ANTHROPOLOGY INTERROGATING POWER AND POLITICS

Faye V. Harrison
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Illinois, U.S.A.

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Contents

1. Introduction
2. Studying Politics and Power with Anthropological Tools
3. Perspectives from Poststructuralisms
4. The State and Neoliberalism in Globalization
5. Colonialism, Empires, and Imperial Formations
6. The Enduring Coloniality of Power, Development, and White Privilege
7. Power to the People
8. Culture through the Window Power Built
9. Conclusion
Acknowledgments
Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

Political anthropology is an important specialty within anthropology. This chapter focuses on how sociocultural anthropology has investigated matters of power and politics as they operate in diverse societies and across cross-cultural terrain. Emphasis is given to a sampling of topical and theoretical shifts that have occurred since political anthropology's beginnings to its current concerns in the age of globalism and globalization.

1. Introduction

Anthropology provides a useful prism through which significant aspects of power and politics can be viewed and understood. This chapter explores the capacity of this prism to illuminate some of the nuances and contours that often remain unseen in the approaches of other social sciences, particularly political science. Not intended to be exhaustive in its coverage, the chapter highlights selected topics and themes germane to political anthropology as it has developed since its foundational queries on the organization and workings of diverse modalities of political life. Although archaeologists have played a major role in theorizing the evolution of political systems culminating in the formation of states, the focus here will be on the contributions sociocultural anthropologists have made in elucidating the interplay of culture and

power, power and resistance, the restructuring of state processes within contexts of neoliberal globalization and development, democracy in its diverse forms, the plurality of imperial formations, the social and political life of human rights, the rise and demise of social movements, and the continuum of violence. The intellectual history of key concepts and analytical frameworks is also highlighted. Although many of its concerns overlap with perspectives detailed here, the considerable literature in legal anthropology and policy studies (e.g., Nader 2002, Merry 2006a, Kingsolver 2010) is not addressed here.

1.1. Anthropology on Colonial and Postcolonial Terrain

As a broadly-encompassing social science discipline, which bridges science and the humanities, anthropology is often greatly misunderstood in the popular imagination and public sphere. In many parts of the world, it has been pushed to the margins of intellectual and public life and, not uncommonly, subsumed within other fields, among them sociology and administratively-expedient interdisciplinary programs in universities and research institutes. In parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, anthropology has been stigmatized because of its perceived historical association with European colonialism (Ntarangwui, Mills, and Babiker. 2006). The field's "handmaiden of colonialism" reputation has induced some sociocultural anthropologists to pass themselves off as sociologists, geographers, or generic social scientists. The history of anthropology reveals that the relationship individual anthropologists had with colonial administrations varied according to their social visions and political orientations. Colonial-era social anthropologists included liberal and radical critics of colonial domination (MacClancy 2002:13, Harrison 2008:33). In overall terms, however, European colonial expansion clearly set the stage for the cross-cultural investigations that established the field that we now know as anthropology (Asad 1973, Harrison 2010). Since its founding, anthropology has included inquiry about the political dimensions of the world's diverse societies.

1.2. Decolonizing and Renewing Anthropology

In many national and regional settings, anthropology is institutionalized as largely social anthropology, while in other contexts (e.g., the United States) it encompasses the "subfields" of sociocultural anthropology, archaeology, biological anthropology, and anthropological linguistics. In recent decades the discipline with its proliferating specializations has undergone considerable change—with important implications for the analysis of power and politics. There have been efforts toward reinvention (Hymes 1974 [1969]), decolonization (Harrison 2010 [1991]; Allen and Jobson 2016), and a postcolonial turn toward endogeneity if not indigenous knowledge (Devisch and Nyamnjoh 2011, Olukoshi and Nyamnjoh 2011; Prah 1977, 2008). Entwined with these trends have been critical projects to rethink and integrate concepts and analytical frameworks related to gender, sexuality, race, nation, and empire and imperialism. These critical trends are not entirely new. In some respects, they build upon earlier anthropological interventions that contested injustices. A case in point is Boasian antiracism (Boas 1940, Benedict 1940, Baker 1998)

Topically, theoretically, and methodologically, anthropology has come of age and into the new millennium, no longer fitting into the once narrowly-scripted role of primarily studying "exotic" (i.e., non-Western) and "simple" (non-complex, politically decentralized) societies, which in earlier periods were pejoratively categorized as largely bounded "primitive." Today anthropologists—from all over the world, including the formerly colonized world—study at least some aspects of the full range of human sociocultural and political-economic variation all over the world, including in the West, which historically was the reserve of social sciences that focused on and formulated their key concepts and paradigms principally in terms of the West and Western modernity. Moreover, it is no longer assumed that societies and cultures are bounded. The emphasis is now on the extent to which blurred boundaries, transnational mobilities, and deterritorialized identities influence the configuration and dynamics of sociocultural and political-economic life.

Especially since the final decades of the twentieth century, the boundaries embedded in the traditional division of intellectual labor have been redrawn along lines that reflect how the social sciences have been rethought over time. Anthropology has been reworked and revitalized in ways that challenge the conventional compartmentalization between it and kindred fields such as sociology, geography, and, of particular relevance here, political science (Aronoff and Kubik 2013). Despite these changes and transdisciplinary convergences, anthropologists have found interesting ways to renew their discipline in terms of how it defines and nuances its foci of study.

1.3. The Anthropological Perspective and Political Science

Anthropological perspectives offer unique insights that ultimately complement the knowledges generated from other social sciences concerned with similar or overlapping issues. Both sociocultural anthropologists—especially political anthropologists—and political scientists study the workings of democracy and citizenship, and both address the shifting or restructured role of the state in the current context, whose constraints and opportunities are influenced by the political-economic and cultural logics of neoliberalism and the related processes of neoliberalization. The geography-trained anthropologist David Harvey characterizes the pervasive application of neoliberal ideology and common sense in terms of market "[d]eregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision" (2005:3). Neoliberal discourse and economic practices have become pervasive throughout the world, even in places like present-day People's Republic of China (Osburg 2013) and, to a lesser extent, Cuba (M. Perry 2016), which have communist governments. Neoliberalism has significant effects on cultural signification, the reconstitution of personhood, and politics.

Anthropology is inclined to situate the problems it interrogates in conceptual and methodological contexts of (i) comparison across time (i.e., the evolutionary and historical past) and space (sociocultural and geographic), (ii) holistic connections (i.e., links across sociocultural domains, e.g., politics, language, religion, subsistence, kinship, ecology, etc.), and (iii) building a coherent perspective on what is being studied from a "frog's eye view," that is, from the bottom up. Although this investigative angle usually contrasts with the methods political scientists employ, ethnography is also

employed in that field (Schatz 2009, Wedeen 2010). Exemplary of this minor trend within the quantitatively-oriented political science is James C. Scott, author of several widely read books, including *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), and *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998).

The ethnographic methodology that most sociocultural anthropologists use (sometimes in combination with other methods) leads them to points of entry into wider sociocultural and sociopolitical spheres that illuminate the everyday life, social discourse, and vernacular knowledge of ordinary people. From these starting points, ethnographers navigate sociocultural landscapes that take them in all sorts of directions, depending on their research focus, including the paths for investigating government and modes of governance (wherever they are performed), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movements, and even entities such as Wall Street, the World Bank, and transnational corporations (Ho, 2009, Schuller 2012, Lie 2015, Mosse 2005, 2011; Ribeiro 2005, Tett 2009). The trajectories of anthropological research and knowledge production within distinct national settings as well as in a cumulative, global context— such as that of "World Anthropologies" (Escobar and Ribeiro 2006)—demonstrate that anthropology is a dynamic field offering significant insights into the contemporary world's major trends, problems, and policy-(re)making possibilities.

2. Studying Power and Politics with Anthropological Tools

The anthropology of power and politics, labeled "political anthropology" in its most distilled form, is a specialty rich in the perspectives it brings to our understanding of the workings, structure, and multiple modalities of politics, political processes, and power. It is a major source of comparative knowledge. It also offers a vantage point that illuminates political phenomena from the vantage point of the diverse social actors whose practices, identities, and embodied experiences are integral to political life. Anthropological analyses approach politics from both above and below. The perspectives zoom in and out to elucidate micro, meso, and macro scales of social and political action.

Political anthropology, unlike the mainstream of political science, has tended not to separate what is "political" from other interrelated domains of society and culture. Their analyses have highlighted the ways in which political life can be organized through kinship, caste, ethnicity and other social categories that political scientists may not feature in their frames of analysis. Many year ago, political scientist David Easton (1959) criticized what he described as the "nondiscipline" of political anthropology because of its failure to distinguish or delimit political systems from other subsystems within society (Lewellan 2003: x). However, the interrelatedness among subsystems has been an integral concern in social anthropology, particularly as elaborated in the work of functionalists and structural-functionalists who emphasized that "political institutions are an aspect of the whole society and intimately related and interdependent with other aspects like economic institutions and kinship" (Schoenmakers 2012:58, paraphrasing Radcliffe-Brown's preface to the classic anthology, *African Political Systems*, Fortes and Evans Pritchard, 1940).

2.1. Early Theorists Clearing the Way

Cross-cultural forms of political organization were a concern in the writings of 18th and 19th century philosophers and jurists interested in the evolution of societies. Charles-Louis Montesquieu, Henry Sumner Maine, Johann Jakob Bachofen, and Lewis Henry Morgan were among those theorists, some of whom speculated on the role that kinship played in ancient systems of social control, in the absence or presence of political centralization. Building on Montesquieu's tripartite classification (savagery, barbarism, and civilization), U.S. lawyer-ethnologist Morgan theorized the processes that propelled transitions from kinship-based forms of regulation to centralized governments with territorial and property-based sovereignty. His ethnographic descriptions of the North American indigenous Iroquois social, religious and political organization were foundational to anthropology in the United States and internationally.

His research, as detailed in *League of the Iroquois* (1851) was indebted to his collaboration with Native American (Seneca, Iroquois League) ethnographer, Ely Samuel Parker, whose writings remain part of an archive that has only begun to be explored for its evidence of intercultural cross-fertilization as well as power disparities in the social relations of knowledge production in the history of anthropology (Michaelsen 1996, 1999). Morgan later did research on several other North American indigenous peoples and developed a synthesis that allowed him to do the theorizing evidenced in *Ancient Society* (1977).

During his time, Morgan was unusual in having a direct connection to ethnographic field sites and consultants—or "key informants." The typologies of most of the early evolutionists were largely based on conjecture informed by the uneven and often misinterpreted accounts of missionaries, merchants, and travelers. Working with those sources, they, nonetheless, cleared the ground for the emergence of later work that addressed the conditions giving rise to increasingly complex and centralized political formations, ranging from chiefdoms to the earliest forms of state-level society.

Morgan's writings influenced the classic work of Karl Marx's associate and collaborator, Frederick Engels, notably his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* ([1884] 2010). Morgan's contributions, particularly his analysis of Iroquois political organization, also inspired the work of twentieth-century anthropologists, such as Jack Weatherford, whose *Tribes on the Hill* (1981) and *Indian Givers* (2010 [1988]) analyzes the U.S. Congress using metaphors derived from anthropological categories such as clans, tribes, and rituals. In these books he underscores the debt that American democracy owes not only to Britain but also to the Iroquois Confederacy.

2.2. Twentieth-Century Classics and Shifting Trends

Political anthropology was crystallized as an explicitly defined program of study with the publication of the classic *African Political Systems* (1940), co-edited by Meyer Fortes and Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, who were former students of Bronislaw Malinowski, the Polish-born social anthropologist who became the leading proponent of functionalism in Britain. The volume's "introduction and eight ethnographic [chapters

delineated] the problems, the theoretical foundation, the methodology, and the controversy for more than a decade of research into the politics of preindustrial societies" (Lewellan 2003:7). Its functionalist framework

> posit[ed] that all political systems must perform a certain number of functions in order to survive. Rule-making, rule-enforcement and rule adjudication are some of these functions. As the two editors state in the Introduction, a relatively stable political system in Africa presents a balance between conflicting tendencies and between divergent interests. The government of an African state consists of a balance between power and authority on the one side and, obligation and responsibility on the other (Schoenmakers 2012:59).

The political typology the editors crafted consisted of a simple dichotomy between stateless societies and primitive states. In the former, kinship provided the mechanisms for social integration, social control, and political decision-making; in the latter centralized administrations "overrode or united" the corporate descent groups based on the patrilineages or matrilineages, which comprised clans. This dualism over-simplified the political landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa, but despite its emphasis on an organic (i.e., bodily anatomy and physiology) analogy and on social equilibrium, it stimulated debates that led to conceptual and analytical refinements in the years to come.

The 1950s witnessed a transition from the synchronic functionalist and the structural-functionalist approaches that Alfred Radcliffe-Brown advocated to more historicized, process-oriented analyses. Even the co-editor of *African Political Systems*, Evans-Pritchard changed his views, shifting in the direction of an ethnographically-informed social history. Another Malinowski-trained anthropologist, Lucy Mair, also adopted a historicizing approach in her *Primitive Government* (1962). Based on East African fieldwork, her analysis of the "origins and functioning of political organization and states" among peoples with "simple technology" emphasized the influence of subsistence patterns (Shoenmakers 2012: 60). In this respect, she anticipated later investigations of political economy, including French structural Marxian approaches to the articulation or linkages of modes of production. She also acknowledged that the interlocking modes of governance and subsistence that co-existed in Uganda were affected by and embedded in wider regimes of colonial domination. With this contextualization, she departed from most of her contemporaries who rarely brought colonial states and empires into the picture. Mair was also one of the first anthropologists to analyze the demise of colonialism and the rise of new, independent nations (Mair 1963, Vincent 1990:308), anticipating later studies of nationalism and postcoloniality. Her investigation of social change was a key aspect of the legacy she left to the field (Mair 1969).

Other precursors to the full-fledged break away from static functionalism were Raymond Firth, Edmund Leach and Max Gluckman. The New Zealand-born Firth cleared the way to action and process theory by distinguishing between social structure and social organization, terms that were often used interchangeably. The latter domain permitted the investigation of individual behavioral variation—the choice making of "the calculating man" and woman—and social change, while social structure represented the underlying normative rules and patterns for behavior, which constrained

and reproduced social relations (Macdonald 2011:64). He found the "constant process of [responding] to fresh situations" more interesting. His writings opened the gate for developing a full-fledged alternative to the paradigm that his teacher, Malinowski, promoted.

Both Leach and Gluckman presented "diachronic [i.e., across-time] variants" within functionalism, which entailed contesting "the structural components" that preempted the space for agency (Vincent, 1990: 270). Edmund Leach's *Political Systems in Highland Burma* (1954) marked this shift in an original ethnography of a complex regional landscape in which three different polities (i.e., "an anarchic traditional system, an unstable intermediate system, and a small-scale centralized state") co-existed in unstable, tension-laden, oscillating relations, which, Leach explained, over time reflected the choices individuals made to maximize power (Barrett 2011:117). That sociopolitical setting, albeit inhabited by many different cultural and linguistic subgroups, constituted "an interrelated whole" (Lewellan 2003: 8). Despite his innovation, Leach "failed to take into account both punitive colonialism and indigenous resistance in arriving at his timeless cyclical model of alternating political forms" (Vincent, 1990: 271). Hans Schoenmakers concurs with this observation, remarking that "[t]he political struggles of African and Asian leaders and their supporters to obtain national independence from colonial dominance and oppression were seldom … the subject of study" at that time (2013: 61). However, this omission would be corrected in the political anthropology of later decades with its heightened concern with nationalism, resistance, social movements, and cultural-political struggles for citizenship and human rights.

More than most of his contemporaries, the South African-born Max Gluckman addressed problems of conflict, colonialism, and institutional racism in the context of his research in South Africa and Central Africa. A student of Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard, he was concerned with the ways in which "social order and social hierarchy were maintained despite tension and dissatisfaction" (Wolf 1990:589). His major contribution examined "rural locations, mining centers, and towns not as separate social and cultural entities but as interrelated elements caught up in one social field" (Ibid.). However, consistent with the trends of that time, he still did not go far enough in his analysis, because, as Eric Wolf pointed out: "[i]ts major failing lay in not taking systematic and critical account of the colonial structure in which these settings were embedded" (Ibid.). John Gledhill's critique is similar, writing that Gluckman treated "the colonial status quo as a structure which [was] stable… [although he] felt that this stability was paradoxical enough to require explanation. His perspective still deflected attention from forms of action among Black South Africans which could be described as 'counter-hegemonic' resistance to domination " (2000:71).

Gluckman preferred to focus on rituals of rebellion whose effects were to restore social order. Nonetheless, he was clearly a leading transitional figure pointing the way beyond structural-functionalist precepts. The seminal research he, his associates, and students undertook first at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and later at Manchester University in the United Kingdom, however, broke new ground in "facing power" (Wolf 1990) and in contributing to later trends that put processes, action, and individual decision-making in the foreground.

An under-recognized example of research pursued within this groundbreaking context and very much inspired by Gluckman's neo-functionalist opening to process-oriented social analysis was U.S. anthropologist Audrey Smedley's early 1960s ethnographic investigation of the patrilineal Birom of Northern Nigeria. Smedley studied with Gluckman at Manchester and completed her doctoral thesis in 1967. She found that women's decision-making and creative navigation of the sociopolitical landscape resulted in effective and sustainable exploitation of environmental resources (Smedley 2004). She illuminated the creative agency that African women exercised within patriliny, a terrain she viewed as being characterized by gendered navigation and negotiation of power rather than by the rigidly imposed determinant patriarchal role assignment usually highlighted in more orthodox feminist ethnography.

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Biographical Sketch

Faye V. Harrison is Professor of African American Studies and Anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the United States. Trained as a Caribbeanist and African diaspora specialist, she has focused on the politics and political economy of social inequalities, intersections of race and gender, and the social and political life of human rights. Another of her research interests is the history and politics of anthropology's subjugated knowledges. She has done intensive research in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Caribbean along with briefer periods of investigation in other parts of the world. Among her publications are: *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further toward an Anthropology for Liberation*, *African-American Pioneers in Anthropology*, *Outsider Within: Reworking Anthropology in the Global Age*, and *Resisting Race & Racism: Global Perspectives on Race, Gender, &*

Human Rights. She is President of the International Union of Anthropological & Ethnological Sciences during the 2013-18 term.