

# **Anthropological Theories**

# A. Evolutionism

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- ☐ Edward Burnet Tylor (19th century) offered a classical definition of culture and proposed it as a topic that could be studied scientifically.
- ☐ Lewis Henry Morgan (19th century) assumed that human society had evolved through a series of stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization.
- ☐ Savagery and barbarism were subdivided into three substages:
  - ☐ - lower, middle, and upper savagery
  - ☐ - lower, middle, and upper barbarism

☐ **Applied to early humans:**

☐ **Lower savagery = subsistence based on fruits and nuts**

☐ **Middle savagery = fishing and control over fire**

☐ **Upper savagery = invention of bow and arrow.**

☐ **Lower barbarism = pottery**

☐ **Middle barbarism = domestication of plants and animals + irrigated agriculture**

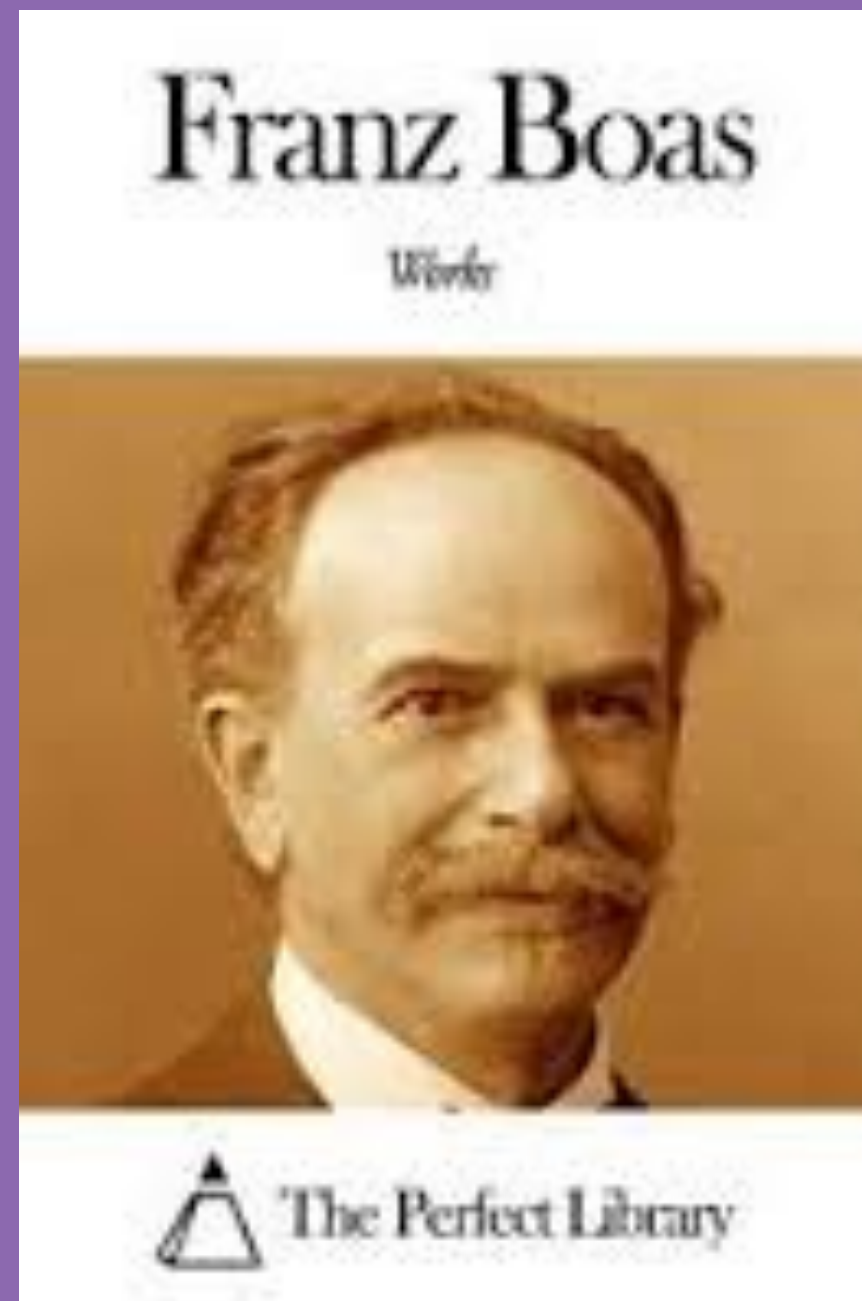
☐ **Upper barbarism = iron smelting and use of iron tools**

- **Civilization = invention of writing**
- **There was only one direction towards which all societies have to evolve = unilineal evolutionism.**
- **Critics disputed the linear scheme. Polynesians never developed pottery. Were they frozen in upper savagery?**

## B. The Boasians

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- Franz Boas is the father of four-field American anthropology.



- ☐ **Historical particularism:**
- ☐ **The particular histories of totemism in societies A, B, and C are all different because they have different causes which make them incomparable.**
- ☐ **They might seem the same but they are really different because they have different histories.**

- **Independent invention:** For the evolutionists, people in different areas came up with the same cultural solution to a common problem as they move up the evolution stages.
- **Diffusion:** The Boasians stressed the importance of diffusion - borrowing - from other cultures.

## C. FUNCTIONALISM

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- ☐ **Focused on the role of culture traits and practices in contemporary society.**
- ☐ **Focus on the present rather than seeking the origins through historical reconstruction.**





□ Bronislaw Malinowski - Polish anthropologist.

- ☐ **1. All customs and institutions in society are integrated and interrelated, so that if one changes others would change as well.**
- ☐ **Thus, an ethnography could start anywhere and eventually get the rest of the culture.**
- ☐ **2. Needs functionalism: Humans have a set of universal biological needs. Customs develop to fulfill those needs.**

□ Alfred Reginald  
Radcliffe-Brown





- ☐ **Advocated that cultural anthropology be a synchronic rather than diachronic science. The aim is to study societies as they exist today (synchronic, at one time) rather than across time (diachronic)**
- ☐ **Structural functionalism: customs function to preserve the social structure. The function of any practice is what it does to maintain the system of which it is a part.**
- ☐ **That system has a structure whose parts work or function to maintain the whole.**

# D. CONFIGURATIONALISM

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- Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead

- ☐ **Related to functionalism in the sense that culture is seen as integrated.**
- ☐ **Culture traits - indeed, whole cultures - are uniquely patterned or integrated.**
- ☐ **Borrowed traits (diffusion) are indigenized - modified to fit the existing culture.**



# E. NEOEVOLUTIONISM

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- ☐ **Leslie White**
- ☐ **Return to the same concept of cultural evolution used by Taylor and Morgan, but now informed by a century of archaeological discoveries and much larger ethnographic records.**
- ☐ **Main idea: over time and through the archaeological, historical, and ethnographic records, we can see the evolution of culture as a whole.**
- ☐ **However, particular cultures might not evolve in the same direction (linear evolutionism).**

- **Julian Steward**
- **Multilinear evolution: cultures evolved along several different lines.**
- **Pioneer in cultural ecology or ecological anthropology: considers the relationships between cultures and environmental variables.**



# F. CULTURAL MATERIALISM

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HARRIS



Marvin Harris

1927 – 2001

Materialismo cultural

- **Main insight: All societies consist of infrastructure, structure, and super structure.**
- **First layer = infrastructure: consists of technology, economics, and demography - the systems of production and reproduction without which societies could not survive.**

- **Second layer: Growing out of infrastructure is structure = social relations, forms of kinship and descent, patterns of distribution and consumption.**
- **Third layer = superstructure: religion, ideology, play - aspects of culture furthest away from the meat and bones that enable cultures to survive.**
- **Key belief (shared with White, Steward, Marx): in the final analysis, infrastructure determines structure and superstructure.**

# G. SYMBOLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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□ Victor Turner



- ☐ **Symbolic anthropology = the study of symbols in their social and cultural context.**
- ☐ **Recognized links between symbolic anthropology and such other fields as social psychology, psychology, and psychoanalysis.**

- **Turner examines**
- **1) how symbols and rituals are used to redress, regulate, anticipate, and avoid conflict and**
- **2) a hierarchy of meanings of symbols, from their social meanings and functions to their internalization within individuals.**

# H. INTERPRETIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

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☐ Clifford Geertz

☐ 1926 - 2006



- ☐ **Interpretive anthropology approaches cultures as texts whose forms and meanings must be deciphered in particular cultural and historical contexts.**
- ☐ **Culture = ideas based on cultural learning and symbols.**



- ☐ **During enculturation, individuals internalize a previously established system of meanings and symbols.**
- ☐ **Research focuses on getting the ‘native’s point of view.’**
- ☐ **Cultures are texts that natives constantly “read” and ethnographers must decipher.**

# I. STRUCTURALISM

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□ Claude Levi-Strauss

□ 1908 - 2009



- ☐ **Structuralism in anthropology = human minds have certain universal characteristics which originate in common features of the Homo sapiens brain.**
- ☐ **These common mental structures lead people everywhere to think similarly regardless of their society or cultural background.**
- ☐ **Criticism: too formal and ignores social processes.**

# J. PROCESSUAL APPROACHES

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- ☐ **1. Agency**
- ☐ **Culture is no longer seen as a fixed set of practices acting as a permanent social glue.**
- ☐ **Culture is seen as an ongoing process, continually created and reworked in the present.**
- ☐ **Day-to-day action, practice, or resistance can make and remake culture.**
- ☐ **Agency refers to the actions that individuals take, both alone and in groups, in forming and transforming cultural identities.**

## ☐ **2. Practice Theory**

- ☐ **Sherry Ortner (American anthropologist); Pierre Bourdieu (French) and Anthony Giddens (British) are social theorists.**
- ☐ **Individuals in society have diverse motives and intentions as well as different degrees of power and influence.**
- ☐ **Practice theory focuses on how such varied individuals - through their actions and practices - influence and transform the world they live in.**
- ☐ **Recognizes a reciprocal relation between culture and the individual.**
- ☐ **Recognizes both constraints on individuals and the flexibility and changeability of cultures and social systems.**