

Problems With Culture

1. History and Anthropology

- a. Hutchinson emphasizes that her ethnography tries to encompass the history of the Nuer people
- b. Evans-Pritchard (EP) on the other hand, tries only to capture the Nuer at one moment in time
- c. Why doesn't EP historicize?
 - i. Both EP and Boas are marked by older approaches they opposed.
 - ii. One thing that plagued Boas was trying to replace/fight racism with culture. He struggled against a racist establishment. But also against evolutionism even when it wasn't racist.
 - iii. EP had to deal with historical anthropologists of an extreme nature
 1. diffusionism: recognition that things move between cultures. This is basically common sense
 2. However, extreme diffusionists sought to explain the movement of all items of cultural value as having originated from one or two original sources (China and Mesopotamia)
 3. Though most British anthropologists thought this theory was junk, the few who did buy into it were very well funded.

4. EP and Malinowski thought that much of history was littered with these kind of outmoded ideas, so Malonowski especially, saw history as purely speculative in anthropology.

d. Another explanation for neglect of history:

i. Most of the great ideas of the 19th century were diachronic discoveries, meaning they were ideas about historical change that happened over a long period of time

1. I.e. the Grimm Brothers made some important linguistic discoveries about how vowel sounds evolved through languages.

ii. But these studies did little to help us understand how languages work at one moment as systems, synchronic analysis

iii. In response, many 20th century researchers started taking synchronic approaches to their work

iv. EP I part of a more general trend toward synchronic analysis

e. EP also didn't want to talk about colonialism, of which he is a participant

i. Sent in by colonial authority to study the people they were colonizing

ii. His work was used by colonial authorities to deal with local peoples.

iii. Nonetheless, EP still had a subtle political message in his work, subverting perceived ideas about "primitive" people and Africa:

1. As Geertz points out, EP presents everything in a very even tone, making even the most wild descriptions seem commonplace and ordinary. In his own way, EP was making a statement that non-western practices were “normal” too.
 - f. In the 1950’s EP argued for bringing history back into anthropology
 - g. Fieldwork is often shaped by the questions people are thinking about at the time.
2. Problems with Culture: Our core concept, but flawed and messy
 - a. Culture has inherent difficulties in both concept and the way it gets used
 - b. Heterogeneous origins of culture
 - i. Especially true now with globalization, though it has always been the case
 - ii. It’s hard to make a case for culture
 - c. Internal diversity of culture
 - i. Culture is common to a number of people, but they are all individuals
 - ii. It is difficult to know how to deal with “deviants” in the culture
 - d. Some people thought that only traditional societies have culture, but western societies have lost it
 - i. Study by Redfield: homogeneity of different local cultures in Yucatan. Saw a continuum from the folk end possessing culture on to major cities, that had lost culture

- ii. Actually, local cultures were constantly reshaping and reinventing themselves.
 - iii. Villages he thought were stable, timeless and homogenous were actually recently created after a huge native rebellion.
 - iv. Cultures are not outside history
- e. But anthropologists are supposed to make sense of culture. It's necessary to understand culture in order to understand people.
- i. If culture is agreement, what do you do with disagreement?
 1. One way to deal with this problem is to focus in on a small units
 - a. Very interesting to know one small culture in such detail.
 - b. But this kind of marginalizes anthropology
 - c. This also doesn't deal with the problem of culture
 2. Often the disagreement will hinge on agreement
 - a. I.e. the Nuer may agree or disagree about the ways to set bride wealth, but they all agree that cows are involved
 3. You have to talk about the things that vary as well as the things that agree.
 - a. But a finely detailed study that captures every agreement and disagreement in a culture would take a lifetime.

- ii. Where are the boundaries of culture? People participate in multiple cultures.
- iii. People have the tendency to try and homogenize culture to make sense of it.
 - 1. But culture is always breaking down and slipping away
 - 2. At the same time, people are building it back up: i.e. runaway slaves would bring together multiple cultures from all over Africa and try to make a synthesis and reconstitute a new culture. They were called Maroons.
- iv. You just have to embrace the messiness of culture