

SESSION NAME: THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Social Anthropology and Cultural Anthropology

Social Anthropology and Cultural Anthropology are not different disciplines, not even two sub-disciplines. The two designations simply indicate different emphasis on aspects that are intimately connected: Social Anthropology, which pertains mostly to the British tradition, focuses mainly on social relations and social institutions, such as family and kinship or political structures and organizations. As for Cultural Anthropology, which stems from the American tradition, it focuses mostly on ideas, attitudes, behaviours, and objects.

The Science of Social and Cultural Diversity

Anthropology as it is practiced nowadays is not the same as the one in the 1950s, let alone the one practiced in the 19th century. But no matter how important its transformation has been since then, there is a specific point of view and a characteristic project which have remained constant for the most part. It is a discipline that studies differences – which also entails necessarily the study of similarities – between social and cultural forms. It is therefore the science of social and cultural diversity. Its project has been the study of the relation between the unity and the diversity of humankind.

Fieldwork and Cultural Translation

In this sense, anthropology can be thought of as an enterprise of cultural translation. It is a discipline which studies other ways of thinking, being, and acting. Anthropologists try to understand cultural forms from the inside, that is, from the native's point of view.

Most of the time this learning process is achieved through participant observation. This consists of a long and continued period of fieldwork (usually from one up to three years), during which the anthropologist tries to share as much as possible of peoples'

lives and their routine activities. As participant observation, fieldwork is a mixture of method and experience, of objectivity and subjectivity, of systematic observation and data recording on the one hand, and, on the other, improvised social engaging, of personal involvement with others and analytical detachment.

The final aim, it must be stressed, is not to just penetrate a culture and to understand it from the inside, in the same way a native does. This is important, but after learning or absorbing a culture the anthropologist has to emerge out of it in order to translate it to others, to another cultural frame. However this translation has to obey certain rules. It has to be done through the proper concepts. These concepts must be both accurate and faithful to the culture being studied, and, at same stime, they must be understandable to outsiders. The code of translation, so to speak, is obtained through anthropological training. If an anthropologist only succeeds in internalizing that other culture without translating it to others by relating it to his or her culture of origin, as well as to the anthropological theoretical framework, then he or she can do no more than to share that knowledge with the natives themselves and with nobody else. That knowledge has to be made communicable to others. As someone once put it, the anthropologist who has assimilated the worldview of, say, the Bororo so well that he or she cannot see them in a way other than the Bororo way, is not an anthropologist anymore. He or she is a Bororo – and the Bororos are not anthropologists.

Hence, two distancing movements are necessary. In a first moment, anthropologists have to decenter themselves as much as possible from their cultural universe in order to better assimilate another culture in its own terms. But in a second moment they have to distance themselves from that other culture. In sum, the anthropologist has to translate a particular way of understanding things – that is, a system of meaning – into another system of meaning.

Anthropological Comparison and Objectivity

Still, this is an intermediate step. The final aim is to take this knowledge on the various possibilities of being human and to produce a knowledge on human nature. It is a task that involves simultaneously an attention to what is common and to what is different, an attention to the universal and to the particular.

Anthropology is therefore necessarily comparative. Beyond other methodological tools such as observation (through fieldwork) and interpretation, its most specific method is the comparative method. The comparative nature of anthropology is also what enables it to be particularly aware even of its own theoretical premises. Not only its own, for that matter, but the very categories that are used by the social and human sciences in general. For instance, the concepts of hierarchy, marriage, development, and even the Oedipus complex, which still bear the mark of their Western origins. These are concepts that cease to be self-evident once the comparison with other cultural contexts puts them to a test.

Very often social scientist don't realize how shallow and unrigorous their use of these concepts can be, or that these are not categories as neutral as, for example, "photon" or "neutron". On the contrary, such categories are often contaminated by the common sense of the society they were born in. They are historical categories which are to some extent prisoners of that society. Therefore, by studying other societies we can learn a lot about our selves. We can learn not only as a society, but also as a scientific discipline by deconstructing the very concepts we use to describe reality. The idea is to find concepts and logical categories that can have a universal validity.

This is a particular kind of objectivity. It not merely objectivity in the sense that the observer seeks to suspend his or her emotions, prejudices and values ("the suspension of belief"). This first level objectivity is the one which characterises all social sciences,

otherwise they wouldn't be sciences. The objectivity I am referring to pertains to a second level of abstraction. The aim is not only to rise above the values of our own society, but also to elevate oneself above certain methods of thinking in order to reach a formulation which is valid for all possible observers. The anthropologist seeks to build new mental categories and to integrate notions -- for instance of space and time -- which are alien to Western thinking, for example, or to whatever society the anthropologist comes from.

Difference, Otherness, Alterity

Anthropology deals therefore with difference, diversity, otherness, in a word, alterity. But alterity is not an essence, or a property inherent to this or that population. It is a relative notion. In other words, one becomes Other only from someone else's perspective. Therefore it is not an absolute entity, a fixed reality, but a relative position. Also, there are degrees of difference. In this sense, the other is not necessarily located far away. The distance out of which otherness is produced is not necessarily a geographical distance, say, Amazonia. It can be a social and cognitive distance: for example, a certain neighborhood, a fishermen's community, a prison, a group of football supporters, even if they are located in the same society than the anthropologist's. But it is important for him or her to have the theoretical and the methodological background that enables him or her to achieve some scientific distancing. One of the main items of this background is the comparative perspective. The comparative gaze helps to render familiar what seems strange to us. But it also enables us to render strange what seems most familiar, and therefore natural and self-evident. Even when the comparison is not explicit, one can say that the comparative knowledge produced over decades by anthropology on what is socially and culturally distant shapes the way anthropologists look at what stands close to them. To look at

one's own society from this perspective of exteriority contributes to make similarities and differences clearer, and highlights the relative nature of our own forms of existence, which we tend to consider as the natural way of doing things.

The Holistic Perspective

Another important characteristic is anthropology's comprehensive perspective, most known as the holistic perspective (even though this is not the exact technical sense of the word). It consists in trying to comprehend not isolated parts but wholes, and the interrelatedness of elements in the context of these totalities. In fieldwork, anthropologists attempt "to treat the group's life as a whole -- not to isolate some artificially abstracted aspect, such as economics, politics, or nutrition, but to consider all of these as they relate to each other and to other aspects: religion, education, family life, biological, medical, or environmental conditions, art, and so on. In fact, it is both a premise and a conclusion of ethnographic research that existence [...] is a web of threads which cannot be disentangled. To divide this whole into parts such as economics and politics may be useful for analysis, but one must always remember that the compartments are analytical creations and that the whole must be grasped in order to understand any part" (Peacock : 1986: 19). This perspective then consist in the attempt to relate any given aspect of a social reality with other aspects of that reality.

This is why ethnography (the description of a way of life) often focuses on small units, where social relations are directly observable and that allow for capturing the interrelatedness of their different aspects. This should not imply that these units are closed and isolated, nor that they lead an existence which is autonomous and independent of a wider reality. On the contrary, this perspective may show how global forces (economical, political, cultural, social) are refracted in, acted on, and lived at the local level, in concrete relationships, and how it all works locally according yo a

specific logic. So what is in fact being studied is this relation between the global and the particular. That is why one can say that the anthropological approach is “localized”, rather than “local” (Bromberger 1987). In other words, it is an approach anchored in a local point of observation, but the horizon of analysis is much wider and open.

Ethnography can therefore reveal the general through the particular. One classical example is how a “thick description” of a cockfight in Bali can reveal as much of Indonesian society as a set of statistics, even though it produces a different kind of information (Geertz 1973) .

In conclusion, the anthropological approach is characterized by two main characteristics. First, it tends to examine a society as a whole, from an holistic perspective, in order to grasp how an element of that society articulates itself with others and derives its meaning from them, or makes sense in that particular context. Second, it examines each society in relation to other societies, trying to grasp the similarities and the differences between them in order to understand them both.

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