

# A HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Second Edition

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# 1

## Proto-Anthropology

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How long have anthropologists existed? Opinions are divided on this issue. The answer depends on what you mean by an anthropologist. People around the world have always been curious about their neighbours and more remote people. They have gossiped about them, fought them, married them and told stories about them. Some of their stories were written down. Some were later criticised as inaccurate or ethnocentric (or flatly racist). Some stories were compared with others, about other people, leading to general assumptions about ‘people elsewhere’, and what humans everywhere have in common. In this broad sense, we start an anthropological enquiry the moment a foreigner moves into the neighbouring flat.

If we restrict ourselves to anthropology as a scientific discipline, some would trace its roots back to the European Enlightenment during the eighteenth century; others would claim that anthropology did not arise as a science until the 1850s, others again would argue that anthropological research in its present-day sense only commenced after the First World War. Nor can we avoid such ambiguities.

It is beyond doubt, however, that anthropology, considered as the science of humanity, originated in the region we commonly refer to as ‘the West’, notably in four ‘Western’ countries: France, Britain, the USA and Germany. Historically speaking, this is a European discipline, and its practitioners, like those of all European sciences, occasionally like to trace its roots back to the ancient Greeks.

### HERODOTUS AND OTHER GREEKS

Thanks to research carried out by anthropologists, historians and archaeologists, we today believe that ‘the ancient Greeks’ differed quite radically from ourselves. In the classical city-states, more than half the population were slaves; free citizens regarded manual labour as degrading, and democracy (which was also ‘invented’ by the Greeks) was probably more similar to the competitive *potlatch* feasts of the Kwakiutl (Chapter 4), than to the institutions described in modern constitutions (Finley 1973; P. Anderson 1974).

Going back to the Greeks is thus a long journey, and we peer into their world through cracked and smoky glass. We catch glimpses of little city-states surrounded by traditional Iron Age farmland where family and kinship formed the main social units, connected to the outside world through a network of maritime trade relationships between urban settlements along the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts. The trade in luxury goods and the free labour entailed by slavery brought considerable wealth to the cities, and the citizens of the *polis*, with their distaste for manual work, had at their disposal a large surplus, which they used, among other things, to wage war, and to build temples, stadiums, baths and other public buildings, where male citizens could meet and engage in philosophical disputes and speculations about how the world was put together.

It was in such a community that Herodotus of Halicarnassus (c. 484–425 BCE) lived. Born in a Greek colonial town on the south-west coast of present-day Turkey, Herodotus began to travel as a young man and gained personal knowledge of the many foreign peoples that the Greeks maintained contacts with. Today, Herodotus is mainly remembered for his history of the Persian Wars (Herodotus 1982), but he also wrote detailed travel narratives from various parts of western Asia and Egypt, and (based on second-hand information) from as far away as the land of the Scythians on the northern coast of the Black Sea, the Ethiopians, and the peoples of the Indus valley. In these narratives, far removed as they are from our present world, we recognise a problem that has pursued anthropology, in various guises, up to this day: how should we relate to ‘the Others’? Are they basically like ourselves, or basically different? Most, if not all, anthropological theory has tried to strike a balance between these positions, and this is what Herodotus did too. Sometimes he is a prejudiced and ethnocentric ‘civilised man’, who disdains everything foreign. At other times he acknowledges that different peoples have different values because they live under different circumstances, not because they are morally deficient. Herodotus’ descriptions of language, dress, political and judicial institutions, crafts and economics are highly readable today. Although he sometimes clearly got the facts wrong, he was a meticulous scholar, whose books are often the only written sources we have about peoples of a distant past.

Many Greeks tested their wits against a philosophical paradox that touches directly on the problem of how we should relate to ‘the Others’. This is the paradox of *universalism* versus *relativism*. A present-day universalist would try to identify commonalities and

similarities (or even universals) between different societies, while a relativist would emphasise the uniqueness and particularity of each society or culture. The Sophists of Athens are sometimes described as the first philosophical relativists in the European tradition (several almost contemporary thinkers in Asia, such as Gautama Buddha, Confucius and Lao-Tze, were concerned with similar questions). In Plato's (427–347 BCE) dialogues *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, Socrates argues with the Sophists. We may picture them in dignified intellectual battle, surrounded by colourful temples and solemn public buildings, with their slaves scarcely visible in the shadows between the columns. Other citizens stand as spectators, while Socrates' faith in a universal reason, capable of ascertaining universal truths, is confronted by the relativist view that truth will always vary with experience and what we would today call culture.

Plato's dialogues do not deal directly with cultural differences. But they bear witness to the fact that cross-cultural encounters were part of everyday life in the city-states. The Greek trade routes stretched from the Straits of Gibraltar to present-day Ukraine, they fought wars with Persians and many other 'barbarians'. The very term 'barbarian' is Greek and means 'foreigner'. To a Greek ear it sounded as if these aliens were only able to make unintelligible noises, which sounded like 'bar-bar, bar-bar'. Similarly, in Russian, Germans are to this day called *nemtsy* (the mute ones): those who speak, but say nothing.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) also indulged in sophisticated speculations about the nature of humanity. In his philosophical anthropology he discusses the differences between humans in general and animals, and concludes that although humans have several needs in common with animals, only man possesses reason, wisdom and morality. He also argued that humans are fundamentally social by nature. In anthropology and elsewhere, such a universalistic style of thought, which seeks to establish similarities rather than differences between groups of people, plays a prominent role to this day. Furthermore, it seems clear that anthropology has vacillated up through history between a universalistic and a relativistic stance, and that central figures in the discipline are also often said to lean either towards one position or the other.

## AFTER ANTIQUITY

In the classical Greek city-state, conditions were perhaps particularly favourable for the development of systematic science. But in the

ensuing centuries as well, 'civilised' activities such as art, science and philosophy were cultivated all around the Mediterranean: first, in the Hellenistic period, after the Macedonian, Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) had led his armies to the northern reaches of India, spreading Greek urban culture wherever he went; then later, during the several centuries when Rome dominated most of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and impressed on its population a culture deriving from Greek ideals. In this complex, multinational society, it is not surprising to find that the Greek interest in 'the Other' was also carried on. Thus, the geographer Strabo (c. 63–64 BCE–c. CE 21) wrote several voluminous tomes about strange peoples and distant places, which sparkle with curiosity and the joy of discovery. But when Christianity was established as state religion and the Roman Empire started falling apart in the mid-fourth century CE, a fundamental change took place in European cultural life. Gone were the affluent citizens of the cities of Antiquity, who could indulge in science and philosophy, thanks to their income from trade and slave labour. Gone, indeed, was the entire city culture, the very glue that held the Roman Empire together as an (albeit loosely) integrated state. In its place, countless local European peoples manifested themselves, carriers of Germanic, Slavic, Finno-Ugric and Celtic traditions that were as ancient as those of pre-urban Greece. Politically, Europe fell apart into hundreds of chiefdoms, cities and autonomous local enclaves, which were only integrated into larger units with the growth of the modern state, from the sixteenth century onwards. Throughout this long period, what tied the continent together was largely the Church, the last lingering trustee of Roman universalism. Under the aegis of the Church, international networks of monks and clergymen arose and flourished, connecting the pockets of learning in which the philosophical and scientific traditions of Antiquity survived.

Europeans like to see themselves as linear descendants of Antiquity, but throughout the Middle Ages, Europe was an economic, political and scientific periphery. Following the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the Arabs conquered territories from Spain to India and, for at least the next seven centuries, the economic, political and intellectual centres of the Mediterranean world lay in sophisticated metropolises such as Baghdad and Cordoba, not in the ruins of Rome or Athens, nor in glorified villages such as London or Paris. The greatest historian and social philosopher of this period was Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), who lived in present-day Tunisia. Khaldun wrote, among other things, a massive history of the Arabs and

Berbers, furnished with a long, critical introduction on his use of sources. He developed one of the first non-religious social theories, and anticipated Émile Durkheim's ideas about social solidarity (Chapter 2), which are today considered a cornerstone of sociology and anthropology. In line with Durkheim and the first anthropologists who utilised his theories, Khaldun stresses the importance of kinship and religion in creating and maintaining a sense of solidarity and mutual commitment among the members of a group. His theory of the difference between pastoral nomads and city-states may, with the wisdom of hindsight, be said to have been centuries ahead of its time.

A contemporary of Khaldun, Ibn Battuta (1304–1369), was in his way just as significant for the history of anthropology. Not a major social theorist, Battuta is considered to be the most widely travelled person of the pre-industrial world. Born in Tangier in present-day Morocco, Battuta's travels brought him as far east as China and as far south as present-day Tanzania. Battuta's main work, the *Rihla* ('Travels'), was completed in 1355. Although later scholars doubt the authenticity of some of the journeys described in the book, it is considered a major source of knowledge about the world known to the Arabs at the time, and of prevailing interpretations of other cultures.

In spite of the cultural hegemony of the Arab world, there are a few European writings from the late medieval period, which may be considered precursors of latter-day anthropology. Most famous is Marco Polo's (1254–1323) account of his expedition to China, where he allegedly spent 17 years. Another example is the great journey through Asia described in *The Voyage and Travels of Sir John Mandeville, Knight*, compiled by an unknown author in the fourteenth century. Both books stimulated the European interest in alien peoples and customs, although the reliability of their accounts must have been questioned already then (Launay 2010).

Then, with the advent of mercantilist economies and the contemporaneous Renaissance in the sciences and arts, the small, but rich European cities of the late Middle Ages began to develop rapidly, and the earliest signs of a capitalist class emerged. Fired by these great social movements and financed by the new entrepreneurs, a series of grand exploratory sea voyages were launched by European rulers. These journeys – to Africa, Asia and America – are often described in the West as the 'Age of Discovery', though the 'discovered' peoples themselves may have had reason to question their greatness (see Wolf 1982).

## THE EUROPEAN CONQUESTS AND THEIR IMPACT

The 'Age of Discovery' was of crucial importance for later developments in Europe and the world, and – on a lesser scale – for the development of anthropology. From the Portuguese King Henry the Navigator's exploration of the West coast of Africa in the early fifteenth century, via Columbus' five journeys to America (1492–1506), to Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe (1519–22), the travels of this period fed the imaginations of Europeans with vivid descriptions of places whose very existence they had been unaware of. These travelogues, moreover, reached wide audiences, since the printing press, invented in the mid-fifteenth century, soon made books a common and relatively inexpensive commodity all over Europe.

Many of the early travelogues from the New World were full of factual errors and saturated with Christian piety and cultural prejudices. A famous example is the work of the merchant and explorer Amerigo Vespucci, whose letters describing his voyages to the continent that still bears his name were widely circulated at the time. His writings were reprinted and translated, but his descriptions of the Native Americans (who were called *Indios*, Indians, since Columbus believed he had found a route to India), reveal a much less scrupulous attitude to facts than in Herodotus' or Khaldun's writings. Occasionally, Vespucci seems to use the Native Americans as a mere literary illustration, to underpin the statements he makes about his own society. Native Americans are, as a rule, represented as distorted or, frequently, inverted reflections of Europeans: they are godless, promiscuous, naked, have no authority or laws; they are even cannibals! Against this background, Vespucci argues effectively for the virtues of absolutist monarchy and papal power, but his ethnographic descriptions are virtually useless as clues to native life at the time of the Conquest.

There were contemporaries of Vespucci, such as the French Huguenot Jean de Léry and the Spanish clergyman Bartolomé de las Casas, who gave more truthful and even sympathetic accounts of Native American life, and such books also sold well. But then, the market for adventure stories from distant climes seems to have been insatiable in Europe at this time. In most of the books, a more or less explicit contrast is drawn between the Others (who are either 'noble savages' or 'barbarians') and the existing order in Europe (which is either challenged or defended). As we shall see in later chapters, the legacy of these early, morally ambiguous accounts still weighs

on contemporary anthropology, and to this day, anthropologists are often accused of distorting the reality of the peoples they write about – in the colonies, in the Third World, among ethnic minorities or in marginal areas. And, as in Vespucci's case, these descriptions are often denounced as telling us more about the anthropologist's own background than about the people under study.

The conquest of America contributed to a veritable revolution among European intellectuals. Not only did it provoke thought about cultural differences, it soon became clear that an entire continent had been discovered which was not even mentioned in the Bible! This potentially blasphemous insight stimulated the ongoing secularisation of European intellectual life, the liberation of science from the authority of the Church, and the relativisation of concepts of morality and personhood. As Todorov (1984) argues, the Native Americans struck at the very heart of the European idea of what it means to be human. The Native Americans were humans, but they did not behave in ways that Europeans considered 'natural' for human beings. What was then human? What was natural? During the Middle Ages, philosophers assumed that God had created the world once and for all and given its inhabitants their particular natures, which they had since retained. Now it was becoming possible to ask whether the Native Americans represented an *earlier stage* in the development of humanity. This in turn led to embryonic notions of progress and development, which heralded a radical break with the static worldview of the Middle Ages, and in the later history of anthropology, notions of development and progress have at times played an important role. But if progress is possible, it follows that progress is brought about by the activity of human beings, and this idea, that people shape their own destinies, is an even more enduring notion in anthropology.

Thus, when the Europeans examined themselves in the mirror held up by the Native Americans, they discovered themselves as free, modern individuals. Among the most striking expressions of this new-found, subjective freedom, are the *Essais* (1580) of the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592). With an open-mindedness and in a personal style that were unheard of at the time, Montaigne speculates about numerous issues large and small. Unlike nearly all his contemporaries, Montaigne, in his writings about remote peoples, appears as what we today would call a cultural relativist. In the essay 'Of Cannibals', he even concludes that if he had been born and raised in a cannibal tribe, he would in all likelihood himself have eaten human flesh. In the same essay,

Montaigne invoked *le bon sauvage*, ‘the noble savage’, an idea of the assumed inherent goodness of stateless peoples, which is another part of the common heritage of anthropology.

In the following centuries, the European societies expanded rapidly in scale and complexity, and intercultural encounters – through trade, warfare, missionary work, colonisation, migration and research – became increasingly common. At the same time, ‘the others’ became increasingly visible in European cultural life – from Shakespeare’s plays to Rameau’s librettos. Every major philosopher from Descartes to Nietzsche developed his own doctrine of human nature, his own philosophical anthropology, often basing it directly on current knowledge and beliefs about non-European peoples. But in most of these accounts ‘the others’ still play a passive role: the authors are rarely interested in their lifeways as such, but rather in their usefulness as rhetorical ammunition in European debates about Europe, or about ‘Man’, usually synonymous with a ‘Male European’.

A famous example was the great seventeenth-century philosophical debate between *rationalists* and *empiricists*. The former position was held by René Descartes (1596–1650), a Frenchman of many talents, who made substantial contributions to mathematics and anatomy, and is widely considered to be the founder of modern philosophy. Among anthropologists Descartes’ name is almost synonymous with the sharp distinction he supposedly drew between consciousness and spiritual life on the one hand, and the material world and the human body on the other. However, the clear-cut ‘Cartesian dualism’ that is often criticised by anthropologists is a caricature of Descartes’ thought. Descartes distinguished two kinds of substance: that of thought and mind, which had no spatial dimensions, and that of the spatially organised world. The latter could be partitioned up, measured and made subject to the laws of mathematics so its true properties might be revealed, the former could not. But by critical reasoning one could identify ideas that were axiomatically true.

The primary task of philosophy was to identify ideas that would form an unassailable basis for scientific knowledge of the external world. To achieve this, Descartes assumed an attitude of ‘radical methodological doubt’: any idea that may be doubted is uncertain, and thus an unsuitable foundation for science. Not many ideas survived Descartes’ acid test. His famous *cogito ergo sum* (‘I think, therefore I am’) expressed his primary certainty: I can be sure that I exist since I know that I think. Descartes’ philosophical system is derived from this axiomatic truth.

Descartes was not a social philosopher. Still, he was a child of his times. He asserted that the individual was the measure of all things. If God's existence can be proven, it must be on the basis of the individual's certain knowledge of himself. Even if God, through the inborn ideas, was the ultimate source of certain knowledge, it was the reason of individuals that separated true ideas from falsehood, applied true ideas on the world, and 'perfected' society 'from a semi-barbarous state ... to civilization' (Descartes 1637: part 2).

Descartes' belief in reason, typified in the clear and consistent laws of geometry, was shared by his opponents, the British empiricists. The empiricists also attempted to establish a foundation for certain knowledge, but Descartes' notion of axiomatic ideas was unacceptable for them. John Locke (1632–1704), the first great Empiricist philosopher (Chapter 6), claimed that the human mind was a blank slate, *tabula rasa*, at birth. Our ideas and values have their origin in our experiences, or 'sense impressions', as they were called. *Tabula rasa* is a much used and abused term. Locke did not claim that people were born with no abilities at all. One had an inborn intellect. When sense impressions put their mark on the blank slate, the intellect combined them with other sense impressions to form ideas about the world that became points of departure for abstraction and generalisation. Here Locke is laying the groundwork of a human science that combines a universalistic principle (we are all born the same) and a relativistic principle (our differing experiences make us different).

Locke was a political liberalist and a confirmed democrat, and his philosophical empiricism is related to his political argument for the idea of 'natural law' (*lex naturalis*). Like 'Cartesian dualism' the notion that all humans have certain inborn rights goes back to the Middle Ages, when it was argued that natural law was established by God. Locke claimed that natural law was not a gift from God or princes, but a defence of the individual's needs. Thus, Locke's argument explicitly contradicted that of the rationalists, but his basic anthropology was similar to theirs. As in Descartes, the individual was the measure of all things. This was a radical view in the seventeenth century. Even when it was used to justify the power of princes (as Thomas Hobbes did), it had revolutionary force. All over Europe, kings and princes were confronted by the demands of an increasingly restive and powerful liberal bourgeoisie: demands that the Ruler be bound by law to respect the rights of individuals to property, personal security and rational public debate.

As in Descartes, the ‘primitives’ are a minor concern within this larger argument. They remain a category of contrast. ‘Children, idiots, savages and illiterate people’ are ‘of all others the least corrupted by custom, or borrowed opinion’, writes Locke. But, he continues, if we consider their behaviour, we see that they are helpless, they have no inborn ideas to support them. Therefore they must be ‘improved’ (Locke 1690: §27).

The legacy of these seemingly distant philosophical debates is still, as we shall see later in this book, evident in anthropology today. An empiricist stamp rests on British anthropology, a rationalist stamp on French *ethnologie*. On German anthropology completely different influences came to bear.

### WHY ALL THIS IS NOT QUITE ANTHROPOLOGY YET

This brief review of the prehistory of anthropology has suggested that a number of issues that would later attain prominence in the discipline had been the subject of extensive debate since Antiquity. Exotic peoples had been described normatively (ethnocentrism) or descriptively (cultural relativism). The question had repeatedly been raised whether people everywhere and at all times are basically the same (universalism) or profoundly different (relativism). There had been attempts to define the difference between animals and humans, nature and culture, the inborn and the learned, the sensual body and the conscious mind. Many detailed descriptions of foreign peoples had been published; some were based on meticulous scholarship.

In spite of these continuities, we maintain that anthropology as a science only appeared at a later stage, though it is true that its birth was a more gradual process than is sometimes assumed. Our reasons for this are, first, that all the work mentioned so far belongs to one of two genres: travel writing or social philosophy. It is only when these aspects of anthropological enquiry are fused, that is, when data and theory are brought together, that anthropology appears. Second, we call attention to the fact that all the writers mentioned so far were influenced by their times and their society. This is of course true of modern anthropologists as well. But modern anthropologists live in a modern world, and we argue that anthropology makes no sense at all outside a modern context. The discipline is a product, not merely of a series of singular thoughts such as those we have mentioned above, but of wide-ranging changes in European culture and society, that in time would lead to the formation of

capitalism, individualism, secularised science, patriotic nationalism and cultural reflexivity.

On the one hand, then, certain topics have followed us throughout the time we have dealt with so far. On the other hand, from the fifteenth century onwards, a range of new ideas and new forms of social life have appeared, which will form the groundwork on which anthropology and the other social sciences will be built.

Two of these new ideas have been discussed above. First, we have seen that the encounter with 'the Other' stimulated European intellectuals to see society as an entity undergoing change and growth, from relatively simple, small-scale communities, to large, complex nations. But the idea of development or progress was not confined to notions of social change. The individual, too, could develop, through education and career, by refining his personality and finding his 'true self'. As the sociologist Bruno Latour (1991) points out, the idea of the autonomous individual was a prerequisite for the idea of society. Only when the free individual was established as 'the measure of all things' could the idea of society as an association of individuals put down roots and become an object of systematic reflection. And only when society had emerged as an object to be continuously 'improved' and reshaped into more 'advanced' forms could the independent, rational individual change into something new and different, and even 'truer to its nature'. And without an explicit discourse about these ideas, a subject such as anthropology could never arise. The seeds were sown in early modern philosophy, important advances were made in the eighteenth century, but it was only in the nineteenth century that anthropology became an academic discipline, and only in the twentieth century that it attained the form in which it is taught today. We shall now turn to the intellectual currents of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before recounting – in the next chapter – how the discipline of anthropology came of age.

## THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The eighteenth century saw a flowering of science and philosophy in Europe. The self-confidence of the bourgeoisie increased, citizens reflected on the world and their place in it, and would soon make political demands for a rational, just, predictable and transparent social order. The key word was *enlightenment* (*Aufklärung*, *lumières*), literally shedding light on matters that had so far been left in the dark. As Locke and Descartes had argued, the free individual

was to be the measure of all things – of knowledge and of the social order: the authority of God and princes was no longer taken for granted. But the new generations of intellectuals developed these ideas further. They met in informal clubs and salons to discuss art, philosophy and social issues. Private letters and diaries evolved into newspapers and novels, and although censorship was still common in most places in Europe, the new media soon gained greater freedom and wider circulation. The bourgeoisie sought to free itself from the power of Church and nobility, and to establish in their stead a secular democracy. Traditional religious beliefs were increasingly denounced as superstitions – roadblocks on the way to a better society, governed by reason. The idea of progress also seemed to be confirmed by the development of technology, which made important advances at this time. New technologies made scientific measurements more accurate. Industrial machinery made a hesitant debut. Descartes' purely theoretical attempt to prove the universal truth of mathematics was becoming a practical issue of incalculable relevance. For if mathematics, the language of reason, could reveal such fundamental natural truths as Newton's laws, did it not follow that nature was itself reasonable, and that any reason-driven enterprise was bound to succeed? All these expectations culminated in the French Revolution, which attempted to realise the dream of a perfectly rational social order in practice, but was quickly superseded by its irrational opposite: the revolution devoured its children. Then the dreams, the disappointments, the paradoxes of the Revolution spread during the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1800s to all of Europe, deeply influencing the ideas of society that later generations would develop.

But we are still in the eighteenth century, the 'Age of Reason', when the first attempts were made at creating an anthropological science. An important early work was Giambattista Vico's (1668–1744) *La scienza nuova* (1725; *The New Science*, 1999), a grand synthesis of ethnography, religious studies, philosophy and natural science. Vico proposed a universal scheme of social development, in which all societies passed through four phases, with particular, well-defined characteristics. The first stage was a 'bestial condition' without morality or art, followed by an 'Age of Gods', of nature worship and rudimentary social structures. Then came the 'Age of Heroes', with widespread social unrest due to great social inequality, and finally the 'Age of Man', when class differences disappeared and equality reigned. This epoch, however, was in its turn threatened by internal corruption and degeneration

to 'bestiality'. Here, for the first time, we see a theory of social development that not only contrasts barbarism and civilisation, but specifies a number of transitional stages. Vico's theory would become a model for later evolutionists from Karl Marx to James Frazer. But Vico has an element that many of his followers lacked. Societies do not necessarily develop linearly towards constantly improved conditions, but go through cycles of degeneration and growth. This gives Vico's Enlightenment work a critical and romantic subtext, as in Rousseau (see below).

Vico was an Italian pioneer, but it was in France that the first steps were taken towards the establishment of anthropology as a science. In 1748, Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755) published his *De l'esprit des loix* (*The Spirit of Laws*, 1977). This is a comparative, cross-cultural study of legislative systems which Montesquieu had first- or second-hand knowledge of, and from which he attempts to derive the general principles that underlie legal systems cross-culturally. Montesquieu pictures the legal system as an aspect of the wider social system, intimately entwined with many other aspects of the larger whole (politics, economy, kinship, demography, religion, and so on) – a view that has led many to describe him as a proto-functionalists (Chapter 3). According to Montesquieu, polygamy, cannibalism, paganism, slavery and other barbarous customs could be explained by the functions they fulfilled within society as a whole. Montesquieu also wrote the remarkable *Lettres persanes* (1722; *Persian Letters*, 1973), a collection of fictitious letters from two Persians describing France to their countrymen. He here exploits the 'strangeness' of cultural difference to parody France at the time of Louis XIV. The book is thought-provoking. Even today it remains controversial, since Montesquieu has been accused of being a proto-Orientalist (Said 1978, 1993), who unduly emphasised the exoticism of the Persians. This critique is undoubtedly justified, and Montesquieu's primary aim is clearly not to describe Persia but to criticise France. But the Persian letters also reveal an understanding of a problem in contemporary anthropology that might be referred to as *homeblindness*: our inability to see our own culture 'objectively', 'from outside'. Montesquieu employed a particular technique to overcome this problem: he described his own society from the point of view of an outsider, a technique that is widely used in anthropology today.

Yet another step towards a science of anthropology was taken by a group of idealistic French intellectuals. These were the Encyclopaedists, led by the philosopher Denis Diderot (1713–1784) and

the mathematician Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (1717–1783). Their aim was to collect, classify and systematise as much knowledge as possible in order to further the advance of reason, progress, science and technology. Diderot's *Encyclopédie* was published in 1751–72, and included articles by illustrious intellectuals like Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu. The encyclopaedia quickly established itself as a model for later projects of its kind. It was a liberal and wide-ranging, not to say a revolutionary work, which was censored in many parts of Europe for its criticism of the Church. But the 17 volumes of text and 11 volumes of illustrations also contained other controversial material, such as detailed descriptions of mechanical devices developed by ordinary farmers and craftsmen. The fact that such matters were taken seriously in an academic work was unheard of at the time, and hinted that it would soon be legitimate to study the everyday life of ordinary people. The encyclopaedia also contained detailed descriptions of culture and social customs all over the world. One of its youngest contributors, Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794), who was to die prematurely in a Jacobin jail, wrote systematic comparisons between different social systems, and tried to develop a synthesis of mathematics and social science that would allow him to formulate objective laws of social development.

The most influential contributor to the *Encyclopédie* was undoubtedly Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Contrary to his French and British contemporaries (but not unlike Southern Europeans such as Vico), Rousseau argued that development was not progressive, but degenerative, and that the source of decline was society itself. Starting from an initial, innocent state of nature, where each individual lived by himself in harmony with his surroundings, people went on to found institutions of marriage and kinship, and settled in small, sedentary groups. Eventually, these groups grew in complexity, and invented priests and chiefs, kings and princes, private property, police and magistrates, until the free and good soul of man was crushed under the weight of society. All human vices were the product of society's increasing demands on the individual, particularly the increasing social inequality that development entailed. 'Man was born free, but is everywhere in chains', he declares in *Du contrat social* (1762; *On the Social Contract*, 1978). But the false social contract could be replaced by a true one, based on freedom and democracy, and this is where Rousseau's importance becomes evident. An individual, says Rousseau, is free if he follows a law he has set for himself, and society can freely follow a law that was collectively adopted. But society consists of many subjects,

each with his own will. The true social contract therefore implies a particular relationship of *exchange*: the individual gives up his natural rights in return for rights as a citizen of society, which give greater and longer-lasting freedom. But the individual, though good, is often stupid. Great leaders are therefore needed, to establish good judicial systems, if necessary by subterfuge or force. Here we see the inspiration of one of Rousseau's greatest influences, the Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527).

The paradoxical passage above about the relationship of individual to society is packed with insights that would have heavy influence on future events. Most clearly this is seen in Karl Marx (Chapter 2), who was inspired by Rousseau's ideas about inequality and property, human nature and alienation. Rousseau's ideas about the exchange relation underlying the true social contract inspired Claude Lévi-Strauss' theory of society as a product of exchange (Chapter 6). More generally, Rousseau's elevation of 'primitives' at the expense of Europe's corrupted civilisation was an important precursor of anthropological cultural relativism, although for Rousseau, as for so many others, the 'primitives' were primarily a mirror image of his own society, a viewpoint that hardly stimulated empirical investigations of real (primitive or modern) societies.

Most importantly, though, Rousseau was a mediator between the French-dominated Enlightenment and the predominantly German Romanticism that took over the leading position in European philosophy toward the end of the eighteenth century. Here, Rousseau's admiration for the original human being was further developed, the first theoretical concepts of *culture* were put forth, and the outlines of scientific anthropology start emerging.

## ROMANTICISM

While Enlightenment thinkers saw society as a law-bound association of reasoning citizens, Romanticism cultivated the creative, emotional individual, and the warm-blooded community of feeling – the nation. Romanticism is often said to displace the Enlightenment during the years of reaction after the French Revolution. But it may be more accurate, as Gellner (1991) suggests, to see the two movements as parallel flows, at times diverging or competing, at times intersecting and binding together. This is especially true of anthropology, which seeks not only to understand cultural wholes (a Romantic project), but also to dissect, analyse and compare them (an enterprise of the Enlightenment).

Romanticism spread everywhere in Europe, but its influence was greatest in Germany. In the eighteenth century, when France and England were strong, centralised states, Germany was little more than a diffuse linguistic area, embracing a medieval patchwork of independent principalities, free cities and multi-ethnic landscapes that it would take another hundred years to forge into a unified nation state. Germans had reason to speculate about what bound their nation together. The French could safely invoke the universality of human reason, as long as French fashion, language and nobility dominated the Western world and defined *what reason was*. One of the most popular German romantics even took a French pen-name: Jean Paul. Predictably, the politically fragmented, but culturally articulate Germans would at some point react to French domination.

1770 was a seminal year for this movement. It was when the young poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) – the soon-to-be spiritual father of the German nation – met the philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), who had recently made a major contribution to linguistics. Their meeting is said to be the spark that ignited the *Sturm und Drang* epoch of German cultural history, with its sharply reasoned philosophy and its worship of the poet's solitary yearnings and the people's deep and inscrutable fate. In 1784–91, Herder published his magnum opus, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (*Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, 1968), where he presents the ideas that had made him famous during the last 15 years as parts of a wider, continuous argument. He attacks French universalism as it was propounded, for example, by Voltaire, and argues that human experience is a totality that cannot be split into separate functions, such as reason, sense perception and emotion. Every people (*Volk*) shares a holistic, bodily experience, grounded in common history, common dependence on local natural environments and a national character (*Volksgeist*) that expressed itself through language, folklore and myths.

According to Herder, cosmopolitanism and cultural intermixture damaged the nation's moral integrity. This notion of *Volk* added fuel to the nationalist ideologies that swept like wildfire through nineteenth-century Europe. However, Herder is also considered the father of the anthropological concepts of culture and cultural relativism. During the many years he spent in Riga, he investigated Latvian folk traditions and poetry, and found a *Volksgeist* buried in them that was suppressed by (German-led) internationalism. It

is an important paradox that cultural relativism and nationalism both trace their origins back to Romanticism.

The greatest philosopher of the time was Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), whose contribution to European thought is too pervasive to fit into any philosophical school. Here we consider him a German Romanticist in order to highlight how his work was continued by the Romanticist Hegel. The Romantic element in Kant lies in his overcoming the split between sensual and rational knowledge. In his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781; *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1991) Kant argued that empiricism and rationalism were not opposed, but two sides of the same coin. Knowledge was both sensual and mathematical, objective and subjective. The problem was not a matter of choosing between extremes, but of demonstrating how they presuppose each other. After Kant's revolution, knowledge no longer consisted of mental images that reflected reality as it is in itself more or less adequately, but of mental *judgements* based on criteria that are subjective (they exist only in the mind), but also objective (they are universally present in every knowing mind).

We argue that these formulations made social science possible. We do not imply that Kant single-handedly laid the groundwork for the sciences of society. However, Kant established the preconditions for a species of social theory that has shaped anthropology deeply. A direct line leads from Kant, via Hegel, to Marx, Durkheim, Weber and the classical sociology that remains the core of anthropological theory to this day. Kant opened up a new field of intellectual endeavour by demonstrating that it was possible to produce scientific knowledge about society. In all the precursors of social science we have seen so far, we sense an underlying uncertainty about the very definition of the social. What kind of reality was society? What could we know about it? Some (with Vico) were attracted to the natural sciences, hoping to discover social laws similar to the laws of physics. Others (as Rousseau) saw their role as more artistic. Now Kant seemed to offer a third way. Knowledge is self-reflexive, the subject must be conscious of itself as a knowing subject in order to know the object. To study 'the world out there' is to study the encounter between the world and myself. Our meeting, gives the world a subjectively knowable form, that still is objective, since it derives from universal qualities inherent in understanding as such. As any anthropologist on fieldwork will tell you: to know the world is to contribute to its creation. Suddenly it seemed possible that those parts of the world that are not extended in space – Descartes' thought substance – could indeed be investigated scientifically. Still,

something hindered the direct application of Kant's insights to social science. This 'something' would be only be addressed by his successor, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831).

Kant's critical reasoning shook the foundations of Western thinking, and after his death there were many attempts to find loopholes in his logical construction and complete the revolution he started. Hegel's goal was to bring together Kant's idea of the universal preconditions of knowledge, and the particularistic orientation of Herder and the Romanticists. Kant's knowing subject existed outside context and history. It belonged to no concrete place or time. Hegel sought to reinstate it in the world by focusing on its 'spirit' (*Geist*) – a concept he developed in great and often cryptic detail in *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 2000).

Like Kant's knowledge, Hegel's spirit is self-reflexive: A subject can know another only by knowing itself as a knowing subject. Hegel adds intersubjectivity to this picture: A subject can only know itself when it is known by another knowing subject. 'Spirit' is the relationship between the knower and the known – two points with no independent existence, their only being is their relation (Habermas 1999).

From a social scientist's point of view, Kant's revolution was now complete. Knowledge of society is knowledge of 'spirit', of self-reflexive relations and patterns of relations. Hegel refers to this pattern as a whole, as the 'world spirit' (*Weltgeist*). It has its centres and peripheries, and changes in accordance with evolutionary laws. Later theoreticians have described it in various terms, as structure, function, solidarity, power, system, aggregate or discourse. Indeed, Hegel's far-ranging discussion of the dialectics of the world spirit's self-expression through history, was not only the first systemic description of sociality in motion, but the first systematic vision of a truly global humanity (Geana 1995).

But still, this is not social science. The communicative collective and the subjects participating in it are too abstract and lacking in context. Yet it is here we find the root of the idea of a socially constructed reality (Berger and Luckman 1966), which is our most important heritage from eighteenth-century European philosophy.

But this idea also had strong affinities with the nationalist movements that Herder had inspired, which had spread throughout Europe in the decades after 1800. Nations were precisely such socially constructed realities ('imagined communities', according to one modern authority) as Hegel had described, each with its

unique style and character. Ideally, the nation was a collectivity of the people, ruled by the people, in accordance with the people's deepest longings and needs. But although nationalism was inspired by Romantic philosophy, as a social movement it was a product of underlying historical processes: the political upheavals in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, the sense of alienation brought about by industrialisation, the spread of revolutionary ideals of freedom, equality and brotherhood.

It was into this world of upheaval and transition that anthropology first emerged as an academic discipline. The first step was the establishment of the ethnographic museums. Collections of exotica had long existed at the European courts. One of the earliest, founded by Danish King Frederik III, dates back to 1650 and would later form the basis of the Danish National Museum. But systematic collection of ethnographica only started in the 1800s. Large national museums were established in London (1753), Paris (1801) and Washington, DC (1843), and these would all eventually develop influential ethnographic departments. Still, the first specialised ethnographic museums were established in German-speaking areas, notably Vienna (1806), Munich (1859) and Berlin (1868). This may seem surprising, as Germany and Austria had no colonial empires. Nevertheless, German academics had, in accordance with Herder's programme, begun to carry out empirical studies of the customs of 'the people'. They collected data on peasant life – folktales and legends, dress and dance, crafts and skills. The earliest museums were primarily concerned with *Volkskunde* (the study of peasant cultures at home) rather than *Völkerkunde* (the study of remote peoples). Thus, the institutionalisation of anthropology commenced in Germany, rather than in France or Britain – a fact that is often overlooked in accounts of the history of anthropology.

As the next chapter will show, German anthropology retained an important, in some respects a dominant, position throughout the nineteenth century, while in Britain a more peculiar 'Victorian' anthropology emerged.

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