

On The Verge – An Anthropological Perspective

Isanee Sengupta

Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Gujarat

Correspondence: isanee2987a@gmail.com

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The Clash

The interplay between concept and theory has historically constituted, and will continue to represent, a central paradigm within sociological inquiry. (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The anthropological engagement with real-life issues exerts an inevitable and transformative influence on the various components of the society that constitute how a society will survive or will change the ways to survive. Consequently, a comprehensive and critical examination of existing theoretical frameworks is imperative. Such discourse is essential for reconfiguring the relationship between conceptual understanding and its practical implications on human life, thereby enabling the formulation of revised and contextually relevant theories. When effectively implemented, this theoretical realignment can facilitate the necessary structural adjustments to maintain equilibrium within the adaptive systems of the contemporary world (Malinowski, 1944). So, basically this research focuses that the evolving relationship between concept and theory is fundamental to sociology and anthropology, demanding ongoing critical review to address pressing societal realities.

The Interplay

Classical anthropological theories such as Structural Functionalism, Cultural Materialism, and Symbolic Anthropology, continue to provide valuable frameworks for interpreting contemporary issues, including globalisation, climate change, identity politics, and technological advancements. They help us analyse the evolution of societal structures, economic transformations, and cultural meanings in an increasingly interconnected world.

Structural Functionalism – Then and Now:

Structural Functionalism was one of the dominant approaches in early anthropology, largely shaped by the works of Bronisław Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. This theory sees society as a complex system made up of different parts (institutions), each with a role to play in maintaining social stability and harmony. Although the theory has evolved and faced criticism, it still offers valuable insights into how societies function—both in the past and today.

Foundations of Structural Functionalism:

Malinowski (1944), through his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, introduced what's often called psychological functionalism. He argued that cultural practices are not random—they serve specific purposes to meet the basic needs of individuals, such as food, shelter, or social belonging. For example, his famous study of the *Kula*¹ exchange showed how ritualised gift-giving helped create long-lasting relationships and cooperation among islanders.

On the other hand, Radcliffe-Brown (1952) developed a more society-focused model, known as structural functionalism. Drawing inspiration from Émile Durkheim, he saw society as an organism made up of interdependent parts—like kinship, religion, and law—all of which function together to maintain social order. His work emphasised how social structures regulate behavior and help preserve the continuity of society.

¹ The Kula is a ceremonial and extensive exchange system in which symbolic items are circulated among island communities spread across vast distances. The primary objects exchanged include Soulava (red shell necklaces that move in a clockwise direction) and Mwali (white shell armbands that circulate counter-clockwise). These objects are not intended for permanent possession; instead, each recipient is expected to pass them on, thereby sustaining the continuous flow of the exchange network.

Modern relevance and applications:

Despite its limitations, structural functionalism remains useful for understanding how different systems and institutions maintain order in modern societies. For instance, digital platforms like Facebook or Reddit have their own rules, roles, and rituals. Moderators act like legal authorities, community norms guide behavior, and features like likes or upvotes function as symbolic forms of approval—similar to rituals in traditional societies.

In India, structural functionalism has been used to study traditional institutions such as the caste system, joint family, and village councils ('panchayats'). These structures, while adapting over time, continue to play a role in organising social life, managing resources, and resolving conflicts (Dube, 1967). However, critics argue that this theory often overlooks inequalities and power struggles within these systems (Dirks, 2001).

Criticisms and new directions:

One major critique of structural functionalism is its tendency to focus too much on stability and order, often ignoring issues like conflict, change, and agency. By treating societies as static systems, it can miss the dynamic nature of social life. This led to the rise of other approaches like conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and postmodernism, which bring in historical, political, and interpretive perspectives.

Still, structural functionalism continues to be useful in areas such as policy analysis, institutional studies, and community development, where understanding how systems work together is crucial.

Although structural functionalism is no longer the leading theory in anthropology, it remains an important framework for analysing how societies maintain order and cohesion. By examining how various institutions function and interact, it offers a clear and organised way to understand both traditional and modern forms of social life.

Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology: Understanding Meaning in The Modern World:

In today's complex and interconnected global society, the interpretation of meaning has taken center stage in the study of culture. Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology, prominently

associated with the work of Clifford Geertz, remains a critical framework for examining how individuals and communities assign meaning to actions, symbols, and experiences. This theoretical tradition argues that culture is not merely a set of observable behaviors, but rather a system of symbols and meanings that people use to interpret the world around them (Geertz, 1973).

Geertz (1973) conceptualised culture as a “web of significance” woven by humans themselves, asserting that the role of the anthropologist is to uncover these webs by interpreting cultural symbols much like texts. Through thick description—a method of detailed observation and contextual analysis—anthropologists gain insight into the symbolic structures that underlie social actions and cultural expressions.

Contemporary relevance:

Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology continues to provide valuable insight into the dynamics of the modern world, particularly in areas where symbolic communication is central.

Digital culture and online behaviour:

In the digital age, identity is constructed and performed through symbolic actions such as sharing memes, using hashtags, and curating social media profiles. These online practices mirror traditional rituals and symbolic acts, offering a new field for anthropological interpretation (Miller et al., 2016). Interpretive anthropology enables scholars to understand how digital spaces function as cultural arenas where meaning is negotiated and identities are expressed.

Politics and Symbolism:

Political discourse increasingly relies on symbolic representation—through flags, slogans, protest gestures, and visual iconography. These elements function as cultural texts that reflect and shape political ideologies. The interpretive approach is crucial in analyzing how such symbols mobilise collective sentiment or reinforce national narratives (Handler, 1988).

Religion and spiritual practice:

In both traditional and new-age spiritual movements, rituals and symbols continue to play a vital role. Even in secular contexts, individuals engage with symbolic frameworks to express belief,

find belonging, or create meaning in uncertain times (Turner, 1967). Contemporary spirituality, often blending elements across traditions, can be better understood through the interpretive lens.

Globalisation and Cultural Hybridity:

In a globalised world, cultural symbols travel, merge, and are recontextualised. Interpretive anthropology is uniquely positioned to analyse the ways individuals and communities navigate cultural hybridity, adapt symbols to new contexts, and form new cultural expressions (Appadurai, 1996).

Consumer culture and branding:

Brands and advertising rely heavily on symbolic associations to convey values, lifestyles, and identity. Interpretive approaches help decode how cultural meanings are embedded in consumer goods and how individuals engage with these meanings in shaping their self-perception (Moore, 2003).

Despite its roots in mid-20th century anthropology, Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology remains highly relevant today. Its emphasis on meaning-making, ritual, and cultural symbolism offers powerful tools for understanding the complexities of modern life. As culture continues to evolve in digital, political, spiritual, and economic domains, this theoretical approach ensures that anthropologists can interpret the symbols and stories through which people continue to define their world.

Reclaiming Knowledge: The Enduring Relevance of Postcolonial and Decolonial Theories in The Contemporary World:

Eventually, symbolic anthropology intersects with postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, to critique power dynamics, ideological control, and the enduring impact of colonialism. In a way, the meaning and representation of these perspectives align with symbolic anthropology, which analyses how symbols embody meaning, identity, and culture are shaped by power, history, and context. This connection enables a deeper examination to unpack how symbols, traditions, and narratives have been influenced—or distorted—by colonial rule and dominant ideologies, allowing for a richer critique of cultural representation and knowledge systems. (Geertz, 1973; Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978; Smith, 2012).

Theoretical foundations:

Postcolonial theory, which gained prominence through scholars like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, focuses on how colonial discourse shaped perceptions of the colonised world. Said's (1978) foundational work, *Orientalism*, exposed how the West constructed the "Orient" as exotic and inferior to justify colonial rule. Bhabha (1994) introduced the concepts of hybridity and mimicry to explore how colonized cultures responded to colonial domination in complex, often contradictory ways. Spivak (1988), in her critical essay, interrogated whether marginalised voices—the "subaltern"—can be truly heard within Western academic and political frameworks.

In contrast, 'decolonial theory' evolved from Latin American and Global South perspectives, particularly through the work of Anibal Quijano and Walter Dignolo. Quijano (2000) introduced the concept of the coloniality of power, arguing that colonial structures of dominance were never dismantled but instead reconfigured into modern systems of racial, epistemological, and economic hierarchy. Decolonial theorists advocate for epistemic disobedience, or a deliberate disengagement from Eurocentric ways of knowing, to restore and legitimize indigenous knowledge systems (Dignolo, 2007).

Contemporary relevance:

Far from being confined to post-independence critique, these theories remain vital tools for understanding current global dynamics.

Decolonising education and knowledge production:

Academic institutions are increasingly scrutinised for perpetuating Eurocentric curricula and research practices. Decolonial theory plays a key role in efforts to diversify educational systems by recognising non-Western epistemologies and challenging established hierarchies of knowledge (Smith, 2012). Postcolonial perspectives complement this by questioning which voices are legitimised within scholarly discourse.

Race, identity, and cultural representation:

Contemporary discussions on race, representation, and identity politics are deeply informed by postcolonial insights. Stuart Hall (1997) emphasised how media and culture produce meaning and shape identities. These ideas remain relevant in unpacking how cultural production continues to reflect colonial-era power imbalances and stereotypes. Decolonial theory broadens this critique by locating these issues within global systems of racialised control.

Global development and economic dependency:

Postcolonial critiques of development reveal how global aid and economic models often replicate colonial patterns of domination and dependency (Escobar, 1995). Decolonial approaches offer alternative frameworks rooted in local contexts and knowledge systems, advocating for self-determined paths to development.

Environmental justice and indigenous sovereignty:

Environmental movements increasingly turn to indigenous knowledge and stewardship practices to address climate change and ecological degradation. Decolonial theory provides a foundation for recognising indigenous epistemologies as valid and vital to sustainable futures (Whyte, 2018).

Migration, diaspora, and Transnationalism:

Postcolonial theory remains central to understanding the cultural hybridity, displacement, and identity negotiation experienced by migrant and diasporic communities. These experiences are often shaped by historic colonial relationships, reinforcing the enduring nature of imperial legacies.

Postcolonial and decolonial theories offer powerful frameworks for interrogating contemporary structures of power, knowledge, and representation. They move beyond critique to propose transformative alternatives that center marginalised voices and knowledge systems. In an increasingly interconnected but unequal world, these theories help scholars, activists, and institutions imagine more equitable, inclusive futures—ones not defined by colonial legacies, but by justice and epistemic plurality.

Decolonial Human System Theory: Reimagining Anthropology Through Structure, Meaning, and Liberation:

Decolonial Human System Theory (DHST) represents a contemporary anthropological framework that synthesises insights from Structural Functionalism, Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology, and Postcolonial/Decolonial perspectives. It posits that societies are dynamic systems shaped not only by institutional structures and cultural meanings but also by enduring histories of colonialism, marginalisation, and resistance. DHST seeks to deconstruct dominant narratives by centering human dignity, plural knowledge systems, and social transformation within anthropological inquiry. (Geertz, 1973).

Rethinking anthropology in decolonial era:

The field of anthropology, rooted in colonial contexts, continues to evolve in response to ethical, epistemological, and political challenges. While traditional theoretical frameworks offered foundational insights, they often excluded the lived realities and voices of colonised and marginalised communities. In response, Decolonial Human System Theory (DHST) emerges as a holistic model that integrates structural analysis, symbolic interpretation, and decolonial critique.

DHST asserts that human systems are not neutral; they are forged through power dynamics, cultural contestation, and historical legacies. This theory prioritises relational understanding, ethical engagement, and the co-production of knowledge to reimagine anthropology as an inclusive, liberatory discipline. (Quijano, 2000; Smith, 2012).

Core principles of Decolonial Human System Theory:

a. Systemic dialogics:

Societies are interpreted as dialogical systems, shaped by ongoing interactions between institutions, symbolic frameworks, and historical forces.

b. Human-Centered Relationality:

The theory prioritises the relational nature of human existence, advocating for research that upholds dignity, mutual respect, and ethical responsibility.

c. Decolonial Reflexivity:

DHST encourages anthropologists to examine their own positionalities and engage in reflexive, ethical research practices that question dominant paradigms.

d. Plural Epistemologies:

DHST upholds the legitimacy of diverse knowledge systems and calls for an anthropology that is epistemologically inclusive and intellectually pluralistic.

e. Liberatory structures:

Beyond analysis, DHST seeks to inform and support efforts toward social justice, cultural revitalisation, and systemic change. (Geertz, 1973; Mignolo, 2007)

Applications in contemporary anthropological research:

Urban Anthropology:

DHST provides tools to explore how informal settlements and urban peripheries are not merely marginal spaces but sites of innovation, survival, and symbolic negotiation.

Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty:

Through DHST, indigenous practices and governance systems are understood not just as cultural expressions but as assertions of political and epistemic sovereignty.

Migration and Transnationalism:

The theory allows for a more nuanced understanding of migration as shaped by colonial legacies, global inequalities, and cultural resilience.

Digital Anthropology:

DHST can also be applied to digital spaces, analysing how online communities resist, reinterpret, and recreate systems of meaning under digital capitalism and algorithmic control. (Appadurai, 1996; Whyte, 2018; Quijano, 2000; Escobar, 2018)

Methodological implications:

DHST calls for methodological innovation that aligns with its theoretical commitments. This includes:

- Participatory and community-led research
- Collaborative ethnography and co-authorship
- Culturally responsive and context-specific ethics
- Decolonial analysis of fieldwork and representation

Researchers are expected to act as partners and facilitators, not extractors of knowledge. (Tuck & Yang, 2012)

Toward a decolonial anthropology of human systems:

Decolonial Human System Theory offers a vital reorientation of anthropological thought and practice. It transcends binary debates between structure and agency, tradition and modernity, and the West and the rest. By weaving together structural insight, symbolic interpretation, and decolonial critique, DHST enables a richer understanding of human complexity grounded in justice, plurality, and hope.

Anthropology, through the lens of DHST, becomes not just a study of cultures, but a transformative dialogue for imagining liberated and inclusive futures. (Mignolo, 2007)

The Accountability of The Knowledge

The imperative to reimagine anthropology lies in its potential to evolve as a discipline that not only explains human diversity but also engages meaningfully with the urgent challenges of our time. By confronting its interdisciplinary, and transformative praxis, anthropology can reassert its relevance as a field committed to understanding—and reshaping—the human condition. Basically, this research brings together the conceptual foundations, and prospective directions that support the call for a response from anthropology to contemporary global realities.

Responding to Structural Inequalities and Global Realities:

The contemporary world is shaped by intersecting crises—climate change, mass displacement, economic precarity, and systemic violence. These conditions necessitate an anthropology that is both analytical and adaptive, capable of unpacking the lived complexities of human experience in shifting global contexts. Static or essentialist understandings of culture are inadequate; instead, anthropology can emphasize fluidity, negotiation, and resilience in socio-cultural systems.

Engaging Interdisciplinary and Systemic Thinking:

The complexity of contemporary challenges calls for interdisciplinary integration. Anthropology can intersect with fields such as political ecology, digital studies, public health, and critical race theory to construct nuanced analyses of systemic power, technological change, and global interdependencies. Reimagining the discipline in this way enhances its analytical depth and societal impact.

Envisioning A Liberatory Future:

Finally, a reimagined anthropology can transcend academic observation and actively contribute to the pursuit of social justice, equity, and human dignity. It can transform into a discipline of resistance and repair—one that supports marginalised voices and promotes the ethical reconstitution of knowledge and power in society (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

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