

21A.100 – Professor James Howe

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

September 9, 2004

Welcome to the course, which is an introduction to cultural or sociocultural anthropology. We will have two lectures and one discussion a week. Most of the requirements (a final exam, series of six papers adding up to about twenty pages; at least an hour a week of discussion) is set by the MIT Humanities Distribution system.

This lecture will be devoted to briefly introducing the field of anthropology. For really serious introductions to the field, you should consult a textbook.

Anthropology was called the science of man.

We now avoid the assumption that the human species is entirely male, might say instead the science of humanity

Still pretty nervy to make that claim, as if sociology, economics, history etc. weren't sciences of humanity

Anthropology is different in that it has the broadest scope.

Over time, covers several million years, from the first protohuman ancestors to the present.

Widest range of societies, from small hunter-gatherer bands to modern countries.

Until recently, anthropology was less concerned with modern complex societies than with so-called savages or primitives. Anthropologists might claim that they also covered modern society but they actually didn't typically study it.

Studied ancient past societies; ancient humans and pre-humans; and contemporary “primitives”.

As a recognized discipline, anthropology mostly developed in the 19th century. It was a child of colonialism, imperialism, and the expansion of the West. It was the means by which “we” studied “them”.

Anthropologists now try to live down that past, but we cannot deny it.

Many academic disciplines act as if they were established by God, that their boundaries with other disciplines and their internal foci were established by God or pure logic.

But many are the product of accidents or historical peculiarities. That is certainly the case for us.

There is a unity to what we do, but also mess and complications.

Anthropology has traditionally been said to have four fields. Early anthropologists were expected to be able to work in at least two, maybe all four. No one today does that.

4 fields are physical or biological anthropology; archaeology; anthropological linguistics; cultural anthropology.

In everyday speech, when people say anthropology, sometimes they mean all four fields, sometimes just cultural.

In this course you will get a little physical anthropology, but otherwise nothing but cultural. Which is plenty for one course.

At MIT, archaeology and what little physical we teach are in another department, which is increasingly the case around the country.

Today I will give you a quick and very rough sketch of the other three fields, telling you mostly what you won't get in this course, giving you a feel for the larger field.

Archaeology, the study of the past through physical remains.

There is a complication, in that some archaeologists do *not* consider themselves anthropologists. Non-anthropological archaeologists are mostly in Classics Departments, or Art History, or in regional specialties like Middle Eastern Studies or Sinology.

Anthropological archaeologists mostly look down on classical archaeologists and the others as pot-hunters with PhDs, even if that isn't fair.

Who is world's most famous archaeologist?---Indiana Jones, who is certainly nothing but a pot-hunter, a looter, in it only to grab the goodies. Pots or temples.

And in early days, in 18th and 19th century, this was true of many early archaeologists.

But as the discipline developed in 19th century, they learned that goodies by themselves don't tell you all that much..

Apart from looters, the field began with gentlemanly amateurs, often digging on their own land, where they had seen remains on surface. Thomas Jefferson is a good example.

As they started to dig more seriously, they slowly realized the crucial importance of *context*, esp. the placement of artifacts in time and space.

So they were not so much interested in a pot as the fact that it was dug up 2 inches from the burial of a body.

Or that it was a kind of pot known to be made 100 miles away, thus evidence of regional trade.

Or a pot made only in certain sectors of a city, suggesting specialized craft production.

Or found only in large elaborate houses, with other special fancy goods, suggesting social stratification.

So it is less a matter of pots in themselves than pots in context.

In fact, anthropological archaeologists are just as interested in crap as pots.

Garbage tells you a lot. Even crap literally: feces are full of information. about diet and disease.

As amateurs turned to pros in the 19th century, one of first things that they began to notice was vertical layering in archaeological digs. More recent things were on top of older things: this is called stratigraphy, the layering of sites.

The most famous example, excavated by the German, Schliemann, in 1870s, 1880s, at site of what thought to be ancient Troy. He dug a huge deep mound, with layer upon layer, thousands of years of occupation. The layer he identified with Homeric Troy was the wrong one, but still crucially important excavation.

So archaeologists worked out techniques for exact recording of everything in a dug, horizontally and vertically. Squares, grids, photos, diagrams, etc.

And also to analyze exhaustively anything that came to light.

Much of what one sees on TV with forensic science generally borrowed from archaeology.

Also need lots of back-breaking labor. I did it for one summer and then decided to try something else.

The sequences that are found in one dig from deepest to shallowest, could be combined with other digs to establish a chronology.

All pots of a certain type come earlier than all pots of another type.

Eventually, whenever we find a pot or potsherd of type A, we can be pretty sure it is from a certain era.

Inevitably, archaeologists had to become experts on all the types of pots, stone tools, and other things that are preserved in the archaeological record.

So they might be interested in pots mostly for their value in establishing chronology.

From this perspective, the distribution in time and space of a certain artifact or style is what is most important

The great limitation of this work is that it only established relative chronology: pot style A was older than style B, but no dates, no absolute chronology

First breakthrough in getting absolute dates came in first half of 20th century, with tree rings. In 1930s. in American Southwest, they figured out the sequence of rings (which varied year by year) up to the present.

So any time that one had a wood sample, one could date by the rings.

But often wood was not preserved.

Then after World War II, methods were established based on changes in the composition of materials over time, which allowed rough absolute dating.

The first method devised was based on the decay, the half-life of carbon 14.

Could get at least century or decade if not year.

Though one would still have to find charred wood, and the technique doesn't go back more than a few thousand years.

Then technique called thermoluminescence, covered much longer time scales

Now potassium argon dating, uranium-series dating, fission-track dating, obsidian hydration dating, archaeomagnetic dating and several others.

Anything that changes regularly over time.

Archaeologists, like TV forensic scientists, learned to wring every last piece of information out of material remains. What is its composition? How could it have been made? Typically all you had was the remains, so you had to get it to talk to you..

An example of archaeological inference. Study by Olga Linares of burials from famous sites in western Panama. No big temples, but gold work and beautiful polychrome (multicolored) pottery. Lots of animal designs on pottery, guessed that animals symbolic of something. But we have no information on the people who used the pots, on what they believed.

She used placement. Pots were found with bodies, often mass burials. So they were grave goods of some sort.

Only some burials, so maybe stratified.

Pots had decoration only on one side. What could that tell us? Probably meant to be viewed by people looking down into graves.

Then she asked, which animals? Concerned not just with one animal but with all of them, what the whole set taken together might mean.

If we look at them, we saw the animals are all:

-dangerous. nothing timid

-hard, not soft. No game animals

-creatures with weapons. stingrays with nasty dangerous tail, etc. Even tiny animals on the pot were armed and dangerous, e.g. ticks

Taken together, they were symbols, metaphors for the men (no women) buried there.

So her inference was that these were the grave goods of warriors fallen in battle.

Inferred that the society was not firmly stratified, rather fluid chiefdoms with lots of competition, especially in war.

In broad outline, this is representative of how archaeologists think.

Other archaeologists make heavy use of science and engineering.

For studying such things as pollen, which allows close study of natural environment.

Tells you e.g. when agriculture appears. In Panama studies showed it was much earlier than previously thought.

Also studies of technology: examine composition, figure out how made, make inferences.

Learn to do it yourself.

MIT archaeologists are famous for this kind of work.

Also extending scope of where work. esp. underwater. Another area of strength at MIT.

What I have been saying so far assumes that there is no writing.

But where there is, then physical remains studied along with written records.

In some cases, ancient forms of writing were only deciphered after many years.

In case of ancient Maya, whose writing was only decoded in late 20th century, our view of their society has been transformed.

Even where writing exists, archaeology can tell us things we didn't know, things that no one bothered to write down.

E.g. that the Pilgrims at Plymouth threw their trash out the window.

Similarly, study of water mills and their distribution in early America, one can learn a lot that not written.

Even today: famous study of garbage in Tucson.

Physical Anthropology

Physical or biological anthropology is quite a varied field, anything to do with the biological nature of humans

Probably best known is human paleontology. A small field that gets more publicity than the rest of anthropology put together.

We will get a little in a later lecture.

There is an obvious overlap with archaeology, both are digging up remains.

As with ordinary archaeology, there is an emphasis on getting the last bit of information out of physical remains. Often will find just one tooth, or just one fragment of a jawbone.

Today the study of the biological history of our species also depends on genetics, on mapping out the relationships among contemporary primate species through DNA mapping

Another major area in physical anthropology was the study of so-called races, in other words, the biological variation among modern human populations

As you will hear in another lecture, the problem with this field was that the concept of race turns out to be useless for the study of biological variation

The races distinguished were wildly variable from one theorist to another. The boundaries between races could not be reliably determined. The features like skin color that were used turn out to be biologically pretty unimportant. The measurements used were often subjective and bogus. And the supposedly scientific studies of race were used to promote prejudice and discrimination.

So still study human biological variation, but not thru the race concept.

The past racism of anthropology is a big thing to live down. Archaeology was often distorted by nationalism, but nothing as bad as the racist use of supposedly scientific studies.

Physical anthropologists often used to studies of human anatomy. Anthropologists at Harvard designed the chairs for the Boston & Maine Railroad, which donated a bunch to the graduate student lounge.

Another famous study at Harvard tried to divide humans into three basic body types. For many years Harvard freshmen had to undergo nude photos for study.

Now such research more likely to be carried by medical researchers and scientists in other disciplines. Reveals the flexible and somewhat arbitrary boundaries between disciplines.

Most recently, lots of work in forensic anthropology. Study of human remains for purposes of studying crimes. Often recent crimes, massacres, terrorism. Recent flyer to our department, advertised seminars on bones in mass burials or dispersal of bodies in bomb blasts. Grisly, a sign of the times we live in.

Medical study of past skeletal remains very revealing. Tendency to see past populations as much healthier than modern polluted world. Now show that many endemic diseases in ancient populations.

Third great division of anthropology is anthropological linguistics. Used to be expected that anthropologists would record language of people that studied. But for most of 20th century there have also been linguists who not anthropologists. In linguistics departments. MIT one of the great centers. There are still linguistic anthropologists, but they tend to study things like the use of language in society. The basic study of the structure of languages now mostly outside anthropology.

Lastly, cultural anthropology, what this course is about.

Originally, we were expected to go out to far parts of the globe to study “savages” or “primitives”---modern societies were left to sociologists.

We no longer use these words, because inappropriate.

Basically cultural anthros ended up studying everyone but western Europeans and North Americans, who were left to sociologists

There was an assumption that primitives were living fossils, the remnants of past stages in human evolution. Thus we could learn about our past by studying modern primitives, saw them as living ancestors.

This is still a popular assumption: journalists say the so-and-sos are stuck in the 17th century, or the 14th, or the 5th.

Not only do we not believe any more that human history sorts itself out into these convenient ages, but it is not true that such peoples are living fossils. The histories of the simplest and most small-scale societies is every bit as long as ours.

-e.g. the so-called Bushmen of the Kalahari desert, seen in the film “The Gods Must be Crazy”. Supposedly ancient, no contact with the outside world. Actually have been in touch with herders and agriculturalists for maybe 1000 years, In 19th century hunted by white South Africans.

-Similarly, white colonists saw the Indian societies of North America as simple band societies. In fact, many had complex organizations, and those that didn't in 1620 had been much more complex a couple of hundred years before.

But cultural anthropologists, even though they discarded these assumptions about small-scale non-western societies, continued to specialize in studying them.

What our discipline was supposed to do.

But this has changed completely. First we added on peasants—agriculturalists who belonged to complex state societies.

Then minorities in industrial societies. Because they were seen as living in small homogeneous communities like the people we started out studying.

Then in the last 20 years we have expanded to study just about anything

Hugh Gusterson, in our program, studies nuclear weapons scientists

Susan Slyomovics, also in our group, her forthcoming book is on national debates in Morocco on human rights

Stefan Helmreich studies marine biologists

Past members of our program have studied nuclear accelerators and Chinese factories

So now we are truly a global discipline, ready to study anything

Our methods are still somewhat distinctive: we still tend to study people in small communities, to do what called participant observation

But now sociologists are doing that too

So what do we want you to get out of this course?

Not a lot of facts.

Not even a lot of the results of anthropology, what we think we have learned. Some, but not a lot.

We don't expect that more than one out of a thousand will want to become an anthropologist.

But we hope you learn to think like anthropologists.

That is, to think systematically and seriously about how cultures and social groups work, and to understand human actions in their cultural context. It is intuitive, learning to think in a certain way. Learn by doing it in class. Readings will emphasize case studies.