

# Cultural change



Lecture for the course  
General Anthropology II  
Socio-cultural Anthropology  
Bi7879  
27/03/2022

Image: Macondo by Luisa Rivera (Source:  
<https://www.luisarivera.cl/artwork/>)

# What is change?



Image: Ailton Krenak painting his face during the Brazilian Constituent Assembly in 1987 (source: <https://revistaesquinas.casperlibero.edu.br>)

Beyond “chronology”  
Beyond “evolution”

People participation in  
social change

Diachronic and  
synchronic dimensions

# The myth of atemporal culture

Western observers described “others” as immobile and static

Evolutionism: other societies as survival of previous stages of European history

Diffusionism: search for “cultural areas” and common traits

“Denial of coevalness”\*: not recognizing to others the contemporaneity with the “West”

\*Fabian, Johannes. 2014. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.

THE FAR SIDE® BY GARY LARSON



“Anthropologists! Anthropologists!”

# Time and history as a methodological question

Historicist approach: observing the “present” through the influences of the “past”

Nomologic approach: observing regularities and universal trends despite historical differences

Attention: not absolute opposite, but as oscillating emphasis (change and continuity)!

i.e.: Gluckman and the study of how social tensions and transformation in social organization from “tribal” to “urban” life in the Copperbelt region\*

\*See: Gluckman, Max. 1940. Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand. *Bantu Studies* 14(1): 1–30.



Image: station (source: <https://www.theasa.org/networks/time>)

# “Hot” and “cold” societies

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1961)\*

Specific temporalities vs evolution (all societies are in history)

Not real but yes analytical division

Hot societies: emphasis on change and low social cohesion

Cold societies: emphasis on permanence and high social cohesion

\*Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1961. *Entretiens avec Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Edited by Georges Charbonnier). Paris: Plon.



Image: Brno Augustine Abbey Library (Source: <https://mendelmuseum.muni.cz/en/tours/augustinian-abbey>)

# Ethnography of change...



Not growth or evolution (not immanent, natural or cumulative)

“Mingled facts of persistence and change”\*

From macro to micro in change analysis: ethnography of people experiences of “changes”

Image: “Technology 2020” by Mikhail Denishchenko  
(source: <https://www.publicdomainpictures.net/en/view-image.php?image=320340&picture=technology-2020>)

\*Nisbet, Robert A. 1969. *Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 3.

...

“to describe life as it is lived and experiences, by a people, somewhere, sometime”\*

Attention to the different scales of analysis: global and local

i.e.: Agricultural College and Secondary Agricultural School implementing “precision agriculture” in Czech

\*Ingold, Tim. 2017. “Anthropology contra Ethnography.” HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 7, no. 1: 21–26.



Image: Precision Agriculture in Czech (source: <https://europea.org/the-czech-agricultural-school-is-ready-to-educate-students-in-the-field-of-precision-agriculture/>)

# Social and cultural changes

Social: changes in relations and institutions (i.e. family, economy, politics, etc.)

Cultural: changes in ideologies, technologies and beliefs

Not separated but alternative emphasis



Image: Capitol Invasion (source: <https://mashable.com/article/antifa-conspiracies-trump-mob-january-6-capitol-debunk>)



# The scale of change

Frederick Barth: the metaphor of the aquarium\*

Change as an ongoing process and as a result of an event

\*Barth, Fredrik. 1967. On the Study of Social Change. *American Anthropologist* 69(6): 661-669.



Image: Genova aquarium (source: <https://www.acquariodigenova.it/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/image004.jpg>)

# First example:

Change in  
anthropological  
paradigms:

Post-evolutionism  
Post-structuralism  
Post-modernism  
Post-...

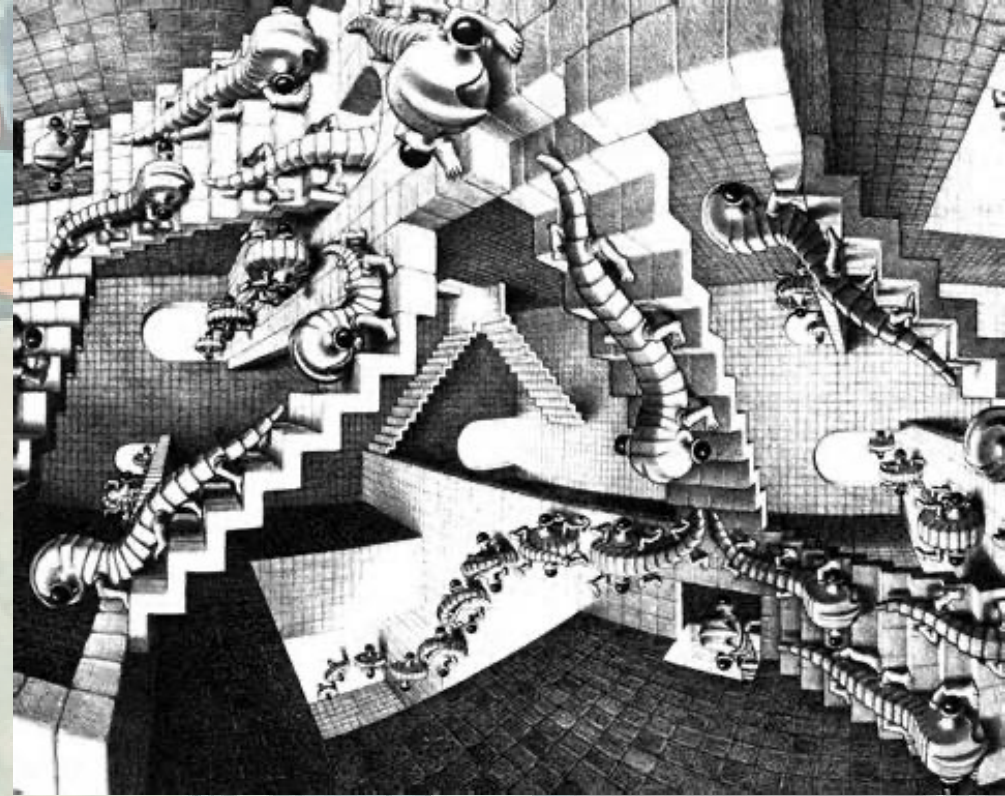


Image: Escher House of Stairs, 1951 (source: <https://ely135.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/houseofstairs11.jpg>)

# Second example:

Ideas of modernity:

Post-socialist

Post-conflict

Post-apartheid

Post-colonialism

Post-...



Image: Disparity in Brazil (source: <https://brasilitalia-doiscoracoes.blogspot.com/2012/01/il-brasile-e-il-2-paese-con-piu.html>)

# From “post” to “action”



Image: India (source:  
<https://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=3877>)

Modernization  
Individualization  
Democratization  
Globalization  
...a(c)tion

Shift from result to  
process

# Naming changes

Etic vs. emic terminologies  
(categories)

Authority in naming changes:  
evolution, rupture, transition,  
development, revolution, etc.

Reflexivity (academics as  
“experts”)



Image: Brněnský orloj (source:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brno\\_astronomical\\_clock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brno_astronomical_clock))



Image: Popular protests in Yemen in 2011 (source: <https://www.repubblica.it/>)

*“categories and assumptions of improvement are still with us everywhere. We imagine their objects on a daily basis: democracy, growth, science, hope”\**

*\*Tsing, Anna L. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. p. 20-21.*

# Acceleration?



Image: Rock art in Colombian Amazon (source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-55172063>)

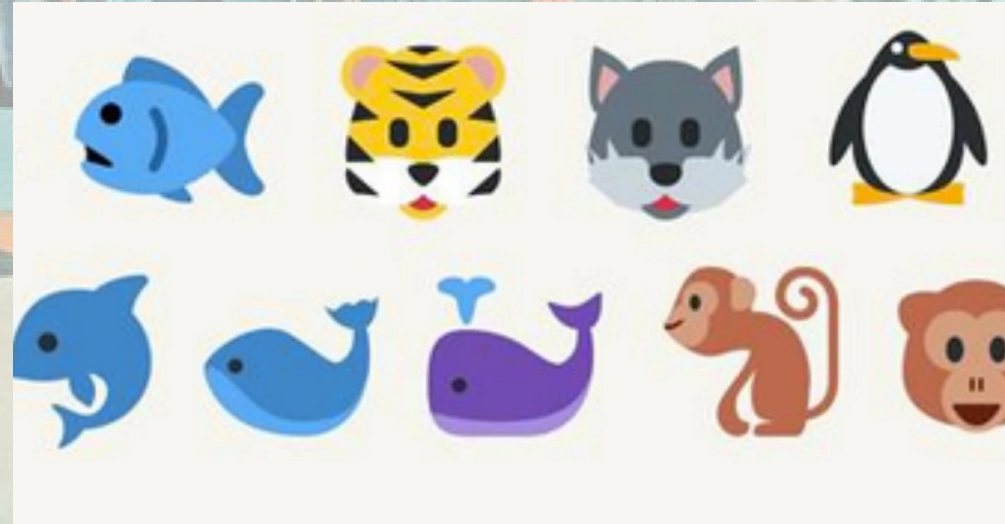


Image: Animal emojis (source: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ae38mj/emojis-reveal-our-bias-toward-mammals>)

# How changes happen?

How does a new feature arise?

- innovation (emergence of new technology and/or ideas)

- diffusion (acquisition from other people)



Image: Mesoamerican toys with wheels (source: <https://www.mesoweb.com/mpa/nationalmuseum/veracruz1.html>)



# Individuals or groups

Is the novelty public/private?

Is the novelty aimed at something or casual?

How the novelty affect the social/cultural experience?

i.e. plastic: 1861, Alexander Parkes from cellulose nitrate; 1912, Fritz Klatte and PVC; 1954, Giulio Natta and Polietilene; etc...



Image: Plastic trash island (source: <https://phys.org/news/2017-11-trash-islands-central-america-ocean.html>)

# Acculturation and enculturation

Acculturation: the process of influences taking place in the contact between diverse groups

Enculturation: the process of socialization of the individuals in a group



Image: venetian school at the beginning of '900 (source: <https://www.gildavenezia.it/la-scuola-di-una-volta/>)

# Acculturation and power relations

From contacts between “cultures” and exchange of traits, knowledges, etc.



Image: Macha Mission School, Zambia, 1910 (source: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37728/37728-h/37728-h.htm>)

Voluntary or forced

Direct: conquest, colonization, etc.

Indirect: soft power, indirect rule, etc.

# Back to the life as it is lived...

Change is not uniform or total,  
but it articulates diverse  
elements from previous and  
subsequent patterns

Attention to varied perceptions  
of people

Hybridization, reconfiguration,  
polyphonic assemblage\*

\*Tsing, Anna L. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.



Image: Pražské jaro (source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/from-the-archive-blog/2018/aug/10/russia-crushes-prague-spring-czechoslovakia-1968>)

# Focusing changes

Description of a change via multiple prolonged fieldworks

Descriptions of change via ethnographic and archival materials

Attention to metanarratives on change (theories, ideologies, power, etc.)

Attention to situated experiences



Image: traditional and new plantations in Sicily (source: <https://www.siciliaavocado.it>)

# Multi-temporal changes

Change as the difference between the past and the present

Change also as the result of the future on the present: anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality, hope, destiny\*

\*Bryant, Rebecca and Kight, Daniel. 2019. *The Anthropology of the Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Image: Fridays for future by Emmanuel Dunand (source: <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/students-take-part-in-a-march-for-the-environment-and-the-news-photo/1126526949>)

A vibrant, stylized illustration of a rural landscape. In the background, a yellow steam train with a tall chimney is on a track. A person stands with arms raised in a field. In the foreground, a woman in traditional attire (a white blouse with a dark shawl and a plaid skirt) looks towards the left. The scene is filled with lush greenery, trees, and a bright sun or moon in the sky.

Please think about the personal and collective experience of cultural changes in Brno and Czech Republic...

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