THEORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

In social or cultural anthropology, a distinction is often made between 'ethnography' and 'theory'. Ethnography is literally the practice of writing about peoples. Often it is taken to mean our way of making sense of other peoples' modes of thought, since anthropologists usually study cultures other than their own. Theory is also, in part anyway, our way of making sense of our own, anthropological mode of thought.

However, theory and ethnography inevitably merge into one. It is impossible to engage in ethnography without some idea of what is important and what is not. On the other side of the coin, theory without ethnography is pretty meaningless, since the understanding of cultural difference is at least one of the most important goals of anthropological enquiry.

It is useful to think of theory as containing four basic elements: **(1) questions, (2) assumptions, (3) methods, and (4) evidence.**

Questions: The most important questions, to my mind, are 'What are we trying to find out?', and 'Why is this knowledge useful?' Anthropological knowledge could be useful, for example, either in trying to understand one's own society, or in trying to understand the nature of the human species. Some anthropological questions are historical: 'How do societies change?', or 'What came first, private property or social hierarchy?' Other anthropological questions are about contemporary issues: 'How do social institutions work?', or 'How do humans envisage and classify what they see around them?'

Assumptions include notions of common humanity, of cultural difference, of value in all cultures, or of differences in cultural values. More specifically, anthropologists may assume either human inventiveness or human uninventiveness; or that society constrains the individual, or individuals create society. Some assumptions are common to all anthropologists, others are not. Thus, while having some common ground, anthropologists can have significant differences of opinion about the way they see their subject.

Methods have developed through the years and are part of every field work study. However, methods include not only fieldwork but, equally importantly, comparison.

Evidence is obviously a methodological component, but how it is treated, or even understood, will differ according to theoretical perspective.

In anthropology, as for many other disciplines, the only thing that is agreed is that evidence must relate to the problem at hand. In other words, not only do theories depend on evidence, evidence itself depends on what questions one is trying to answer. To take archaeology as an analogy, one cannot just dig any old place and expect to find something of significance. An archaeologist who is interested in the development of urbanism will only dig where there is likely to be the remains of an ancient city.

Likewise in social anthropology, we go to places where we expect to find things we are interested in; and once there we ask small questions designed to produce evidence for the larger questions posed by our respective theoretical orientations. For example, an interest in relations between gender and power might take us to a community in which gender differentiation is strong. In this case, we might focus our questions to elucidate how individual women and men pursue strategies for overcoming or maintaining their respective positions.

Beyond these four elements, there are two more specific aspects of enquiry in social anthropology. These are characteristic of anthropological method, no matter what theoretical persuasion an anthropologist may otherwise maintain. Thus, they serve to define an anthropological approach, as against an approach which is characteristic of other social sciences, especially sociology. The two aspects are:

(1) **observing a society as a whole**, to see how each element of that society fits together with, or is meaningful in terms of, other such elements; (integrated approach) Observing a society as a whole entails trying to understand how things are related, for example, how politics fits together with kinship or economics, or how specific economic institutions fit together with others.

(2) **examining each society in relation to others**, to find similarities and differences and account for them. Examining each society in relation to others implies an attempt to find and account for their similarities and their differences. Such a Framework can encompass: (1) the comparison of isolated cases (e.g., the Trobrianders of Melanesia compared to the Nuer of East Africa), (2) comparisons within a region (e.g., the Trobrianders within the context of Melanesian ethnography), or (3) a more universal sort of comparison (taking in societies across the globe). Most social anthropologists in fact engage in all three at one time or another, even though, as anthropological theorists, they may differ about which is the most useful form of comparison in general.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropology, defined as the study of (Hu)Man is paradoxically among the most recent of all disciplines that was considered worthy of study. The reason was also simple, that human communities across the world took their society and ways of life as given, as a taken for granted truth for which no questions were asked. Questions and doubts, that some people naturally have, were answered through existing cosmologies and religious doctrines.

Around the 16th century, Europe underwent a paradigm shift in philosophical thinking as it expanded its geopolitical boundaries across the world in terms of travel and trade. There was growing disillusionment with the Church and its dictums. The French Revolution as well as the American Revolution brought about the realisation that the social order was not based on divine origins but was an entity that could be shaken at its roots by human action and agency. The exposure to the rest of the globe also made the Europeans realise that societies and people could be found in varieties of forms and shapes, not only in terms of physical differences but also in terms of customs, ways of life and thinking.

Even before Darwin and Wallace had formulated the theories of biological evolution, the French thinkers and the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers were formulating their hypotheses of human social evolution and the possibility of society being a human rather than a divine creation. The exposure to other cultures triggered ideas of social evolution as the European thinkers tried to explain the diversity of cultures by connecting them with their own past. Auguste Comte gave his theory of a stage-by-stage evolution of human societies that set the stage for further speculative thinking on these lines. Comte's thesis that human societies evolved through the ages of Theolog, Metaphysics and Reason, put Europeans at the top of the evolutionary scale. When Europeans looked at other people, they thought they were looking down as well as looking back.

While Comte concentrated on the reflective faculties of humans and their capacity for rational thought; another major contributor to theory of social evolution was Herbert Spencer, who was also a contemporary of Charles Darwin and their theories of social and biological evolutions overlapped to some extent.

Spencer's rather controversial theory that societies behave like natural systems where all those parts (people) that are weak or lack survival potential get eliminated was established as the popular conception of 'survival of the fittest' that also got mistakenly grafted to Darwin's theory of evolution. Spencer's theory was also used by the emerging industrial capitalism of Europe to justify both the spread of colonial rule and the onus that capitalism put on the individual entrepreneur. Both Comte and Spencer along with other European scholars were representing what is known as the Positivist approach to the study of social phenomenon.

Positivism
The Positivist approach advocated that societies were capable of being studied and analysed as objects like any other object of scientific investigation. In other words, the scholar of society was also a scientist who could apply his analytical skills to objectively scrutinize society with the same degree of objective detachment and methodological rigour that a scientist brings to his examinations. Societies were compared to organisms and like organisms they were subjects of evolution and predictable laws.

A great deal of theory building in the age of positivism was triggered by the great curiosity that Europeans had about their 'origins' and ultimately it was this search for the origin and evolution of human beings that gave rise formally to a discipline labelled anthropology or the, 'Science of Man'.

ANTHROPOLOGY AS A DISCIPLINE

The discipline of anthropology was finally established as a distinct discipline with Edward B. Tylor assuming the chair of anthropology at the Oxford University. The goals of the discipline were to formally study and research the origins and diversity of human beings. Darwin had firmly established that the human was a single species biologically and the race theories that had attributed differences inhuman societies. The discipline of anthropology then was to examine the biological as well as social evolution of humans and to explain the observed differences of physical types and of social and cultural life. The biological evolution needed to look beyond the time when humans became humans so biological evolution was rooted in palaeoanthropology or the study of fossil remains of humans and pre human hominids and also primatology or study of behaviour and physiology of higher primates. Social evolution on the other hand not only examined pre-historical remains and archaeological roots but also considered existing human societies as remains of the past of the most evolved societies namely the western European.

It was this last assumption that formed the basis of the theory of social evolution where Tylor assumed that spatial differences could be translated into temporal differences. While this theory put some people on the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder, it also based itself on what was then recognised as the theory of 'psychic unity of mankind'. Since humans were one species, it was believed their mental functioning would necessarily be the same. All humans were supposed to have one Culture, what Ingold (1986) has called culture with a capital C. The observed differences were then explained by saying that the different peoples had evolved to different levels of culture, with the added proposition that all would ultimately attain the same level of culture as had already been attained by western civilisation. Anthropology was at times criticised for being a colonial discipline especially as the theory of social evolution was both Eurocentric and directly or indirectly supported colonisation by its definition of 'civilisation' as synonymous with the west.