

CHAPTER ONE

The idea of a social system

Anthropology is the study of people; social anthropology is the study of human society. Social anthropology can be described as ‘comparative sociology’, which is the study of the vast range of human societies in order to develop general theories about how societies work. More particularly, social anthropology has often been regarded as the study of ‘small-scale’ societies, whose relative simplicity makes them easier to study in their entirety. Social anthropology can also be characterised as ‘the translation of culture’; making sense of the apparently exotic customs of unfamiliar peoples.

In about 450 BC, the Greek historian Herodotus wrote an account of the events which had ultimately led, a generation earlier, to the Greek defeat of the Persians. Herodotus’ idea was that the Persians’ defeat was not caused solely by the deeds of great men, nor from the will of the gods. Herodotus explained the Persians’ defeat as the outcome of conflict between alien cultures. This justified his documentation of the cultures which surrounded the ancient Greeks and, to substantiate his argument, he provided detailed accounts of contemporary societies very different from his own, tracing the history of their contact with the Persian empire. He has, therefore, been described as the father of anthropology (Gould 1989: 1). Herodotus portrays an ancient world of tantalising cultural diversity, in which familiar values are often put into question by the unexpected or exotic. The Scythians, who lived north of the Black Sea, were invincible because of their nomadic way of life. A people who lacked fortified towns and lived in wagons which

they took with them wherever they went, who fought on horseback and depended on cattle rather than fields for their subsistence, could never be defeated. There were no trees in Scythian territory and, whenever they killed a cow, the Scythians made a fire of the bones to cook the meat. As soon as Cyrus invaded Scythian territory, the Scythians moved on. On the only occasion the Persian and Scythian armies confronted each other, the Scythians were diverted by a hare which jumped up from the grass between the armies. The Scythians revealed their contempt for the Persians by galloping off in pursuit of the hare (Herodotus 1954: 286ff.). Another good example of Herodotus' technique is provided by the episode in which Cambyses sends envoys to people whom Herodotus knew as the Ethiopians. The Persian king had sent his agents to spy out the land in preparation for conquest, but instructed them to appear friendly. Hoping to overawe the Ethiopians with their sophistication, the envoys offered the king of Ethiopia various presents, including dyed fabric and wine. To their surprise, he dismissed dyeing as a trick which made things appear other than they were. Although he liked the taste of the wine, the king ridiculed Persian food as 'dung', remarking that they must need the wine to survive into old age on such a diet. The Ethiopians, said the king, lived to the age of 120 by drinking milk and eating boiled meat. Cambyses was enraged when he heard of the king's reply but, not surprisingly, the subsequent Persian invasion was a failure (Herodotus 1954: 211–12).

The Roman historian Tacitus used similar techniques in his account of the German tribes living on the edge of the Roman empire in about AD 100. Tacitus, less patriotic than Herodotus, implicitly opposed the honest, simple lives of the Germans with the decadent indulgence of life in Rome. He also wished to assess the military threat the Germans posed to the Roman empire, which he did by investigating the form of German society. The Germans had wide tracts of cultivable land available and every community allocated fresh plough land to each household, each year. Germanic local democracy was conducted in a very different style to the Roman Senate: 'When the assembled crowd thinks fit they take their seats fully armed . . . If a proposal displeases them, the people shout their dissent; if they approve, they clash their spears.' Silver vessels presented to chiefs and ambassadors when they travelled abroad could be seen in their houses, put to the same everyday uses as earthenware (Tacitus 1985: 104, 110, 123).

Ethnography, or 'writing about peoples' is the descriptive tradition

in anthropology. Complete description is impossible. Consciously or otherwise, our ideas and assumptions lead us to notice certain aspects of peoples' social life, but to disregard others. Neither Tacitus nor Herodotus were disinterested in their subject. Both set out to document unfamiliar cultures in order to support an argument, yet archaeological evidence has confirmed some of their statements, such as the elaborate burial customs of the Scythians and the agricultural system and village organisation of the Germanic peoples (Herodotus 1954: 294n.; Hedeager 1992: 205, 230, 250). Theory directs our attention to particular features of social behaviour, and suggests connections between what we observe and hear. The theories of evolution as progress which dominated the social sciences in the nineteenth century encourage a broad gaze across cultural diversity, while interactionist theories promote a close focus upon the details of individual actions. Some theories grow out of others which have come to seem inadequate. Socioecology, for example, supplants Functionalism as a way of explaining the connections between customs. In other cases, theories collide head-on: Marxism explains social life in terms of its material consequences; Structuralism explains it as the outcome of ideas and values. Whether there are general explanatory laws of social life, or whether every society must be understood in its own terms, remains a lively issue in anthropology. Theories are not idle speculation. Wherever they guide practical action, they have political implications. Many of the theories to be outlined here originated in attempts to make sense of the writer's own social condition, and to place it in the context of other, seemingly exotic, ways of living in society.

Framing the modern questions

The problems which have preoccupied recent social anthropology are rather different to those which interested Herodotus and Tacitus. They were first formulated during the Enlightenment. Theories which attempt to resolve these problems were established at the same time. Until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European kings had been believed to rule by Divine Right, and human society was supposed to reproduce, on a lower scale, the Divine society of Heaven. These assumptions were questioned during the Enlightenment (see Watson 1991). Once people considered themselves free to decide for themselves what was, or was not, proper social behaviour according to natural rather than divine law it became possible to ask both how

actual societies might be improved, and how present societies had diverged from the natural, or original human condition. Both the European past and more exotic but living, human societies were seen as sources of information that could help answer these questions. The quality of the evidence and the techniques for assessing it were greatly inferior to those found in the work of Herodotus and Tacitus (compare Trigger 1989: 55–60).

During the years leading to the Civil War in England, supporters of Parliament who opposed the king's claim to rule by Divine Right relied on Tacitus' account of ancient Germanic democracy. They argued that these customs had been brought to England by the Anglo-Saxons and historically transmitted to their own time via English common law. Royalists argued to the contrary that current common law had been brought to England by William the Conqueror, extinguishing any liberties that might previously have existed. While most participants in the debate assumed that Germanic society had been historically unique, the Levellers took the argument a step further by contending that ancient Germanic society was the 'original human condition' which revealed the natural rights of man prior to the appropriation of land by a wealthy elite and thus, in a sense, inaugurating a general theory of human society (see Burrow 1981; Hill 1958; MacDougall 1982).

Hobbes (1588–1679), who was at one time tutor to the future King Charles II, experienced the disorder caused by the English Civil War and asked what it was that holds a society together. Contrary to the primitive communalism postulated by the Levellers, Hobbes envisaged the opposite condition to regulated social life as one of random disorder, in which people sought their own self-preservation by trying to control others. Such a condition would be a war of every man against every other man, and life would be 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes 1970 [1651]: 65). Hobbes imagined that people living in such a condition would therefore be compelled to choose a leader, or sovereign, and surrender sufficient of their personal freedom to the sovereign to give him the power he needed to uphold a social contract. People would only be willing to work for the general good if they could be confident that anyone cheating would be punished by law. Hobbes offered virtually no evidence that his war of each against all had ever existed, although he did remark that 'For the savage people in many places in America, except the government of small families, the concord whereof dependeth on naturall lust, have no government at all;

and live at this day in that brutish manner' (Hobbes 1970 [1651]: 65). Hobbes' main aim was to construct a logical opposition between order and disorder, rather than to identify an actual condition against which contemporary European society could be assessed (Hill 1958: 271).

Rousseau (1712–72), a diplomat and citizen of Geneva during the last years of the feudal *ancien régime*, took a different view again of the original human society. Like the Levellers, Rousseau regarded the European regimes of his time as oppressive. In his essay on *The Social Contract* he wrote, 'Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains' (Rousseau 1963 [1762]: 3). Admitting that he did not know how people had originally lived, he hypothesised in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* that they must first have existed as isolated individuals in a state of nature, satisfying their meagre wants immediately but rarely, if ever, coming into contact with one another. But humans are not like animals. Animals are nothing more than machines wound up by nature, whereas 'Man' acts through free will. Rousseau guessed that people formed an association when natural sources of food began to be depleted and people turned to agriculture, banding together to defend their tilled land against others who wanted to annexe it. 'All ran headlong to their chains, in the hopes of securing their liberty' (Rousseau 1963 [1755]: 205).

Rousseau relied on descriptions of the contemporary, exotic people of the Caribbean as support for his reconstruction of the original human condition. Just as he imagined the original human to have had few wants, 'satisfying his hunger at the first oak, and slaking his thirst at the first brook' (Rousseau 1963 [1755]: 163), so the eighteenth-century Caribbean will reportedly sell you his bed in the morning, not having anticipated that he would need it again, and ask for it back in the evening (for Rousseau's source, see du Tertre 1992 [1667]: 133). Similarly, 'the Caribbeans, who have as yet least of all deviated from the state of nature' are the most peaceable of people in their love affairs and far from the selfish individuals imagined by Hobbes (Rousseau 1963 [1755]: 187). 'What a sight would the perplexing and envied labours of a European minister of State present to the eyes of a Caribbean!' (Rousseau 1963 [1755]: 220). Even the rich now depend on the service of others but, as long as people wandered freely as individuals, no one could exact obedience or servitude from another. The many desires of Hobbes' savage, such as covetousness, ambition and magnanimity, are in fact the product of society: 'The first man who, having enclosed a

piece of ground, bethought himself of saying “this is mine”, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society’ (Rousseau 1963 [1755]: 192).

Social systems

The founding fathers of social anthropology were struck by the way in which, during social life, people were influenced by the thoughts and actions of those around them, giving rise to the concept of society as a system of interrelated parts. Although a general theory of systems was not developed until the mid-twentieth century (von Bertalanffy 1951), two qualities of systems were already apparent to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theorists. A system is made up of a set of components which are interrelated in such a way that the properties of the whole are different to those which the components exhibit in isolation. The whole has a degree of internal coherence and a recognisable boundary so that it tends to persist as a system rather than break down and merge with its environment (cf. Buckley 1967).

For Hobbes, people were constrained by each other’s actions because they, or their ancestors, had entered into a social contract. This contract prevented them from acting entirely of their own free will, but benefited everyone. Rousseau similarly regarded society, not as a natural thing but a ‘sum of forces (which) can only arise when several persons come together’. If any individual rights remained, this would perpetuate the state of nature. Each associate must give himself up, not to an individual sovereign, but to the collectivity or association by obeying ‘the supreme direction of the general will’ (Rousseau 1963 [1762]: 12–13). The apparent paradox of a whole greater than the sum of its parts was, for Rousseau, exemplified by the problem of the origin of language. If language originated in the use of arbitrary or conventional signs, how could these be agreed without the prior existence of society? Such signs could only be agreed by common consent (Rousseau 1963 [1755]: 176–7). Yet how could society come into being without the prior existence of concepts such as *property*, or *mutual interest*? Rousseau surmises that such ideas could have been signified with the kind of cries used by rooks or monkeys and that, thereafter, language and society developed together.

Two general approaches to explaining the way in which social systems come into being emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These can be called the interactionist and the organic. Adam

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62982-9 - An Introduction to Theory in Anthropology

Robert Layton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Smith proposed an interactionist theory, according to which the social order emerges from the interaction of individuals pursuing their self-interest. Smith considered that society was brought about by the division of labour. The division of labour was not created by wisdom or foresight, but had its origin in a natural human propensity, 'to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another' (Smith 1976 [1776]: 25). Smith noted that the propensity to exchange was uniquely human, since no one had ever seen two dogs exchange bones, yet humans depended upon one another in countless ways. It would be useless to rely on others' benevolence. People are more likely to gain what they need by appealing to others' self-interest. 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest' (Smith 1976 [1776]: 27). Since, in the society of his own time and place, most goods were exchanged by trade or barter, Smith imagines the division of labour originating through barter in simple societies:

In a tribe of hunters or shepherds a particular person makes bows and arrows, for example, with more readiness and dexterity than any other. He frequently exchanges them for cattle or for venison . . . he finds at last that he can in this manner get more cattle or venison, than if he himself went into the field to catch them (Smith 1976 [1776]: 27).

Once the division of labour has begun the productive powers of labour are increased, but only to the extent that the division of labour allows. Among the Hottentots of southern Africa, specialists can only partially support themselves from their trade; even an English village carpenter cannot specialise in building carts or cabinets (Smith 1976 [1776]: 32n.). The more that can be obtained by exchange, however, the harder everyone will work to produce a surplus to trade, causing 'in a well-governed society, that universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people' (Smith 1976 [1776]: 22). The differences between a philosopher and a workman are almost entirely the product, rather than the cause, of the division of labour achieved by the market.

Comte (writing during the first half of the nineteenth century) took the opposing view that, far from originating in a contract between free individuals, humans are intrinsically social beings. Society has organs, like the body of an animal, in which the function of the part is determined by its place in the whole. The notion of the 'individual' is a social

construct, derived from the role which society assigns to individual action. This has become known as the 'organic analogy'. Herbert Spencer developed the analogy during the middle years of the nineteenth century, regarding social progress as the consequence of the evolution of social systems. Spencer considered that societies develop like animal or plant organisms. In contrast to Darwin's theory of natural selection, in which random variations between individuals in a population have different consequences for survival in a particular environment, Spencer's theory embodied an internal dynamic driving populations towards increasing complexity. Just as the embryo begins as a small clump of undifferentiated cells and develops into a complex system of tissues and organs, so human societies become increasingly differentiated through time (Spencer 1972 [1857]: 39). Since all societies must follow the same developmental sequence, any existing or past society can be classified according to its degree of complexity. Contemporary, but simple societies retain what were once universal levels of organisation. The simplest societies resemble organisms in which the body is segmented into many similar parts but, in the most complex societies, every part plays a unique role. None the less, the policies of government will only succeed if they conform to the wishes of the collectivity (Spencer 1972 [1860]: 55, 64).

The formulation of general theories

Among the authors whose ideas are summarised above, only Smith and Comte elaborated a detailed theory that could be put to the test. The thinkers who most influenced the development of anthropological theory were Durkheim and Marx, who took the ideas of the social contract, evolution as cumulative change, and the generation of social relationships through exchange, and developed them into well-argued bodies of theory. Comte influenced Durkheim and Smith influenced Marx.

Marx (1818–1883)

Marx was active fifty years before Durkheim but his influence on anthropology was less immediate, and his theory of how social systems work is more complex. Marx and Darwin were contemporaries. Marx's book *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* was published in the same year as *The Origin of Species*. Whereas Darwin upset the Church by denying that God had created a fixed number of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-62982-9 - An Introduction to Theory in Anthropology

Robert Layton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

species at a single moment, Marx upset the political establishment by denying the universal benefits of the capitalist system. Darwin's theory of natural selection was, like Spencer's theory of evolution, consonant with the capitalist market ethic in which competition eliminated the weak or maladapted and favoured the strongest, or best adapted. Rather than implicitly condoning nineteenth-century industrial society, Marx interpreted it as irremediably unjust.

Marx took four ideas from Adam Smith:

- 1 Social relationships are generated by exchange.
- 2 A person can produce more than he requires for his own subsistence (Smith 1976 [1776]: 22).
- 3 The power conferred by the ownership of money is the power to buy other people's labour (Smith 1976 [1776]: 48).
- 4 While supply and demand may cause the value of a good to fluctuate, its true or natural value is determined by the cost of the labour required to make it (Smith 1976 [1776]: 47).

But, whereas Adam Smith argued that the market produced universal improvement in people's wealth, Marx argued that it created inequalities.

Marx was writing at a time when urban slums housed ten or more people to a room, with perhaps only one bed between three; when children of eight years old were already at work and the working day lasted between ten and fifteen hours. It was clear to Marx that universal opulence had not extended itself to the lowest ranks of the people. Marx recognised that social systems have unique properties which cannot be reduced to individual motivation or, as Hegel had argued, the general development of the human mind. 'In the social production of their existence men inevitably enter into definite relations which are independent of their will . . . It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness' (Marx 1971 [1859]: 20–1). Unlike Durkheim, Marx regarded social systems as inherently unstable, rather than normally existing in a stable condition. In the terms of mid-twentieth-century systems theory, Durkheim later identified processes of *negative feedback*, such as punishment for deviance from social norms, which tended to restore equilibrium. Marx aimed to identify processes of *positive feedback*, which would increase the effect of any deviation from stability. Marx found the driving force of social instability in the

capacity of human beings to produce, by their own labour, more than they needed to subsist. He recognised that the way in which a social system controlled people's access to the resources they needed was equally fundamental. The concept of property arises from the character of society. Marx echoed Rousseau in his observation that 'an isolated individual could no more possess property in land than he could speak. At most he could live off it as a source of supply like the animals' (Marx 1964: 81–2). The way in which people exchange the goods they produce but do not keep for their own subsistence, their 'surplus production', is also a characteristic of the social system, because each individual needs others to exchange with. Patterns of exchange depend in turn on a division of labour, and different social systems divide their members' labour in different ways. The various forms which the three social traits take, in combination, constitute *modes of production*. Each mode of production has three aspects:

- a distinctive principle determining property;
- a distinctive division of labour;
- a distinctive principle of exchange.

Like Durkheim and other nineteenth-century social theorists, Marx conceived of social evolution as the consequence of an internal social dynamic rather than as adaptation to an environment. Although Marx's evolutionary scheme had several alternative pathways, rather than constituting a single ladder of development, the dynamic processes still tended to drive social change in a particular direction. Even Darwin, in fact, had difficulty grasping the inherent relativity of his model of natural selection and had to write notes to himself that 'I must not talk about higher and lower forms of life' (Trivers 1985: 32).

A fundamental element of Marx's analysis of society was his theory of how the items which are exchanged acquired value. In contrast to the liberal economic theory that the value of goods is determined solely by supply and demand, Marx argued that the basic value of goods is determined by the amount of labour needed to produce them. Supply and demand merely have a secondary effect. If several different items are produced by the same quantity of labour, each will have the same value. Conversely, if the same item can be produced by two techniques which require different amounts of labour, the less laborious technique will displace its alternative, because the same goods can be sold for less. The way in which labour is allocated between alternative techniques of