What I Learned in Anthropology: Reflections on Change and Constancy.

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Students ask: Why anthropology? After long acquaintance with this subject, I argue that anthropology can help us live in our globalised world. This may sound dramatic, so I had better explain.

My first encounter with anthropology occurred when I was a freshman at Queens College in New York City. The year was 1941, and the encounter was with Franz Boas. Admittedly, I “met” him at some distance. This was not long before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Boas was participating in a public forum concerning the war. Like several of the other participants, he was speaking in German. He died not long thereafter. I had not yet taken a course in anthropology and was only dimly aware of who he was or what he might mean to me later. When I chose to concentrate in anthropology, I discovered how important he was in the history of the discipline. And later, because my doctoral advisor, Professor Herskovits was his student, I found myself in a direct line of descent from him. But that is true of many American anthropologists of my generation.

When I did take my first anthropology course sometime later, it was with Professor Joseph Bram and we used Boas’ *General Anthropology* (1938) as our principal text. I also took a class with Professor Hortense Powdermaker, who would become my adviser and mentor (Bourguignon 1991). What where the major questions of these early courses and what might they look like now, more than sixty years later? What has
changed and what has remained recognizably the same? And have I learned that will be
of help to the current generation of students?

Perhaps the most striking thing about General Anthropology (1938) is its broad
scope and its language. It was assumed that students had some background and that they
had the reading capacity of educated adults. “Levels of Reading” had not yet been
invented. That did not happen until the 1950s. American anthropologists, in the 1930s
and ‘40s, were Americanists, students of the American Indian. The two major exceptions,
among Boas’ students, were M.J. Herskovits, whose interests were in Afro-Americans
and Africans, and Margaret Mead, almost all of whose studies were carried out in the
Pacific. My teacher, Hortense Powdermaker, had been a student of Malinowski’s, at the
London School of Economics. Her first fieldwork had been in Lesu, in Melanesia, and
more recently and quite unusually for an anthropologist in those days, in Mississippi.
Bram, who had studied at the University of Chicago, had written a library dissertation on
the Inca. Then, as now, not all dissertations were based on fieldwork. As a result,
contrary to the general domination of the field by concerns with Native Americans (a
term that would be coined only many years later), we were being introduced to other
parts of the world as well.

In the following pages I want to consider various the approaches to two key
anthropological concepts: cultural evolution and cultural relativism. Significantly, many
of these debates and discussions involved changes of language and matters of vocabulary.
Anthropology as a self-conscious discipline began toward the end of the 19th century in an intellectual environment in which a concept of “evolution” or “development” of culture was central. Biological evolution was another matter and much more contested. One reason for this separation between the two was that a significant portion of the development of early cultural anthropology took place in Europe, in France with Auguste Comte (1789-1857), in Britain with Karl Marx (1818-1883), George Herbert Spencer (1818-1903) and Edward Burnett Tylor (1823-1917). There was also, and importantly, Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) in the United States. It is interesting to see how closely these dates cluster and how much these men learned from each other, their predecessors, and from other contemporaries.

Anthropology as a four-field discipline, combining cultural and physical anthropology, as well as archaeology and anthropological linguistics, developed in the United States. This distinction between Europe and America was related to studies of the American Indian, which played such a great role in this country in the 19th and 20th centuries. Indeed, we could say that it began with Jefferson’s instructions to the Corps of Discovery, the Lewis and Clarke expedition of 1804-1806. Jefferson asked them to report on the Indians they would meet on their way: the Indians’ physical appearance and languages, their arts and customs—with many specifics—and their monuments.

The central concern of the various 19th century fathers of anthropology, a concern that was linked to a vigorous faith in Progress, was the evolution of culture. In this scheme, societies and cultures were seen as more or less “evolved,” so that they could be
arranged along a scale of development. This applied to living groups as well as to those that might be known from ancient history, the Bible, and archaeology. The idea of evolution that dominated this approach was not Darwinian; it was not based on a biological idea of selection. Indeed some of it preceded Darwin’s major work. To the extent that biology was at all involved, it was so only in the sense that cultures were treated as reflecting “race”, i.e. the biological characteristics of the peoples. The popular “Social Darwinism,” so called, was based on a misreading of Darwin altogether.

This early evolutionism justified colonialism, since, it was claimed, the Europeans would bring the benefits of “civilization” to “backward” peoples. Evolutionary theory was also built into Marx’s theory of history, so that he could expect an inevitable sequence of development from Feudalism to Capitalism to Socialism.

Once anthropologists began to take a closer look at the diverse societies of the world, it became clear that not all elements of social life could be put so neatly into an evolutionary scale. Kinship systems, for example, presented serious problems for the construction of such a sequence. After all, once a series of types of kinship terminologies was identified, it turned out that the industrial societies of the West had a system of kin terms quite like that of the Eskimo hunter and gatherers. Nor was there any evidence for the stages of family life as proposed by the early evolutionists such as Morgan (1877) proposed: a series running from “group marriage,” to “matriarchy” to “patriarchy.” In fact, what was taken to be a matter of power relationships was actually a way of tracing descent, whether through the mother (matrilineal descent) or the father (patrilineal
descent. Matrilineal descent was, quite erroneously, taken to be evidence of “matriarchy” (or “Mother Right”), a social system (an imaginary one at that) in which women held power.

In the early 20th century, most American anthropologists, under the leadership of Boas and his many students, among them prominently Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and Melville J. Herskovits, rejected the notion of cultural evolution. They did so, on the one hand because of the inconsistency they found in it. On the other hand, they rejected colonialism and the notion of the “superiority” of the European colonial powers, entitling them, as it was claimed, to rule over “inferior” peoples. They also did so because they, and many of their contemporaries, found the idea of Progress, indeed of an inevitable Progress, wanting. World War I had lead to a widespread questioning of this optimistic view. The years of the great economic depression and finally of World War II destroyed any such notions.

Boas (1936:3), ever cautious, formulated the matter explicitly: “…the question arises” he wrote, “whether [the data of human history] present an orderly picture or whether history proceeds haphazardly; in other words…whether a regular sequence of stages can be discovered.” Clearly, at the time this was written, they had not yet been discovered. The problem had to be reformulated and the criteria for stages of cultural evolution altered significantly for the subject to be taken up again, slowly at first, more than twenty years later (Meggers, 1959). That year, 1959, was the year of the Darwin Centenary. Boas, as we see, did not reject the idea of cultural evolution, but he was not
ready to accept it either: the evidence was not in. He was, however, critical of the key method of the evolutionists, what was then called the Comparative Method. Praising Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* (1934), he wrote: “the old method of constructing a history of human culture based on bits of evidence, torn out of their natural contacts, and collected from all times and places of the world, has lost much of its hold.” (Boas1959/1934: XV).

It was, in part, the emphasis on fieldwork and close first hand study of numerous societies and their cultures that led to the demise of 19th century evolutionism. It also brought about a deepening understanding of cultural differences. Yet these widely differing groups could no longer be ranked as more or less evolved, higher or lower on some scale of evolution or development. The research method of participant observation made is clear to the anthropologists that people they studied generally believed in the superiority of their own way of life, and resisted change. It was out of this mixture of observations and theoretical formulations that cultural relativism was born in the 1920s. It became the dominant view of American anthropologists for some thirty years. As Howard Stein (1996: 281) has noted: “Cultural relativism is variously a theory of human meaning, a method of inquiry, a moral system, a professional discipline’s worldview, and a view of human nature.”

Benedict’s very influential 1934 book *Patterns of Culture* is representative of much of the anthropological thinking of the period: “In culture,” she writes, “we must imagine a great arc on which are ranged the possible interests provided either by the
human age-cycle or by the environment, or by man’s various activities.” And she continues: “Its identity as a culture depends on its selection of some segments of this arc. Every society everywhere has made such selections in its cultural institutions” (p.24). What is selected, and what is not, varies from culture to culture. This is the key observation, the central datum of cultural relativism. Methodologically, it derives from, and reinforces, the strength of the discipline: detailed observation at close hand. It also contains a weakness: we are given no suggestion about how we should understand these choices, why one society “[b]uilds an enormous superstructure upon adolescence, one upon death, one upon after-life” (p.24). We know only that in each case they create a unique pattern.

The term “Cultural Relativism” requires a closer look: Benedict describes the striking differences in the ways of life of three cultural groups: the Zuñi and other Pueblo-dwelling peoples of the American Southwest, the Dобuans of Melanesia, and the Kwakiutl and other peoples of the Northwest Coast of America. She clearly shows their contrasting economies, family organizations, beliefs, and practices. What is valued in one is rejected by another—values, behaviors, institutions are “relative.” We might refer to this observation as “relativity.” “Relativism,” properly speaking, however, is a philosophical position, as various writers have pointed out (Herskovits 1949, Spiro 1992, Stein 1996, among others).

As Benedict describes them, none of the cultures in her “sample” is totally satisfying to all of their members. Each way of life has its winners and its losers. When
this is realized, the description of cultural differences leads not only to an appreciation of each life style, but also to cultural criticism. When Mead (1928) tells us that girls’ adolescence in Samoa is not marked by the stresses characteristic of the life of American teenagers, this not only suggests that the Samoans do some things well, but also the Americans do not and might do better by learning from them.

These presentations show individual cultures as bounded, static units. Such a picture offers an appreciation of human diversity and creativity, and an aesthetic satisfaction but could not lead to the formulations of hypotheses and the development of anthropology as science.

Margaret Mead, I recall, argued at a later date, that in the 1930s Benedict’s was a hopeful position, an attempt at showing readers the dignity of various life ways. This argument against ethnocentrism was particularly important at a time of strong racism in American society and of increasing intolerance and persecutions in Hitler’s Germany. Such a valuing of diverse life styles also fit in well with the growth of nationalism and with its recognition in Woodrow Wilson’s support for national self-determination. This seemed an appropriate ethical stance but its practical consequences could not be fully appreciated at the time. It led to the break up of the multiethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire and with it of the economic unity of the Danube basin. The ethnic strife of the Balkans of the late 20th century is one of its consequences. Anthropological thinking responds to the issues of its times.
Among the Boasians there was, early on, a disagreement over the practical application of anthropological knowledge, whether in American society or elsewhere. Mead became the founder of the Society for Applied Anthropology, while Herskovits was highly critical of this activity.

As Fascism rose to power in Europe and World War II began to cast its shadow, cultural relativism began to come under stress. How could one think about Fascism in relativistic terms? And if there were absolutes, should they not be applied elsewhere as well? American anthropology began to serve the war effort. After the war, seeing more clearly what horror the Nazis had perpetrated, anthropologists turned to other kinds of research: structuralism, kinship studies, and a newer scientifically based view of cultural evolution.

Such approaches to evolution had been developed over the years and by 1964 even Margaret Mead speaks of *Continuities in Cultural Evolution*. Reviewing the history of the evolutionary concept, she also considers the state of the world in the 1960s. In the face of the Cold War and realistic fears of atomic annihilation, she maps out strategies for the survival of humanity, strategies in which anthropology would play a central role.

Both evolutionism, in various forms, and cultural relativism have managed to coexist, although the terms themselves cover increasingly different and varied territory. Relativism, as a philosophical approach, argues that the differences that field research has shown to exist are valuable to the people themselves and, in the case of Herskovits for example, this led to a rejection of applied anthropology. In the case of the post-
modernists, who view cultures as “unique “texts,”-an approach taken over from French
literary criticism- they are often viewed as so different that that no comparison is
possible. Anthropology then is no longer seen as science of any kind.

Critics of this position, such as Spiro (1992), present evidence that there are indeed
human universals that allow for comparisons and that can form the basis for a scientific
anthropology. Moreover, by focusing on the description of single cultures
(“anthropological particularism”), anthropology data become trivia and irrelevant to any
further intellectual, scientific undertaking.

What seem to be arguments among scholars have implications with reference to
the larger world: In the past fifty years, and at an ever accelerating rate, there have been
massive movements of peoples across the globe. In 1972 Jane Kramer could entitle her
book *Unsettling Europe* as she described migrations from the rural South to the industrial
North of the continent. As former colonies gained independence, Britain, France,
Belgium, Holland, Italy, Spain and Portugal saw a massive influx of non-European
peoples into what had been relatively homogenous societies. Countries without colonies,
such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland recruited so-called “guest workers, to meet
their needs for labor. In some respects this pattern is similar to what the United States has
experienced but on a more massive scale.

All of this has made cultural relativity and cultural relativism—the description of
cultural differences and the valuing of cultural differences—a matter of political and
practical urgency. Is female circumcision a human rights violation and to be prosecuted?
Is the wearing of head scarves by Moslem girls in school to be prohibited in France and Turkey? Is spirit possession among Ethiopian women in Israel a matter for psychiatric intervention or of traditional religious healing practice? Should traditional healers from Suriname be compensated by the Dutch national health system? These questions have relevance in the United States too: What, for example, should social workers and health care professionals know about health and healing beliefs among immigrants from countries as diverse as Mexico, Haiti, Somali, Vietnam and Cambodia? Or among various Native American peoples, for example the Navajo (e.g., Storck and Csordas, 2000)? Or about religious healing in this country, for example among Charismatics (Csordas 1994)?

What then should students know as they think about embarking on the further study of anthropology? First and foremost, that anthropology, like other fields of study and research, is in a constant state of change, and some of this change relates to changes in the larger world, as these questions illustrate. The questions listed above, and many others as well arise from the reality and importance of cultural differences. They show that anthropology can be more than a device for the appreciation of different life ways, for historical reconstruction of the past of specific groups, or for the recording of differences before they vanish. At the same time, old questions appear never to be completely answered. Rather, as new data are brought to bear on them the questions change and are rephrased and give rise to new questions. In the 1930s and ‘40s, the weaknesses of the 19th century theory of cultural evolution seemed evident and the
subject seemed settled. In a new form, cultural evolution became the dominant paradigm until it was challenged again by postmodernists. And so the wheel continues to turn.

There will be work for new generations of anthropologists for a long time to come.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology is an excellent resource for a great variety of topics in cultural anthropology. With reference to the present article, see the following entries:

Culture, Cultural Evolution, Cultural Relativism, Human Universals, Postmodernism, Structuralism and Poststructuralism.

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