

theory in anthropology

since the sixties

AUTUMN TERM 2008

Lectures: Dr Jon Mitchell

Seminars: Mr Gavin Weston

Introduction:

This course serves to offer a context for the rest of the anthropology curriculum by offering an historical overview of the development of anthropological theory since the 1960s and earlier. The focus is on the increasing dissatisfaction since the 1960s with anthropological theories that offer an a-political and a-historical view of human society and culture. Since then, anthropologists have recognised the need to place their analyses in historical context, and have placed issues of power and practice at the centre of the anthropological project.

The course focuses on three central tensions within the development of anthropological theory:

1. Continuity vs Change:

This tension is expressed in a variety of ways: structure vs action; culture vs practical reason; determinism vs autonomy. One of the enduring themes of anthropology has been how to account for simultaneous continuity and change in human society and culture, and this is an enduring theme throughout the course – how do we describe and understand the fact that societies endure despite the flux of everyday life? In the last three weeks of term we investigate one solution to this paradox: the theory of practice.

2. Materialism vs Idealism:

Throughout the history of anthropology in particular and social science in general, theorists have argued about what drives the creation of society and culture. Is human social action determined by material considerations – the economic relations that surround provisioning, production and consumption – or by ideas? Does culture determine the economic relations of subsistence, or rather do those economic relations determine cultural forms? What comes first: the idea or the material activity? Again, the theory of practice attempts to answer this 'chicken-and-egg' question.

3. Autonomy and Constraint:

This tension is central to our understanding of power and legitimacy. How free are people to generate their own understandings of their lives; to innovate and create new social structures or cultural forms? To what extent is human behaviour determined by power relations – what are the limits of human autonomy. This theme is complementary to that of continuity and change, and is likewise addressed in the theory of practice.

Classes

Each week there will be a one-hour lecture that will introduce the overall theme for the week, and a corresponding one-hour seminar. Both sessions are **compulsory**. For the seminar you should prepare well by reading as widely as you can. The course is resourced by a **study pack** that is available for purchase, and contains all the **main readings** you will need for the course. The readings marked with an asterisk (*) below are **main readings** and are included in the **study pack**. You should read at least these **main readings** each week, in advance of your seminar. Please check your timetable details on Sussex Direct.

Examination

The course is examined by a 48 hour **take away paper** to be distributed and submitted in week 10. A take away paper is an examination in which candidates may use notes and/or texts. Question papers will be available at 12 noon on Monday 8 December 2008 in the Soccul School Office, and should be submitted by 12 noon on Wednesday 10 December 2008 also in the Soccul School Office.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, a successful student should be able to:

- Understand the key theoretical developments in anthropology since the sixties.
- Place these theoretical developments in the context of enduring tensions within the discipline - eg between materialism and idealism.
- Understand how these theoretical developments have informed ethnographic practice and writing.
- Critically evaluate these theoretical developments in written form.

Syllabus

The course is oriented around Ortner's 1984 review of the 'state of play' in anthropological theory. Each week you will be reading a section of this article, plus further supporting articles or chapters to demonstrate the theoretical trends she is describing.

MAIN COURSE READING:

*SB Ortner, 1984, Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26: 126-166

Weekly Readings:

1. Theory Counts: why and what kind of theory do we need?

Anthropology as a discipline is not only concerned with description, but also with theorising – making generalisations based on observations, and exploring ways in which particular ethnographic events and phenomena can be understood. As well as introducing the course as a whole, this week will explore the question of theory: why do we need theory, and what kind of theory do we need? Can anthropology hope to be a discipline similar to the natural sciences, that is geared towards establishing general laws, or should its ambitions be more modest? What are the limits of universalism and particularism in anthropological theory? Should anthropological theory be political? If so, how?

*SP Reyna, 2001, Theory Counts: (discounting) discourse to the contrary by adopting a confrontational stance, *Anthropological Theory* 1(1): 9-29

*SB Ortner, 1984, Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26: 126-166: pages 126-128: *Introduction* and *THE SIXTIES: SYMBOL, NATURE, STRUCTURE*

2. Function and Structure

Before we embark on 'theory since the sixties' it is important to understand what was happening before then – as in many ways what came after was a response to these early years. This week we explore the two main trends in British social anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century: Functionalism and Structural-Functionalism. We do this by focusing particularly on the work of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, both of whom developed functional theories of human society, but whose versions of functionalism differed in important ways. In contrasting the two approaches, we will examine the reasons why anthropology became a-historical, the tension between theories of adaptation and arbitrariness, and begin to explore one of the key questions of anthropology: what is a symbol?

*A Barnard, 2000, *History and Theory in Social Anthropology* – chapter 5: Functionalism and Structural-Functionalism

*AR Radcliffe-Brown, 1952 [1929] The Sociological Theory of Totemism, in AR Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*

*B Malinowski, 1963 [1936] The Foundations of Faith and Morals – V: Totemic Miracles of the Desert

Compare:

B Malinowski, 1963 [1939], The Group and the Individual in Functional Analysis, in B Malinowski, *Sex, Culture and Myth*

With:

AR Radcliffe-Brown, 1952 [1935], On the Concept of Function in Social Science, in AR Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*

For a History:

G Stocking, 1984, Radcliffe-Brown and British Social Anthropology, in G Stocking (ed) *Functionalism Historicised*

Examples of Malinowski's Functionalism at work:

B Malinowski, 1922, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* – final chapter: The Meaning of the Kula

B Malinowski, 1932, *The Sexual Life of Savages* – Special foreword to the Third Edition

Examples of Radcliffe-Brown's Structural-Functionalism at work:

Fortes, M., and E. E. Evans-Pritchard. "Introduction." In *African Political Systems*. London and New York: KPI, 1940.

AR Radcliffe-Brown, 1950, *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*

3. A Different Kind of Structure

This week we will explore the Structuralist theories of the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. His notion of Structure was different from that of Radcliffe-Brown, in that he viewed human activity as determined by mental structures (structures of the mind) rather than social structures. Social structures, he argued, are secondary phenomena. To this extent, he guides us towards a further tension in anthropological theory – between idealist and materialist ideas: what drives society; thought or things? Again we examine questions of symbolism, as we assess Levi-Strauss's contribution, and his legacy.

*SB Ortner, 1984, Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26: 126-166 – pages 135-138: *Structuralism*

*R Layton, 1998, *An Introduction to Theory in Anthropology* – chapter 3: Structuralism

*P Worsley, 1967, Groote Eylandt Totemism and *Le Totemisme aujourd'hui*, in E Leach (ed) *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*

Levi-Strauss Himself:

C Levi-Strauss, 1963, *Totemism* – chapter 5: Totemism From Within

C Levi-Strauss, 1966, *The Savage Mind* – chapter 1: The Science of the Concrete

C Levi-Strauss, 1963, *Structural Anthropology I* – chapter II: Structural Analysis in Linguistics and in Anthropology; chapter XI: The Structural Study of Myth

Critiques/Commentaries:

D Sperber, 1975, *Rethinking Symbolism*

D Sperber, 1982, *On Anthropological Knowledge* – chapter 3: Claude Levi-Strauss Today

C Geertz, 1973, *The Interpretation of Cultures* – chapter 13: The Cerebral Savage: on the work of Claude Levi-Strauss

A Kuper, 1989, Symbols in Myth and Dreams: Freud vs Levi-Strauss, *Encounter*, March

M Sahlins, 1976, *Culture and Practical Reason* – chapter 1: Marxism and Two Structuralisms

Legacies and Links:

M Douglas, 1966, *Purity and Danger* – and her material on food classifications

SB Ortner, 1974, Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture? in MZ Rosaldo & L Lamphere (eds) *Woman, Culture and Society*

D Sperber, 1975, *Rethinking Symbolism*

R Astuti, 2001, Are we all natural dualists? A cognitive developmental approach, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7 (3): 429-447

P Bourdieu, 1971, The Berber House, in M Douglas (ed), *Rules and Meanings*

JJ Fox, 1975, On Binary Categories and Primary Symbols, in R Willis (ed) *The Interpretation of Symbolism*

4. Symbolic Anthropology: Geertz and Culture

The previous two weeks' focus on the question of the symbol feeds into this week's topic of Symbolic Anthropology. We will examine in detail here the work of Clifford Geertz, probably the world's most famous Anthropologist, who developed a particular theory of symbolism. For him, the symbol was neither the product of society nor of mental structures, but of persons, who weave 'webs of significance' – of meaning. We will question, though, Geertz's implied argument that such meaning-making is free from constraint. To what extent is the cultural potential to generate meanings, and to make interpretations, governed by power relations?

*SB Ortner, 1984, Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26: 126-166 – pages 128-132: *Symbolic Anthropology*

*C Geertz, 1973, *The Interpretation of Cultures* – chapter 15: Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight

*W Roseberry, 1989, *Anthropologies and Histories* – chapter 1: Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology

More on Symbolic Anthropology:

A Kuper, 1999, *Culture: the anthropologists' account* – chapter 3: Clifford Geertz: culture as religion and as grand opera

V Turner, 1975, Symbolic Studies, *Annual Review of Anthropology*: 145-161

D Schneider, 1980 [1968], *American Kinship: a cultural account*

M Sahlins, 1976, *Culture and Practical Reason* – chapter 4: La Pensée Bourgeoise

5. Critical Voices: feminism, Marxism, postmodernism

Many of the criticisms of both types of Functionalism, of Structuralism and of Symbolic Anthropology focus on power: to what extent do these theories ignore questions of power when it comes to their understanding of social and cultural phenomena. This week we will explore three major theoretical movements of the 1970s and 1980s which focus precisely on questions of power: feminism, Marxism and postmodernism. Feminism questioned male power – both within anthropological analysis and within the societies anthropologists study. Anthropology had a male bias which ignored gender inequality, and they called for this to be acknowledged and addressed. Marxism questioned the models of structural or systemic harmony inherent in earlier theoretical frameworks, suggesting that power – and particularly economic power – is the central driving force of human society. To this extent, they also challenged the predominantly a-historical models of earlier anthropologies. Postmodernism questioned the very anthropological project itself, suggesting that the mere act of representing ‘other cultures’ – a task that anthropology had set itself – was a political act. This ‘critical phase’ was a turning-point for anthropology, and most of what has come since has tried to incorporate these three sets of critiques.

*SB Ortner, 1984, Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26: 126-166 – pages 132-143: *Cultural Ecology* AND 138-141: *THE SEVENTIES: MARX and Structural Marxism*

*J Nash, 1997, When Isms Became Wasms: structural functionalism, marxism, feminism and postmodernism, *Critique of Anthropology* 17(1): 11-32

*J Spencer, 1989, Anthropology as a Kind of Writing, *Man* (ns) 24(1): 145-164

*M Melhuus, 1993, Pursuit of Knowledge; Pursuit of Justice: a marxist dilemma? *Social Anthropology* 1(3): 265-275

*P Harvey, 1998, Feminism and Anthropology, in S Jackson and J Jones (eds.), *Contemporary Feminist Theories*

Feminism:

M Strathern Marilyn, 1987, An Awkward Relationship: the case of feminism and anthropology, *Signs* 12(2): 276-292

L Abu-Lughod, 1986, *Veiled sentiments: honor and poetry in a Bedouin society*

M Wolf, 1992, *A thrice told tale: feminism, postmodernism & ethnographic responsibility*

H Moore, 1988, *Feminism and anthropology*

H Moore, 1994, *A Passion for Difference*

J Boddy, 1990, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*

R Behar & A Gordon, 1995, *Women Writing Culture*

Marxism:

W Roseberry, 1997, Marx and Anthropology, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26: 25-46

DL Donham, 1999, *History, Power, Ideology*

M Bloch, 1983, *Marxism and Anthropology: The History of a Relationship*
M Godelier, 1978, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*
W Roseberry, 1989, *Anthropologies and Histories: Essays in culture, history
and political economy*
M Bloch (ed.), 1975, *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology*
M Taussig, 1980, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*
M Sahlins, 1976, *Culture and Practical Reason* – chapter 3: Anthropology and
Two Marxisms

Postmodernism:

J Clifford & GE Marcus (eds), 1986, *Writing Culture*
J Clifford, 1988, *The Predicament of Culture*
R Rosaldo, 1989, *Culture and Truth*
Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Authority." *Representations* 2 (1983): 118-
146.

6. After Culture: globalisation and political economy

After the 'critical phase' two things happened. First, anthropologists began to question the notion of culture as a bounded unit and suggested we acknowledge the contemporary reality of global social process. Second, they began to rethink the ethnographic endeavour and revisit the history of global social process to try and understand the relationship between global political economy and local sociocultural forms. Such analysis took power – imperial, economic, patriarchal – as its starting point, as it attempted to understand the relationship between the local and the global.

*SB Ortner, 1984, Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26: 126-166 – pages 141-144: *Political Economy*

*A Gupta & J Ferguson, 1992, Beyond Culture: Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference, *Cultural Anthropology* 7(1): 6-23

*GE Marcus & MMJ Fischer, 1986, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* – chapter 4: Taking Account of World Political Economy

More on Political Economy:

E Wolf, 1982, *Europe and the People Without History*

J Nash, 1981, Ethnographic Aspects of the World Capitalist System, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 10

W Roseberry, 1988, Political Economy, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 17: 161-185

J Schneider & P Schneider, 1976, *Culture and Political Economy in Western Sicily*

J Schneider & R Rapp (eds), 1995, *Articulating Hidden Histories*

M Sahlins, 1993, 'Cosmologies of Capitalism: the trans-pacific sector of the world system' in Dirks, Ortner, Eley (eds) *Culture/Power/History*

7. Towards a Theory of Practice (1): Sahlins and Captain Cook

The final three weeks of the course focus on the theory of practice, which attempts to mediate or resolve the tensions or dichotomies of continuity and change, structure and action, materialism and idealism, autonomy and constraint – even self and other. We will look first at the work of Marshall Sahlins, whose reanalysis of historical events in late 18th century Hawai'i is a classic of the genre. There he attempts to show how, in attempting to reproduce enduring cultural structures, people always run the risk of generating socio-cultural change. Thus autonomy is constrained by prevailing systems of power, but these systems are never so stable as to prevent the generation of new forms – new ideas.

*SB Ortner, 1984, Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26: 126-166 – pages 144-160: *INTO THE EIGHTIES: PRACTICE – and to the end of the article*

*M Sahlins, 1981, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* – chapter 3: Transformation: Structure and Practice

*M Sahlins, 1985, *Islands of History* – chapter 4: Captain James Cook, or The Dying God

Sahlins, M. "Two or three things that I know about culture." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5, no. 3 (1999): 399-421.

On the Captain Cook Controversy:

G Obeyesekere, 1992, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* – parts III, IV and VIII

M Sahlins, 1995, *How 'Natives' Think: About Captain Cook, for example* – Introduction, Chapters 3 and 4

R Borofsky, 1997, Cook, Lono, Obeyesekere, and Sahlins. *Current Anthropology* 38(2):255-282

On the uses and users of Practice Theory:

J Comaroff and J Comaroff, 1992, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*

J Comaroff, and J Comaroff, 1991, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Vol. 1*

J Comaroff, 1985, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance*

R Price, 1983, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People*

R Rosaldo, 1980, *Ilongot Headhunting, 1883-1974*

K Hastrup, 1985, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*

M Sahlins, The Political Economy of Grandeur in Hawaii from 1810 to 1830 in E Ohnuki-Tierney (ed) *Culture Through Time*

T Todorov, T, *The Conquest of America*

8. Towards a Theory of Practice (2): Bourdieu and *Habitus*

The most influential exponent of practice theory is Pierre Bourdieu, whose work in the 1970s and 1980s revolutionised the way in which anthropologists understand structure and action. Like Sahlins, he attempted to understand and explain how societies could be simultaneously structured and enduring, and constantly changing. His central concept is that of *habitus*: which effectively replaces 'structure' to provide a non-deterministic theory of people's tendency to reproduce society as it has been in the past. He thus replaces the idea that action is determined by social or cultural structures with the idea that people are predisposed to act in certain ways, but their actions are not straightforwardly governed by structure. Moreover, he argues that *habitus* – a way of being and behaving – only makes sense if you see it in its historical context.

*SB Ortner, 1984, Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26: 126-166 – pages 144-160: *INTO THE EIGHTIES: PRACTICE – and to the end of the article*

*P Bourdieu, 1990, *The Logic of Practice* – BOOK II chapter 1: Land and Matrimonial Strategies

*P Bourdieu, 1978, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* – chapter 2: Structures and the Habitus

More on Practice:

P Bourdieu, 1990, *In Other Words* – chapter 3: From Rules to Strategies

S Turner, 1994, *The Social Theory of Practices*

R Jenkins, 1992, *Pierre Bourdieu*

B Knauft, 1996, *Genealogies for the Present in Cultural Anthropology* – chapter 4: Practices

D Robbins, 2000, *Bourdieu and Culture*

D Robbins, 1991, *The Work of Pierre Bourdieu*

De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

9. Towards a Theory of Practice (3): Power and Legitimacy

In this final week, we explore the power dimension within Bourdieu's theory of practice. The key to understanding power, he argues, is to understand that the *habitus* – the tendency to behave in a particular way – is driven by a set of ideas about what is natural. Thus, certain ways of behaving are seen to be natural, even though they are actually the product of particular historical conditions. In other words, contextual, historically specific, and in a sense arbitrary practices – behaviours, ideas, tendencies – come to be seen as universal. This is what Bourdieu refers to as *doxa*. This final week will examine in detail what Bourdieu means by *doxa*, but also provide an introduction to the Spring term course on Political Movements, which will examine notions of hegemony – which comes from Gramsci – and discourse – from Foucault; ideas which also see the key to power as the naturalisation of ideology.

*SB Ortner, 1984, Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26: 126-166 – pages 144-160: *INTO THE EIGHTIES: PRACTICE – and to the end of the article*

*P Bourdieu, 1993, Structures, Habitus, Power: Basis for a Theory of Symbolic Power, in N Dirks, G Eley & SB Ortner, *Culture/Power/History*

More on Symbolic Power:

P Bourdieu, 1984, Distinction :a social critique of the judgement of taste

P Bourdieu, 1986, The Forms of Capital, in J Richardson (ed) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*

Reviewing Ortner and Practice Theory

Lewis, Herbert S. "The misrepresentation of anthropology and its consequences." *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 3 (1998): 716.

Appadurai, A. "Theory in Anthropology - Center and Periphery." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28, no. 2 (1986): 356-361.

Moore, Henrietta L., ed. *Anthropological theory today*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1999. (intro)

Moore, Henrietta L., and Todd Sanders. "Anthropology and Epistemology." In *Anthropology in theory: a reader*, edited by Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders, 1-21. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

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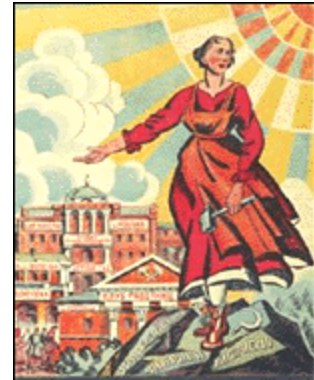
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Dictionary for the Study of Michel Foucault

The World of Michel Foucault

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PRACTICE THEORY

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