

PLUTUS IAS

Anthropology Optional Value

Addition Notes

Paper I

**(Topic 6- Anthropological
Thought)**

By

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Anthropology Paper I- Syllabus Topic- Anthropological Thought

- (a) Classical evolutionism (Tylor, Morgan and Frazer)**
- (b) Historical particularism (Boas); Diffusionism (British, German and American)**
- (c) Functionalism (Malinowski); Structural-functionalism (RadcliffeBrown)**
- (d) Structuralism (Levi - Strauss and E.Leach)**
- (e) Culture and personality (Benedict, Mead, Linton, Kardiner and Cora – du Bois).**
- (f) Neo - evolutionism (Childe, White, Steward, Sahlins and Service)**
- (g) Cultural materialism (Harris)**
- (h) Symbolic and interpretive theories (Turner, Schneider and Geertz)**
- (i) Cognitive theories (Tyler, Conklin)**
- (j) Postmodernism in anthropology**

Anthropological Thought

Introduction

Theory is the core of anthropology. Theories determine the types of questions anthropologists ask and the sorts of information they collect. Without a solid understanding of the history of theory, anthropological data remains a collection of exotic ethnographic vignettes. With a knowledge of theory, these vignettes become attempts to answer critical philosophical and practical problems. Thus it is critical that anthropologists understand theory and its historical context.

Theory is a set of propositions or postulates explaining the nature of ‘society’, ‘culture’, ‘human behaviour’ and ‘social relationships’. Theories, in simpler terms, are statements that use various concepts and ideas as analytical tools or heuristic devices to explain social phenomena of different scale and magnitude. Theories are generally able to explain a wide range of phenomena through a limited set of central and significant thought categories. Thus concepts constitute the basic elements and logics cement them together. The relationships among these concepts are weaved together in such a manner giving rise to a series of propositions or a grand proposition which is a theoretical explanation of the phenomena. Theory is thus a body of knowledge that explains a wide range of phenomena from different cultural backgrounds.

Theory and Ethnography

In social or cultural anthropology, a distinction is often made between 'ethnography and theory'. **Ethnography** is literally the practice of writing about peoples. Often it is taken to mean our way of making sense of other peoples' modes of thought, since anthropologists usually study cultures other than their own. **Theory** is also, in part anyway, our way of making sense of our own, anthropological mode of thought.

Ideally, ethnography serves to enhance our understanding of culture in the abstract and define the essence of human nature (which is in fact predicated on the existence of culture). On the other side of the coin, theory without ethnography is pretty meaningless, since the understanding of cultural divergence is at least one of the most important goals of anthropological inquiry.

Elements of a Theory

Every theory comprises certain elements. These elements are interconnected, each giving rise to the others and each shaping the other. Thus a meaningful set of ideas logically interconnected and capable of explaining other phenomena come up. Anthropological theory, like any other social science theory, comprises the following elements:

(i) Questions

The most important questions in my mind are: 'What are we trying to find out?', and 'Why is this knowledge useful?' Anthropological knowledge could be useful, for example, either in trying to understand one's own society, or in trying to understand the nature of the human species. Some anthropological questions are historical: 'How Do Societies Change?', or 'What came first, private property or social hierarchy?' Other anthropological questions are about contemporary issues: 'How do social institutions work?', or 'How do humans envisage and classify what they see around them?'

(ii) Assumptions

Assumptions include notions of common humanity, of cultural difference, of value in all cultures, or of differences in cultural values. More specifically, anthropologists may assume either human inventiveness or human inventiveness; or that society constrains the individual, or individuals create society. Some assumptions are common to all anthropologists, others are not. Thus, while having some common ground, anthropologists can have significant differences of opinion about the way they see their subject.

(iii) Methods

Methods have developed through the years and are part of every field work study. However, methods include not only fieldwork but, equally importantly, comparison.

(iv) Evidence

Evidence is obviously a methodological component, but how it is treated, or even understood, will differ according to theoretical perspective. Some anthropologists prefer to see comparison as a method of building a picture of a particular culture area. Others see it as a method for explaining their own discoveries in light of a more world wide pattern. Still others regard comparison itself as an illusory objective, except insofar as one always understands the exotic through its difference from the familiar.

What evidence might actually be. In anthropology, as for many other disciplines, the only thing that is agreed is that evidence must relate to the problem at hand. In other words, not only do theories depend on evidence, evidence itself depends on what questions one is trying to answer.

Beyond these four elements, there are **two more specific aspects of enquiry in social anthropology**. These are characteristic of anthropological methods, no matter what theoretical persuasion an anthropologist may otherwise maintain. Thus they serve to define an anthropological approach, as against an approach which is characteristic of other social sciences, especially sociology. The two aspects are:

- (1) **Observing a society as a whole**, to see how each element that society fits together with, or is meaningful in terms of, other such elements; Observing a society as a whole entails trying to understand how things are related, for example, how politics fits together with kinship or economics, or how specific economic institutions fit together with others.
- (2) **Examine each society in relation to others**, to find similarities and differences and account for them. Examining each society in relation to others implies an attempt to find and account for their similarities and their differences.

Thus, for this purpose of anthropological inquiry, a methodical framework can encompass:

- (1) Comparison of isolated cases (e.g., the Trobrianders of Melanesia and Nuer of East Africa)
- (2) Comparisons within a region (e.g., the Trobrianders within the context of Melanesian ethnography)
- (3) A more universal sort of comparison (taking place in societies across the globe)

Theory and ethnography are the twin pillars of this programme, and virtually all anthropological inquiry includes either straightforward comparison or an explicit attempt to come to grips with the difficulties which comparisons entail.

Comparative Approach in Anthropology

It is useful to distinguish three types of comparison in anthropology: illustrative, global, and controlled (which includes regional comparison).

Illustrative comparison- involves choosing examples to make some point about cultural difference or similarity. This is the basis of much introductory teaching in anthropology. We might choose Nuer as an example of a patrilineal society, and compare Nuer to Trobrianders, as an example of a matrilineal society. We might choose an element of one society which is unfamiliar to our audience, say gift-giving in Bushman society, and compare it to a similar practice in a more familiar case, say gift-giving in American society. Such comparisons may show similarities (e.g., the practice of gift-giving itself), but usually the illustrations are designed to show differences which reveal aspects of the less-familiar society.

Global comparison- or more accurately, global-sample comparison, involves comparing a sample of the world's societies to find statistical correlations among cultural features, or (in ecological anthropology) between environmental and cultural features. George Peter Murdock's approach is the best-known example.

Controlled comparison- lies in-between in scope. It involves limiting the range of variables, usually (though not always) by confining comparisons to those within a region. Regional comparison has been prevalent in the work of a number of anthropologists of a variety of schools. Among the diffusionists, Frobenius (in his studies of African Culture Areas) followed a mainly regional approach. Among the evolutionists, Steward employed a form of regional comparison. Among the functionalists, A. R. Radcliffe Brown (writing on Australia) and Fred Eggan (writing on Native North America) sought an understanding of specific cultures through a wider understanding of their place within regional structures. At a deeper level, structuralist anthropologists have sought to comprehend such regional structures and define generative principles peculiar to a given region, common structures which set the limits of variation, or culture traits which stand in relation to one another in interesting ways— often capable of transformations when they move between cultures.

Anthropological Paradigms

It is commonplace in many academic fields to distinguish between a 'theory' and a 'theoretical perspective'. By a **theoretical perspective**, we usually mean a grand theory, what is sometimes

called a theoretical framework or a broad way of looking at the world. In anthropology, we sometimes call such a thing a cosmology if it is attributed to a 'traditional' culture, or a paradigm if it is attributed to Western scientists.

The theoretical perspective, cosmology, or paradigm defines the major issues with which a theorist is concerned. The principle is the same whether one is a member of a traditional culture, an anthropologist, or a natural scientist. In the philosophy of science itself there are differences of opinion as to the precise nature of scientific thinking, the process of gaining scientific knowledge, and the existential status of that knowledge.

According to **Kuhn**, paradigms are large theories which contain within them smaller theories. When smaller theories no longer make sense of the world, then a crisis occurs. At least in the natural sciences (if not quite to the same extent in the social sciences), such a crisis eventually results in either the overthrow of a paradigm or incorporation of it, as a special case, into a newer and larger one.

There is some dispute about whether or not anthropology can really be considered a science in the sense that physics is, but most would agree that anthropology at least bear some relation to physics in having a single overarching framework (in this case, the understanding of humankind), and within this, more specific paradigms (such as functionalism and structuralism). Within our paradigms we have the particular facts and explanations which make up any given anthropological study. Anthropology goes through 'revolutions' or 'paradigm shifts' from time to time, although the nature of ours may be different from those in the natural sciences. For anthropology, fashion, as much as explanatory value, has its part to play.

Diachronic, Synchronic, and Interactive Perspectives

Within anthropology, it is useful to think in terms of both a set of competing theoretical perspectives within any given framework, and a hierarchy of theoretical levels. Take evolutionism and diffusionism, for example. **Evolutionism** is an anthropological perspective which emphasises the growing complexity of culture through time. **Diffusionism** is a perspective which emphasises the transmission of ideas from one place to another. They compete because they offer different explanations of the same thing: how cultures change. Yet both are really part of the same grand theory: the theory of social change.

- **Diachronic perspective- indicating the relation of things through[over] time.** E.g. Evolutionism, Diffusionism etc.
- **Synchronic perspective- indicating the relation of things together at the same time.** These do not take reference of the time period. Synchronic approaches include

functionalism, structuralism, interpretivism, and other ones which try to explain the workings of particular cultures without reference to time.

- **Interactive perspective-** or, more accurately, set of perspectives, has both diachronic and synchronic aspects. Its adherents reject the static nature of most synchronic analysis, and also reject the simplistic historical assumptions of the classical evolutionist and diffusionist traditions. Proponents of interactive approaches include those who study cyclical social processes, or cause-and-effect relations between culture and environment.

Diachronic	Synchronic	Interactive
Evolutionism Diffusionism Marxism (in some respects) Culture-area approaches (in some respects)	Relativism (including ‘culture and personality’) Structuralism Structural-functionalism Cognitive approaches Culture-area approaches (in most respects) Functionalism (in some respects) Interpretivism (in some respects)	Transactionalism Processualism Feminism Poststructuralism Postmodernism Functionalism (in some respects) Interpretivism (in some respects) Marxism (in some respects)

Idiographic and Nomothetic Approaches

The natural sciences are nomothetic in that they seek facts in order to draw generalisations (the term is derived from the classical Greek word *nomos*, meaning “law”). A nomothetic study, then, is interested in facts primarily as a means to producing theory. An idiographic study is one that is particularising, seeking individual facts to understand them more fully within context. The field of history (and anthropology, according to Boas’ reading of Windelband) is a discipline that cannot and should not be made to produce generalisations. You can probably see by now that Durkheim and other positivists such as Edward Burnett Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan share a nomothetic orientation (despite disagreeing about everything else!), while Boas shared an idiographic approach with another German contemporary, Max Weber.

History of Anthropology in Paradigms

Very broadly, the history of anthropology has involved transitions from diachronic perspectives to synchronic perspectives, and from synchronic perspectives to interactive perspectives.

Early diachronic theories like evolutionism, often concentrated on global but quite specific theoretical issues. For example, ‘Which came first, patrilineal or matrilineal descent?’ Behind this question was a set of notions about the relation between men and women, about the nature of marriage, about private property, and so on. Through such questions, quite grand theories were built up. These had great explanatory power, but they were vulnerable to refutation by careful counter-argument, often using contradicting ethnographic evidence.

For the synchronic approaches, in the early twentieth century, it was often more difficult to find answers to that kind of theoretical question. ‘Which is more culturally appropriate, patrilineal or matrilineal descent?’ is rather less meaningful than ‘Which came first?’ The focus landed more on specific societies. Anthropologists began to study societies in great depth and to compare how each dealt with problems such as raising children, maintaining links between kinsfolk, and dealing with members of other kin groups. A debate did emerge on which was more important, descent (relations within a kin group) or alliance (relations between kin groups which intermarry). Yet overall, the emphasis in synchronic approaches has been on the understanding of societies one at a time, whether respect the function, the structure, or the meaning of specific customs.

Interactive approaches have concentrated on the mechanisms through which individuals seek to gain over other individuals, or simply the ways in which individuals define their social situation. For example, the question might arise: ‘Are there any hidden features of matrilineal or patrilineal descent which might lead to the breakdown of groups based on such principles?’ Or, ‘What processes enable such groups to persist?’ Or, ‘How does an individual manoeuvre around the structural constraints imposed by descent groups?’

National Traditions or Paradigms

There are many anthropological theories within the national traditions of Great Britain, USA and France. The **British School** mainly emphasised on the issues of society, social institutions and relationships. While the **American tradition** focused on culture, cultural beliefs, practices and ideologies. The **French tradition** explored the intricacies of the human mind and its functioning following a universal principle.

Rise of Sociological and Anthropological Thought

Sociological tradition was embodied by Montesquieu, Saint-Simon, and Comte. Paralleling this, successors to the Scottish Enlightenment argued vehemently over the biological relationships between the ‘races’. Both of these developments were to leave their mark in nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropology.

Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws (1748) explores the forms of government, the temperament of peoples, and the influence of climate on society, with true ethnographic examples from around the world. Central to his argument is the idea of the '**general spirit**' (**esprit ge'ne'ral**), which is the fundamental essence of a given culture: 'Nature and climate almost alone dominate savages; manners govern the Chinese; laws tyrannise Japan; in former times mores set the tone in Lacedaemon; in Rome it was set by the maxims of government and the ancient mores' (1748). While Levi-Strauss once argued that Rousseau was the founder of the social sciences, Radcliffe-Brown gave that honour to Montesquieu; and the styles of the later structuralist and structural functionalist traditions do owe much to the respective rationalism of Rousseau and empiricism of Montesquieu.

Cloude Henri de Saint Simon

He was the first scholar to treat society as a distinct and separate unit of analysis. He was also the first to stress upon the idea that social sciences might be able to use new methods of social sciences. However, as a social thinker during the Industrial Revolution, he was mainly interested in the analysis of society only related to the desire for social reform.

Auguste Comte

He was among the first scholars to apply the methods of physical sciences to the study of society. He focused on the areas of social order and social change. As pupil of **Saint-Simon**, **Comte** put forward notions which combined Montesquieu's interest in a science of society with a desire to incorporate it within a framework embracing also physics, chemistry, and biology. In Comte's famous lecture on social science (1839), we see the emergence of the discipline that Comte named **sociologie**. The proposed field of sociology comprised the ideas of Montesquieu, Saint-Simon, and other French writers, and also much of what we would later recognize as an evolutionary anthropological thinking about society. Modern biology grew from eighteenth-century interests in Natural History (as it was then called). Similarly, Comte saw his sociology as similar in method to biology. Yet, while the linear development of sociology from pre-Comtean ideas, through Comte to his successors is clear, the development of anthropology or ethnology is not. 'Anthropology' and 'Ethnology' as labels existed independently and with little association with what later came to be seen as mainstream social anthropology.

He gave the evolutionary **Theory (law) of Three Stages** of evolution of society:

- **Theological Stage**
- **Metaphysical Stage**
- **Positivistic Stage**