

# Historico-cultural anthropology as centre of the sciences of culture

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In my talk I will situate the field of historical-cultural anthropology in relation to other enterprises under the guise of anthropology and, more generally, within the humanities and cultural studies. I will argue that anthropology after Nietzsche and Foucault necessarily has to be a historical-cultural anthropology, i.e. a anthropology rooted in both historical and philosophical studies of culture. In the second part of the talk I will leave the conceptual level and show some core topics that cultural-historical anthropology approaches.

Anthropology as part of the humanities can be divided into five distinct yet not independent approaches, (a) evolution-humanization anthropology; (b) the German tradition of philosophical anthropology; (c) the French undertaking of historical anthropology and history of mentalities; (d) cultural anthropology as developed in Great Britain; and, finally, (e) reflexive historico-cultural anthropology as proposed by myself. Elements of the first four understandings of anthropology all found their way into historical cultural anthropology. While evolution-humanisation examines the material self-organisation in evolutionary terms and suggests a 'natural history of man's evolution', philosophical anthropology more specifically used the relation of animal and humans to approach the "conditio humana". In contrast to these traditions that take the whole evolutionary development of the modern human as their basis of analysis, the French *Annales-school* departed from a universalistic perspective that made claims about "man in general" toward a historical analysis of "fundamental human experiences". In addition to the temporal specificity, cultural anthropology and ethnography provided the insight that the human condition is also geographically specific. No longer can the European male serve as a yardstick of the human per se. When ethnographic and historical study of the Other were self-reflexively turned on the own they were able to show and analyze the peculiarities of Western culture. The project of cultural historical anthropology, finally, draws from the approaches mentioned above while reflecting on itself. The center of interest, thus, has shifted toward the analysis of contemporary phenomena, using not only historical methods but also those of the humanities and social sciences. This project can provide an important contribution to the (self-)understanding and interpretation of cultures and societies, however, at the same time it runs at risk of not being able to transcend its initial insights. As a safeguard against this a critical assessment of the relation of cultural-historical anthropology to its normative conceptions and to power is necessary. In doing so, historico-cultural anthropology can become a transdisciplinary endeavor that provides new perspectives on the problems of the present and the future.

To demonstrate the implementation of this research program, I will use three thematic complexes, the body, mimetic learning, and ritual/performativity.

- a) The body has been a focus of anthropological studies for a long time, first of body, later of the *the diversity* of human bodies. Modern bodies have undergone historical processes of distancing and disciplining, of being made visible in various ways, and often are a pivot of power relations. Current studies of the body are concerned with its de-materialization, technologization and fragmentation, and with the relation to sexuality and to the body's performativity.
- b) Mimesis as an anthropological concept provides an explanation to a large variety

of social processes and human action. The reference to a model is exactly that which allows to create something entirely novel. In this sense mimesis should be viewed as an active and creative process. Mimesis also plays an important role in the the third exemplary topic of cultural-historical anthropology, rituals and performativity.

- c) Rituals function as stagings of the body, as symbolic actions, as aesthetic spectacles, and as ethical events that are produced, reproduced, and transformed through mimetic processes. For social groups, rituals serve important functions and, on a more general level, I would argue that repetition, scenic arrangement, symbolic character, and expressivity – in other words: ritualisation – are constitutive elements of social action and the social as such.