



# Introduction – Anthropology's Interdisciplinary Connections

Cris Shore and Richard A. Wilson

According to the SAGE Guidelines that frame this volume, handbooks are intended to be 'reviews, accounts and audits of a discipline' that try to address the questions, 'What is the state of the art?' 'Where is the discipline going', and 'What are the key debates/issues that comprise the discipline'? Part 1 of this ASA Handbook provides answers to all three of these questions by asking a fourth: 'How does contemporary social anthropology relate to other disciplines or branches of knowledge?'

While not intended to be exhaustive in their coverage, these 16 chapters illustrate the breadth and scope of social anthropology, as well as the key trajectories and research agendas that its practitioners have been pursuing over the last quarter century. Some of these represent long-standing disciplinary connections, notably linguistics, archaeology, economics and law, whereas others represent more recent interfaces and developments in knowledge to which social anthropology has contributed, such as science and technology studies (STS), media and cultural studies, and postcolonial studies. This section lays out the wares of current social anthropology by exhibiting how anthropologists contribute to wider academic and professional conversations, by framing

other disciplinary discussions in different terms, or by challenging their operating assumptions and defining principles. In this engagement with disciplines that are both cognate and distant, we see what social anthropology has to offer as a qualitative social inquiry into *all* aspects of human behaviour, from art, psychology and religion, to literature, politics and development studies.

Given the apparent trend towards ever-greater sub-disciplinary specialization, is there a danger of social anthropology fragmenting and losing its coherence or distinctiveness? Such questions evoke a sense of *déjà vu*. As Jane Cowan reminds us in her chapter on anthropology and history, the intellectual and social upheavals of the 1960s threatened to plunge both social anthropology and history into a state of what Bernard Cohn termed 'epistemological anarchy'. Eric Wolf (1980) famously complained about the effects of too much specialization that was occurring within the discipline during the 1980s. With the sub-fields increasingly pursuing their own interests, he and others feared that anthropology was coming apart, that there was no longer a shared language that we speak, however idiosyncratically. As Ortner (1984: 127) summed it up, 'We no longer call each other names'. Yet what is

striking in these chapters is precisely the degree to which the discipline has retained a common centre: if not entirely in terms of theory, then certainly with regard to methodology, or at least to a shared commitment to an empirical and ethnographic approach in the production of anthropological knowledge. While we should be cautious about overstressing our claim to disciplinary unity, the chapters in this section highlight at least four characteristics of contemporary social anthropological inquiry.

- 1 *Anthropology is an integrative and comparative discipline.* Even if social anthropologists now refrain from the claims of holism made by earlier generations of theorists, there remains a remarkable breadth and range of inquiry in the discipline. This scope is both theoretical as well as geographical, and aims at the integration of social processes that other social science and humanities approaches often isolate and treat as separate and distinct for the purposes of study. Being more reticent to give causal priority to any one sphere of social life, and being attuned to the contingency and unpredictability of social relationships, social anthropologists are less predisposed to seeing one aspect of human sociality as determinative of all others, or to sequestering a small number of variables and testing their causal relationships. Instead, their analyses are more likely to demonstrate the interconnectedness of social processes, even those in far-flung locales, including those conventionally held to be disparate and unrelated. This is particularly well-illustrated in the chapters on gender (Henrietta Moore), literature (Bill Watson) and economics (Keith Hart). As Keith Hart argues, 'We need to rescue economics from the economists' in order to show how money, markets and social action are imminent and embedded in wider structures. Much the same argument can also be made for the study of policy, politics and law – all of which are entwined in wider symbolic systems and fields of social action.
- 2 *Anthropology is inherently contextualizing.* As implied by the integrative approach outlined above, social anthropology is an inherently contextualizing endeavour that delineates the deep and abiding attachments of particular social phenomena to local contexts, including those held to be global or long-distance forms of exchange and interaction such as international law or globalized media representations. Despite their widespread circulation, representations, people and commodities still remain embedded

in historically constituted and deeply sedimented social relations. Anthropologists have demonstrated how messages are often received in ways other than those intended by the social actors who design, say, global advertising campaigns or international development policies, and this differential reception goes some way to explaining why top-down policies and programmes seldom unfold as planned. Jennifer Curtis and Jonathan Spencer draw on case studies from Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland to show why analysts need to take more seriously the way that the category of the 'political' is conceptualized by local actors. In her chapter on the anthropology of law, Sally Engle Merry documents how women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in four cities translate international human rights into local terms, thereby 'vernacularizing' a set of globalizing ideas and practices. Kevin Latham's account of anthropological studies of new global media makes a strong case for using ethnography to find out what people 'really' do with television, video and other media. However, this raises one of the conundrums of anthropological analysis: how to reconcile the external (or 'etic') and theoretical perspectives of the observer with the insider (or 'emic') accounts of the local actors themselves. As Martin Mills argues, while social anthropology and religious studies share a critical sympathy with the religious communities that constitute their traditional subject matter – and while they are united in their rejection of the unqualified positivism manifested in comparativist and behavioural explanations of human action – cultural relativism has its limits.

- 3 *Anthropology retains commitment to social agency.* As a consequence of the ethnographic research techniques of language learning and long-term immersion in the field, social anthropologists are often resistant to those social science accounts which marginalize or neglect the conscious agency of the actors involved in social processes. A phenomenological account of social agency – what people think, their consciousness of macro processes, how they plan and strategize and make sense of their actions – has been a hallmark of social anthropology since Malinowski. As a result, social anthropology has often been sceptical of deterministic theories and excessively universalizing approaches which portray social actors as relatively powerless ciphers for the deep structures of society, language or the human mind. A prominent place for the volition of social actors can be found in a number of the contributions to Part 1. In her chapter on anthropology and psychology, Christina Toren makes the case for a 'unified model of human being' that is 'explicitly opposed to cognitivist models because of their inability to come to

grips with human historical actuality in general and their own historical nature in particular'. Cris Shore's chapter on the anthropology of policy provides a counterpoint to the anthropological tendency to highlight individual autonomy and agency, as he shows how 'policies are technologies that powerfully influence human consciousness and behaviour; they create the bureaucratic taxonomies that define the conditions of people's existence'. Part of the value of an 'anthropology of policy', he suggests, is that it offers a critical window on the wider processes and relations of power that are shaping the contemporary world. Richard Werbner's chapter on postcolonial identity and subjectivity, by contrast, illustrates both the high degree of moral agency and the complex identity strategies that exist in postcolonial Africa and Asia, as well as the powerful processes of postcolonial subjection that are redefining identity, self and other, particularly in those situations where traumatic conflict has led to a breakdown of society and the norms of civility.

- 4 *Culture matters to anthropology.* Although social anthropology's traditional concern with (and some might say obsession with) culture has diminished, anthropologists continue to insist on the necessity of the term, broadly conceived, and understood as the symbolic and learned ideas and practices found in different societies. None of the chapters in this section sets culture up in opposition either to biology or to principles of social structure and social organization such as race, nation or social class. Virtually all of them conceive of culture as a mutually constitutive element that is necessary for a full understanding of those elements of social organization. In Sarah Franklin's chapter on the anthropology of biomedicine, 'biology is no longer seen as prior to culture, but as a domain of phenomena that is shaped by historical and cultural forces'. In a similar vein, Alessandro Duranti proposes a linguistics of human praxis that shifts our attention from 'the study of linguistic structures as manifestations of a common code (or grammar) to the study of language as a socio-historically defined resource for the constitution of society and the reproduction of cultural meanings and practices'. Several contributions go further by showing how forms of material culture such as art (Arnd Schneider), museum artefacts (Brian Durrans) or genres of literature (Bill Watson) can be used to shed light on deeper aspects of the societies that produced them. Julian Thomas's chapter on anthropology and archaeology also shows how material culture – in combination with ethnography – can provide a valuable tool for ethnoarchaeologists to understand human prehistory by interpreting historical sites.

Understanding the present remains the core challenge of contemporary social anthropology. Regrettably, we were unable to include a number of potential topical areas such as anthropology and sociology, the anthropology of education, or of tourism, or anthropology and architecture. These are all areas of valuable exchange between anthropologists and other disciplines, but the editors of this admittedly large and compendious Handbook faced unyielding space constraints that called for difficult choices and a need to prioritize certain areas where we felt the anthropological contribution was most apparent. Other editors may have selected a different list, all of which underlines the remarkable breadth and depth of social anthropology as a discipline with a global purview and a distinctive set of methods and theories that seek to comprehend all aspects of human behaviour. That wide purview explains why anthropology necessarily interfaces with so many other disciplines, and why it has evolved into so many sub-disciplinary fields and specialisms. Is this evidence of disintegration and fragmentation? Quite the contrary: returning to Sherry Ortner, who described a similar process of epistemological ferment over a quarter of a century ago, these expressions of 'chaos' and 'disorder' are often the classic symptoms of liminality, which, as social anthropologists well recognize, is 'the breeding ground for a new and perhaps better order' (Ortner 1984: 127). As Marilyn Strathern points out in the Afterword to this Handbook, however, creating that new order will be the task for anthropology's heirs, in whose hands the future of the discipline will lie.

## REFERENCES

- Ortner, Sherry. 1984. 'Theory in anthropology since the sixties', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26 (1): 126–166.
- Wolf, Eric. 1980. 'They divide and subdivide and call it anthropology', *New York Times* (30 November), Ideas and Trends Section, p. E9.