

Key Debates in Anthropological Theory (AHAN7012)

Task 1: Presentation of a motion for one GDAT – Topic

Debate of 1989: “The concept of society is theoretically obsolete”

Arguing against the motion.

The debate, that I am focussing on is one of the oldest, from 1989, but in my opinion that doesn't make it less current. Social- (and Cultural) Anthropology is still a very young discipline, compared to other sciences like Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Psychology or Philosophie, and there are still existing some questions, queries and about its purpose, definition or used methods, not only coming from other- , but also from within our own discipline, due to different ways of thoughts and paradigm changes, dealing with abstract and complex terms and phenomena. But these disagreements almost “naturally” arise, when it comes to studying the human ways of life and mind. One might say, that sciences like Philosophie or Psychology also deal with human minds and Biology with human lives, what makes it so difficult then for our discipline to settle as “real science”? Well, first, as I mentioned before, Social Anthropology is still a young discipline, beginning with the 19th century as Ethnography and the theoretical studies of indigenous tribes, with knowledge gained from reports received out of third hand, from missionaries or travellers, which didn't make it very accurate. This ways of gaining knowledge changed over the years, but it still takes time, patience and work to get acknowledged in theory and practice, especially in our rapidly changing, globalised world. Second, Anthropology deals not only with human minds, but also with its connection to human-constructed systems, phenomena, or norms and patterns, we are living with and in all the time. In natural science, for example, norms and patterns often get to be methodologically categorised and generalized, when it is dealing with matter. Humanities, on the other hand deal with the human mind and often only refer to speculations and hypothesis. The tricky part in Anthropology is to find a way of understanding both sides. I would like to refer to it here as, the “individual – mind”, acknowledging, that every history of every human is unique and differs from each single one, and the “community-mind”, starting with habits and norms within a family, a social-circle, a city, a nation, a state, and so on. All included and described as “society”.

But what should we do now, with the term of “society”? Where does it starts? Or is it already obsolete to talk about society? Before we get to answer these questions, I want to describe the difficulties of working with such an abstract term as “society”. Only to show, that these difficulties could be part of the answer.

What makes “society” an abstract term:

1) Language

The English word “society” comes from the Latin word “societas”, describing a friendly bond or interaction between parties (Oxford Dictionary, 2018). In German we refer to “society” as “Gesellschaft”, coming from the “Old High German” “sal”, which means room/space, and “gisellio”, which means fellow/companion (DUDEN, 2018). As we can see, the English “society” is more related to a mental bond of sharing the same ideas, while the German “Gesellschaft” relates to a spatial union, sharing the same space. And even though, the Spanish “sociedad” has the same Latin origin, as the English “society”, in many cases its definition refers to the word “culture” and “sociedad” as a description of “culture” (Definición, 2012), which differs again from the English or German sources. It is just a small example, yet it shows the linguistic conflict of intelligibility, which makes an important topic for our discipline: All three initial meanings differ from one another, but they are used for the same term. This natural conflict, when it comes to communication through language, points out to a very specific matter: Accuracy in translation. Especially in Anthropology - according to the history of our discipline - dealing with language, communication and further on with translation is a big part of fieldwork, and as we can see it doesn't even stop on essential terms, such as “society”. The “Ethnography of Speaking” (Hymes, 1962) is one well known theoretical and methodological concept in Social Anthropology, that describes exactly those difficulties with language and communication in sociocultural contexts. Dialects, bilingualism, indigenous ways of speaking, slang, greetings, onomatopoeia, loanwords and so on, are just a few examples, which drive the topic. This does not just happen between different languages, even if we look at just one language: According to the “Cambridge Dictionary” there exists not only one definition for the word “society” in English, but over ten. All of them, which brings me to my next point, dependent on the context of use (Cambridge Dictionary, 2014).

2) Context

The word “society” is not comprehensible in its entirety, without context, time and place. As I already mentioned, the definition – and therefore further work with the term – of “society” is not only difficult between languages, but also within one language. To find a way of still using it in an anthropological reputable work, it is necessary to build and to describe a construct in which the term can be embedded. Peel and Spencer (1996, p.48) put the term “society” in the same semantic field as “culture”, but also together with terms such as “nation or state”, with which I disagree. I believe that “society” (as well as “culture”) is affected and shaped by human influence, but not constructed, like “state”, “nation” or “political systems”, “norms” or “laws”. Those constructed phenomena are simply used to build hierarchies, and to transform power into “legitimate” authority (Lincoln, 2014). Other than Marilyn Strathern (1996, p.52), who
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believes, that “society” is either half, or else a whole phenomenon, divided into systems, which makes it a human-constructed notion, I believe the abstract term of “society” being more of a natural habit of “grouping for survival”. Even though one abstraction led to another and the term “society” gave way to concepts of organizations and rules, it is not the (first) responsibility of Anthropologists to judge or interfere, but to observe those “groupings-for-survival”. Where I understand “grouping” as union with others and “surviving” as defined for each single “society”, depending on the context: survival as outbreak of norms in urban spaces, through union with likeminded (e.g. Punks, Skate/Sprayer-society, medieval festival-society, ...) or union in rural spaces, e.g. machinery-sharing among farmers, community-kitchens, craftsman-unions, and so on. Of course, society could also be built on like-mindedness through following norms and patterns, given on a makro-level of systems, e.g. of a constructed state, political system, or religion. Each one of them independently defined by cultural goods of material, spiritual and/or ritual value, with a certain recognition and expression of affiliation. Like Peel argues in his motion (1996, p.55), that the concept of “society” seems to be always listed as dichotomy, I also think, that it can only exist, when it is put in comparison with a notion I want to study, which leads to my next point: The importance of time and space.

3) Time and Place

I want to conclude the former two mentioned points in this third one. In my opinion, as Anthropologists it is our duty to observe, reflect and analyse so-called “cultures” and “societies”, having language and context in mind, but also (nowadays probably most important) a specific time(-period) and specific place – the field. Those two semantics are essential for ethnographical work (Englert and Dannecker, 2014) and, in my opinion essential for every further use and definition of “society”. What we learned from the history of our discipline is, especially after the great shift in theoretical paradigm in the British tradition with Malinowski, 1922 (Barth, 2005, p.22) that it is impossible to do research on one community in its entirety, including all aspects of their lives, not to mention the influence of the Anthropologist him-/herself on the field and its participants (which should be reappraised in self-reflection). Our world changes constantly, what makes it much more important for our work to be accurate with time and place circumstances. What was first called civilization, was changed into “society”. While in German language Anthropologists were using the word “Volk”, for a period of time, it was (after WWII) absolutely frowned upon, using this expression, referring to “society”. But did all that changes, and struggles of definition and concepts thrown upon the term, really make it theoretically obsolete?

I am against the motion, and in my opinion the use of the term “society” is not theoretically obsolete. I even have a problem with the debate per se. Not because the topic is somehow old

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or out of date. It might be 30 years old, but it is still accurate, and that should make us more concerned about the future of our discipline, than anything. First, “society” might be an abstract term for the phenomenon of inclusion-and exclusion, but I don’t think, that it is just depending on an individual thought. It is a necessary notion for Anthropologists, not to categorize civilians, but to understand – casually said – where they are coming from. Moreover, I believe, that even if the debate is interesting and “mind-driving” the theoretical dispute with motions like this only leads to a, metaphorically spoken, new generation of “Armchair Anthropologists”, not referring to its original meaning, of Anthropologists consulting their ethnographic materials from third parties. I refer to a generation of young scientists, leaning back in their “armchairs” at universities around the globe, trying to force abstract and context-depending – but still necessary – terms into patterns and generalized categorizations, with the aim of (mostly western-) universal legitimation.

I don’t want to demotivate, neither do I believe, that the debate is redundant. With my argumentation, fundamentally against the motion, I want to demonstrate, how important it is to focus on the aspects in the field, with which we are dealing with. We should not only waste energy on abstract patterns, causing instability within our own discipline and among colleagues. Debating and trying to stay up-to-date is one thing, as long, as it doesn’t lead to losing the legitimation of our work. But because we are spending our time, debating about the legitimation (or even existence) of decisive terms for our discipline, such as “society” or “culture”, we are losing focus on what is important in Anthropology, and that is the link, we successfully created between natural science and humanities, going out in the field and studying “cultures” and “societies”.

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