
The challenges of anthropology

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Abstract: Although anthropology is often associated with studies of small-scale societies, traditional cultures or arcane customs, this article argues that anthropology is first and foremost a way of thinking that can be applied to any aspect of human life. As such, it is complementary to and a useful supplement to other human sciences such as psychology and economics. Anthropology distinguishes itself by trying to account for human diversity, studied through long-term fieldwork and analysed via comparative methods. By virtue of its ethnographic method, anthropology produces unique insights into the informal dimension of social and cultural life, emphasising the contrasts between what people say and what they do, and between the formal structure of society and what actually happens. In the endeavour to understand the human condition, anthropology is one of several indispensable tools.

Keywords: anthropology; cultural diversity; interdisciplinarity; ethnography; informal sector; comparative method.

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Biographical notes: Thomas Hylland Eriksen is a Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo and the author of many books on human diversity, globalisation and anthropology. His research has focused on the complexities of social identity and one of his most widely read books is *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (3rd edition, 2010). In *Engaging Anthropology* (2006), he speaks of interdisciplinarity, while *Small Places, Large Issues* (3rd edition, 2010) is a comprehensive introductory textbook, *What is Anthropology?* (2004) is a shorter primer, and *A History of Anthropology* (2001) traces the origins of anthropology as a global discipline.

A generation or two ago, anthropology was scarcely known outside of fairly narrow academic circles. It was a tiny university subject taught in a few dozen universities, seen by outsiders as esoteric and by insiders as a kind of secret knowledge guarded by a community of esteemed initiates. Anthropologists went about their fieldwork in remote areas and returned with fascinating, but often arcane and intricate analyses of kinship, swidden agriculture or warfare among 'the others'. With a few spectacular exceptions (Margaret Mead's name comes to mind), 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 can offer certain fundamental insights concerning the human condition, applicable in many everyday situations at home, wherever one happens to live. 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 increased from about 70 in 1982 to more than 600 a decade later, and it remains a popular subject among students today.

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. Indeed, I should argue that an anthropological perspective 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 19th 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 exponentially 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 or 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', 'indigenous tourism' and 'cultural tourism', where one can go on guided tours to South African townships, Brazilian *favelas* or Indonesian *kampungs*. The fact that 'cultural tourism' has become an important source of income for many communities in the Third World is a clear indication of an increased interest in other cultures from the West.

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, obviously, 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 2010, there are dozens, ranging from first class establishments to inexpensive takeaway holes in the wall. Pieces and fragments of the world's cultural variation can now be found virtually anywhere in the North Atlantic world. As a result, 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 alleged 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, global 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. Pandemics and international terrorism are also transnational problems which can only be understood and addressed through international coordination. 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 era, and this is noticed nearly everywhere. 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, secularism is rapidly changing the role of religion in society, and media consumption is thoroughly transnational. 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 'have' a 'culture'?', 'What do we have in common with the people who used to live here 50 years ago, and what do we have in common with people who live in an entirely different place today?', and '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 being 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 – to the considerable exasperation, it must be conceded, of many non-anthropologists, who may find it difficult to tease out the conclusions in many an anthropological text. My response to this reaction is that anthropology is not so much a precise science as a way of approaching the world: it offers substantial knowledge about local ways of life, world-views and cultural diversity, but more importantly, it raises questions in a way which differs from the other social sciences. Instead of asking, ‘What is a human being?’, it asks, ‘What is it like to be a human being in this particular society?’ Such questions, I believe, may profitably be asked within other disciplines as well, in the spirit of intellectual pluralism and cross-fertilisation (topics which are themselves, incidentally, explored by anthropologists).

Social and cultural anthropology has the whole of human society as its area of interest, and tries to understand the ways in which human lives are unique, but also the sense in which we are all similar. When, for example, we study the traditional economic system of the Tiv of Central Nigeria, an essential part of the exploration consists in understanding how their economy is connected with other aspects of their society. If this dimension is absent, Tiv economy becomes incomprehensible to anthropologists. If we do not know that the Tiv traditionally could not buy and sell land, and that they have customarily not used money as a means of payment, it will be plainly impossible to understand how they themselves interpret their situation and how they responded to the economic changes imposed on their society during colonialism in the last century.

Anthropology tries to account for the social and cultural variation in the world, but a crucial part of the anthropological project also consists in conceptualising and understanding similarities between social systems and human relationships. As one of the foremost anthropologists of the 20th century, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), once wrote, “Anthropology has humanity as its object of research, but unlike the other human sciences, it tries to grasp its object through its most diverse manifestations” [Lévi-Strauss, (1983), p.49]. Differently phrased: anthropology is about how different people can be, but it also tries to find out in what sense it can be said that all humans have something in common.

Although anthropologists have wide-ranging and frequently highly specialised interests, they share a common concern in trying to understand both connections *within* societies and connections *between* societies. There is a multitude of ways in which to approach these problems. Whether one is interested in understanding why and in which sense the Azande of Central Africa believe in witches (and why most Europeans have ceased doing so), why there is greater social inequality in Brazil than in Sweden, how the inhabitants of the densely populated, ethnically complex island of Mauritius avoid violent ethnic conflict, or what has happened to the traditional ways of life of the Inuits in recent years, in most cases one or several anthropologists would have carried out research and written on the issue. Whether one is interested in the study of religion, child-raising, political power, economic life or the relationship between men and women, one may go to the anthropological literature for inspiration and substantial knowledge.

Anthropologists are also concerned with accounting for the *interrelationships* between different aspects of human existence, and usually investigate these interrelationships taking as their point of departure a detailed study of local life in a particular society or a more or less clearly delineated social environment. One may therefore say that anthropology asks large questions, while at the same time it draws its most important insights from small places.

For many years, anthropology focused on small-scale non-industrial societies which distinguished it from other subjects dealing with culture and society. However, owing to changes in the world and in the discipline itself, this is no longer an accurate description. Practically, any social system can be studied anthropologically and contemporary anthropological research displays an enormous range, empirically as well as theoretically. Some study witchcraft in contemporary South Africa, others study diplomacy. Some travel to Melanesia for fieldwork, while others take the bus to the other side of town. Some analyse the economic adaptations of migrants, others write about the new social networks on the internet.

A short definition of anthropology may read like this:

“Anthropology is the comparative study of cultural and social life. Its most important method is participant observation, which consists in lengthy fieldwork in a specific social setting.”

“If each discipline can be said to have a central problem”, writes Carrithers (1992, p.2), “then the central problem of anthropology is the diversity of human social life.” Put differently, one could say that anthropological research and theory tries to strike a balance between similarities and differences, and theoretical questions have often revolved around the issue of universality versus relativism: To what extent do all humans, cultures or societies have something in common, and to what extent is each of them unique? Since we employ comparative concepts, that are supposedly culturally neutral terms like kinship system, gender role, system of inheritance etc., it is implicitly acknowledged that all or nearly all societies have several features in common. However, many anthropologists challenge this view, and insist on the uniqueness of each culture or society.

A strong universalist programme is found in Donald Brown’s book *Human Universals* (Brown, 1991), where the author claims that anthropologists have for generations exaggerated the differences between societies, neglecting the very substantial commonalities that hold humanity together. In this controversial book, Brown draws extensively on an earlier study of ‘human universals’, which included: ‘age-grading, athletic sports, bodily adornment, calendar, cleanliness training, community organisation, cooking, cooperative labour, cosmology, courtship, dancing, decorative art, divination, division of labour, dream interpretation, education, eschatology, ethics, ethnobotany, etiquette, faith healing, family, feasting, fire making, folklore, food taboos, funeral rites, games, gestures, gift giving, government, greetings...’ – and this was just the a-to-g segment of an alphabetical ‘partial list’ [Brown, (1991), p.70].

Several arguments could be invoked against this kind of list: that it is trivial and that what matters is to comprehend the unique expressions of such ‘universals’; that phenomena such as ‘family’ have totally different meanings in different societies, and thus cannot be said to be ‘the same’ everywhere; and that this piecemeal approach to society and culture removes the very hallmark of good anthropology, namely the ability to see isolated phenomena (like age-grading or food taboos) in a broad context. An

institution such as arranged marriage means something fundamentally different in the Punjabi countryside than in the French upper class. Is it still the same institution? Yes – and no. Brown is right in accusing anthropologists of having been inclined to emphasise the exotic and unique at the expense of neglecting cross-cultural similarities (and, I would add, mutual influence between societies), but this does not mean that his approach is the only possible way of bridging the gap between societies. Other theoretical approaches, which went in and out of fashion during the 20th century, include structural-functionalism (all societies operate according to the same general principles), structuralism (the human mind has a common architecture expressed through myth, kinship and other cultural phenomena), transactionalism (rational man is universal) and materialist approaches (culture and society are determined by ecological and/or technological factors).

The tension between the universal and the particular has been immensely productive in anthropology, and it remains an important one. One common way of framing it, inside and outside anthropology, is through the concept of ethnocentrism.

A society or a culture must be understood on its own terms. Anthropologists are, thus, suspicious of any application of a shared, universal scale to be used in the evaluation of every society. Such a scale could be defined as life expectancy, gross domestic product (GDP), democratic rights, literacy rates, and so on. Until quite recently, it was common in European society to rank non-Europeans according to the ratio of their population which was admitted into a Christian church. Such a ranking of peoples is utterly irrelevant to anthropology. In order to pass judgement on the quality of life in a foreign society, we must first try to understand that society from the inside; otherwise our judgement has a very limited intellectual interest. What is conceived of as 'the good life' in the society in which we happen to live may not appear attractive at all if it is seen from a different vantage-point. In order to understand people's lives, it is therefore necessary to try to grasp the totality of their experiential world; and in order to succeed in this project, it is inadequate to look at selected, isolated 'variables'. Obviously, a typical statistical criterion such as 'annual income' is meaningless in a society where neither money nor wagework is common. This kind of argument may be read as a warning against ethnocentrism. This term (from Greek 'ethnos', meaning 'a people') means evaluating other people from one's own vantage-point and describing them in one's own terms. One's own 'ethnos', including one's cultural values, is literally placed at the centre. Other peoples would, within this frame of thought, necessarily appear as inferior imitations of oneself. If the Nuer of the Sudan is unable to acquire a mortgage to buy a house, they thus appear to have a less perfect society than ourselves. If the Melanesians of Vanuatu lack electricity, they seem to have a less fulfilling life than we do. If the Kachin of upper Burma reject conversion to Christianity, they are less civilised than we are, and if the Bushmen of the Kalahari are illiterate, they appear to be less intelligent than us. Such points of view express an ethnocentric attitude which can be a serious obstacle to understanding because it conflates analytical questions with normative ones. Rather than comparing strangers with one's own society and placing oneself on top of an imaginary pyramid, anthropology calls for a comparative understanding of different societies as they appear from the inside. Anthropology cannot provide an answer to a question of which societies are better than others, simply because it does not ask such questions. If asked what is the good life, the anthropologist will have to answer that every society has its own definition(s) of it.

Moreover, an ethnocentric bias, which may be less easy to detect than moralistic judgements, may shape the very concepts we use in describing and classifying the world. For example, it has been argued that it may be inappropriate to speak of politics and kinship when referring to societies which themselves lack concepts of 'politics' and 'kinship'.

Cultural relativism is sometimes posited as the opposite of ethnocentrism. This is the doctrine that societies or cultures are qualitatively different and have their own unique inner logic, and that it is therefore scientifically absurd to rank them on a scale. If one places a Bushman group, say, at the bottom of a ladder where the variables are, say, literacy and annual income, this ladder is irrelevant to them if it turns out that the Bushmen do not place a high priority on money and books. It should also be evident that one cannot, within a cultural relativist framework, argue that a society with many cars is 'better' than one with fewer, or that the ratio of cinemas to population is a useful indicator of the quality of life. [By the way, the Bushmen are sometimes spoken of as the San, since the term Bushmen is by some considered a racist term. However, since 'San' is a pejorative term used by the neighbouring Khoikhoi, the term Bushmen is again in common use, see Barnard (2007).]

Cultural relativism is an indispensable and unquestionable theoretical premise and methodological rule-of-thumb in anthropological attempts to understand other societies in an as unprejudiced way as possible. As an ethical principle, however, it is probably impossible in practice (and most would say undesirable), since it seems to indicate that everything is as good as everything else, provided it makes sense in a particular cultural context. It would, taken to its extreme, ultimately lead to nihilism. For this reason, it may be timely to stress that many anthropologists are impeccable cultural relativists in their daily work, while they may perfectly well have definite, frequently dogmatic notions about right and wrong in their private lives. In Western societies and elsewhere, current debates over minority rights and multiculturalism indicate both the need for anthropological knowledge and the impossibility of defining a simple, scientific solution to these complex problems, which are of a political nature.

Cultural relativism cannot be posited simply as the opposite of ethnocentrism, the reason being that it does not in itself contain a moral principle. The principle of cultural relativism in anthropology is a methodological one – it is indispensable for the investigation and comparison of societies without relating them to a usually irrelevant developmental scale; but this does not imply that there is no difference between right and wrong. Finally, we should be aware that many anthropologists wish to discover general, shared aspects of humanity or human societies. There is no necessary contradiction between a project of this kind and a cultural relativist approach, even if universalism – doctrines emphasising the similarities between humans – is frequently seen as the opposite of cultural relativism. One may well be a relativist at the level of method and description, yet simultaneously argue, at the level of analysis, that a particular underlying pattern is common to all societies or persons. Many would indeed claim that this is what anthropology is about: to discover both the uniqueness of each social and cultural setting and the ways in which humanity is one.

In the 21st century, anthropology is a sprawling and diverse kind of academic activity, with specialisations ranging from the anthropology of global migration to the anthropology of medical practices in the Amazon; from the anthropology of consumption to the anthropology of Hinduism. Increasingly, however, anthropologists today study complex societies or, if the focus is on a small-scale society, their interconnectedness

with large-scale society and, ultimately, the global system is nearly always emphasised. Nobody works from the assumption that a local community can be studied as an isolated entity any more [see Eriksen (2010) for more on this].

In the ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue about human society, anthropology has a few major contributions to make (as well as some minor ones). An excellent first introduction to the questions typically raised by anthropologists is John Monaghan and Peter Just's *Social and Cultural Anthropology: A Very Brief Introduction* (2000), while Michael Carrithers' *Why Humans Have Cultures* (1992) takes on the question of culture in a more systematic way. To economists, James Carrier's edited *Handbook of Economic Anthropology* (2006) should be a – hopefully – absorbing read; the contributions to this wide-ranging book indicate the importance of economics to anthropology and highlight some of the unique approaches of economic anthropology. And there is much more; lots of introductory books to various aspects of anthropology, or to the discipline as a whole, exist in English, as well as excellent 'group blogs' such as *Savage Minds* (<http://savageminds.org>) and *Culture Matters* (<http://culturematters.wordpress.com>), where professional concerns and controversies are discussed in engaging and informal ways.

Interestingly, no two introductions to anthropology take exactly the same approach to the subject. The style of writing, the discussion of theories, the choice of examples always differ in such a way as to give each text its personal flavour. This diversity illustrates, perhaps, the anthropologist Eric Wolf's statement to the effect that 'anthropology is the most humanistic of the sciences and the most scientific of the humanities' (Wolf, 1964).

For now, I shall restrict myself to mentioning three domains where anthropological perspectives may enrich the understanding of phenomena usually explored by other disciplines, including economics.

First, the emphasis on informal social life, which can only be studied through qualitative, preferably long-term fieldwork, is one of anthropology's defining characteristics. In the realm of economics, it should be remembered, the concept of the informal sector was introduced by the anthropologist Keith Hart (1973, 1999). Doing fieldwork in open-air markets in Ghana, Hart was struck by the fact that many of the transactions took place as barter, gifting and other forms of exchange that did not fit into the received models from economics. Similarly, if one were to study bureaucracies anywhere in the world, it would doubtless soon become apparent that in order to understand how they function, one has to look at informal relationships between the people who work there, including friendship, rule-bending as a common practice and trust.

Second, if anything, anthropology is the study of human diversity. Knowledge about the ways in which cultural diversity is managed in non-Western societies can prove to be essential for the understanding and political handling of the current diversity in modern complex societies.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, anthropology contributes to the long conversation about what it is to be human, and gives flesh and blood to philosophical questions. It is a genuinely cosmopolitan discipline in that it does not, explicitly or implicitly, privilege certain ways of life above others, but charts and compares the full range of solutions to the perennial human challenges. Doing anthropology can be like doing economics or chemistry, but it can also occasionally feel like reading a novel.

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