

Anthropology



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Anthropology, a Discipline About Man Himself

JAMES W. FERNANDEZ

The privilege of the anthropologist is to have lived in several worlds. But a price is paid. It is hard to be fully at home in any. And there are no easy answers. Humans pronouncing judgment on their nature are easily beguiled. What seems most plausible is often, with wider knowledge, merely specious.

Anthropology is the discipline that asks the question "what is human nature?" and seeks answers that take into account all manifestations of that nature. This is a "pre-sumptuous" purpose—Susan Soniat's more generous word is "heretic." To define what anthropologists do, a wide net must be cast in time and space from the earliest proto-humans to people in the present high pitch of modernization or the backwaters of urbanization.

The brevity of early fieldwork, "Notes and Queries in Anthropology," shows the presumption. Anthropologists had to be all things to the people they went out to study.

Another in a continuing series on the state of the academic disciplines.

Everything was described: art, disease, law, ritual. This diversified inquiry led to extensive multidisciplinary specialization: medical anthropology, the anthropology of religion, of law, of art, not to mention the enduring specialties of archeology and biophysical anthropology.

Western expansion gave men of anthropological bent the opportunity to participate for long periods in other cultures. Thus the first modern anthropologist was the 16th century Franciscan, Bernardino de Sahagun, who lived many decades with the Aztec. Unhappily the link of anthropology with Western expansion and colonialism now troubles relations with the developing countries.

American anthropology begins with the mid-nineteenth century Inquisit work of Lewis Henry Morgan. A pioneer of the comparative study of kinship, his "Ancient Society"

is a classic in the study of cultural evolution. Sahagun and Morgan embody the three enduring and debated interests of the field: description of cultures, evolution of cultures, comparison of cultures.

The description of cultures, ethnography, gives the archival data upon which all else rests. The dilemmas here are two: describing another life way without imposing one's own, and fulfilling the archival function without boring the reader. Bronislaw Malinowski, whose works on the Trobriand Islands have become classics, continues to be admired for providing rich data while writing compellingly, if sometimes with a "wind in the palm trees" flourish. The coherence and momentum of his accounts derive from a functionalist point of view, showing how the parts relate to each other and to the whole.

There are two other compelling strategies. Victor Turner, whose special interest is the study of ritual and symbols, focuses upon episodes of conflict. While treating them dramatically, he sets their causes, course, resolution and consequences into full social context. Oscar Lewis, in his 1961 best seller "Children of Sanchez" and other peasant and proletarian family studies, used the "day-in-the-life" approach, achieving unsurpassed ethnographic realism if less useful archival data.

A recent method of description, etnoscience, by phrasing questions in local idioms has gone far to escape the imposition of the ethnographer's bias. This method focuses on such systematic aspects of culture as kinship and explores the logic of the system. Influenced by linguistic models, this method seeks rules by which life in culture is conducted, the cultural grammar, as it were.

Such formalism has been criticized as itself an imposition of Western penchants. Not much of culture, even modern rational-technical culture, it is observed, is systematic. There is now a return to the enduring questions of interpretation. While emphasizing detailed fieldwork, interpretive ethnography artfully constructs, from data that do not speak for themselves, a convincing text. The object is to "enter into discourse" with the "circumstantiality" of

being a Zulu or a Zuni.

In the study of cultural evolution, anthropology engages a central contemporary issue. By studying the simpler societies more in equilibrium with their natural milieu, anthropologists like Roy Rappaport in his New Guinea study "Pigs for the Ancestors" seek perspective on the intensifying disequilibrium, the large energy subsidies, and the vulnerability of modern systems of production and consumption. The object is a theory of how balanced ecosystems operate and how ravenous industrial cultures might evolve into equilibrium without cataclysm.

Debate is acute as to the role of ideas and values, of consensus intention, in evolution. Cultural materialists argue that evolution is the result of a core of technological and population changes that carry ideas and values with them. Indeed cultures have rarely been dislodged from accustomed life ways unless forced by changes in resource base, by population pressure, or by conquest. Still, the emerging theory of cultural ecology, the modern evolutionism, seeks to model the interplay of biological, cultural and environmental forces that shape the evolving energy flow of society. It seeks to identify the pressure points where human intention can influence evolution.

Evolution is par excellence the province of the bio-anthropologists. They can best tell what humans are from what adaptation has made them over millions of years. Studies of primate social organization shed light on the social organization of early humans if not upon the dominance hierarchies of modern corporations. Irving DeVore and Richard Lee's recent studies of bushmen hunters and gatherers illuminate the more recent ancestral condition.

Far-reaching questions are put playfully: "Why is man such a sneaky Hairless Creature?" or "Did the Neanderthals what is taken for granted: a thermostat and a vocal apparatus unique in the animal kingdom.

The comparison of cultures is inevitable in anthropology. Comparisons constantly, perhaps irritatingly, suggest themselves, if only to that "other society" the anthropologist

But there are difficulties in diverse fieldworkers. Many preferred selected societies or a selected anthropology's laboratory—is one not otherwise easily achieved in a participation.

Two important studies hold the Rimok value studies and Plantamen. Bennett shows the Cree Indians, Euro-American ranchers and Firtzerie Brethren to the "Peoples of Rimok," the summer work. Evon Vogt and Ethel Albert that are held in the same southern Zuni, Spanish Americans, Texas moons. Both studies argue for the culture from environment.

Like other social sciences, artistic and humanistic wings. The to the humanistic disciplines has h Morgan, a solid upper New York views on the evolution of property Engels as unimpeachable socialists the Scottish anthropologist and as he was, could hardly have an observation. "No book has had modern literature as 'The Golden

Anthropology's place in scientific. An early president of the the Advancement of Science was Dunn, in 1854, and a recent one, This place in American science are to understand aboriginal Indian culture any concern to preserve a record.

She has spoken forcefully on predicaments: population control, the conduct of family life, the condition. Intense participation in other of a biologist away from his own. But reside in this unpatriotic condition. That joyfully provokes resistance to "pseudospecialization," treating other order and generalizing from one.

The sociobiological argument, f are adapted to act self-interested genes accords, as Marshall Sahl competitive individualism and f lasting ethos of the West. That lary polologists to resist propositions w cultures.

Humans, because of the power speculated like other animals, how they have remained in communitarian their due, there is always a self-in boundaries, to celebrate contentment to make these prevail. Anthropologist Rather it seeks to understand if possible the human potential. It agrees f ing circumstances and finally the lies in that understanding.

James W. Fernandez is professor, Princeton University.