1.6: Cultural Anthropology Theory

Anthropological Theory

Why learn theory? "Theories are analytical tools for understanding, explaining, and making predictions about a given subject matter" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory). Theories help to direct our thinking and provide a common framework from which people can work. Oftentimes through the process of using a theoretical framework, we discover that it lacks explanatory abilities. When that happens, it is modified or even abandoned.

There are a number of theoretical approaches used in cultural anthropology. This page highlights some of the major theoretical approaches used in cultural anthropology. Not all of the theories reviewed are in use any more. Social evolutionism was abandoned early on in cultural anthropology. Culture and Personality, Cultural Ecology, and Cultural Materialism have all been jumping off points for more modern theoretical perspectives.
Social Evolution

Proposed in the 19th century, social evolution, which is sometimes referred to as Unilineal Evolution, was the first theory developed for anthropology. This theory claims that societies develop according to one universal order of cultural evolution, albeit at different rates, which explained why there were different types of society existing in the world. E. B. Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Herbert Spencer (a sociologist) were the most notable of the Nineteenth-century social evolutionists. They collected data from missionaries and traders; they themselves rarely went to the societies that they were analyzing. They organized these second-hand data and applied the general theory they developed to all societies.

Social evolutionists identified universal evolutionary stages to classify different societies as in a state of savagery, barbarism, or civilization. Morgan further subdivided savagery and barbarism into sub-categories: low, middle, and high. The stages were based primarily on technological characteristics, but included other things such as political organization, marriage, family, and religion. Since Western societies had the most advanced technology, they put those societies at the highest rank of civilization. Societies at a stage of savagery or barbarism were viewed as inherently inferior to civilized society. Spencer’s theory of social evolution, which is often referred to as Social Darwinism but which he called synthetic philosophy, proposed that war promoted evolution, stating that those societies that conducted more warfare were the most evolved. He also coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” and advocated for allowing societies to compete, thereby allowing the most fit in society to survive. With these ideas, Spencer opposed social policy that would help the poor. Eugenicists used Spencer’s ideas to promote intellectual and ethnic cleansing as a ‘natural’ occurrence.

There are two main assumptions embedded in social evolutionism: psychic unity and the superiority of Western cultures. Psychic unity is a concept that suggests human minds share similar characteristics all over the world. This means that all people and their societies will go through the same process of development. The assumption of Western superiority was not unusual for the time period. This assumption was deeply rooted in European colonialism and based on the fact that Western societies had more technologically sophisticated technology and a belief that Christianity was the true religion.
Nineteenth-century evolutionists contributed to anthropology by providing the first systematic methods for thinking about and explaining human societies; however, contemporary anthropologists view nineteenth-century evolutionism as too simplistic to explain the development of societies in the world. In general, the nineteenth-century evolutionists relied on racist views of human development that were popular at that time. For example, both Lewis Henry Morgan and E. B. Tylor believed that people in various societies have different levels of intelligence, which leads to societal differences, a view of intelligence that is no longer valid in contemporary science. Nineteenth-century evolutionism was strongly attacked by historical particularists for being speculative and ethnocentric in the early twentieth-century. At the same time, its materialist approaches and cross-cultural views influenced Marxist Anthropology and Neo-evolutionists.

**Historical Particularism**

Franz Boas and his students developed *historical particularism* early in the twentieth century. This approach claims that each society has its own unique historical development and must be understood based on its own specific cultural and environmental context, especially its historical process. Its core premise was that culture was a “set of ideas or symbols held in common by a group of people who see themselves as a social group” (Darnell 2013: 399). Historical particularists criticized the theory of the nineteenth-century social evolution as non-scientific and proclaimed themselves to be free from preconceived ideas. Boas believed that there were universal laws that could be derived from the comparative study of cultures; however, he thought that the ethnographic database was not yet robust enough for us to identify those laws. To that end, he and his students collected a vast amount of first-hand cultural data by conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Based on these raw data, they described particular cultures instead of trying to establish general theories that apply to all societies.

The Historical particularists valued fieldwork and history as critical methods of cultural analysis. At the same time, the anthropologists in this theoretical school had different views on the importance of individuals in a society. For example, Frantz Boas saw each individual as the basic component of a society. He gathered information from individual informants and considered such data valuable enough for cultural analysis. On the other hand, Alfred Kroeber did not see individuals as the fundamental elements of a society. He believed a society evolves according to its own internal laws that do not directly originate from its individuals. He named this cultural aspect superorganic and claimed that a society cannot be explained without considering this impersonal force.

Historical particularism was a dominant trend in anthropology during the first half of the twentieth century. One of the achievements of the historical particularists was that they succeeded in excluding racism from anthropology. The nineteenth-century evolutionists explained cultural similarities and differences by classifying societies into superior and inferior categories. Historical particularists showed that this labeling is based on insufficient evidence and claimed that societies cannot be ranked by the value judgment of researchers. Historical particularists were also responsible for showing the need for long-term, intensive fieldwork in order to produce accurate descriptions of cultures. One important part of doing that was to learn the language of the study group.

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**Learn more about the anthropologists**

Lewis Henry Morgan: [https://rochester.edu/College/ANT/morgan/bio.html](https://rochester.edu/College/ANT/morgan/bio.html)

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References


