# SOCIETY: A KEY CONCEPT IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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## Contents

## Summary

In this chapter, we present the major anthropological currents that directly or indirectly made use of the notion of society in their theoretical reflections and analyses of empirical data. Having first clarified the polysemic nature of the term anthropology, we analyze the theoretical framework of early anthropologists who drew upon the evolutionist theories stemming from natural science. We then analyze British functionalism, whose theoretical basis chiefly consists in a criticism of evolutionism, which was regarded as too speculative. Functionalism is characterized by its interest in institutions that, through their functions, generate cohesion in societies deemed primitive. Typical of British functionalism is the empirical orientation of research put forward by Bronislaw Malinowski. This is followed by an analysis of French structuralism, which is akin to yet distinct from British functionalism. We then present post-structuralism, which is a reaction to structuralism, and its influence on agency theory. Dynamic anthropology, a trend that emerged in response to the lack of consideration for social change, completes this section on the French school of thought. The third current analyzed is American anthropology centering on the personality of Franz Boas, who influenced an entire generation of anthropologists. The epistemological and methodological basis of this school is characterized by diffusionism, historicism and relativism. Boas and his followers built upon the principle

that culture, as the expression of society, is the outcome of historical interchanges between different social groups. Inherent in this theoretical conception is also the relativist idea that there are no superior or inferior cultures. Finally, we analyze the characteristics of interpretive anthropology and conclude with a critical reflection on post-modern currents that tend to omit the concept of society in favor of an individualistic conception of life in common.

## 1. Introduction: Semantic Ambiguities of the Concept of Anthropology

The concept of anthropology is probably the most polysemic one in social sciences, comprising many meanings that often point to highly diverse if not indeed clashing scientific horizons.

In fact, in the case of physical anthropology this discipline focuses more on anatomy and biology. We need only to mention the juridical anthropology of the Italian positivist school, highly renowned even at an international level between the end of the 19th century and the first thirty years of the 20th century, which sought to explain deviant behavior, thus also criminal behavior, through specific physical and anatomical characteristics. Accordingly, it discusses human beings in terms of entities with specific biological and racial characteristics that lead to committing criminal acts (Lombroso, 1876; Sergi, 1901; Niceforo, 1901). This approach is obsolete nowadays and has been essentially cast aside because of its biological determinism. Consistent with physical anthropology's most famous currents, in fact, a criminal is so from birth and does not become one because of social reasons or psychological traumas.

At this point, we also need to mention philosophical anthropology, which discusses the essence of the human being in terms of enigma or problem as Max Scheler (1928), one of the founders of philosophical anthropology, upheld. Yet, philosophical anthropology strives to abstract from mere individual reality to focus instead on the shared characteristics that typify all human beings beyond social, cultural, ethnic, environmental etc. differences. Based primarily on an abstract speculation developed chiefly by outstanding scholars such as Max Scheler (1928), Helmut Plessner (1982) and Arnold Gehlen (1940) in particular, philosophical anthropology, therefore, explores mankind's unchanging factors beyond history, society and culture. It was a highly popular branch of thought especially in Germany during the second half of the 19th century and up to the 1930s.

Unlike physical anthropology and in line with Max Scheler, philosophical anthropology upholds that man as a human being is open to the world, thus is able to make it his own. Therefore, man is determined neither by biology nor by the environment; however, man is biologically flawed, as Arnold Gehlen (1940) asserted, thus needs to devise and develop tools and strategies in order to survive. We should further note that philosophical anthropology is a deductive discipline not based on collected empirical data, though some of its observations are certainly valid to this day.

The type of anthropology we will discuss in this chapter differs markedly from both the physical and the philosophical anthropology, despite some affinities with the latter. There are, however, two substantial differences.

The first difference is that, paradoxically, the focus of the analysis is not man as a biologically determined being, but rather societies, which obviously consist of human beings. Accordingly, the anthropological currents we will present concentrate on collectivities created by human beings in which they live and act, rather than on mankind. The basic concept of this chapter, therefore, centers on society, not the individual.

The second difference is that this type of anthropology in particular does not settle for desk-bound speculations, i.e. as those of the well-known armchair anthropology, because by definition it is empirical, thus based on fieldwork.

## 2. Pioneers of Social Anthropology: Evolutionism and Society

At this point, a preliminary caveat is of the essence. The great difference between social and cultural anthropology is often stressed. In our view, this distinction, aimed especially at highlighting the difference between European (in this case, the British and French schools in particular) and North American anthropology, appears redundant and contrived in this chapter's context. Ultimately, in fact, all these anthropological paradigms of an empirical nature are based on approaches that study man as a member of a given society. Consequently, we will disregard this distinction, which is essentially terminological, thus formal rather than substantive.

The foundation of contemporary social anthropology dates back to the second half of the 19$^{th}$ century in the United Kingdom. With the publication of his *Primitive Culture* (1871), Edward B. Tylor may be regarded as the father of modern anthropology. In his book, he highlighted that human societies and their cultures are individual complex social aggregations that comprise

> "knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871: vol.1, 1).

It is important to note that, contrary to several previous anthropological paradigms, human abilities and customs are not deemed innate, but rather are learnt by the single individuals as members of a given society through socialization processes. Society is man-made, yet it is likewise true that man would not be able to survive without a society. Society, therefore, is the *sine qua non* also for the reproduction of human beings, hence for the survival of the species. This presumption, still valid in anthropology to this day, disproves that mankind is biologically determined and is a fundamental concept in anthropology because it implicitly undermines deterministic theories grounded in the concept of race.

Yet, Tylor was a scientist of his day who, influenced by the epoch's scientism, believed that anthropology should not be included amongst humanities, but should rather be associated with sciences. At the time, the theory of evolution modeled on the ideas of Charles Darwin and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck was the predominant standard. After all, also James G. Frazer in Britain and Lewis H. Morgan in the United States are evolutionists like Tylor, though in a somewhat different way. All of these authors assume that the modalities of sociocultural processes are analogous to those observable

in nature. Evolutionist anthropology, therefore, is based on the idea that the evolution of society is a process of development more or less akin to those studied by natural sciences.

Consequently, social sciences should neither reject nor have concerns about the methodological paradigms employed in natural sciences. Ultimately, their calling is to follow in the footsteps of natural sciences' teachings. According to these authors, anthropology as a social science must become a natural science endeavoring to seek generalizations and universal laws that govern all societies, thus universally valid ones; therefore, evolutionism is characterized by a radical universalism.

These evolutionist theories are grounded in the concept of development still and always present in current social theories of modernization, which, wittingly or not, ultimately hark back to evolutionism. The term development denotes a unidirectional process common to all societies, thus universal, involving the passage from a simpler, more primitive stage, to humanly and socially more complex, thus more civilized stages. In essence, evolutionist anthropology is based on the notion of progress, which in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a predominant and practically mainstream theory. To this day, this notion is still very widespread and appealing, despite having been criticized and partially rejected.

In delving into these theories, we need to point out that they are characterized by the idea of discontinuity, i.e. on the certainty that not all societies share the same level of civilization. Accordingly, some societies will be more civilized while others will be less so, i.e. archaic, if not primitive.

In order to explain this disparity, evolutionists created the notion of stages by which some societies have reached a higher stage of civilization whereas others are still at a lower stage, though in a more or less near future they, too, will move to a higher stage.

According to evolutionists, there are three principal stages that all of the world's societies have experienced. For example, with reference to Lewis H. Morgan's terminology, there is a universal law by which societies start from the stage of savagery, go through the stage of barbarism, then reach the final stage of civilization (Morgan, 1877). In order to corroborate this point, Morgan pointed up that in all societies the evolution of family went through the three above-mentioned stages. The stage of savagery is characterized by the promiscuity and incest of group marriage. This is followed by the stage of polygamy and finally by the third stage, the most advanced one, of generalized monogamy.

Tylor and Frazer (Frazer, 1890), on the other hand, developed similar yet differing evolutionist theories relating in particular to creeds, religion and science. Tylor envisions an evolution characterized by the sequence animism-polytheism-monotheism, whereas Frazer proposes a development that goes from the phase of magic to that of religion and finally to the last stage where science prevails. Philosophically speaking, this is a teleological process leading perforce towards a desirable and feasible goal for all societies.

Evolutionist anthropology, therefore, is an optimistic, quasi-utopian theory typical of its epoch, i.e. the second half of the 19th century. Since it views Western societies as the blueprint for all other societies, regarded as inferior or less advanced, evolutionist anthropology is definitely an ethnocentric approach and was undoubtedly an ideological justification for colonial expansion and domination.

Yet, this approach is not racist since it rests on the assumption of the psychic unity of mankind by which all human beings have the chance of becoming like the Western ones. Nor should a further positive element of this theoretic approach be overlooked; specifically, the assumption that human beings are first and foremost socially influenced and not biologically, i.e. racially, determined.

There are, however, four negative aspects. The first one is an ethnocentric vision of the world grounded in the certainty of a European or more in general a Western superiority. The second one concerns a very rigid and practically unitary vision of social development (with rare exceptions due to the persistence of survivals). This implies that all societies are subject to the same inflexible law that prescribes the same development pattern for all of the world's societies. The third one is that all of the above-mentioned evolutionist theories are speculative since none is corroborated by empirically verifiable data. The fourth one concerns viewing the evolution of societies as a harmonious process from which conflicts have been omitted. Most times, however, conflicts (such as political or even scientific revolutions) are precisely what gives rise to epoch-making social changes, thus to the most radical and important ones.

## 3. The Idea of Society in British Anthropology: Functionalism

In the first decades of the 20th century, evolutionist anthropology faced intense criticisms. The current that more than any other was instrumental in challenging the validity of the evolutionist hypotheses and purported certainties was certainly functionalism, which may be defined as a typically British current of thought.

The functionalist critique to the evolutionist theories was based on the following two crucial points: the lack of data gathered through a systematic empirical research on site, and the consequent inconsistency and unreliability of diachronic speculations concerning the ineluctable succession of the various stages of societies' evolutionary process.

Unlike evolutionism, functionalism put forward an organic-like theoretic paradigm by which society's individual elements are viewed as parts of a living organism. Similar to living organisms, societies survive and reproduce across time thanks to an organized system consisting of single interdependent parts called social institutions. These institutions, such as kinship, family, politics, economy, religion, ritual practices, segmentary political structures etc., represent the fundamental organs, which, through their functioning, ensure a given society's continuance across time. Individuals, instead, are comparable to an organism's individual cells. Functionalist anthropologists, therefore, set out to study the crucial role of social institutions in society's continuance. According to this approach, social institutions ensure the survival of society as such

along with that of the single individuals without whom human life would not continue to exist.

In order to grasp how social institutions operate, functionalist anthropologists stressed the importance of fieldwork, in contrast, as previously mentioned, with the essentially speculative method of 19th-century armchair anthropologists. For functionalism, primitive societies were particularly suited to this type of empirical research due to their limited size and a social structure deemed less complex than that of more advanced societies. Though functionalist anthropologists rejected evolutionism, they, too, were steeped in the ethnocentric assumption by which the societies they studied were considered inferior.

Two eminent anthropologists, markedly different in terms of methodology and character, would bring functionalism to the fore; namely, Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, who are now regarded as the true founders of British social anthropology.

Bronislaw Malinowski, a naturalized British of Polish origin, sets forth from the hypothesis that the function of a society's institutions is to satisfy the needs, including biological ones, of its members, i.e. its single individuals; therefore, Malinowskian functionalism may be defined as bio-psychological. Under this aspect, its most significant theoretic contribution is its reflections on basic needs and the social institutions in charge of fulfilling them. Malinowski founds his functionalist theory on the existence of basic needs determined by the human organism's characteristics, the social environment's set-up and the natural environment's conditions. Through the social institutions produced by its culture, society must meet the following seven basic needs: 1) metabolism, i.e. nutrition; 2) reproduction, i.e. perpetuating the species; 3) bodily comfort, i.e. shelter from environmental hazards such as bad weather; 4) safety, by means of defense systems; 5) movement, by means of specific leisure activity; 6) the biological development of human beings along with adequate learning activities, and finally 7) health, ensured via adequate sanitary practices.

Nowadays this theory seems rather naïve, if not faulty and was already being showered with criticisms at the time.

In the first place, Malinowski was criticized for the banality of his assertions, which ultimately narrow down human activities to the bare necessities for survival. For example, why then has every society not limited itself to producing basic foodstuff to survive but has developed its own cuisine or gastronomy? Similar examples regarding all of the other basic needs can easily be found.

Secondly, the banality of Malinowski's biologistic assertions, not corroborated by natural sciences, came under scrutiny as well.

From a point of view more strictly correlated to social sciences, Malinowski may be accused of having an exclusive interest towards society's internal cohesion. Yet, he dedicated only a few observations to processes of social change, even though the Trobriand Islands were part of the British Empire at the time of his empirical fieldwork

there. In the end, Malinowski gave rise to the myth of an untouched primitive society, thus uncontaminated by modern civilization.

Finally, Malinowski's lack of historical sensitivity came under scrutiny too, since the society he is studying gives the impression of being unchanging. Moreover, in connection with this methodological flaw, Malinowski's conception of society is ahistorical, thus change is practically non-existent in his analyses.

There are, however, a number of positive aspects. Malinowski was able to prove the validity of the empirical method based on fieldwork on site. Thanks to this methodology, by now a *sine qua non* of theoretic reflection in anthropology, he was able to cogently prove
1) that societies are not a haphazard cluster of institutions, but rather an integrated complex of institutions and
2) that human beings, even those deemed less advanced, are able to devise sound and rational solutions to the social and natural environment's challenges. Thus, he cogently formulated the question of rationality inherent to all mankind.

The second founder of British functionalist anthropology is Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown. Unlike Malinowski, he was less drawn to fieldwork, whereas he was passionate about theoretic questions clearly linked to the development of the concept of function. In fact, his interest centered primarily on the analysis of how specific social structures are able to persist and reproduce themselves across time. In this context, Radcliffe-Brown was chiefly interested in phenomena of social continuity and much less in those of social discontinuity such as conflicts. His approach, therefore, was very similar to that of Emile Durkheim, the founder of French sociology.

At this point, we need to highlight the significant theoretic difference between Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. Whereas for Malinowski the institutions' function was to ensure the biological existence of individuals, for Radcliffe-Brown institutions were crucial, hence essential for the preservation of social systems, i.e. of societies themselves. This is why Radcliffe-Brown's approach is often called structural functionalism, differentiating it from Malinowski's.

Finally, we ought to bear in mind that Radcliffe-Brown actively postulated the advent of a nomothetic anthropology, a goal he did not achieve in the end (Radcliffe-Brown 1952): namely, a social science that would formulate socially universal laws through generalizations. Accordingly, he was opposed to an idiographic anthropology that was confined to producing case studies. The anthropology envisioned by Radcliffe-Brown would have been more akin to sciences than humanities. Viewed from a contemporary standing, his project failed miserably.

The most serious flaw of Radcliffe-Brown's theoretical framework was undoubtedly the static nature of its conception of society. On reading this author's social analyses, in fact, there is a definite feeling that societies termed primitive or primordial have neither past nor future. They appear to be stationary and unchanging, which is clearly a methodological fiction.

Despite the gaps in their theories, the two above-mentioned authors had a formidable influence on British social anthropology and a string of brilliant researchers followed in their wake. Amongst the many, in this chapter on the concept of society in anthropology we will discuss three of the most important ones in terms of theoretical standing: Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, Edmund Leach and Max Gluckman.

Evans-Pritchard rightly criticized the static nature of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown's theoretical framework and proposed to include history, i.e. a reconstruction of the past of the societies being studied, because the present, even that of the most primitive societies that may seem to have no history, cannot possibly be analyzed and interpreted satisfactorily without knowledge of their past. Due to his specific theoretical standing, Evans-Pritchard would ultimately distance himself forcefully from the key concept of early British functionalism, upheld by Radcliffe-Brown in particular, by which anthropology must be a science and not be grouped under the humanities (Evans-Pritchard, 1951). Thanks also to his deep empirical knowledge as an Africanist, he would uphold that anthropology must become a historical-comparative discipline.

Having carried out empirical researches in Southeast Asia (especially in Burma now Myanmar, British North Borneo now Malaysian Sabah and Ceylon now Sri Lanka), Edmund Leach realized that a monographic research reconstructing a single society's existence is an abstraction that may oversimplify or indeed distort actual reality (Kuper, 1996: 155 ff.). During his researches in Burma's highlands, not far from the Chinese border, he became aware of the sociocultural complexity existing between the various components of the ethnic societies that populated this region. Moreover, he noted that these societies and groups did not live in mutual isolation, but rather interacted intensively and that the anthropologist must take account of this social and interethnic complexity (Leach, 1954). Accordingly, he strongly favored a truly dynamic approach that would thematize the various forms of interconnectedness between society, groups, institutions etc. (Tambiah, 2002: 309). Thus, his extensive fieldwork experience led him to question the validity of a strictly monographic research focused on a single society.

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**Dr. Andrea Boscoboinik** is Senior Lecturer of Social Anthropology at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Her main research topics are the anthropology of disasters, namely vulnerability and fear, the identity strategies of Roma population in Eastern Europe, the anthropology of tourism and the transformation of rural space. She has published several articles and chapters, as well as edited books on these topics. Her latest publications include: the chapter *Glamping and Rural Imaginary*, (with Eric Bourquard), in Hana Horáková and Andrea Boscoboinik (eds.) *From Production to Consumption*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 149-164, 2012; the peer-reviewed articles published in Urbanities Vol. 2, No 2, *Places of Vulnerability or Vulnerability of Places? Considerations of Reconstruction after a 'Natural' Disaster*, 2012; "Find Your Nature" in the Swiss Alps. In Search of a Better Life in the Mountains (with Viviane Cretton), *Český lid* 104, 199–212, 2017. *The Anthropology of Fear. Cultures beyond Emotions,* Münster: Lit Verlag, edited together with Hana Horáková, 2014. Forthcoming in 2017 is *Becoming Cities, Losing Paradise? Gentrification* in *the Swiss Alps,* in The Palgrave Handbook of Urban Ethnography, edited by Italo Pardo and Giuliana Prato.