THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL LENS

Harsh Light, Soft Focus

Second Edition

Anthropology is a complex, wide-ranging, and ever changing field. Yet, despite its diversity, certain major themes do occur in the understandings of the world that anthropologists have offered. In this clear, coherent, and well-crafted book, James L. Peacock spells out the central concepts, distinctive methodologies, and philosophical as well as practical issues of cultural anthropology. Designed to supplement standard textbooks and monographs, the book focuses on the premises that underlie the facts that the former kinds of works generally present. Free from unnecessarily abstract theoretical language and based on compelling concrete anecdote and engaging illustration, it is written in terms understandable to the anthropological novice, as well as being of value to the professional.

The book's three main concerns are the substance, method, and significance of anthropology. In his discussion of substance, Peacock examines the major assumptions and conclusions of anthropology, such as the concept of culture, as well as holism. In writing about method, he explores the distinctive character of ethnographic fieldwork and raises questions of interpretation and comparison. Finally, he considers the relevance of anthropology with respect to both its practical application and what it contributes to understanding of human affairs. The revised edition considers recent issues such as globalism, feminism, power, and human rights.

Using the photographic metaphors of "harsh light" and "soft focus" Peacock characterizes the anthropological worldview as consisting of two elements: on the one hand, a concern with the basic reality of the human condition, free of cultural influence; on the other, a broadly based holism that attempts to grasp all aspects of that condition, including its relation to the anthropologist. This book will appeal widely to readers intersted in anthropology, at all levels.

JAMES L. PEACOCK is Kenan Professor of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His previous publications include *Rites of Modernization*, 1968; *The Human Directions*, 1970; *Indonesia: Anthropological Perspectives*, 1973; *Consciousness and Change*, 1975; *Muslim Puritans*, 1978; and *Pilgrims of Paradox*, 1989. He was President of the American Anthropological Association 1993–95, and was initiated into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1995.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 1986 © Cambridge University Press 1986
Second edition 2001

Fourteenth printing 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Baskerville Monotype 11/12.5 pt. *System* LaTeX 2ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data
Peacock, James L.
The anthropological lens : harsh light, soft focus / James L. Peacock. – 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 80838 3 – ISBN 0 521 00459 4 (pb.)
1. Anthropology – Philosophy. I. Title.
GN33 .P358 2001
301′.01 – dc21 2001037560

ISBN 0 521 80838 3 hardback
ISBN 0 521 00459 4 paperback

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Preface to the first edition

Can you see the moon? Can you see it seen . . .
Gertrude Stein, *A Circular Play*

Fall semester began, and I gave the first lecture in an introductory course in anthropology. This course, at a state university, was being taught in the gymnasium and was heavily attended by people whose clothing and demeanor suggested more interest in sports than in study. The class ended, and I asked if there were questions. I was startled when a young man inquired, "What's your hermeneutic?"

"Hermeneutic" in the narrow sense pertains to the study of texts in order to interpret their meaning. This student used the term in a broad sense. He wanted to know the meaning of this course. Perhaps he wanted to know the meaning of anthropology.

The student's question was profound. This book attempts to answer it, at an elementary level. The study of a field like anthropology can be all sound and fury, signifying nothing: exciting facts without sufficient understanding of their meanings. Introductory courses teach such facts. Such courses tell about "bones and stones," as some students term human fossils and artifacts; the varieties of economies, governments, and family organizations throughout the world; how grammars of language vary as we move out of our Indo-European heritage to exotic cultures. What is meant by all this information?

Meaning at a certain level is given by substantive synthesis. All these facts can be made to compose a picture of human existence. The stones and bones can be woven into a story of human origins and evolution. The varieties of social life and languages can display pattern in human culture. Such a panoramic synthesis of

human existence is an important objective of anthropology, and a major purpose of introductory courses is to provide such a picture. Knowing these facts and weaving them into a coherent synthesis, one still does not grasp the full meaning of the anthropological perspective.

My wife's elderly uncle recently went to a meeting and heard a speech. When he came home, someone asked, "What did the man say?" The old man replied, "He didn't say."

Every statement of fact in anthropology or any other discipline is like the statements of the speaker who said something but did not say what he was saying. The speaker spoke but did not get across what he meant: What was his point? What did he imply? What were the assumptions behind his statements? Only by grasping the assumptions behind statements do we begin to comprehend their meaning. Such understanding is what we seek in exploring the question, What is the anthropological perspective? Through what kind of lens does the anthropologist view the world?

Asking the question, one immediately encounters a problem. Does anthropology have just one lens – a single perspective? There are as many perspectives as there are anthropologists. Consider three autobiographical accounts. Margaret Mead, in her autobiography *Blackberry Winter*, saw anthropology as intimate interpersonal understanding. She extended insights and experiences from her own childhood and family to encompass the entire human family, including the various cultures – in Samoa, in Bali, in New Guinea – where she lived and studied. Anthropologist Richard MacNeish presented a different picture in his autobiographical account *The Science of Archaeology?* No families – in fact, no living people – appear in the landscapes featured in MacNeish's account. His world is not intimate social circles but the outdoors, broad vistas of adventure and travel from arctic Canada to tropical America, where he searched for potsherds, fossil seeds, and other archeological remains. Hovering somewhere between the perspectives of Mead and MacNeish is *Tristes Tropiques*, the enchanting autobiographical travelogue by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss recounts his experiences with living peoples, but they are hardly portrayed as intimates in a family circle. Instead they are depicted rather objectively and analytically as ciphers, carriers of abstract

meanings that are part of some vast system of information that for Lévi-Strauss is the *raison d'être* of existence. Encountering such varied perspectives, one remembers the doggerel: "Two men look out from the self-same bars; one sees mud, the other sees stars."

To construct a single perspective that encompasses the variety of anthropological viewpoints is impossible, except at a very general level. Yet certain major themes do recur in the understandings set forth by anthropologists. These do compose a broadly held perspective that, if grasped, can helpfully (if not exhaustively) explain some of the meanings and implications of the subject matter. Even so tentative and limited a formulation – and it must be tentative and limited not only because of anthropology's diversity but also because of its incessant change – can be of use.

OBJECTIVES

This book is aimed at several types of readers. The neophyte, just beginning the study of anthropology, can profit from understanding something of the philosophy of what he is getting into (and soon, no doubt, will get out of). Middle-level students will profit from examining the premises of the field as they move into specialized topics within it. Advanced students or professionals may find some use in a backward look at that of which they are a part.

This work is not a textbook; it does not catalog the facts of human life as an introductory anthropology textbook does. Instead, it can supplement such a text by elucidating the worldview or perspective that lies behind its subject matter.

Nor is this book an academic treatise, exhaustively surveying the theoretical and methodological writings of the discipline and training the full force of critical analysis on these. Especially, it attempts no full-scale philosophical critique like one a professional philosopher might attempt; instead, it is a somewhat philosophically oriented glance at anthropology by an anthropologist.

Neither textbook nor academic treatise, this book endeavors to combine analysis and anecdote. In place of esoteric fact and academic reference, illustrative material is frequently drawn from common experience. If lighthearted, the work is serious-minded. While

avoiding extensive citation of authors and texts, it does endeavor to reflect the deeper issues of the discipline.

A final caution: The work does not give "equal time" to all fields of anthropology. It gives less emphasis to biological, archeological, and linguistic anthropology than to social and cultural anthropology, though striving to encompass all as parts of a holistic view. Perhaps it is accurate to say that the point of view is that of sociocultural anthropology, or of one sociocultural anthropologist.

OUTLINE AND APPROACH

This book is divided into three chapters, on the substance, the method, and the significance of anthropology, respectively.

By substance is meant both the major assumptions and major conclusions of anthropology: its major concepts, illustrated through its findings. Culture – a set of shared understandings – is the dominant concept in anthropology. Yet culture is part of a broad view of human existence that anthropologists term "holistic." Some anthropologists would not so strongly emphasize either culture or holism; nevertheless, taking anthropology as a whole in its full history and breadth, these concepts loom as dominant.

Chapter 2 treats method: the way anthropologists go about learning what they learn. Fieldwork is the distinctive method of anthropology. The peculiarly demanding combination of physical hardship, psychological disorientation, and intellectual challenge that constitutes fieldwork can be understood only by those who have done it. In fact, even for these, memory dims, so that the experience is difficult to recall and describe sharply. In order to draw nearer to a sense of what fieldwork entails, this chapter begins with experiences familiar to most us, then works toward isolating those features central to the field experience.

Fieldwork is not merely experience. It is also method. Anthropology has distinctive ways of contributing to scientific and humanistic understanding. Questions of interpretation and comparison are considered with respect to this discipline, which seeks both minute detail and broad understanding.

The final chapter attempts to formulate perspectives that unite themes of substance and method. It suggests that no single

framework unites the entire discipline but that two major ones compete: one based more on the natural sciences; the other, on the humanities. In conclusion, it explores the relevance and significance of anthropology with respect to both practical application and general understanding in human affairs.

The quotations at the head of each chapter signal a movement from wonder to skepticism to speculation, in accord with the movement of chapters from substance to method to significance. The quotations are biblical, but it is their general connotation of attitude rather than specific theological doctrine that is pertinent here. There is a certain message, however, in the framing of analysis within religious imagery. Analysis is grounded in belief; the premise of rationality – that truth is to be found through logic – is itself not provable through logic but is ultimately a matter of faith.

The quotation from Gertrude Stein that heads the Preface refers to the notion of a perspective. One sees the moon (or anything else); one asks about the moon, the object seen, and one also asks about the *seeing* – *how* one sees or how *one* sees. These latter questions are about perspective. "Lens" in the book's title is analogous to "perspective"; both determine – the one optically, the other mentally – what one sees.

A GUIDING IMAGE: HARSH LIGHT AND SOFT FOCUS

In the physics of photography, the brighter the light, the smaller the aperture of the lens; with more light, a smaller hole is sufficient to transmit the image to the film. And the smaller the aperture, the larger is the depth of field. That is, the photographer can include in focus the background and foreground of the object as well as the object itself. If this field could be extended infinitely, it could include even the camera.

Anthropology is not imprisoned in the laws of optics, nor is it exclusively visual; but a visual analogy may help us think concretely. Imagine a photographer who favors bright, harsh light – conditions where glare is intense. Imagine also that he seeks depth of field – to include in focus the foreground and background as well as the object itself. Anthropology seeks conditions of harsh light; this may be literally true, inasmuch as anthropologists tend to work

in settings exposed to the intense sun of desert and tropics, but it is also true metaphorically in that anthropologists usually seek to do their work in conditions that are in some sense harsh, so as to expose the raw and elemental, the fundamentals of human nature stripped of the fluff of civilization. Within those settings, anthropology focuses softly rather than sharply: rather than focus narrowly on the object, anthropology blurs the boundary between object and milieu so as to include not only the object but also its background, side-ground, and foreground; this perception of the total milieu we call holism. Were this holistic field of vision extended far enough, it would include the perceiver as well as the object perceived, and this too is a concern of anthropology, which recognizes the subjective as well as the objective aspect of knowledge.

APOLOGIES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With apologies, I adhere to the convention of using the pronoun "he" rather than "he/she," "she/he" "s/he," or "she" to refer to third persons whose gender is not specified. The practice is editorial, not ideological.

I thank Stanford University Press for permission to quote from Gregory Bateson, *Naven* (1958 ed.), p. 262; Curtis Brown Ltd. for permission to quote from Lincoln Barnett, *The Universe and Dr. Einstein* (1948 ed.), pp. 8 and 9; Oxford University Press for permission to quote from E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (1940 ed.), pp. 12–13; Pantheon Books, Random House for permission to quote from Boris Pasternak, *Dr. Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari (1958 ed.), pp. 270–1; the University of California Press for permission to quote from Rodney Needham, *Against the Tranquility of Axioms* (1983 ed.), p. 33; and the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, for permission to reproduce Henri Rousseau, *La Charmeuse de Serpents*.

Special gratitude is due to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which supported a year at Oxford University when this project was begun; to Rodney Needham, All Souls College, and the Institute of Social Anthropology, gracious hosts at Oxford; to family,

students, and friends for indispensable assistance and suggestions: John Baggett, Keith Basso, Carolyn Bloomer, David Brown, Richard Eckley, Louly Fowler, Marilyn Grunkemeyer, Steven Klein, Christine Loken-Kim, Edwin Lonergan, Karen McIntyre, Stuart Marks, and Louly Peacock. My father and mother I thank for many things.

Preface to the second edition

As Anthropology and the world have moved toward and into the new millennium, both have changed, not so radically, perhaps, as some would announce but nonetheless importantly. This revised edition responds to those changes while retaining concerns and concepts which remain salient throughout Anthropology's first century and into the present. Three of these abiding foci are culture, fieldwork, and relevance. Each remains a focus of one of the three chapters: culture in the first chapter, "Substance," fieldwork in the second chapter, "Method," and relevance in the third chapter, "Significance."

Within each chapter, however, new questions, issues, and perspectives are interwoven. In Chapter 1, the concept of culture now leads into dynamic perspectives and issues, such as globalism, feminism, and power. In Chapter 2, fieldwork now leads into questions about reflexivity – the interplay between fieldworker and fieldwork and the larger question of how knower affects the known. In Chapter 3, questions about application now lead into such concerns as Human Rights and the potential for anthropology to shape public issues.

While revisions are called for since the *Lens* was drafted two decades ago, the first edition anticipated many of the recent developments. For example, the postmodernist emphasis on "construction" continues the caution against "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" and is also cautioned by "the fallacy of misplaced abstractness," both mentioned in the first edition; that is, culture is a construction, to be sure, but saying so should not deny the primordial power of those phenomena to which we apply labels such as "culture." Reflexivity was anticipated as well, for

example in the imagery of the lens and photography, where it was suggested that in ethnography the photographer is always part of that which is photographed.

While some terms, for example, "holism" and "culture," are criticized by some anthropologists, they have a long history and wide use in the discipline and in the wider society. Where these terms remain useful in denoting abiding concepts I continue to use them, rather than substitute more specialized, esoteric, and possibly short-lived substitutes recently introduced. I also strive to show the theoretical links and precedents to those more recent concepts. Revealing the parallels between Durkheim's and Foucault's arguments, or Margaret Mead's work and more recent feminist anthropology, provides the historical perspective on the discipline for which I strove in both editions of the *Lens*.

Acknowledging changes, therefore, I also seek continuities and fundamentals. I guard against trendiness, jumping on bandwagons that crash. I try not to exaggerate what is current since what is new today will already be old tomorrow. Instead, I try to incorporate new material by locating it within frameworks and directions that seem likely to endure and continue and, sometimes, to point beyond what is current toward emerging needs and opportunities. Whether or not this effort succeeds, I look forward to future formulations and action by anthropology and anthropologists. As the first edition concluded, "New uses demand new lenses; new lenses new formulas to describe them." While our dynamic process might be better captured by words other than "formulas," few would disagree that the future will require new and richer modes of expression to represent so explosive a discipline as anthropology. Another *Lens* can snapshot us as we struggle along the way.

Among the sources of this revision, an important one was serving as president of the American Anthropological Association from 1993 to 1995. The experience of "leading" an organization of 11,000 anthropologists representing a great diversity of views incalculably enriched my own perspective and is reflected especially in the final chapter in discussion of ethics, human rights, and "public anthropology."

I thank Carla Jones, doctoral candidate in Anthropology. Carla drafted new sections on globalism, feminism, ecology, human

rights, and postmodernism and she has worked with me to shape these sections and weave them into a revised manuscript. I deeply appreciate her absolutely essential stimulating transfusion of new substance, leading toward future "lenses."

I also thank Carrie Matthews, master's candidate in Comparative Literature. Carrie has read the manuscript and suggested some editorial revisions, as well as drafting a paragraph on Edward Said's view of "orientalism." Finally, I thank Jessica Kuper, editor, for suggesting it is time for a new *Lens*.