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Carol Delaney

with Deborah Kaspin

An Experiential Introduction to Anthropology

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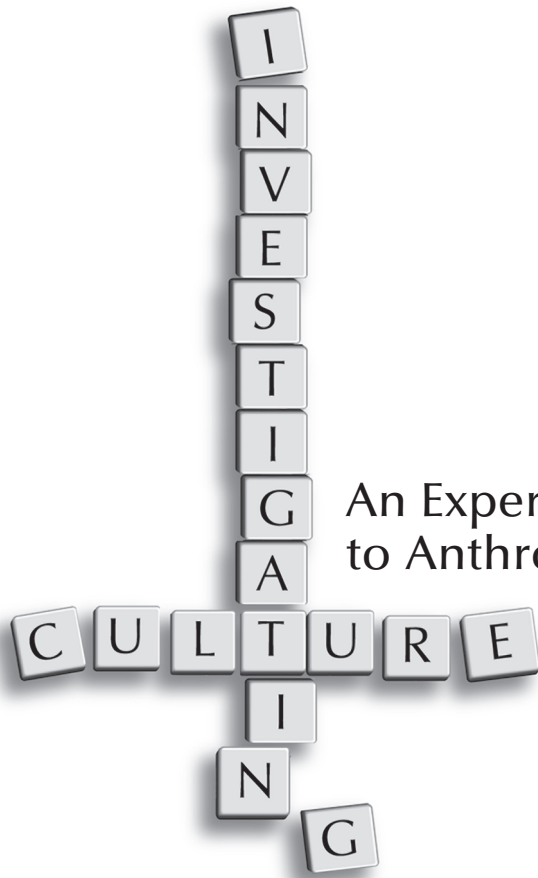
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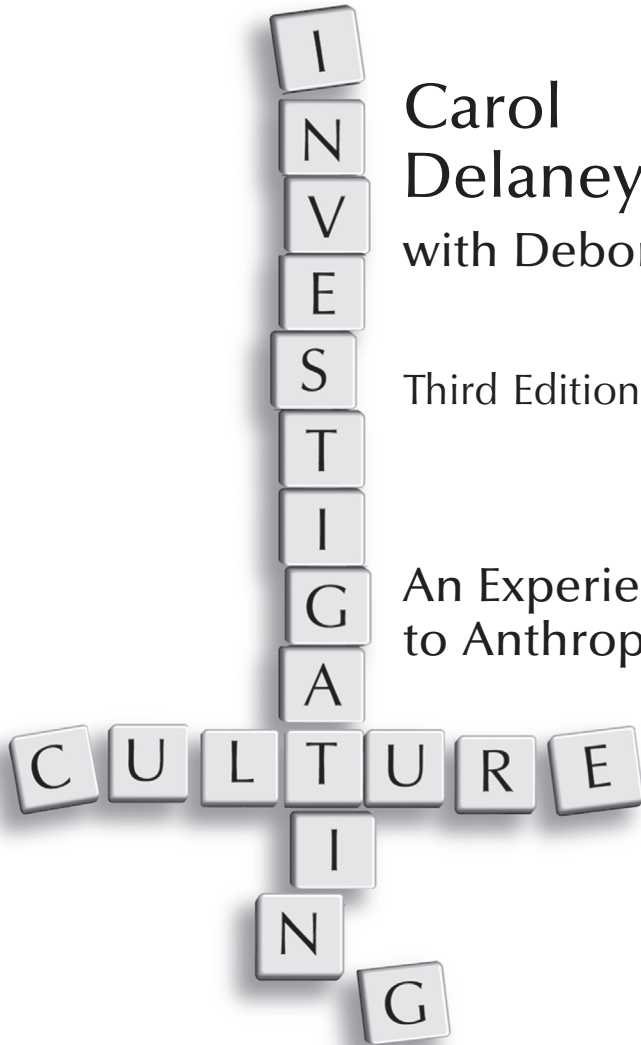
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WILEY Blackwell



An Experiential Introduction
to Anthropology



Carol
Delaney

with Deborah Kaspin

Third Edition

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to Anthropology

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*To all of the students
who have participated in one
version or another of our
Investigating Culture classes.*

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Acknowledgments

The course on which this book is based emerged as a result of “trial by fire” when I had to offer a course – to start in two weeks’ time – in cultural anthropology and comparative religion to a small group of freshmen in the University Professors’ Program at Boston University. I had very little time to prepare and decided to use the class as an experiment, that is, to use the experience of entering the university as an analogy to think about what it was like for anthropologists to go elsewhere. It worked. It was exciting. We had a great time and learned a lot. I continue to hear from the students who took that first course long ago (1986), and who feel it set them on a path of discovery. This what an undergraduate education ought to be.

I taught the course regularly at Stanford University, where it came to the attention of Jane Huber, an editor at Blackwell Publishers. She first suggested that it become a book. I was able to hire as research assistants several students who were eligible for federal work-study grants. They made many trips to the library and found material on the Internet, with which they were far more proficient than I. Even more important, they served as “guinea pigs,” telling me when the tone was all wrong or that a particular example was passé, and suggested new topics and new material. Here I acknowledge the help of Alisha Niehaus (my first student research assistant), who was indefatigable in locating interesting material and telling me when I was “off.” Sam Gellman and Andrea Christensen helped during the summer of 2001, and Andrea, along with Katie Cueva, helped during the final phases in the summer of 2002. They had a tough job: in addition to new research, they had to trace everything I had neglected to record, and serve as editors, reading and rereading each chapter. In addition, my daughter, Elizabeth Quarantiello, and colleagues Miyako Inoue (Stanford) and Don Brenneis (University of California, Santa Cruz) read and made suggestions for the language chapter. Steve Piker, a professor at Swarthmore, was brave enough to try out the penultimate draft on his students at the same time I used it with mine, and the response was gratifying.

Because the response from students and professors to the first edition was very positive, I was asked to prepare a second edition. I took on this task after I had retired from Stanford and was teaching the course at Brown University. Once again, my students helped to pinpoint areas that needed updating. In particular I wish to acknowledge Sarah Cocuzzo, Lydia Magyar, and Andrew Mathis, who met with me on a regular basis. As we went over each chapter, they made suggestions for revisions and brought in material from their experience and independent research. To all of these people I extend my heartfelt thanks. Your input made this a better book, and I am deeply grateful for your help.

The second edition would not have happened without the gentle persistence of Rosalie Robertson at Blackwell Publishers. When she suggested that I find a collaborator, I immediately thought of Deborah Kaspin, who had been a fellow graduate student at the University of Chicago, and had taught at the University of Virginia, Yale University, Wheaton College, and Rhode Island College. Working with her proved to be a great pleasure; not only did she smooth out the narrative and update existing material, but she added material from her own research and made subtle but important elaborations and clarifications in the text. She also drew on her own teaching experience to suggest ways to make the material more accessible to a broader student population.

In this, the third and final edition of *Investigating Culture*, we have updated material in the first and second editions, and added new material not found in either. Because I am now retired from teaching, we did not hire students to act as research assistants or “guinea pigs,” but drew instead on our own work experience and concerns. Much of the new material comes from my research in Turkey and in Spain, and from Deborah Kaspin’s in Malawi. Much else comes from revisiting topics in the earlier editions that we felt warranted fresh insight and consideration. We also worked to make this the most readable of the three editions. In all of these efforts we are very grateful to our editor, Giles Flitney, whose scrupulous attention to detail saved us from some embarrassing goofs. He engaged our subject matter seriously, pointed out weaknesses in fact and logic, and relentlessly chased down large and small errors in grammar, syntax, and consistency. Our hats are off to Giles for ensuring that this is, indeed, the best of the three editions.

Notwithstanding the updates and additions, the third edition remains committed to the goals of the first and second. Unlike most introductory anthropology textbooks, ours is intended less to teach facts *about* other cultures, and more to help students learn to investigate any culture, including their own. Additionally, this book is not constructed according to traditional categories such as the family, religion, economy, and politics, because we feel these domains cannot be so easily separated. Instead, it is organized in terms of space, time, language, social relations, body, food, clothing, and culture icons – important people, places, and performances – in order to show how systems of cultural symbols and meanings span a range of domains. Material gleaned from a variety of cultures is used primarily as illustration, so that the text and the ethnographic exercises will enable students to think like anthropologists. Towards this end, we hope that professors will draw on their own experience and expertise to widen the scope of the issues we raise.

Although this book was originally intended for entering freshman, it can be used at any time during college, might even be adapted for high school, and has been used productively

for people posted to positions in foreign countries – military, diplomats, journalists, and so on. We hope that all future users of this book will find enlightenment, inspiration, new perspectives, and ways of making connections between things they never thought were related.

Carol Delaney
Deborah Kaspin

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Chapter 9

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CHAPTER 1

Disorientation and Orientation

*Introduction; how culture provides orientation in the world;
what is culture and how do anthropologists investigate it?
Learning to think anthropologically.*

Disorientation and Orientation

Introduction

A number of years ago, I was asked to teach a course on anthropology and comparative religion to incoming freshmen at Boston University. I was intrigued because freshmen do not usually enroll in anthropology courses and often do not know what it is. Furthermore, the course was to begin in two weeks, leaving me very little time to prepare a syllabus and order books. Consequently, I decided to take a bold approach. Rather than trying to do a typical survey course, beginning with human origins and moving on to hunters and gatherers, and then peasants, to modern urban society, I decided to treat the course as an anthropological experience. I wanted students to imagine themselves as anthropologists coming to study another culture, for, although they wouldn't think of it that way, that was a part of what they were doing when they entered college. I wanted them to learn not only *about* anthropology, but also about *being* an anthropologist.

That original course was an adventure for all of us, and it was a great success. However, when I first went to Stanford, I was not able to teach it as a freshman course because freshmen were tracked into a number of prescribed large lecture courses. Instead, I taught somewhat revised forms for upperclassmen, for students planning to go abroad for a time, and at the Stanford campus in Berlin. Other professors borrowed it, modified it, and taught it at Stanford campuses in Spain and Italy. When the university instituted a "freshman seminar" program, I was able, once again, to teach this course to entering freshmen. While the course can, obviously, be taught in a number of contexts, I still think it works best for freshmen as they enter college or university, not because the material is simplified, but because their experience is fresh.

The course is an innovative way to introduce students to anthropology, and because it has been a success, I was asked by the publisher to write a textbook based on it so that it might become available to students elsewhere. Although each chapter is devoted to one of the topics I discuss in class, such as space or time or food, it is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of any one of them. Otherwise, each chapter could easily have become a book on its own. Even less is this book meant to be an in-depth analysis of American, British, or any other culture, although it is intended for use in the United States and United Kingdom. I juxtapose a range of material – classical anthropological material about a variety of cultures; contemporary items drawn from the newspaper, the Web, Stanford, and Brown; and ethnographic material from my own fieldwork in Turkey and from Deborah Kaspin's work in Malawi for the purpose of generating ideas and indicating the range of areas for further exploration. Teachers should feel free to introduce material from their own fieldwork, substitute articles for those appended at the end of each chapter, and revise the exercises as appropriate. Ours are merely suggestions.

While this book is a general introduction to anthropology, it also reflects my own journey as an anthropologist. This includes my graduate training at the Harvard Divinity School and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago, my academic concentrations on gender issues and the Abrahamic religions, and my personal life as a teenager of the 1950s, a young wife of the 1960s, a divorcee, a welfare mother, and so on. All of this led me into and informed my academic career. This is how anthropology (and any life path) unfolds: the personal intertwines with the professional. So too, another anthropologist could write a similar book (or design a similar course) using the same canon of classic and current anthropology, but would read that canon into his or her own areas of specialization and personal biography. I think the subjective experience reveals the relevance of anthropology to everyday life, although this necessarily means that other worthwhile issues – including those of particular interest to the readers – are overlooked in the process. Such omissions are not meant as dismissals, but as invitations to take an anthropological approach to your own topics of interest.

I wrote the first edition of this book as my own enterprise, but the second and third editions are collaborative efforts with Deborah Kaspin. She was a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Chicago while I was, conducted fieldwork among Chewa in Malawi for her dissertation project, and more recently pursued fieldwork among modern orthodox Jews in New England. She has taught at several places of various types – private and public, universities and colleges – which are listed in the preface. Kaspin's contributions include material from her own research, updates on topics in the first edition, and occasionally slightly different interpretations of issues developed in the first edition. She also pushed to make the subject matter more accessible to a wider range of students and educational settings. It is our hope that the new edition accomplishes this.

The goal of the third edition, like the first and second, is not to teach *about* other cultures. That is the normal pedagogical approach adopted in schools, but it is passive and distanced learning. I believe that people learn best when they are actively involved in the process. You will learn about anthropology and about culture by learning how to think like an anthropologist, that is, by becoming amateur anthropologists. Not everyone is able to go to another society to gain this experience, but it is possible to simulate it. As I illustrate

below, you will learn to draw analogies between your own experience of entering and becoming acclimated to college life and the experience of anthropologists who go to study another culture. Both can be quite disorienting, at least initially. Hold on to the disorientation for a while, because it provides some mental space from which you can grasp, as they occur, aspects of the new culture you have entered and how these aspects relate to each other. Even while the focus must be on your own environment, the aim is not to illuminate merely the “culture” of your particular school, but also to explore the way those particular aspects connect to and represent concepts, values, and structures of the wider culture. Indeed, I think the use of the word *culture* in that restricted sense is inappropriate.

Clifford Geertz, probably the most influential American anthropologist of the last 40 years, made the point very clear: “[T]he locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don’t study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods . . .); they study *in* villages” (1973: 22). Substitute *college* for *village*, and you will see what I mean. Although I conducted my fieldwork in a village in central Turkey, my aim was to try to understand something about Turkish culture and how it was inflected in that one place. Analogously, the object of your study is the culture of your country even as you investigate it in your particular locale. My goal is to get you to learn *experientially*, to get you to adopt an anthropological approach that you can use to investigate any social or cultural phenomenon in any culture. Prerequisite is a mind open to new ways of thinking about things and willing to take nothing for granted. Anything is available for inspection, including the most ordinary, mundane items and events such as a McDonald’s hamburger, a pair of blue jeans, a cell phone, a birthday or New Year’s Eve, and so forth. These items and events are *clues* you can use to investigate your sociocultural system. Each of them provides a window into a much larger set of beliefs, power relations, and values. For example, what would you make of a community that celebrates death days rather than birthdays? How might that fact relate to other facets of that society? What other kinds of questions would you need to ask to begin to understand not just that practice but also the culture in which it occurs?

Disorientation

The experience of beginning college can be exhilarating, anxiety producing, and disorienting. This is magnified for those who come from other parts of the country or from foreign countries. Even when the language is familiar and you have not moved from your home town or city, college life is different from high school. You are entering a new world. You don’t know where anything is or how to find it; you don’t understand the time schedule or how to manage your time; you don’t know the lingo – the insider abbreviations and acronyms; and you don’t know the code of dress or behavior. For those who go away to college, it might be the first time you are away from home alone. It might be the first time you share a room with someone or have a room of your own. It might be the first time you have to schedule your own time.

Listen to the echoes of your experience in one of the most famous and oft-quoted sentences in anthropology. It was written by Bronislaw Malinowski, who is credited with inventing the

anthropological method of intensive fieldwork. At the beginning of his work in the Trobriand Islands in the South Pacific, where he was interned during World War I, he wrote,

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. ([1922] 1961: 4)

An analogous translation might be something like:

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone in your room with unfamiliar people nearby, while the car that brought you drives away out of sight.

Many students, just like many anthropologists, get a feeling of panic at that moment: “What am I doing here?” “Why didn’t I go to X?” “I want to go home.” Anthropologists call this feeling of panic *culture shock*. The term is credited to Ruth Benedict, but Cora Du Bois defines it as a “syndrome precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all your familiar cues” (cited in Golde [1970] 1986: 11); in short, you become disoriented. Culture shock is not confined to that initial moment but can resurface at various times at the beginning of any new adventure. Nor is it confined only to anthropologists or to students, for it can occur at other life-changing moments, for example when you take a new job or move to a new city. Anthropologists who have studied the phenomenon of culture shock have noted the following telltale signs: “frustration, repressed or expressed aggression against the source of discomfort, an irrational fervor for the familiar and comforting, and disproportionate anger at trivial interferences” (Golde [1970] 1986: 11).¹ It is useful to keep this in mind during the first few weeks of college life.

As an example, let me tell you about something that happened to me when I began my fieldwork in Turkey. I was excited to be there and ready to begin my fieldwork, but I didn’t know how I was supposed to go about it or where to start. I recall that I got a craving for vanilla yogurt. This was a very trivial thing, and I was never even that fond of yogurt at home, but in Turkey I had to have vanilla yogurt. Now you have to realize that Turkey is full of yogurt; it is one of their basic foods. Yogurt, yogurt everywhere, but no vanilla to be found anywhere. I was frustrated and angry: how could they not have vanilla? What kind of people are they anyway? I began a frantic search, feeling that I would not be happy until I found it; vanilla yogurt would be my comfort food, my little piece of home. I eventually found a few desiccated pods of vanilla in a spice shop and ground my own. After that, I was prepared for anything.

In order to avoid severe culture shock and to overcome students’ initial disorientation, it is no wonder colleges set aside some time, often several days, for “orientation.”

Orientation

An orientation program is, obviously, intended to help you get oriented in the new environment. Often you are told something about the history, the resources, and the rules of the school; you are shown where to go for class, for books, for food, for exercise, and for help if you get sick. Such a program helps you to get your bearings, literally and figuratively.

The purpose of orientation programs is to help you feel at home and become acclimated to your new environment. It can also be viewed quite productively as an *initiation* ritual, for it does initiate you into your new status – that of undergraduate. Initiation rituals are one type of *rites de passage* first analyzed by a Flemish anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in 1909 ([1909] 1960). Although there are a number of rites of passage, rites that mark transitions from one life stage to another, such as at birth, puberty, marriage, and death, Van Gennep focused primarily on initiation rites that occur around the time of puberty in a number of small-scale, kinship-based, hunter-gatherer societies, namely, those societies we have so condescendingly called “primitive.”² Initiation rites are the rituals that transform youths or adolescents into adults; during the rituals, they are initiated by tribal elders into the lore of the tribe and into adult responsibilities. In some places, the rites occur over a number of weeks or months, but in others they have been known to last several years. Among Australian aborigines, for example, the initiation rites traditionally took about four years, exactly equivalent to a typical American college education.

According to Van Gennep’s schema, most *rites de passage* have three stages. The first is rites of separation, when the person is detached from his or her group or family; the second is made up of rites that characterize the *liminal* period, which is *the* transitional stage. Victor Turner, a famous British anthropologist who developed Van Gennep’s schema in his own studies of ritual, characterized this stage as “betwixt and between” fixed statuses when a boy, for example, is no longer a child but not yet a man with adult responsibilities (1967: 93–111). The third stage includes the rites of reaggregation, when the transformed person is inserted back into society.

You will have to analyze your own orientation programs for some of these features. The example that follows, from Stanford University, is meant to be used for comparative purposes and is not held up as the norm or as an ideal. I use it only because it was my locale. While some of the particulars vary from year to year, the orientation program follows quite closely the pattern laid down by Van Gennep. It is primarily for freshmen and takes place over a three-day weekend, *before* the other students arrive. Students leave their homes, familiar surroundings, and friends. This is the beginning of the “separation” phase. On Friday the freshmen arrive, often with their parents, siblings, and sometimes friends in tow. Some come by car; others arrive by plane, train, or bus. They are taken to their living quarters and introduced to their roommates and the resident heads. After a few activities that include parents, there is an announced time when parents (and friends) are supposed to leave. This truly marks the “separation” phase, though at this point the separation is often more traumatic for the parents. Students then have their first dinner with their assembled dorm mates.

Saturday resembles the “liminal” phase of the rite, when initiates are expected to undergo a number of *ordeals*. At Stanford, these can vary from being led around campus in the dead of night, not knowing where you are or where you are going, to being awakened at dawn and dragged out of bed to participate in a scavenger hunt. Later in the day students sit for hours and take placement exams that will determine the level of the classes in which they will enroll. They must also consider the other classes they will take and the extracurricular activities they will join. At least for a while, their choices will have an

impact on their academic and social direction (or orientation). Other parts of the *ordeal* can include being quizzed on the names of other students and of residence heads, the local jargon that they should have memorized, and so forth. In the evening, they are sometimes required to participate in a race and gender sensitivity-training program, which can be unsettling for a number of students who must confront their prejudices. Then they are taught some of the new rules for academic and personal behavior – what is acceptable and what is not.

The culmination of orientation weekend is a football game, where the freshmen go *en masse* and sit in a special area reserved for them. Many alumni attend this game, and faculty are given free passes. The freshmen are being made into Stanfordites: they are shown the school symbols, they hear the school songs and cheers for the first time, and they are caught up in the school spirit, rooting for *their* team against the opponents. This could be imagined as the *reaggregation* ritual, for symbolically they are being incorporated into the Stanford community.

You could also easily see all four years of college as a prolonged initiation ritual, since you are separated from the rest of society for the entire period. You are no longer a child, but are not yet a fully functioning adult. You have a special, liminal, “student” status that is socially recognized; you receive certain benefits – discounts on buses, airplanes, movies, and so on, as well as a wide berth for some types of disruptive behavior. During the college years, you are freer than you will ever be again to “discover who you are,” to try on various identities, and to prepare yourself for your adult role in society. In this latter task, you are aided by the wisdom of the elders – professors and counselors – just as in initiation rites among traditional societies.

For some students, the liminal phase is more interesting or even comforting than what awaits them “outside” in the “real world,” and they want to stay on as long as possible. Eventually, however, most of you pass through the initiation and come out ready to be reinserted, as adults, into society. This achievement is marked by the graduation ceremony, which, with ironic connotations, is called *commencement*, no doubt to indicate that this is the *beginning* of the rest of your life, as a newly fledged person.

What Is Anthropology?

The foregoing may not be *at all* your image of what anthropology is. Most people think it has to do with “stones and bones” and with *elsewhere* but not here. This is a very common assumption that I hear in the responses of people when I tell them that I am an anthropologist. They often launch into an account of some program they saw on television about an ancient site or a recent bone find. They are thinking of archaeology (the “stones”) and physical anthropology (the “bones”). Yet, these are only two of the traditional four subfields of anthropology, while linguistics is a third. Other people sometimes think of Margaret Mead and realize that anthropology can also be about psychology and human behavior; the kinds of studies she conducted fall in the major subfield of the discipline – social and cultural anthropology. Many anthropologists today, myself included, no longer subscribe to the fourfield division of the discipline

but feel, instead, that the defining element is not so much what one studies but the *theoretical* stance one takes toward what one studies. The difference has to do with the way people define, or at least imagine, human nature and culture (see Segal and Yanagisako 2004).

Nature and Culture

To give you some sense of what this means in practice, think about some of the ways we often identify *differences* between peoples: environment, race, genetics, religion, economy, technology, and development. Often these differences are collapsed into broader categories of *nature* versus *culture*, with race and genetics put in the nature box and religion, economy, and technology in the culture box. Many people then conflate the nature and culture categories by assuming that peoples with the best natural gifts (genes, intelligence, and strength) produce the most advanced cultures.

But who makes these judgments about “advanced” and “primitive” cultures, and whose scale is used as the standard? And what exactly does *advanced* mean? If advanced means *complex*, then the Australian aborigines are among the most advanced peoples, judging by the extraordinary complexity of their kinship system and their religious concepts. Or perhaps some of the Western nations are the most advanced, as evidenced by the mechanical complexity of their locomotive technologies. Or perhaps Hindus and Buddhists are the most advanced, given the complexity and sophistication of their meditative and mental practices. In the nineteenth century, British and American social theorists ranked peoples of the world on an evolutionary, progressive, unilinear, and universal scale of culture that ended, not coincidentally, with themselves at the top. They simply assumed that all peoples necessarily tread the same path to civilization, for there was only one scale and one orientation – up and West.

A very popular notion about anthropology is that it is the search for human universals with the corollary that whatever is universal must, *ipso facto*, be natural. People want to know what is natural to the human species and often try to make analogies from animal behavior to human behavior, believing that the overlap indicates what is natural about human nature. For a long time, it was believed that *Homo sapiens* first developed their modern form (two-legged stance, opposable thumbs, and large brain), and *then* invented culture. Instead, it is now generally accepted not only that *Homo sapiens* developed from their ape-ical ancestors to their modern form, but also that culture was part of their development. Clifford Geertz wrote that “the greater part of human cortical expansion has *followed*, not preceded, the ‘beginning’ of culture” (1973: 64, emphasis mine). In other words, “cultural resources are ingredient, not accessory, to human thought” (Geertz 1973: 83).

And yet some scientists continue to see in animal behavior (not so) faint echoes of our own. They persist in drawing analogies *from* animal *to* human, all too often by drawing concepts and beliefs from human society, imposing them on animals, and then reading them back again to human society. Curiously, Marx was the first to notice this sleight-of-hand movement: “It is remarkable how Darwin recognizes among beasts and plants his English

society with its division of labour, competition, opening of new markets, ‘inventions,’ and the Malthusian ‘struggle for existence’” (cited in Sahlins 1976: 53). Engels continued,

The whole Darwinian teaching of the struggle for existence is simply a transference from society to living nature of Hobbes’s doctrine of *bellum omnium contra omnes* and of the bourgeois-economic doctrine of competition together with Malthus’s theory of population. When this conjurer’s trick has been performed ... the same theories are transferred back again from organic nature into history and it is now claimed that their validity as eternal laws of human society has been proved. (1976: 54)³

This in no way detracts from the general notion of human physical evolution that Darwin outlined, but it does call into question some of his assumptions about the motives and drivers of evolution. Even he found it too easy to project human behaviors on to animals and back again.⁴

According to Franz Boas, the founder of American anthropology, perception is molded not simply by extraneous suggestions, but also by long-term cultural training. This, according to his student, Ruth Benedict, was his insight during his fieldwork in Baffinland, where the local people could see different colors of seawater that were wholly unapparent to him. He concluded that the seeing eye is “not a mere physical organ but a means of perception conditioned by the tradition in which its possessor has been reared” (cited in Stocking 1968: 146).

Alan Dundes develops this point further in “Seeing Is Believing,” which “shows how American culture affects the way Americans experience their world” (1972: 14; see chapter 4). He also illuminates how we privilege sight in our value system by using it metaphorically to describe the acquisition of knowledge (see my examples in this and the preceding paragraphs).⁵ A blind student in my fall 2001 class made us all aware of the extent to which Americans depend on sight, and not just the metaphor of it, as the primary means of cultural knowledge. For instance, think how quickly we make judgments about people based solely on how they look or the clothes they wear. The *judgments* are made not because of sight but because of the meanings and values supplied by the culture.

While the capacity for culture is a human universal, this doesn’t explain why cultures are so different. The facts that “everywhere people mate and produce children, have some sense of mine and thine and protect themselves in one fashion or another from rain and sun are neither false nor, from some points of view, unimportant” (Geertz 1973: 40), but they are questionable; Geertz says that “whether a lowest-common-denominator view of humanity is what we want anyway ... it may be in the cultural particularities of people – in their oddities – that some of the most instructive revelations of what it is to be generically human are to be found” (p. 43).

It is not only that humans developed along with culture in the generic sense, but also that we are always within culture in the particular sense. Humans cannot exist outside of culture, the tales of “wolf boys” – children reared by wolves or other animals – notwithstanding. Stylites and their ilk – people who deliberately isolate themselves from society – are the exceptions that prove the rule. Stylites were hermit-like monks of the fifth to seventh centuries in what is now Syria and Turkey, who sat on top of pillars to separate themselves from society and devote themselves to prayer. The most famous Stylite was St Simon. Despite their self-imposed and celebrated isolation, they had been reared in the society they rejected, and, even when totally alone, carried on a silent dialogue with it.

As Geertz explains, people “unmodified by the customs of particular places do not in fact exist, have never existed, and most important, could not in the very nature of the case exist” (1973: 35). Thus there is no backstage, no place outside of culture in both the generic and particular senses, where you can go to study the so-called naked ape stripped of his or her culture. People are molded by culture from the moment of birth, and probably even before that due to the cultural prescriptions for pregnancy and birth and the expectations that people have about the child.

For a very long time, however, the humanities have assumed that there *is* a constant human nature and that the differences among people are superficial. Thus a Shakespeare play, for example, should be meaningful to all people (once it is translated) because people everywhere should have the same concepts, emotions, and motivations. Indeed, Shakespeare’s genius, like that of any great artist, supposedly rested on his ability to appeal to universal emotions and circumstances. Others, however, have asked if a people’s emotions and responses are conditioned by the particularities of their culture. Anthropologist Laura Bohannan (1966) put this question to the test when she told the story of *Hamlet* to a group of Africans with whom she was living and conducting anthropological fieldwork. She encountered many problems with the translation not of the words, but of the concepts. Was it possible to translate Shakespeare’s world into an African language and context and render the story understandable to them, or did the translation fundamentally alter it? Her famous article is included with this chapter.

To understand people and cultures, you have to get into the particulars, for this is where you pick up the clues. This is anthropology in a new key;⁶ it does not dismiss human universals, but discovering them is not its primary goal since they do not help us understand why different peoples do things differently. In short, although universals give us the common human denominator, they do not tell us very much about specific cultures. What, then, is this “culture” that we should be mindful of it?

Because I think it is important for you to come to your own understanding of culture, I do not intend to give it a specific definition, although, in the next section, I will briefly discuss some general ideas that have been put forth by a variety of theorists who have dealt with the concept. Before reading this section, it would be useful to stop here and define *culture* for yourself and then see how your understanding of it changes as you read further in the book.

Culture

Culture is, admittedly, a slippery concept that is difficult to grasp. According to British social theorist Raymond Williams:

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and *incompatible* systems of thought. ([1976] 1983: 87, emphasis mine)

Culture has become such a contested word that some anthropologists think we should drop it. Since I have used the word in the title of this book, it is clear that I do not agree. To get some sense of the approach taken in this book, it is helpful, I think, to examine some of the meanings of the word. I begin with the historical etymology worked out by Williams in his helpful book, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* ([1976] 1983).

According to Williams, “Culture in all its early uses was a noun of process: the tending of something, basically crops or animals.” This is the sense behind such words as *horticulture*, *vini-/viticulture*, and *agriculture*. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the idea of *cultivation* was transferred to humans and with it was born the notion of a *cultivated* person. This had distinct class overtones and was closely related to the idea of *civilization*. That idea has not completely died out, for culture is still often associated with “great works” that are housed in libraries and museums or performed on stage. Poetry and literature, painting and sculpture, symphony and opera, theater and dance – these were, and still are to a large extent, what most people imagine when they think of culture. Not so long ago, these were the things you went to college to study, for to be a cultured person you had to know about and appreciate them. In addition, it was essential that upper-class youth complete their education with a European tour to absorb the great works of Western culture, presumed to be the epitome of civilization. When combined with a belief that culture is an evolutionary, unidirectional, and progressive phenomenon that all peoples are striving for, one can sense how assumptions about class, race, and gender hierarchy were reinforced by such a tour.

In the twentieth century, many anthropologists dropped this framework with the realization that different cultures are just different. And while cultures are conditioned by the global network of power and resources in which they are embedded, they nevertheless spring from different premises about life and from different goals and values. This idea stems from Johann Gottfried von Herder, an eighteenth-century German historian, who thought that every people (*Volk*) had their own values, language, and spirit (*Geist*). He also argued against the presumptions of European superiority:

Men of all the quarters of the globe, who have perished over the ages, you have not lived solely to manure the earth with your ashes, so that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture. The very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature. (Cited in Williams [1976] 1983: 89)

It is from Herder that the notion of culture in the plural derives, and it is in this sense that the concept entered anthropology, notably through Franz Boas. Boas is considered the founder of American anthropology, even though he was German and trained in the German intellectual tradition. In New York at Columbia University, he established the first department of anthropology in the United States. Boas was also a major player in championing *nurture* over *nature*, a debate that had then and has today racial underpinnings and implications. Thus, if your nature (now read *genes*) is responsible for your lowly position, nothing can be done. But if your (lack of) nurture – not only food and nutrients but also cultural and social resources – is responsible, then social measures can be instituted to ameliorate it.

Raymond Williams claims that “in archaeology and in *cultural anthropology* the reference to culture or a culture is primarily to *material* production, while in history and *cultural studies* the reference is primarily to *signifying* or *symbolic* systems” ([1976] 1983: 91). While that may be true in the British context, it is not so in the American. Culture, among American anthropologists, generally refers to signifying or symbolic systems, as we shall see. (More proof of George Bernard Shaw’s dictum that England and the United States are two countries divided by a common language.) No wonder some anthropologists wish to abandon the term *culture* altogether. But Williams’s take on this issue is, I believe, related to another important difference between British and American anthropology. As he notes, the adjective *cultural* came into prominence at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the emergence of anthropology. This usage develops in relation, and often in contrast, to the adjective *social*.

Social and Cultural Anthropology

Within the major subfield of social and cultural anthropology (see “Anthropology,” above), contentious debates once revolved around the distinction between the social and the cultural, and left their mark on the vocabulary and methodologies of the discipline. For our purposes, *culture* refers to signifying, symbolic, or meaning systems, while *social* refers to institutions and arrangements of people and their activities in the realm of the concrete. Thus the alphabet, Euclidian geometry, and the story of creation in the Old Testament are systems of meaning, while the Stop and Shop, Stanford University, and the Vatican are social institutions. To some extent – some would argue a very large extent – the distinction is arbitrary, since one can’t explain cultural systems except through the social institutions that use them, or explain social institutions without the systems of meaning that guide their invention and operation. Think of it this way: can (or should) a contractor build a house without a blueprint, or understand a blueprint without seeing a good many houses?

The debates between social and cultural anthropologists concern not the differences between the concepts but the analytical priority: which should come first, the social chicken or the cultural egg? British anthropology emphasizes the social. It assumes that social institutions determine culture and that universal domains of society (such as kinship, economy, politics, and religion) are represented by specific institutions (such as the family, subsistence farming, the British Parliament, and the Church of England) which can be compared cross-culturally. American anthropology emphasizes the cultural. It assumes that culture shapes social institutions by providing the shared beliefs, the core values, the communicative tools, and so on that make social life possible. It does not assume that there are universal social domains, preferring instead to discover domains empirically as aspects of each society’s own classificatory schemes – in other words, its culture. And it rejects the notion that any social institution can be understood in isolation from its own context. To some extent, this characterization of British and American anthropologies is an overstatement, since most anthropologists on both sides of the Atlantic try to account for and integrate both the social and the cultural. But it does capture important differences in orientation and emphasis.

Cultural and social anthropologies stem from somewhat different intellectual lineages. The American lineage draws, to a large extent, on the German tradition that began with Herder and was adopted by Boas, as noted above. Herder's preoccupations with a people's "spirit" (*Geist*) and Boas's with intellectual traditions led to concentrations in American anthropology on folklore, material arts, linguistics, and personality – all expressions of symbolic or meaning systems. The British lineage draws instead on utilitarianism, a socio-economic theory developed by the philosophers Hobbes and Locke, and by the economists Malthus and Smith. Utilitarianism claims that everyone (or every British man) is a rational, self-interested actor pursuing universal wants. The British lineage also drew on French theorist Emile Durkheim, who gave social anthropology and sociology their distinctive framework.⁷ Durkheim's principal contribution was his belief that society is *sui generis*, a thing of its own kind. This means that society cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of psychology or biology or economics, because it is a totality that operates according to its own principles. Just as physicists must discover the laws of the physical universe, so too sociologists and social anthropologists must discover the laws of society.

We can illustrate what is at stake in prioritizing social or cultural approaches by examining the institution of marriage and attempting to explain its meaning and purpose. If we take as our example a conventional American marriage – monogamous, heterosexual, and purportedly permanent – we discover numerous attributes that it can or should have. It should be based in love, maintain sexual exclusivity, and provide companionship for the husband and wife. It legitimates – and, for some, mandates – the bearing and raising of children. It is the foundation of a household and the division of labor required to sustain that household. It is a legal contract that turns two people into one legal person for establishing custodial duties, property rights, and inheritance. It is a sacrament created within a church or temple. And it is the actualization of God's plan for man and woman which he established with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

From this list, it is clear that marriage is not one thing, since it has numerous meanings, purposes, and implications. A social anthropologist would look at this list and determine that marriage means primarily one thing, while everything else is tangential. Perhaps the primary purpose of marriage is to legitimate childrearing and thereby establish rights of inheritance; this means that everything else – from romantic love to religious sacrament – are ideological grace notes dressing up what is fundamentally a legal-economic contract. A cultural anthropologist, in contrast, would say that the numerous meanings, purposes, and implications of marriage are of a piece and indivisible and must be treated as such. She would then ask where else in this society we find similar constellations of emotional attachment, sexual discipline, property rights, and religious motifs, and perhaps decide to compare secular marriages to the lives of nuns and priests who are married to Christ and/or the church.

I have written this book with the premises and postures of cultural – and not social – anthropology in mind. This means, first, that the book is *not* organized around prescribed social domains, as introductory textbooks typically are, with a chapter on economy, a chapter on kinship, a chapter on politics, a chapter on religion, and so on. It is organized instead around interpretive problems which I will lay out at the end of this chapter. This also means that I prioritize culture – as symbolism, signification, and meaning – both in