

# Recent Trends in Anthropological Thought

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## ABSTRACT

Recent trends in anthropological thought immensely include a greater emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches, global perspectives and reflexive methodologies. Anthropologists are increasingly exploring the impact of globalization, migration, and digital technologies on cultures and societies, while also engaging in more collaborative research and public outreach. Key concepts in the anthropological arena such as structure, thought, culture, ethnography, history and social change, related to epistemological frameworks centered on the discussion of objectivity, interpretation and ethnographic representation. In sum, this course frames anthropology as a humanist discipline and provider of responses to social issues with a broad public impact.

## INTRODUCTION

An increased diversity of concerns and methods has marked the modern growth of anthropological studies. Examples are the shift by some researchers from primitive to peasant and urban societies, the proliferation of symbolic and structural modes of analysis, and the development of the ethnography of communication. Modern anthropology is the development of the scientific study of humanity in recent centuries. This follows on many millennia of traditional studies of humans. In modern anthropology, humans are seen as apes, which are primates, mammals that evolved in Africa.

At the outset I wish to point out that although this paper seeks to describe the development of theories in anthropology since 1950, it is necessary, in order to put this paper in a proper perspective, to review the past in brief. It shall also be necessary to look at the developments in other disciplines, particularly in linguistics, because they came to provide the basic ideas on which much of the progress in anthropology in recent times largely depends. Anthropological thought has always progressed along two mutually exclusive paths and based on two basically different principles materialist and ideological. The materialists consider that the aim of anthropological study is to find out the basic law that governs the development of society and culture.

Among the earlier exponents of this line of thought were **Morgan, Tylor, Fraser, Spencer etc.** The School of Evolution stood for scientific study of society and culture. In recent times, Cultural Ecology, Ecological Anthropology, Cultural Materialism etc. subscribe to this view. The idealists, on the other hand, consider culture essentially a mental or psychological phenomenon and deny the existence of any natural laws. The proponents of this thought were Franz Boas and his followers. They believed that each culture was unique, and a product of its own ecological and historical circumstances, which cannot be duplicated. Their concept of cultural relativism precluded the possibility of cross-cultural comparisons and universal generalisations. The school of culture and personality also was essentially similar. In recent times, Ethnoscience, Cognitive Anthropology, Structural Anthropology, Symbolic Anthropology, Post Modernism etc. belong to this group. The two functionalist schools that developed in Europe in 1920s and 30s, stood midway between the two perspectives.

By 1940, anthropology had come to a deadlock as regards theory of society and culture. It had become a descriptive rather than an analytical discipline. The arrival of neo-evolutionists once again revived the explanatory role of anthropology. Gordon Childe and Leslie White emphasized the materialist perspective. This was the stage of anthropological thought by 1950, which is the starting point of this paper. The anthropological theories since 1950 progressed in two different lines. It will be more fruitful to look at them in

lineal sequence. Therefore, it will not always be possible to follow a strictly chronological order. We shall begin with the materialist line, taking first a branch of Neo-evolutionism the Cultural Ecology.

## Recent Trends

Additionally, the latest update in human sociology has seen a growing emphasis on global interconnectedness and the impact of globalization on societies. This includes the study of transnational social movements, migration patterns, and the increasing interconnectedness of economies and cultures.

## Cultural Ecology

The emergence of cultural ecology as an area within anthropology is formally associated with the publication of Julian Steward's "Theory of Culture Change" in 1955. Steward was interested in the evolution of cultures. However, unlike White or 19<sup>th</sup> Century evolutionists, he believed that cultures developed not in a single direction but in any number of patterns depending on their environments. He called his approach Multilinear Evolution, and the methodology for the delineation of the evolution as Cultural Ecology. His methodology focuses on environment as presenting adaptive problems & opportunities. He argues that adaptive processes shape cultures to achieve patterns that are best suited to given environment, not just any possible

## Ecological Functionalism or New Ecology

Partly as a result of dissatisfaction with problems of Cultural Ecology, and as new insights developed, a second school of ecological anthropology emerged in late 1960s. Though built on Cultural Ecology, this new approach emphasized, taking populations rather than cultures as the unit of study, cybernetics (feedback loops) rather than linear causality, study of non-subsistence traits, especially ritual and population regulation. Because of focus on how traits functioned to maintain populations in balance with their resources, and emphasis on homeostatic regulation, this approach is often termed "Ecological Functionalism" or "Neofunctionalism" or New Ecology

## Cultural Materialism

Cultural Materialism is a scientific research strategy that accords priority to the material, behaviour and etic processes in the explanation of the evolution of human socio-cultural systems. It was first introduced in The Rise of Anthropological Theory (1968) by **Marvin Harris** who is the originator and has been the main figure in cultural materialism.

## Socio-biology

Sociobiology is a very controversial new paradigm. It is a research strategy that seeks to explain human social life by means of the theoretical principles of Darwinian and neo-Darwinian evolutionary biology. The basic Darwinian principle is that individuals with those variations best suited to their environments will reproduce more than others. Sociobiologists argue that because humans are biological organisms they are subject to the same evolutionary laws as other organisms. In 1975 and 1976 two books were published which brought this concept to the attention of the anthropologists **E.O.Wilsons Sociobiology: The New Synthesis** and **Richard Dawkins The Selfish Gene**. These authors saw social behaviours as controlled, in principle, by particular genes and evolution occurring at this level because reproductive success amounted to increasing the frequency of certain genes in future generations

## Human Materialism

Recently, in 1993, **Paul Magnarella** of the University of Florida has proposed yet another paradigm called Human Materialism, which he styles as A Model of Sociocultural Systems and a Strategy for Analysis. Stimulated by the Cultural Materialism of Marvin Harris, and retaining the basic conception of Infrastructure, Structure and Superstructure, Magnarella insists they stand for different set of contents and relationships in Human Materialism (1993: 4). We now turn to the second group of anthropological thought which is based on the psychological explanations of culture, and is heavily dependent on the methodology of linguistics. As I

said earlier, the insights offered by Linguistic Relativism and the Prague School of Linguistics are mainly responsible for the development of the thoughts that now follow. We are back in time to about 1950.

### **Ethnoscience, Ethnosemantics or New Ethnography**

At about this period, validity of ethnographic data had become a matter of general concern for the anthropologists. As trained anthropologists started fieldwork in growing numbers, it was found that the ethnographies of places revisited did not always match the ethnographies of a previous generation. Ethnographic studies were often equated with laboratory experiments of the natural sciences, and thus crucial to anthropology's claims to scientific authority. But, as the **Redfield-Lewis** controversy of the early 1950s illustrated, different anthropologists studying the same people could gather very different data, unlike the situation in a "true laboratory."

### **Cognitive Anthropology**

Building upon the work of Ethnoscience, Cognitive Anthropology proposed to analyse the native categories of thought, which would lead to the knowledge of how human mind functioned. Cognitive anthropology is closely aligned with psychology, because both explore the nature of cognitive processes (**D'Andrade 1995:1**). It has also adopted theoretical elements and methodological techniques from structuralism and linguistics.

### **Symbolism or Symbolic Anthropology**

Although sharing the basic idea that the culture is a psychological or mental phenomenon with ethnoscience, structural linguistics, and cognitive anthropology, symbolic anthropology differs from them in several ways. One of the major differences is the Symbolic anthropologists belief that symbols are external expressions of meanings and are not locked inside the heads.

### **Structural Anthropology or Structuralism**

This approach is associated with one of the most famous, and at the same time most controversial, anthropologists of 20<sup>th</sup> century **Claude Levi-Strauss**. His writings exhibit the direct influence of **Durkheim and Marcel Mauss**, and his methodology the ideas of Saussure and Jakobson of Prague School of Linguistics. However his presentations are original and a little too thick for an average reader. His basic theoretical stance can be easily understood with reference to the structural linguistics.

### **Phenomenological Anthropology**

From the study of human thought to the study of human feelings was but a single step, and it would have been surprising if this step had not been taken by the anthropologists. And it was taken recently in the shape of Phenomenological Anthropology. It refers to a way of doing ethnography and ethnology which emphasizes the study of consciousness. Speaking generally, a phenomenological study is one that is grounded in the direct experience of aspects of one's own consciousness. Phenomenological anthropology is concerned with methods that may be utilized in fieldwork to "get into the native's head" and understand what the native is experiencing.

### **Postmodernism**

One of the most disputed concepts and intellectual revolutions in recent times, Post-Modernism has taken the entire social sciences by storm. In fact, its impact is felt in every branch of human knowledge. It is still a controversial concept and is highly debated even between post-modernists themselves. Post-modernism means different things to different persons. It is a complicated term, or set of ideas; one that has only emerged as an area of academic study since the mid-1980s. Postmodernism is hard to define, because it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study, including art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, fashion, and technology. In addition to those discussed above, there are also a number of theories doing the round in anthropology today. Some of these are, Holocultural Analysis,

Humanistic Anthropology, Feminist Anthropology, etc. And of course the raging debate all through the 1990s about the scientific or humanistic nature of Anthropology. The debate is still unfinished.

## CONCLUSION

Today, it is crucial to identify different approaches in the analysis and understanding of anthropological concepts (i.e. culture, structure, agency, time, space, social change, representation.) Reflecting upon the limitations, challenges and repercussions of the diversity of theoretical frameworks they are exposed to in this course. In learning about our discipline's ancestors so we can better understand current theoretical approaches and trends in our field. Examining critically the ways the anthropological knowledge learned can be applied to students' own understanding of the social reality. key concepts in the anthropological arena such as structure, thought, culture, ethnography, history and social change, related to epistemological frameworks centered on the discussion of objectivity, interpretation and ethnographic representation. In sum, this course frames anthropology as a humanist discipline and provider of responses to social issues with a broad public impact.

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