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Early Development of Ethnography

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... Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you.

Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, 1922

Sound romantic in an Indiana Jones sort of way? When Malinowski embarked on his first ethnographic fieldwork in Trobriand Island during World War I, long-term immersion was not yet the established standard of anthropological research. His four-year stint in these remote islands (near New Guinea) later became the archetype of ethnographic research: a lone male ethnographer (yes, most ethnographers were white men at the time) in an isolated location, struggling his way through strange customs and outlandish beliefs of the “native” population.

In the end of the 19th century Europeans and Euroamericans were struggling to understand and control non-western peoples they encountered through their colonial expansion around the world. Their insatiable curiosity about non-western others gave rise to scientific studies of difference among diverse human groups and also raised the question of “man”: Where does the boundary of humanity lie, and what commonality unites us as a species despite seemingly unfathomable difference and diversity amongst us? Anthropology emerged as the new scientific discipline specialized in answering these questions through the analysis of “exotic” peoples around the world.

The question of “man” is the product of Eurocentric colonial mentality in the late 19th and early 20th century, which explained the diversity among human groups in terms of unilinear social evolution. Namely, various groups progressed toward the “advanced” state of “civilization” at a different speed, with Western Europeans at the pinnacle of this evolutionary ascent. Conversely, the more different a group of people seemed in the European/Euro-American eyes, the more “backward,” “primitive,” or “savage” they were considered.

If it all seems terribly racist, it sure is, from today’s standard. And that’s why many anthropologists consider this colonial origin of their discipline their “skeleton in the closet.” At the same time, many founding figures of anthropology were also the vocal advocates of indigenous rights and staunch critics of racism. Franz Boas, a German Jew who left Europe to escape anti-Semitism, debunked the “myth” of racial difference and insisted upon analyzing cultural practices in their own historical context, instead of judging them by external standards. Bronislaw Malinowski stated the functional equality of all social systems, regardless of how exotic or strange they may seem, and criticized the Eurocentrism in social science scholarship of his time. Even Lewis Henry Morgan, known for his social evolutionist theory, was a vocal advocate for Native American rights.

These contradictory instances do not exonerate anthropology from its early colonial connections; rather, they illustrate how early anthropologists' desire – despite their own colonial entanglement – to understand the lives of people unlike themselves pushed them to see past the prevailing ideology of their time. Ethnography as a research method emerged from this intellectual and moral commitment to do the best we can to see the world through the eyes of the others. This is also the very core of “ethnographic thinking.”

This shift in the discipline's priority also coincides with the shift in their method of analysis. The 19th century anthropologists were largely “armchair” scholars, who collected accounts of distant cultures from amateur observers, such as traders, missionaries, colonial administrators and military personnel, and theorized about human species in the comfort of their armchair in a European or North-American metropole.

The requirement of long-term immersive fieldwork emerged out of this historical context. Scholars like Boas and Malinowski found traditional information sources of non-western societies and cultures full of prejudice and inherently problematic. That's when they started going to the field themselves and gathered information for analysis through first-hand observation and interaction, which matured into a set of fieldwork practices throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Reading/Viewing Suggestions:

Read more on Western obsession with the “exotic others” in Edward Said's classic, *Orientalism*, which provides detailed historical analysis of how colonialism and racism came hand-in-hand. On the role of “science” in justifying racism, I recommend Stephen Jay Gould's *Mismeasure of Man*. Neither of these books are without criticisms and controversies – as often the case when people challenge scientific orthodoxy.

Orientalism, Chapter 1 Full Text https://sites.evergreen.edu/politicalshakespeares/wp-content/uploads/sites/33/2014/12/Said_full.pdf

Mismeasure of Man description https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Mismeasure_of_Man

“First Contact” (Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson, 1983) is an exceptional documentary film that also speaks to the issue of colonial encounter. It combines the original footage from the 1930s, filmed by the first White explorers who reached the interior regions of New Guinea, with interviews with surviving individuals who recollect their “first contact” half a century later.

Preview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=2Y5rC7kDx3o>