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Title

Entry for "Anthropology"

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4rc3346q>

ISBN

9781849723275

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Publication Date

2001

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anthropology

Anthropology's mission of documenting the cultures of the world and demonstrating the fundamental humanity of all peoples consolidated itself in the early twentieth century, just as many of its traditional subjects found their lives profoundly transformed by colonialism, capitalism, and world wars. With the publication of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) by Claude **Lévi-Strauss** (1908–), anthropology's humanism

bifurcated into projects asserting a perceived need to “preserve” and to “protect” the world’s “traditional” cultures from Western dominance, based on strong claims to difference and incommensurability, and projects concerned to prove the deep, underlying laws of human culture, based on strong claims of sameness and comparability. At the same time, especially after the Second World War, anthropology, like the other social sciences, entered a phase of positivist empiricism, seeking out forms of data based less on the anthropologist’s participation in an alien ethos and more on the anthropologist’s ability to “extract” and objectify elements of cultural life in order to test hypotheses about generalized psychological, social, and cultural laws. At mid-century anthropology was relatively unified under three main approaches, each of which aspired to the model of the natural sciences: (1) structural-functionalism, which sought to identify social structures through the extrapolation of social rules from kinship and political processes; (2) psychocultural anthropology, based on assertions about the impact of cultural patterns in shaping personality; and (3) evolutionism, sometimes weakly rooted in Marxist historical materialism, based on assertions of unilineal or multilineal progressions from “simpler” to more “complex” forms of society due to adaptations to natural and social environments.

Although these three approaches to anthropology maintained their dominance for some time, anthropological theory experienced a period of reconceptualization during the 1960s. The impact of Lévi-Straussian structuralism on the field transformed structural-functionalism and psycho-cultural anthropology by introducing new conceptions of structure and mind. As well, the conservative political climate transformed evolutionism into adaptationist and ecological arguments.

Two theoretical moves in the late 1960s and 1970s further impacted the field. The first change involved a turning away from structuralism and toward hermeneutics. Clifford Geertz (1926–) was the pivotal figure here, bringing to anthropological theory a concern with the textual form of ethnographic writing and a theoretical attention to the richness of ethnographic description. He also relocated “culture” out of people’s heads and into public life, bringing attention to public symbols and interactions without structuralism’s drive to derive deep mental structures from observed phenomena. The second change involved a turning away from functionalist systems theories (of which Geertz himself occasionally partook) associated with Talcott Parsons and based on consensus models of society. New forms of Marxism, especially French structural Marxism, and feminism were central here, contributing conflict models of society, attention to inequality, and a break with the idea that societies are internally homogeneous entities.

In 1984, Sherry Ortner’s influential article summarizing anthropological theory since the 1960s made a case for “structuration” or “practice” theories, borrowed from Anthony Giddens and Pierre **Bourdieu** (1930–). These theories were seen to have the advantage of avoiding the extreme subjectivism of certain

interpretative and psychological frameworks, and the extreme objectivism of varieties of functionalism and Marxism. Shortly after the publication of Ortner's essay, however, other trends emerged which pushed anthropology further toward its present post-paradigmatic position. These trends can be traced to the influence of postmodernism, to a reconsideration of the textual form of anthropological writing, embodied in the critique of ethnographic **representation** and informed by postmodern theories, and to a reconsideration of the subjects of anthropological inquiry, embodied in the turn toward analyzing the cultural forms of modernism and postmodernity and developed from critiques of disciplinarity as well as theorizing about the "postmodern condition."

The critique of the textual form of ethnography was a reaction against the continuing dominance of scientific anthropology and also a response to Geertzian hermeneutics. Criticisms of Geertz had centered on the question of judgment and the evaluation or replicability of ethnographic work, especially since Geertz's emphasis on public symbols gave little direction on precisely whose symbols anthropologists should be concerned with. The Geertzian definition of culture as a system of meaning embodied in symbols seemed to reify the old notion of culture as internally coherent and monolithic, a notion that had been challenged by Marxism and feminism as well as critiques of anthropology's complicity in colonialism. At the same time, however, Geertz's work led to the recognition that ethnographies are not transparent recordings of "facts" or "experiences" but rather are texts, cultural artifacts in themselves which could be analyzed using the apparatus of literary theory.

The publication of Clifford and Marcus's edited collection, *Writing Culture* (1986), was a definitive moment in this move to problematize textuality in anthropology. Ethnographic textuality came under a number of different, often complementary, attacks. The most important of these was the attack on authorial authority, the voice of the anthropologist-as-expert writing "above" those written about and hidden from view as participant in the social milieu studied. This attack resonated powerfully with Bourdieu's project of objectifying the practice of objectivism in the social sciences.

Yet immediately after the publication of *Writing Culture*, innovative efforts to address ethnographic forms tended to emphasize reflexivity and "voice" – the voice of the native and the voice of the anthropologist – rather than engage in sustained critique of anthropological projects. Reflexive ethnographies often came under scrutiny for being too personal, too local, and ultimately too obfuscating of the authorial construction that went into such texts. For instance, it was seen as short-sighted to put the "native's voice" in one's text when selection, editing, and layout are still under authorial control and authorship remains as an effect of textuality. Shades of liberal voluntarist conceptions of the subject were lurking in these ethnographic projects, as well as in their elevation of voices and knowledges that supposedly "spoke for themselves." Nevertheless, reflexive ethnographies brought attention to the

objectivist myths underpinning much anthropological scholarship. At the same time, in being labeled “postmodern” from other quarters of the discipline, such ethnographies generated familiar criticisms of self-reflective social scientific work captured best by the old joke: “What did the native say to the postmodern ethnographer? ‘Can we talk about ME for a while?’” These ethnographies were often deemed non-empirical, as if the presence of tabular data, diagrams, and maps made an ethnography more empirical than the presence of the ethnographer’s experience in the text. What these ethnographies were *not* was positivist, in that they did not – at least explicitly – try to create formal or general laws but rather questioned the meta-narratives or foundational truth-claims of scientific discourse.

The critique of authorial authority generated another move in anthropological thinking and writing which was overshadowed by reflexive texts. This was a move to introduce modernist and postmodernist aesthetic sensibilities into ethnography and to produce experimental textual forms that broke conventions of authorship, intention, science, and objectivism. Anthropologists also noted these same sensibilities in the “texts” of culture they had been studying all along, and, influenced by Mikhail **Bakhtin** (1895–1975), emphasized **heteroglossia**, polyvocality and transgression. Resistance was a privileged category for a time, as anthropologists found in it a means to challenge representations of culture as stable, consistent, and harmonious and stressed political struggle in the ongoing practices of culture. The work of Michel **Foucault** (1926–84) served to reorient this emphasis on resistance toward a greater understanding of the embeddedness of resistance in **power** and a greater appreciation of the liberal conceptions of the resisting, speaking subject undergirding much of this work.

Feminists within the discipline criticized the *Writing Culture* project for several reasons. Some argued that feminist anthropologists had been doing experimental work all along and that such work had never been recognized in the field. Others argued that the critique of the textual form, and the metaphor of culture as text open to interpretation, left feminism with no “real” from which to launch critique. Finally, still others pointed out that, given contemporary academic politics and conventions of scholarship (such as the authored text itself), experimental texts never really displace authorial authority anyway. Feminism in the 1980s and 1990s lent its emphases on situatedness and positionality to the critique of ethnography and made the reformulation of anthropological theory considerably more complex by highlighting fragmented and multiple identities and the politics of culture.

Critiques of anthropology as a form of colonial discourse and as a handmaiden in colonial projects also challenged and complicated the *post-Writing Culture* moment by bringing anthropology as a discipline under scrutiny, in the Foucauldian sense, as a mode of power-knowledge whose original mission was to catalog and order the peoples of the colonial world for Western powers. Attention to colonialism also made anthropology significantly more historical, and the influence of Foucault found

expression in works on colonial discourse, on constructions of colonial subjects and “natives” in places studied by anthropologists, and on the power-effects of bureaucratic forms of modernity itself.

By the 1990s, anthropologists influenced by broader trends in social and literary theory who had taken to heart the critique of ethnographic representation found themselves working in the tracks of Foucault, Bourdieu, and, through the influence of British cultural studies, Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). The core concepts of the discipline, its own meta-narratives and truth-claims founded in the experience of fieldwork, came under the anthropological gaze. Anthropology’s hallmark concept of “culture” was now recognized as linked to colonialism and territorial nationalism. The liberal conception of culture as property came under scrutiny as well, as anthropologists asked questions about the practices and processes through which people come to objectify and construct culture as both property and identity under specific conditions of struggle.

Culture, too, was no longer connected as a matter of course to space. Anthropologists criticized the discipline’s traditional equation of culture with territory (an equation that was as much a product of the Westphalian order of European territorial nationalism as an analytic construct), taking insights from critical **geography**. The disintegration of the culture concept also allowed for new views of the spatiality of culture: when space is seen as a problem, not as a given, other forms of spatiality, like contemporary diasporas, transnational processes, and **globalization**, come into greater focus. Anthropologists began to study the overlapping and contingent spaces of ethnicity, identity, mass media, and capitalism by opening up the boundedness of the culture concept and recognizing the contingent politics of cultural processes rather than maintaining the cultural holism that had been characteristic of the discipline previously.

The culture concept also rested on a notion of time, borrowed from nineteenth-century evolutionism and its translation into twentieth-century modernization narratives. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, Franz Boas (1858–1942), the founding father of American anthropology, saw his task as a mission of “salvaging” for (Western) posterity the lifeways of non-Western native peoples. With the modernization projects of the postwar era, the “disappearance” of traditional subjects of anthropological inquiry had been seen as a harbinger of global cultural homogenization. But the critique of the temporal logic of the notion of culture highlighted the teleology of such arguments and focused attention on modernization narratives themselves. Not only were the “primitives” contemporaneous with the “civilized,” and not existing in some modern Stone Age, but their encounter with “modernity” was never a case of total assimilation or erasure but one shot through with ruptures, disarticulations, and hybrid reformulations.

When the culture concept is seen as part and parcel of modern apparatuses of power, then modernity itself demands an anthropology. Anthropology has found resonances with **cultural studies**, **postcolonial** criticism, science studies, **queer theory**, certain varieties of neo-Marxism, and psychoanalysis as it interrogates the forms of modernity that were part and parcel of its origin (the map, the state, gender, sexuality, race, the timetable, the liberal subject, biomedicine, law, science, and the ethnographic text itself). But anthropology still lives in a social science world, where anything not “empirical” – based on the evidence of experience verifiable across a number of unspecified and supposedly unsituated observers – is dismissed as “postmodern.” Within the discipline, *any* explicit theorizing or reflection on the limits of positivist empiricism is often considered “postmodern” or “theoretical” or “interpretivist” (as if these were equivalent). Neo-Marxist forms of political economy have suffered less under these charges, perhaps because of their truth-claims and purported groundedness in the real. Yet exciting work in anthropology, influenced by postmodern theories and attending to the postmodern condition, successfully integrates interpretivist and political economic approaches and is richly empirical, even as it destabilizes the claims of empiricism and in so doing challenges the ground of the discipline itself.

Further reading

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