

# Chapter 12

## Theory in Cultural Anthropology

Anthropology first sought to be a science of culture. The past century has shown this idea really doesn't stand.

### **Anthropology of Science**

Early anthropologists (Spencer, Morgan, Tylor and Durkheim) believed culture evolved and was not random thus the law like patterns could be studied with the scientific methods.

Theory is used in anthropology just as in other science fields

Since culture is so complex anthropologists try to look for simpler elements and laws that determine the direction of cultural evolution

Scientists stress the importance of empirical evidence (hands-on experience that can be replicated by someone else)

### **The Nineteenth-Century Approaches**

Unilineal cultural evolutionism is considered the first theoretical perspective

Herbert Spencer believed human societies were like organism in that they would increase in size and complexity over time

Lewis Henry Morgan believed that (1) there were patterned variations in kinship terminology and (2) trying to connect these patterns of family organization to patterns of subsistence

Some early anthropologists took the approach of biological determinism (scientific racism)

They believed societies rose up from savagery to barbarism to civilizations

### **Early twentieth century approaches**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists started to look the idea of diffusion where it was believed the regular spread of cultural items

Franz Boas thought both were becoming too extreme Cultures did not develop in a unilineal fashion

People such as Boas, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown urged research on living societies to find real and true empirical evidence

Malinowski worked in the Trobriand Islands and thought it was best to learn about the customs and beliefs through the function they played in the culture (Functionalism)

Radcliffe-Brown developed structural-functionalism where he looked how the function of customs and beliefs preserved the structure of society

He wanted to know what kept societies from falling apart

By the mid-twentieth century there was a split between British anthropologists and American anthropologists.

The British used society as their defining concept (social determinism) while the Americans focused on culture (cultural determinism (ideas, beliefs, values and meanings))

### **Mid-Twentieth Century Approaches**

ethnoscience took its ideas from the study of language

the Anthropologists looked at how groups classified objects and events in the environment

Claude Levi-Strauss developed structuralism which believed that since everyone is human each person would possess the same innate mental structure

The most obvious structure he believed were binary oppositions in language like up-down, day-night, male-female

Critics later said that reducing all the variants of a myth to a single structure ignored possible variants

The big struggle is that while most believe culture is learned the issue is how it is learned

Mary Douglas, Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz helped develop symbolic anthropology. This emphasizes the systems of meaning not structure

Turner focused his work on social dramas: people's concrete interactions and conflicts in everyday life. What did symbols mean to specific people and how did it lead to action in specific social situations?

Geertz saw culture as a system of symbols and meanings that are publicly displayed in objects and actions He saw cultures made of texts i.e. stories that can be read by anthropologists

Ecological anthropologists believe it perhaps the environments themselves were responsible for culture diversity

Julian Steward was an important founder of cultural ecology looked at how humans interacted with their environment

Behavioral ecology claims that natural selection has produced humans programmed to automatically find ways of maximizing their own individual self-interest which can mean getting your genes into the next generation

Marvin Harris developed cultural materialism which says the best way to understand human culture is to observe material conditions such as climate, food supply geography

Historical materialism explains cultural evolution in world historical terms

Political ecology look at the ways in which human groups struggle with one another for control of material resources

### **Late Twentieth Century Debates**

Now cultural anthropologists are split in to two groups

1. positivism - universal, objective truths can be discovered by rational , scientific explanations
2. postmodernism - seek a reflexive, interpretive approach in in which the details of specific cultural realities are not eliminated

One issue with postmodernism is it could possible allow for the acceptance of genocide if all forms of culture are assumed to be equal

Many contemporary anthropologists walk a thin line between positivism and interpretivism

Today anthropologists pay attention to the position of the situated observer- the person's standpoint. One ethnography cannot tell the whole story

### **New Directions in the Twenty-first Century**

Anthropologists have widened how ethnographies are done.

1. some place their work among a given local "indigenous" group in a particular location and look at the global forces
2. some focus on the international political and economic processes
3. a growing number of anthropologists come from other parts of the world besides the U.S. and Europe