What is Anthropology?

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Part 1

Entrances

I

Why Anthropology?

Anthropology is sometimes described as the art of 'making the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar'. It has also been described as 'the most humanistic of the sciences and the most scientific of the humanities'. Anthropology can be defined as the comparative study of humans, their societies and their cultural worlds. It simultaneously explores human diversity and what it is that all human beings have in common.

For many years, social and cultural anthropology was associated with the study of 'remote places' and small-scale societies, many of them unfamiliar with literacy and not incorporated into the institutions of the state. Although the study of human diversity concerns all societies, from the smallest to the largest and from the simplest to the most complex, most anthropologists today recognise that all societies in the contemporary world are involved in processes of enormous complexity, such as migration, climate change, global economic crises and the transnational circulation of ideas. Just as European and North American anthropologists of the early twentieth century struggled to understand and describe 'the native's point of view' when they travelled to such then-remote parts of the world as Melanesia or Africa, contemporary anthropologists try to grasp their areas of inquiry as fully as possible wherever they conduct research, be it in their own backyard or in faraway locations. They then report on how the people they are studying perceive the world and act upon it, still striving to understand 'the native's point of view', even if the focus of inquiry may now be consumption in a European city or ethnic politics in the Pacific.

In many North Atlantic societies, ideas and patterns of thinking derived from anthropology have become part of the vocabulary of journalists and policymakers in the last few decades. This is no coincidence. In fact, it can be argued that anthropology is indispensable for understanding the present world, and there is no need to have a strong passion for African kinship or Polynesian gift exchange to appreciate its significance. Indeed, in a shrinking world like ours – a world of cultural diversity, frictions,

mobility, misunderstandings, ethnic complexity and rapid social and cultural change – the kind of knowledge anthropologists can contribute is more indispensable than ever. In the study of human diversity, anthropology offers tools and perspectives that make the contemporary world easier to understand and, perhaps, easier to make peace with.

Let us look at some of the reasons why anthropological knowledge can be especially useful when we try to make sense of the contemporary world. First, contact between culturally different groups has increased enormously in our time. Long-distance travel has become common, safe and relatively inexpensive. In the nineteenth century, only a small proportion of the western populations travelled to other countries (emigrants excluded) and, as late as the 1950s, even fairly affluent Europeans rarely went on holiday abroad. As is well known, this has changed dramatically in recent decades. The flows of people who move temporarily between countries have grown and have led to intensified contact: business-people, aid workers and tourists travel from more economically developed countries to less economically developed ones, and labour migrants, refugees and students move in the opposite direction. Many more westerners visit 'exotic' places today than a generation ago. In the 1950s, people may have been able to go on a trip to Rome or London once in their lifetime. In the 1980s, young North Europeans could travel by Interrail to Portugal and Greece, and take similar trips every summer. Young people with similar backgrounds today might go on holiday to the Far East, Latin America and India. The number of international tourist arrivals grew from 200 million annually to over a billion from 1980 to 2012. The scope of tourism has also been widened and now includes tailor-made trips and a broad range of special interest forms including 'adventure tourism' and 'cultural tourism', where one can go on guided tours to South African townships, Brazilian *favelas* or Indonesian villages. The fact that 'cultural tourism' has become an important source of income for many communities in the less economically developed world can be seen as an indication of an increased interest in other cultures from the West. It can be a short step from cultural tourism to anthropological studies proper.

At the same time as 'we' visit 'them' in growing numbers and under new circumstances, the opposite movement also takes place, though not for the same reasons. It is because of the great differences in standards of living and life opportunities between more and less economically developed countries that millions of people from the Global South have settled in Europe and North America. Half a century ago, it might have

been necessary for an inhabitant in a European city to travel to the Indian subcontinent in order to savour the fragrances and sounds of subcontinental cuisine and music. Today there are large numbers of Indian restaurants in many North Atlantic cities, ranging from four-star establishments to inexpensive takeaway holes in the wall. Pieces and fragments of the world's cultural variation can now be found in many, if not most, of the great cities of the world, from São Paulo to Hong Kong. As a result, curiosity about others has been stimulated, and it has also become necessary for political reasons to understand what cultural variation entails. Ongoing controversies over multicultural issues, such as religious minority rights, the *hijab* (Muslim headscarf), language instruction in schools and calls for affirmative action because of ethnic discrimination in the labour market testify to an urgent need to deal sensibly with cultural differences, and, in the twenty-first century, identity politics based on religion or nationalism represents a threat to the cohesion of many societies around the world.

Second, the world is shrinking in other ways too. Satellite television, cellphone networks and the now nearly ubiquitous internet have created conditions for truly global, instantaneous and friction-free communications. Distance is no longer a decisive hindrance for close contact; new, deterritorialised social networks or even 'virtual communities' develop and, at the same time, individuals have a larger palette of information from which to choose. Moreover, the economy is also becoming increasingly globally integrated. Transnational companies have grown dramatically in numbers, size and economic importance since the Second World War. The capitalist mode of production and monetary economies in general, globally dominant throughout the twentieth century, have become nearly universal.

In politics as well, global issues increasingly dominate the agenda. Issues of war and peace, the environment and poverty are all of such a scope, and involve so many transnational linkages, that they cannot be handled satisfactorily by single states alone. Climate change and international terrorism are also transnational problems which can only be understood and addressed through a global, comparative perspective. This ever tighter interweaving of formerly relatively separate sociocultural environments can lead to a growing recognition of the fact that we are all in the same boat; that humanity, divided as it is by class, culture, geography and opportunities, is fundamentally one.

Third, culture changes rapidly in our day and age, which is felt nearly everywhere in the world. In the West, typical ways of life are being

transformed. The stable nuclear family is no longer the only common and socially acceptable way of life. Youth culture and trends in fashion and music change so fast that older people have difficulties following their twists and turns; food habits are being transformed, leading to greater diversity within many countries, and so on. These and other changes make it necessary to ask questions such as: 'Who are we really?', 'What is our culture, and is it at all meaningful to speak of a "we" that "has" a "culture"?' 'What do we have in common with the people who used to live here 50 years ago, and what do we have in common with people who live in an entirely different place today?' 'Is it still defensible to speak as if we primarily belong to nations, or are other forms of group belonging more important?' The changes lead to counter-reactions, from Britain's controversial Brexit vote to the spread of conservative Islam and ethnic nationalism, leading to often heated controversies over political identity, rights and entitlements.

Fourth, recent decades have seen the rise of an unprecedented interest in cultural identity, which is increasingly seen as an asset. Many feel that their local uniqueness is threatened by globalisation, indirect colonialism, corporate power and other forms of influence from the outside, and react by attempting to strengthen or at least preserve what they see as their unique culture or their local autonomy. In many cases, minority organisations demand cultural rights on behalf of their constituency; in other cases, the state tries to slow down or prevent processes of change or outside influence through legislation.

Our era, the period after the fall of the Berlin wall and the disappearance of Soviet-style communism, the time of the internet, the smartphone and social media, the time of global neoliberal capitalism, ethnic cleansing and culturally complex modernities, has been labelled, among other things, the age of globalisation and the information age. I call it an overheated world (Eriksen 2016), an era characterised by unprecedented, accelerated change in a number of different domains, from waste production to urban growth. In order to understand this seemingly chaotic, confusing and complex historical period, there is a need for a perspective on humanity which does not take preconceived assumptions about human societies for granted, which is sensitive to both similarities and differences, and which simultaneously approaches the human world from a global and a local angle. The only academic subject which fulfils these criteria is anthropology, which studies humans in societies under the most varying circumstances imaginable, searches for patterns and similarities, but is

fundamentally critical of quick solutions and simple answers to complex questions. There is also an explicit ambition among anthropologists not to see the world from a European or North American vantage-point, but to establish a truly global, comparative perspective where as many voices and life-worlds as possible are taken seriously.

Although the concepts and ideas of anthropology have become widely circulated since the late twentieth century, anthropology as such remains little known (and often misunderstood). It is still widely believed that the ultimate aim of anthropology consists in 'discovering' new peoples, in remote locations such as the Amazon or Borneo. Many assume that anthropologists are drawn magnetically towards the most exotic customs and rituals imaginable, eschewing the commonplace for the spectacular. There are those who believe that anthropologists spend most of their lives travelling the world, with or without khaki suits, intermittently penning dry, learned travelogues. All these notions about anthropology are wrong, although they may, admittedly – like many myths of their kind – contain a kernel of truth.

The Uniqueness of Anthropology

Anthropology is an intellectually challenging, theoretically ambitious subject which tries to achieve an understanding of culture, society and humanity through detailed studies of local life, made sense of through comparison and contextualisation. But it is also a form of storytelling about the lives that you and I could have led, but didn't because we were busy living our own lives. Some anthropologists have chosen their field of inquiry for existential reasons, sometimes with a strong element of self-discovery; they may have grown up as the children of migrants or expatriates in a culturally foreign environment, or they are simply fascinated by faraway places, or they may be engaged in questions of global justice or minority rights issues – immigrants, indigenous groups or other minorities, as the case might be – or they might even have fallen in love with a Mexican village or an African man. As a profession and as a science – sometimes even as a vocation – anthropology has grander ambitions than offering keys to individual self-understanding, or bringing travel stories or political tracts to the people. At the deepest level, anthropology raises philosophical questions which it tries to respond to by exploring human lives under different conditions, thereby saying something not just about what it means to be human, but also about the world in which we

live. At a slightly less lofty level, it may be said that the task of anthropology is to create astonishment, to show that the world is both richer and more complex than it is usually assumed to be.

To simplify somewhat, one may say that anthropology primarily offers two kinds of insight. First, its practitioners produce knowledge about the actual cultural variation in the world; studies may deal with, say, the role of caste and wealth in Indian village life, technology among highland people in New Guinea, religion in southern Africa, life on the Wall Street stock exchange, the political importance of kinship in the Middle East, or concepts about life and the cosmos in the Amazon basin. Although most anthropologists are specialists in one or two regions, it is necessary to be knowledgeable about global cultural variation, and about humanity as such, in order to be able to say anything interesting about one's region, topic or people.

Second, anthropology offers methods and theoretical perspectives enabling the practitioner to explore, compare and understand these varied expressions of the human condition. In other words, the subject offers both things to think *about* and things to think *with*.

But anthropology is not just a toolbox; it is also a craft which teaches the novice how to obtain a certain kind of knowledge and what this knowledge might say something about. Just as a carpenter can specialise in either furniture or buildings, and one journalist may cover fluctuations in the stockmarket while another deals with royal scandals, the craft of anthropology can be used for many different things. Like carpenters or journalists, all anthropologists share a set of professional skills.

Some newcomers to anthropology are initially flabbergasted to discover that it is just as often rigorously analytical as it may be colourfully evocative, and some see it as deeply ironic that a subject which claims to make sense of the life-worlds of ordinary people can be so knotty. Many anthropological texts are beautifully written, but it is also true that many of them are tough, dry and convoluted. Anthropology insists on being analytical and theoretical, and, as a consequence, it can often feel both inaccessible and even alienating. Since its contents are so important and – arguably – fascinating, this only indicates that there is a great need for good anthropological writing, and believe me, it exists.

Anthropology is not alone in studying society and culture academically. Sociology describes and accounts for social life, especially in modern societies, in great breadth and depth. Political science deals with politics at all levels, from the village to the United Nations. Psychology studies the

mental life of humans by means of scientific and interpretive methods, and human geography looks at economic and social processes in a transnational perspective. Finally, there is the fairly new subject, controversial but popular among students and the public, of cultural studies, which can be described as an amalgamation of cultural sociology, history of ideas, literary studies and anthropology. (Evil tongues describe it, somewhat uncharitably, as 'anthropology without the pain', that is, without field research and meticulous analysis.) In other words, there is a considerable overlap between the social sciences, and it may well be argued that the disciplinary boundaries are to some extent artificial. The social sciences represent some of the same interests and try to respond to some of the same questions, although there are also differences. Moreover, anthropology also has much in common with humanities such as literary studies and history. Philosophy has always provided intellectual input for anthropology, and there is a productive, passionately debated frontier area towards biology.

Until the 1970s, anthropology still concentrated mainly on detailed studies of local life in traditional societies and ethnographic fieldwork was its main – in some cases its sole – method. The situation eventually became more complex, as anthropologists increasingly began to study all kinds of societies, and also because the methodological repertoire has become more diverse. This book consists in its entirety of a long answer to the question 'What is anthropology?', but for now, we might say that it is *the comparative study of culture and society, with local life as the starting point*. Put differently, anthropology distinguishes itself from other lines of enquiry by insisting that social reality is first and foremost created through relationships between people and the groups to which they belong. A current concept such as globalisation, for example, has no meaning to an anthropologist unless it can be studied through actual people, their relationship to each other and to a larger surrounding world. When this level of the 'nitty-gritty' is established, it is possible to explore the linkages between the locally lived world and large-scale phenomena (such as global capitalism or the state). But it is only when an anthropologist has spent enough time crawling on all fours, as it were, studying the world by looking at the grains of sand on the beach through a magnifying glass, that he or she is ready to enter the helicopter, armed with a pair of binoculars, in order to obtain an overview.

Anthropology means, translated literally from ancient Greek, the study of humanity. Of course, it would be presumptuous to assume

that anthropologists have a monopoly here. Besides, there are other anthropologies than the one described in this book. Philosophical anthropology raises fundamental questions concerning the human condition. Physical anthropology is the study of human pre-history and evolution. (For some time, physical anthropology also included the study of 'races'. These are no longer scientifically interesting since genetics has disproven their existence, but in social and cultural anthropology, race may still be interesting as a social construction, because it remains important in ideologies by which people live.) Moreover, a distinction, admittedly a fuzzy one, is sometimes drawn between *cultural* and *social* anthropology. Cultural anthropology is the term used in the USA (and some other countries), while social anthropology traces its origins to Britain and France. Historically, there have been certain differences between these traditions – social anthropology has its foundation in sociological theory and comparative law, while cultural anthropology is more broadly based on the humanities or, since the German influence was decisive, *Geisteswissenschaften* – but the distinction has become sufficiently blurred that it can be disregarded. Here, the distinction between social and cultural anthropology will only be used when it is necessary to highlight the specificity of North American or European anthropology.

As a university discipline, anthropology is not a very old subject – it has been taught for about 100 years, in most universities less – but it has raised questions which have been formulated in different guises since antiquity: Are the differences between peoples inborn or learned? Why are there so many languages, and how different are they really? Do all religions have something in common? Which forms of governance exist, and how do they work? Is it possible to rank societies on a ladder according to their level of development? What is it that all humans have in common? And, perhaps most importantly: What kind of creatures are humans? Are they aggressive animals, social animals, altruistic animals, or are they, perhaps, the only self-defining animals on the planet?

Every thinking person has an opinion on these matters. Such questions can scarcely be answered once and for all, but they can at least be asked in an accurate and informed way. It is the goal of anthropology to establish as detailed a knowledge as possible about human life in its mind-boggling diversity, and to develop a conceptual apparatus that makes it possible to compare life-worlds and societies. This in turn enables us to understand both differences and similarities between the many different ways of being human. In spite of the enormous variations anthropologists

document, the very existence of the discipline proves beyond doubt that it is possible to communicate fruitfully and intelligibly between different forms of human life. Had it been impossible to understand culturally remote peoples, anthropology as such would have been impossible; and nobody who practises anthropology believes that this is impossible (although few believe that it is possible to understand everything). On the contrary, different societies are made to shed light on each other through comparison.

The great enigma of anthropology can be phrased like this: All over the world, humans are born with the same cognitive and physical apparatus, and yet they grow into distinctly different persons and groups, with different societal types, beliefs, technologies, languages and notions about the good life. Differences in innate endowments vary within each group and not between them, so that musicality, intelligence, intuition and other qualities that vary from person to person are quite evenly distributed globally. It is not the case that Africans are 'born with rhythm', or that northerners are 'innately cold and introverted'. To the extent that such differences exist, they are not inborn. On the other hand, it is true that particular social milieux stimulate inborn potentials for rhythmicity, while others encourage the ability to think abstractly. Mozart, a man filled to the brim with musical talent, would hardly have become the world's greatest composer if he, that is a person with the same genetic code as Mozart, had been born in Greenland. Perhaps he would only have become a bad hunter (because of his notorious impatience).

Put differently, and paraphrasing the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 45), all humans are born with the potential to live thousands of different lives, yet we end up having lived only one. One of the central tasks of anthropology consists of giving accounts of some of the other lives we could have led.

From Enlightenment to Evolutionism

This is not the place for a detailed account of the history of anthropology, but a brief excursion back in time is necessary in order to give a proper context to the present and the recent past.

Like other human sciences, anthropology emerged as a distinct field of enquiry in Europe following the period of heightened intellectual awareness and scientific curiosity known as the Enlightenment, culminating with the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century.

More or less trustworthy accounts about remote peoples had already been recorded for centuries by European missionaries, officers and other travellers, and they now formed the raw material for general theories about cultural variation. (An early theory, espoused by the Enlightenment philosopher Montesquieu, explained cultural differences largely as a consequence of climatic variation.) From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, a family of theories usually described as *evolutionism* became dominant. The adherents of these doctrines assumed that societies could be ranked according to their level of development, and unsurprisingly built on the premise that the author's own society was the end product of a long and strenuous process of social evolution. Technological elements such as the bow and arrow, plough-driven agriculture with beasts of burden and writing were posited as the boundaries between the evolutionary levels. The evolutionist models were compatible with (and similar in form to) Darwin's theory of biological evolution, which was launched in 1859, and worked well with the colonial ideology according to which non-European peoples must be governed and developed from above, sternly and with force if need be.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, evolutionist accounts met serious competition in *diffusionism*, a largely German-language tendency which, as the name suggests, emphasised the study of the spread of cultural traits. Whereas the evolutionists often argued that every society contained the germ of its own development, diffusionists argued that change largely took place through contact and 'borrowing'.

Momentous changes took place in the world during the first decades of the twentieth century, with the First World War as a dramatic high point. In the same period, a near total revolution took place in anthropology on both sides of the Atlantic. The established evolutionist and diffusionist explanations were discarded for several reasons.

Evolutionism was now judged as a fundamentally flawed approach. The increasingly detailed and nuanced studies which were now at the anthropologists' disposal did not indicate that societies developed according to a predetermined pattern, and the normative assumption that the scholar's own society was at the top of the ladder had been exposed as a misleading, unscientific notion. The considerable differences in culture and social organisation between societies possessing roughly the same technology (such as San, or Bushmen, in southern Africa and Australian Aborigines), indicated that it was unthinkable that 'primitive peoples' could be seen

as suggestive of what our own societies might have been like at an earlier stage, as evolutionists claimed.

Diffusionism was rejected chiefly because it made assumptions about contacts and processes of diffusion that could not be substantiated. The fact that similar phenomena, such as techniques or beliefs, existed in two or more places, did not in itself prove that there had been historical contact between them. The phenomenon in question might have developed independently in several places. On the other hand, nobody doubts that diffusion takes place (it is in fact a central premise for studies of globalisation and cultural flows), and it may well be argued that the 'Young Turks' of early twentieth-century anthropology overdid their critique of diffusionism, with the result that anthropology became lopsided in the opposite way: as the study of single, small-scale societies.

Be this as it may, the main point is that the collection of data about 'other cultures' was by now – the decade preceding the First World War – subjected to ever stricter quality demands and, as far as the people who did the collecting were concerned, professional researchers gradually replaced other travellers, going on lengthy expeditions to collect detailed and often specialised data.

The Founding Fathers

Four men are conventionally mentioned as the founders of modern anthropology (the women would make their mark slightly later): Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Marcel Mauss. Boas (1864–1942) was German, but emigrated to the USA after several lengthy stays in the country in the 1880s and 1890s. As a professor at Columbia University, he was instrumental in establishing American cultural anthropology, and 'Papa Franz' was the undisputed leader of the discipline until his death in 1942. Most American anthropologists of note in the first half of the twentieth century had been students of Boas.

Boas had very wide-ranging interests, and he was an important opponent of racist pseudoscience, but in this context we shall associate him with two particularly important, and typical, concepts, which contributed to defining American anthropology: *cultural relativism* and *historical particularism*. Cultural relativism is the view that every society, or every culture, has to be understood on its own terms, from within, and that it is neither possible nor particularly interesting to rank societies on an evolutionary ladder.