

CONTROVERSIAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Coordinator: Sophie Balcoff

This study group examines some of the most famous anthropologists of our day. Their highly colorful theories about the societies they studied have come in for harsh criticism. We discuss six anthropologists of the twentieth century and try to understand both their ideas and the attacks made on them. Overall, we reach for understanding of why so many loved their ideas, and why others sought to devalue both the ideas and (sometimes) the anthropologists themselves. In each case we try to decide for ourselves which side we favor and why. Readings from Malinowski, Benedict, Mead, Freeman, Chagnon, Borofsky and others.

Readings: coursepack

Sophie Balcoff joined the IRP in Fall 2012. Since then, she has led five study groups. She is a former high school history teacher.

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The coursepack will contain excerpts from the following sources:

1. Bronislaw Malinowski, A diary in the strict sense of the term
2. Marcus, Beyond Malinowski
3. Ruth Benedict, The chrysanthemum and the sword – (Introduction, Chs.1 and 6, “Repaying One-Ten-Thousandth”)
4. C. Douglas Lummis, “Ruth Benedict’s obituary for Japanese culture” (July 19, 2007)
5. Margaret Mead, Coming of age in Samoa
6. Derek Freeman, Margaret Mead and Samoa: The making and unmaking of an anthropological myth
7. Colin Turnbull, The Mountain People
8. Bernd Heine, “Some notes on the Ik of Northern Uganda”
9. Harris, Cannibals and kings – Chs. 5, 9 and 10
10. Raymond Firth, Essays on social organization and values
11. Chagnon, Yanomamo, the Fierce People, (Introduction, Chapter 1, and pp 81-92: About men, women and children’s roles in Yanomamo Society)
12. Borofsky, Yanomami: The Fierce controversy and what we can learn from it.

Week 1. Malinowski’s fieldwork, theories, and diaries.

Who was Malinowski? How did he contribute to the founding of anthropology as a discipline? What do his diaries reveal about him and how do they connect to larger issues?

- Week 2. Marcus and others' critique of Malinowski.
How were the revelations in Malinowski's diaries received? Was anthropology founded on shaky ground?
- Week 3. Benedict's analysis of Japanese culture and society.
Why was Ruth Benedict's analysis of Japan so influential?
- Week 4. Lummis and others' critique of Benedict's analysis.
Was Benedict's view of Japan distorted and misleading?
- Week 5. Mead and Samoa
One of the most sensational, pioneering works of anthropology, Mead's work was a must-read.
- Week 6. Debunking Mead's work (Derek Freeman and others).
Derek Freeman delivers a devastating blow to Mead's credibility, which has never recovered.
- Week 7. Turnbull's career and his book, The Mountain People, about the tragic and bizarre group called the Ik.
Turnbull's strange career and his book, The Mountain People, about the tragic and bizarre group called the Ik.
- Week 8. Challenges to Turnbull's "mythology" of the Ik as well as other groups.
Bernd Heine challenges Turnbull's depiction of the Ik .
- Week 9. Marvin Harris and cultural materialism: His explanation of the Aztecs' inordinate cannibalism.
Why did the Aztecs kill and eat thousands each day? Marvin Harris explains.
- Week 10. Attacks on Harris's theories; alternate explanations.
Harris's theory of cultural materialism is attacked.
- Week 11. Chagnon, the Yanomamo, and theories of human nature.
Chagnon studied the Yanomamo, whose lives seem to refute what many anthropologists would like to think about pre-literate societies.
- Week 12. Chagnon's work is challenged.
Years after serious allegations against Chagnon, widely believed, were refuted, we can still learn something from the controversy.