

## Anthropology, Culture and Society

Series Editors:

Professor Thomas Hylland Eriksen, University of Oslo  
Dr Jon P. Mitchell, University of Sussex

- Land, Law and Environment:  
Mythical Land, Legal Boundaries*  
Edited by ALLEN ABRAMSON AND  
DIMITRIOS THEODOSSOPOULOS
- The Trouble with Community:  
Anthropological Reflections on  
Movement, Identity and Collectivity*  
VERED AMIT AND NIGEL RAPPOORT
- Anthropology and the Will to Meaning:  
A Postcolonial Critique*  
VASSOS ARGYROU
- Risk Revisited*  
Edited by PAT CAPLAN
- Macedonia:  
The Politics of Identity and Difference*  
Edited by JANE K. COWAN
- Ethnicity and Nationalism:  
Anthropological Perspectives*  
THOMAS HYLLEND ERIKSEN
- Globalisation:  
Studies in Anthropology*  
THOMAS HYLLEND ERIKSEN
- A History of Anthropology*  
THOMAS HYLLEND ERIKSEN AND  
FINN SIVERT NIELSEN
- Small Places, Large Issues:  
An Introduction to Social  
and Cultural Anthropology*  
THOMAS HYLLEND ERIKSEN
- Anthropology, Development and  
the Post-modern Challenge*  
KATY GARDNER AND DAVID LEWIS
- Power and its Disguises:  
Anthropological Perspectives on Power*  
JOHN GLEDHILL
- Control and Subversion:  
Gender Relations in Tajikistan*  
COLETTE HARRIS
- Youth and the State in Hungary:  
Capitalism, Communism and Class*  
LÁSZLÓ KÖRÖSI
- Locating Cultural Creativity*  
Edited by JOHN LIEP
- Cord of Blood:  
Possession and the Making of Voodoo*  
NADIA LOVELL
- Cultivating Development:  
An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*  
DAVID MOSSE
- Ethnography and Prostitution in Peru*  
LORRAINE NENCEL
- Witchcraft, Power and Politics:  
Exploring the Occult in  
the South African Lowveld*  
ISAK A. NIEHAUS with ELIAZAAR MOHLALA  
AND KALLY SHOKANE
- Power Community and the State:  
The Political Anthropology  
of Organisation in Mexico*  
MONIQUE NUIJTEN
- Social Mobility in Kerala:  
Modernity and Identity in Conflict*  
FILIPPO OSELLA AND CAROLINE OSELLA
- Negotiating Local Knowledge:  
Power and Identity in Development*  
Edited by  
JOHAN POTTIER, ALAN BICKER  
AND PAUL SILLITOE
- Class, Nation and Identity:  
The Anthropology of Political Movements*  
JEFF PRATT
- The Cultural Politics of Markets:  
Economic Liberalization and  
Social Change in Nepal*  
KATHERINE NEILSON RANKIN
- Bearing Witness:  
Women and the Truth and Reconciliation  
Commission in South Africa*  
FIONA C. ROSS
- Landscape Memory and History:  
Anthropological Perspectives*  
Edited by  
PAMELA J. STEWART  
AND ANDREW STRATHERN
- Race, Nation and Culture:  
An Anthropological Perspective*  
PETER WADE

# What is Anthropology?

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

Pluto  Press  
LONDON • ANN ARBOR, MI

# 1

## Why Anthropology?

A generation ago, anthropology was scarcely known outside of academic circles. It was a tiny university subject taught in a few dozen countries, seen by outsiders as esoteric and by insiders as a kind of sacred knowledge guarded by a community of devoted initiates. Anthropologists went about their fieldwork in remote areas and returned with fascinating, but often arcane analyses of kinship, slash and burn horticulture or warfare among 'the others'. With a few spectacular exceptions, the interest in anthropology from the outside world was modest, and its influence was usually limited to academic circles. Only very rarely did it play a part in the public life of the anthropologist's own society.

This has changed. Growing numbers of non-academics in the West have discovered that anthropology represents certain fundamental insights concerning the human condition, applicable in many everyday situations at home. Its concepts are being borrowed by other university disciplines and applied to new phenomena, its ideas about the need to see human life from below and from the inside have influenced popular journalism, and student numbers have grown steadily, in some places dramatically. For example, at the University of Oslo, the number of anthropology students grew from about 70 in 1982 to more than 600 a decade later.

In many western societies, anthropology and ideas derived from the subject became part of the vocabulary of journalists and policymakers in the 1990s. This is no coincidence. In fact, it can be argued that anthropology is indispensable for understanding the present world, and there is no need to have a strong passion for African kinship or Polynesian gift exchange to appreciate its significance.

There are several reasons why anthropological knowledge can help in making sense of the contemporary world. First, contact between culturally different groups has increased enormously in our time. Long-distance travel has become common, safe and relatively inexpensive. In the nineteenth century, only a small

proportion of the western populations travelled to other countries (emigrants excluded), and as late as the 1950s, even fairly affluent westerners rarely went on holiday abroad. As is well known, this has changed dramatically in recent decades. The flows of people who move temporarily between countries have grown and have led to intensified contact: business-people, aid workers and tourists travel from more economically developed countries to less economically developed ones, and labour migrants, refugees and students move in the opposite direction. Many more westerners visit 'exotic' places today than a generation ago. In the 1950s, people may have been able to go on a trip to Rome or London once in their lifetime. In the 1980s, people could travel by Interrail to Portugal and Greece, and take similar trips every summer. Young people with similar backgrounds today might go on holiday to the Far East, Latin America and India. The scope of tourism has also been widened and now includes tailor-made trips and a broad range of special interest forms including 'adventure tourism' and 'cultural tourism', where one can go on guided tours to South African townships, Brazilian *favelas* or Indonesian villages. The fact that 'cultural tourism' has become an important source of income for many communities in the less economically developed world can be seen as an indication of an increased interest in other cultures from the West. It can be a short step from cultural tourism to anthropological studies proper.

At the same time as 'we' visit 'them' in growing numbers and under new circumstances, the opposite movement also takes place, though not for the same reasons. It is because of the great differences in standards of living and life opportunities between more and less economically developed countries that millions of people from non-western countries have settled in Europe and North America. A generation ago, it might have been necessary for an inhabitant in a western city to travel to the Indian subcontinent in order to savour the fragrances and sounds of subcontinental cuisine and music. Today there are large numbers of Indian restaurants in many western cities, ranging from four-star establishments to inexpensive takeaway holes in the wall. Pieces and fragments of the world's cultural variation can now be found on the doorstep of westerners. As a result, the curiosity about others has been stimulated, and it has also become necessary for political reasons to understand what cultural

variation entails. Current controversies over multicultural issues, such as religious minority rights, the *hijab* (shawl or headscarf), language instruction in schools and calls for affirmative action because of ethnic discrimination in the labour market testify to an urgent need to deal sensibly with cultural differences.

Second, the world is shrinking in other ways too. Satellite television, cellphone networks and the Internet have created conditions for truly global, instantaneous and friction-free communications. Distance is no longer a decisive hindrance for close contact; new, deterritorialised social networks or even 'virtual communities' develop, and at the same time, individuals have a larger palette of information to choose from. Moreover, the economy is also becoming increasingly globally integrated. Transnational companies have grown dramatically in numbers, size and economic importance over the last decades. The capitalist mode of production and monetary economies in general, globally dominant throughout the twentieth century, have become nearly universal. In politics as well, global issues increasingly dominate the agenda. Issues of war and peace, the environment and poverty are all of such a scope, and involve so many transnational linkages, that they cannot be handled satisfactorily by single states alone. AIDS and international terrorism are also transnational problems which can only be understood and addressed through international cooperation. This ever tighter interweaving of formerly relatively separate sociocultural environments can lead to a growing recognition of the fact that we are all in the same boat; that humanity, divided as it is by class, culture, geography and opportunities, is fundamentally one.

Third, culture changes rapidly in our day and age, which is felt nearly everywhere in the world. In the West, typical ways of life are being transformed. The stable nuclear family is no longer the only common and socially acceptable way of life. Youth culture and trends in fashion and music change so fast that older people have difficulties following their twists and turns; food habits are being transformed, leading to greater diversity within many countries, and so on. These and other changes make it necessary to ask questions such as: 'Who are we really?', 'What is our culture, and is it at all meaningful to speak of a "we" that "has" a "culture"?' 'What do we have in common with the people who used to live here 50 years ago, and what do we have in common with people

who live in an entirely different place today?' 'Is it still defensible to speak as if we primarily belong to nations, or are other forms of group belonging more important?'

Fourth, recent decades have seen the rise of an unprecedented interest in cultural identity, which is increasingly seen as an asset. Many feel that their local uniqueness is threatened by globalisation, indirect colonialism and other forms of influence from the outside, and react by attempting to strengthen or at least preserve what they see as their unique culture. In many cases, minority organisations demand cultural rights on behalf of their constituency; in other cases, the state tries to slow down or prevent processes of change or outside influence through legislation.

Our era, the period after the fall of the Berlin wall and the disappearance of Soviet-style communism, the time of the Internet and satellite TV, the time of global capitalism, ethnic cleansing and multi-ethnic modernities, has been labelled, among other things, the age of globalisation and the information age. In order to understand this seemingly chaotic, confusing and complex historical period, there is a need for a perspective on humanity which does not take preconceived assumptions about human societies for granted, which is sensitive to both similarities and differences, and which simultaneously approaches the human world from a global and a local angle. The only academic subject which fulfils these conditions is anthropology, which studies humans in societies under the most varying circumstances imaginable, yet searches for patterns and similarities, but is fundamentally critical of quick solutions and simple answers to complex questions.

Although the concepts and ideas of anthropology have become widely circulated in recent years, anthropology as such remains little known. It is still widely believed that the aim of anthropology consists in 'discovering' new peoples, in remote locations such as the Amazon or Borneo. Many assume that anthropologists are drawn magnetically towards the most exotic customs and rituals imaginable, eschewing the commonplace for the spectacular. There are those who believe that anthropologists spend most of their lives travelling the world, with or without khaki suits, intermittently penning dry, learned travelogues. All these notions about anthropology are wrong, although they – like many myths of their kind – contain a kernel of truth.

## THE UNIQUENESS OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology is an intellectually challenging, theoretically ambitious subject which tries to achieve an understanding of culture, society and humanity through detailed studies of local life, supplemented by comparison. Many are attracted to it for personal reasons; they may have grown up in a culturally foreign environment, or they are simply fascinated by faraway places, or they are engaged in minority rights issues – immigrants, indigenous groups or other minorities, as the case might be – or they might even have fallen in love with a Mexican village or an African man. But as a profession and as a science, anthropology has grander ambitions than offering keys to individual self-understanding, or bringing travel stories or political tracts to the people. At the deepest level, anthropology raises philosophical questions which it tries to respond to by exploring human lives under different conditions. At a slightly less lofty level, it may be said that the task of anthropology is to create astonishment, to show that the world is both richer and more complex than it is usually assumed to be.

To simplify somewhat, one may say that anthropology primarily offers two kinds of insight. First, the discipline produces knowledge about the actual cultural variation in the world; studies may deal with, say, the role of caste and wealth in Indian village life, technology among highland people in New Guinea, religion in southern Africa, food habits in northern Norway, the political importance of kinship in the Middle East, or notions about gender in the Amazon basin. Although most anthropologists are specialists on one or two regions, it is necessary to be knowledgeable about global cultural variation in order to be able to say anything interesting about one's region, topic or people.

Second, anthropology offers methods and theoretical perspectives enabling the practitioner to explore, compare and understand these varied expressions of the human condition. In other words, the subject offers both things to think *about* and things to think *with*.

But anthropology is not just a toolbox; it is also a craft which teaches the novice how to obtain a certain kind of knowledge and what this knowledge might say something about. Just as a carpenter can specialise in either furniture or buildings, and

one journalist may cover fluctuations in the stockmarket while another deals with royal scandals, the craft of anthropology can be used for many different things. Like carpenters or journalists, all anthropologists share a set of professional skills.

Some newcomers to the subject are flabbergasted at its theoretical character, and some see it as deeply ironic that a subject which claims to make sense of the life-worlds of ordinary people can be so difficult to read. Many anthropological texts are beautifully written, but it is also true that many of them are tough and convoluted. Anthropology insists on being analytical and theoretical, and as a consequence, it can often feel both inaccessible and even alienating. Since its contents are so important and – arguably – fascinating, this only indicates that there is a great need for good popularisations of anthropology.

Anthropology is not alone in studying society and culture academically. Sociology describes and accounts for social life, especially in modern societies, in great breadth and depth. Political science deals with politics at all levels, from the municipal to the global. Psychology studies the mental life of humans by means of scientific and interpretive methods, and human geography looks at economic and social processes in a transnational perspective. Finally, there is the recent subject, controversial but popular among students and the public, of cultural studies, which can be described as an amalgamation of cultural sociology, history of ideas, literary studies and anthropology. (Evil tongues describe it as ‘anthropology without the pain’, that is without field research and meticulous analysis.) In other words, there is a considerable overlap between the social sciences, and it may well be argued that the disciplinary boundaries are to some extent artificial. The social sciences represent some of the same interests and try to respond to some of the same questions, although there are also differences. Moreover, anthropology also has much in common with humanities such as literary studies and history. Philosophy has always provided intellectual input for anthropology, and there is a productive, passionately debated frontier area towards biology.

A generation ago, anthropology still concentrated almost exclusively on detailed studies of local life in traditional societies, and ethnographic fieldwork was its main – in some cases its sole – method. The situation has become more complex, because

anthropologists now study all kinds of societies and also because the methodological repertoire has become more varied. This book consists in its entirety of a long answer to the question ‘What is anthropology?’, but for now, we might say that it is *the comparative study of culture and society, with a focus on local life*. Put differently, anthropology distinguishes itself from other lines of enquiry by insisting that social reality is first and foremost created through relationships between persons and the groups they belong to. A currently fashionable concept such as globalisation, for example, has no meaning to an anthropologist unless it can be studied through actual persons, their relationship to each other and to a larger surrounding world. When this level of the ‘nitty-gritty’ is established, it is possible to explore the linkages between the locally lived world and large-scale phenomena (such as global capitalism or the state). But it is only when an anthropologist has spent enough time crawling on all fours, as it were, studying the world through a magnifying glass, that he or she is ready to enter the helicopter in order to obtain an overview.

Anthropology means, translated literally from ancient Greek, the study of humanity. As already indicated, anthropologists do not have a monopoly here. Besides, there are other anthropologies than the one described in this book. Philosophical anthropology raises fundamental questions concerning the human condition. Physical anthropology is the study of human pre-history and evolution. (For some time, physical anthropology also included the study of ‘races’. These are no longer scientifically interesting since genetics has disproven their existence, but in social and cultural anthropology, race may still be interesting as a social construction, because it remains important in many ideologies that people live by.) Moreover, a distinction, admittedly a fuzzy one, is sometimes drawn between *cultural* and *social* anthropology. Cultural anthropology is the term used in the USA (and some other countries), while social anthropology traces its origins to Britain and, to some extent, France. Historically, there have been certain differences between these traditions – social anthropology has its foundation in sociological theory, while cultural anthropology is more broadly based – but the distinction has become sufficiently blurred not to be bothered with here. In the following, the distinction between social and cultural anthropology will only

be used when it is necessary to highlight the specificity of North American or European anthropology.

As a university discipline, anthropology is not a very old subject – it has been taught for about 100 years – but it has raised questions which have been formulated in different guises since antiquity: Are the differences between peoples inborn or learned? Why are there so many languages, and how different are they really? Do all religions have something in common? Which forms of governance exist, and how do they work? Is it possible to rank societies on a ladder according to their level of development? What is it that all humans have in common? And, perhaps most importantly: What kind of creatures are humans; aggressive animals, social animals, religious animals or are they, perhaps, the only self-defining animals on the planet?

Every thinking person has an opinion on these matters. Some of them can hardly be answered once and for all, but they can at least be asked in an accurate and informed way. It is the goal of anthropology to establish as detailed a knowledge as possible about varied forms of human life, and to develop a conceptual apparatus making it possible to compare them. This in turn enables us to understand both differences and similarities between the many different ways of being human. In spite of the enormous variations anthropologists document, the very existence of the discipline proves beyond doubt that it is possible to communicate fruitfully and intelligibly between different forms of human life. Had it been impossible to understand culturally remote peoples, anthropology as such would have been impossible; and nobody who practises anthropology believes that this is impossible (although few believe that it is possible to understand everything). On the contrary, different societies are made to shed light on each other through comparison.

The great enigma of anthropology can be phrased like this: All over the world, humans are born with the same cognitive and physical apparatus, and yet they grow into distinctly different persons and groups, with different societal types, beliefs, technologies, languages and notions about the good life. Differences in innate endowments vary within each group and not between them, so that musicality, intelligence, intuition and other qualities which vary from person to person, are quite evenly distributed globally. It is not the case that Africans are 'born with

rhythm', or that northerners are 'innately cold and introverted'. To the extent that such differences exist, they are not inborn. On the other hand, it is true that particular social milieux stimulate inborn potentials for rhythmicity, while others encourage the ability to think abstractly. Mozart, a man filled to the brim with musical talent, would hardly have become the world's greatest composer if he, that is a person with the same genetic code as Mozart, had been born in Greenland. Perhaps he would only have become a bad hunter (because of his famous impatience).

Put differently, and paraphrasing the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, all humans are born with the potential to live thousands of different lives, yet we end up having lived only one. One of the central tasks of anthropology consists of giving accounts of some of the other lives we could have led.

#### ENLIGHTENMENT AND EVOLUTIONISM

This is not the place for a detailed account of the history of anthropology, but a brief excursion back in time is necessary in order to give a proper context to the present and the recent past.

Like other human sciences, anthropology emerged as a distinct field of enquiry in Europe following the period of heightened intellectual awareness and scientific curiosity known as the Enlightenment, at the end of the eighteenth century. More or less trustworthy accounts about remote peoples had already been recorded for centuries by European missionaries, officers and other travellers, and they now formed the raw material for general theories about cultural variation. (An early theory, sometimes attributed to Montesquieu, explained cultural differences as a consequence of climatic variation.) From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, a family of theories usually described as *evolutionism* became dominant. The adherents of these doctrines assumed that societies could be ranked according to their level of development, and unsurprisingly built on the premise that the author's own society was the end-product of a long and strenuous process of social evolution. Technological elements such as the bow and arrow, plough-driven agriculture with beasts of burden and writing were posited as the boundaries between the 'evolutionary levels'. The evolutionist models were

both compatible with (and similar in form to) Darwin's theory of biological evolution, which was launched in 1859, and with the colonial ideology stating that non-European peoples must be governed and developed from above, sternly and with force if need be.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, evolutionist accounts met serious competition in *diffusionism*, a largely German language tendency which, as the name suggests, emphasised the study of the spreading of cultural traits. Whereas the evolutionists tended to assume that every society contained the germ of its own development, diffusionists argued that change largely took place through contact and 'borrowing'.

Momentous changes characterised western societies during the first decades of the twentieth century, with the First World War as a dramatic high point. In the same period, a near total revolution took place in anthropology. The established evolutionist and diffusionist explanations were discarded for several reasons.

Evolutionism was now judged as a fundamentally flawed approach. The increasingly detailed and nuanced studies which were now at the anthropologists' disposal did not indicate that societies developed along a predetermined pattern, and the normative assumption that the scholar's own society was at the top of the ladder had been exposed as plain bigotry and prejudice. The considerable cultural differences between societies possessing roughly the same technology (such as San in southern Africa and Australian Aborigines), indicated that it was unthinkable that 'primitive peoples' could be seen as suggestive of what our own societies might have been like at an earlier stage, which evolutionists claimed.

Diffusionism was rejected chiefly because it made assumptions about contacts and processes of diffusion which could not be substantiated. The fact that similar phenomena, such as techniques or beliefs, existed in two or more places, did not in itself prove that there had been historical contact between them. The phenomenon in question might have developed independently in several places. On the other hand, nobody doubts that diffusion takes place (it is in fact a central premise for a contemporary trend in social science, namely globalisation studies), and it may well be argued that the 'Young Turks' of early twentieth-century anthropology overdid their critique of

diffusionism, with the result that anthropology became lopsided in the opposite way; as the study of single, small-scale societies.

Be this as it may, the main point is that the collection of data about 'other cultures' was by now – the decade preceding the First World War – subjected to ever stricter quality demands, and as far as the people who did the collecting were concerned, professional researchers gradually replaced other travellers, going on lengthy expeditions to collect detailed and often specialised data.

#### THE FOUNDING FATHERS

Four men are conventionally mentioned as the founders of modern anthropology: Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, AR Radcliffe-Brown and Marcel Mauss. Boas, born in 1864, was German, but emigrated to the USA after several lengthy stays in the country in the 1880s and 1890s. As a professor at Columbia University, he was instrumental in establishing American cultural anthropology, and 'Papa Franz' was the undisputed leader of the discipline until his death in 1942. Most of the American anthropologists of note in the first half of the twentieth century had been students of Boas.

Boas had very wide-ranging interests, but in this context, we shall associate him with two particularly important, and typical, concepts, which contributed to defining American anthropology: *cultural relativism* and *historical particularism*. Cultural relativism is the view that every society, or every culture, has to be understood on its own terms, from within, and that it is neither possible nor particularly interesting to rank societies on an evolutionary ladder.

In Boas' youth, evolutionist perspectives were widespread. In order to understand cultural variation, he argued, this way of thinking is not satisfactory. In fact, he regarded the belief that certain societies were objectively more advanced than others as an ethnocentric fallacy, that is a view governed by prejudice and an unconsidered belief in the superiority of one's own culture.

Cultural relativism is primarily a method (not a world-view) designed to explore cultural variation as independently as possible from the researcher's prejudices. Its aim is to learn to see the world, as far as possible, in the same way as the informants, or 'natives', see it. Theoretical analysis can begin only when this is

achieved. In today's public debates about cultural contact and 'integration' of migrants in the West, a similar ideal might be posited; only when one has understood the lives of others, can it be justified to make moral judgements about them.

Boas' historical particularism, which is closely related to cultural relativism, consists of the view that every society has its own, unique history, which is to say that there are no 'necessary stages' that societies pass through. As a result, it is impossible to generalise about historical sequences; they are all unique. All societies have their own paths towards sustainability and their own mechanisms of change, Boas argued. Both this view and certain forms of cultural relativism have always been controversial among anthropologists, but they have been deeply influential up to the present.

Malinowski, born in 1884, was a Pole who studied in Krakow, but he emigrated to England to further his studies in anthropology. Malinowski was a charismatic and inspiring teacher in his time, but his sustained influence has been particularly strong regarding intensive fieldwork as method. Malinowski was not the first to carry out long-term fieldwork in local communities (Boas, for one, had done it), but his study of the inhabitants of the Trobriand islands during the First World War was so detailed and thorough that it set a standard which has its defenders even today. Through a series of books about the Trobriands, the first and most famous of which was *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski showed the enormous intellectual potential of the slow, meticulous and painstakingly detailed study of a small group of which his fieldwork was an exemplar. He wrote about the economy, the religion and the political organisation of the Trobrianders with great authority, and due to his very comprehensive knowledge of their way of life, he was able to demonstrate the interconnections between such partial systems.

In his field methodology, Malinowski strongly emphasised the need to learn the native language, and recommended that the main method should be one of *participant observation*: the ethnographer should live with the people he studied, he should participate in their everyday activities, and make systematic observations as he went along. Similar if not necessarily identical ideals guide anthropological fieldwork even today.

It would be grossly misleading to claim that anthropological investigations began with Boas and Malinowski. Of course, people have asked questions concerning cultural variation and 'how others live' for thousands of years, and both cultural theory and ethnography had existed in various guises long before them. Yet they contributed, perhaps more than anyone else, to turning anthropology into a body of knowledge sufficiently organised and coherent to deserve the label science. The method of fieldwork through long-term participant observation ensured that the knowledge procured by ethnographers was reliable and usable in comparisons, and the principle of cultural relativism was intended not only to keep prejudices in check, but also to develop a neutral, descriptive terminology for describing cultural variation.

Although hardly of central importance, the biographies of Boas and Malinowski may shed a little light on their unorthodox approaches to cultural variation. As indicated above, both men spent most of their adult life abroad; the German Boas in the USA, the Pole Malinowski in England. One may wonder if the uprootedness and alienness they must have felt, both in relation to their native countries and towards their new ones, could not have been a valuable resource when they set out to develop their new science. For it is only when one is able to see one's own culture from a marginal vantage point that one can understand it in anthropological terms. Most people live their entire lives without reflecting upon the fact that they are profoundly shaped by a particular culture. Such 'homeblindness' by default makes them less suited for studying other peoples than those who have realised that even their own habits and notions are created in a particular social environment, under special circumstances; and that they would in crucial ways have been different individuals if they had been raised elsewhere. This kind of reflexivity – self-reflection – is both a condition for the comparative study of culture and society, and a result of it. When the novice anthropologist returns from her first fieldwork, she inevitably views her own society in a new light. However, one must also, to some extent, be able to leave one's own society behind mentally before embarking on fieldwork. Anthropologists try to impart this skill through their teaching of anthropological concepts and models, but the students are unlikely to realise that they have acquired it until it has become too late to return to an earlier state of innocence.



In fact, a significant number of anthropologists have a personal background which has to a certain degree alienated them in relation to their society; quite a few have spent several years in another country as children of diplomats, aid workers or missionaries; some are adopted from another country or have a minority background; and Jews have always been strongly represented in the profession. Women have always been more prominent in anthropology than in most other academic professions. For once, in other words, being a partial stranger can be an asset.

The third of the leading anthropologists during the crucial first decades of the twentieth century was never the less a native Englishman, AR Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955). Radcliffe-Brown, who spent many years teaching and undertaking research at the universities of Chicago, Cape Town and Sydney, before returning to a chair in Oxford in 1937, is chiefly known for his ambitious scientific programme for social anthropology. Unlike Boas, and to some extent Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown's interest was not in culture and meaning, but in the ways societies functioned. He was deeply influenced by Emile Durkheim's sociology, which was primarily a doctrine about social integration, and used it as a stepping-stone to develop *structural-functionalism* in anthropology. This theory argued that all the parts, or institutions, of a society filled a particular function, roughly in the same way as all bodily parts contribute to the whole; and that the ultimate goal of anthropology consisted in establishing 'natural laws of society' with the same level of precision as the ones found in natural science. Like Boas and Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown had his circle of outstanding, devoted students, some of them among the most influential British anthropologists of the postwar years. However, his original programme was eventually abandoned by most of them. It would soon become clear that societies were much less predictable than cells and chemical compounds.

To many anthropologists, the fourth ancestor to be mentioned here is the most important one. Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) is not associated with a concept such as cultural relativism, a method like participant observation, or a theory such as structural-functionalism. Yet his influence on anthropology, especially in France, has been decisive. Mauss was a nephew of the great Durkheim, and they collaborated closely until Durkheim's death in 1917, writing, among other things, a book entitled *Primitive*

*Classification* together. Mauss was a learned man, familiar with many languages, global cultural history and the classics. Although he never carried out fieldwork, he wrote insightful essays covering a broad range of themes (and relentlessly taught techniques of observation): on the concept of the person in different societies, on nationalism and on the body as a social product. His most famous contribution is a powerful essay about gift exchange in traditional societies. Mauss shows that *reciprocity*, the exchange of gifts and services, is the 'glue' that ties societies together in the absence of a centralised power. Gifts may appear to be voluntary, but are in fact obligatory, and they create debts of gratitude and other social commitments of considerable scope and duration. Other anthropologists continue to build analyses on this perspective even today.

Slightly simplistically, one may say that these four founders and their many students defined the mainstream of twentieth-century anthropology. (Several fascinating minor lines of intellectual descent also exist, but space does not permit an exploration of them here.) However, anthropology has always been a self-critical subject, and these great men did not only exert influence through their admonitions and writings, but also by provoking contradiction and criticism. The cultural relativism of Boas (and the Boasians) met strong resistance in the postwar years, when a new generation of American anthropologists would return to the pre-Boasian concerns with social evolution and concentrate on material conditions, technology and economics. Malinowski, and to some extent his students, were criticised for being unfocused and theoretically weak. Radcliffe-Brown, on his part, was criticised for seeming to believe that his elegant models were more truthful than the far more chaotic social reality; and in France, Mauss was, some years later, largely seen as irrelevant by young, politically radical anthropologists who were more keen on studying conflict than integration.

In the decades after the Second World War, anthropology grew and diversified rapidly. New theoretical schools and perspectives appeared, fieldwork was carried out in new areas, which also added complexity and perspectives; new research centres and university departments were founded, and at the start of the twenty-first century, there are thousands of professional anthropologists worldwide, all of them specialised in one way or another. It may

still be said that underneath this teeming diversity, there is a clearly defined, shared subject. The reason is that we continue to return to the same fundamental questions, which are raised in roughly the same ways everywhere. A Brazilian anthropologist and her Russian colleague may perfectly well understand each other (provided they have a common language, which in most cases would be English); there is much to distinguish a feminist postmodernist from a human ecologist, but if they are both anthropologists, they still have much in common intellectually. In spite of intellectual patricides and matricides, heated controversies and bewildering specialisation, anthropology is still delineated through its consistent interest in the relationship between the unique and the universal, its emphasis on 'the native's point of view' (Malinowski's term) and the study of local life, its ambition to understand connections in societies and its comparisons between societies.

#### FURTHER READING

- Barnard, Alan (2000) *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kuper, Adam (1996) *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The Modern British School*, 3rd edition. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

## 2 The Key Concepts

The world, as it is perceived by human beings, is to a certain extent shaped by language. However, there is no agreement as to just what the relationship between language and non-linguistic reality is. In the 1930s, the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' was launched by two linguistically oriented anthropologists. The hypothesis proposes that language creates decisive differences between the respective life-worlds different groups inhabit. Certain North American languages – the Hopi language is the most famous example – contained, according to Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, few nouns or words denoting things, and many verbs or words denoting movement and process. As a result, they reasoned, the Hopi world must contain fewer objects and more movement than, say, the life-world typically inhabited by someone who spoke English. This view, which has many adherents (albeit always in a modified form), has been challenged by the view that humans everywhere generally perceive the world in the same ways, and that all languages have many concepts in common.

There is no doubt that when one discusses abstract phenomena, terminology strongly influences what one perceives and how one perceives it. Of course, a Hindu, who is aware of the existence of many divine beings and believes in reincarnation, has ideas about life and death which differ from those of a Muslim, who worships only one god and believes in an eternal, transcendent paradise after death. These ideas are, moreover, likely to inform their everyday lives to a certain extent. In academic studies, similarly, particular concepts enable us to see certain facts in a certain way, at the expense of excluding other aspects of, or approaches to reality. If, for example, one studies a society using kinship as the central concept, one will inevitably discover other connections and problems than one would if one had instead used concepts such as patriarchy or ethnicity.

The choice of concepts and theoretical approaches is influenced both by the researcher's personal interests, his or her training, and – hopefully not least – the society under scrutiny. There