

Some Selected Theoretical Underpinnings in the Long Journey of Cultural Anthropology : Uncovering Key Concepts and their Implications for Anthropological Studies

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This article explores the historical development and key concepts of classical and contemporary anthropological theories, highlighting their implications for anthropological studies. It delves into the factors that led to the transition from classical to contemporary theories, including social movements, decolonization, and the critique of classical ontological traditions. Classical anthropological theories focused on issues such as evolution, diffusion, and cultural structure, while contemporary theories shifted attention towards representation, gender, power, and globalization. A specific comparison is drawn between classical evolutionism and structuration theory, emphasizing their differing perspectives on

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culture's progressive development and the relationship between structure and agency. Furthermore, the emergence of feminist anthropology is examined, with a focus on Emily Martin's works "The Egg and the Sperm" and "The Women in the Body," which critically analyze gender biases and the cultural construction of reproductive processes. The article contributes to a deeper understanding of the theoretical foundations and evolving landscape of cultural anthropology.

[**Keywords** : Classical theory, Contemporary theory, Classical evolutionism, Structuration Theory, Feminist Anthropology, Anthropology of embodiment]

1. Introduction

The anthropological theories developed in the beginning phase of the discipline, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries are known as classical anthropological theories. There is diversification within the classical theories regarding their ontological, epistemological, and methodological considerations. Due to the different philosophical considerations they adopted, classical theories are even different from the theories which are categorized as contemporary. Similarly, contemporary anthropological theories emerged in the second half of the 20th century, due to various political and contextual reasons.

There are different social, economic, and political contexts responsible for the end of the classical theoretical tradition and the emergence of contemporary anthropological theories. After the 1960s, particularly in the 1970s to early 1980s, the global scenarios were changed by major social and political movements in the west. Moreover, in this period, full of social movements in Europe and the US, the decolonization process, and the growing professionalism of anthropology in the west, as well as the rest had created great upheaval in the theoretical history of anthropology. At the same time, particularly in 1968, a series of political movements (workers' and students' movements in France), civil rights, feminist, antiwar, environment, counterculture, anti-Vietnam war movements, and so on in the US had not only affected the academic scenario but also had a great impact on the importance and relevance of classical ontological traditions of anthropological theory (Ortner, 1984). In this period, the entire established theories, "grand theory", positivist tradition, objectivist position, political neutrality, or the classical anthropological theories were questioned and challenged. These new scenarios created a situation where anthropology began to concentrate on real-world events.

Similarly, this new scenario created discourses concerning the relationship of anthropology with western hegemony, racism, and colonialism. Moreover, post-structuralist, feminist, resistance, identity, morality, orientalism, representations, embodiment, globalization, indigenism, subaltern, agency, structuration, practice, power, literary, and so on approaches in anthropology began to emerge and sustained. In fact, these new issues of discussion became the subject matters of what we now known as contemporary anthropological theories.

2. Demarking the Classical and Contemporary Theories in Anthropology

Classical and contemporary anthropological theories differ in many respects. The first and most important difference is their focus areas and issues regarding the study of human culture and society. The major focuses of classical anthropological theories are on the issues like evolution, diffusion, historical particularism, structure and function, ecology, adaptation, personality formation, and symbolic aspects of human culture and society. Whereas contemporary anthropological theories focus on issues like representation, gender, morality, power, globalization, identity, embodiment, agency, resistance, subaltern, class, ethnicity, race, nationality, and so on.

Likewise, the second major difference is the specific perspectives and methodologies they adopted. Classical anthropological theories have adopted the grand-generalizing, ethnocentric, modernist, and more objective way of studying the culture and society whereas the contemporary ones have criticized and questioned the stances of classical theories. Instead, the contemporary theories focus on reflexive, interpretive, critical, transformative, post-structural, and more on the subjective way of studying culture and society.

There are different classical and contemporary theories in anthropology. They have their own assumptions, concepts, and logic regarding the study and understanding of human culture and society. Here, I have compared a dominant classical theory of classical evolutionism as classical theory with the contemporary post-structural theory of structuration.

3. Classical Evolutionism

The evolutionary idea of socio-cultural progress of the 19th century is called classical or unilinear evolutionism in anthropology. This is the oldest theory regarding to the scientific way of understanding and studying the culture. This theory believes that society and culture as a complete entity or social and cultural institutions evolve in a progressive way from simple to complex stages in a unilinear sequence. In other words, all societies progressively evolve through the same stages toward civilization. These progressive stages of evolution can be categorized through the use of the comparative method. This comparative method believes that the existing primitive cultures can be taken as living fossils and evidence of the primitive stages of the current advanced cultures. They can be taken as clues to the evolutionary development of culture. Moreover, this theory believes that socio-cultural similarities or parallel inventions around the world should be taken as the result of the psychic unity of mankind (Tylor, 1873; Morgan, 1877 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017; Ojha, 2021).

The dominant figures of unilinear evolutionism were British anthropologist E. B. Tylor and American Anthropologist L. H. Morgan. Both of them believe that because of the psychic unity of mankind, cultures have similar beginnings everywhere and evolved through three progressive universal stages of development: savagery, barbarism, and civilization phase (Tylor, 1873; Morgan, 1877 cited in Erickson and Murphy, 2017). Though both Tylor and Morgan are regarded as classical evolutionists, they have different contributions to classical evolutionism. In fact, Tylor focused on the evolution of religion whereas Morgan was interested in the evolution of the social organization, particularly, subsistence patterns, kinship, and family. Similarly, Morgan's evolutionary scheme was purely based on a materialistic perspective in which technology is of prime importance whereas Tylor's scheme was strictly based on cognitive aspects.

4. Structuration Theory

The structuration theory which is developed by Anthony Giddens is regarded as a post-structural theory because it holds the proposition that structure both creates and is created in a very structuration process within a specific time and space (Giddens, 1984). As a contemporary theory in anthropology, structuration

theory discards the belief in universal truth and objective and scientific study of human culture and institutions. Moreover, it is against the idea of interpreting cultural phenomena through pre-established and socially constructed objective structures. This theory rejects the concept of over-determinism and the self-sufficiency of structures.

Structuration theory believes that one should not take the experience of an individual actor and the existence of structure separately without consulting each other. Rather, the focus should be given to how social practices or institutions are structured across specific time and space (Giddens, 1984 : 2). The main thrust of the theory of structuration is to establish the duality between structure and agency. Structure and agency are constituted in such a way that neither can exist without the other. Structuration theory believes that the agents have agency and power, which means they have transformative capacity. Moreover, without structure, the action of agents is not possible. The agent needs structure to perform the action, and the existence of structure is only possible through the activities of agents. In structuration theory, the structure is itself a “structuring properties” or the rules and resources (Giddens, 1984 : 16). In fact, time, space, body, and encounter are essential parts of the existence of agency and structure themselves, and for the very structuration process. Therefore, the structuration theory focuses on the different modalities of the structuration process to clarify the existence of multiple forms of social institutions.

5. Differences between Classical Evolutionism and Structuration Theory

As a dominant theory in anthropology, classical evolutionism focuses on how different societies and cultures or socio-cultural institutions evolve in a unilinear progressive sequence, stage after stage, from simple to complex form. In addition, it focuses on the universal stages of human evolution from savagery to civilization. In the case of structuration, as a contemporary post-structuralist theory, it does not focus on the evolution of socio-cultural institutions. Rather, structuration theory focuses on how different institutions (particularly symbolic, economic, social, and legal) are structured through the very structuration process within a specific time and space. Classical evolutionists talk about the progressive development

of culture and society based on technology and cognitive aspects, whereas, structurationists focus on these progressive stages as the results of the “rationalization of structuring structures” through the activities of actors in particular physical and social contexts.

In addition, classical evolutionists use the “comparative method” to analyze the progressive stages of socio-cultural institutions whereas structurationists focus on the actors’ priority of the use of “modality of structure” (rules and resources) in their practices to structure the different forms of institutions. In other words, structurationists do not focus on evolution but rather on structuration, i.e., how actors use different structures in their practices through which the existence of institutions is possible.

6. Feminist Anthropology : Emily Martin’s “The Egg and the Sperm”

As a contemporary theory, feminist anthropology emerged in the 1970s as a product of the global feminist movement. Though feminist anthropology emerged after the second half of the 20th century, it has a long history of women-based advocacy. In the 1830s, US women collectively raised their voices against slavery. Similarly, in the 1890s the issue of voting right for women had been raised. Since the 1960s women from different parts of the world, particularly African and Asian women started to participate in different programs related to the issue of women. In the 1970s as a radical movement, the global feminist movement began demanding autonomy for women.

In anthropology, there were some renowned female anthropological figures like Ruth Benedict, Margret Mead, and Mary Douglas in the middle of the 20th century. But, they were bounded by the philosophical considerations of their early masters. In the 1960s and 1970s, global radical movements including the feminist movement had a great impact on the existing pieces of literature on anthropology. They blamed the existing anthropological tradition as an “androcentric bias”. It is because most of the previous anthropological theorists were men, and there was little access to women in cultural studies. Similarly, existing anthropological studies were given priority to the issue of men, politics, religion, war, economics, and so on. The issues of women were not treated separately, but rather as a passive term and relationships with men.

In such a situation, along with other movements, the feminist movement emerged in the 1970s, and the development of feminist anthropology itself was a result of that movement.

In her famous article, "The egg and the Sperm" (Martin, 1997 : 485) feminist anthropologist, Emily Martin has also raised the issue of "androcentric bias" in biology regarding the role of egg and sperm in the process of fertilization. Using the metaphorical image of egg and sperm, she criticizes biological science for constructing and justifying the romance-based, not reality-based stereotypical cultural roles of male and female. This biased writing of biology about the sperm and egg also suggests that the fertilization processes of females are less valuable than that of men. Moreover, the language used in the reproductive biology further indicates that the less worthy biological process of females in turn makes them less worthy in comparison to men. Martin wants to expose the gender stereotypes which are hidden in the language of biological science. Biology treats the woman's monthly cycle as a means to produce eggs and a suitable place to fertilize and grow them to make babies. Similarly, if this does not happen then it converts into a kind of "debris" in the uterine (Martin, 1997). Therefore, menstruation is a failure or a symptom of not having a baby and a kind of wasted or scrap.

To justify the androcentric bias inherent in the text of biology, Martin blames that the male reproductive process is presented in a quite different fashion. She further says that medical physiology has glorified the male to have a capacity to produce millions of sperm every single day and it has delimited the capacity of a female by saying that a female "sheds" only one gamete per month. It shows the enthusiasm for the male reproductive processes and underestimates the woman. Martin also presents a bitter picture of the common depiction of reproductive biology regarding the role of egg and sperm in such a way that, the egg is a feminine "damsel in distress" whereas the sperm is a masculine "heroic warrior" for the rescue (Martin, 1997 : 491).

Martin presents the findings of new research regarding the fertilization process and the role of egg and sperm. The finding of new research claims that the surfaces of both egg and sperm have adhesive molecules and for this reason, they stick together. No one is superior in the fertilization process rather they interact in a mutual way. But, the biological imagery of medical science ignores this fact and

exaggerated the role of sperm as active one who “penetrates” the passive egg (Martin, 1997). Martin exposes the hidden stereotypes inherent in the writings of what we regard as natural science. This clearly shows how the uses of gender biased language in biological science naturalize the stereotypes of cultural roles of male and female.

7. The Anthropology of Embodiment : Emily Martin’s “The Women in the Body”

Another article by the same author, Emily Martin “The Women in the Body” (Martin, 1994 : 180) is based on the contemporary anthropological paradigm of embodiment. The paradigm of the embodiment is mainly concerned with the study of culture and the self. The methodological postulate of embodiment advocates that the body is not to be an object in relation to the study of culture but is to be considered the subject to the study of culture. The anthropology of embodiment considers the multiplicity of bodies by accepting the fact that bodies are neither universal nor strictly biological entities what we generally perceive to be. In anthropology, the study of “the body” emerged in the middle of the 1980s with the development of a separate subfield named “anthropology of the body” (Martin, 1994).

Anthropologists at the time, particularly feminist anthropologists considered that the issue of power and oppression, the main agenda of feminism could not be addressed without first challenging the ideologies which naturalized gender, sex, and racial differences by dichotomies as mind/body, male/female, subject/object, and culture/nature. Since then, the study of “the body” has come to be taken as subject and object, individual and social, and meaningful and material. Therefore, Martin’s study “The Women in the Body” should be also understood in this context.

In this article, Martin presents a cultural analysis of reproduction by using Marxian analysis. Marxian analysis appeals to the liberation from the prejudices of sexism, class oppression, racism, and biomedicine (Martin, 1994). Martin presents here the issue of how women in the United States, particularly the women in the Baltimore area understand the reproduction process and its role in their lives. She has taken interviews of women working in different places and organizations, and included those women in three different life stages : puberty but before child-bearing, child-bearing, and menopause. Moreover, she has included blacks and whites,

working-class, and middle-class women in the study. The main intention of the study was how women understand and perceive the reproductive mechanisms of their bodies, particularly menstruation, childbearing, and menopause.

Martin found that middle-class, and black and white women possessed scientific views regarding the menstruation process, but working-class women did not have an endorsement with a scientific view, rather, they resist the scientific view and explain menstruation in terms of their own experiences or as a life change phenomena. Similarly, on the issue of birth, she found the resistance of women to the medical and societal perception of birth as the production of goods. Likewise, her study also revealed that women rejected the medical perception of menopause as a decline. Instead, they took it as a transition, liberation, and a freeing from the worries regarding menstruation and pregnancy. Martin found inconsistent resistance in women regarding the biomedical view of their bodies. Their variations of resistance toward the medical view of their bodies were based on topic, class, and race.

In this article, Martin successfully dissects the dominant metaphors surrounding the medical interpretations of women's physiology. Medical literature considered the bodily functions (such as childbirth, menstruation, and menopause) as a part of the private or domestic realm by being separated from the men-dominated public world. Similarly, medical literature depicts the negative imagery of female physiology and cast a positive light on male physiology. Therefore, these pervasive metaphors regarding female bodies are value-laden and culturally determined. Moreover, she further claims that they are anti-feminist and anti-woman.

8. Conclusion

The field of cultural anthropology has evolved significantly over time, transitioning from classical anthropological theories to contemporary perspectives. The emergence of contemporary theories was influenced by various social, economic, and political contexts, including major social and political movements, decolonization processes, and the growing professionalism of anthropology. These changes challenged and questioned the established theories, leading anthropology to focus more on real-world events and issues. Classical anthropological theories, such as classical evolutionism, emphasized

the unilinear progression of societies and cultures from simple to complex stages. They focused on the evolution of socio-cultural institutions, primarily based on technology and cognitive aspects. In contrast, contemporary theories, like structuration theory, rejected the idea of universal truth and objective study of culture. They emphasized the duality between structure and agency, highlighting how different institutions are structured through the activities of actors in specific contexts.

Feminist anthropology emerged as a response to the androcentric bias present in previous anthropological studies. Feminist anthropologists aimed to give voice to women and challenge the stereotypes and gender roles perpetuated by the discipline. Emily Martin's work, such as "The Egg and the Sperm" and "The Women in the Body," exposed the biases inherent in scientific and biomedical discourse, revealing how language and cultural representations shape our understanding of gender and reproduction. The anthropology of embodiment, another contemporary paradigm, shifted the focus from considering the body as an object to understanding it as a subject in the study of culture. This approach recognized the multiplicity of bodies and aimed to challenge the dichotomies that naturalize differences and perpetuate power imbalances.

Furthermore, cultural anthropology has undergone a transformation from classical theories to contemporary perspectives that address issues of power, representation, gender, and embodiment. By critically examining and deconstructing existing paradigms, anthropologists have expanded the boundaries of the discipline, allowing for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of human culture and society.

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