

History and Epistemology of Anthropology

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Abstract

This essay describes the field of social and cultural anthropology. The central concern of this subfield of anthropology is the study of human variations as a defining feature of the evolution of human societies and cultures. It stands in contrast to the development of other social and behavioral science disciplines that are based on evolutionism and has a stronger affinity to the humanities than these other disciplines. The present status of theory and research in social and cultural anthropology is described and promising courses of development going forward are identified.

Today, the market in the social science disciplines is suffering from a strange disease. Let us call it a disease of imitation. Economics has long wanted to look like mathematics, or perhaps more realistically, like physics. The few economists that have not succumbed to this tendency have gone “behavioral.” Political scientists also have a form of split personality: some want to look like economists; others want to look like sociologists. As for sociology, it too is a moving target. Some sociologists want to be ethnographers, examining the details of everyday life, especially in the modern West. Others, a dwindling number, also want to be mathematicians of the social, using large data sets to identify large correlations and then seek explanations for such macropatterns. Psychologists, at the other end of the spectrum from economists in their interest in individual actors, motivations, and cognition, suffer a similar variety of discipline-envy as economists, and have for some time gravitated toward evolutionary biology and neuroscience as their exemplars. A simple way to explain these trends would be to note that the social sciences, like all the sciences, are evolving, and like evolving creatures, they seek certain parts of their environment as preferred niches. A less happy way to look at these trends would be to say that all the social sciences have lost their self-confidence and none have any respect for their founding figures. Marx, Weber, Freud, Durkheim, Jevons, Knight, and many other founding

fathers of the social sciences from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are now simply part of the prehistory of the social sciences.

Where does anthropology fit into this melancholy picture? Here the picture is less clear, because anthropology, having early claimed the broad rubric of the “study of man,” has never had a highly specific subject matter. Furthermore, it evolved differently in its major sites of national formation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In England, social anthropology emerged from the study of comparative religion and its founding figures, such as Tylor, Marrett, and Frazier, were concerned with spirits, sacrifice, magic, and mythology. Later, after the fieldwork revolution of Haddon, Rivers, and Malinowski, it became defined by an intense interest in the holistic study of remote, scale–scale societies. Throughout, social anthropology evolved separately from archaeology and that distinction remains a hallmark of British anthropology. In France, Durkheim was also interested in primitive religions, but he was deeply affected by Comte, Spencer, and Marx, and thus imparted to French anthropology a permanent interest in the problems of social solidarity, the division of labor and the logic of moral progress. For various specific reasons, Durkheim’s followers became preoccupied with problems of classification, cognition, and speculation in primitive thought, encouraging the domination of Levi-Straussian structuralism both in France and beyond for almost the whole of the second half of the twentieth century. Germany, and those countries influenced by Germanic models, developed a form of ethnology which dominated by the interest in folklore, folk history, and folkways, an emphasis which has recently been broken by the important of methods and theories of social anthropology mostly imported from Britain.

In the United States, the profound influence of Franz Boas, generally agreed to be the founding father of American anthropology, brought to the United States the concern of various neo-Kantian thinkers from Germany, notably Dilthey, and ideas that addressed the obvious salience of African Americans, Native Americans, and the emerging conditions of a power multicultural democracy. Thus, it was that the major departments of anthropology in the United States (Columbia, Chicago, Michigan, Berkeley) became committed to the now embattled four-field approach, including linguistics, archaeology, physical anthropology, and cultural anthropology. It is no secret that this Boasian umbrella has for many decades now let in a great deal of rain and these major departments and many others are simply holding companies for the subfields, each of which consorts with many other disciplines (such as metallurgy, evolutionary biology, linguistics, literature, and others) as problems and interests shift within the four fields. Other anthropological traditions, in places such as Africa, Australia, India, Japan, and the Scandinavian countries, are simply rearrangements of trends

in the founding countries, reflecting variations based on local themes and idiosyncrasies.

To the extent that the four-field umbrella has a serious intellectual foundation, it is the question of human evolution, as it relates to the history of *Homo sapiens*. In itself, this interest is shared by many other natural and social scientists. What anthropology has emphasized is the story of human variation as a crucial part of the story of human evolution. Such variation can be somatic, technological, linguistic, racial, or simply cultural. The finest work in the anthropology of the twentieth century has opened up new vistas in the study of human variation in each of these dimensions. Yet Boas, the founding father of American anthropology and of the four-field approach, was deeply opposed to the unilineal evolutionary approach that began with Darwin and was taken to be the heart of the evolutionary doctrine of the time. Boas, by contrast, thought that specific cultures evolved in their own ways, often skipping stages or violating established sequences in the current models of human evolution. In their stead, Boas installed a strong theory of cultural relativism and the method of historical particularism. Ever since, these arguments have held sway among many cultural anthropologists, who have displayed a consistent allergy toward evolutionism in any guise.

Some major American products of the Boasian tradition of interest in cultural history, such as Eric Wolf and Sindey Mintz, sought to supplement historical particularism with their own varieties of Marxism. Others, such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, sought patterns in individual cultures, and pushed the idea of cultural relativism into the domains of child development, war, and aesthetics. Yet others, such as Julian Steward, Lesley White, and Marvin Harris developed various brands of cultural materialism, anchored in distinct ideas about energy, agriculture, and technology.

The two dominant figures of American cultural anthropology in the post-War period are without a doubt Clifford Geertz and Marshall Sahlins, who came from rather different academic traditions, although both taught at the University of Chicago at crucial points in their lives, and Sahlins still is a lively presence as an Emeritus Professor there. They had an uneasy relationship to each other's work, in spite of sharing a deep distaste for any tendency among cultural anthropologists to find common cause with sociobiology, neuroscience, or other hard science approaches. Sahlins, originally very interested in economy, ecology, and social variation, had a major conversion to the structuralism of Levi-Strauss in the late 1960s and became committed to finding a way to combine French structuralism with a certain kind of historical approach to ethnography. Clifford Geertz, originally trained by Clyde Kluckhohn and Talcott Parsons at Harvard, was deeply influenced by Max Weber and spent the first two decades of his career exploring economic, social, and religious change in Indonesia and later in Morocco. In the early

1970s, he too had a sort of conversion experience, but in his case, it was to what he called *the interpretive turn*, for which he became famous across the humanities and cultural studies. His approach was an American brew of approaches drawn from the hermeneutical tradition, various literary critical styles, and from such American pragmatists as Dewey and William James. In the 1970s and 1980s, Sahlins ruled the structuralist roost in American anthropology and Geertz owned the rest. Their joint and collective influence meant that Boas' commitments to cultural relativism and historical particularism are still in play but the four-field approach was more or less turned into an administrative convenience at most major departments of anthropology. Archaeology and biological anthropology developed largely in their own directions. Linguistic anthropology, interestingly, became an increasing part of the repertoire of all American anthropology departments.

The subject of language as a part of the cultural anthropology tradition in the United States deserves special remark. From very early in the twentieth century, and very much in the spirit of Boas, language was an important part of the research of American cultural anthropologists. The key historical figure in this process was Edward Sapir, a student of Boas, who devoted his life to an exploration of how linguistics could contribute to the study of what he called *cultural relativity* (with a conscious reference to Albert Einstein) and the role of language in this sort of relativity. Edward Sapir spent much of his life in detailed studies of many languages, mostly those of North American indigenous populations, and along with his equally famous pupil Benjamin Whorf, developed the idea that our mental and linguistic categories were cast in unique and varied cultural molds, and that, as a consequence, the biggest responsibility of cultural anthropology was to understand how linguistic variation was the crucible of cultural variation. Even today, there are important linguistic anthropologists who derive their program from Sapir and Whorf, and have drawn on their approach to cultural relativity to explain linguistic variation as a necessary source and symptom of cultural variation.

But the influence of Sapir and Whorf (traceable to the ideas of Franz Boas) came under severe attack from several directions, starting in the 1960s. On one hand, Noam Chomsky and his followers became convinced of the fundamental place of universal cognitive structures underlying all surface variation in language and thus in culture. They had no use for the doctrine of linguistic and cultural relativity. Even earlier, Claude Levi-Strauss, who was a great admirer of Boas, spent some crucial years in the United States in the years immediately after the Second World War and developed the beginnings of his version of anthropological structuralism, with its roots in the phonetic work of the great French linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. From Saussure, Levi-Strauss took the idea that meaning in language, and thus in culture, was not located at the level of words (morphemes) but rather

at the level of phonemes, and even specifically, derivable from the contrast between opposed sets of phonemes (such as the phonemes “ba” and “fa”). Levi-Strauss’ most productive intellectual move was to bring this Saussurian idea up to the level of recognizable words and pairs such as night and day, raw and cooked, man and woman, father and mother.

This derivation from Saussure arose from one of the richest mistakes in the history of social science in the twentieth century, namely the idea that pairs of words, in any language, which were simply semantically contrastive, could be treated as the foundational building blocks of culture, just as Saussure had shown for contrastive phonemes. This move allowed Levi-Strauss to examine myths and cosmologies from many societies, to show that foundational semantic oppositions were even more meaningful than phonetic contrasts, although, in truth, the two phenomena have nothing to do with one another. As in natural science, models do not have to be true or lawful. They simply have to be productive. And Levi-Strauss’ strategy of analyzing cosmologies and societies as reflecting simple semantic contrasts allowed him to abandon the Boasian heritage of cultural relativism and relativity and ally himself with such thinkers as Chomsky, with whom he shared a faith in the common neurological operations of all human minds, regardless of cultural variation. The rest is not history, but it certainly seemed that way for some decades, during which Levi-Strauss was the sacred reference point for many anthropologists on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as in many other regions.

Starting in the late 1960s, American anthropologists brought language back into the study of culture by developing an insight which is owed to American pragmatic traditions on one hand, and to British ideas, particularly those of the key philosopher J. L. Austin, about how “to do things with words.” This movement, which can broadly be described as sociolinguistics, generated some of the most creative work in American linguistics and anthropology in the 1970s and ever since. Its key figures were Dell Hymes, William Labov, John Gumperz, Michael Silverstein, and their many students and followers, who branched out and shaped such fields as discourse analysis, ethnomethodology, conversational analysis, and meta-pragmatics, which incorporated the best traditions of Boasian fieldwork, Whorfian attention to cultural singularities, Peircean interest in semiosis, and Austinian concerns with language in use, while also taking the best out of the foundational importance of the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure. This mix of methods and insights about the relationship between language and culture is today the key to why young American anthropologists generate more linguistically sensitive work than their peers trained in other countries.

Even so, no one could have anticipated how the world began to change in big ways starting in the early 1990s and as a consequence, also unsettled the

social sciences. Anthropology was part of these changes and the new interest among younger anthropologists in such topics as diaspora, globalization, advertising, violence, sovereignty, war, refugees, and human rights makes Sahlins and Geertz look old-fashioned, although they dominated the anthropological avant-garde of the two prior decades.

Today, cultural anthropologists in the United States, and certainly elsewhere in the world, have largely abandoned the umbrella interest in human evolution and variation which marked the Boasian area and generated the four-field approach. But the news is not altogether negative. They have developed a new interest in the human body, in technology, and in science. But this interest is not defined by shared scientific questions but rather by a new anthropological interest in science studies (also shared by sociologists and other human scientists) which has generated brilliant ethnographies of the global pharmaceutical industry; the human genome project; the birth of nuclear engineering at Los Alamos; the problems of oceans, climate, and cloning; and virtually every other area of contemporary scientific work. This work uses the ethnographic method to explain how scientists and engineers work and create their models, theories, and policies about nature. Scientists, doctors, and engineers are anthropology's new primitives. By extension, this new class of primitives also includes derivatives traders, development professionals, army strategists, and other professionals whose cultures share codes of honor, private languages, secret strategies, and rituals of induction and recognition. Many cultural anthropologists have given up on quantification but they are keenly interested in every variety of professional quantifier.

This is not an exclusive trend. There are many cultural anthropologists who continue to work on empirically oriented topics which bring them into active contact with their colleagues in archaeology and biological anthropology. They produce interesting work on economics, demography, and technology to which they bring an ethnographic spin. But these more traditionally trained and committed scholars will probably admit that they do not represent the most exciting sectors of their discipline. In this sense, the "normal" science portion of cultural and social anthropology remains active and even the idea of a unified science of humanity which might unite anthropologists in all the four fields is by no means dead. But it does not define the most exciting agendas in the best journals, blogs, and conferences in which the younger generation displays its wares.

Like every field in the chaotic social science scene today, anthropologists are trying to maintain both their core and their emerging border territories equally. This is always a tough act. For anthropology, however, it is not a bad thing. Anthropology, of all the social science fields, has always been a bit of a no-host bar, allowing widely different conversations to take place

among friends, strangers, and even enemies. It is today, and has always been, a broker discipline, claiming to study everything about humanity but in fact performing a curating and convening role, both between the human and natural sciences, and between the ever-changing social science disciplines themselves. This is not a bad place to occupy in the academic division of labor. And anthropologists seem to be having fun in playing this role, today as in the past.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Appadurai, A. (2013). *The future as cultural fact: Essays on the global condition* (1st ed.). London, England: Verso.
- Duranti, A. (1997). *Linguistic anthropology*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
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- Hicks, D. (2013). Four-field anthropology: Charter myths and time warps from St. Louis to Oxford. *Current Anthropology*, 54(6), 753–763. doi:10.1086/673385
- Zaloom, C. (2010). *Out of the pits: Traders and technology from Chicago to London* (1st ed.). Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press.

ARJUN APPADURAI SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Arjun Appadurai is the Paulette Goddard Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. He is a prominent contemporary social-cultural anthropologist, having formerly served as Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at The New School in NYC. He has held various professorial chairs and visiting appointments at some of top institutions in the United States and Europe. In addition, he has served on several scholarly and advisory bodies in the United States, Latin America, Europe, and India. Dr. Appadurai is world renowned expert on the cultural dynamics of globalization, having authored numerous books and scholarly articles. The nature and significance of his contributions throughout his academic career have earned him the reputation as a leading figure in his field. His latest book is *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (Verso, 2013). He is a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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