay on Benares, Chamars of Senapur or the civil service recruitment, the long historical span of 300 years seemed to be so easily integrated and comprehended in his writings. The essay on recruitment and training of the British civil servants in India covering the time span of 1600-1860 provides an interesting genealogical account into the making of the British civil service institution from the time of its inception. The historical transition from class of merchants and brokers to the class of rulers was also about the historical sociology of power about who they were and where they came from. To construct and narrate the story from a mine of historical sources - official records, memoirs of officers employed in different capacities and from the local reports - were the task of an accomplished reader and writer. As a social historian, he showed the dual processes of localisation of colonial power and colonisation of the local world as one of intimately related to each other. The ruptures and continuities in history had to be understood, according to Cohn's episte- mological schema, in a manner that produced both metropole and colony of power simultaneously. This truly reflects his extraordinary command over history and its power without losing sight of more subtle and subversive effects of the colonial rule. Cohn integrated the two disciplines of history and anthropology in remarkable and unique ways, and can be said to have pioneered the new sub-fields of historical anthropology and anthropological history through his numerous writings on colonial India. He urged the scholars and readers to look into the anthropological making of the British empire and its power. His writ- ings neatly form the thematic universe mutually interlinking the colonial socio- logy of knowledge and the sociology of colonial knowledge. His works cannot easily be categorised into any rigid disci- plinary framework because he innovatively ruptured the given methodological and conceptual unities. For him, questioning the objectified forms of power and their modes of representation was an ethical academic call of the day. Cohn's command over the themes and subjects of interest was wide-ranging, and he employed the same degree of rigour, honesty of analysis and passion of historical facts to all his writings whether on law, language, land, caste, census, clothes and so on. He continued to analyse how the British colonial state in India institutionalised the formal- legal apparatus of its power along with an explicit and exhibit symbolic construction of power in the domains of culture and ideology. Culture and Its Meanings Barney was struck by the impact of British colonial laws on the indigenous Indian social structure with its widespread preva- lence on every rung of the society. This was clearly a case of colonial authority and its reception and rejection by the colonised. Even after four decades of his writings on law and authority in colonial India, the field of legal studies still reverberates with Cohn's initial influence. Cohn brought attention to the cultural history and its political power in the field of south Asian studies. For him, the notion of culture was not simply to be understood in terms of patterns of social behaviour and practices but in its more invisible forms of meaning- system and discursive power. In this respect, he moved beyond the more canonised and standardised theories of culture, and sharpened its understanding as a critical category of social reproduction and political articulation of power. The culture of imperial power needed to be addressed not in oppositional terms between the colonisers and colonised but in their mutually reproductive and reconsti- tutive sense. For this, one must, as Cohn would emphasise, go beyond the semantics of more obvious and explicit opposition between domination and subordination. Instead, it is more instructive to see how the two are interlinked with the inherent capacity to resist on the part of the latter (dominated or subordinated groups and people). Whether writing on the 18th century Benares region, language of command and control, law of the imperial colonial state or enumerative exercise of the British empire, in all of them, Cohn extended the boundaries of history and anthropology and moved beyond their given limits. In each of these and other essays, he is seen at his best in embedding archives with ethnography in a synchronic narrative of past with the present. With extensive footnotes (150 footnotes in a 54-page long essay), that is, characteristic of his writ- ings, Cohn narratives would easily medi- ate through the language of colonisers (English) and colonised (Indian languages). His interest in the language of the British empire as a form of hegemony over the natives remained with him till the very end. How and why did the colonial officials learn Hindustani along with Persian and Arabic? How did they negotiate and bar- gain with the Indians over their prized ancestry of English language? These and many other such questions continued to occupy his interest for a long time. Cohn contributed immensely to the enrichment of south Asian studies programme at the University of Chicago, a leading place for south Asian studies for decades. Like his many other renowned colleagues and academic giantsjoining the University of Chicago in other disciplines around the same time such as Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph in political science, Milton Singer, Mckim Marriott, Robert Redfield, Marshall Sahlins in anthropology, Ronald Inden in history and many others, Cohn was a legend in setting up several of the cutting edge debates and discourses in his disciplines. But unlike many of his contemporary anthropologists of the post- war era, Cohn clearly saw the ideology of the US state department in promoting area studies and always had a critical gaze at the discipline itself. He shared his perspec- tive on the colonial roots of anthropology with his students more inside the class- rooms. He was one of the best thesis advisors one could possibly imagine in terms of his dedication and support not only till the dissertation was over but een beyond the graduate school, and more particularly in working towards his students' careers and placements in the academia. Even though he formally retired from teaching at the University of Chicago in 1995, he continued to guide the research of his graduate students despite his failing health and deteriorated physical condition. He was on several dissertation committees and continued to attend seminars and conferences asking the most pertinent questions and participating in the defenses of his students' theses. Gifted with a sense of witty humour, Cohn's presence made all seminars and conversations interesting. Cohn looked at different turns in social sciences with an ironical twist when he once remarked "where do we turn now that we have turned away so much" implying the inadequacy of post-modern turn, linguistic-turn, post-structuralist turn, feminist-turn, deconstructionist-turn, post- colonial turn and so on. However, for him, these turns and isms were not enough to explain the power of history and anthropology. He was an institution builder, and after joining the University of Chicago in 1964 he continued to stay there despite several coveted positions offered to him several times throughout his academic career. The 40 years of long-standing scholarship and relationship with one place with intermit- tent commitments such as a visiting professor at the University of Michigan, New York University and California Institute of Technology have inspired several generations of scholars who are now well established historians and an- thropologists in their own fields. It synchronised well with his intellectual rigour of mind, which he would apply to any subject or theme he examined and analysed for a considerable period of time with a sustained passion. This speaks for his love of knowledge and passion for work, and not for fulfilling the academic requirements for tenure, promotion or seniority, etc. His classes were truly democratic and profoundly participatory in nature allowing students to discuss their own thoughts and ideas as well as to engage with readings more seriously. He gave the most comprehensive reading lists in his courses, which were most innovative in content and form. At times, he would take the entire class to a nearby museum, church, syna- gogle and cemetery for a short visit to acquaint them with the power of architec- ture and its varied forms. One often found him gleaning through the card catalogues of the registering library of the University of Chicago. He himself was a great bibliographer as seen in his essay titled Social Institutions of Indian Civilisation: A Criti- cal Bibliography".2 Cohn was most interested in the histori- cal and anthropological making of the British colonial state in India along with its cultural programmes and practices, which were enforced through multiple regulatory mechanisms. Cohn's writings show how this historical anthropology of the colonial state cannot be separated from the ideology of power and political char- acter of the state from the 18th century to the post-colonial era, and as Nicholas Dirks well suggested in his preface to Cohn's collection of essays, that "the historical anthropology of the colonial state must not be separated from the historical anthro- pology of the modern nation state in general".3 His insights into the historical project of the British colonial state can well explain the hegemonic cultural and political agenda of the contemporary glo- bal neo-liberal colonialism of the US and her allies. He himself stated that "a guiding assumption in my research on the British conquest of India in the 18th and 19th centuries has been that metropole and colony have to be seen in a unitary field of analysis".4 Inthe introduction of his last published work, he summarised his approach as one of 'investigative modalities' to analyse the totalising project of the British colonial state in India. These investigative modalities for him were historiographic, observational, survey oriented, enumerative, museological and surveil- lance oriented in nature. All of these investigative modalities are also true of our contemporary times enforced both by the post-colonial and neo-imperial states. Barney can truly be considered a visionary future historian whose analyses of the past can also explain the trajectory of the neo- colonial project of our future time to come. He can be called an E P Thompson of modern Indian history and his writings have greatly influenced the subaltern stud- ies, cultural studies and social and intellectual histories of modem south Asia for the last three decades. The recent surge of writings over mapping and territorialising the boundaries and spaces of the modern nation states owe much to Barney's early works on regions, census, authority and Benares. He was not an intimidating pro- fessor rather a man of true intellect, emotions and feelings for his teaching and research, and combined brilliantly the multiple roles of a remarkable teacher, researcher, colleague, mentor and friend in his persona.

[171 Notes 1 Singer Milton (ed), Structure and Change in Indian Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). In the years to come, his other writings were collected under the titles of India: The Social Anthropology of a Civilisation (Prentice Hall, 1971),AnAnthropologistAmong the Historians and Other Essays (Oxford University Press, 1987) and Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India (Princeton University Press, 1996).

2 Singer Milton (ed), Introducing India in Liberal Education (University of Chicago Press, 1967).

3 Nicholas B Dirks, Foreword in Bernard S Cohn, Colonialism and Its forms of Knowledge.

4 Cohn B, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India, 1996.