

6 Action-centred, processual, and Marxist perspectives

From the 1950s onwards there were a number of attempts to move anthropology away from the formal, society-centred paradigms, especially structural-functionalism, towards more individual and action-centred ones. Among these are the transactionalism of Fredrik Barth, various interrelated approaches of the 'Manchester School', and 'processual' offshoots of structuralism, including much of the work of Edmund Leach (see chapters 8 and 9).

Earlier ideas on social and cultural processes include the sociological theories of Georg Simmel and Max Weber, some of A. L. Kroeber's perceptive comments on 'culture patterns and processes' (1963 [1948]) and Arnold van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) seminal study of 'rites of passage'. The last was picked up especially by structural processualists such as Edmund Leach and Victor Turner. Relations between structures, processes, and historical events returned with a vengeance in the 1980s in debates such as that between Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere on the death of Captain Cook, and between Richard Lee and Edwin Wilmsen on the political economy of the Kalahari. Meanwhile, a Marxist revolution had succeeded in turning many away from functionalist and structuralist interests towards Marxism, a processual theory based on the social relations of production.

However, Marxism's status in anthropology is ambiguous: it contains aspects of several other theoretical positions. As a trajectory, evolutionist history was firmly in Karl Marx's own mind and in the minds of Marxists of later times. Diffusionism is there too, exemplified by the spread of the revolutions of past and future which so concerned Marx and Engels. Marxism is even more firmly grounded in functionalism, with the idea of societies as self-regulatory systems, but systems which are transformable by revolutionary change. It is also loosely relativist in the sense that different modes of production are said to entail ideologies which need to be understood in their own terms – albeit their own terms of 'false consciousness'. Marxist anthropology has structuralist elements too: a number of its proponents, particularly in France from the 1960s to the

1980s, aligned themselves with structuralist positions in traditional areas such as kinship studies. Marxist-feminists have been prominent in equating class consciousness with gender consciousness (see chapter 9), and Marxism has links with poststructuralism and postmodernism in its concern with power relations.

I group Marxism with processual approaches, as in anthropology (if less so in other disciplines) that is its closest association in both historical time and field of debate. Both processual approaches and Marxism reached prominence in Western anthropology in the 1970s. And while the placement of Marxism with functionalism would have been rejected by mainstream functionalists and Marxists alike, both Marxists and processualists in their heyday saw themselves as at least arguing from common ground. Over the last decade or more Marxism has declined as a predominant paradigm in anthropology. In the West, this has little to do with the revolutionary changes in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. It has more to do with the prior movement of former Marxist scholars away from explicitly Marxist endeavours towards concerns which align them with their former enemies, the (postmodern) relativists, who have in the past couple of decades taken an interest in things like power, oppression, and global politico-economic relations.

Action-centred and processual approaches

Roots in sociology

Two figures stand out among sociological thinkers whose classic understandings of social process and individual action have influenced anthropological ideas: Weber and Simmel.

Georg Simmel was a German philosopher active at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century and author of treatises on social differentiation, the philosophy of history, the philosophy of money, fashion, literature, music, and aesthetics generally (see, e.g., Wolff 1950; 1965). Simmel's approach was formalistic and highly theoretical, but it gave prominence to the individual. He introduced the idea of the *Wechselwirkung* (reciprocal effect), which anticipated Mauss' theory (1990 [1923]) of 'the gift', developed not long after. The idea is that the social exists when two or more people engage in interaction with each other, and when the behaviour of one is seen as a response to the behaviour of the other. These dyadic relations provided Simmel with a notion of structural opposition which was dynamic rather than static, and one focused as much on the individual as on society in the abstract.

Max Weber was a German economist and founder of one of the three

great traditions of sociology (the others being Marx and Durkheim). Weber wrote on economics, economic history, social science methodology, charisma, bureaucracy, social stratification, differences between Eastern and Western societies, ancient Judaism, and religion in China and India. His fame, though, rests especially on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930 [1922]), which he composed between 1904 and 1905. He died in 1920; most of his works were published after his death, and a collection of his key essays appeared in 1946 (Gerth and Mills 1946).

Weber borrowed from Simmel and, at first glance, he was the more formalist of the two. He developed the anti-empiricist notion of 'ideal types' – our imagined understandings of how things work. He argued that these are necessary in order to comprehend individual events in a social system. In his eyes, social action should be the central concern of sociology, but he also emphasized the notion of 'spirit' (*Geist*) within society. For example, in his study of relations between the feudal economy of rural Germany and the emergent market economy, he argued that not only were these in interaction, but that each was driven by a different 'spirit'. In his work on the Protestant Ethic, he argued that Calvinism and modern capitalism have the same 'spirit', and thus that Calvinist countries are conducive to the development of capitalist economies. Weber made contributions to early debates on the nature of 'interpretation' (*Verstehen*), and his writings consider values, objectivity, and causal explanation. His ideas were picked up by anthropologists, including those of the Manchester School in the 1950s, and they still influence anthropology today. Both transactionalists and interpretivists derive important elements of their thinking from their roots in Weberian sociology.

Roots in anthropology

Within the Boasian tradition, social and cultural change also received some comment, and sometimes even functional analysis. For example, Kroeber (1963 [1948]: 142–4) pointed out that European women's fashion goes through periods of stability and instability. Using statistics on skirt length and width, and waist height and width, for eight selected years between 1789 and 1935, he noted that fashion stability is correlated with times of socio-political stability, and fashion instability with times of strife and restlessness such as those occasioned by revolution and world war.

Transactionalism, the perspective which emphasizes the relations between individuals and the decisions these individuals make in social behaviour, has roots in Malinowski's functionalism, especially as championed by his successor at the London School of Economics, Sir

Raymond Firth (e.g., 1961 [1951]). Firth's approach stresses the importance of 'social organization' (which in sociological terms is made of the roles people play) rather than 'social structure' (the statuses people occupy).

Another precursor was Oscar Lewis, an American anthropologist who conducted a restudy of Robert Redfield's fieldwork site, the village of Tepoztlan in Mexico. Redfield (1930), in an apparent mixing of Boasian, functionalist, evolutionist, and German sociological traditions, had concentrated on the normative rules which are supposed to govern social behaviour. Lewis (1951) concentrated on behaviour itself, which turned out not to conform to Redfield's rules at all. Redfield's idealist representation of Tepoztlan portrays a quiet place in which the inhabitants live in peaceful harmony. Lewis describes it as full of factionalism, with personal antagonism, drunkenness, and fighting as the prevalent characteristics. The village described had not so much undergone social change as a change of paradigm in the hands of these two very different ethnographers.

It was characteristic of the classic functionalist monographs that they should end with a section, a chapter, or even a collection of chapters on 'culture contact' or 'social change' – apparently often perceived as the same thing (e.g., Ottenberg and Ottenberg 1960: 475–564). However, as social change gradually came to be regarded as the norm and social dynamics recognized as a subject worthy of study in its own right, new perspectives appeared which focused directly on change, both linear and oscillating. At first drawing heavily on both functionalism and structuralism, anthropologists from the 1950s began to examine deficiencies in their own received paradigms and adapt them to suit their ethnographic and their archival findings. From the Manchester School to the debates between Leach and Friedman and between Sahlins and Obeyesekere (both discussed later in this chapter), the roots of anthropological discourse in functionalist and structuralist understandings are clearly present.

Transactionalism

The main proponent of transactionalism has always been Fredrik Barth – a Cambridge-trained Norwegian, who has taught both in Norway (at Oslo and later Bergen) and in the United States (at Emory University, and at Boston). Barth was no doubt influenced by the functionalist tradition and especially by his teacher Meyer Fortes, but from his earliest writings he reacted against what he saw as excessive equilibrium in models of social organization current in 1950s British anthropology. Working in field areas as diverse as Pakistan, Norway, Sudan, Bali, and

Papua New Guinea, Barth devised an approach which gave prominence to social action, the negotiation of identity, and the production of social values through reciprocity and decision-making.

Barth's (1959) study of politics among Swat Pathan showed that the position of leaders is dependent on maintaining the allegiance of followers through transaction, and a constant 'game' oscillating between conflict and coalition. He developed these ideas further in his short monograph *Models of Social Organization* (1966), as well as in the introduction to his famous edited volume, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). Barth has shown himself to be a consistent thinker, as his recent work, and indeed that of his students and students' students, still echoes his early studies. Barthian models have proved especially valuable in the study of ethnicity and nationalism, where negotiation of identity is readily apparent. Although the specifics of his Swat ethnography were questioned by later writers (e.g., Ahmed 1976), Barth's analytical insights have withstood the challenge.

Transactionalism proceeded through work by, among others, Czech-British Africanist Ladislav Holy, British-American Melanesianist Andrew Strathern, Dutch Mediterraneanist Jeremy Boissevain, American South Asianist F. G. Bailey, and Australian South Asianist Bruce Kapferer. Each has brought his own theoretical twist into the paradigm. For example, Holy was interested in the relation between folk models, normative rules, and the creation of representations (e.g., Holy and Stuchlik 1983). In his last book (Holy 1996), he turned his attention to the understanding of national identity in his native Bohemia as it underwent the transition from Communist Czechoslovakia to the creation of a new Czech Republic. Holy also borrowed from the poststructuralist tradition of Bourdieu, which has parallels with both transactionalist and processualist approaches (see chapter 9). Indeed, there is a sense in which all these perspectives merge into one, though adherents to each school would, for reasons of their own historical, scholastic, national, and literary identities, probably prefer to see them as unique.

Thus transactionalism never fully became a 'school of thought', but remains a powerful analytical tool amenable to use in combination with others. It has both ardent adherents and quiet users among young anthropologists today.

The Manchester School

The Manchester School consisted of a close-knit group of scholars, mainly Oxford educated at first, then transplanted to Manchester and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) in Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia

(now Zambia). It was at its height in Manchester between the 1950s and early 1970s, though arguably one could trace its origins to Max Gluckman's arrival at the RLI in 1939. Anthropology at Manchester today is far more eclectic, as testified by the annual debates in anthropological theory held under the auspices of the department there since 1988 (see, e.g., Ingold 1996). However, the term 'Manchester anthropology' once implied an allegiance both to group and to the agreed line, and for a time even to Gluckman's favourite soccer team, Manchester United.

Those associated either with the Institute in colonial times or with Manchester in its heyday include J. A. Barnes, A. L. Epstein, Scarlett Epstein, Elizabeth Colson, Clyde Mitchell, Godfrey Wilson, and Monica Wilson; and those of more recent times include Richard Werbner, John Comaroff, and Jean Comaroff. Each made distinctive and original contributions, and there were variations in approach. For example, Mitchell and (in some of his work) A. L. Epstein favoured 'network analysis', showing the ways in which individuals interacted socially and economically and the lines of connection built up from such interactions. This approach had much in common with Barth's.

However, two names stand out above all the others as providing the distinctive characteristics of the Manchester School: Max Gluckman and Victor Turner. Gluckman was a South African, trained in anthropology and law. He conducted fieldwork with several Central and Southern African groups, including Barotse, Tonga, Lamba, and Zulu, and maintained a strong interest in social change and the relation between 'tribal' and 'town' life. Yet he reacted against the Malinowskian notion that social change was all about culture contact, and sought instead the complex dynamics of African society. He also reacted against functionalist assumptions that African societies were essentially stable, and he set about the study of social action, differences between rules and behaviour, contradictions in social norms, the anatomy of conflict, and the means of dispute settlement. In general works such as *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (1955) and *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society* (1965), as well as in a number of specific ethnographies, Gluckman examined the relations between stability and change, the ways in which order is maintained in stateless societies, and the role of conflict in creating order. This last issue was one on which he expressed somewhat different views in different publications, but his classic statements in *Custom and Conflict* assert that cross-cutting ties of loyalty strengthen the social order, that social cohesion results from conflict itself, and even that 'the whole system depends on the existence of conflicts in smaller sub-systems' (Gluckman 1955: 21). Gluckman's interest in indigenous African law, including the ways in which disputes are handled, also brought into social anthropology new methodological tools, notably the 'extended case study'.

Perhaps contrary to his own theory of conflict, Gluckman's charismatic leadership fostered a climate of intellectual engagement and general agreement on the central aims of anthropology at Manchester. It also engendered a dread on the part of outsiders when they went to present seminar papers there, that they would be savaged by Gluckman and a room full of his followers. This sense even continued after Gluckman's death in 1975, when his successors were known, on occasion, to kick the wastepaper basket in disapproval of the ideas of visiting speakers.

Turner was a Scotsman transplanted to England, Central Africa, and, from 1964, the United States. In later life he studied pilgrimage in Mexico, Brazil, and Ireland, but he is best known for his research on the symbolism and rituals of the Ndembu people of what is now Zambia. Turner's *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (1957) has been called 'a centerpiece for understanding the Manchester School's principal currents of ideas, orientations, and empirical concerns' (Werbner 1984: 176). It is built around the idea of 'social drama', with pre-crisis and post-crisis phases. This notion, borrowed in part from the famous study of rites of passage by Arnold van Gennep (1960 [1909]), became a recurrent theme in Turner's rich corpus on Ndembu ritual (cf., e.g., Turner 1967) and his later work on pilgrimage (e.g., Turner and Turner 1978). Others (e.g., Myerhoff 1978) have developed the idea of social dramas further, though Turner's work remains the classic foundation of the 'social drama' approach.

In the ritual process, participants pass through a *liminal phase* (as van Gennep termed it, after the Latin for 'threshold'), which is characterized by what Turner called *communitas*. *Communitas* is an 'unstructured' realm of 'social structure', where often the normal ranking of individuals is reversed or the symbols of rank inverted. In structural terms (and there is a clear sense in which Turner was *the* structuralist of the Manchester School), one might envisage it as a realm which is simultaneously one thing and not that thing (as in the Venn diagram, figure 6.1)

The diverse interests of Turner and Gluckman provided the Manchester School with a range of pursuits. United by their focus on Central Africa, by their basic theoretical assumptions and, at least at first, by their institutional affiliations, the school they led presented British anthropology with a challenge when perhaps it most needed it. While Gluckman leaned towards the functionalism of the past (even in his concern with rejecting functionalist dogma), Turner turned to structuralist interests in the systematic relations between symbolic aspects of culture. Even Marxism was present in the school – quite apart from the alleged Communist sympathies of Gluckman and others. Specifically, Peter Worsley's (1956) re-analysis of Fortes' (1945) study of lineage organization among

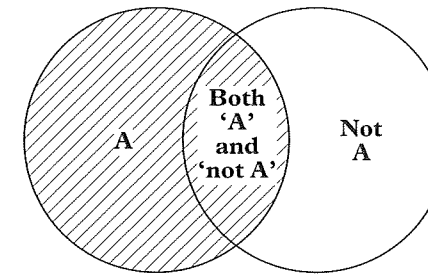


Figure 6.1 The liminal phase as both 'A' and 'not A'

the Tallensi of Ghana emphasized control by elders over the productive power of the land. In contrast, Fortes' functionalist ethnography had stressed merely the continuity of the lineage through association with ancestors buried in the land.

Marxist approaches

In the 1960s a new school was emerging: Marxism. It had a profound influence over the next two decades, especially in France, and also in Britain, South Africa, India, The Netherlands, Scandinavia, Canada, and Latin America. For obvious political reasons, it had less impact in the United States. Even evolutionist Leslie White, though influenced by Marxist thought, remained largely silent on explicitly Marxist issues and debates.

While Marxist ideas had been the established anthropological orthodoxy in the Soviet Union from the 1920s, the more liberal French version offered something different. French Marxists, like Russian ones, were often politically Communist; but they were decidedly more open to theoretical ideas from French structuralism, British functionalism, and non-Marxist materialist approaches such as Steward's cultural ecology. Some writers stuck close to Marx (see especially Marx 1965 [1857–58]), with interests in land, labour, capital, and the like. Others sought to apply the spirit of Marx to questions he had never looked at. For example, one subject of debate in the 1960s and 1970s was whether in West Africa gender and age hierarchy could be analysed in the same manner that classical Marxism analysed class hierarchy (see, e.g., Terray 1972 [1969]; Kahn 1981). Marxists seemed to argue with each other on such matters as much as they argued with non-Marxists, who opposed them at a much deeper level. Nevertheless, a number of widely agreed ideas emerged, and some remain prominent even in our post-Marxist age, both among an-

thropologists who follow non-Marxist materialist approaches and among those interested in the anthropology of colonialism and imperialism.

Key concepts in Marxist anthropology

The most important of all concepts in Marxist anthropology is *mode of production*, based on Karl Marx's ideas in *Capital*, Vol. I (see especially Marx 1974 [1867]: 667–724). The classic commentary on its usage is that by Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst (1975: 9). They define a mode of production as 'an articulated combination of relations and forces of production structured by the dominance of the relations of production'. The notion of 'articulation' here refers to the interaction between these elements, although in Marxist theory more generally it usually refers to an interaction between different modes of production. Hindess and Hirst (1975: 9–10) go on to say that the relations of production 'define a specific mode of appropriation of surplus-labour and the specific form of social distribution of the means of production corresponding to that mode of appropriation of surplus-labour'. Surplus-labour, in their view, is found in all societies, but different societies 'appropriate' it differently. For example, primitive communist and advanced socialist societies appropriate it collectively, whereas in feudal and capitalist societies it is appropriated by classes of non-labourers (i.e., by feudal lords and modern capitalists respectively). Forces of production involve 'the mode of appropriation of nature' (1975: 10). Means of production are simply those economic activities such as food-gathering, horticulture, or pastoralism which individuals practise. Hindess and Hirst (1975: 11) sum up their definitions with the comment that 'there can be no definition of the relations or of the forces of production independently of the mode of production in which they are combined'.

Marxist anthropologists have debated, for example, whether there is a distinctive 'foraging' mode of production, or whether foraging as a means of production is included within a larger mode of production involving other means of production which have similar effects (see, e.g., Lee 1981 [1980]). Those who hold the latter view might argue that what they call the 'domestic' mode, that is, where the household is the unit of producing and distributing goods, characterizes not only foraging societies but also small-scale horticultural ones. Beyond this on a scale of evolving complexity, there are 'lineage', 'feudal', and 'capitalist' modes of production.

On another front, Marx made a distinction between the *base* or *infrastructure* and its *superstructure* (e.g., Godelier 1975). The base consists of elements of a social formation (the Marxist term for 'society') which are closely related to production, such as subsistence technology, settlement

patterns, and exchange relations. The superstructure consists of things which are more distant from production, such as ritual and religious belief. Of course, there may be a connection between production and religion, but it is not usually as direct as that between, say, production and politics. In fact by the 1970s, if not earlier, Marxists and cultural ecologists were coming to similar conclusions on a number of issues. Steward (1955) called the Marxist base the 'cultural core' (that related to exploitation of the environment and upon which, he argued, cultural evolution operated). Likewise, the Marxist idea of superstructure resembled Steward's idea of the 'total culture' (upon which cultural diffusion operated).

Yet another distinction common in Marxist anthropology is that between *centre* and *periphery*. The centre, in this sense, is the place where power is exercised, such as the colonial or national capital. The periphery is one of the places affected by decisions made at the centre, such as a rural area where peasants produce for redistribution or trade from the centre. According to Immanuel Wallerstein (1974–89), a centre–periphery relation has characterized economic relations on a global scale since the end of the fifteenth century.

In the 1970s and 1980s, interest grew in the *reproduction* of society through processes involving technology and labour (see, e.g., Meillassoux 1972), and in the articulation of (or interaction between) different modes of production (e.g., Friedman 1975). Interest turned equally towards arguing the rightful place of Marxist theory in anthropology generally (e.g., Kahn and Llobera 1981; Bloch 1983).

The structural Marxism of Godelier

While non-Marxist political anthropologists have sometimes argued an evolutionary trajectory, from band societies to clan-based societies, to chiefdoms, to states, Marxists have always emphasized the significance of economic relations in determining political structures. Still, Marxists differed from each other in how they incorporated non-economic issues, in other words, how important they saw the superstructure.

Structural Marxists regarded superstructure as fundamental. Some even reinterpreted superstructural elements (such as religion or kinship) as being infrastructural, in that they were seen as embedded in a socio-economic framework rather than constructed on top of it. The most prominent member of this school, Maurice Godelier carried out ethnographic research in Melanesia and has long actively undertaken and encouraged research in traditional realms of anthropology. His approach drew on conventional structuralism as well as on Marxism, though his overriding concern in the 1970s was with the description and analysis of

modes of production (see, e.g., Godelier 1975; 1977 [1973]). As hinted above, Godelier's structural Marxism also built on cultural ecology and paralleled it in seeking an understanding of relations between environment, technology, and society. The difference was that structural Marxism emphasized relations of production (i.e., social relations) over either technologies or individual activities. Societies as bounded universes remained the units of analysis, though they were called by their Marxian term, 'social formations'. Likewise, culture became 'ideology', and the economy was the 'mode of production'. Structural Marxism had much in common with functionalism too, as both emphasized the synchronic and the functional qualities of ritual, lineage organization, and so on.

Even mainstream economic anthropologists were influenced by the trend. Marshall Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics* (1974 [1972]) is an example. An American anthropologist much taken with Marxism during a year in France, Sahlins eventually repudiated the structural Marxist tradition on the grounds that it gave too little emphasis to culture and therefore had little analytical power to explain the workings of pre-capitalist societies (see Sahlins 1976). Yet it was through *Stone Age Economics* that the notion of the 'domestic mode of production' (where the household is the dominant unit of production and exchange) became popularized.

Another American influenced by but opposed to new directions in Marxist anthropology, Marvin Harris (e.g., 1979: 216–57), built his attack on the notion that the structural Marxists were too structuralist and not materialist enough. Harris' 'cultural materialism' – labelled 'vulgar materialism' in an important Marxist attack by Jonathan Friedman (1974) – sought to reduce culture to virtually pure material forces. Harris argued that even religious taboos, such as that against eating cattle in Hindu India, have a material basis. In this case, it is the preservation of such animals for use in ploughing. Thus, Harris argued, ecological constraints prevail over all others; and culture is essentially a product of material forces (see chapter 3; see also Harris 1977).

The 'land and labour' Marxism of Meillassoux

Claude Meillassoux was critical of Lévi-Straussian structuralism (and perhaps implicitly structural Marxism) for leaving aside the question of exploitation and the material causes of transformation in kinship systems. He distinguishes societies in which land is the subject of labour from those in which it is the instrument of labour. In his view, the domestic economy ensures the reproduction of labour and therefore contributes to the existing power structures. For him, it is control over the means of

reproduction (that is, over women) which is most important, not control over the means of production *per se* (see, e.g., Meillassoux 1972; 1981 [1975]). For this reason, Meillassoux's work is often used in feminist anthropology as a starting point for debate.

However, feminists have levelled a number of critiques (see, e.g., H. L. Moore 1988: 49–54). Women are largely invisible in his discussion, though they are central to it. Where they are visible, they form a homogeneous category and are taken out of the essential kinship context in which they belong ('woman' as wife is not the same as 'woman' as mother-in-law). Also, he seems to conflate the notion of biological reproduction with that of social reproduction; and ironically, he seems to see women mainly as reproducers of the labour force rather than as labourers or producers (see, e.g., Edholm, Harris, and Young 1977; Harris and Young 1981).

In fact Meillassoux's Marxism has strong functionalist elements, as well as relying to a great extent on technology as a determinant of mode of production. His arguments reflect his own ethnography, on the Guro of the Ivory Coast (see Meillassoux 1964), perhaps more than is generally the case among Marxists. He argues that capitalism does not destroy pre-capitalist modes of production but rather, maintains them 'in articulation' with a capitalist mode.

Political economy and globalization theory

A third school, still influential, is that of political economy, derived in part from the 'world systems' approach of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974–89) and the 'underdevelopment' ideas of Andre Gunder Frank (e.g., 1967). Whereas structural Marxism and interests in land, labour, and capital within small-scale societies were predominantly European interests, political economy as a school of thought took hold more in North America and the Third World. The influence of this school in Britain is also apparent in the shift in focus, during the late 1970s and 1980s, to large 'regional systems' (e.g., Hart 1982). Unlike other Marxist schools within anthropology, the political economy school stresses history. It also opposes the notion, implied in Meillassoux's work, that capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production can simply co-exist in a state of 'articulation'.

Wallerstein's idea of a 'world system' which links the economies of the smallest societies to the powerful capitalist economies of the West and the Far East has proved a powerful one. Relations between these economies are unequal, in that developed capitalist ones benefit at the expense of the others. The idea has influenced anthropologists to look in similar

directions (see, e.g., Kahn 1980; Wolf 1982), and the relation between the 'global' and the 'local' in cultural as well as economic spheres has become a widespread interest in the discipline. The problem, for mainstream anthropology, is that the political-economy view is outsider-centred. Their 'centre' is remote from the people who should be the objects (if not indeed the subjects) of study. Some writers in the 'subaltern studies' tradition (see, e.g., Guha and Spivak 1988) have put my general point here rather more strongly.

There is no doubt that the capitalist world system has had a global impact over the last few centuries, and little doubt that this impact is on the increase. Commentators have tended to view the phenomenon in Marxist or, more broadly, in evolutionist terms, where the capitalist system represents an evolutionary stage in which this type of society dominates those of the developing world. However, the idea of the 'world system' or 'globalization theory' can also be seen as a diffusionist notion. It is a modern (indeed a 'postmodern') version of grand diffusionism, where the global culture of the West stands in relation to the rest of the world as Elliot Smith and Perry believed Egypt had once stood (chapter 4). Ironically, there is a debate now emerging in archaeology about whether Wallerstein was correct to see the world system as developing only in the last few centuries, or whether it is more useful to consider the impact of prehistoric trade links too. There are also hints of this in the Kalahari debate, as we shall see shortly (cf. Shott 1992).

Three ethnographic debates

Several fierce debates have emerged in processual and Marxist anthropology. Here I want to look briefly at three, which to my mind provide illuminating illustrations of the interplay between the theoretical perspectives touched on in this chapter.

Friedman versus Leach: the political economy of the Kachin

Sir Edmund Leach was an intellectual eccentric who eventually became both an establishment figure and an inspiration to young anthropologists of his day. After training as an engineer, he studied under Sir Raymond Firth and did fieldwork in Sri Lanka (Leach 1961a), Burma (e.g., 1954), and elsewhere. He is usually thought of as one who turned against functionalism at an early date and introduced French structuralism into British anthropology. However, like Turner he advocated broadly a mixture of process and structure as constituting the foundations of social life, and it is his processualism which is our focus here.

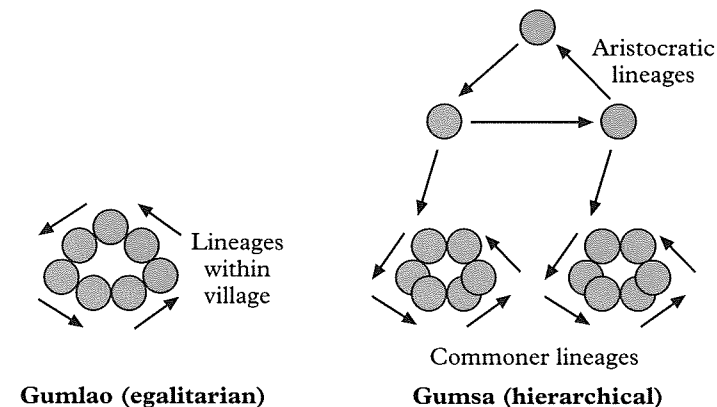


Figure 6.2 Marital alliance between Kachin lineages

Consider Leach's book *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954) and related work on the Kachin (notably Leach 1961b [1945/1951/1961]: 28-53, 54-104, 114-23). Before Leach, pre-functionalist ethnographic accounts of the Kachin described them as having an essentially uniform culture and social organization. The functionalist anthropology prevalent when Leach wrote his book assumed a balanced equilibrium, and it took for granted the existence of a single social system within which the ethnographer would work. In contrast to both, Leach focuses on the different structural arrangements in the kinship and political systems of two closely related groupings of clans, one system being egalitarian (*gumlao*) and the other a hierarchical version of the same thing (*gumsa*). A third, also hierarchical system impinges on these, namely that of the Tai-speaking Shan.

Another consideration with regard to kinship is that while *gumsa* is a hypogamous system (women marrying down), the Shan system is hypergamous (women marrying up). In *gumlao*, marriage is in a circle, with each man owing deference to his in-laws but no one clan having absolute priority over the others. This is transformed in the *gumsa* system into a relation of dominance, as men from superior groups give their sisters in marriage to members of lower-status groups. An idealized model is illustrated in figure 6. 2, where arrows indicate the direction of movement of women in marriage. Since bridewealth passes from the groom's family to the bride's, men in higher-status groups end up with fewer potential wives but greater wealth (indeed it seems that wealth was more important than status to those involved). Some marry Shan Chinese, and some become monks. Some Kachin even 'become' Shan.

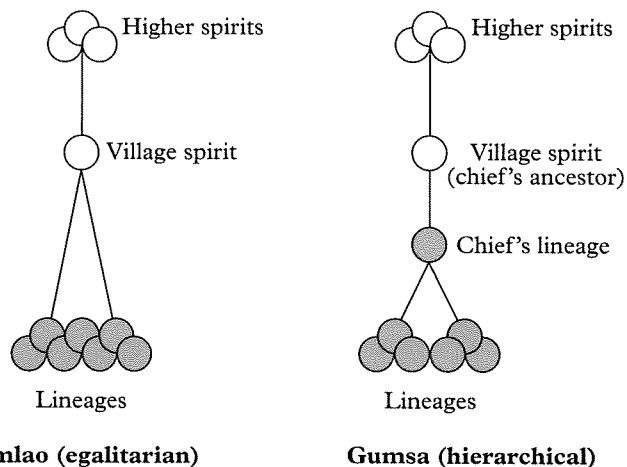


Figure 6.3 Relations between Kachin and their ancestral spirits

For Leach, kinship, class, history, and ideology work together in a complex framework, but not one which would readily be understood by the followers of Radcliffe-Brown or even Malinowski. Leach (1954: 292) summed up his efforts as follows: 'I am not concerned with *average* Kachin behaviour; I am concerned with the relationship between actual Kachin behaviour and ideal Kachin behaviour. And with this in mind I have tried to represent Kachin cultural variations as differing forms of compromise between two conflicting systems of ethics.'

In a now classic library re-study, Jonathan Friedman (1975; cf. 1996 [1979]) analysed Leach's ethnographic data in a structural Marxist perspective, and with particular attention to ecological factors which cause the oscillation and transformation of Kachin social structures. In Friedman's model, instead of the simpler Marxist notion of base and superstructure, we get a more complex four-tier model: the *ecosystem*, which constrains *productive forces*, which constrain *relations of production*, which in turn dominate both the ecosystem and the *superstructure*. Friedman emphasized relations between economics, kinship, and religion in arguing that surplus leads both to feasting and to the accumulation of wives, which entail respectively a gain in prestige and the birth of children, and in turn a higher rank, leading ultimately to the acquisition of prestations and more surplus. A wealthy lineage head would hold feasts for the entire village and thus be seen to have greater influence with the spirit world. This results in the setting apart of such a lineage, as it comes to be recognized as 'closer' to the spirits through its ancestor (as in figure 6.3). Thus the egalitarian *gumlao* system evolves into a *gumsa* one through a

sequential combination of environmental, economic, kinship, and religious factors.

In Friedman's model, the social processes described by Leach have been amplified, and Leach's structural-processual framework opened to a framework which emphasizes power and productive relations to a much greater extent. Leach was sceptical of Friedman's Marxist reading of his work, but its existence highlights the potential for multiple interpretations. These may be especially appropriate in the analysis of dynamic social frameworks such as that of Burma in the period Leach described (which is until the Second World War). Marxist anthropology always worked best when it tackled real historical and ethnographic cases, and in this case its interplay with processualism was essential for its insight into Kachin society and social action.

Wilmsen versus Lee: Kalahari history and ethnography

The Kalahari debate concerns the degree to which the Bushmen or San of Southern Africa represent part of a regional or global economic system. It had been simmering for some time, but erupted with a vengeance in response to Marxist-influenced archaeologist-anthropologist Edwin Wilmsen's *Land Filled with Flies* (1989). Ecological-Marxist anthropologist Richard Lee (e.g., 1979: 401-31) and others had long described relations between Bushmen and Bantu-speaking cattle-herders, but they had de-emphasized them and placed them in a context of 'social change'. The real problem is: when does 'traditional' life end and 'social change' begin?

The core of the debate consists of a series of articles and short comments published in the journal *Current Anthropology* (especially Solway and Lee 1990; Wilmsen and Denbow 1990; Lee and Guenther 1991) and one in *History in Africa* (Lee and Guenther 1993). More crucial, though, are the differing assumptions behind Lee's and Wilmsen's ethnographies. Lee often admits that his interest in Bushmen has come from his desire to reconstruct something of the foraging way of life of early humanity:

Foraging was a way of life that prevailed during an important period of human history. The modern foragers do offer clues to the nature of this way of life, and by understanding the adaptations of the past we can better understand the present and the basic human material that produced them both. (Lee 1979: 433)

Lee takes foraging for granted, as a basic and adaptive way of life, an assumption which is anathema to the hard-line revisionists. He also takes for granted the fact that Bushman societies are relevant units of analysis, in spite of the presence of members of other groups within their territories

and at their waterholes. Although Bushmen and their cattle-herding neighbours do interact, they are seen as occupying different ecological niches.

Wilmsen (1989) argues that the political economy of the Kalahari is the best unit of analysis, and that this unit has been a meaningful construct since livestock were first introduced to the fringe areas of the Kalahari a thousand years ago. The apparent isolation of Bushmen observed by Lee and others, he says, is a product of the white domination of Southern Africa since the late nineteenth century:

Their appearance as foragers is a function of their relegation to an underclass in the playing out of historical processes that began before the current millennium and culminated in the early decades of this century. The isolation in which they are said to be found is a creation of our view of them, not of their history as they lived it. (Wilmsen 1989: 3)

Traditionalists like Lee emphasize cultural continuity and the cultural integrity of Bushman groups. They see Bushmen as the inheritors of ancient indigenous environmental knowledge, hunting techniques, kinship practices, religious beliefs, and so on. Revisionists like Wilmsen de-emphasize these aspects in favour of greater concern with the integration of Southern African politico-economic structures taken as a whole. The irony is that both sides claim intellectual descent from Marx, and both sides see their approach as one which explains social processes.

Obeyesekere versus Sahlins: the death of Captain Cook

The third debate concerns an intriguing historical problem: why, on 14 February 1779, did Hawaiian warriors kill Captain James Cook upon his return to the islands? To date, each of the two main players, Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere, has contributed some half a dozen publications on the problem (see especially Sahlins 1981; 1985: 104–35; 1995; Obeyesekere 1992), and other protagonists and commentators on the debate are emerging (see, e.g. Borofsky 1997; Kuper 1999: 177–200).

Sahlins, a senior American anthropologist with a specialization in Polynesia, takes an essentially structuralist (or structural-processualist) point of view. He argues that Cook was the victim of mistaken identity and ritual sacrifice. Cook first arrived in the islands in January 1778 at the height of the annual celebrations for their fertility god Lono, and he came back a year later. The Hawaiians, in Sahlins' view, took him for Lono, and duly honoured him as their god. Shortly thereafter Cook set off to continue his expedition, but a storm forced him to turn back. This time his return was decidedly unexpected. More importantly, it was precisely

at the wrong time of year for the god. A taboo was in effect, with the change in ritual cycle, and the king had gone inland. Cook's landing and his search for the king led to skirmishing between his marines and the islanders and the death of one of the local chiefs. This action was an apparent reversal of Hawaiian ritual, and 'Lono' had to die.

Obeyesekere, a Sri Lankan anthropologist of religion (based at Princeton), explains away Sahlins' argument as a Western imperialist myth. He argues that the Hawaiians treated Cook as a chief, not as a god. To Obeyesekere, Cook was a 'civilizer' who became a 'savage' when his expedition went wrong. What is more, to Obeyesekere, Sahlins is a myth-maker building his myth of Cook on a wrongful supposition that the Hawaiians had a structuralist mentality, whereas in fact they were pragmatic rationalists. Like Sahlins, Obeyesekere is interested in the relations between culture and historical process, but the focus is entirely different. In a sense, Obeyesekere's focus is on Western culture and the process of exploration and colonization, whereas Sahlins' focus is decidedly on Hawaiian culture and the Hawaiian ritual process.

What is at stake here is not just historical fact. Nor is it merely how to interpret the evidence to come up with a 'correct' retrospective ethnography of eighteenth-century Hawaii. The crux of the matter is two-fold: it relates first to the opposition between 'us' and 'them', which Obeyesekere is trying to break down, and secondly to the issue of who can speak for whom. Is Obeyesekere a legitimate, surrogate 'native voice' because he comes from a culture which was, like the Hawaiian one, the subject of colonial oppression? Or does he go too far in denying Sahlins, with his apparent mastery of the relevant sources, the ability to come up with a competent analysis?

These questions, taken much more broadly, form the theme of the postmodern critique which in the 1980s supplanted Marxism as the leading challenge to traditional lines of enquiry. Embedded in them is one of the central debates of anthropology in our time. Indeed, many would argue that it is *the* anthropological debate of all time. Can anthropology provide objective insights into alien cultures and their social action, or is the discipline forever doomed to implicit subjectivity which ought to be made explicit?

Concluding summary

Action-centred, processual, and Marxist perspectives represent the culmination of the 'social' tradition in anthropology. These perspectives, especially Marxism, have elements of all the preceding ones. Transactionalism, for example, has its roots in Malinowski's ideas on social

organization, as well as in the sociology of Simmel and Weber. Different approaches within Marxism emphasize variously social evolution, diffusion (globalization), function, structure, and even reflexivity. On the last point, for example, Hindess and Hirst in their 'auto-critique' (1977: 7) suggest that theories exist only in the context in which they are expressed: their Marxist ideas are, in fact, a product of writing about them.

Plainly, transactionalism, processualism, and the various brands of Marxism are complex perspectives. Even the 'Manchester School' consisted of a blend of ideas and a variety of interests, from ritual to legal processes, from symbolic structures to relations between whites and blacks in the British colonies of south-central Africa.

In the remaining chapters we shall turn our attention away from 'social' to 'cultural' traditions. There is, of course, no absolute divide between them. The difference is one of emphasis: whether it is understanding society which should be our paramount goal, or understanding thought, the symbolic world, communication, or the place of the anthropologist and his or her worldview in relation to that of the alien 'other'.

FURTHER READING

The classic transactionalist monograph is Barth's *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* (1959). Diverse Manchester ethnographies include Gluckman's *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (1955) and Turner's *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (1957). An excellent example of structural-Marxist ethnography is Godelier's *The Making of Great Men* (1986 [1982]).

For a review of the Manchester School, see Richard Werbner's 'The Manchester School in South-Central Africa' (1984). Important edited collections respectively on transactionalism and Marxism include Kapferer's *Transaction and Meaning* (1976) and Bloch's *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology* (1975). For commentaries on the Kalahari debate, see, e.g., those by Kuper (1992) and Shott (1992). On the Hawaiian debate, see Borofsky (1997).

For a comprehensive review of theoretical developments from the 1960s to the 1980s, including those in Marxist anthropology, see Sherry Ortner's essay 'Theory in anthropology since the sixties' (1984). Bloch's *Marxism and Anthropology* (1983) provides a history of Marxist ideas in social anthropology. The review by O'Laughlin (1975) gives an overview of approaches in the Marxist tradition, while Legros' (1977) critique of evolutionist cultural ecology presents a good picture of the differences between Marxist and non-Marxist understandings of productive forces.

7 From relativism to cognitive science

Melford Spiro (1992), one of several critics of contemporary cultural relativism, defines three types: descriptive, normative, and epistemological. It is useful to follow his classification, and I shall outline each briefly here.

It is a truism that cultures differ one from another. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, anthropologists since the late nineteenth century have been 'cultural determinists', arguing that culture itself (and not merely biology) regulates the ways in which humans perceive the world. A corollary is that cultural variability will produce different social and psychological understandings among different peoples, and this position is called *descriptive relativism*. Virtually all schools of anthropology entail an acceptance of at least a weak form of descriptive relativism.

Normative relativism goes a step further in asserting that, because cultures judge each other according to their own internal standards, there are no universal standards to judge between cultures. Within normative relativism, we can distinguish two logically distinct forms: *cognitive relativism* and *moral relativism*. Cognitive relativism concerns descriptive propositions, like 'The moon is made of green cheese', or 'Pop music causes headaches.' It holds that in terms of truth and falsehood, all statements about the world are culturally contingent, and therefore non-culturally-contingent statements are simply not possible. In other words, all science is ethnoscience. Moral relativism concerns evaluative propositions, like 'Cats are more beautiful than dogs', or 'It is wrong to eat vegetables.' It holds that aesthetic and ethical judgements must be assessed in terms of specific cultural values rather than universal ones. It follows that in social and psychological terms, both appropriate behaviour and processes of thought (i.e., rationality) must also be judged according to cultural values. Boas and his followers, and to a lesser extent Evans-Pritchard and his, all espoused tenets of normative, and especially cognitive, relativism.

Epistemological relativism takes as its starting point the strongest possible form of descriptive relativism. It combines an extreme cultural-determin-