

Aims:

By the end of this course, Students will be able to know more about the founding fathers of Anthropology.

THE FOUNDING FATHERS:

Four men are conventionally mentioned as the founders of modern anthropology:

Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, AR Radcliffe-Brown and Marcel Mauss. Boas, born in 1864, was German, but emigrated to the USA after several lengthy stays in the country in the 1880s and 1890s. As a professor at Columbia University, he was instrumental in establishing American cultural anthropology, and ‘Papa Franz’ was the undisputed leader of the discipline until his death in 1942.

Most of the American anthropologists of note in the first half of the twentieth century had been students of Boas. Boas had very wide-ranging interests, but in this context, we shall associate him with two particularly important, and typical, concepts, which contributed to defining American anthropology: cultural relativism and historical particularism.

Cultural relativism is the view that every society, or every culture, has to be understood on its own terms, from within, and that it is neither possible nor particularly interesting to rank societies on an evolutionary ladder. In Boas’ youth, evolutionist perspectives were widespread. In order to understand cultural variation, he argued, this way of thinking is not satisfactory. In fact, he regarded the belief that certain societies were objectively more advanced than others as an ethnocentric fallacy, that is a view governed by prejudice and an unconsidered belief in the superiority of one’s own culture.

Cultural relativism is primarily a method (not a world-view) designed to explore cultural variation as independently as possible from the researcher’s prejudices. Its aim is to learn to see the world, as far as possible, in the same way as the informants, or ‘natives’, see it. Theoretical analysis can begin only when this is achieved. In today’s public debates about cultural contact and ‘integration’ of migrants in the West, a similar ideal might be posited; only when one has understood the lives of others, can it be justified to make moral judgements about them.

Boas’ historical particularism, which is closely related to cultural relativism, consists of the view that every society has its own, unique history, which is to say that there are no ‘necessary stages’ that societies pass through. As a result, it is impossible to generalise about historical sequences; they are all unique. All societies have their own paths towards sustainability and their own mechanisms of change, Boas argued. Both this view and certain forms of cultural relativism have always been controversial among anthropologists, but they have been deeply influential up to the present.

Malinowski, born in 1884, was a Pole who studied in Krakow, but he emigrated to England to further his studies in anthropology. Malinowski was a charismatic and inspiring teacher in his time, but his sustained influence has been particularly strong regarding intensive fieldwork as method.

Malinowski was not the first to carry out long-term fieldwork in local communities (Boas, for one, had done it), but his study of the inhabitants of the Trobriand islands during the First World War was so detailed and thorough that it set a standard which has its defenders even today.

Through a series of books about the Trobriands, the first and most famous of which was *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski showed the enormous intellectual potential of the slow, meticulous and painstakingly detailed study of a small group of which his fieldwork was an exemplar. He wrote about the economy, the religion and the political organisation of the Trobrianders with great authority, and due to his very comprehensive knowledge of their way of life, he was able to demonstrate the interconnections between such partial systems. In his field methodology, Malinowski strongly emphasised the need to learn the native language, and recommended that the main method should be one of participant observation:

the ethnographer should live with the people he studied, he should participate in their everyday activities, and make systematic observations as he went along. Similar if not necessarily identical ideals guide anthropological fieldwork even today.

Why Anthropology?

It would be grossly misleading to claim that anthropological investigations began with Boas and Malinowski. Of course, people have asked questions concerning cultural variation and 'how others live' for thousands of years, and both cultural theory and ethnography had existed in various guises long before them.

Yet they contributed, perhaps more than anyone else, to turning anthropology into a body of knowledge sufficiently organised and coherent to deserve the label science. The method of fieldwork through long-term participant observation ensured that the knowledge procured by ethnographers was reliable and usable in comparisons, and the principle of cultural relativism was intended not only to keep prejudices in check, but also to develop a neutral, descriptive terminology for describing cultural variation.

Although hardly of central importance, the biographies of Boas and Malinowski may shed a little light on their unorthodox approaches to cultural variation. As indicated above, both men spent most of their adult life abroad; the German Boas in the USA, the Pole Malinowski in England. One may wonder if the uprootedness and alienness they must have felt, both in relation to their native countries and towards their new ones, could not have been a valuable resource when they set out to develop their new science. For it is only when one is able to see one's own culture from a marginal vantage point that one can understand it in anthropological terms. Most people live their entire lives without reflecting upon the fact that they are profoundly shaped by a particular culture. Such 'homeblindness' by default makes them less

suited for studying other peoples than those who have realised that even their own habits and notions are created in a particular social environment, under special circumstances; and that they would in crucial ways have been different individuals if they had been raised elsewhere.

This kind of reflexivity – self-reflection – is both a condition for the comparative study of culture and society, and a result of it. When the novice anthropologist returns from her first fieldwork, she inevitably views her own society in a new light. However, one must also, to some extent, be able to leave one's own society behind mentally before embarking on fieldwork. Anthropologists try to impart this skill through their teaching of anthropological concepts and models, but the students are unlikely to realise that they have acquired it until it has become too late to return to an earlier state of innocence.

In fact, a significant number of anthropologists have a personal background which has to a certain degree alienated them in relation to their society; quite a few have spent several years in another country as children of diplomats, aid workers or missionaries; some are adopted from another country or have a minority background; and Jews have always been strongly represented in the profession.

Women have always been more prominent in anthropology than in most other academic professions. For once, in other words, being a partial stranger can be an asset. The third of the leading anthropologists during the crucial first decades of the twentieth century was never the less a native Englishman, AR Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955). Radcliffe-Brown, who spent many years teaching and undertaking research at the universities of Chicago, Cape Town and Sydney, before returning to a chair in Oxford in 1937, is chiefly known for his ambitious scientific programme for social anthropology.

Unlike Boas, and to some extent Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown's interest was not in culture and meaning, but in the ways societies functioned. He was deeply influenced by Emile Durkheim's sociology, which was primarily a doctrine about social integration, and used it as a stepping-stone to develop structural-functionalism in anthropology.

This theory argued that all the parts, or institutions, of a society filled a particular function, roughly in the same way as all bodily parts contribute to the whole; and that the ultimate goal of anthropology consisted in establishing 'natural laws of society' with the same level of precision as the ones found in natural science.

Like Boas and Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown had his circle of outstanding, devoted students, some of them among the most influential British anthropologists of the postwar years. However, his original programme was eventually abandoned by most of them. It would soon become clear that societies were much less predictable than cells and chemical compounds. To many anthropologists, the fourth ancestor to be mentioned here is the most important one.

Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) is not associated with a concept such as cultural relativism, a method like participant observation, or a theory such as structural functionalism. Yet his influence on anthropology, especially in France, has been decisive. Mauss was a nephew of

the great Durkheim, and they collaborated closely until Durkheim's death in 1917, writing, among other things, a book entitled *Primitive*

Why Anthropology?

Classification together. Mauss was a learned man, familiar with many languages, global cultural history and the classics. Although he never carried out fieldwork, he wrote insightful essays covering a broad range of themes (and relentlessly taught techniques of observation): on the concept of the person in different societies, on nationalism and on the body as a social product. His most famous contribution is a powerful essay about gift exchange in traditional societies.

Mauss shows that reciprocity, the exchange of gifts and services, is the 'glue' that ties societies together in the absence of a centralised power. Gifts may appear to be voluntary, but are in fact obligatory, and they create debts of gratitude and other social commitments of considerable scope and duration. Other anthropologists continue to build analyses on this perspective even today. Slightly simplistically, one may say that these four founders and their many students defined the mainstream of twentieth-century anthropology. (Several fascinating minor lines of intellectual descent also exist, but space does not permit an exploration of them here.) However, anthropology has always been a self-critical subject, and these great men did not only exert influence through their admonitions and writings, but also by provoking contradiction and criticism.

The cultural relativism of Boas (and the Boasians) met strong resistance in the postwar years, when a new generation of American anthropologists would return to the pre-Boasian concerns with social evolution and concentrate on material conditions, technology and economics. Malinowski, and to some extent his students, were criticised for being unfocused and theoretically weak. Radcliffe-Brown, on his part, was criticised for seeming to believe that his elegant models were more truthful than the far more chaotic social reality; and in France, Mauss was, some years later, largely seen as irrelevant by young, politically radical anthropologists who were more keen on studying conflict than integration.

In the decades after the Second World War, anthropology grew and diversified rapidly. New theoretical schools and perspectives appeared, fieldwork was carried out in new areas, which also added complexity and perspectives; new research centres and university departments were founded, and at the start of the twenty-first century, there are thousands of professional anthropologists worldwide, all of them specialised in one way or another.

It may still be said that underneath this teeming diversity, there is a clearly defined, shared subject. The reason is that we continue to return to the same fundamental questions, which are raised in roughly the same ways everywhere. A Brazilian anthropologist and her Russian colleague may perfectly well understand each other (provided they have a common language, which in most cases would be English); there is much to distinguish a feminist postmodernist from a human ecologist, but if they are both anthropologists, they still have much in common intellectually. In spite of intellectual patricides and matricides, heated controversies and bewildering specialisation, anthropology is still delineated through its consistent interest in

the relationship between the unique and the universal, its emphasis on 'the native's point of view' (Malinowski's term) and the study of local life, its ambition to understand connections in societies and its comparisons between societies.

FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES

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