

Small Places, Large Issues

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Concordia University

‘In almost three decades since it was first published, this book has evolved with its subject, magnificently corroborating its author’s thesis, that the best anthropology addresses timeless themes of the human condition through a relentless focus on the contemporary. In a novelty-obsessed age, Eriksen’s encyclopaedic tour of comparative anthropology teaches us to build on classical foundations. This is not just another book in the library of anthropology; it is an entire anthropological library in one book.’

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Small Places, Large Issues

An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology

FIFTH EDITION

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

PLUTO  PRESS

First published 1995
Revised fifth edition published 2023 by Pluto Press
New Wing, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 1LA
and Pluto Press, Inc.
1930 Village Center Circle, 3-834, Las Vegas, NV 89134

www.plutobooks.com

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Illustrations by Maria Kartveit

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 4819 3 Paperback

ISBN 978 0 7453 4820 9 PDF

ISBN 978 0 7453 4818 6 EPUB

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

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Series Preface

As people around the world confront the inequality and injustice of new forms of oppression, as well as the impacts of human life on planetary ecosystems, this book series asks what anthropology can contribute to the crises and challenges of the twenty-first century. Our goal is to establish a distinctive anthropological contribution to debates and discussions that are often dominated by politics and economics. What is sorely lacking, and what anthropological methods can provide, is an appreciation of the human condition.

We publish works that draw inspiration from traditions of ethnographic research and anthropological analysis to address power and social change while keeping the struggles and stories of human beings centre stage. We welcome books that set out to make anthropology matter, bringing classic anthropological concerns with exchange, difference, belief, kinship and the material world into engagement with contemporary environmental change, capitalist economy and forms of inequality. We publish work from all traditions of anthropology, combining theoretical debate with empirical evidence to demonstrate the unique contribution anthropology can make to understanding the contemporary world.

Holly High and Joshua O. Reno

Preface to the Fifth Edition

When I first started to take notes for this book in 1992, it did not occur to me that it would follow me, like a shadow, for three decades and possibly more. This is the fifth English edition, but there are also to date (2023) four Norwegian editions which are not identical to the Pluto book. As a result of many years of whittling, rewriting, tweaking, updating and changing priorities, *Small Places* is slowly becoming a palimpsest, a text in continuous renewal where some of the older parts have been erased to make way for the new, but which can still be glimpsed through the layers.

On the whole, this is a fairly conventional introduction to social and cultural anthropology. As the chapter titles indicate, the book does not represent an attempt to reinvent or revolutionise the subject. What I aim to do is simply to introduce the main tools of the craft, the theoretical discussions, the key figures, the main subject-areas and a representative selection of empirical fields studied by anthropologists. By 'conventional', incidentally, I do not necessarily mean 'boring'. (Innovation is not always a good thing. Who wants to book an innovative dentist? Or to fly with an innovative pilot keen to explore alternative knowledge systems?)

Twenty-first-century anthropology is a global discipline, but it is unevenly distributed across the globe. English is the dominant language of anthropological discourse, more so today than in its early days, but important research is also being carried out in other languages, from Russian and Japanese to Portuguese and Spanish. It is beyond my abilities to do justice to all these national traditions of anthropology, but I have made some attempts. It remains a fact, though, that this book is mainly written from a vantage-point in Anglophone and Francophone anthropology. For many years, it was common to distinguish between a British 'social' and an American 'cultural' anthropology. Today, this boundary is blurred, and although I sometimes mention the distinction, the book is deliberately subtitled with 'social and cultural anthropology in a bid to overcome an ultimately unproductive boundary.

The most controversial aspect of this book may be the prominence given to classic anthropological research in several of the chapters. In my view, it is not only a great advantage to be familiar with the classic studies in order to understand later trends and debates, but I also remain convinced that a sound grasp of mid-twentieth-century anthropology is essential for doing good research in the twenty-first century. Since many students no longer systematically read classic monographs and articles, the capsule reviews provided here may also give an

understanding of the context of contemporary research – its intellectual origins and theoretical debates on which it elaborates. We contemporary anthropologists are dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants, and their work deserves to be known, even if superficially, in order to understand properly what anthropological researchers are doing now. The general development of this book, both at the theoretical and at the empirical level, moves from simple to increasingly complex models and sociocultural environments – from the social person to the global information society. The book is a stand-alone work, but it should also work as a companion volume to the original texts.

This book introduces both the subject-matter of social anthropology and an anthropological way of thinking. It is my conviction that the comparative study of society and culture is a fundamental intellectual activity which is indispensable for other forms of engagement with the world to be productive. Through the study of different societies, we learn not only about other people's worlds, but also about ourselves. In a sense, anthropologists excel in making the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar through comparison. For this reason, comparisons with modern urban societies are implicit throughout, even when the topic is Melanesian gift-giving, Malagasy ritual or Nuer politics. In fact, the whole book may, perhaps, be read as an exercise in comparative thinking. In order to fully grasp an aspect of one's own society, it needs to be understood comparatively. If your field of study is the role of kinship in cabin culture in Norway, it helps to know something about dwelling and kinship in Melanesia.

* * *

This fifth edition of *Small Places* has undergone a far more radical revision than the earlier editions. The chapter structure has been reshuffled from Chapter 11 onwards. It seemed sensible and logical to deal with symbolic anthropology (religion and knowledge) in one segment (Chapters 11 and 12), political anthropology in another (Chapters 13 to 15), similarly with economic anthropology (Chapters 16 and 17), and allow these to segue into the anthropology of contemporary complexity. New chapters about climate anthropology and medical anthropology have also been added.

Three of the most important changes to this edition are the attention paid to (a) the way in which human lives everywhere are now saturated with information technology, (b) the fact that climate change, environmental transformation and the relationship between humanity and external nature have become central preoccupations, and (c) the rise of new forms of identity politics – from conservative nationalism to Islamism. A fourth tendency is the continued, and intensified, debate about decolonisation of anthropological knowledge, which – as we shall see – can refer to several quite distinct projects. Several of the chapters have been partly rewritten and restructured in order to adjust to and

contribute to the conversation about these and other changes in the world. Anthropology concerns the human condition and the nature of social life and cultural meaning in general, but it also concerns the world as it is today, and the best research combines these two aspects.

I have also emphasised the strengths of social and cultural anthropology as ways of knowing more strongly in this edition than in the earlier ones. The interpretive, qualitative research methods of anthropology have increasingly been challenged by alternative, highly articulate and publicly visible ways of accounting for the unity and diversity of humanity. On the one hand, humanistic disciplines (sometimes lumped together as ‘cultural studies’) and, on the other hand, approaches based on natural sciences, counting and measuring propose answers to some of the questions typically raised in social anthropology – concerning, for example, the nature of society, ethnic complexity, kinship, ecology and so on. In this situation, neither antagonistic competition nor the merging of disciplines into a ‘super-discipline’ of sociocultural science comes across as an attractive option; instead, I advocate openness, dialogue and interdisciplinarity. Owing to the prevalence of competing claims, however, it is necessary to state explicitly what it is that the methods, theory and body of research in anthropology have to offer in studies of the contemporary world. I argue that credible accounts of culture and society should have an ethnographic component, and that proper knowledge of traditional or otherwise ‘remote’ societies greatly enhances the understanding of phenomena such as tourism, ethnic violence, climate change or migration. If social anthropology does have a bright future, it is not in spite of, but because of global change.

* * *

As mentioned, when I began drafting the first chapters three decades ago, a happy young man just having emerged from his PhD rite of passage, it was beyond my wildest imagination that I should still be working on the book in 2023. Having said this, I am really very pleased to have done so, and the present revision has the additional, personal benefit of reminding the middle-aged Eriksen why the young Eriksen, among other things, could be so exasperating. Perhaps it is precisely the conventional structure of the book that has passed the test of time; whatever the case may be, it is a privilege to be allowed once more to develop, and not least to update and try to improve, my vision of anthropology through a fairly comprehensive text like this.

Over the years, I have received many suggestions and comments on the earlier editions of the books from people all over the world, and for this I am grateful. I see the production and dissemination of knowledge as an essentially collective endeavour, as a gift economy of the kind described especially in Chapter 16. This, then, is my belated return gift to my teachers, students, senior colleagues,

translators into other languages and everybody who has cared to read the book and give me their comments and questions. Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude, accumulated over many years, to Pluto Press, and especially Anne Beech, for her unflinching support of my work for many years now.

Oslo, spring 2023



1

Anthropology: Comparison and Context

[Anthropology] is less a subject matter than a bond between subject matters. It is in part history, part literature; in part natural science, part social science; it strives to study men both from within and without; it represents both a manner of looking at man and a vision of man – the most scientific of the humanities, the most humanist of sciences.

— Eric Wolf

Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.

(I am a human; nothing human is foreign to me.)

— Terence (c. 195–159 BCE)

Studying anthropology is like embarking on a journey which turns out to be much longer than you had initially planned, possibly because the plans were somewhat open-ended to begin with and the terrain turned out to be bumpier and more diverse than the map suggested. Fortunately, like many journeys which take an unexpected turn, this one also has numerous unexpected rewards in store (as well as, it is fair to concede, a few frustrations en route). This journey brings the traveller from the damp rainforests of the Amazon to the cold semi-desert of the Arctic; from the streets of north London to mud huts in the Sahel; from Indonesian paddies to African cities; from coral islands threatened by rising seas to the electronic universes of the smartphone. The aim of this book is dual: to provide useful maps, and to explore some of the main sights (as well as a few less visited sites). Anthropology explores the human condition, but also the world.

In spite of the dizzying geography of this trip, it is chiefly in a different sense that this is a long journey. Social and cultural anthropology has the whole of human society as its area of interest, and tries to understand the ways in which human lives are unique, but also the sense in which we are all similar. When, for example, we study the traditional economic system of the Tiv of central Nigeria, an essential part of the exploration consists in understanding how their economy is connected with other aspects of their society. If this dimension is absent, Tiv economy becomes incomprehensible to anthropologists. If

we do not know that the Tiv traditionally could not buy and sell land, and that they have customarily not used money as a means of payment, it will plainly be impossible to understand how they themselves interpret their situation and how they responded to the economic changes imposed on their society during colonialism in the twentieth century.

Anthropology tries to account for the social and cultural variation in the world, but a crucial part of the anthropological project also consists in conceptualising and understanding similarities between social systems and human relationships. As one of the foremost anthropologists of the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), has expressed it: ‘Anthropology has humanity as its object of research, but unlike the other human sciences, it tries to grasp its object through its most diverse manifestations’ (1983 p. 49). Differently phrased: anthropology is about how different people can be, but it also tries to find out in what sense it can be said that all humans have something in common. It oscillates between the universal and the particular.

Another prominent anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), expresses a similar view in an essay which essentially deals with the differences between humans and animals:

If we want to discover what man amounts to, we can only find it in what men are: and what men are, above all other things, is various. It is in understanding that variousness – its range, its nature, its basis, and its implications – that we shall come to construct a concept of human nature that, more than a statistical shadow and less than a primitivist dream, has both substance and truth. (Geertz 1973, p. 52)

Although anthropologists have wide-ranging and frequently specialised interests, they share a common concern in trying to understand connections both *within* societies and *between* societies. As will become clearer as we proceed through the subject-matter and theories of social and cultural anthropology, there is a multitude of ways in which to approach these problems. Whether you are interested in understanding why and in what sense the Azande of Central Africa believe in witches (and why most Europeans seem to have ceased doing so), why there is greater social inequality in Brazil than in Sweden, how the inhabitants of the densely populated, ethnically complex island of Mauritius prevent violent ethnic conflict, or what has happened to the self-understanding and ways of life among Inuits in recent decades, one or several anthropologists would likely have studied the issue. Whether you are interested in the study of religion, child-raising, political power, economic life, gender, precarious labour or climate change, you may go to the anthropological literature for inspiration and knowledge.

Anthropologists are also concerned with accounting for the interrelationships between different aspects of human existence, and usually investigate these interrelationships by taking their point of departure in a deep engagement with local life in a particular society or a delineated social environment. One may therefore say that anthropology asks large questions, while at the same time it draws its most important insights from small places.

For many years, it was common to see its traditional focus on small-scale non-industrial societies as a distinguishing feature of anthropology, compared with other subjects dealing with culture and society. However, owing to changes in the world and in the discipline itself, this is no longer an accurate description. Any social system can be studied anthropologically and contemporary anthropological research displays an enormous range, empirically as well as theoretically. Some study witchcraft accusations in contemporary Southern Africa, others study diplomacy. Some travel to Melanesia for fieldwork, while others take the bus to the other side of town. Some analyse the economic adaptations of Central American migrants to the USA, while others write about social media in rural China.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION

What, then, is anthropology? Let us begin with the etymology of the concept. It is a compound of two ancient Greek words, 'anthropos' and 'logos', which can be translated as 'human' and 'reason', respectively. So anthropology means 'reason about humans' or, rather, 'knowledge about humans'. Social anthropology would then mean knowledge about humans in societies. Such a definition would cover the other social sciences as well as anthropology, but it may still be useful as a beginning.

The word 'culture', which is also central to the discipline, originates from the Latin *colere*, which means to cultivate. (The word 'colony' has the same etymology.) Cultural anthropology thus means 'knowledge about cultivated humans'; that is, knowledge about those aspects of humanity which are not natural, but which are acquired.

'Culture' has famously been described, by the British theorist Raymond Williams, as 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams 1981, p. 87). In the early 1950s, Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber (1952 [1917]) identified 161 different definitions of culture. It would not be possible to consider the majority of these definitions here; besides, many of them were quite similar. Let us therefore, as a preliminary conceptualisation of culture, define it as those abilities, notions and forms of behaviour persons have acquired as members of society. A definition of this kind, which

is indebted to both the Victorian anthropologist E.B. Tylor (1832–1917) and Geertz, is the most common one among anthropologists.

The concept of culture carries with it a basic ambiguity. On the one hand, every human is equally cultural; in this sense, the term refers to a basic *similarity* within humanity distinguishing us from other animals including the higher primates. On the other hand, people have acquired different abilities, notions, etc., and are thereby *different* because of culture. Culture can, in other words, refer both to basic similarities and to systematic differences between humans.

If this sounds complex, some more complexity is required at this point. In fact, the concept of culture has been contested in anthropology for decades. The influential Geertzian concept of culture, which had been elaborated through a series of essays written in the 1960s and 1970s (Geertz 1973, 1983), depicted a culture both as an integrated whole, as a puzzle where all the pieces were at hand, and as a system of meanings that was largely shared by a population. Culture thus appeared as integrated, shared within the group, and bounded. But what of variations within the group, and what about similarities or mutual influences with neighbouring groups, mixing and creolisation – and what to make of, say, the technologically and economically driven processes of globalisation, which seem to ensure that nearly every community in the world is to varying degrees incorporated in a monetary economy, is exposed to news about football (soccer) world cups, climate change, the war in Ukraine, the Covid-19 pandemic and the concept of human rights? In many cases, it could indeed be said that a national or local culture is neither shared by all or most of the inhabitants, nor bounded. Many began to criticise the overly tidy picture suggested in the dominant concept of culture, from a variety of viewpoints, some of which will be discussed in later chapters. Alternative ways of conceptualising culture were proposed (e.g. as unbounded ‘cultural flows’, or as ‘fields of discourse’, or as ‘traditions of knowledge’), and some even wanted to get rid of the concept altogether (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Hannerz 1992; James et al. 1997; Ortner 1999). As I shall indicate later, the concept of society has been subjected to similar critiques, but problematic as they may be, both concepts still form part of the conceptual backbone of anthropology. In his magisterial review of the culture concept in American cultural anthropology, Adam Kuper (1999, p. 226) notes that ‘[t]hese days, anthropologists get remarkably nervous when they discuss culture – which is surprising, on the face of it, since the anthropology of culture is something of a success story’. The reason for this ‘nervousness’ is not just the contested meaning of the term ‘culture’, but also the fact that culture concepts that are close kin to the classic anthropological one are being exploited politically in exclusionary and often xenophobic identity politics (see Chapters 14–15).

The relationship between culture and society can be described in the following way. Culture refers to the acquired, cognitive and symbolic aspects of existence,

whereas society refers to the social organisation of human life, patterns of interaction and power relationships. The importance of this analytical distinction, which may seem bewildering or irrelevant, will eventually be evident.

A short definition of anthropology may read like this: 'Anthropology is the comparative study of cultural and social life. Its most important method is participant observation, which consists in lengthy fieldwork in a specific social setting.' In other words, anthropology compares aspects of different societies, and continuously searches for interesting dimensions for comparison. If, say, one chooses to write a monograph about a people in the New Guinea highlands, an anthropologist will always describe it with at least some concepts (such as kinship, gender and power) that render it comparable with aspects of other societies.

Further, the discipline emphasises the importance of ethnographic fieldwork, which is a thorough close-up study of a particular social and cultural environment, where the researcher is normally required to spend around a year. Many do shorter fieldwork, but many also return to their original location several times, often spanning decades altogether.

Anthropology has many features in common with the other social sciences and humanities that were developed in Europe and North America between the late eighteenth century and the late nineteenth century. Indeed, a difficult question consists in deciding whether it is a science, narrowly defined, or one of the humanities. Do we search for general laws, as the natural scientists do, or do we instead try to understand and interpret different societies? E.E. Evans-Pritchard in Britain and Alfred Kroeber in the USA, leading anthropologists in their day, both argued around 1950 that anthropology had more in common with history than with the natural sciences. Although their view, considered something of a heresy at the time, has become common since, there are still anthropologists who feel that the subject should aim at a degree of scientific rigour similar to that of the natural sciences.

Some of the implications of this divergence in views will be discussed in later chapters. A few important defining features of anthropology are nevertheless common to all practitioners of the subject: it is comparative and empirical; its most important method of data collection is fieldwork; and it has a truly global focus in that it does not single out one region, or one kind of society, as being more important than others. Unlike sociology, anthropology does not mainly focus on complex state societies; unlike philosophy, it stresses the importance of empirical research; unlike history, it studies society as it is being enacted; and unlike linguistics, it stresses the social and cultural context of speech when looking at language. There are considerable overlaps with other sciences and disciplines, yet anthropology has its distinctive character as an intellectual discipline, based on ethnographic fieldwork, which tries simultaneously to account

for actual cultural variation in the world and to develop a theoretical perspective on culture and society, and what it entails to be a human in the world. Anthropologists do not just discuss with other academics and read their works; they also learn from, and develop theoretical perspectives, in dialogue and sustained interaction with their interlocutors. This is why ethnographic fieldwork (Chapter 3) can be so time-consuming.

THE UNIVERSAL AND THE PARTICULAR

'If each discipline can be said to have a central problem,' writes Carrithers (1992, p. 2), 'then the central problem of anthropology is the diversity of human social life.' Put differently, you could say that anthropological research and theory tries to strike a balance between similarities and differences, and theoretical questions have often revolved around the issue of universality versus relativism: to what extent do all humans, cultures or societies have something in common, and to what extent is each of them unique? Since we employ comparative concepts, that is supposedly culturally neutral terms like 'kinship system', 'gender role', 'system of inheritance', etc., it is implicitly acknowledged that all or nearly all societies have several features in common. However, many anthropologists challenge this view, and claim the uniqueness of each culture or society. To them, the important question concerns how it can be that people, who are born with the same potentials everywhere, become so different in their outlooks, values and ways of life. A strong universalist programme is found in Brown's book *Human Universals* (1991), where the author claims that anthropologists have for generations exaggerated the differences between societies, neglecting the very substantial commonalities that hold humanity together. In this controversial book, Brown draws extensively on an earlier study of 'human universals', which included:

age-grading, athletic sports, bodily adornment, calendar, cleanliness training, community organization, cooking, cooperative labor, cosmology, courtship, dancing, decorative art, divination, division of labor, dream interpretation, education, eschatology, ethics, ethnobotany, etiquette, faith healing, family, feasting, fire making, folklore, food taboos, funeral rites, games, gestures, gift giving, government, greetings ... (Murdock 1945, p. 124, quoted in Brown 1991, p. 70)

And this was just the a-to-g segment of an alphabetical 'partial list'.

Several objections have been raised against this kind of list: that it is trivial and that what matters is to comprehend the unique expressions of such 'universals'; that phenomena such as 'family' have different meanings in different

societies, and thus cannot be said to be 'the same' everywhere; and that this piecemeal approach to society and culture removes the very hallmark of good anthropology, namely the ability to see isolated phenomena (like age-grading or food taboos) in a broad, holistic context. An institution such as arranged marriage means something different in the Punjabi countryside than in the European upper classes. Is it still the same institution? Yes – and no. Brown is right in arguing that anthropologists have been inclined to emphasise the unique at the expense of cross-cultural similarities (and mutual influence between societies), but this does not mean that his approach is the best way of bridging the gap between societies. In later chapters, several other alternatives will be discussed, including structural-functionalism ('all societies operate according to the same general principles'), structuralism ('the human mind has a common architecture expressed through myth, kinship and other cultural phenomena'), neo-Darwinism ('evolution gives the answers to most of the pressing questions'), transactionalism ('the logic of human action is the same everywhere') and materialist approaches ('culture and society are shaped by ecological and/or economic and technological factors').

The tension between the universal and the particular has been immensely productive in anthropology, and it remains an important one. One useful way of framing it, inside and outside anthropology, is by examining the critique of ethnocentrism.

Anthropology and the Good Life

'Anthropologists', it has been said, 'have been far more interested in pathologies and oddities than in normality' (Thin 2008, p. 23). Although Malinowski in his day saw happiness and the pursuit of the good life as worthy topics of comparative research, very few have followed his cue. According to Thin, basing his conclusion on a comprehensive database search, anthropologists appear to have been more interested in basket-weaving than in happiness! Thousands of academic articles have appeared on the topic of health, but they always seem to deal with disease (Thin 2005). (Peace research, similarly, rarely studies peace, but has a lot to say about war and violence.) Giving short shrift to the usually brief, often superficial and romantic (either Hobbesian or Rousseauian) depictions of 'the good life' that appear in anthropological monographs, Thin concludes, in a slightly exasperated vein, that 'the cold-shouldering of well-being by anthropologists is itself a bizarre feature of the culture of academic anthropology, one that begs to be analyzed' (2008, p. 26). It needs to be added that Thin left social anthropology a few years later.

Moving on to propose a research programme for the anthropological study of happiness, or subjective well-being – a topic which has received massive interest in other social sciences, including psychology, recently – Thin argues that every society has notions about what it is to feel good as opposed to feeling bad, and that every society has significant distinctions between 'feeling well' and 'living a

good life'. He then introduces a number of distinctions facilitating comparisons between 'happiness regimes,' such as the contrast between this-worldly and other-worldly notions of the good life, short-term versus long-term orientations, and so on. An emergent anthropology of happiness is evident in journal articles (e.g. Robbins 2013) and a number of edited volumes (e.g. Mathews and Izquierdo, 2008; Kavedžija and Walker 2016), and these books showcase the strengths of anthropological field methods by comparison to questionnaire surveys in studying well-being and ideas of the good life. Much more work is waiting to be done in this burgeoning field.

ETHNOCENTRISM AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM

A society or a cultural world must be understood on its own terms. In saying this, we warn against the application of a shared, universal scale to be used in the evaluation of every society. Such a scale, which is often used, could be defined as longevity, gross domestic product (GDP), democratic rights, official literacy rates, etc. Until quite recently, it was common in European society to rank non-Europeans according to the ratio of their population admitted into a Christian church. Such a ranking of peoples is irrelevant to anthropology. In order to pass judgement on the quality of life in a foreign society, we must first try to understand that society from the inside; otherwise our judgement has limited intellectual interest. What is conceived of as 'the good life' in the society in which we live may not appear attractive at all from a different vantage-point. In order to understand people's lives, it is therefore necessary to try to grasp the totality of their experiential world; and in order to succeed in this project, it is inadequate to look at selected, isolated 'variables'. Obviously, a typical statistical criterion such as 'annual income' is meaningless in a society where neither money nor wage work is common.

This kind of argument may be read as a warning against ethnocentrism. This term (from Greek *'ethnos'*, meaning 'a people') means evaluating other people from one's own vantage-point and describing them in one's own terms. One's own *'ethnos'*, including one's cultural values, is literally placed at the centre. Other peoples would, within this frame of thought, necessarily appear as inferior imitations of oneself. If the Nuer of South Sudan are unable to acquire a mortgage to buy a house, they thus appear to have a less perfect society than ourselves. If the Kwakiutl of the west coast of North America lack electricity, they seem to have a less fulfilling life than we do. If the Kachin of upper Burma reject conversion to Christianity, they are less civilised than Europeans, and if the Bushmen/San people of the Kalahari are illiterate, they come across as less intelligent than us. Such points of view express an ethnocentric attitude which fails to allow other peoples to be different from ourselves on their own terms, and can be a

serious obstacle to understanding. Rather than comparing strangers with our own society and placing ourselves on top of an imaginary pyramid, anthropology calls for an understanding of different societies as they appear *from the inside*. Anthropology cannot provide an objective answer to a question about which societies are better than others, although it offers tools enabling greater precision in asking the question, notably about criteria for evaluating societies against each other. If asked what is the good life, the anthropologist will have to answer that every society has its own definition(s) of it.

Moreover, an ethnocentric bias, which may be less easy to detect than moralistic judgements, may shape the very concepts we use in describing and classifying the world. For example, it has been argued that it may be inappropriate to speak of politics and kinship when referring to societies which themselves lack concepts of 'politics' and 'kinship'. Politics, perhaps, belongs to the ethnographer's society and not to the society under study. To this fundamental problem I shall return later.

Cultural relativism is sometimes posited as the opposite of ethnocentrism. This is the doctrine that societies or cultures are qualitatively different and have their own unique inner logic, and that it is therefore scientifically useless to rank them on a scale. If one places a Bushman group at the bottom of a ladder where the variables are, say, literacy and annual income, this ladder is irrelevant to them if it turns out that the Bushmen do not place a high priority on money and books. It should also be evident that one cannot, within a cultural relativist framework, argue that a society with many cars is 'better' than one with fewer, or that the ratio of coffee shops to population size is a useful indicator of the quality of life. (The Bushmen are also known as the San, since the term 'Bushman' is by some considered racist. However, 'San' is a pejorative term originally used by the neighbouring Khoikhoi, and the term 'Bushman' has in recent years again become common; see Barnard 2007.)

Cultural relativism is an indispensable and unquestionable theoretical premise and methodological rule-of-thumb in our attempts to understand other societies in as unprejudiced a way as possible. As an ethical principle, however, it is probably impossible in practice (and most would say undesirable), since it seems to indicate that everything is as good as everything else, provided it makes sense in a particular social context. Taken to its extreme, it would lead to nihilism. For this reason, it may be timely to stress that many anthropologists are impeccable cultural relativists in their daily work, while they may perfectly well have definite, frequently dogmatic notions about right and wrong in their private lives. In many parts of the world, current debates over minority rights and multiculturalism indicate both the need for anthropological knowledge and the impossibility of defining a simple, scientific solution to these complex problems, which are of a political nature.

Cultural relativism cannot be posited simply as the opposite of ethnocentrism, for the simple reason that it does not in itself contain a moral principle. The principle of cultural relativism in anthropology is a methodological one – it is indispensable for the investigation and comparison of societies without relating them to a misleading developmental scale; but this does not imply that there is no difference between right and wrong. Finally, we should be aware that many anthropologists wish to discover general, shared aspects of humanity or human societies. There is no necessary contradiction between a project of this kind and a cultural relativist approach, even if universalism – emphasising the similarities between humans – is frequently seen as the opposite of cultural relativism. One may well be a relativist at the level of method and description, yet simultaneously argue, at the level of analysis, that a particular underlying pattern is common to all societies or persons. Many would indeed claim that this is precisely what anthropology is about: to discover both the uniqueness of each social and cultural setting *and* the ways in which humanity is one.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Matthew Engelke: *How to Think Like an Anthropologist*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2019.

Kirsten Hastrup: *A Passage to Anthropology*. London: Routledge 1995.

Adam Kuper: *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The British School in the Twentieth Century*, 4th edn. London: Routledge 2014.