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Issues in Sociocultural Anthropology since the Sixties

BRUCE M. KNAUFT

During the last half century, sociocultural anthropology has been increasingly engaged with a broad and growing set of new issues that have both scholarly and practical significance. This timing is not coincidental. During the later 1960s and the 1970s, issues of critical theory and awareness, drawing upon the writing of Karl Marx, increasingly influenced a range of anthropological concerns. In American, English, and French anthropology, the 1960s and 1970s were a time of stock-taking, and often practical engagement with civil and political activism concerning the U.S. war in Vietnam and American imperialism more generally, the civil rights movement, feminism and the women's movement, the Watergate scandal, and increasing awareness of issues such as environmental pollution, the growth of ghettos, and the wealth and health disparities between rich and poor.

As part of this mix, students and faculty of anthropology, especially in the United States, increased, and many new departments were established at American colleges and universities. As such, the concerns of anthropology during the 1960s and 1970s had a strong demographic as well as intellectual and institutional basis, and they influenced the discipline during the following decades and up to the present.

Although the anthropological interests that emerged as a reflection of those concerns did not supplant or overwhelm previous subfields, they did augment and expand them in new ways. Interest in various dimensions or axes of inequality burgeoned, including those of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, and the impact of globalization on consumption, migration, material culture, economic development, and the environment. Though critical interests on the part of disempowered or marginal peoples had long been important to anthropologists, it became increasingly acceptable to make these concerns explicit as a focus of both ethnography and theory. Many of these concerns are the focus of the chapters in the present "Issues" section of this handbook.

This background informed changes in anthropological theory at the time. As summarized by Ortner (1984) in her influential "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," older models of social and cultural stasis and continuity in British, French, and American anthropology were challenged during the 1960s and 1970s by "interest theories" and new developments in Marxism. More broadly, emerging approaches in anthropology were influenced by a variety of new intellectual sources, including the critical perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., 1977). Increasingly at issue were the culturally sanctioned and socially reproduced inequalities that people of different classes, statuses, and identities experienced in practice. The view was emerging, then, that domination and subordination persisted in large part because of larger symbolic systems and social structures, which reproduced and reinforced status inequality and the cultural elements associated with it. On the other hand, as Ortner also stressed, anthropological emphasis on critically exposing inequity needed to be complemented by an understanding of how people continue to find meaning, value, and significance in their social and symbolic worlds, and do so in ways that are not just reflex functions of class or status domination or of resistance.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, anthropological efforts to address these issues reflected an increasingly diverse appreciation of subjectivity, personal experience, and cultural relativity, including in relation to power, disempowerment, and status inequality. As a result, anthropology has been significantly influenced by theoretical approaches that include postmodernism, cultural studies, experimental and reflexive ethnographic writing, postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, and the genealogical perspectives on knowledge and power associated with Michel Foucault (see generally Knauft 1996). As well as becoming more theoretically diverse and relativized in recent decades, the discipline also has become more cautious about asserting explicit systematic relationships between larger theories and ethnographic specifics. As a result, there has been less direct attention to theory and more interest in what might be called "mid-level" connections that focus on the analytic configuration and designation of important ethnographic or comparative issues (see Knauft 2006). This makes the understanding of issues particularly important for contemporary anthropology.

One way to characterize these changes is to view newer issues alongside various topics that presaged or preceded them (as described in the preceding sections of this handbook). For instance, previous views that culture was an enduring organization of meanings and practices have given way increasingly to a more fluid notion of cultural orientations. These are informed by subjective experiences that are continually being negotiated in relation to social stress, inequality, and change. In the process, interest in studying culture in remote, village-based societies has been increasingly complemented by concern with documenting and understanding the shifting dynamics and stresses of contemporary ethnicity and migration in modern urban environments and, indeed, across the entire spectrum of globalized human connection.

Complementing the older economic anthropology arising from the study of small-scale societies, newer issues have emphasized the importance of consumption and

development, which inform and reinforce patterns of inequity in and across world areas. Older considerations of documenting the location or physical setting of cultures and societies has given way to newer concern with dynamic relations of interaction and feedback between people and their environment, and of the environmental impact of state-level societies as well of those smaller in scale.

So, too, against older concerns of a male-dominated anthropology, focused typically on men and with little treatment of women, issues of gender mushroomed in anthropology as both topics of interest and issues of theoretical concern. In the process, anthropology's strong and important understanding of kinship and social organization was significantly recast as members of the discipline increasingly engaged with issues of domestic and community power, status, and inequality, including along lines of gendered difference. During the 1980s and since, following in part on the work of Michel Foucault (e.g., 1984) and of the American anthropologist Gayle Rubin (2012), the study of sexuality became increasingly important in anthropology, both as an axis of inequality and as a focus of alternative, as well as normative or "mainstream," sexuality.

In the area of politics, earlier views of political anthropology, the leadership and functional organization of social control in small-scale societies, have become increasingly engaged with anthropological considerations of political economy, in which political power, economic control or leverage, and cultural orientations are dynamically and fluidly linked. In the process, the idea of a relatively self-contained system of local organization through political control has been greatly expanded by the work of Eric Wolf (e.g., 1982) and others, to consider wide-ranging networks of trade and political influence or control across regions, continents, and, indeed, the world as a whole. As part of these expanded views, sociocultural anthropologists have paid increasing attention to globalization, uneven economic development across world regions, and uneven patterns of production, distribution, and consumption.

It is important to note how the trends that I have mentioned are connected with, and not just separated from, the anthropology that preceded them. Many of the newer issues that inform recent sociocultural anthropology were not absent from previous work. Often, they were presaged by it or, on the other hand, stifled and denied more explicit expression by the academic and social politics of earlier decades.

As is frequently and appropriately emphasized, Franz Boas, often considered to be the institutional founder of American anthropology late in the nineteenth century, had a strong and active role in documenting and presenting the richness and value of Native North American cultures on the one hand, and on the other, in empirically disproving the eugenics and Social Darwinism of American racism (e.g., Boas 1940). Edward Burnett Tylor, who was appointed to the first Professorship of Anthropology in Great Britain in 1896, was a Quaker with much stronger sympathies for non-Western peoples than most of his contemporaries.

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in Melanesian local cultures (e.g., Malinowski 1922). He also developed studies of social change in Africa and was academic mentor to Jomo Kenyatta, the first prime minister of modern-day Kenya. However, there were practical limits to the pursuit of informed critical perspectives within sociocultural anthropology. Anthropologists influenced by Marxist or other critical theoretical perspectives had to be highly circumspect lest they lose their reputations or their jobs. The famous materialist anthropologist, and socialist, Leslie White, the guiding founder of anthropology at the University of Michigan from the 1930s, suffered under the suspicion of being a Communist. His materialist masterwork of cultural development, *The Science of Culture* (White 1949), cited Marx only once, and that in a footnote.

If the topical concerns and theoretical interests of anthropologists have always been diverse, this diversity has been amplified since the 1960s and has directly influenced all of the topics discussed in the chapters in the "Issues" section of this handbook (see Knauft 2006). Implicit or explicit political strictures against topics and perspectives of anthropological study of the sort White confronted have reduced. Increasingly, the constraints that anthropologists face are more practically economic: will a topic or approach be attractive enough to generate research funding, publication, a teaching position, and promotion?

In terms of issues, anthropology's scholarly breadth is reflected in the burgeoning scholarship across diverse world areas and the development of large literatures and even subliteratures for each of the chapters in this section. To these, a range of additional issues could, if space allowed, easily have been added, including health, medical anthropology, nationality, the state, the body, social movements, and science and technology studies. The existence of such additional topics indicates that the issues that have developed in sociocultural anthropology in recent decades admit no definitive list and, happily, have no natural ending point or conclusion; they are open to further elaboration and proliferation.

One way to consider these developments in general terms is to examine the emerging anthropological understanding of sociocultural *diversity*, in relation to sociocultural *difference*, and social and cultural *inequality*. These three arguably form a triangle of mutual interaction that is linked to and informed by political economy on the one hand, and on the other, to cultural orientations, beliefs, and motivations.

By itself, sociocultural diversity can be taken as the natural proliferation of human collective expression. But the working of cultural attribution in conjunction with differential power creates marked assertions of difference. In the same way that the rainbow's spectrum is culturally divided into separately named colors, so skin and body types are culturally divided and projected as discrete races or ethnicities, and so likewise the geographic expanse of global territory is segmented and divided into discrete and mutually exclusive states. None of these divisions has a natural or scientific basis apart from cultural attribution and projection. And yet, these designations—of race, ethnicity, statehood, and so forth—function as key and very powerful social facts of their own in the contemporary world. And these social facts correspond with, and selectively reproduce or reinforce, dramatic patterns of human inequity in and across the world. Understanding the cultural attribution of gender, ethnicity, nationality, and the rest, engages us

with cultural tropes and idioms of assertion as well as the practical context of power or inequality that they alternately inform and are informed by.

Considering the power and political dimensions of cultural attribution and social action is a key step for contemporary anthropology. At the same time, however, it can also be a dehumanizing one, facilitating what Clifford Geertz (1973) called "experience-distant" rather than "experience-near" understanding. To humanize and deeply appreciate contemporary issues in sociocultural anthropology, we need to complement understandings of power and inequity with those of meaning and value as judged by local people themselves. In some cases, these local perceptions may line up with and reinforce those we might adduce on a broader or deeper analytic scale as critical social scientists. For instance, people may be highly aware of and resistant to patterns of inequality or domination. But they may not; or, more commonly, their beliefs and actions may be more contextual and complex, or ambivalent, than either of these simpler alternatives.

On the other hand, appreciating the local dynamics of meaning and value "from the inside," as it were, can be useful or indispensable, but by itself will not necessarily reveal larger patterns of political-economic structure, inequality, or the pattern of cultural dominance that constitutes hegemony. One can appreciate a consumer's explanation and understanding of his or her own consumption, a gendered person's understanding of his or her own gender, a migrant's understanding of his or her own migration, but this will not necessarily reveal larger patterns of socioeconomic, political, and cultural structure, much less inequity.

As such, anthropologists benefit from *both* a more inductive or "grassroots" understanding of culture, from the perspective of people themselves, and from a more deductive or "top-down" view of culture and society as structurally configured. Taken together as two sides of the same coin, as it were, these perspectives complement each other to provide issues in sociocultural anthropology with a richness and a relevance that are both striking and exciting. This also puts them in touch, dynamically, with current conditions and developments of locally experienced modern worlds.

In the area of gender, for instance, as Susan Brownell and Niko Besnier (Chap. 11) discuss, issues of colonialism, the nation-state, and global sex greatly enrich and expand anthropology's earlier emphasis on men and, then, its emphasis on the "anthropology of women." Moving beyond anthropology's received understandings from the early twentieth century, gender is not now considered to be an attribute of one or another sex so much as it is a socially and culturally constructed relationship between masculinity and femininity. These constructions are at the same time strongly related to, but not totally reducible to, the powers and persuasions at work in local and larger political economies. As Brownell and Besnier note, gendered understandings and expectations are historically as well as culturally informed, and they change, sometimes dramatically, over time. Their account humanizes these processes and puts them in play through discussion of gendered agency, practice, and performativity, including in more classic and more contemporary considerations of gender and sexuality in sociocultural anthropology. These considerations bring us back both to understanding concrete and embodied emotion

and feeling, and to broader understandings of modernity and the contemporary development of gender and sexuality. In the mix, the strong and sometimes draconian domination and disempowerment that can occur along lines of gendered or sexual attribution and discrimination are exposed and brought to attention. Since the 1980s particularly, the study of sexuality per se has burgeoned in anthropology and has engaged and enriched our understanding of human diversity, including the stigma of practices considered nonnormative, and of the ways that people engage with, respond to, and sometimes resist or counter sexual or gendered identity in the face of such attributions. As Brownell and Besnier conclude, gender and sexuality have become so important and integral to anthropology today that little ethnographic work can be conducted without some significant attention to gendered and sexual dimensions of society and culture.

With respect to development, Marc Edelman (Chap. 12) considers the local or national impetus for economic growth in relation to Western development projects and programs that have their own political and cultural agendas of influence, control, even domination. As such, development is not a local or even national phenomenon but instead engages a much wider political economy that is linked, as he describes, to the interests, crises, and financial machinations of Western, developed countries themselves. The substantial twists and turns of development policies and programs in recent decades are hence informed by Western projections, desires, and manipulations. There is substantial debate as to whether these projects and programs have significantly reduced poverty and underdevelopment at all, not withstanding their good intentions. As Edelman describes, one of the latest incarnations of this pattern has been the burgeoning of so-called neoliberalism, including emphasis on open markets and trade liberalization, reduction of restrictions on private capital flows and investment, and reduced government scale and activity. The conditions and degree to which these policies facilitate economic growth for local populations, as opposed to capitalist exploitation by those who are already wealthy, remains an important question. The anthropological engagement of these issues has been increasingly important through the concrete ethnographic research on nongovernmental organizations ("NGO-graphy"), national schemes for economic growth, local motives for and responses to development, and even the Western investment banking that so strongly influences global capital flows. These mark an important budding arena of contemporary and critical ethnographic engagement and theory.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen's consideration of ethnicity (Chap. 13) shows how received notions of cultural coherence and stability have been at once expanded, made dynamic, and put in human motion by considering ethnic identity and its inequities in social practice. Rather than being a border or a mark of separation, ethnicity is a frontier of proliferating and contextually shifting identifications. In this sense, the anthropological study of ethnicity now links to our understanding of nationalism, multiculturalism, transnationalism, hybridity, and the political economy of majority–minority relations, as well as to fundamental issues of culture itself. Rather than being a stable set of attributions or identifications, as Eriksen stresses, ethnicity can be socially and strategically changeable, even for a single individual, across time and space. Studying these patterns

has made anthropologists more aware of the flexibility of social action and organization, beyond received notions of social, political, and cultural structure. This trend has been fueled by anthropological study of the skyrocketing social changes and inequalities of the contemporary world. Focus on globalization and on the diversity of discursive means by which people grapple with social change has exerted complementary influences in the contemporary studies of ethnic identity, some of which are concerned with integrative or "centripetal" factors, while others are concerned with diversifying or "centrifugal" ones. As the scale of globalizing influences increase, so too do the diverse ways that people interpret, respond to, and identify with or against aspects of change. In the mix, as Eriksen emphasizes, our understanding of culture is at once expanded and made dynamic, and also revisited and reasserted in a new key that recognizes the relativity of norms and identifications in different contexts.

Issues of ethnicity link directly to those of migration, considered by Katy Gardner (Chap. 14). Patterns of migration have been a significant feature of social life since the origin of humanity itself, but this legacy takes on new dimensions in the contemporary era. Trade, intermarriage, extension of political influence or conquest, and travel are central to modern life, and the intensification of these has posed challenges for ethnographic research, restricted as it is in time and place. This restriction has been addressed in part by increasing emphasis on multisited research (Marcus 1995), especially in the study of migration. This emphasis challenges and in many ways transcends received anthropological notions of "native" and "foreigner," of "home" and "away," and, in regional or global terms of political economy, of "core" and "peripheral" areas. As Gardner emphasizes, the way that inequity or domination works, including through the ostensibly free (or at least willful) movement of people and their labor, is a key area of ethnographic and broader anthropological focus. (Coercive or "forced" migration is an important, if different and sometimes related, topic of interest.) These concerns engage the contemporary anthropology of migration with broader, macroscopic issues of political-economic dependency, and more microscopic ones of human agency. Increasingly, anthropologists are engaging not just the social, political, and economic features that engage migration but issues of value, motivation, emotional work, and intimacy, both within and across the spaces that are integral to migration. This links our understanding of migration to issues of identity and affiliation, as well as to ones of inequity, conflict, and violence or disempowerment, including across borders of various kinds. These lead anthropologists to "study up," examining institutions and structures of power, as well as to consider the lives, experiences, and challenges of migrants themselves.

Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld's treatment of consumption (Chap. 15) addresses the combined features of culture and capitalism that inform the possession and use of goods. Whereas other dimensions of economy, such as production and distribution, have long been subjects of anthropological interest and inquiry, the anthropological study of consumption has developed particularly during the last two or three decades. This both reflects and informs our increasing awareness that goods are acquired and consumed not simply for bare survival or for the satisfaction of "basic needs," but to cultivate or

construct a lifestyle that reflects meaning and status in the context of modern capitalism. From Coca-Cola in Trinidad to home décor in Canada and to the reception and eating of exchange pigs in New Guinea, consumption encodes and engages the cultural assertions of value and status that transcend the instrumental or efficient conversion of effort into necessary human goods. A larger issue is the train of associations and conversions that link and transmute material productions into cultural results, and vice-versa. In this sense, as Colloredo-Mansfeld suggests, consumption is ultimately ontological: it constitutes, as well as reflects, our very notion of human being or existence. In terms of commodities, this awareness connects the study of consumerism in a new key to patterns of mass consumption and modern lifestyle. In non-Western contexts and environments as well, the acquisition and consumption of different commodities is increasingly key to lifestyle, identity, and status, beyond simple assumptions of supply and demand. To an extent, the loop between these features is closed by advertising, the creation, construction, and incitement of demand across local, regional, and global cultures.

Melissa Johnson's chapter on the environment (Chap. 16) shows how anthropology's received interest in the physical location, material culture, and technology of societies has been transformed in recent years. Beyond assertions that physical or material features provide a grounding or "base" for culture, anthropologists since the 1960s have been increasingly aware of how the cultural perception and understanding of people's environment not only shape behavior but appropriate and create the environment itself: "environment" is a co-constructed material–human relationship. Johnson describes how awareness of this relationship engages the long scale of human development (as human evolutionary ecology) as well as the politics and inequities of current human–environment relations (as political ecology) and the local perceptions and views of the environment itself (as ethno-ecology). In the current, increasingly global context, these matters connect directly to concerns about pollution, environmental degradation, and global warming across local, regional, and global scales. In all, environmental anthropology now links to and includes issues of environmental justice, health and disaster, biodiversity, conservation, development projects, commodity chains, state-level policies, and science studies, as well as indigeneity and the appropriation of plants and animals for direct human sustenance. As such, anthropological work that investigates the social construction and appropriation of nature as "place" and "materiality" engages the environment in a host of newly important ways.

Globalization in anthropology is the focus of Jonathan Friedman's contribution (Chap. 17). Developing an innovative and provocative thesis, Friedman suggests that anthropologists' emergent strong concern with global patterns and processes during recent decades risks perpetuating and reinforcing an understanding of globality that is biased by selective, and in some ways self-serving, Western assumptions that derive in significant part from perspectives outside of anthropology. Against this, he suggests, a more empirical and analytical anthropological understanding of globalization is called for. In particular, he suggests, progressivist assumptions have wrongly implied that the world was previously divided into more-or-less separable cultures characterized by

inward-looking identities. These, along with the nation-state as a form of territorial separation and segmentation, were viewed as being surpassed and transcended by modern globalization as a higher stage of world history, associated with an increased flow of people, goods, and ideas across and among world areas. As against this, Friedman suggests that the notion that globalization frees us from previously narrower identities and affiliations is not only biased but reflects the worldview of cultural elites and other traveling intellectuals. In the mix, both the interconnection of the world prior to modern globalization and the degree to which new patterns revisit older ones of inequality in the guise of imperial assertion are all-too-easily overlooked. In all, Friedman's perspective cautions us against adopting and reinforcing perspectives that uncritically champion recent developments of globalization and their presumed advantages or advancements, over more nuanced anthropological understanding of older globalizing trends on the one hand, and on the other, specific understanding of how people actually engage with and experience globalization from various cultural, geographic, and class positions. As opposed to being a new or separable quality or process, Friedman suggests that "the global" is not an entity in its own right but emerges through the interactions of diverse social units and actors, which anthropologists are effectively positioned to study concretely.

In the final chapter of this section, on material culture and art, Paul Basu (Chap. 18) traces anthropological ancestries and trajectories of material culture studies. He begins by noting that while material culture is integral to human life and existence, the cultural understanding and subjective production of materiality has not been a prime focus of anthropological interest until relatively recently. In part, as a result, the study of materiality, like the diversity of human material artifacts themselves, has been scattered across a range of topical areas and disciplinary fields. In the anthropology of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, material culture was strongly associated with the curation of artifacts in museums ("museology"), including the categorization and classification of material items. As the twentieth century progressed, however, the cultural context, symbolic operations, meaning, and subjective process of "materializing culture" became increasingly important. Beyond the seemingly utilitarian function of artifacts or their diffusion across time and space, newer approaches link human materiality increasingly to culture as well as to economy and politics. This, in turn, has facilitated increasing connection between human artifactual material and its "art" and "aesthetic" in the broad sense of these terms. In this perspective, as Basu describes, the "social life of things" (Appadurai 1986) provided material understanding as a key link between, rather than separation of, the physical productions of human action and its social relations. This connects our understanding of materiality not just to exchange or gift giving, but to sociality more generally, including cultural processes of objectification, internalization, and alienation. More recently, the flow of human materiality, including information as well as commodities, has led to interest in the trajectories and cartographies of social and cultural space from the perspective of transmitted or exchanged items. As such, material productions become "entangled objects" (Thomas 1991) in myriad relations, ideas, motivations, and transactions that both reflect and help define human interactions and

identities across space and time. Combining the subjective, the aesthetic, the symbolic, and the physically material, the current anthropological study of materiality connects rather than divides our understanding of physical and cultural phenomena.

At the level of content or topic, the range of issues raised in contemporary sociocultural anthropology, and reflected in the chapters of this section, defy easy summary or characterization. But in a sense, this reveals a larger and more important point. In focusing on cultural dynamics and subjective understandings and projections, both individual and collective, contemporary anthropology links our understanding of culture integrally to the political economy of difference and to the social, political, economic, and cultural disparities and inequalities that result. In the process, the issues addressed by sociocultural anthropology have both deepened and expanded dramatically during the past half-century. These now include most, indeed virtually all, aspects and topics of contemporary life, both in Western societies and in a multitude of non-Western contexts, as well as in their hybrid and mutually influencing combination across and between contexts.

If the issues addressed by sociocultural anthropology have proliferated widely in recent decades, often generating their own specific fields of study and literatures, they have also become increasingly overlapping and interconnected. This provides sociocultural anthropology both the breadth and the depth to engagingly address new issues in the future, some of which are as yet unknown or undefined. These will increasingly combine academic scholarship per se with important consideration of practical human challenges and problems across both Western and non-Western societies. In this sense, the issues addressed by sociocultural anthropology are well and excitingly positioned to continue expanding their relevance as well as their intellectual importance in coming decades.

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THE HANDBOOK OF SOCIOCULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

EDITED BY JAMES G. CARRIER
AND DEBORAH B. GEWERTZ

BLOOMSBURY

The Handbook of Sociocultural Anthropology presents a state of the art overview of the subject – its methodologies, current debates, history and future. It will provide the ultimate source of authoritative, critical descriptions of all the key aspects of the discipline as well as a consideration of the general state of the discipline at a time when there is notable uncertainty about its foundations, composition and direction.

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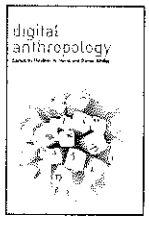

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