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Anthropology: Comparison and Context

> [Anthropology] is less a subject matter than a bond between subject matters. It is in part history, part literature; in part natural science, part social science; it strives to study men both from within and without; it represents both a manner of looking at man and a vision of man—the most scientific of the humanities, the most humanist of sciences.
>
> — *Eric Wolf*

Studying anthropology is like embarking on a journey which turns out to be much longer than you had initially planned, possibly because the plans were somewhat open-ended to begin with and the terrain turned out to be bumpier and more diverse than the map suggested. Fortunately, like many journeys which take an unexpected turn, this one also has numerous unexpected rewards in store (as well as, it is only fair to concede, a few frustrations en route). This journey brings the traveller from the damp rainforests of the Amazon to the cold semi-desert of the Arctic; from the streets of north London to mud huts in the Sahel; from Indonesian paddies to African cities. The aim of this book is dual: to provide useful maps, and to explore some of the main sights (as well as a few less visited sites).

In spite of the dizzying geography of this trip, it is chiefly in a different sense that this is a long journey. Social and cultural anthropology has the whole of human society as its area of interest, and tries to understand the ways in which human lives are unique, but also the sense in which we are all similar. When, for example, we study the traditional economic system of the Tiv of central Nigeria, an essential part of the exploration consists in understanding how their economy is connected with other aspects of their society. If this dimension is absent, Tiv economy becomes incomprehensible to anthropologists. If we do not know that the Tiv traditionally could not buy and sell land, and that they have customarily not used money as a means of payment, it will be plainly impossible to understand

how they themselves interpret their situation and how they responded to the economic changes imposed on their society during colonialism in the twentieth century.

Anthropology tries to account for the social and cultural variation in the world, but a crucial part of the anthropological project also consists in conceptualising and understanding similarities between social systems and human relationships. As one of the foremost anthropologists of the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), has expressed it: 'Anthropology has humanity as its object of research, but unlike the other human sciences, it tries to grasp its object through its most diverse manifestations' (1983, p. 49). Differently phrased: anthropology is about how different people can be, but it also tries to find out in what sense it can be said that all humans have something in common. It oscillates between the universal and the particular.

Another prominent anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), expresses a similar view in an essay which essentially deals with the differences between humans and animals:

> If we want to discover what man amounts to, we can only find it in what men are: and what men are, above all other things, is various. It is in understanding that variousness – its range, its nature, its basis, and its implications – that we shall come to construct a concept of human nature that, more than a statistical shadow and less than a primitivist dream, has both substance and truth. (Geertz 1973, p. 52)

Although anthropologists have wide-ranging and frequently highly specialised interests, they share a common concern in trying to understand both connections *within* societies and connections *between* societies. As will become clearer as we proceed on this journey through the subject-matter and theories of social and cultural anthropology, there is a multitude of ways in which to approach these problems. Whether you are interested in understanding why and in what sense the Azande of Central Africa believe in witches (and why most Europeans have ceased doing so), why there is greater social inequality in Brazil than in Sweden, how the inhabitants of the densely populated, ethnically complex island of Mauritius avoid violent ethnic conflict, or what has happened to the traditional ways of life of the Inuit in recent decades, in most cases one or several anthropologists would have carried out research and written on the issue. Whether you are interested in the study of religion, child-raising, political power,

economic life, gender, precarious labour or climate change, you may go to the anthropological literature for inspiration and knowledge.

Anthropologists are also concerned with accounting for the interrelationships between different aspects of human existence, and usually investigate these interrelationships taking as their point of departure a detailed study of local life in a particular society or a more or less clearly delineated social environment. One may therefore say that anthropology asks large questions, while at the same time it draws its most important insights from small places.

For many years, it was common to see its traditional focus on small-scale non-industrial societies as a distinguishing feature of anthropology, compared with other subjects dealing with culture and society. However, owing to changes in the world and in the discipline itself, this is no longer an accurate description. Practically any social system can be studied anthropologically and contemporary anthropological research displays an enormous range, empirically as well as theoretically. Some study witchcraft in contemporary South Africa, others study diplomacy. Some travel to Melanesia for fieldwork, while others take the bus to the other side of town. Some analyse the economic adaptations of migrants, others write about the new social networks on the Internet.

An Outline of the Subject

What, then, is anthropology? Let us begin with the etymology of the concept. It is a compound of two ancient Greek words, 'anthropos' and 'logos', which can be translated as 'human' and 'reason', respectively. So anthropology means 'reason about humans' or, rather, 'knowledge about humans'. Social anthropology would then mean knowledge about humans in societies. Such a definition would, of course, cover the other social sciences as well as anthropology, but it may still be useful as a beginning.

The word 'culture', which is also central to the discipline, originates from the Latin '*colere*', which means to cultivate. (The word 'colony' has the same origin.) Cultural anthropology thus means 'knowledge about cultivated humans'; that is, knowledge about those aspects of humanity which are not natural, but which are related to that which is acquired.

'Culture' has famously been described as one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language (Williams 1981, p. 87). In the early 1950s, Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber (1952 [1917]) presented 161 different definitions of culture. It would not be possible to consider

the majority of these definitions here; besides, many of them were quite similar. Let us therefore, as a preliminary conceptualisation of culture, define it as those abilities, notions and forms of behaviour persons have acquired as members of society. A definition of this kind, which is indebted to both the Victorian anthropologist E.B. Tylor (1832–1917) and to Geertz (although the latter emphasises meaning rather than behaviour), is the most common one among anthropologists.

Culture nevertheless carries with it a basic ambiguity. On the one hand, every human is equally cultural; in this sense, the term refers to a basic *similarity* within humanity distinguishing us from other animals including the higher primates. On the other hand, people have acquired different abilities, notions, etc., and are thereby *different* because of culture. Culture can, in other words, refer both to basic similarities and to systematic differences between humans.

If this sounds slightly complex, some more complexity is required at this point. As a matter of fact, the concept of culture has been contested in anthropology for decades. The influential Geertzian concept of culture, which had been elaborated through a series of erudite and elegant essays written in the 1960s and 1970s (Geertz 1973, 1983), depicted a culture both as an integrated whole, as a puzzle where all the pieces were at hand, and as a system of meanings that was largely shared by a population. Culture thus appeared as integrated, shared within the group, and bounded. But what of variations within the group, and what about similarities or mutual contacts with neighbouring groups – and what to make of, say, the technologically and economically driven processes of globalisation, which ensure that nearly every nook and cranny in the world is to varying degrees exposed to news about football world cups, climate change, wars and the concept of human rights? In many cases, it could indeed be said that a national or local culture is neither shared by all or most of the inhabitants, nor bounded. Many began to criticise the overly neat and tidy picture suggested in the dominant concept of culture, from a variety of viewpoints, some of which will be discussed in later chapters. Alternative ways of conceptualising culture were proposed (e.g. as unbounded 'cultural flows' or as 'fields of discourse', or as 'traditions of knowledge'), and some even wanted to get rid of the concept altogether (for some of the debates, see Clifford and Marcus 1986; James et al. 1997; Ortner 1999). As I shall indicate later, the concept of society has been subjected to similar critiques, but problematic as they may be, both concepts still seem to form part of the conceptual backbone of anthropology. In his magisterial, deeply ambivalent review of the culture concept in American

cultural anthropology, Adam Kuper (1999, p. 226) notes that '[t]hese days, anthropologists get remarkably nervous when they discuss culture – which is surprising, on the face of it, since the anthropology of culture is something of a success story'. The reason for this 'nervousness' is not just the contested meaning of the term 'culture', but also the fact that culture concepts that are close kin to the classic anthropological one are being exploited politically, in identity politics (see Chapters 17–19).

The relationship between culture and society can be described in the following way. Culture refers to the acquired, cognitive and symbolic aspects of existence, whereas society refers to the social organisation of human life, patterns of interaction and power relationships. The importance of this analytical distinction, which may seem bewildering or irrelevant, will eventually be evident.

A short definition of anthropology may read like this: 'Anthropology is the comparative study of cultural and social life. Its most important method is participant observation, which consists in lengthy fieldwork in a specific social setting.' In other words, anthropology compares aspects of different societies, and continuously searches for interesting dimensions for comparison. If, say, one chooses to write a monograph about a people in the New Guinea highlands, an anthropologist will always describe it with at least some concepts (such as kinship, gender and power) that render it comparable with aspects of other societies.

Further, the discipline emphasises the importance of ethnographic fieldwork, which is a thorough close-up study of a particular social and cultural environment, where the researcher is normally required to spend around a year. Many do shorter fieldwork, but many also return to the field several times, often spanning decades altogether.

Anthropology has many features in common with the other social sciences and humanities that were developed in Europe and North America between the late eighteenth century and the late nineteenth century. Indeed, a difficult question consists in deciding whether it is a science, narrowly defined, or one of the humanities. Do we search for general laws, as the natural scientists do, or do we instead try to understand and interpret different societies? E.E. Evans-Pritchard in Britain and Alfred Kroeber in the USA, leading anthropologists in their day, both argued around 1950 that anthropology had more in common with history than with the natural sciences. Although their view, considered something of a heresy at the time, has become common since, there are still anthropologists who feel that the subject should aim at a degree of scientific rigour similar to that of the natural sciences.

Some of the implications of this divergence in views will be discussed in later chapters. A few important defining features of anthropology are nevertheless common to all practitioners of the subject: it is comparative and empirical; its most important method of data collection is fieldwork; and it has a truly global focus in that it does not single out one region, or one kind of society, as being more important than others. Unlike sociology, anthropology does not concentrate its attention mainly on the industrialised world; unlike philosophy, it stresses the importance of empirical research; unlike history, it studies society as it is being enacted; and unlike linguistics, it stresses the social and cultural context of speech when looking at language. There are considerable overlaps with other sciences and disciplines, yet anthropology has its distinctive character as an intellectual discipline, based on ethnographic fieldwork, which tries simultaneously to account for actual cultural variation in the world and to develop a theoretical perspective on culture and society, and what it entails to be a human in the world.

The Universal and the Particular

'If each discipline can be said to have a central problem,' writes Michael Carrithers (1992, p. 2), 'then the central problem of anthropology is the diversity of human social life.' Put differently, you could say that anthropological research and theory tries to strike a balance between similarities and differences, and theoretical questions have often revolved around the issue of universality versus relativism: to what extent do all humans, cultures or societies have something in common, and to what extent is each of them unique? Since we employ comparative concepts, that is supposedly culturally neutral terms like kinship system, gender role, system of inheritance, etc., it is implicitly acknowledged that all or nearly all societies have several features in common. However, many anthropologists challenge this view, and claim the uniqueness of each culture or society. A strong universalist programme is found in Donald Brown's book *Human Universals* (1991), where the author claims that anthropologists have for generations exaggerated the differences between societies, neglecting the very substantial commonalities that hold humanity together. In this controversial book, Brown draws extensively on an earlier study of 'human universals', which included:

> age-grading, athletic sports, bodily adornment, calendar, cleanliness training, community organization, cooking, cooperative labor, cosmology, courtship, dancing, decorative art, divination, division of labor, dream interpretation, education, eschatology, ethics, ethnobotany, etiquette, faith healing, family, feasting, fire making, folklore, food taboos, funeral rites, games, gestures, gift giving, government, greetings … (Murdock 1945, p. 124, quoted in Brown 1991, p. 70)

And this was just the a-to-g segment of an alphabetical 'partial list'.

Several arguments have been invoked against this kind of list: that it is trivial and that what matters is to comprehend the unique expressions of such 'universals'; that phenomena such as 'family' have totally different meanings in different societies, and thus cannot be said to be 'the same' everywhere; and that this piecemeal approach to society and culture removes the very hallmark of good anthropology, namely the ability to see isolated phenomena (like age-grading or food taboos) in a broad context. An institution such as arranged marriage means something different in the Punjabi countryside than among the Bengali upper class. Is it still the same institution? Yes – and no. Brown is right in accusing anthropologists of having been inclined to emphasise the exotic and unique at the expense of neglecting cross-cultural similarities (and mutual influence between societies), but this does not mean that his approach is the only possible way of bridging the gap between societies. In later chapters, several other alternatives will be discussed, including structural-functionalism ('all societies operate according to the same general principles'), structuralism ('the human mind has a common architecture expressed through myth, kinship and other cultural phenomena'), transactionalism ('the logic of human action is the same everywhere') and materialist approaches ('culture and society are determined by ecological and/or technological factors').

The tension between the universal and the particular has been immensely productive in anthropology, and it remains an important one. One common way of framing it, inside and outside anthropology, is through the concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism.

The Problem of Ethnocentrism

A society or a cultural world, it was remarked above, must be understood on its own terms. In saying this, we warn against the application of a

shared, universal scale to be used in the evaluation of every society. Such a scale, which is often used, could be defined as longevity, gross domestic product (GDP), democratic rights, literacy rates, etc. Until quite recently, it was common in European society to rank non-Europeans according to the ratio of their population which was admitted into a Christian church. Such a ranking of peoples is irrelevant to anthropology. In order to pass judgement on the quality of life in a foreign society, we must first try to understand that society from the inside; otherwise our judgement has a limited intellectual interest. What is conceived of as 'the good life' in the society in which we live may not appear attractive at all from a different vantage-point. In order to understand people's lives, it is therefore necessary to try to grasp the totality of their experiential world; and in order to succeed in this project, it is inadequate to look at selected, isolated 'variables'. Obviously, a typical statistical criterion such as 'annual income' is meaningless in a society where neither money nor wagework is common.

This kind of argument may be read as a warning against ethnocentrism. This term (from Greek '*ethnos*', meaning 'a people') means evaluating other people from one's own vantage-point and describing them in one's own terms. One's own '*ethnos*', including one's cultural values, is literally placed at the centre. Other peoples would, within this frame of thought, necessarily appear as inferior imitations of oneself. If the Nuer of South Sudan are unable to acquire a mortgage to buy a house, they thus appear to have a less perfect society than ourselves. If the Kwakiutl of the west coast of North America lacked electricity, they seemed to have a less fulfilling life than we do. If the Kachin of upper Burma reject conversion to Christianity, they are less civilised than we are, and if the Bushmen of the Kalahari are illiterate, they appear less intelligent than us. Such points of view express an ethnocentric attitude which fails to allow other peoples to be different from ourselves on their own terms, and can be a serious obstacle to understanding. Rather than comparing strangers with our own society and placing ourselves on top of an imaginary pyramid, anthropology calls for an understanding of different societies as they appear *from the inside*. Anthropology cannot provide an answer to a question about which societies are better than others, simply because the discipline does not ask such questions. If asked what is the good life, the anthropologist will have to answer that every society has its own definition(s) of it.

Moreover, an ethnocentric bias, which may be less easy to detect than moralistic judgements, may shape the very concepts we use in describing and classifying the world. For example, it has been argued that it may be

Anthropology and the Good Life

'Anthropologists', claims Neil Thin, 'have been far more interested in pathologies and oddities than in normality' (2008, p. 23). Although Malinowski in his day saw happiness and the pursuit of the good life as worthy topics of comparative research, very few have followed his cue. According to Thin, basing his conclusion on a comprehensive database search, anthropologists appear to have been more interested in basket-weaving than in happiness! Thousands of academic articles have appeared on the topic of health, but they always concentrate on disease (Thin 2005). (Peace research, similarly, rarely studies peace, but war and violence.) Giving short shrift to the usually brief, often superficial and romantic (either Hobbesian or Rousseauian) depictions of 'the good life' that appear in anthropological monographs, Thin concludes, in a slightly exasperated vein, that 'the cold-shouldering of well-being by anthropologists is itself a bizarre feature of the culture of academic anthropology, one that begs to be analyzed' (2008, p. 26).

Moving on to propose a research programme for the anthropological study of happiness, or subjective well-being – a topic which has received massive interest in other social sciences, including psychology, recently – Thin argues that every society has notions about what it is to feel good as opposed to feeling bad, and that every society has significant distinctions between 'feeling well' and 'living a good life'. He then introduces a number of distinctions facilitating comparisons between 'happiness regimes', such as the contrast between this-worldly and other-worldly notions of the good life, short-term versus long-term orientations, and so on. An emergent anthropology of happiness is documented in a recent monograph (Fischer 2014) and a couple of edited volumes (Jiménez, 2008; Mathews and Izquierdo, 2008), and these books showcase the strengths of anthropological field methods by comparison to questionnaire surveys in studying well-being and ideas of the good life. It goes without saying that more work is waiting to be done in this field.

inappropriate to speak of politics and kinship when referring to societies which themselves lack concepts of 'politics' and 'kinship'. Politics, perhaps, belongs to the ethnographer's society and not to the society under study. To this fundamental problem I shall return later.

Cultural relativism is sometimes posited as the opposite of ethnocentrism. This is the doctrine that societies or cultures are qualitatively different and have their own unique inner logic, and that it is therefore scientifically absurd to rank them on a scale. If one places a Bushman group, say, at

the bottom of a ladder where the variables are, say, literacy and annual income, this ladder is irrelevant to them if it turns out that the Bushmen do not place a high priority on money and books. It should also be evident that one cannot, within a cultural relativist framework, argue that a society with many cars is 'better' than one with fewer, or that the ratio of cinemas to population is a useful indicator of the quality of life. (The Bushmen are sometimes spoken of as the San, since the term Bushmen is by some considered vaguely racist. However, since 'San' is a pejorative term used by the neighbouring Khoikhoi, the term Bushmen is again in common use; see Barnard 2007.)

Cultural relativism is an indispensable and unquestionable theoretical premise and methodological rule-of-thumb in our attempts to understand other societies in an as unprejudiced way as possible. As an ethical principle, however, it is probably impossible in practice (and most would say undesirable), since it seems to indicate that everything is as good as everything else, provided it makes sense in a particular social context. Taken to its extreme, it would ultimately lead to nihilism. For this reason, it may be timely to stress that many anthropologists are impeccable cultural relativists in their daily work, while they may perfectly well have definite, frequently dogmatic notions about right and wrong in their private lives. In Western societies and elsewhere, current debates over minority rights and multiculturalism indicate both the need for anthropological knowledge and the impossibility of defining a simple, scientific solution to these complex problems, which are of a political nature.

Cultural relativism cannot be posited simply as the opposite of ethnocentrism, the simple reason being that it does not in itself contain a moral principle. The principle of cultural relativism in anthropology is a methodological one – it is indispensable for the investigation and comparison of societies without relating them to a usually irrelevant developmental scale; but this does not imply that there is no difference between right and wrong. Finally, we should be aware that many anthropologists wish to discover general, shared aspects of humanity or human societies. There is no necessary contradiction between a project of this kind and a cultural relativist approach, even if universalism – doctrines emphasising the similarities between humans – is frequently seen as the opposite of cultural relativism. One may well be a relativist at the level of method and description, yet simultaneously argue, at the level of analysis, that a particular underlying pattern is common to all societies or persons. Many would indeed claim that this is precisely what anthropology is

about: to discover both the uniqueness of each social and cultural setting *and* the ways in which humanity is one.

Suggestions for Further Reading

E.E. Evans-Pritchard: *Social Anthropology*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press 1951.

Clifford Geertz: *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2000.

Adam Kuper: *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The British School in the Twentieth Century*, 4th edn. London: Routledge 2014.