

Cultural Anthropology Theories, Perspectives & Methodologies

Different ways of examining and
understanding different cultures

Cultural Materialism

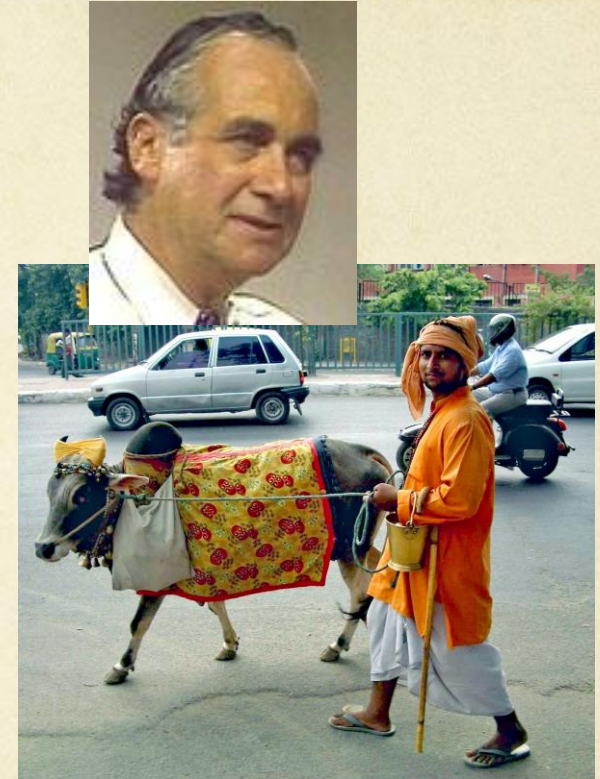
Material stuff
drives cultural change
more than ideas or
thoughts

- This theory explains cultures by looking at them using three levels.
 1. Infrastructure (what they produce – technology, economics, reproduction)
 2. Structure (how a society is organized – family, labour division, government)
 3. Superstructure (ideologies, beliefs, art, symbols, ceremonies & rites)
- This theory embraces the idea of cultures **evolving** in proposing that culture can change due to advances selected by society because it benefits or increases their ability to produce.
- Everything is determined by the infrastructure or what they produce. The other two levels are determined by whether or not they benefit production in the end.
- In terms of methodology they encourage empirical evidence over native explanations of their culture – to avoid bias and error (alcohol example).

Cultural Materialism example...

Among the Hindus in India, the cow is considered a sacred animal. It cannot be eaten. Harris, found this interesting because he saw that cows played an important role in the agricultural economy, they pulled ploughs and hauled heavy loads.

Because of the importance of the cow to the way the culture produced agriculturally, it is important and this influences decisions about how to treat cows, example do not eat them.



Feminist Anthropology

Feminism means advocating for equal rights for men and women, politically, socially and economically

- This field emerged as a reaction to a perceived male focused bias in anthropology though women have been involved in this field early on, the dominant approaches have been male based.
- There are three waves of feminist anthropology
 1. 1850 to 1920 include women's voices in ethnography (interviewer & interviewee)
 2. 1920 to 1980 separate sex (biology) & gender (culture) – avoid generalizations – reject the idea of an inherent dichotomy male/female work/home (that it has to be opposites and one or the other)
 3. 1980s onward not only focused on gender differences anymore, now also look at how race, class, sexual orientation and so on come into play in experiences, viewpoints, power & identity (differences between women; not just between men and women) look at work, production, reproduction, sexuality and gender and the state



- Feminist anthropology has raised awareness regarding the role, status, and contributions of women to their societies
- Looks at how gender roles are culturally constructed rather than biologically

Feminist Anthropology examples...



- 20s to 50s Mead & Benedict studies on culture, gender & personality
- 80s Gayle Rubin examines the issues of sex & gender, and brought gender back to the anthropological table by introducing the "sex /gender system": which also separates biology from behaviour.
 - She challenges the idea that people are born either male or female only & looks at various "Queer subcultures".
 - Her approach is more inclusive of additional aspects of identity than gender equality.



Culturally constructed ?

or

Biologically determined ?

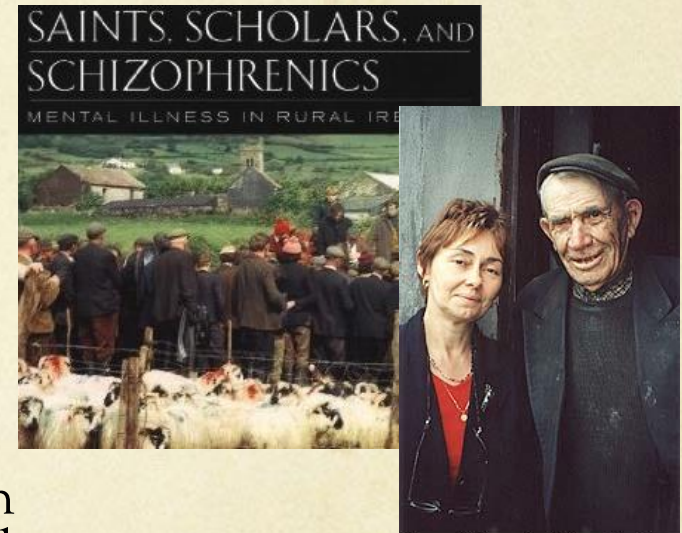
Post Modernism

- Post Modern anthropologists dissect, interpret & write cultural critiques
- They are concerned with subjectivity, because ethnographies are influenced by whoever is writing them
 - they ask the question can this truly be considered scientific?
 - it is impossible to have any true knowledge about the world because the information is constructed through our own lens of culture or society
- They ask - Can an anthropologist speak and or write on behalf of someone else's culture?
- To address this, post modern anthropologists point out that all cultural descriptions are of cultural others. All writing by any person is completed from one standpoint - writing about others living in a different standpoint. Anthropologists are essentially culture agents or brokers.
- Main points...
 - It is important to include the opinions of the people being studied
 - Recognizing the idea of cultural relativism is important
 - Rejection of science and scientific “methods”
 - Rejection of big, universal theories which explain cultures

Post Modernism began in the 1960s. It is essentially critical of “modern” interpretations of all sorts of things including... literature, fiction, literary criticism, art, architecture, philosophy, history, psychology, feminism, economics, political science, culture & more.

Post Modern Anthropology example...

- This movement has led to a close look at how data is collected, interpreted and used.
- Nancy Scheper-Hughes studied mental illness among bachelor farmers in Ireland, during the decline of the agrarian economy and disintegration of rural family life.
 - The book was published and people in Ireland were offended.
 - She dealt with this by providing an update on the changes the community was undergoing – 20 years later.
 - She also then wrote about the challenges and ethics of ethnography – noting that this becomes really important when communities that are being studied can subsequently read and critique the work.



Scheper-Hughes with Pa Keane. A quick, last-minute photo before being run out of the village. "With love to Pa," her once long-ago boon companion in Peig's pub. Ballynalacken, An Clochan, summer 1999. photo by Naze Hughes

"Anthropologists, no less than any other professionals, should be held accountable for how we have used and how we have failed to use anthropology as a critical tool at crucial historical moments.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes

Hmmm....

Consider all the theories and theorists...

- Who do you think agrees with whom?
- Who do you think would have a lively debate?
- Who would you like to chat with at the pub?

Talk amongst yourselves

