

Unhomoely', 'Moments of Being' and 'Individuality'. Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer's *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (1996) and David Levinson and Melvin Ember's massive *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* (1996) both cover the entire discipline alphabetically, with interesting variations – the former being British, the latter American – while Robert Layton's *An Introduction to Theory in Anthropology* (1997) and Alan Barnard's *History and Theory in Anthropology* (2000) offer different accounts of the twentieth-century development of the subject. Priorities are bound to differ. This book distinguishes itself in that its main structure is thematic; discussions of theories are bound up with the substantial fields – kinship, economics, gender relations, politics – that anthropologists study. It is also fuelled by a conviction that the craft of social anthropology has a bright future indeed – not in spite of, but because of changes that have taken place, both in the intellectual world and in the world that we study.

My thanks are due to friends and colleagues at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo, who have coped with me for many years now; and to a social form of more recent origin, but of overwhelming importance in my life, namely my beloved Kari and our children, Ole Johan and Amanda.

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1 INTRODUCTION: COMPARISON AND CONTEXT

Anthropology is philosophy with the people in.
— Tim Ingold

This book is an invitation to a journey which, in the author's opinion, is one of the most rewarding a human being can embark on – and it is definitely one of the longest. It will bring the reader from the damp rainforests of the Amazon to the cold semi-desert of the Arctic; from the skyscrapers of Manhattan to mud huts in the Sahel; from villages in the New Guinea highlands to African cities.

It is a long journey in a different sense too. Social and cultural anthropology has the whole of human society as its field of interest, and tries to understand the connections between the various aspects of our existence. When, for example, we study the traditional economic system of the Tiv of central Nigeria, an essential part of the exploration consists in understanding how their economy is connected with other aspects of their society. If this dimension is absent, Tiv economy becomes incomprehensible to anthropologists. If we do not know that the Tiv traditionally could not buy and sell land, and that they have customarily not used money as a means of payment, it will plainly be impossible to understand how they themselves interpret their situation and how they responded to the economic changes imposed on their society during colonialism.

Anthropology tries to account for the social and cultural variation in the world, but a crucial part of the anthropological project also consists in conceptualising and understanding similarities between social systems and human relationships. As one of the foremost anthropologists of the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss, has expressed it: 'Anthropology has humanity as its object of research, but unlike the other human sciences, it tries to grasp its object through its most diverse manifestations' (1983, p. 49). Put in another way: anthropology is about how different people can be, but it also tries to find out in what sense it can be said that all humans have something in common.

Another prominent anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, has expressed a similar view in an essay which essentially deals with the differences between humans and animals:

If we want to discover what man amounts to, we can only find it in what men are: and what men are, above all other things, is various. It is in understanding that variousness – its range, its nature, its basis, and its implications – that we shall come to construct a concept of human nature that, more than a statistical shadow and less than a primitivist dream, has both substance and truth. (Geertz 1973, p. 52)

Although anthropologists have wide-ranging and frequently highly specialised interests, they all share a common concern in trying to understand both connections *within* societies and connections *between* societies. As will become clearer as we proceed on this journey through the subject-matter and theories of social and cultural anthropology, there is a multitude of ways in which to approach these problems. Whether one is interested in understanding why and in which sense the Azande of Central Africa believe in witches, why there is greater social inequality in Brazil than in Sweden, how the inhabitants of Mauritius avoid violent ethnic conflict, or what has happened to the traditional way of life of the Inuit (Eskimos) in recent years, in most cases one or several anthropologists would have carried out research and written on the issue. Whether one is interested in the study of religion, child-raising, political power, economic life or the relationship between men and women, one may go to the professional anthropological literature for inspiration and knowledge.

The discipline is also concerned with accounting for the interrelationships between different aspects of human existence, and usually anthropologists investigate these interrelationships taking as their point of departure a detailed study of local life in a particular society or a delineated social environment. One may therefore say that anthropology asks large questions, while at the same time it draws its most important insights from small places.

It has been common to regard its traditional focus on small-scale non-industrial societies as a distinguishing feature of anthropology, compared with other subjects dealing with culture and society. However, because of changes in the world and in the discipline itself, this is no longer an accurate description. Practically any social system can be studied anthropologically and contemporary anthropological research displays an enormous range, empirically as well as thematically.

AN OUTLINE OF THE SUBJECT

What, then, is anthropology? Let us begin with the etymology of the concept. It is a compound of two Greek words, '*anthropos*' and '*logos*', which can be translated as 'human' and 'reason', respectively. So anthropology means 'reason about humans' or 'knowledge about humans'. Social anthropology would then mean knowledge about humans in societies. Such a definition would, of course, cover the other social sciences as well as anthropology, but it may still be useful as a beginning.

The word 'culture', which is also crucial to the discipline, originates from the Latin '*colere*', which means to cultivate. (The word 'colony' has the same origin.) Cultural anthropology thus means 'knowledge about cultivated humans'; that is, knowledge about those aspects of humanity which are not natural, but which are related to that which is acquired.

'Culture' has been described as one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language (Williams 1981, p. 87). In the early 1950s, Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber (1952) presented 161 different definitions of culture. It would not be possible to consider the majority of these definitions here; besides, many of them were – fortunately – quite similar. Let us therefore, as a preliminary conceptualisation of culture, define it as those abilities, notions and forms of behaviour persons have acquired as members of society. A definition of this kind, which is indebted to both the Victorian anthropologist Edward Tylor and to Geertz (although the latter stresses meaning rather than behaviour), is the most common one among anthropologists.

Culture nevertheless carries with it a basic ambiguity. On the one hand, every human is equally cultural; in this sense, the term refers to a basic *similarity* within humanity. On the other hand, people have acquired different abilities, notions, etc., and are thereby *different* because of culture. Culture refers, in other words, both to basic similarities and to systematic differences between humans.

If this sounds slightly complex, some more complexity is necessary already at this point. Truth to tell, during the last decades of the twentieth century, the concept of culture was deeply contested in anthropology on both sides of the Atlantic. The influential Geertzian concept of culture, which had been elaborated through a series of erudite and elegant essays written in the 1960s and 1970s (Geertz 1973, 1983), depicted a culture both as an integrated whole, as a puzzle where all the pieces were at hand, and as a system of meanings that was largely shared by a population. Culture thus appeared as integrated, shared in the group and sharply bounded. But what of variations within the group, and what about similarities or mutual contacts with neighbouring groups – and what to make of, say, the technologically and economically driven processes of globalisation (see Chapter 19), which ensure that nearly every nook and cranny in the world is, to varying degrees, exposed to news about football world cups, to wagework and the concept of human rights? In many cases, it could indeed be said that a national or local culture is neither shared by all or most of the inhabitants, nor bounded – I have myself explored this myth regarding my native Norway, a country usually considered 'culturally homogeneous' (Eriksen 1993b). Many began to criticise the overly neat and tidy picture suggested in the dominant concept of culture, from a variety of viewpoints, some of which will be discussed in later chapters. Alternative ways of conceptualising culture were proposed (e.g. as unbounded 'cultural flows' or as 'fields of discourse', or as 'traditions of knowledge'), and some even wanted to get rid of the concept altogether

(for some of the debates, see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Ortner 1999). As I shall indicate later, the concept of society has been subjected to similar critiques, but problematic as they may be, both concepts still seem to form part of the conceptual backbone of anthropology. In his magisterial, deeply ambivalent review of the culture concept, Adam Kuper (1999, p. 226) notes that '[t]hese days, anthropologists get remarkably nervous when they discuss culture – which is surprising, on the face of it, since the anthropology of culture is something of a success story'. The reason for this 'nervousness' is not just the contested meaning of the term culture, but also the fact that culture concepts that are close kin to the classic anthropological one are being exploited politically, in identity politics (see Chapters 17–19).

The relationship between culture and society can be described in the following way. Culture refers to the acquired, cognitive and symbolic aspects of existence, whereas society refers to the social organisation of human life, patterns of interaction and power relationships. The implications of this analytical distinction, which may seem bewildering, will eventually be evident.

A short definition of anthropology may read thus: 'Anthropology is the comparative study of cultural and social life. Its most important method is participant observation, which consists in lengthy fieldwork in a particular social setting.' The discipline thus compares aspects of different societies, and continuously searches for interesting dimensions for comparison. If, say, one chooses to write a monograph about a people in the New Guinea highlands, one will always choose to describe it with at least some concepts (such as kinship, gender and power) that render it comparable with aspects of other societies.

Further, the discipline emphasises the importance of ethnographic fieldwork, which is a thorough close-up study of a particular social and cultural environment, where the researcher is normally required to spend a year or more.

Clearly, anthropology has many features in common with other social sciences and humanities. Indeed, a difficult question consists in deciding whether it is a science or one of the humanities. Do we search for general laws, as the natural scientists do, or do we instead try to understand and interpret different societies? E.E. Evans-Pritchard in Britain and Alfred Kroeber in the USA, leading anthropologists in their day, both argued around 1950 that anthropology had more in common with history than with the natural sciences. Although their view, considered something of a heresy at the time, has become commonplace since, there are still some anthropologists who feel that the subject should aim at scientific rigour similar to that of the natural sciences.

Some of the implications of this divergence in views will be discussed in later chapters. A few important defining features of anthropology are nevertheless common to all practitioners of the subject: it is comparative and empirical; its most important method is fieldwork; and it has a truly global

focus in that it does not single out one region, or one kind of society, as being more important than others. Unlike sociology proper, anthropology does not concentrate its attention on the industrialised world; unlike philosophy, it stresses the importance of empirical research; unlike history, it studies society as it is being enacted; and unlike linguistics, it stresses the social and cultural context of speech when looking at language. Definitely, there are great overlaps with other sciences and disciplines, and there is a lot to be learnt from them, yet anthropology has its distinctive character as an intellectual discipline, based on ethnographic fieldwork, which tries simultaneously to account for actual cultural variation in the world and to develop a theoretical perspective on culture and society.

THE UNIVERSAL AND THE PARTICULAR

'If each discipline can be said to have a central problem', writes Michael Carrithers (1992, p. 2), 'then the central problem of anthropology is the diversity of human social life.' Put differently, one could say that anthropological research and theory tries to strike a balance between similarities and differences, and theoretical questions have often revolved around the issue of universality versus relativism: To what extent do all humans, cultures or societies have something in common, and to what extent is each of them unique? Since we employ comparative concepts – that is, supposedly culturally neutral terms like kinship system, gender role, system of inheritance, etc. – it is implicitly acknowledged that all or nearly all societies have several features in common. However, many anthropologists challenge this view and claim the uniqueness of each culture or society. A strong universalist programme is found in Donald Brown's book *Human Universals* (Brown 1991), where the author claims that anthropologists have for generations exaggerated the differences between societies, neglecting the very substantial commonalities that hold humanity together. In his influential, if controversial book, he draws extensively on an earlier study of 'human universals', which included:

age-grading, athletic sports, bodily adornment, calendar, cleanliness training, community organization, cooking, cooperative labor, cosmology, courtship, dancing, decorative art, divination, division of labor, dream interpretation, education, eschatology, ethics, ethnobotany, etiquette, faith healing, family, feasting, fire making, folklore, food taboos, funeral rites, games, gestures, gift giving, government, greetings ...

And this was just the a-to-g segment of an alphabetical 'partial list' (Murdock 1945, p. 124, quoted from Brown 1991, p. 70). Several arguments could be invoked against this kind of list: that it is trivial and that what matters is to comprehend the unique expressions of such 'universals'; that phenomena such as 'family' have totally different meanings in different societies, and thus cannot be said to be 'the same' everywhere; and that this piecemeal

approach to society and culture removes the very hallmark of good anthropology, namely the ability to see isolated phenomena (like age-grading or food taboos) in a broad context. An institution such as arranged marriage means something fundamentally different in the Punjabi countryside than in the French upper class. Is it still the same institution? Yes – and no. Brown is right in accusing anthropologists of having been inclined to emphasise the exotic and unique at the expense of neglecting cross-cultural similarities, but this does not mean that his approach is the only possible way of bridging the gap between societies. In later chapters, several other alternatives will be discussed, including structural-functionalism (all societies operate according to the same general principles), structuralism (the human mind has a common architecture expressed through myth, kinship and other cultural phenomena), transactionalism (the logic of human action is the same everywhere) and materialist approaches (culture and society are determined by ecological and/or technological factors).

The tension between the universal and the particular has been immensely productive in anthropology, and it remains an important one. It is commonly discussed, inside and outside anthropology, through the concept of ethnocentrism.

THE PROBLEM OF ETHNOCENTRISM

A society or a culture, it was remarked above, must be understood on its own terms. In saying this, we warn against the application of a shared, universal scale to be used in the evaluation of every society. Such a scale, which is often used, could be defined as longevity, gross national product (GNP), democratic rights, literacy rates, etc. Until quite recently, it was common in European society to rank non-Europeans according to the ratio of their population which was admitted into the Christian Church. Such a ranking of peoples is utterly irrelevant to anthropology. In order to pass judgement on the quality of life in a foreign society, we must first try to understand that society from the inside; otherwise our judgement has a very limited intellectual interest. What is conceived of as 'the good life' in the society in which we live may not appear attractive at all if it is seen from a different vantage-point. In order to understand people's lives, it is therefore necessary to try to grasp the totality of their experiential world; and in order to succeed in this project, it is inadequate to look at selected 'variables'. Obviously, a concept such as 'annual income' is meaningless in a society where neither money nor wamework is common.

This kind of argument may be read as a warning against ethnocentrism. This term (from Greek '*ethnos*', meaning 'a people') means evaluating other people from one's own vantage-point and describing them in one's own terms. One's own '*ethnos*', including one's cultural values, is literally placed at the centre. Within this frame of thought, other peoples would necessarily

appear as inferior imitations of oneself. If the Nuer of the Sudan are unable to get a mortgage to buy a house, they thus appear to have a less perfect society than ourselves. If the Kwakiutl Indians of the west coast of North America lack electricity, they seem to have a less fulfilling life than we do. If the Kachin of upper Burma reject conversion to Christianity, they are less civilised than we are, and if the San ('Bushmen') of the Kalahari are illiterate, they appear less intelligent than us. Such points of view express an ethnocentric attitude which fails to allow other peoples to be different from ourselves on their own terms, and can be a serious obstacle to understanding. Rather than comparing strangers with our own society and placing ourselves on top of an imaginary pyramid, anthropology calls for an understanding of different societies as they appear *from the inside*. Anthropology cannot provide an answer to a question of which societies are better than others, simply because the discipline does not ask it. If asked what is the good life, the anthropologist will have to answer that every society has its own definition(s) of it.

Moreover, an ethnocentric bias, which may be less easy to detect than moralistic judgements, may shape the very concepts we use in describing and classifying the world. For example, it has been argued that it may be inappropriate to speak of politics and kinship when referring to societies which themselves lack concepts of 'politics' and 'kinship'. Politics, perhaps, belongs to the ethnographer's society and not to the society under study. We return to this fundamental problem later.

Cultural relativism is sometimes posited as the opposite of ethnocentrism. This is the doctrine that societies or cultures are qualitatively different and have their own unique inner logic, and that it is therefore scientifically absurd to rank them on a scale. If one places a San group, say, at the bottom of a ladder where the variables are, say, literacy and annual income, this ladder is irrelevant to them if it turns out that the San do not place a high priority on money and books. It should also be evident that one cannot, within a cultural relativist framework, argue that a society with many cars is 'better' than one with fewer, or that the ratio of cinemas to population is a useful indicator of the quality of life.

Cultural relativism is an indispensable and unquestionable theoretical premiss and methodological rule-of-thumb in our attempts to understand alien societies in as unprejudiced a way as possible. As an ethical principle, however, it is probably impossible in practice, since it seems to indicate that everything is as good as everything else, provided it makes sense in a particular society. It may ultimately lead to nihilism. For this reason, it may be timely to stress that many anthropologists are impeccable cultural relativists in their daily work, while they have definite, frequently dogmatic notions about right and wrong in their private lives. In Western societies and elsewhere, current debates over minority rights and multiculturalism indicate both the need for anthropological knowledge and the impossibility

of finding a simple solution to these complex problems, which will naturally be discussed in later chapters.

Cultural relativism cannot, when all is said and done, be posited simply as the opposite of ethnocentrism, the simple reason being that it does not in itself contain a moral principle. The principle of cultural relativism in anthropology is a methodological one – it helps us investigate and compare societies without relating them to an intellectually irrelevant moral scale; but this does not logically imply that there is no difference between right and wrong. Finally, we should be aware that many anthropologists wish to discover general, shared aspects of humanity or human societies. There is no necessary contradiction between a project of this kind and a cultural relativist approach, even if universalism – doctrines emphasising the similarities between humans – is frequently seen as the opposite of cultural relativism. One may well be a relativist at a certain level of anthropological analysis, yet simultaneously argue that a particular underlying pattern is common to all societies or persons. Many would indeed claim that this is what anthropology is about: to discover both the uniqueness of each social and cultural setting *and* the ways in which humanity is one.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- E.E. Evans-Pritchard: *Social Anthropology*. Glencoe: Free Press 1951.
 Clifford Geertz: *The Uses of Diversity*. In *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*, ed. Robert Borofsky. New York: McGraw-Hill 1994.
 Adam Kuper: *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The Modern British School* (3rd edition). London: Routledge 1996.

2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

I have spent over 8 months in one village in the Trobriands and this proved to me, how even a poor observer like myself can get a certain amount of reliable information, if he puts himself into the proper conditions for observation.

— Bronislaw Malinowski (*letter to A.C. Haddon, May 1916*)

Like the other social sciences, anthropology is a fairly recent discipline. It was given its present shape during the twentieth century, but it has important forerunners in the historiography, geography, travel writing, philosophy and jurisprudence of earlier times. There are, in any case, many ways of writing the history of anthropology, just as, in any given society, there may exist competing versions of national history or origin myths, promoted by groups or individuals with diverging interests. History is not primarily a product of the past itself, but is rather shaped by the concerns of the present. As these concerns change, past events and persons shift between foreground and background, and will be understood and evaluated in new ways. In an important book on the state of the art in (chiefly) American cultural anthropology, Bruce Knauft (1996) distinguishes between at least four 'genealogies of the present' – four different ways of accounting for the present situation. This ambiguity of the past not only has a bearing on the writing of our own professional history, but is itself a subject of anthropological inquiry to be dealt with in a later chapter.

In other words, there can be no neutral history of anthropology (or of anything), but what follows below is nevertheless an attempt to provide a brief and – as far as possible – uncontroversial description of the development of the subject.

PROTO-ANTHROPOLOGY

If anthropology is the study of cultural variation, its roots may be traced as far back in history as the ancient Greeks. The historian Herodotus (5th century BC) wrote detailed accounts of 'barbarian' peoples to the east and north of the Greek peninsula, comparing their customs and beliefs to those of Athens, and the group of philosophers known as the Sophists were perhaps the first philosophical relativists, arguing (as many twentieth-century anthropologists have done) that there can be no absolute truth because, as we would put it today, truth is context-bound. Yet their interest in human