

What is anthropology?

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London: Pluto 2004.

This is a longer version of *Hva er sosialantropologi?*, published by Universitetsforlaget. Chapters 7 and 8 were not included in the Norwegian edition.

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1. Why anthropology?

A generation or two ago, anthropology was scarcely known outside of academic circles. It was a tiny university subject taught in a few dozen countries, seen by outsiders as esoteric and by insiders as a kind of secret knowledge guarded by a community of devoted initiates. Anthropologists went about their fieldwork in remote areas and returned with fascinating, but often arcane and knobbly analyses of kinship, swidden agriculture or warfare among 'the others'. With a few spectacular exceptions, the interest in anthropology from the outside world was modest, and its influence was usually limited to academic circles. Only very rarely did it play a part in the public life of the anthropologist's own society.

This has changed. Growing numbers of non-academics in the West have discovered that anthropology represents certain fundamental insights concerning the human condition, applicable in many everyday situations at home. In some countries, it is even being taught in vocational colleges training nurses and policemen, its concepts are being borrowed by other university disciplines and applied to new phenomena, its ideas about the need to see human life from below and from the inside have influenced popular journalism, and student numbers have grown steadily, in some places dramatically. At the University of Oslo, where I teach, the number of anthropology students grew from about 70 in 1982 to more than 600 a decade later.

In many Western societies, anthropology and ideas derived from the subject became part of the vocabulary of journalists and policymakers in the 1990s. This is no coincidence. In fact, I would argue 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.

There are several reasons why anthropological knowledge can help in making sense of the contemporary world.

Firstly, contact between culturally different groups has increased enormously in our time. Long-distance travelling 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 Westerners 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: Businesspeople, aid workers and tourists travel from rich countries to the poor ones, and labour migrants, refugees and students move in the opposite direction. Many more Westerners visit 'exotic' places today than a generation or two ago. When my parents were young in the 1950s, they might be able to go on a trip to Italy or London once. When I was young in the 1980s, we went by Interrail to Portugal and Greece, or on similar trips, every summer. Young people with similar backgrounds today might go on holiday to the Far East, Latin America and India. 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 Third World can be seen as an indication of an increased interest in other cultures from the West. And 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 rich and poor countries that millions of people from non-Western countries have settled in Europe and North America. A generation ago, it might have been necessary for an inhabitant in a Western city to travel to the Indian subcontinent in order to savour the fragrances and sounds of subcontinental cuisine and music. In fact, as late as 1980, there were no Indian restaurants in my hometown. In 2004, there are dozens, 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 at the doorstep of Westerners. As a result, the curiosity about others has been stimulated, and it has also become necessary for political reasons to understand what cultural variation entails. Current controversies over multicultural issues, such as religious minority rights, the *hijab* (shawl or 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.

Secondly, the world is shrinking in other ways too. Satellite television, cellphone networks and the Internet have created conditions for truly global, instantaneous and friction-free communications, for better and for worse in the opinion of many: 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 to choose from. Moreover, the economy is also becoming increasingly globally integrated. Transnational companies have grown dramatically in numbers, size and economic importance over the last decades. The capitalist mode of production and monetary economies in general, globally dominant throughout the 20th 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. AIDS and international terrorism are also transnational problems which can only be understood and addressed through international cooperation. 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.

Thirdly, culture changes rapidly in our day and age, which is felt nearly anywhere in the world. In the West, the typical ways of life are certainly 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 fifty 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?”

Fourthly, 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 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. 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 communism, Soviet-style, the time of the Internet and satellite TV, the time of global capitalism, ethnic cleansing and multiethnic modernities, has been labelled, among other things, the age of globalisation and the information age. 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 the conditions listed above is anthropology, which studies humans in societies under the most varying circumstances imaginable, yet searches for patterns and similarities, but which is

fundamentally critical of quick solutions and simple answers to complex questions.

Now, although the concepts and ideas of anthropology have become widely circulated in recent years, anthropology as such remains little known. It is still widely believed that the 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, and there are those who believe that anthropologists spend most of their lives travelling the world, with or without khaki suits, intermittently penning a kind of dry, learned travelogues. All these notions about anthropology are wrong, although they – like many myths of their kind – contain a kernel of truth.

So far, I have said that anthropology can be crucial for an understanding of the contemporary world, that many of its central ideas enter into people's everyday lives, and that it is – in spite of this – little known. Let us, therefore, get on with it.

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, supplemented by comparison. Many are attracted to it for personal reasons: they may have grown up in a culturally foreign environment, or they are simply fascinated by faraway places, or they are engaged in 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. But as a profession and as a science, 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. 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, the discipline produces 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, food habits in Northern Norway, the political importance of kinship in the Middle East, or notions about gender in the Amazon basin.

Although most anthropologists are specialists on one or two regions, it is necessary to be knowledgeable about global cultural variation in order to be able to say anything interesting about one's region, topic or people.

Secondly, 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. And 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 a lot of different things. Like carpenters or journalists, all anthropologists share a set of professional skills.

Some newcomers to the subject are flabbergasted at its theoretical character, 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 difficult to read. Now, it must be interjected that many anthropological texts are beautifully written, but it is also true that many of them are tough 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 popularisations of anthropology.)

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 municipal to the global. 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 recent 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 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.

A generation or so ago, anthropology still concentrated almost exclusively on detailed studies of local life in traditional societies, and ethnographic fieldwork was its main – in some cases its sole – method. The situation is more complex now, because anthropologists now study all kinds of societies and also because the methodological repertoire has become more varied. This book consists in its entirety in 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 a focus on local life*. Put differently, anthropology distinguishes itself from other lines of enquiry by insisting that social reality is first and foremost created through

relationships between persons and the groups they belong to. A currently fashionable concept such as globalisation, for example, has no meaning to an anthropologist unless it can be studied through actual persons, 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 through a magnifying-glass, that she is ready to enter the helicopter in order to obtain an overview.

Anthropology means, translated literally from ancient Greek, the study of humanity. As already indicated, anthropologists do not 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'. They 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 many ideologies that people live by.) 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, to some extent, France. Historically, there have been certain differences between these traditions – social anthropology has its foundation in sociological theory, while cultural anthropology is more broadly based – but the distinction has become sufficiently blurred not to be bothered with here. In the following, 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 a hundred years – but it has raised questions which have been formulated in different guises since antiquity: Are the differences between

peoples inborn or learnt? 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; aggressive animals, social animals, religious animals or are they, perhaps, the only self-defining animals on the planet?

Every thinking person has an opinion on these matters. Some of them can hardly 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 knowledge as possible about varied forms of human life, and to develop a conceptual apparatus making it possible to compare them. 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 them. 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 which 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 famous impatience).

Put differently, and paraphrasing the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, 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 in giving accounts of some of the other lives we could have led.

The chapter continues with a bit about the history of anthropology and so on. To read it, you've got to buy the book!

* * *

8. Thought

In a previous chapter, it was mentioned that anthropology is concerned with that which takes place between people, not with their innermost feelings and thoughts. How can it then be that this chapter is going to be about... thought? The answer is not simple. It may justly be said that thought has an important social aspect; in different societies, the inhabitants think differently because of differences in the circumstances of learning, different experiences etc. At the same time, thought has an undeniable private and personal dimension, which cannot be studied directly with the methods available to anthropologists.

Fortunately, thoughts are usually expressed in social life, for example when people say what they think or express it through their acts, in rituals and other public performances. Therefore, thought can be explored, if often obliquely, through the field methods available to anthropology – participant observation, questions and answers, and common curiosity.

The rationality debate

Studies of thought and modes of reasoning have been central in the history of anthropology from the nineteenth century to the present day. The most famous (and possibly most voluminous) anthropological work from the years before the fieldwork revolution was James Frazer's twelve-volume *The Golden Bough* (1890/1912), a comparative work about myth, religion and cosmologies among virtually all the peoples the author had heard about. Frazer shared the evolutionist views of his contemporaries and had little faith in the ability of 'savages' to think logically and rationally. A younger contemporary of Frazer, the philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, was less impressive in his use of empirical materials, but as a compensation, he was more analytically lucid than Frazer. Lévy-Bruhl described traditional peoples as representatives of what he spoke of, in an unfortunate turn of phrase, as a 'pre-logical mode of thought'. However, Lévy-Bruhl emphasised that the term 'pre-logical' did not necessarily refer to a developmental or evolutionary line of progress, but rather that the unhampered, metaphorical and symbol-laden way of thinking he associated with traditional peoples was more fundamental, and logically prior to, logical thought. Contemporary moderns may have retained their ability to think in a 'pre-logical' way, but a logical rationality has been superimposed on it, as it were.

Lévy-Bruhl was criticised sharply by several of his contemporaries, who pointed out that the empirical foundation for his lofty generalisations was weak to say the least. However, it would nonetheless be Lévy-Bruhl's books from the years around the First World War that set the stage for one of the most exciting theoretical debates in anthropology, where contributors from several academic fields have discussed (and still do) to what degree there are fundamental differences in thought styles between peoples, and conversely, to what extent it may be said that a common human rationality exists.

One of the first to criticise Lévy-Bruhl on an empirical basis was Evans-Pritchard. In the 1930s, he had several lengthy periods of fieldwork in the Sudan. His Nuer research has already been mentioned, but his 1937 book about the Azande is no less important – some would argue that it is much more important – than *The*

Nuer. Whereas Evans-Pritchard's first Nuer monograph dealt with politics, ecology and kinship, *Witchcraft, Magic and Oracles Among the Azande* is a book about the system of knowledge and belief in a traditional people, and as such, it was one of the first of its kind. One would in fact have to wait for Kluckhohn's *Navaho Witchcraft* (1944) for another study of comparable depth.

The Azande live right in the middle of the African continent, only a few hundred kilometres south of the Nuer; but in terms of culture and social organisation, they are very different from the nomadic peoples to the north. They are sedentary crop growers, politically relatively centralised with aristocratic clans and princes. At the time of Evans-Pritchard's research, they had been incorporated into the British empire, and the power of the traditional rulers had been reduced considerably.

The Zande belief in witchcraft, and their use of various remedies to control it, are in the foreground of Evans-Pritchard's book. Witchcraft, as it is defined in anthropology, is distinguished from magic in that it is an invisible force. Accordingly, it is difficult to decide who is responsible when someone is struck by witchcraft. Magic is, on the contrary, the result of rites and technologies which are known, and one may consult recognised magicians for assistance with one's problems. In societies where witchcraft is assumed to exist, it is thus necessary to develop methods to expose the witches. When a Zande experiences a 'mishap' (Evans-Pritchard's term), he is likely to blame witchcraft for it, and he may begin to suspect people he believes has a reason to want to harm him. (It stands to reason that like other peoples who are concerned with witchcraft, the Azande may be said to fit Benedict's 'paranoid' cultural type fairly well.)

If a Zande walks on the forest path, stumbles and hurts himself, only to discover that the wound won't heal, he blames witchcraft. If one objects that occasional stumbling is normal, he might respond that yes, it is normal, but I walk this path every day and have never stumbled before, and besides, wounds normally begin to heal after a few days. When a group of Azande sit under an elevated granary on poles (to protect the cereals against wild animals), which suddenly collapses

and hurts them badly, the immediate cause is that termites have slowly perforated the poles until they were no longer capable of keeping the granary stable. But the Azande will say that it was extremely unlikely that they should sit beneath their granary just as it fell, and thus witchcraft had to be involved somehow. Deaths among Azande are always caused by witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard reports; disease is usually caused by it.

The Azande have at their disposal a range of techniques enabling them to explore whether or not a suspect is actually a witch. (The term witch is, in anthropological usage, gender neutral.) Most commonly, they consult so-called oracles, that is spiritual beings who talk to them through mediums. One popular medium is a kind of sounding board, and there are others, but the most expensive and famous is the poison oracle. To make it communicate, one needs a strong plant-derived poison and a chicken. The chicken is fed the poison, and the oracle is asked whether a certain person is a witch or not. If the chicken dies, the answer is yes; if it survives, the accused is innocent.

In the old days, Evans-Pritchard says, witches were regularly executed. Under the 'indirect rule' of the British, implemented from the early 20th century, the princely power was reduced, and judicial power was transferred to the colonial courts of law. Therefore, Evans-Pritchard himself never witnessed executions of witches. In his time, many in fact believed that the very witchcraft institution would gradually disappear thanks to 'progress'.

The oracles were not infallible. When a witch was dead, one would cut their belly open to establish whether it contained a certain 'witchcraft substance', described as a dark lump of flesh. If a witch had been convicted and killed, and no such substance could subsequently be found, the relatives of the dead person could demand compensation.

Evans-Pritchard describes the witchcraft institution in a sober and morally neutral way, skilfully showing how the Azande think and act rationally and logically, given their cultural context. If one were to ask an educated Zande if it

might not be the case that bacteria, not witchcraft, made him ill, he might respond that yes, of course, but this so-called explanation said nothing about the reason for *his* illness right *now*: the bacteria were around continuously, so why wasn't his neighbour ill, and why didn't the illness occur last year? The logic is, as we see, impeccable. Unlike medical science, the witchcraft institution offers answers to the pressing questions 'Why me?' and 'Why now?'

The book on witchcraft is a remarkable read, and it has rightly been praised as one of the few books that set an agenda for research and discussion which lasted more than half a century after its publication. The book offers rare, deep insights into the knowledge system of a traditional people, and shows how it is coherent, gives meaning to the world, and explains unusual events. Had Evans-Pritchard been ideologically bolder, he might have compared the institution of witchcraft with religions such as Christianity.

The book also shows how the witchcraft institution is functional in the sense that is socially integrative. Usually, the people accused of witchcraft belong to politically weak lineages (nobody would dream of accusing a prince), and he points out that the institution functions as a security valve by channeling discontent and frustrations away from the social order (which would have been exceedingly difficult to change anyway) towards individuals who become scapegoats. Much of the later literature on witchcraft in Africa, especially that published in the 1950s, is purely structural-functionalist, and strongly emphasises that those who are accused of witchcraft are often women, who, in virilocal societies are outsiders without strong political support locally. Evans-Pritchard offers a richer picture, supplementing the functional analysis with a vivid description of local life-worlds.

Unfortunately, many of those who have never read the book itself have heard about it through secondary sources, and therefore believe that it is a condescending, functionalistic description of a primitive people that believes in phenomena that do not exist. A main culprit in creating this distorted view of the book is the philosopher Peter Winch. In 1958, he published the very challenging

book *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*, where Evans-Pritchard appears as one of his main opponents. Winch refers to a number of intermittent remarks in the Azande book, where the anthropologist expresses the view that witches obviously do not exist. In an appendix to the book, Evans-Pritchard distinguishes between three kinds of knowledge: Mystical knowledge based on the belief in invisible and unverifiable forces; commonsensical knowledge based on everyday experience; and scientific knowledge based on the tenets of logic and the experimental method. The middle, quantitatively largest category is common to Azande and Englishmen; the latter exists only in modern societies, whereas the first category is typical of societies where one believes in witchcraft.

Winch argues that the two systems of knowledge – the English one and that of the Azande – cannot be ranked in this way; they can in fact not be ranked at all. All knowledge is socially produced, he continues; and mentions the widespread ‘superstitious’ belief in meteorology as a modern equivalent to Zande witchcraft beliefs. In other words, Winch regards scientific knowledge as a kind of culturally produced knowledge on a par with other forms of knowledge.

The criticism of Evans-Pritchard is not based on fabricated evidence, but as I have shown, it does not do justice to his pioneering, and largely non-judgemental exposition of a non-Western knowledge system.

Be this as it may, Winch’s book gave the impetus to a broad debate about rationality and relativism. It would give the initial inspiration for several books, dissertations and conferences in the 1960s and later. Both anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers contributed.

The criticism against Evans-Pritchard contains several independent questions, at least three. The first and second concern methodological possibilities and limitations. The third concerns the nature of knowledge and is anthropological in a philosophical sense.

Firstly: Is it possible to translate from one system of knowledge to another without distorting it by introducing concepts initially alien to that 'other' world of representations?

Secondly: Does a context-independent or neutral language exist to describe systems of knowledge?

Thirdly: Do all humans reason in fundamentally the same way?

There are, perhaps, no final answers to any of these questions, and yet (or perhaps therefore) they remain important. We should keep in mind here that Evans-Pritchard himself criticised Lévy-Bruhl's dichotomy between logical and pre-logical thought, and emphasised time and again that the Azande were just as rational as Westerners, but that they reasoned logically and rationally from premises which were, at the end of the day, erroneous when it came to witchcraft. Winch's question was whether general, unquestionable criteria exist to evaluate the premises or axioms, and he replies that this is not the case – since the axioms themselves are socially created and therefore not true in an absolute, ahistorical sense.

It should be noted here that a research area which has grown rapidly since the 1980s is the so-called STS field, that is the sociological study of technology and science. In this research, Western science and technology are studied as cultural products, and most of its practitioners adhere to the so-called symmetry principle, which entails that the same terminology and the same methods of analysis should be used for failures as for successes; in other words, that what we are doing is looking at science as a social fact, not as truth or falsity. Similarly, most anthropologists would argue that our task consists in making sense of 'the others', not judging whether they are right or wrong.

Classification and pollution

Unfortunately, it is necessary to leave the fascinating controversies about

rationality and the rich anthropological research tradition dealing with witchcraft here. Another, no less interesting, way of approaching other knowledges and thought systems, points the searchlight towards classification. All peoples are aware that different things and persons exist in the world, but they subdivide them in different, locally defined ways.

Already in 1903, Durkheim and Mauss published a book about primitive classification, which was to a great extent based on ethnography from Australia. They there argued that there existed a connection between the classification of natural phenomena and the social order. This connection has been explored by later generations of scholars, but historically, there has been a difference here between European social anthropology and North American cultural anthropology. The latter tradition is generally less sociologically oriented than the former, and often explores symbolic systems as autonomous entities, without connecting them systematically to social conditions. Geertz once wrote that whereas society was integrated in a 'causal-functional way', culture was integrated in a 'logico-meaningful way', and could thus be studied independently of the social. In social anthropology (and, in all fairness, to many American anthropologists), such a delineation is unsatisfactory, since a main preoccupation in this tradition consists in understanding symbolic worlds through their relation to social organisation. Power, politics and technology inevitably interact with knowledge production in a society.

Of the many books about classification and society that have been published since Durkheim and Mauss, two have been especially influential. Researchers and students continue to return to them, and although both were initially published in the 1960s, they do not appear dated even today.

Mary Douglas studied under Evans-Pritchard, and carried out fieldwork among the Lele in Kasai (southern Congo, then Belgian Congo) in the 1950s. She published a monograph about the Lele, but she is far better known for her later theoretical contributions. Especially *Purity and Danger* (1966) has exerted an almost unparalleled influence on anthropological research dealing with thought

and social life.

In this book, Douglas combines influences from her native British structural functionalism and French structuralism, which she became familiar with early on, partly due to her fieldwork in a part of Africa where most of the researchers were French. The main argument is inspired by Durkheim and Mauss, and states that classification of nature and the body reflects society's ideology about itself. However, her main interest consists in accounting for *pollution*, classificatory impurities and their results, and one of the central chapters of the book is devoted to a discussion of food prohibitions in the Old Testament. Animals which do not 'fit in' are deemed unfit for human consumption, and include, among others, maritime animals without fins and, famously, the pig. The pig has cloven hoofs but does not chew the cud, and there is no category available for this kind of animal. This is what makes it polluting.

Douglas' theory is as far removed as conceivable from Marvin Harris' interpretation of sacred cows, and indeed, Harris has argued that the impurity of the pig in West Asia is caused by objective factors, notably the disease-inducing germs which can be present in badly cooked pork. Douglas' views on this kind of explanation are of the same kind as Lévi-Strauss' views on Malinowski. According to Lévi-Strauss, the practically oriented Malinowski saw culture as nothing more than 'a gigantic metaphor for the digestive system'.

The connection between the order of society and the order of classificatory systems is crucial to Douglas' theory. Among other things, she refers to holy men and women in Hinduism and Christianity, who invert dominant perceptions of pure and impure in order to highlight the otherworldly character of their lives. She mentions a Christian saint who is said to have drunk pus from an infected wound since personal cleanliness is incompatible with the status of the holy woman; and Indian sadhus are famous for their transgressive practices, such as drinking from human skulls, eating rotten food, sleeping on spiked mats and so on.

Phenomena that do not fit in, *anomalies*, must be taken care of ideologically lest they pollute the entire classificatory system. If this is not done efficiently, they threaten the order of society. There has to be order in nature, just as there is order in society. Douglas' most famous anomaly is taken from her Lele ethnography, namely the African pangolin. This original forest animal is a mammal, but it has scales like a fish and gives birth to only one or two offspring, just like a human. The Lele have circumscribed the pangolin with a great number of rules and prohibitions to keep it under control; it can be eaten, but only under very special circumstances, and one is usually well advised to avoid close contact with it.

A subgroup of anomalies are the phenomena known as *matter out of place*, that is objects, actions or ideas which appear in the 'wrong' context. The typical example is a human hair, usually far from unaesthetic when it grows out of a head, but repulsive if it floats in a bowl of soup.

Douglas does not write about humour, but one must be allowed to point out that virtually everything that is funny belongs to the same category as the hair floating in the soup: jokes nearly always derive their punchline from wrong contextualisation. Perhaps that is why Geertz once wrote that understanding a different culture is like understanding a joke. When one is able to laugh at the natives' jokes, one has internalised local norms about correct and wrong contextualisation. This indicates that one has understood a great deal.

Douglas has been criticised for placing too much emphasis on integration in her analyses. Just as Geertz' concept of culture seems to presuppose that all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of culture fall perfectly into place, Douglas assumes that both society and knowledge systems are ordered and fit together.

On the other hand, one should not rule out the possibility that she may be right. Classificatory systems change – there are many secularised Jews and Muslims who eat pork – and there is clearly a greater variation and more direct contestation, especially in complex societies, than Douglas is prepared to admit.

But this very variation also seems to confirm the validity of Douglas' model. When university educated North European Marxist-Leninists took manual jobs in the 1970s, loyal to the principle of self-proletarianisation, they turned dominant classifications on their head in their attempt to change the very ideological foundations of society. In a racially segregated kind of society as the American South, few actions are more radical, both politically and in terms of classification, than to marry across the colour line. Both these examples show that conscious transgressions serve to confirm the essential validity of the dominant mode of classification.

Douglas' ideas about matter out of place, anomalies, pollution and the analogies between the body, nature and society, have been exceptionally productive. The next chapter will briefly indicate how some of these ideas may be transposed to studies of multiethnic societies, just to illustrate their fruitfulness.

The savage mind

The other indispensable book about classification and society is Lévi-Strauss's masterpiece *La pensée sauvage* (1962, *The Savage Mind*, 1966). Like Douglas, Lévi-Strauss is inspired by Durkheim and Mauss, but he also wishes to disprove Lévy-Bruhl's ideas about 'pre-logical thought' once and for all. However, already in the first chapter, it becomes apparent that Lévi-Strauss is closer to his predecessor than one might have expected.

The main topic of *The Savage Mind* is totemism. This enigmatic phenomenon has been the subject of much anthropological theory and speculation for more than a hundred years. Totemism may be defined as a form of classification whereby individuals or groups (which may be clans) have a special, often mythically based relationship to certain aspects of nature – usually animals or plants, but it could also be, for example, mountain formations or events like thunderstorms. Groups or persons have certain commitments towards their totem; it may be forbidden to eat it, the totem may give protection, in many cases the groups are named after their totem, and sometimes they identify with it (members of the

eagle clan are brave and have a lofty character). In traditional societies, totemism is especially widespread in the Americas, in Oceania and Africa. A great number of competing interpretations of totemism had been proposed before Lévi-Strauss: The Scottish lawyer MacLennan, the first to develop a theory of totemism (in 1869), saw it simply as a form of primitive religion, but it later became more common to see it in a more utilitarian light: Totemic animals and plants were respected because they were economically useful. This was Malinowski's view.

Departing radically from such views, Lévi-Strauss developed a theory of totemism seeing it as a form of classification encompassing both natural and social dimensions, thereby defining it as part of the knowledge system of a society, and as far from being a functional result of some economic adaptation. Lévi-Strauss claims indebtedness to Radcliffe-Brown, but in fact, his theory was entirely original. Totemic animals are respected not because they are good to eat, but because they are *good to think* (*bons à penser*). The natural series of totems at the disposal of a tribe is related to the social series of clans or other internal groupings in such a way that the relationships between the totems correspond metaphorically to the relationships between the social groups. Totemism thereby bridges the gap between nature and culture, deepening the knowledge about both in the process.

'The savage mind', or undomesticated thinking (which might have been a better English title), is thus not there in order to be useful or functional (or even aesthetically pleasing), but in order to be thought. In the chapter 'The science of the concrete', which introduces the topic of the book, this is made clear. Here, Lévi-Strauss develops his famous distinction between *le bricoleur* and *l'ingénieur*, between *bricolage* (associational, nonlinear thought) and 'engineering' (logical thinking) as two styles of thought which he links with traditional and modern societies, respectively. Unlike what many had argued before, including Lévy-Bruhl, there was no qualitative difference between 'primitive' and 'modern' thought. The difference consisted in the raw material they had at their disposal. While the modern 'engineer' builds abstractions upon abstractions (writing,

numbers, geometrical drawings), the traditional 'bricoleur' creates abstractions with the aid of physical objects he is able to observe directly (animals, plants, rocks, rivers...). Whereas the modern person has become dependent on writing as a 'crutch for thought', his opposite number in a traditional society uses whatever is at hand for cognitive assistance. The French word *bricoleur* can be translated as a jack-of-all-trades, an imaginative improviser who creates new objects by combining old ones which happen to be close at hand.

In order to illustrate the contrast between the two thought styles, Lévi-Strauss speaks of music and poetry as modern cultural phenomena where 'the undomesticated' property of the mind can still be glimpsed.

Although the book is introduced with an apparently sharp contrast between 'us' and 'them', and although cultural difference is discussed in every subsequent chapter, the aim of *The Savage Mind* is to show that humans think alike everywhere, even if their thoughts are expressed differently. Science, which, unlike 'the science of the concrete', distinguishes sharply between the perceptible (*le sensible*) and that which can be understood in abstract terms (*l'intelligible*), thus becomes a special case of something much more general, namely undomesticated thought. But it then also becomes clear that the distance between Lévi-Strauss and Lévy-Bruhl is much less than usually assumed. Like his famous successor, Lévy-Bruhl also sees pre-logical thought as the most fundamental style of thought, and logical thought as an embellishment or a special case.

Thought and technology

The cultural historian Lewis Mumford once remarked that the most authoritarian, efficient and socially repressive invention man had ever created was neither the steam engine nor the cannon, but the clock. What he had in mind were the social dimensions of the clock: It synchronises, standardises and integrates people wherever clocks exist and are respected. Right or wrong, Mumford's observation indicates the potential of technology in shaping and

directing human thought and action, given the right social and cultural context. (Clocks may, naturally, be regarded as fancy jewellery in societies where there is no perceived need for synchronisation.)

Let us take a closer look at the clock. It is sometimes said that clocks were initially introduced in Europe as an aid for medieval monks who found it difficult to keep prayer times when they worked in the fields. This version of clock history is half-way between a certain degree of credibility and invention. Different kinds of timepieces had existed well before medieval monasteries, and the abbey clocks did not just regulate prayer times, but also working hours – not unlike contemporary clocks, in other words. However, it is easy to see that the clocks quickly had interesting, unintended side-effects when they became common in European towns. They were instrumental in making punctuality a virtue. They encouraged efficiency since activities now could be planned and synchronised in ways formerly unthinkable. Eventually, the clocks became indispensable for town-dwellers; they needed to ‘keep time’ to get to the concert house or theatre in time, to keep appointments and, increasingly, in working life. Something which has in recent years received wide attention thanks to Dava Sobel’s bestselling book *Longitude*, is the fact that the accurate partitioning of the globe according to longitude was made possible only after the invention of a mechanical clock with minimal error margins. Combined with the Western calendar, the clock served to dissect time into abstract entities and to establish a *linear perception of time*. This refers to a kind of time which can be conceptualised as a line where any segment of the same kind (a year, a month, an hour etc.) is identical to any other segment, no matter when it unfolds. Clock and calendar time may be called *abstract time* since they contrast with the *concrete time* dominating most societies which are not subjected to clocks and calendars. In a temporal regime based on concrete time, time is measured as a combination of experienced, personal time, external events and societal rhythms such as day/night, harvest times and so on. A time segment such as an hour may accordingly vary in length.

Clock time is an *externalised* kind of time; it exists independently of events taking

place in it, about in the same way as the thermometer measures temperature irrespective of the subjective experience of heat or coldness, and quantified distance measures distance without taking subjective experience of distance into account. A kilometer is a kilometer (and about 0.62 mile) anywhere, any time. Even if everybody knows that five minutes may be both a mere instant and a lengthy period (say, in the dentist's office), and that twenty degrees Celsius may be warm if one enters the house on a winter day, but cold if one sits naked in a chair after taking a shower, it is generally accepted in our kind of society that the quantitative measurements of such phenomena are 'truer' than the subjective experience. Such standardising ideas are alien to traditional societies, and are part and parcel of modernity, which is also built around institutions such as social planning, beliefs in progress, population statistics and a zealous drive to control nature. Typically time, which in traditional societies may not be something one *possesses* but rather something one *lives in*, is a scarce resource in contemporary, modern societies. It has been reified to such a degree that a historical preoccupation of the labour movement has been the struggle for shorter working hours, and in the late 1990s, social movements appeared which promote both 'slow cities', 'slow food' and, simply, 'slow time'.

The technological change which has been most intensively studied with a view to its relation to thought, is nonetheless the introduction of writing. Lévi-Strauss hardly mentions it explicitly, but an underlying idea in his contrast between the bricoleur and the ingénieur is quite clearly that of writing versus non-writing. Later, Jack Goody has, especially in his *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977), argued that if one wants to come to grips with the kind of cognitive contrast Lévi-Strauss talks about, one must study transitions to literacy and differences between literate and non-literate societies. Among other things, Goody claims that scientific analysis and systematic, critical thought are impossible without writing. His theory about the transition to literacy as a gigantic watershed in cultural history is contested, and Goody has modified it several times himself. What everybody seems to agree about is that writing is indispensable for the cumulative growth of knowledge, and that it makes it possible to separate the utterance from the context of uttering.

It may be said that some of the criticisms of Goody have been exaggerated. Although there are many exceptions and many interesting 'intermediate forms' (societies with limited literacy in one way or another), and although local realities vary much more than a general theory is able to predict, writing does by and large make a considerable difference regarding thought styles. The Greek miracle, that is the transition from mythical to philosophical thinking in the eastern part of the Mediterranean (incidentally paralleled by similar developments in India and China), must have been linked with the development of alphabetic writing, although it was hardly the sole cause. Although the ancient philosophers were deeply interested in rhetoric, that is oral eloquence, they criticised each other's writings and revealed logical faults in each other's arguments, often with a time lag of a generation or more. Writing does not necessarily make people more 'intelligent' (a difficult concept): it is a crutch for thought which makes the continuous exercise of memory unnecessary; it externalises thoughts, and thus makes it easier to place them outside the brain. When one writes, moreover, one is likely to think along other patterns than when communicating orally, a tendency explored by the philosopher Jacques Derrida and many others. Although there are many similarities between written history based on archives and myths, there are also differences to do with falsifiability, dating and imposition of causal sequences.

Literacy is often accompanied by numeracy. The Phoenicians, this famous people of maritime merchants from the Ancient world, were famous book-keepers. The implications of accurate book-keeping for trade, business and forms of reciprocity in general, should not be underestimated. Technology has both social and cognitive implications here as well, even if it is – naturally – necessary to explore local conditions and variations to get a full picture. Modern computers enable us to make calculations of dizzying complexity at astonishing speed: Some of the readers may think they have a reasonable notion of a billion (1,000,000,000); but consider the fact that each well-nourished, fairly healthy life lasts on average for 2.2 billion seconds altogether!

At the same time, calculators and computers may well make us incapable of carrying out even simple calculations without their aid. The calculator has doubtless affected the ability of schoolchildren to learn double digit multiplication by rote, and digitalised pricing means that cashiers in supermarkets no longer know the prices of all the items in the shop by heart. Thermometers, books, calculators and similar devices create abstract standards and lead to both externalisation and standardisation of certain forms of knowledge.

Now, in practice there is no question of an either-or. It is often said that humans are incapable of counting further than four without the aid of devices such as written numbers, pebbles or the like. However, we are familiar with a great number of traditional peoples, for example in Melanesia, who can count quite accurately and quite far by counting not only their toes and fingers, but other bodily parts as well. Some might get to seventy and further without using a single aid external to the body. There is, in a word, no sharp distinction between the peoples who have only their own memory at their disposal and those who are able to externalise their thoughts on paper; there are *many* kinds of mnemotechnical aids, and although letters and numbers may be the most consequential ones, they are not the only ones.

This brings me to a related but much less theorised field, namely music. The enormous complexity characterising Beethoven's and Mahler's symphonies would have been impossible, had the composers not lived in a society which for centuries had developed an accurate system of writing music, that is notation. Harmony is much rarer in societies without notes than in societies with them. And if one is able to read music, one can play music never heard. The parallel to writing and numbers is obvious: The statement is externalised and frozen, separated from the person who originated it. It can be appreciated in an unchanged manner (externally – interpretations always change) anywhere and any time.

Let me finally mention a phenomenon which will be discussed from a different

point of view in the next chapter: Nationalism would have been impossible without writing. In one of the most widely quoted books about the growth of national identities, Benedict Anderson (1983) shows that printing was a crucial condition for the emergence of nationalist thought and national identification. Before the advent of printing, books were expensive and rarely seen in private homes. In Europe, besides, most books were written in Latin. When books gradually became cheaper in the second half of the 15th century, new markets for books which were aimed at new audiences, quickly materialised: Travel writing became popular, likewise novels, essays and popular science. Since profits were important to the printers (who often were also publishers), the books were increasingly published in vernacular languages. Thereby the national languages were standardised, and people living in Hamburg could read, verbatim, the same texts as people in Munich. The broad standardisation of culture represented in nationalism would not have been possible without a modern mass medium such as the printed book (and, later, the newspaper). Thus it may be said that writing has not only influenced thought about the world, but also thought about who we are. It has made it technologically possible to imagine that one belongs to the same people as millions of other persons whom one will never meet.

Further reading

Douglas, Mary (1966) *Purity and Danger....* London

Goody, Jack (1977) *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1966 [1962]) *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Anthropology is the study of people and cultures in the past and today. How did people live a few decades ago, or thousands of years ago? And how have societies and cultures changed over time? What are the big ideas about anthropology? What would it be like to go to school in Japan or grow up in a Buddhist temple in Tibet? How did people live in the past when your grandparents were kids, 200 years ago, or even 6,000 years ago? How have societies changed over time? What is Anthropology? Career Paths for Anthropology Majors. Featured Alumni. Figuring Out Your Career Goals. Become a K12 STEM Teacher. Majors and Minor. A.B in Evolutionary Anthropology. A.B. in Sociocultural Anthropology. Biological anthropologists study a variety of aspects of human evolutionary biology. Anthropology is the study of humanity. This broad field takes an interdisciplinary approach to looking at human culture, both past and present. What is Anthropology? Skip to main content. Home >. Academic >. Anthropology >. What is Anthropology? Explorable.com 19.4K reads. Anthropology is the study of humanity. What is Anthropology? Eriksen, T. H. (Pluto Press, 2004). Introducing Anthropology 3rd Edition Davies, W. M. (Totem Books, 2006). The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (RAI) - is the world's longest-established scholarly association dedicated to the furtherance of anthropology (the study of humankind) in its broadest and most inclusive sense. What is anthropology - The broad field of anthropology studies all things human in ways that stand apart from other areas of the humanities and sciences. The study of humanity applies to many fields, but anthropology looks at people in a unique way. Orbon Alija/Getty Images. Ask SAPIENS. What Is Anthropology? The broad field of anthropology studies all things human in ways that stand apart from sociology, psychology, history, and other areas of the humanities and sciences.