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The Rejection of Cultural Evolution

(How Evolution Came to be a Dirty Word in Cultural Anthropology and Archaeology)

Lecture 4

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Early Twentieth Century Saw Two New Schools of Thought

- United States
 - Historical Particularism
- Franz Boas
- A. L. Kroeber
- United Kingdom
 - Structural-Functionalism
- B. Malinowski
- A. R. Radcliffe-Brown

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Historical Particularism

The view that each culture is the product of a unique sequence of development in which chance plays a major role in bringing about change. Advocates a detailed descriptive approach instead of a broad generalizing approach.

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Characteristics of Historical Particularism

- Cultural Relativism
- Historical- Ideographic
- Inductive
- Emphasize Fieldwork
- Environmental Possibilism
- Culture as Superorganic

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Key Figure Franz Boas

- Father of American Anthropology
- First ethnographic work among the Eskimo of Baffin Island
- Born in Germany- emigrated to the United States 1886
- Studied the Kwakiutl of northern Vancouver Island BC.
- Founded first Anthropology Department in America- Columbia

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Boas Attacks Comparative Method

- Urged rejection of comparative method
- Undercut by three flaws
 - Assumption of unilinear evolution
 - Notion of modern societies as evolutionary survivals
 - Classifications based on weak data and inappropriate criteria

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- 3 factors for explaining the variability and origins of customs
 - environmental conditions
 - psychological factors
 - historical connections

- Of the three, History is most important

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- supported biological evolution but rejected unilinear cultural evolution as unscientific
- boasians agreed on evolution as transformation of forms, accepted that cultural evolution explicable by natural processes
- rejected
 - biological reductionism
 - tendency to regard parallel evolution as dominant over convergent or divergent evolution
 - notion of progress

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- “we must ... consider all the ingenious attempts at reconstructions of a grand system of evolution of society as of very doubtful value” and
- “renounce the vain endeavor to construct a uniform systematic history of the evolution of culture”

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Cultural Relativism

The view that cultures are simply different with no one culture more or less evolved than another.

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Ideographic-

(historical) - a study that establishes particular, specific, or factual propositions of statements

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Therefore, Historical Particularism is inductive not deductive.

The right way to investigate cultures is to collect descriptive data. Laws of cultural evolution may be apparent later.

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Inductive, Ideographic Research Program emphasizes importance of fieldwork

No armchair theorizing. Anthropologists must know the language, ethnography, prehistory, and physical background of the culture they are studying.

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A.L. Kroeber

- First Doctoral Student of Boas
- Took over Anthropology Department at U.C. Berkeley

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Differences with Boas

- Rejected notion that anthropology primarily concerned with human origins
- Downplayed individuality as playing significant role in cultural development
 - culture exists beyond the the level of individual behavior or consciousness

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Some of Kroeber's Basic Views

- Culture, though carried by individuals, is an entity in itself- superorganic.
- Individuals have no historical value.
- The physical environment is material used by culture, not a determinant of culture.

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Some of Kroeber's Basic Views

- Heredity, selection, or factors of organic evolution have no role in history.
- There are no social species or standard cultural types or stages.

- There are no biological, psychological, or natural science laws in history.

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Interested in Relations of Cultures in their Environmental Surroundings

- *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North Americans* (1939)
- Mapped geographical, climatological, and vegetation distributions in relation to Native American cultural variability.

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Culture and nature

- Problem: How to understand diversity and similarity of Indian groups?
 - Groups of a particular region have the greatest degree of similarity.
 - Does that mean that their cultures are determined by environment?
 - Or by history of close contact with one another?

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Culture area approach

- New World divided based on shared linguistic and cultural traits
- Correspondence with natural areas- general geological and ecological features matched areas of culture features
- Primarily based on food areas
 - Caribou, Bison, Salmon, Wild Seed, Eastern Maize, Intensive Agriculture, Manioc, Guanaco
- Shared traits evidence of diffusion

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- “no culture is wholly intelligible without reference to Environmental factors with which it is in relation, and which condition it (1939:205)
- “interaction of culture and environment becomes increasingly complex when followed out. ... this complexity makes generalization unprofitable, ... in each situation or area, different environmental factors are likely to be impinging on culture with different intensity

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Environmental Possibilism

- environment constrains the possibilities for humans but history and psychology explain what possibility is expressed
- environment not primary modifier of culture
 - culture takes precedence over environment
- environment furnishes the raw materials

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Superorganic

- Although culture came from and was carried by human beings it could not be reduced to individual psychology
- Culture is a pattern that transcends and controls individuals

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British Functionalism

Functionalism

The theory that all social facts can and should be explained by their function in relation to society (anti-survivals)

2 types

Psychological

Structural

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Bronislaw Malinowski

- Trobriand Islands
- *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* 1922
- Culture is not “a loose agglomeration of customs, ... a heap of anthropological curiosities, but a connected living whole... all its elements are interconnected and each fulfils a specific function in the integral scheme (1929)

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- Functionalism biologically and psychologically oriented
- Society satisfies seven basic needs of humans
 - Nutrition
 - Reproduction
 - Bodily comforts
 - Safety
 - Relaxation
 - Movement
 - Growth

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A.R. Radcliffe-Brown

- The Andaman Islanders (1922)

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Structural Functionalism

Borrows analogy of society as with a biological organism from Spencer

Structural Functionalism

Societies have structure and order. All phenomena within a culture are seen to have the underlying goal of maintaining social structure, despite individual motivation.

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Structural Functionalism

Basic Principles

- Society is organically structured like a biological organism.
- Society has structure or an organized arrangement of parts.
- Structure is integrated, unified, and in equilibrium.
- Social activities are interpreted in terms of maintaining the whole social structure of society.

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Functionalism has a synchronic perspective

Important issue is how social institutions function in present- No temporal (historic or evolutionary perspective)

Contributions of Historical Particularism and Structural Functionalism to mid-20th Century Evolutionary Thought in Anthropology

- Attention to Particular Circumstances
 - Historical
 - Environmental
 - Biological- Psychological
- Culture as Superorganic
 - Culture is organized to perform specific functions at the level of the group

Lecture 5

The Incorporation of Ecological and Evolutionary Frameworks into Anthropology

Lecture 5

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19th Century Influences on mid- 20th Century Cultural Evolution

Spencer/Tyler/Morgan

Application of Evolutionary theory to social organization

Culture as Superorganic (Spencer)

Comparative Method
Technology (Morgan)
Marx
Emphasis on Economy as the force driving social evolution

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Early 20th Century Influences on mid- 20th Century Cultural Evolution
Boas/Kroeber
Culture as Superorganic
Environmental Possibilism
Malinowski/ Radcliff Brown
Culture is Structurally Organized to Function
Culture History
The study of the unique pattern of development of a culture by means of archaeology, ethnohistory, linguistics, folklore.
Mechanism of Change
Invention
Migration
Diffusion

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Parallel Economic Stages of Development of the last 15,000 years

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In 1519, Cortez in the Aztec Capital of Tenochtitlan
“passed through cities, towns, villages, markets, and irrigated fields; he saw slavery, poverty, potentates, farmers, judges, churches, massive pyramids, roads, boats, pottery, and textiles; in short he encountered a world whose almost every aspect he could understand in terms of his own experience as an urban Spaniard of the 16th century (Wenke 1980)

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Vere Gordon Childe
(1892-1957)
Man Makes Himself (1936)
Tried to answer why agriculture and civilization in the Middle East and spread to Europe
Traced mixture of indigenous development and diffusion into Europe

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1940s - V. Gordon Childe establishes notion of economic and technological transitions in prehistory.
Transitions concerned revolutionary changes to the mode and relations of production
Transitions had occurred independently in separate centers (Egypt, Mesopotamia)
Then diffused elsewhere (Europe)

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Neolithic Revolution
Term coined by V. Gordon Childe to describe the origin and consequences of farming (stock raising and agriculture), allowing the widespread development of settled village life.

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Urban Revolution
Term coined by V. Gordon Childe to describe the origin and consequences of towns and cities, and consequences for development of state societies, market economies, and writing systems.
Neolithic and Urban Revolutions Concepts emphasized the organization of labor

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Childes' Notion of Prehistory
Implied a process of parallel cultural evolution mixed with diffusion.
Emphasized economic changes.
Was an application of Marxist theory to prehistory.
Was still progressive (teleological) and driven by inventions/ideas
Oasis Theory

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Culture Ecology

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Julian Steward Analyzes the Culture Ecology of Great Basin Native Americans
Steward's Interpretation of Great Basin Shoshonean Lifeways
The Great Basin is a harsh and arid environment.
Resources are dispersed and few (i.e., pinyon) occur in sufficient abundance to allow more than a few months storage.
Shoshonean Culture is an adaptation to this environment:

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1940s- 1950 J. Steward develops Ecological Approach to Anthropology
Culture Ecology
Multilineal Evolution

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Cultural Ecology
The theoretical perspective that culture and environment interact dynamically so that each sets limits and possibilities on the other. Culture is viewed as a primary adaptive mechanism.

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Steward's Interpretation of Great Basin Shoshonean Lifeways
The Great Basin is a harsh and arid environment.
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Shoshonean Culture is an adaptation to this environment:

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High mobility few permanent settlements
Small family and band group size.
No hereditary hierarchy or leadership
Simple technology
Use of a wide variety of food resources, especially seeds.
Importance of Women as Food Providers
Reliance on Food Storage
Family level of sociopolitical organization
No territorial boundedness
Restricted Notions of Property

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Patrilineal Band
(another example of Cultural Ecology)
Expected to occur in environments relatively rich in game (unlike Great Basin).
Males' subsistence labor more important than females.
Society organized around groups of related males who own hunting territory.
Society Patrilineal and Patrilineal

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Culture Ecology postulates a relationship between environmental resources, subsistence technology, and the behavior required to bring technology to bear on resources

Problem: to test if adjustments of human societies to their environments require specific adaptations that initiate cultural evolutionary change.

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Method/ Research Strategy- analyze
the relationship between the subsistence system and the environment
the behavior associated with a given subsistence technology
how subsistence behavior affects other aspects of culture

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Subsistence Strategy

Decisions and actions that affect the raw material procurement of a society.

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Culture Core

Constellation of features (technological, social, political, and religious) that are most closely related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements. Techno-economic variables accorded causal priority, while social and ideological tend to be dependent variables.

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Implications of Cultural Ecology

Applies to both living and ancient societies (diachronic).

Views Culture as a means of adaptation to environment

Implies a theory of cultural evolution related to economic adaptation

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Multilinear Cultural Evolution

The idea that cultures may develop among many paths dependent on initial environmental, technological, and other conditions. However, societies that share the same core circumstances often evolve along similar paths.

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Culture Causality and Law: A Trial Formualtion

Study of parallel developmental sequences in the civilizations in the old and new worlds

Peru amd Mexico w/ Mesopotamia, Egypt and North China

Influence by Karl Wittfogel- historian - hypothesis for the development of oriental despotism

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Karl Wittfogel

Oriental Despotism 1957, presented hydraulic theory of formation of civilization.

Government where autocratic power monopolized by centralized ruler and bureaucracy.

Early civilizations of China, Egypt and India based on canal irrigation.

Requires centralized control to plan, organize construction and maintenance, and resolve conflicts over use.

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Hydraulic Civilizations

Peru, Mexico, Mesopotamia, Egypt, India and North China

shared common cultural core

Developed in arid environments

Economic base irrigation and floodwater agriculture

Produced food surpluses and population growth

Competition of natural resources intensified

Developed political leadership, warfare, empires

City states, temple based religious systems

Demonstrated developmental parallelism

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Other Examples of Multilinear Evolution

Irrigation States

Feudal States

Patrilineal Bands

Matrilineal Tribes

Predatory Horse Nomads

Trappers and Tappers

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Stewards Approach Emphasized

A central relationship between environment and culture and implications for other aspects of social life

The search for patterned regularities and similarities between societies

the importance of causal explanations for parallel developments over historical reconstructions

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Leslie White

1900-1975

Viewed Anthropology as the Science of Culture

Believes anthropology to branch of natural science dealing uniquely w/ culture- laws would become apparent

However culture must be explained in terms of own laws- not borrowed from biology

Viewed Anthropology as the Science of Culture

Central to evolutionary theory is a functionalist conception of culture (influenced by Malinowski and Brown)

Function for social groups not individuals

Most important aspects are those that impart adaptive, biological advantages

Problem w/ notion that culture serves to meet human needs but is superorganic beyond the influence of individuals

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Major Organizational Dimensions of Culture

Technoeconomic- the way energy and materials are produced, distributed, and consumed, the way labor is organized, and how technology is used.

Sociopolitical- the way relationships among members of a culture are structured and how much differentiation exists,

Ideological- The belief system of a particular society, including values, ethics, the place of humans in the natural and supernatural world, and the justification for the existing social and political order,

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“Technology is the hero of our piece”

“Cultural evolution as a whole.. is a function of technological evolution in particular”

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Leslie White

Concept of Culture as an “extrasomatic means of adapting”

White's Notion of Cultural Evolution

Saw directional change in societies- simple to complex- increased differentiation and specialization of social groups

Could be measured in energetic production

Steward referred to it as ‘Universal Evolution’

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White's argument on the importance of technology goes as follows

Technology is an attempt to solve the problems of survival.

This attempt ultimately means capturing enough energy and diverting it for human needs.

Societies that capture more energy and use it more efficiently have an advantage over other societies.

Therefore, these different societies are more advanced in an evolutionary sense.

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“Culture evolves as the amount of energy harnessed per year is increased, or as the efficiency of the means of putting energy to work is increased”

White's Law of Cultural Evolution

Culture = Energy x Technology

$C = E \times T$

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Problems with White's Law

Tautological

General law of cultural change does not explain what types of social and ideological systems from the utilization of technologies in specific environments

Teleological

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Similarities with Steward

Culture as adaptation

Emphasize technology and economy over social structure and ideology

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Differences with Steward

White not interested in the effects of specific habitats- did not consider many of the adaptations noted by Steward to be evolutionary

Brazilian Mundurucu and Algonquin- Tappers and Trappers

Steward rejected generality of Whites laws
White downplays the role of environment

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Reconciling White and Steward

Darwin Centennial 1959

The Evolution of Culture- L. White

Evolution and Culture- M. Sahlins and E. Service

Evolution: General and Specific- Sahlins

The Law of Evolutionary Potential- Service

Attempt to establish cultural evolution as a direct correlate of biological evolution

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Evolution moves simultaneously in two directions. On the one side it creates diversity through adaptive modification: new forms differentiate from old. On the other side, evolution generates progress; higher forms arise from, and suppress lower.

Sahlins 1960

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Law of Evolutionary Potential

The more specialized and adapted a form in a given evolutionary stage, the smaller its potential for passing to the next stage... Specific evolutionary progress is inversely related to general evolutionary potential.

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Types of Cultural Evolution

Specific Evolution- the process by which cultures adapt to environments. Creates diversity and specialization in cultural forms. Analogous to Steward's Multilinear Evolution

General Evolution- The development of more complex forms of culture. Progressive, and based on more general forms. Analogous to White's Universal Evolution.

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Cultural Evolutionary Studies

Neofunctionalism- studies of how particular cultures adapt to their environments. Emphasizes specific evolution and tends to follow Steward.

Neoevolutionism- studies parallel trends in the evolution of cultural complexity. Emphasizes general evolution and tends to follow White.

Differences between Culture Ecology and 19th century Unilinear Evolution