



## An Overview of History and Theory of Anthropology

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### ABSTRACT

This paper entitled “History and Theory of Anthropology” deals with the historical background of anthropology from the very beginning up to its establishment as academic discipline. For this paper, I have reviewed some literatures related with history and theory of anthropology. Hence, anthropology’s history from ancient Greek historical and philosophical writings to 21st century and anthropological theories are chronologically included in this paper. Generally, the contribution of different scholars, event (like enlightenment) and colonialism in the emergence of anthropology are encompassed in this paper.

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## History of Anthropology

### Origins

Anthropology traces its roots to ancient Greek historical and philosophical writings about human nature and the organization of human society. Anthropologists generally regard Herodotus, a Greek historian who lived in the 400 BC, as the first thinker to write widely on concepts that would later become central to anthropology. Herodotus began to travel as a young man and gained an intimate knowledge of the many foreign peoples that the Greeks maintained contacts with. Today, Herodotus is mainly remembered for his history of the Persian Wars, but he also wrote detailed travel narratives from various parts of western Asia and Egypt, and from as far away as the land of the Scythians on the northern coast of the Black Sea. In the book *History*, Herodotus described the cultures of various peoples of the Persian Empire, which the Greeks conquered during the first half of the 400 BC. He referred to Greece as the dominant culture of the West and Persia as the dominant culture of the East. This type of division, between white people of European descent and other peoples, established the mode that most anthropological writing would later adopt (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:2).

Sometimes he is simply a prejudiced and ethnocentric 'civilized man', who disdains everything foreign. At other times he acknowledges that different people have different values because they live under different circumstances, not because they are morally deficient. Herodotus' descriptions of language, dress, political and judicial institutions, crafts and economics are highly readable today (ibid).

The greatest historian and social philosopher of this period was Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), who lived in present-day Tunisia in the 14th century AD, was another early writer of ideas relevant to anthropology. Khaldun examined the environmental, sociological, psychological, and

economic factors that affected the development and the rise and fall of civilizations. Both Khaldun and Herodotus produced remarkably objective, analytic, ethnographic descriptions of the diverse cultures in the Mediterranean world, but they also often used secondhand information (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:2).

Khaldun wrote, among other things, a massive history of the Arabs and Berbers, furnished with a long, critical introduction on his use of sources. He developed one of the first non-religious social theories, and anticipated Émile Durkheim's ideas about social solidarity, which are today considered a cornerstone of sociology and anthropology. In line with Durkheim and the first anthropologists who utilized his theories, Khaldun stresses the importance of kinship and religion in creating and maintaining a sense of solidarity and mutual commitment among the members of a group (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:2).

There are nevertheless a few European writings from the late medieval period, which may be considered precursors of latter-day anthropology.

Most famous is Marco Polo's (1254–1323) account of his expedition to China, where he allegedly spent seventeen years. Another example is the great journey through Western Asia described in *The Voyage and Travels of Sir John Mandeville, Knight*, written by an unknown Englishman in the fourteenth century. Both of these books stimulated the European interest in alien peoples and customs (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:4).

The 'great discoveries' were of crucial importance for later developments in Europe and the world, and on a lesser scale for the development of anthropology. From Henry the Navigator's exploration of the West coast of Africa in the early fifteenth century, via Columbus's five journeys to America (1492–1506), to Magellan's circumnavigation of the world (1519–22), the travels of this period fed the imaginations of the Europeans with vivid descriptions of places whose very existence

they had hitherto been unaware of. These travelogues, moreover, reached unusually wide audiences, since the printing press, invented in 1448, soon made books a common and relatively inexpensive commodity all over Europe. Many travelogues were obviously full of factual errors and marred by deep-seated Christian prejudices. A famous example is the work of the cartographer Amerigo Vespucci, who published many popular accounts from the continent that still bears his name. His books were reprinted and translated many times, but his descriptions of the Americans (who were called Indians, since Columbus believed he had found a route to India), reveal a much less scrupulous attitude to facts than in Herodotus' or Khaldun's writings (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:5).

During the Middle Ages (5th to 15th centuries AD) biblical scholars dominated European thinking on questions of human origins and cultural development. They treated these questions as issues of religious belief and promoted the idea that human existence and all of human diversity were the creations of God.

Beginning in the 15th century, European explorers looking for wealth in new lands provided vivid descriptions of the exotic cultures they encountered on their journeys in Asia, Africa, and what are now the Americas. But these explorers did not respect or know the languages of the peoples with whom they came in contact, and they made brief, unsystematic observations. In the following centuries, the European societies expanded rapidly in scale and complexity, and intercultural encounters – through trade, warfare, missionary work, colonisation, migration and research became increasingly common (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:6).

The eighteenth century saw a flowering of science and philosophy in Europe. The European Age of Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries marked the rise of scientific and rational philosophical thought. Enlightenment thinkers, such as Scottish-born David Hume,

John Locke of England, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau of France, wrote a number of humanistic works on the nature of humankind. They based their work on philosophical reason rather than religious authority and asked important anthropological questions. Rousseau, for instance, wrote on the moral qualities of “primitive” societies and about human inequality. But most writers of the Enlightenment also lacked firsthand experience with non-Western cultures (ibid).

British philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) considered the human mind to be **blank slate at birth**, a *tabula rasa*. All our ideas, values and assumptions are the result of our experiences – or ‘sense impressions’ – of the world. People are not born different, but become different through differing experiences. Here Locke is laying the epistemological groundwork of a science of society that combines a universalistic principle (we are all born the same) and a relativistic principle (our differing experiences make us different) (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:7).

The notion that all humans are born with certain intrinsic rights goes back to the middle Ages, when Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) held that the rights of Man were given by God. But in the seventeenth century, philosophers like Locke and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) argued that natural law was not ‘given’ from above, but implicit in the biological needs of the individual.

René Descartes (1596–1650), a man of many talents, who made substantial contributions to mathematics and anatomy, and is often considered the founder of modern philosophy. In anthropology he is particularly noted for the sharp distinction he drew between consciousness and spiritual life on the one hand, and the material world and the human body on the other (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:8).

The eighteenth century was the ‘age of reason’, when the first attempts were made at creating an anthropological science. An important early work was Giambattista Vico's (1668–1744) *La*

*scienza nuova* (1725; *The New Science*, 1999). This was a grand synthesis of ethnography, history of religion, philosophy and natural science. Vico was among the first to embrace the idea of social progress explicitly. He proposed a universal model of social development, arguing that all societies must go through three stages, with particular, formally defined characteristics. The first stage was the 'Age of Gods', an age of nature worship and rudimentary social structures, traits that Vico associated with 'primitive' peoples. Then came the 'Age of Heroes', with widespread social unrest due to great social inequality – both the European Middle Ages and Vico's own time have doubtlessly served as models here. The final stage, the 'Age of Man' was an envisioned future era ruled by reason. Many similar, more or less utopian developmental schemes have since been proposed, not least during the nineteenth century. Implicit in these is the notion that not only European societies were capable of improvement; with proper guidance, the 'primitive peoples' could also attain progress. This thought was undoubtedly a comforting one for Europeans as they approached the age of the great colonial empires (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:10).

In 1748, Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755) published his *De l'esprit des loix* (*The Spirit of Laws*, 1977). This is a comparative, cross-cultural study of legislative systems which Montesquieu had first- or second-hand knowledge of, and from which he attempts to derive the general principles that underlie legal systems cross-culturally. Montesquieu pictures the legal system as an aspect of the wider social system, intimately entwined with many other aspects of the larger whole (politics, economy, kinship, demography, religion, etc.) (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:11).

According to Montesquieu, polygamy, cannibalism, paganism, slavery and other barbarous customs could be explained by the functions they fulfilled within society as a whole. Montesquieu also wrote the remarkable *Lettres*

*persanes* (1722; *Persian Letters*, 1973), a collection of fictitious letters from two Persians describing France to their countrymen. Montesquieu here exploits the 'strangeness' of cultural difference to parody France at the time of Louis XIV (ibid, 12).

Another step towards a science of anthropology was taken by a group of young, idealistic French intellectuals. These were the Encyclopaedists, led by the philosopher Denis Diderot (1713–84) and the mathematician Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (1717–83). Their aim was to collect, classify and systematise as much knowledge as possible in order to further the advance of reason, progress, science and technology. The encyclopaedia also contained detailed descriptions of culture and social customs all over the world (ibid, 13).

In 1764, the young Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) published his *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* ('Yet another Philosophy of History', 1993). Herder proclaimed the primacy of emotions and language, and defined society a deep-seated, mythical community. He argued that every *Volk* (people) had its own values, customs, language and 'spirit'. Large national museums were established in London (1753), Paris (1801) and Washington, DC (1843), and all of these would eventually develop influential ethnographic departments. Again, the first specialized ethnographic museums were established in German-speaking areas, notably Vienna (1806), Munich (1859) and Berlin (1868) (ibid, 14).

With the rise of imperialism (political and economic control over foreign lands) in the 18th and 19th centuries, Europeans came into increasing contact with other peoples around the world, prompting new interest in the study of culture. Imperialist nations of Western Europe—such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, France, and England—extended their political and economic control to regions in the Pacific, the Americas, Asia, and Africa (Bodley, 2008).

Europeans suddenly had a flood of new information about the foreign peoples encountered in colonial frontiers. The colonizing nations of Europe also wanted scientific explanations and justifications for their global dominance. In response to these developments, and out of an interest in new and strange cultures, the first amateur anthropologists formed societies in many Western European countries in the early 19th century. These societies eventually spawned professional anthropology (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:10).

Anthropological societies devoted themselves to scientifically studying the cultures of colonized and unexplored territories. Researchers filled ethnological and archaeological museums with collections obtained from the new empires of Europe by explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators. Physicians and zoologists, acting as novice physical anthropologists, measured the skulls of people from various cultures and wrote detailed descriptions of the people's physical features (ibid, 10).

Finally, an internationalized science emerged. The global researcher becomes a popular figure – the prototype naturally being Charles Darwin (1809–81), who's *Origin of Species* (1859), was based on data collected during a six-year circumnavigation of the globe. It is hardly surprising that anthropology arose as a discipline at this time. The anthropologist is a prototypical global researcher, dependent on detailed data about people all over the world. Now that these data had suddenly become available, anthropology could be established as an academic discipline (ibid, 10).

Toward the end of the 19th century anthropologists began to take academic positions in colleges and universities. Anthropological associations also became advocates for anthropologists to work in professional positions. They promoted anthropological knowledge for its political, commercial, and humanitarian value (ibid, 11).

## Anthropological Theories

### Evolutionary Theory

In 1859 British naturalist Charles Darwin published his influential book *On the Origin of Species*. In this book, he argued that animal and plant species had changed, or evolved, through time under the influence of a process that he called natural selection. Natural selection, Darwin said, acted on variations within species, so that some variants survived and reproduced, and others perished. In this way, new species slowly evolved even as others continued to exist (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:11).

During the late 1800s many anthropologists promoted their own models of social and biological evolution. Their writings portrayed people of European descent as biologically and culturally superior to all other peoples. English social philosopher Herbert Spencer applied a theory of progressive evolution to human societies in the middle 1800s. He likened societies to biological organisms, each of which adapted to survive or else perished. Spencer later coined the phrase "survival of the fittest" to describe this process (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:17).

The most influential anthropological presentation of this viewpoint appeared in *Ancient Society*, published in 1877 by American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan. Morgan argued that European civilization was the pinnacle of human evolutionary progress, representing humanity's highest biological, moral, and technological achievement. According to Morgan, human societies had evolved to civilization through earlier conditions, or stages, which he called Savagery and Barbarism. Morgan believed these stages occurred over many thousands of years and compared them to geological ages. But Morgan attributed cultural evolution to moral and mental improvements, which he proposed were, in turn, related to improvements in the ways that people produced food and to increases in brain size (ibid,18).

Morgan also examined the material basis of cultural development. He believed that under Savagery and Barbarism people owned property communally, as groups. Civilizations and political states, he said, developed together with the private ownership of property. Like Morgan, Sir Edward Tylor, a founder of British anthropology, also promoted the theories of cultural evolution in the late 1800s. Tylor attempted to describe the development of particular kinds of customs and beliefs found across many cultures. For example, he proposed a sequence of stages for the evolution of religion—from animism (the belief in spirits), through polytheism (the belief in many gods), to monotheism (the belief in one god) (ibid, 18).

In 1871 Tylor also wrote a still widely quoted definition of culture, describing it as “that complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.” This definition formed the basis for the modern anthropological concept of culture (ibid, 19).

### **Diffusionism**

Diffusionism came to prominence in the work of German and Austrian geographer-anthropologists in the late nineteenth century. Diffusionism stresses the transmission of things (material or otherwise) from one culture to another, one people to another or one place to another. An implicit presupposition of extreme diffusionism is that humankind is uninventive: things are invented only once, and then are transmitted from people to people, sometimes across the globe (McGee and Warms, 2008:121, Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:27).

Fritz Graebner (1877-1934) and Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) were founders of the German *Kulturkreis* ("culture circle") school of diffusionism. Ratzel argued that single items of culture tended to diffuse, whereas whole 'culture complexes' (clusters of related cultural features) were spread by migration. His most famous example was the similarity between

hunting bows found in Africa and New Guinea (Ratzel 1891). He postulated a historical connection between them and related this to what he regarded as the similar psychological makeup of peoples in the two areas. He argued further that culture developed mainly through massive migrations and conquests of weaker peoples by stronger, and more culturally advanced, ones. Grafton Elliot Smith (1871-1937) and William Halse Rivers Rivers (that's right, Rivers Rivers) (1864-1922) were radical English diffusionists who believed that all civilization had diffused from Egypt (Barnard, 2004: 47-48, Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:27).

### **New Directions in Theory and Research**

Anthropology emerged as a serious professional and scientific discipline beginning in the 1920s. The focus and practice of anthropological research developed in different ways in the United States and Europe (Bodley, 2008). The men whose work was the backbone of anthropology in new directions in theory and research were Franz Boas (1858–1942), Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), A.R. Radcliffe- Brown (1881–1955) and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950).

### **The Influence of Boas**

In the 1920s and 1930s anthropology assumed its present form as a four-field academic profession in the United States under the influence of German-born American anthropologist Franz Boas. Boas wanted anthropology to be a well-respected science. He was interested in all areas of anthropological research and had done highly regarded fieldwork in all areas except archaeology. As a professor at Columbia University in New York City from 1899 until his retirement in 1937, he helped define the discipline and trained many of the most prominent American anthropologists of the 20th century. Many of his students—including Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead—went on to establish anthropology departments at universities throughout the country (Bodley, 2008).

Boas stressed the importance of anthropologists conducting original fieldwork to get firsthand experiences with the cultures they wished to describe. He also opposed racist and ethnocentric evolutionary theories. Based on his own studies, including his measurement of the heads of people from many cultures, Boas argued that genetic differences among human populations could not explain cultural variation (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:38-41).

Boas urged anthropologists to do detailed research on particular cultures and their histories, rather than attempt to construct grand evolutionary stages for all of humankind in the tradition of Morgan and Tylor. Boas's theoretical approach became known as historical particularism, and it forms the basis for the fundamental anthropological concept of cultural relativism (ibid).

### **Functionalism**

Many other anthropologists working in Boas's time, mostly in Europe, based their research on the theories of 19th-century French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Like Sir Edward Tylor, Durkheim was interested in religions across cultures. But he was not interested in the evolution of religion. Durkheim instead proposed that religious beliefs and rituals functioned to integrate people in groups and to maintain the smooth functioning of societies (Bodley, 2008).

Durkheim's ideas were expanded upon by Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, two major figures in the development of modern British anthropology beginning in the 1920s and 1930s. Their approach to understanding culture was known as structural functionalism or simply functionalism (Erikson and Nielsen, 2001:41).

A typical functionalist study analyzed how cultural institutions kept a society in working order. For example, many studies examined rites of passage, such as initiation ceremonies. Through a series of such ceremonies, groups of children of the same age would be initiated into

new roles and take on new responsibilities as they grew into adults. According to functionalists, any unique characteristics of the rites of passage of a particular society had to do with how initiation ceremonies worked in the function of that society (ibid, 42).

Functionalists based their approach to doing fieldwork on their theories. They lived for long periods with the people they studied, carefully recording even very small details about a people's culture and social life. The resulting ethnographies portrayed all aspects of culture and social life as interdependent parts of a complex model. Functionalist research methods became the blueprint for much anthropological research throughout the 20th century (ibid, 43).

During the first half of the 20th century, many anthropologists conducted functionalist ethnographic studies in the service of colonial governments. This research allowed colonial administrators to predict what would happen to an entire society in response to particular colonial policies. Administrators might want to know, for instance, what would happen if they imposed taxes on households or on individuals (ibid, 44).

### **Structuralism**

In the 1950s French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss developed an anthropological theory and analytic method known as structuralism. He was influenced by the theories of Durkheim and one of Durkheim's collaborators, French anthropologist Marcel Mauss. Lévi-Strauss proposed that many common cultural patterns—such as those found in myth, ritual, and language—are rooted in basic structures of the mind (Bodley, 2008).

He wrote, for instance, about the universal tendency of the human mind to sort things into sets of opposing concepts, such as day and night, black and white, or male and female. Lévi-Strauss believed such basic conceptual patterns became elaborated through culture. For example, many societies divide themselves into contrasting but complementary groups,

known as moieties (from the French word for “half”). Each moiety traces its descent through one line to a common ancestor. In addition to many shared ritual functions, moieties create a system for controlling sex and marriage. A person from one moiety may only marry or have sexual relations with a person from the other moiety (ibid).

### **Cultural Materialism and Cultural Ecology**

In the 1960s, American anthropologists such as Julian Steward, Roy Rappaport, and Marvin Harris began to study how culture and social institutions relate to a people’s technology, economy, and natural environment. All of these factors together define a people’s patterns of subsistence—how they feed, clothe, shelter, and otherwise provide for themselves (Bodley, 2008).

Economic and ecological approaches to understanding culture and societies are known as cultural materialism or cultural ecology. Harris, for instance, analyzed the religious practice in India of regarding cows as sacred. He suggested that this religious practice developed as a cultural response to the value of cows as work animals for farming and other essential tasks and as a source of dung, which is dried as fuel (ibid).

### **Symbolic Anthropology**

In the 1970s many anthropologists, including American ethnologist Clifford Geertz and British ethnologist Victor Turner, moved away from ecological and economic explanations of people’s cultures. Instead, these anthropologists looked for the meanings of particular cultural symbols and rituals within cultures themselves, an approach known as symbolic anthropology (Bodley, 2008).

Symbolic anthropological studies often focus on one particularly important ritual or symbol within a society. Anthropologists using this approach attempt to demonstrate how this one symbol or ritual shapes or reflects an entire culture. Geertz, for example, attempted to show how the culture of the people of Bali, Indonesia,

could be understood by examining the important Balinese ritual of staging and betting on cockfights (ibid).

### **Conclusion**

Anthropology traces its roots to ancient Greek historical and philosophical writings about human nature and the organization of human society. In the book *History*, Herodotus described the cultures of various peoples of the Persian Empire, which the Greeks conquered during the first half of the 400 BC. The greatest historian and social philosopher of this period was Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), who lived in present-day Tunisia in the 14th century AD, was another early writer of ideas relevant to anthropology. The ‘great discoveries’ were of crucial importance for later developments in Europe and the world, and on a lesser scale for the development of anthropology.

During the Middle Ages (5th to 15th centuries AD) biblical scholars dominated European thinking on questions of human origins and cultural development. Beginning in the 15th century, European explorers looking for wealth in new lands provided vivid descriptions of the exotic cultures they encountered on their journeys in Asia, Africa, and what are now the Americas. The eighteenth century saw a flowering of science and philosophy in Europe. The European Age of Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries marked the rise of scientific and rational philosophical thought. Enlightenment thinkers, such as Scottish-born David Hume, John Locke of England, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau of France, wrote a number of humanistic works on the nature of humankind.

Finally, an internationalized science emerged. The global researcher becomes a popular figure – the prototype naturally being Charles Darwin (1809–81), who’s *Origin of Species* (1859), was based on data collected during a six-year circumnavigation of the globe. Toward the end of the 19th century anthropologists began to take academic positions in colleges and universities. Anthropological associations

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