



## Future Directions in the Humanities and Social Sciences

The Institute of Advanced Study in the Humanities and the Social Sciences organizes guest lectures on innovative topics in the humanities and social sciences. The particular aim of these encounters is to promote the dialogue between various disciplines and especially between the «two cultures». For this purpose, the Institute invites scholars who venture outside their own fields into the territory of the natural sciences and medicine, law, economics, politics and other fields.

Thursday, 4 October 2012, 18:15 – 19:45  
Unitobler of the University of Bern, Lerchenweg 36  
Room: F023

# Innovation or Replication? Crossing and Criss-Crossing in Social Science

Prof. Dame Marilyn Strathern, University of Cambridge

What does it mean to find echoes of an innovatory moment in the past, or a discipline's cutting edge in another's worn down tool, or people in different fields quite unknown to one another following a similar intellectual trajectory over the same three or four years? A short case study of what looks uncannily like 'independent invention' is prefaced by reflections on replicatory practice in the social sciences. Some US sociological theorising on the workings of fractal distinctions within disciplines, specifically across many foundational arguments in social science, finds a counterpart in UK anthropological theorising on scale and replication in social phenomena at large. The conjunction is amusing; it could well be instructive. In any event, there is a challenge here to comparisons across disciplines.

There is also the ever-present challenge of what happens to travelling concepts when they escape their original moorings. This is particularly true when the translation of non-verbal (here, mathematical) forms into words for the purposes of exposition means that they then enter the world of words. Once verbalized, they become available for other descriptive usage – as any words do. And here is where the interest of the anthropologist, forever searching for new ways to describe the world, comes in. This lecture is a view from anthropology: the intention is not to demonstrate the aptness of borrowing the language of fractals but to point to the reality of the social forms some borrowings have illuminated. The travelling concept encounters social phenomena it brings to light in new ways.

**Marilyn Strathern**, Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University, is Life President of the (UK and Commonwealth) Association of Social Anthropologists. Since 1964 her interests have been divided between Papua New Guinean and British ethnography. She is probably most well known for *The gender of the gift* (1988), a critique of anthropological theories of society and gender relations applied to Melanesia, which she pairs with *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century* (1992), a comment on the cultural revolution at home. Her most experimental work is an exercise on the comparative method called *Partial connections* (1991). Projects over the last twenty years are reflected in publications on reproductive technologies, and intellectual and cultural property rights, while 'critique of good practice' has been the umbrella under which she has written about audit, accountability and interdisciplinarity. Some of these themes are brought together in *Kinship, law and the unexpected* (2005).

---

Institute of Advanced Study  
In the Humanities and the  
Social Sciences | IASH  
Falkenplatz 16  
CH-3012 Bern  
www.ias.h.unibe.ch



---

<sup>b</sup>  
UNIVERSITÄT  
BERN