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DEFINING
ANTHROPOLOGY

*distinguishing anthropology from the
other social sciences*

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When one is asked to define anthropology one is immediately confronted with a difficult task primarily because the central notions associated with anthropology are shared by many different important disciplines. The term itself means “human study” if interpreted etymologically, and this puts anthropology on the same level as all the other social sciences, including history, psychology and archeology. The purpose of this paper is to make the distinctions between anthropology and these other disciplines clear, and at the same time to help us to come to an understanding of the term ‘anthropology’ and what it encompasses. Comparing and distinguishing these disciplines has also another function in demonstrating the importance of these social sciences to the development of contemporary anthropological theory.

Let us begin by defining the essential concepts connected with the study of anthropology. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary¹ anthropology is the “study of mankind, especially of its societies and customs; study of structure and evolution of man as an animal.” Such an open definition leads inevitably to specialisation. In the case of anthropology we have ended up with an array of smaller disciplines: prehistory, anthropological linguistics, psychological anthropology, symbolic anthropology, cognitive anthropology, ecological anthropology and so on. Keesing² even suggests the existence of a new field that has developed in recent years called *medical anthropology*, which could serve to confuse matters a little. We begin therefore with a very open book covering almost every level of human study, suggesting the need to define in more detail which areas of ‘anthropology’ are of interest to us.

Keesing³ provides us with a diagram that is of particular significance to this discussion. In this diagram the first major level of distinction is between *physical anthropology* (involved with the study of human biology) and those areas of anthropology involved with the study of culture and cultural behaviour (as illustrated in *diagram 1*). Physical anthropology, according to a social anthropologist⁴ is *not* involved with “the analysis of social institutions and of the beliefs and values associated with them” and therefore does not need to be considered in a discussion involved in contrasting anthropology with other social sciences. ‘Cultural Anthropology’ is, then, our main area of interest. Keesing states that cultural anthropology “is often used to label a narrower field concerned with the study of human customs, that is, the comparative study of cultures and societies.” The disciplines we are going to discuss are, in one way or another, also involved with the study of human cultures. The ways in which they can be contrasted form the basis for this paper.

First some structural points. In this paper, the theoretical structure intends to point out what anthropology *isn't* rather than what it *is*. This may seem itself a rather unusual enterprise, but it will soon be revealed to be an important one. By distinguishing anthropology from other major divisions within the field of the social sciences clears up many ambiguities presented by the term. Three terms will be used to help make these distinctions clearer: (i) *methods of research*, (ii) *emphases* and (iii) *origins*. Each of the terms suggests a different way in which the areas will be able to be distinguished. *Methods of research* are involved with a *practical* expression of a discipline, which can be compared to *emphases* which are based on a *theoretical* expression. These both contrast with *origins* which are involved with the *historical* expression of a discipline. Using these basic theoretical tools, we will compare anthropology to the following disciplines: archeology, history, psychology and sociology. I consider these disciplines as those which are closely enough related to ‘anthropology’ to provide a degree of ambiguity which needs to be clarified.

The first important area to discuss is the distinguishing factors which separate (cultural) anthropology and

¹ (1976) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

² Keesing, R. (1981) *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, pg 3.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Beattie, J. (1964) ‘Social anthropology and some other sciences of man’. *Other Cultures*, London: Cohen and West, pg 18.

archeology. This area of distinction is important because archeology actually forms a major division of anthropology as demonstrated in *diagram 1*. Despite the stereotypes that would seem to widely distance the two, anthropology and archeology share many common points. Returning to *diagram 1* we can see that one of the divisions of cultural anthropology is (prehistoric) archeology or *prehistory*. Seeing archeology in this light makes us question the stereotyped role of archeologists as those involved with the *discovery* of ancient cultures, when they are actually in a similar way to anthropologists intimately involved with the study of customs and cultures. How can we, then, distinguish between the study of archeology and (cultural) anthropology? We can do this by a primary contrast in *research methods*. In order for cultural anthropologists to be able to form theories about why certain cultural processes take place, and the relationship between cultural 'events' (customs, rituals etc.) and the structure of a social system, they have to have a practical means of collating the data, just as archeologists need such methods. The term *field work* is synonymous with the study of anthropology, which contrasts considerably to *excavation* (synonymous with archeology). According to Keesing⁵ *field work* involves "intimate participation in a community and observation of modes of behaviour and the organization of social life." Jolly⁶ defines *excavation* in a form which contrasts considerably: "the process of digging a site to recover artifacts and other buried evidence of human activity." From the information learnt by this complex procedure, archeologists are able to help to reconstruct the past. Archeological anthropologists or prehistorians, as a division of cultural anthropology, use this information of the reconstructed past to help form theories about culture and societies that can be useful in examining cultures still in existence in the contemporary world, thus allowing itself to be defined as a division within cultural anthropology. The research methods involved with these disciplines sets them on different levels, necessitating the need for different classifications.

Moving on from archeology, we can now begin to tackle the comparison between history and anthropology. According to Beattie⁷, a social anthropologist, has said that historians "are chiefly interested in the past, whether remote or recent; their business is to find out what happened, and why it happened." The question is, how does this differ from the study of anthropology, which is also in many ways interested in a study of the human past. Beattie informs us that [social] anthropology is related very closely to history:

"an anthropologist who aims to achieve as complete an understanding as possible of the present condition of the society he is studying can hardly fail to ask how it came to be as it is."

By way of *emphasis*, the study of history could be distinguished from anthropology by history's *emphasis* on the study of the past and anthropology's *emphasis* on interpreting the present, be that through the interpretation of events that have occurred in the past or not. Unfortunately another common factor emerges: historians are also interested in examining the present through events from the past. A final contrast in emphasis makes the two disciplines impossible to confuse: history is centred primarily around the interpretation of actual events, events that have occurred in history and have shaped the way we think today. Anthropology is also interested in this, but places an emphasis on events that did not necessarily occur, allowing mythical events significance that is not allowed to the same degree by historical theory. Ambiguity arises however when history "merges with myth": how can fact remain separated from mythical belief if they both centre around a culture's concept of themselves and their world view? This presents us with an anomaly and at the same time a solution. Historians are interested in interpreting human behaviour through examining past events that according to their own cultural belief systems *did* occur.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Jolly, C. (1987), 'Cultural Evolution: the theory and practice of archeology'. *Physical Anthropology and Archeology*, New York: Knopf, pg 241.

⁷ Beattie, J. (1964) 'Social anthropology and some other sciences of man'. *Other Cultures*, London: Cohen and West, pg 20.

Anthropologists however, concern themselves with the cultural belief systems themselves, and how any number of contrasting influences could have resulted in the cultural situation of a society alive on the earth today. Anthropology, then, is involved with a study of the way humans think or interpret themselves in relation to what they learn in a cultural situation. Historians are also interested in the way people interpret themselves in contemporary life, but do it by examining historical (in contrast with cultural) events and what affect these events have had on the human mind.

The discipline of psychology also presents us with problems. It is clearly not the same area of study as anthropology, but how can we define this? Both areas are intimately involved with an interpretation of human cultural behaviour. An important difference here can be again related to *emphasis*. Beattie⁸ himself suggests that “psychology is mainly concerned with the nature and functioning of individual human minds,” which contrasts with the essential realization that anthropologists are involved with the study of groups of human minds, common thought patterns that express themselves as manners, beliefs, ways of speaking and acting that unite a given cultural group. This is, of course, made considerably more complicated if we consider psychologists who have involved themselves with a search for uniting cultural symbols, such as Carl Jung. This poses the question: was Carl Jung an anthropologist or a psychologist? In this case, psychology and anthropology are sharing an *emphasis*. Let us then consider *origins*: Jung came from a background in which the human mind itself was at the forefront as an expression of human behaviour, whereas anthropologists come from a contrasting area in which the ‘structure’ of a culture forms the basic theoretical conception. Even if these two areas come together on some points, the *origin* can help to distinguish them. Developments in psychology have certainly been highly important to the study of cultural anthropology, just as anthropological developments have been important to psychology. The contrasting *origins* and *emphases* don’t prevent the two from influencing each other, in fact encouraging development between the two fields. Beattie adds to this:

“Anthropology is not history, although social anthropologists are sometimes historians, and [anthropology] is not psychology, although it cannot do without psychological categories.”⁹

Unfortunately, when trying to distinguish between anthropology and sociology we are presented with a problem. To quote Beattie¹⁰ again “Like sociologists, social anthropologists study social relationships, and if this were a sufficient definition of their subject, it would be difficult to see why they should think of themselves as different from sociologists.” This makes it clear that a discussion of *emphases* and *origins* will be necessary. From a common source, both areas are involved with the investigation and understanding of social relations, and other data that can be related directly to this area of study. Anthropologists, however, are not only interested in this area, but also other matters such as people’s beliefs and values, even when these areas cannot be connected to social behaviour. In a way, we could define the difference between sociology and anthropology by examining Anthropology’s connection with psychology: an interest in the human mind and how it works, in comparison to sociology which is largely involved in exploring the abstract structures created by humans to allow their social world to rotate. In addition to that, sociologists are involved largely with an analysis of Western society, whereas anthropologists take all cultural material to be valid for the development of cultural theory. Beattie states this contrast as follows:

“Social anthropologists have mostly worked in communities which are both less familiar and technologically less developed, while sociologists have chiefly studied types of social organization characteristic of more

⁸ Beattie, J. (1964) pg 25.

⁹ Beattie, J. (1964) pg 29.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

complex, Western-type societies.”¹¹

Actually, with the passing of time anthropology has moved further and further away from an essentially sociological base and involved itself with other disciplines. This has occurred both through more theoretical developments within the discipline and also from influences taken over from other areas, especially linguistics: anthropologists became interested in how cultural elements (religious and cosmological ideas) could be directly reflected in the social system as expressed in the communication forms of a given culture, and therefore theoretical development was necessary. Contemporary anthropological theory is now becoming interested in psychobiological factors and not simply the interpretation of culture as purely socially learnt behaviour. The dividing lines between psychology and anthropology are again put to the test, although the contrasting *emphases* and *origins* remains to provide a basic level of distinction.

The last area which needs to be discussed in more detail involves the distinction between the divisions *cultural* and *social* anthropology. The distinction between the two terms can be discussed from both from an *origins* or an *emphases* perspective. Historically, social anthropology comes from Britain and is connected with British schools of thought influenced by sociology, the study of the structure of society as defined above. As an extension of this school, social anthropology sought to find expression for these theories through the study of other cultures. In *diagram 1*, we have already seen demonstrated that social anthropology is now considered by many to be merely a subset of cultural anthropology. This notion, whether intentional or unintentional, is supported by Beattie¹² who defines cultural anthropology as “an exceedingly broad field, including practically all the non-biological aspects of human life” and that social anthropology’s central concerns “occupy only a small part of this range.” It is therefore safe to say that social anthropology can be now blanketed under the term cultural anthropology. In recognising that cultural anthropology is indeed only the name for a subject made up of lots of equally important areas of research, the historical ambiguities are quickly resolved, and even Beattie who is interested in maintaining a contrast between the two subjects is willing to confess that two areas are essentially similar. He does this firstly by recognising that cultural anthropology “has broken down into such separate specialist fields as linguistics, acculturation and personality studies”¹³ and that the two areas of studies, although contrasting slightly in *emphasis*, are essentially involved with the same subject matter:

“But however significant these differences in approach—and their importance can be exaggerated—it must be remembered that for the most part they imply only a difference in emphasis: they do not, or at least they should not, imply that social anthropologists and cultural anthropologists study two different kinds of things.”¹⁴

It is now, at the very least, clear that the study of anthropology is a complex matter, involved both with an intricate pattern of subjects interlinked closely with other areas of study, and at the same time involved with a history that has helped it to define itself in different contexts. Hopefully we have been able to place it in this context and at the same time distinguish it from other the other social sciences, remaining at all times aware that the ambiguities and cross-over points between the different areas of study not only exist, but are essentially important for the development of these disciplines.

¹¹ Beattie, J. (1964) pg 30.

¹² Beattie, J. (1964) pg. 20.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Beattie, J. (1964) pg. 21.