

## 1 Visions of anthropology

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Anthropology is a subject in which theory is of great importance. It is also a subject in which theory is closely bound up with practice. In this chapter, we shall explore the general nature of anthropological enquiry. Of special concern are the way the discipline is defined in different national traditions, the relation between theory and ethnography, the distinction between synchronic and diachronic approaches, and how anthropologists and historians have seen the history of the discipline.

Although this book is not a history of anthropology as such, it is organized in part chronologically. In order to understand anthropological theory, it is important to know something of the history of the discipline, both its 'history of ideas' and its characters and events. Historical relations between facets of anthropological theory are complex and interesting. Whether anthropological theory is best understood as a sequence of events, a succession of time frames, a system of ideas, a set of parallel national traditions, or a process of 'agenda hopping' is the subject of the last section of this chapter. In a sense, this question guides my approach through the whole of the book. But first let us consider the nature of anthropology in general and the meaning of some of the terms which define it.

### **Anthropology and ethnology**

The words 'anthropology' and 'ethnology' have had different meanings through the years. They have also had different meanings in different countries.

The word 'anthropology' is ultimately from the Greek (*anthropos*, 'human', plus *logos*, 'discourse' or 'science'). Its first usage to define a scientific discipline is probably around the early sixteenth century (in its Latin form *anthropologium*). Central European writers then employed it as a term to cover anatomy and physiology, part of what much later came to be called 'physical' or 'biological anthropology'. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European theologians also used the term, in this

case to refer to the attribution of human-like features to their deity. The German word *Anthropologie*, which described cultural attributes of different ethnic groups, came to be used by a few writers in Russia and Austria in the late eighteenth century (see Vermeulen 1995). However, this usage did not become established among scholars elsewhere until much later.

Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century scholars tended to use 'ethnology' for the study of both the cultural differences and the features which identify the common humanity of the world's peoples. This English term, or its equivalents like *ethnologie* (French) or *Ethnologie* (German), are still in use in continental Europe and the United States. In the United Kingdom and most other parts of the English-speaking world 'social anthropology' is the more usual designation. In continental Europe, the word 'anthropology' often still tends to carry the meaning 'physical anthropology', though there too 'social anthropology' is now rapidly gaining ground as a synonym for 'ethnology'. Indeed, the main professional organization in Europe is called the European Association of Social Anthropologists or l'Association Européenne des Anthropologues Sociaux. It was founded in 1989 amidst a rapid growth of the discipline across Europe, both Western and Eastern. In the United States, the word 'ethnology' co-exists with 'cultural anthropology'.

In Germany and parts of Central and Eastern Europe, there is a further distinction, namely between *Volkskunde* and *Völkerkunde*. These terms have no precise English equivalents, but the distinction is a very important one. *Volkskunde* usually refers to the study of folklore and local customs, including handicrafts, of one's own country. It is a particularly strong field in these parts of Europe and to some extent in Scandinavia. *Völkerkunde* is the wider, comparative social science also known in German as *Ethnologie*.

Thus, anthropology and ethnology are not really one field; nor are they simply two fields. Nor does either term have a single, agreed meaning. Today they are best seen as foci for the discussion of issues diverse in character, but whose subject matter is defined according to an opposition between the general (anthropology) and the culturally specific (ethnology).

### The 'four fields' approach

In North America, things are much simpler than in Europe. In the United States and Canada, 'anthropology' is generally understood to include four fields or subdisciplines:

- (1) biological anthropology,

- (2) archaeology,
- (3) anthropological linguistics,
- (4) cultural anthropology.

The main concern of this book is with cultural anthropology, but let us take each of these branches of North American anthropology in turn.

(1) Biological anthropology is the study of human biology, especially as it relates to a broadly conceived ‘anthropology’ – the science of humankind. Sometimes this subdiscipline is called by its older term, ‘physical anthropology’. The latter tends to reflect interests in comparative anatomy. Such anatomical comparisons involve especially the relations between the human species and the higher primates (such as chimpanzees and gorillas) and the relation between modern humans and our ancestors (such as *Australopithecus africanus* and *Homo erectus*). The anatomical comparison of ‘races’ is now largely defunct, having been superseded by the rapidly advancing field of human genetics. Genetics, along with aspects of demography, forensic science, and palaeo-medicine, make up modern biological anthropology in its widest sense.

(2) Archaeology (or ‘prehistoric archaeology’, as it would be called in Europe) is a closely related subdiscipline. While the comparison of anatomical features of fossil finds is properly part of biological anthropology, the relation of such finds to their habitat and the search for clues to the structure of prehistoric societies belong more to archaeology. Archaeology also includes the search for relations between groups and the reconstruction of social life even in quite recent times. This is especially true with finds of Native North American material dating from before written records were available. Many American archaeologists consider their subdiscipline a mere extension, backwards in time, of cultural anthropology.

(3) Anthropological linguistics is the study of language, but especially with regard to its diversity. This field is small in comparison with linguistics as a whole, but anthropological linguists keep their ties to anthropology while most mainstream linguists today (and since the early 1960s) concentrate on the underlying principles of all languages. It might be said (somewhat simplistically) that whereas modern linguists study *language*, the more conservative anthropological linguists study *languages*. Anthropological linguistics is integrally bound to the ‘relativist’ perspective of cultural anthropology which was born with it, in the early twentieth-century anthropology of Franz Boas (see chapter 7).

(4) Cultural anthropology is the largest subdiscipline. In its widest sense, this field includes the study of cultural diversity, the search for cultural universals, the unlocking of social structure, the interpretation of

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symbolism, and numerous related problems. It touches on all the other subdisciplines, and for this reason many North American anthropologists insist on keeping their vision of a unified science of anthropology in spite of the fact that the overwhelming majority of North American anthropologists practise this subdiscipline alone (at least if we include within it *applied* cultural anthropology). Rightly or wrongly, ‘anthropology’ in some circles, on several continents, has come to mean most specifically ‘cultural anthropology’, while its North American practitioners maintain approaches which take stock of developments in all of the classic ‘four fields’.

Finally, in the opinion of many American anthropologists, *applied anthropology* should qualify as a field in its own right. Applied anthropology includes the application of ideas from cultural anthropology within medicine, in disaster relief, for community development, and in a host of other areas where a knowledge of culture and society is relevant. In a wider sense, applied anthropology can include aspects of biological and linguistic anthropology, or even archaeology. For example, biological anthropology may help to uncover the identity of murder victims. Anthropological linguistics has applications in teaching the deaf and in speech therapy. Archaeological findings on ancient irrigation systems may help in the construction of modern ones.

A survey for the American Anthropological Association (Givens, Evans, and Jablonski 1997: 308) found that applied anthropology, along with unspecified topics not covered within the traditional four fields, accounted for 7 per cent of American anthropology Ph.D.s between 1972 and 1997. Cultural anthropology Ph.D.s accounted for 50 per cent (and many of these also focused on applied issues); archaeology, 30 per cent; biological anthropology, 10 per cent; and linguistic anthropology, only 3 per cent. That said, some anthropologists reject the distinction between ‘pure’ and ‘applied’, on the grounds that all anthropology has aspects of both. In other words, applied anthropology may best be seen not as a separate subdiscipline, but rather as a part of each of the four fields.

### Theory and ethnography

In social or cultural anthropology, a distinction is often made between ‘ethnography’ and ‘theory’. Ethnography is literally the practice of writing about peoples. Often it is taken to mean our way of making sense of other peoples’ modes of thought, since anthropologists usually study cultures other than their own. Theory is also, in part anyway, our way of making sense of our own, anthropological mode of thought.

However, theory and ethnography inevitably merge into one. It is

impossible to engage in ethnography without some idea of what is important and what is not. Students often ask what anthropological theory is for; they could as easily ask what ethnography is for! Ideally, ethnography serves to enhance our understanding of culture in the abstract and define the essence of human nature (which is in fact predicated on the existence of culture). On the other side of the coin, theory without ethnography is pretty meaningless, since the understanding of cultural difference is at least one of the most important goals of anthropological enquiry.

It is useful to think of theory as containing four basic elements: (1) questions, (2) assumptions, (3) methods, and (4) evidence. The most important *questions*, to my mind, are ‘What are we trying to find out?’, and ‘Why is this knowledge useful?’ Anthropological knowledge could be useful, for example, either in trying to understand one’s own society, or in trying to understand the nature of the human species. Some anthropological questions are historical: ‘How do societies change?’, or ‘What came first, private property or social hierarchy?’ Other anthropological questions are about contemporary issues: ‘How do social institutions work?’, or ‘How do humans envisage and classify what they see around them?’

*Assumptions* include notions of common humanity, of cultural difference, of value in all cultures, or of differences in cultural values. More specifically, anthropologists may assume either human inventiveness or human uninventiveness; or that society constrains the individual, or individuals create society. Some assumptions are common to all anthropologists, others are not. Thus, while having some common ground, anthropologists can have significant differences of opinion about the way they see their subject.

*Methods* have developed through the years and are part of every fieldwork study. However, methods include not only fieldwork but, equally importantly, comparison. *Evidence* is obviously a methodological component, but how it is treated, or even understood, will differ according to theoretical perspective. Some anthropologists prefer to see comparison as a method of building a picture of a particular culture area. Others see it as a method for explaining their own discoveries in light of a more worldwide pattern. Still others regard comparison itself as an illusory objective, except insofar as one always understands the exotic through its difference from the familiar.

This last point begs the existential question as to what evidence might actually be. In anthropology, as for many other disciplines, the only thing that is agreed is that evidence must relate to the problem at hand. In other words, not only do theories depend on evidence, evidence itself depends on what questions one is trying to answer. To take archaeology as an analogy, one cannot just dig any old place and expect to find something of

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significance. An archaeologist who is interested in the development of urbanism will only dig where there is likely to be the remains of an ancient city. Likewise in social anthropology, we go to places where we expect to find things we are interested in; and once there we ask small questions designed to produce evidence for the larger questions posed by our respective theoretical orientations. For example, an interest in relations between gender and power might take us to a community in which gender differentiation is strong. In this case, we might focus our questions to elucidate how individual women and men pursue strategies for overcoming or maintaining their respective positions.

Beyond these four elements, there are two more specific aspects of enquiry in social anthropology. These are characteristic of anthropological method, no matter what theoretical persuasion an anthropologist may otherwise maintain. Thus they serve to define an anthropological approach, as against an approach which is characteristic of other social sciences, especially sociology. The two aspects are:

- (1) observing a society as a whole, to see how each element of that society fits together with, or is meaningful in terms of, other such elements;
- (2) examining each society in relation to others, to find similarities and differences and account for them.

*Observing a society as a whole* entails trying to understand how things are related, for example, how politics fits together with kinship or economics, or how specific economic institutions fit together with others. *Examining each society in relation to others* implies an attempt to find and account for their similarities and their differences. Here we need a broader framework than the one that a fieldworker might employ in his or her study of a single village or ethnic group, but still there are several possibilities. Such a framework can encompass: (1) the comparison of isolated cases (e.g., the Trobrianders of Melanesia compared to the Nuer of East Africa), (2) comparisons within a region (e.g., the Trobrianders within the context of Melanesian ethnography), or (3) a more universal sort of comparison (taking in societies across the globe). Most social anthropologists in fact engage in all three at one time or another, even though, as anthropological theorists, they may differ about which is the most useful form of comparison in general.

Thus it is possible to describe social or cultural anthropology as having a broadly agreed methodological programme, no matter what specific questions anthropologists are trying to answer. Theory and ethnography are the twin pillars of this programme, and virtually all anthropological enquiry includes either straightforward comparison or an explicit attempt to come to grips with the difficulties which comparisons entail. Arguably,

the comparative nature of our discipline tends to make us more aware of our theoretical premises than tends to be the case in less comparative fields, such as sociology. For this reason, perhaps, a special concern with theory rather than methodology has come to dominate anthropology. Every anthropologist is a bit of a theorist, just as every anthropologist is a bit of a fieldworker. In the *other* social sciences, 'social theory' is sometimes considered a separate and quite abstract entity, often divorced from day-to-day concerns.

### **Anthropological paradigms**

It is commonplace in many academic fields to distinguish between a 'theory' and a 'theoretical perspective'. By a theoretical perspective, we usually mean a grand theory, what is sometimes called a theoretical framework or a broad way of looking at the world. In anthropology we sometimes call such a thing a *cosmology* if it is attributed to a 'traditional' culture, or a *paradigm* if it is attributed to Western scientists.

#### *The notion of a 'paradigm'*

The theoretical perspective, cosmology, or paradigm defines the major issues with which a theorist is concerned. The principle is the same whether one is a member of a traditional culture, an anthropologist, or a natural scientist. In the philosophy of science itself there are differences of opinion as to the precise nature of scientific thinking, the process of gaining scientific knowledge, and the existential status of that knowledge. We shall leave the philosophers to their own debates (at least until chapter 7, where their debates impinge upon anthropology), but one philosopher deserves mention here. This is Thomas Kuhn, whose book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970 [1962]) has been influential in helping social scientists to understand their own fields, even though its subject matter is confined to the physical and natural sciences. According to Kuhn, paradigms are large theories which contain within them smaller theories. When smaller theories no longer make sense of the world, then a crisis occurs. At least in the natural sciences (if not quite to the same extent in the social sciences), such a crisis eventually results in either the overthrow of a paradigm or incorporation of it, as a special case, into a newer and larger one.

Consider, as Kuhn does, the difference between Newtonian physics and Einsteinian physics. In Newtonian physics, one takes as the starting point the idea of a fixed point of reference for everything in the universe. In an Einsteinian framework, everything (time, space, etc.) is relative to

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everything else. In Newtonian physics magnetism and electricity are considered separate phenomena and can be explained separately, but in Einsteinian physics magnetism is explained as a necessary part of electricity. Neither Newton's explanation of magnetism nor Einstein's is necessarily either true or false in absolute terms. Rather, they derive their meanings within the larger theoretical frameworks. Einstein's paradigm is 'better' only because it explains some phenomena that Newtonian physics cannot.

There is some dispute about whether or not anthropology can really be considered a science in the sense that physics is, but most would agree that anthropology at least bears some relation to physics in having a single overarching framework (in this case, the understanding of humankind), and within this, more specific paradigms (such as functionalism and structuralism). Within our paradigms we have the particular facts and explanations which make up any given anthropological study. Anthropology goes through 'revolutions' or 'paradigm shifts' from time to time, although the nature of ours may be different from those in the natural sciences. For anthropology, fashion, as much as explanatory value, has its part to play.

*Diachronic, synchronic, and interactive perspectives*

Within anthropology, it is useful to think in terms of both a set of competing theoretical perspectives within any given framework, and a hierarchy of theoretical levels. Take evolutionism and diffusionism, for example. Evolutionism is an anthropological perspective which emphasizes the growing complexity of culture through time. Diffusionism is a perspective which emphasizes the transmission of ideas from one place to another. They compete because they offer different explanations of the same thing: how cultures change. Yet both are really part of the same grand theory: the theory of social change.

Sometimes the larger perspective which embraces both evolutionism and diffusionism is called the *diachronic* one (indicating the relation of things through time). Its opposite is the *synchronic* perspective (indicating the relation of things together in the same time). Synchronic approaches include functionalism, structuralism, interpretivism, and other ones which try to explain the workings of particular cultures without reference to time. A third large grouping of anthropological theories is what might be termed the *interactive* perspective. This perspective or, more accurately, set of perspectives, has both diachronic and synchronic aspects. Its adherents reject the static nature of most synchronic analysis, and reject also the simplistic historical assumptions of the classical evolutionist and

Table 1.1. *Diachronic, synchronic, and interactive perspectives*


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 DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVES

evolutionism  
 diffusionism  
 Marxism (in some respects)  
 culture-area approaches (in some respects)

## SYNCHRONIC PERSPECTIVES

relativism (including 'culture and personality')  
 structuralism  
 structural-functionalism  
 cognitive approaches  
 culture-area approaches (in most respects)  
 functionalism (in some respects)  
 interpretivism (in some respects)

## INTERACTIVE PERSPECTIVES

transactionalism  
 processualism  
 feminism  
 poststructuralism  
 postmodernism  
 functionalism (in some respects)  
 interpretivism (in some respects)  
 Marxism (in some respects)

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diffusionist traditions. Proponents of interactive approaches include those who study cyclical social processes, or cause-and-effect relations between culture and environment.

Table 1.1 illustrates a classification of some of the main anthropological approaches according to their placing in these larger paradigmatic groupings. The details will have to wait until later chapters. The important point for now is that anthropology is constructed of a hierarchy of theoretical levels, though assignment of specific approaches to the larger levels is not always clear-cut. The various 'isms' which make these up form different ways of understanding our subject matter. Anthropologists debate both within their narrower perspectives (e.g., one evolutionist against another about either the cause or the chronology of evolution) and within larger perspectives (e.g., evolutionists versus diffusionists, or those favouring diachronic approaches against those favouring synchronic approaches).

Very broadly, the history of anthropology has involved transitions from diachronic perspectives to synchronic perspectives, and from synchronic perspectives to interactive perspectives. Early diachronic studies,

especially in evolutionism, often concentrated on global but quite specific theoretical issues. For example, ‘Which came first, patrilineal or matrilineal descent?’ Behind this question was a set of notions about the relation between men and women, about the nature of marriage, about private property, and so on. Through such questions, quite grand theories were built up. These had great explanatory power, but they were vulnerable to refutation by careful counter-argument, often using contradicting ethnographic evidence.

For the synchronic approaches, which became prominent in the early twentieth century, it was often more difficult to find answers to that kind of theoretical question. ‘Which is more culturally appropriate, patrilineal or matrilineal descent?’ is rather less meaningful than ‘Which came first?’ The focus landed more on specific societies. Anthropologists began to study societies in great depth and to compare how each dealt with problems such as raising children, maintaining links between kinsfolk, and dealing with members of other kin groups. A debate did emerge on which was more important, descent (relations within a kin group) or alliance (relations between kin groups which intermarry). Yet overall, the emphasis in synchronic approaches has been on the understanding of societies one at a time, whether in respect of the function, the structure, or the meaning of specific customs.

Interactive approaches have concentrated on the mechanisms through which individuals seek to gain over other individuals, or simply the ways in which individuals define their social situation. For example, the question might arise: ‘Are there any hidden features of matrilineal or patrilineal descent which might lead to the breakdown of groups based on such principles?’ Or, ‘What processes enable such groups to persist?’ Or, ‘How does an individual manoeuvre around the structural constraints imposed by descent groups?’

Thus anthropologists of diverse theoretical orientations try to tackle related, if not identical theoretical questions. The complex relation *between* such questions is one of the most interesting aspects of the discipline.

### *Society and culture*

Another way to classify the paradigms of anthropology is according to their broad interest in either *society* (as a social unit) or *culture* (as a shared set of ideas, skills, and objects). The situation is slightly more complicated than the usual designations ‘social anthropology’ (the discipline as practised in the United Kingdom and some other countries) and ‘cultural anthropology’ (as practised in North America) imply. (See table 1.2.)