



IN FOCUS

## ANTHROPOLOGY ON A GLOBAL SCALE

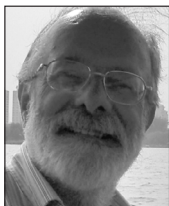
*In light of the AAA's objective to develop its international relations and collaborations, AN invited international anthropologists to engage with questions about the practice of anthropology today, particularly issues of anthropology and its relationships to globalization and postcolonialism, and what this might mean for the future of anthropology and future collaborations between anthropologists and others around the world. Please send your responses in 400 words or less to Stacy Lathrop at slathrop@aaanet.org.*

## American Cultural Anthropology and British Social Anthropology

### Connections and Differences

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A consistent self-critique amongst anthropologists is that we have largely failed as a collective discipline to engage fully in public debate and policymaking in the same way that other social scientists have done. As global communication technologies improve exponentially and the possibility of inserting an anthropological perspective into public debates increases, this self-critique comes more and more to the fore. But can anthropologists from different national and regional "traditions" communicate and collaborate enough to create the unified disciplinary "voice" that would allow for effective engagement?



Robert Layton



Adam R Kaul

One of the first barriers that must be overcome in order to better situate ourselves in the forefront of public debate is to educate each other about the connections and differences between our traditions. Here, as a first step, albeit a small one, we briefly highlight the major differences and connections between American "cultural" anthropology and British "social" anthropology. The differences between these two traditions was the subject of a recent round of emails in our department, which is made up of a significant number of American as well as British and continental European anthropologists.

### Four-Field Approach

Most of our colleagues' comments began by highlighting the strength of the "four-field" approach in the US. One argued that this approach is in fact on the decline following the deeper impact that postmodernism has had in the US relative to the UK. Another responded that this split has only occurred in some departments while other departments firmly stick to the four-field approach.

Historically, combining sociocultural anthropology with the other "subdisciplines" of linguistics, archaeology and biological anthropology never really took off in Britain in the same way that it did in the US. In Britain, archaeology was always more closely associated with classics or art history departments. Linguistics is more often than not a subdiscipline of English literature departments in the UK. Biological anthropology had the closest affiliation with social anthropology in Britain in the 19th century, but when the discipline became institutionalized in academia, this connection was all but abandoned. Only a handful of British anthropology departments such as University College London, the University of Durham, Oxford Brookes University (and to some extent Cambridge) bridge this gap today.

Thus, what is often couched as one of the key distinguishing features of anthropology in the US—the broad four-field study of humanity—is certainly not a universal feature of the discipline worldwide. In the US, the influence of Boas and his students cannot be understated when discussing the American four-field approach. With its focus on Native American and "primitive" cultures, this combination of subdisciplines made sense in the early days of American anthropology.

### Professionalization

The professionalization of the discipline also historically differed in the US and the UK. One colleague stated

that the all-embracing nature of the AAA, as opposed to the separate creation of the Royal Anthropological Institute (in 1907) and the Association of Social Anthropologists (in 1946) in Britain, contributes to a higher national profile of anthropologists as professionals in US.

Also, because of the vetting system involved in recruitment in the ASA, and because the ASA is particularly designed for social anthropologists, it has remained very small in size (in the 100s) compared to the AAA (in excess of 10,000). This exclusive focus on social anthropology is dramatically illustrated in David Mills' report that Louis Leakey was invited by E E Evans-Pritchard to attend the meeting where the ASA was formed, but he was not invited to join!

### COMMENTARY

Likewise, in the early 20th century, the institutionalization of anthropology in academia was rapid in the US, while in Britain there are still only a relative handful of departments. On the one hand, the result is an intimate feel to the social community of anthropologists in Britain. On the other, it is well recognized that the AAA has done far more during the last century to professionalize and promote the discipline in the US, in and out of academia, than British associations have done in the UK. Some contributors to our discussion, however, argued that the sheer size of the discipline in the US tends to encourage professionals to identify more strongly with a subfield such as ecological or cognitive anthropology than is the case in the UK where theoretical and topical eclecticism is more acceptable.

### Theoretical Orientations

There is also a subtly different theoretical orientation resulting from the different intellectual heritages of anthropology in the US and Britain.

One former US colleague pointed out that Boas's four-field approach is today presented at the undergraduate level in some departments in the US as the feature that distinguishes social anthropology from sociology, highlighting the fact that, as a German colleague noted, British anthropologists seem more secure about an affinity with sociology. Clearly British anthropology traces its lineage to the sociological founding fathers—Durkheim, Weber and Mauss—thereby placing primary emphasis on social structure in anthropological analyses; whereas in the US there is a stronger sense of the influence of the American greats within anthropology itself—Boas, Mead, Kroeber, Lowie, Geertz.

It is perhaps appropriate then to continue to label our sister anthropological clans "social" versus "cultural" anthropology, although this difference should be painted more in shades of grey than in blacks and whites. If we are related clans, then in the US, anthropologists have a habit of creating fictive academic kinship charts that stretch back to Boas. By contrast, UK social anthropologists tend to name their anthropological intellectual ancestors in a line back to Malinowski or Evans-Pritchard. Nonetheless, since there has been a great deal of communication between anthropologists on either side of the Atlantic for the last 100 years the theoretical differences that result, while evident, are very subtle indeed.

Nevertheless, these subtle differences are powerful. For national and regional anthropologists and their professional organizations to understand one another, much less create an international collaborative anthropological voice in public debates, these different histories must be recognized. This certainly does not mean that we need to abandon our unique traditions and perspectives, but if we don't recognize the barriers to fostering communication within a globalized anthropology, how can we expect to contribute a voice to a globalized world? ■

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