

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology is one of the chief sources of methodology and theory for Cultural Studies. As we have discussed in Chapter Two it was instrumental in widening the study of culture from questions of value into scientific research. A number of different approaches have emerged in anthropology since the nineteenth century as the science has changed its theoretical constructs and insight in the study of humankind. All of these have had an impact on Cultural Studies.

SOCIAL EVOLUTIONISM

In the early years of anthropology, anthropologists and other scholars believed that culture evolves in a uniform and progressive manner. They built on Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection attempting to track the development of culture through time. Just as animals besides humans were thought to evolve into increasing complexity, so too were cultures thought to progress from a simple to complex states. It was thought that most societies pass through the same series of stages to arrive, ultimately, at a common end. Change was thought to originate from within the culture, so development was thought to be internally determined.

The notion of dividing the ethnological record into evolutionary stages ranging from primitive to civilized was basic to the ideas of the nineteenth century social evolutionists. Drawing upon Enlightenment thought, Darwin's work, and new cross-cultural, historical, and archaeological evidence, a whole generation of social evolutionary theorists emerged such as Tylor and Morgan. They developed rival schemes of overall social and cultural progress, as well as the origins of different institutions such as religion, marriage, and the family.

Edward B. Tylor disagreed with the contention of some early-nineteenth-century French and English writers, led by Comte Joseph de Maistre, that groups such as the American Indians and other indigenous peoples were examples of cultural degeneration. He believed that peoples in different locations were equally capable of developing and progressing through the stages. Primitive groups had "reached their position by learning and not by unlearning". Tylor maintained that culture evolved from the simple to the complex, and that all societies passed through the three basic stages of development suggested by Montesquieu: from savagery through barbarism to civilization. "Progress," therefore, was possible for all.

Tylor believed, like Adolf Bastian, that there was a kind of psychic unity among all peoples that explained parallel evolutionary sequences in different cultural traditions. In other words, because of the basic similarities in the mental framework of all peoples, different societies often find the same solutions to the same problems independently. But, Tylor was also aware that cultural traits could spread from one society to another by simple diffusion - the borrowing by one culture of a characteristic belonging to another due to contact between the two.

Another nineteenth-century advocate of uniform and progressive cultural evolution was **Lewis Henry Morgan**. He was a lawyer in the state of New York and became interested in the local Iroquois Indians and defended their reservation in a land-grant case. In gratitude, the Iroquois adopted Morgan, who regarded them as "noble savages."

In his best-known work, *Ancient Society*, Morgan divided the evolution of human culture into the same three basic stages that Tylor had suggested (savagery, barbarism, and civilization). But he also subdivided savagery and barbarism into upper, middle, and lower segments, providing examples of each of these three stages. Each stage was distinguished by a technological development and matched by patterns of subsistence, marriage, family, and political organization. In his book, *Ancient Society*, Morgan wrote, "As it is undeniable that

portions of the human family have existed in a state of savagery, other portions in a state of barbarism, and still others in a state of civilization, it seems equally so that these three distinct conditions are connected with each other in a natural as well as necessary sequence of progress".

DISCUSSION OF SOCIAL EVOLUTIONISM

One debate arising from the evolutionist point of view was whether civilization had evolved from a state of savagery or had always coexisted with primitive groups. Moreover, the degeneration theory of savagery had to be refuted before social anthropology could progress.

Social evolutionism offered an alternative to a nineteenth century Christian approach to understanding cultural diversity, and thus encountered more opposition. This new view proposed that evolution was a line of progression in which the lower stages were necessary for the upper. This idea seemed to completely contradict traditional ideas about the relationships between God and mankind and the nature of life and progress. Evolutionists criticized the Christian approach as requiring divine revelation to explain civilization.

Within the school of social evolution there were debates concerning the most primitive stages of society, for example the order of primitive promiscuity, patriarchy, and matriarchy.

Karl Marx was struck by the parallels between Morgan's evolutionism and his own theory of history. Marx and his co-worker, Friedrich Engels, devised a theory in which the institutions of monogamy, private property, and the state were assumed to be chiefly responsible for the exploitation of the working classes in modern industrialized societies. Marx and Engels extended Morgan's evolutionary scheme to include a future stage of cultural evolution in which monogamy, private property, and the state would cease to exist and the "communism" of primitive society would once more come into being.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the end of evolutionism's domination in cultural anthropology. Its leading opponent was Franz Boas, whose main disagreement with the evolutionists involved their assumption that universal laws governed all human culture. Boas argued that these nineteenth-century individuals lacked sufficient data to formulate many useful generalizations.

METHODS

The Comparative Method

The main stimulus for the comparative method came out of biology where zoological and botanical knowledge of living organisms was applied to the interpretation of the structure and function of extinct fossil forms.

The early evolutionists made the first efforts to establish a scientific discipline of anthropology despite an intellectual environment of religious explanations, a lack of reliable empirical materials, and their habit of armchair speculation as opposed to research in the field. They helped in the development of the foundations of an organized discipline where none had been before. They left three basic assumptions which have become an integral part of anthropological thought and research methodology:

- cultural phenomena are to be studied in naturalistic fashion
- the premise of the "psychic unity of mankind," that is that cultural differences between groups are not due to differences in psychobiological equipment but to differences in sociocultural experience
- the use of the comparative method instead of the experimental and laboratory techniques of the physical sciences.

Morgan believed that family units became progressively smaller and more self-contained as human society developed. However, his sequence for the evolution of the family is not supported by the enormous amount of ethnographic data that has been collected since his time.

A second criticism is on the use by Tylor and others of 'recurrence' - if a similar belief or custom could be found in different cultures in many parts of the world, then it was considered to be a valid clue for reconstructing the history of the development, spread and contact in human societies. The great weakness of this method lay in the evaluation of evidence taken out of context, and that much of the material came from amateur observers.

The evolutionism of Tylor and Morgan is rejected today largely because their theories cannot account for cultural variation - why, for instance, some societies today are in "upper savagery" and others in "civilization." The "psychic unity of mankind" or "germs of thought" cannot account for cultural differences.

Another weakness in the early evolutionists' theories is that they cannot explain why some societies have regressed or even become extinct. Also, although other societies may have progressed to "civilization," some of them have not passed through all the stages. Thus, early evolutionist theory cannot explain the details of cultural evolution and variation as anthropology now knows them.

Finally, one of the most common criticisms leveled at the nineteenth century evolutionists is that they were highly ethnocentric - they assumed that Victorian England and its American equivalent were the highest level of development for mankind.

Morgan and Tylor have been called racists but they were among the great thinkers of their time. Today, students continue to learn Tylor's definition of culture and all cultural anthropology classes discuss Morgan's stages of development. Their works are the earliest attempts to understand culture.

DIFFUSIONISM AND ACCULTURATION

Diffusionism was an attempt to understand the nature of culture in terms of the origin of cultural traits and their movement from one society to another. One version of diffusionist thought was the belief that all cultures originated from one culture center, heliocentric diffusion. A more persuasive idea was that cultures originated from a limited number of culture centers, culture circles. Thirdly there is the notion that each society is influenced by others but that the process of diffusion is both contingent and arbitrary.

Diffusion may be simply defined as the spread of a cultural item from its place of origin to other places. A more complex definition describes diffusion as the process by which individual culture traits are transferred from one society to another, through migration, trade, war or other contact.

Diffusionist research started in the middle of the nineteenth century as a way of understanding how human culture spread across the world. Scholars studied not only advanced cultures, but also cultures of nonliterate people. Among the major issues that this created was whether human culture had evolved in a manner similar to biological evolution or whether culture spread from innovation centres by diffusion.

Boas argued that although the **independent invention** of a cultural trait can occur at the same time within widely separated societies where there is limited control of individual members, allowing them freedom to create a unique style, a link such as genetic relationship is still possible. He felt this was especially true in societies where there were similar combinations of traits. Boas noted that cultural traits should be regarded in terms of a relatively unique historical process that occurs from the first introduction of a trait until its

origin becomes obscured by time. He tried to understand cultural traits in terms of two historical processes, **diffusion and modification**. Boas used these key concepts to explain culture and interpret the meaning of culture. He believed that the cultural inventory of a people was the cumulative result of diffusion. He viewed culture as consisting of countless loose threads, mostly of foreign origin, woven together to fit into their new cultural context.

Recently there have been theoretical developments in anthropology among those seeking to explain contemporary processes of cultural globalization and transnational culture flows. This "anthropology of place" approach attempts to understand and explain how dominant cultural forms are "imposed, invented, reworked, and transformed." To do this, an ethnographic approach must be taken to study the inter-relations of culture, power, and place: place making, identity, and resistance.

ACCULTURATION

Alfred L. Kroeber stated that acculturation consists of those changes in a culture brought about by another culture resulting in an increased similarity between the two cultures. This type of change may be reciprocal, but very often the process is asymmetrical and the result is the absorption of one culture into the other. Kroeber believed that acculturation is gradual rather than abrupt. He connected the process of diffusion with the process of acculturation by considering that diffusion contributes to acculturation and that acculturation necessarily involves diffusion. He attempted to separate the two processes by stating that diffusion is a matter of what happens to the elements of a culture, whereas acculturation is a process of what happens to a whole culture.

Acculturation is the process of systematic cultural change of a particular society carried out by an alien, dominant society. This change is brought about under conditions of direct contact between individuals of each society. Individuals of a foreign or minority culture learn the language, habits, and values of a standard or dominant culture by the cultural process of acculturation. The process by which these individuals enter the social positions, as well as acquire the political, economic, and educational standards of the dominant culture is called assimilation.

Assimilation can be described as a series of stages through which an individual must pass. These three stages are behavioural assimilation, acculturation, structural assimilation, social assimilation and marital assimilation of the individuals of the minority society and individuals of the dominant society.

Complete assimilation is not the inevitable consequence of acculturation due to the value systems of the minority or weaker culture being a part of the entire configuration of culture. It may not always be possible for the minority culture to take over the complete way of life of the majority culture. Often a period of transition follows where the minority society increasingly loses faith in its own traditional values, but is unable to adopt the values of the dominant culture. During this transition period there is a feeling of dysphoria, in which individuals in the minority society exhibit feelings of insecurity and unhappiness.

There are a number of important cross-cultural generalizations about the process of acculturation and assimilation. These generalizations are as follows:

- Dominant cultures coerce minorities and foreigners to acculturate and assimilate.
- Second, acculturation must precede assimilation.
- Even though a minority may be acculturated, assimilation is not always the final result.
- Acculturation and assimilation serve to homogenize the minority group into the dominant group. The many factors facilitating or preventing this homogenization include the age of the individual, ethnic background, religious and political affiliations, and economic level.

DISCUSSION OF DIFFUSION AND ACCULTURATION

Actual diffusion research did not take place until the nineteenth century when some scholars attempted to understand the nature of culture and whether it spread to the rest of the world from few or many innovation centers. The concept of diffusion strengthened in its opposition to the more powerful concept of evolution, which proposed that all human beings possessed equal potential for innovation.

Acculturation studies evolved into assimilation studies during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries when great numbers of immigrants arrived in the United States. Studies of the rate of assimilation of minority groups already living in the United States became another area of focus. Explanations, as to why groups assimilate at different rates, have largely been the underlying reasons for acculturation and assimilation studies.

IMPORTANT THINKERS

Franz Boas (1858-1942) was born in Germany where he studied physics and geography. Boas was a pioneering anthropological field worker and based many of his concepts on experiences gained while working in the field. He insisted that the fieldworker collect detailed cultural data, learn as much of the native language as possible, and become a part of the native society in order to interpret native life "from within." He believed the cultural inventory of a people was cumulative and was the result of diffusion. Boas envisioned culture traits as being part of two historical processes, diffusion and modification.

A. L. Kroeber (1876-1960) was an early American student of Franz Boas. Kroeber observed that the culture-area concept was "a community product of nearly the whole school of American Anthropologists."

E.B. Tylor (1832-1917) was a cultural evolutionist who believed that diffusion was involved in the process of humankind's cultural evolution from savagery to civilization. He promoted the idea that culture probably originated independently more than once, owing to the psychic similarity of man the world over, but that actual historical development involved numerous instances of cultural diffusion or inheritance from a common tradition.

Diffusion, as an anthropological school of thought was part of the development of anthropological concepts about how societies change due to the spread of culture traits and independent inventions. However, it was distorted by ethnocentric ideas and was only a small part of an analysis of world cultures. A more holistic approach emerging from the contrast of diffusionism and evolutionism has provided a better understanding of the overall picture.

FUNCTIONALISM

Functionalists seek to describe the different parts of a society and their relationship through organic analogy. Organic analogy compares the different parts of a society to the organs of a living organism. The organism is able to live, reproduce and function through the organized system of its several parts and organs. A society is able to maintain its essential processes through the way that the different parts interacted together. Institutions such as religion, kinship and the economy are the organs and individuals are the cells in this social organism. Functionalism, as a school of thought in anthropology, emerged in the early twentieth century. Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown had the greatest influence on the development of functionalism from their posts in Great Britain.

Two versions of functionalism developed between 1910 and 1930: Malinowski's **biocultural functionalism** and **structural-functionalism**, the approach advanced by Radcliffe-Brown. Malinowski suggested that individuals have physiological needs (reproduction, food, shelter) and that social institutions exist to meet these needs. There are also culturally derived needs

and four basic "instrumental needs" (economics, social control, education, and political organization), that require institutional devices.

Radcliffe-Brown focused on social structure rather than biological needs. He suggested that a society is a system of relationships maintaining itself through cybernetic feedback, while institutions are orderly sets of relationships whose function is to maintain the society as a system. Radcliffe-Brown stated that the social constituted a separate "level" of reality distinct from those of biological forms and inorganic matter. Radcliffe-Brown argued that explanations of social phenomena had to be constructed within the social level. Thus, individuals were replaceable, transient occupants of social roles.

As a new paradigm, functionalism was presented as a reaction against what was believed to be outdated ideologies. There was a shift in focus from the speculatively historical or diachronic study of customs and cultural traits as "survivals" to the ahistorical, synchronic study of social "institutions" within bounded, functioning societies.

Functionalists presented their theoretical and methodological approaches as an attempt to expand sociocultural inquiry beyond the bounds of the evolutionary conception of social history. The evolutionary approach viewed customs or cultural traits as residual artifacts of cultural history. From the functionalist standpoint these earlier approaches focused on speculative theorizing rather than the discovery of facts. Functionalists believed the reality of events was to be found in their manifestations in the present. Consequently, if events were to be understood it was their contemporary functioning that should be observed and recorded.

This led some to interpret functionalism as being opposed to the study of history altogether. Radcliffe-Brown responded to this critique by stating that functionalists did not believe that useful historical information could be obtained with respect to primitive societies. It was not history, but "pseudo-history" to which functionalists objected. In the "primitive" societies that are studied by social anthropology, there are too few written historical records to make an historical approach valuable.

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The primary starting points of Malinowski's theorizing included:

- understanding behavior in terms of the motivation of individuals, including both rational, 'scientifically' validated behavior and 'irrational', ritual, magical, or religious behavior
- recognizing the interconnectedness of the different items which constituted a 'culture' to form some kind of system
- understanding a particular item by identifying its function in the current contemporary operation of that culture.

Malinowski went on to assert in **The Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays**

- Culture is essentially an instrumental apparatus by which man is put in a position to better cope with the concrete, specific problems that face him in his environment in the course of the satisfaction of his needs.
- It is a system of objects, activities, and attitudes in which every part exists as a means to an end.
- It is an integral system in which the various elements are interdependent.
- Such activities, attitudes and objects are organized around important and vital tasks into institutions such as family, the clan, the local community, the tribe, and the organized teams of economic cooperation, political, legal, and educational activity.
- From the dynamic point of view, that is, as regards the type of activity, culture can be analyzed into a number of aspects such as education, social control, economics, systems of knowledge, belief, and morality, and also modes of creative and artistic expression.

Radcliffe-Brown's emphasis on social function is derived from the influence of the French sociological school. Radcliffe-Brown established an analogy between social life and organic

life to explain the concept of function. He emphasized the contribution of phenomena to maintaining social order. However, Radcliffe-Brown's ignored individual needs in this analogy. He argued that as long as a biological organism lives, it preserves the continuity of structure, but not the unity of its constituent parts. Over time, while the constituent cells do not remain the same, the structural arrangement of the constituent units remains similar. He suggested that human beings, as essential units, are connected by a set of social relations into an integrated whole. Like a biological organism, continuity in social structure is not destroyed by changes in the units. Although individuals may leave the society by death or other means, other individuals may enter it. Continuity is maintained by the process of social life, which consists of the activities and interactions of individual human beings and of organized groups into which they are united. The social life of a community is the functioning of the social structure.

This school of thought has contributed to the concept of culture that traditional usages, whatever their origin, have been shaped by the requirement that human beings must live together in harmony. The demands of interpersonal relationships are a causative force in culture. Despite its theoretical limitations, functionalism has made important methodological contributions. With its emphasis on intensive fieldwork, functionalism has provided in-depth studies of societies. Additionally, the investigation of functional interrelationships of customs and institutions provides a ready-made framework for the collection of information.

Criticism of Functionalism increased in the early 1970s. Interactionist theorists criticized functionalism for failing to conceptualize the complex nature of actors and the process of interaction. Marxist theory argued against functionalism's conservatism and the static nature of analysis that emphasized the contribution of social phenomena to the maintenance of the status-quo. Advocates of theory construction questioned the utility of excessively typological theories that pigeonholed phenomena in terms of their functions. Functional theory also has been criticized for its disregard of the historical process and for its presupposition that societies are in a state of equilibrium

Functional analysis has also been criticized for being circular: needs are postulated on the basis of existing institutions which are, in turn, used to explain their existence.

Moreover, it has been argued that to account for phenomena by showing what social needs they satisfy does not explain how they originated or why they exist. Functionalism's ahistorical approach has made it impossible to examine social processes. Rejection of psychology has made it impossible to understand attitudes and sentiments and its rejection of culture has led to a lack of recognition of an ecological context.

IMPORTANT THINKERS

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942)

He was one of the founding fathers of British social anthropology. He received his doctorate with highest honors in mathematics, physics and philosophy from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. However, Malinowski's interests turned to anthropology after reading Frazier's *The Golden Bough*. In 1910 he enrolled in the London School of Economics to study anthropology.

With Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski pushed for a paradigm shift in British anthropology; a change from the speculative and historical to the ahistorical study of social institutions. This theoretical shift gave rise to functionalism and established fieldwork as the constitutive experience of social anthropology. Malinowski's functionalism was highly influential in the 1920s and 1930s. As applied methodology, this approach worked, except for situations of social or cultural change. Malinowski made his greatest contribution as an ethnographer. He emphasized the importance of studying social behavior and social relations in their concrete cultural contexts through participant-observation. He considered it crucial to consider the

observable differences between norms and action; between what people say they do and what they actually do.

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955)

He was a founding father of functionalism associated with the branch known as structural-functionalism. He attended Cambridge where he studied moral science, which incorporated philosophy, economics and psychology. After completing his degree in 1904, he conducted fieldwork in the Andaman Islands and Western Australia. Radcliffe-Brown's emphasis on examining the contribution of phenomena to the maintenance of the social structure reflects the influence of French sociologist Emile Durkheim. He particularly focused on the institutions of kinship and descent and suggested that, at least in tribal societies, they determined the character of family organization, politics, economy, and inter-group relations.

MAIN POINTS

- Franz Boas argued that culture developed historically through the interactions of groups of people and the diffusion of ideas and that consequently there was no progress towards "higher" cultural forms.
- Approaches based on the empirical foundations of Franz Boas include the Structural, Functional and Process Approaches.
- A Functional approach examines the purpose and goals of the manifestations of culture.
- Important concepts are acculturation and assimilation.

SEMINAR EXERCISES

- Think of the concept of progress. How many of your ideas about human society and civilization are based on a concept of progress from primitive to sophisticated, from barbarous to civilized?
- Give an example of primitive technology that you still use and sophisticated technology that you use.
- Give an example of barbarous contemporary behaviour as opposed to civilized behaviour.
- Think of contemporary Slovak society and ordinary life. Think of three examples of cultural phenomena which you would describe as examples of cultural diffusion into Slovak society.
- How important are the concepts of assimilation and acculturation in current debates on immigration into Britain and America? Are the theories about acculturation and assimilation relevant to the current debate?
- Find examples of recent changes in the way people in Britain manage the connections between the family and institutions such as education and health.

READING

DIFFUSIONISM

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See also:

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<http://www.studyanthropology.org/theory-of-anthropology>

<http://www.qvctc.commnet.edu/brian/theories.html>

<http://credoreference.libguides.com/content.php?pid=307806&sid=2521183>

<http://www.zeepedia.com/read.php?major+theories+in+cultural+anthropology+diffusionism+cultural+anthropology&b=98&c=3>