What is distinctive about social anthropology and its methods?

The OED defines "distinctive" to mean, "Having the quality of distinguishing; serving or used to distinguish or discriminate; characteristic, distinguishing" and this essay examines what characteristics can be said to distinguish social anthropology and its methods. I answer this question in the following manner. First to identify the remit of social anthropology from its neighbouring disciplines, I survey what it is said that anthropology is not. After touching on the links between the shape of anthropology and the political climate I move on to methodology, ultimately stressing the unique place which fieldwork occupies within social anthropology – both as a source of internal legitimacy and as a quality which is externally distinguishing.

Etymologically the *logos* of *anthropos* points us to the discourse, reason[1] or science of the human[2]. Yet as part of the social sciences, social anthropology finds itself tending towards induction rather more than its deductive cousins and putting greater emphasis on the selection and interpretation of a mass of qualitative data at the micro level as opposed to the macro quantitative and large N statistical analyses favoured by neighbouring disciplines. Whilst sharing roots with sociology through Montesquieu,

[1] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*, p.9
[2] Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology*, p.1

Rousseau, Saint-Simon, Comte, and then later Durkheim and Mauss[3], anthropology today is distinct from sociology which remains preoccupied largely with modern urban European society and is frequently public policy oriented[4].

What anthropology shares with philosophy is a mutual interest in human categories of perception, experience and thought; this is, however, set in stark relief by their methodological approaches. Anthropology ensures that the "experience" behind empiricism is an inductive praxis which transcends continental European thought.

The falsely grounded debate between the evolutionists (such as Tylor, Lubbock, Frazer, Childe, White, Steward, Murdock, Fox) and the diffusionists (Ratzel, Frobenius, Fritz Graebner, Wilhelm Schmidt, ultimately Rivers post-1911 as well as Elliot Smith and Perry) and the discrediting of the evolutionist strand – at least in its unilinear and universal guises – has necessarily distanced anthropology from the promise it once held to provide a narrative for the process of civilisation. Therefore although ethnography continues to inform and be informed by historiography by presenting an ethnographic present framed by indigenous constructions of the past, the claims to historical relevance are secondary in social anthropology to the study of how such a past bears upon the differences and similarities in the human existence of the ethnographic present.

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[3] ibidem, pp.22-23, pp.63-64
[4] Dr Robert Parkin, *Perilous Transactions*, p.5

Archaeology – although it ostensibly shares a study of the Other – necessarily lacks some of the theoretical richness of interpretative scope which inheres in social anthropology. Moreover, whereas social geography is close in scope to social anthropology when it seeks to study identity or returns to Friedrich Ratzel's geographical determinism, modern anthropology is more inclined to assess identity based on clan or ethnicity rather than on spatial community; and for the modern anthropologist, geographical accounts of social facts would seem to understate the capacity of societies to mould their own surroundings[5]. Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes that social anthropology – or to use the Americanism, cultural anthropology – is distinct from linguistics because it "stresses the social and cultural aspects of speech when looking at language" and his definition of anthropology's domain reflects his privileging of "an understanding of different societies as they appear *from the inside*"[6].

Thus, the academic turf of anthropology has been staked out by virtue of what it is not. Geertz wrote that "If we want to discover what man amounts to, we can only find it in what men are: and what men are, above all other things, is various". Modern social anthropology certainly has diverse manifestations, yet it also has commonalities which give it a disciplinary coherence. Briefly adumbrated, some core distinguishing features

[5] ibid., p.9
[6] Eriksen, pp.10-11

include: an interest in networks of kinship, a tracing out of cosmologies and belief systems, typically a focus on systems of exchange (marital, linguistic, economic), and a study of self and ethnic identity. Symbolism too, is a major topic of social anthropology encompassing the life-crisis rites of ritual as well as the explanatory or delusory qualities of myth[7]. Already from this list it is clear that social anthropology requires for its own cosmology, faith in the existence of these social facts as distinct from manifestations of individual psychological configurations.

Social anthropology has not been immune to the vicissitudes of the political fashions of its day shaping its form and purpose. Edward Said has noted the manner in which Darwin's theory of natural selection in Victorian England found resonance with the expansionist impulses of the time. From the point of view of the hegemonic model loosely articulated by Gramsci, the Social Darwinist glosses of Herbert Spencer upon the evolution operating within – and thus presumably between – societies and the implicit assumptions of superiority and capitalist progress within the unilinear models of the banker Lubbock and railroad tycoon Morgan; arose as favoured discourses that serve to shore up the trade and domination of colonialism.[8] Adam Kuper describes with some hyperbole the shift which social anthropology underwent when its main academic

[7] Parkin, p.11.
[8] Said, Edward W., *Culture and Imperialism*

constituency lost faith in Marxism and Hegelian dialectics during the 1970s and moved the centre of focus to issues of representation in step with the identity politics battles of the 1980s. The tangle of post-colonialism and postmodernism forces intercultural difficulties of categorisation into yet more elaborate self-reflexivity for it declares ethnographic study to be a single interpretation denied the legitimacy of either the native's voice or an authoritative "outside" from which to describe events objectively.[9]

Methodologically, the essential defining characteristic which sets social anthropology apart from other disciplines is ethnography. Social anthropology places a high premium upon time spent in the field, preferably in one continuous period, learning the indigenous language and engaging in participant observation. This forms the crux of Eriksen's definition of social anthropology, "Anthropology is the comparative study of cultural and social life. Its most important method is participant observation, which consists in lengthy fieldwork in a particular social setting"[10]. The classical conception of ethnography has altered as Wendy James points out, with the realities of funding and political instability[11] changing the duration or location of some kinds of fieldwork, as at the same time the once voiceless are reading, being reconstituted by and "writing back" to

[9] Adam Kuper, 'Culture, Identity and the Project of a Cosmopolitan Anthropology', *Man*, 1994, pp.537-54
[10] Eriksen, p.9
[11] Wendy James, 'Beyond the First Encounter', Methodology and History in Anthropology, 'Anthropologists in a Wider World', ed. by Paul Dresch, Wendy James, David Parkin (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), vol. 7, pp.69-107

the text, and social anthropology overcomes homeblindness to study the self as Other in the urban West. Styles of writing encompass what van Maanen distinguishes as realist, confessional and impressionist[12], and whilst the experimental moment of thick description may have outstayed its welcome in some quarters, the enduring consensus regarding the significance of the period of fieldwork connotes upon it the internal status of an academic rite of passage – a pilgrimage towards personhood.

Concomitant with participant observation must come cultural relativism as a "methodological rule of thumb"[13] allowing us to approach and understand differing cultures on their own terms without appointing ourselves the moral or aesthetic arbiters of rank status. It is interesting to note here that in a rejection of the nihilistic moral relativism by which postmodernism undercuts itself, Eriksen boldly declares that whilst many anthropologists are "impeccable cultural relativists in their daily work … they have definite, frequently dogmatic notions about right and wrong in their private lives"[14].

A similar quotient of reflexivity greets the methodological mainstay that is the comparative method. Evans-Pritchard is famously said to have observed that "There is only one method in anthropology, and that is the comparative method. But it is

[12] Michael O'Hanlon, 'Memories of New Guinea Highland Warfare', p.66
[13] Eriksen, p.10
[14] ib., p.13

impossible"[15]. In the process of making the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar[16], the etic categories of the anthropologist are used to mediate the emic perspectives of the native[17]. The acculturated member of the academy meets the Other and produces a highly selective interpretation of the culture they see, to some extent in accordance with the categories they have been socialised to perceive. Whether two native cultures are being compared, or whether the comparative act lies implicit in the process of fieldwork itself, the process requires that the anthropologist bridge two or more cultures with terms which may have no happy correspondence to the phenomena they are trying to designate: "ritual", "prophet" and "sacrifice" are examples of this from the work, respectively, of Talal Asad, Evans-Pritchard (in the context translating *The Nuer* into Arabic) and Mary Douglas (the Pangolin Cult). What emerges of value from this fraught and highly self-conscious study surely stems from that inherent comparative difficulty – a deeper understanding of the commonalties and diversity within human existence that illuminates the anthropologist's culture as much as the subjects'.

The ethnographer returns and, continuing a process begun in the field, to some extent "packages" their experiences, their extensive field notes and their differences with

[15] Evans-Pritchard, cited in lecture 'Debates and themes in Anthropological Theory", 13th October 2004, Professor D. Parkin, Oxford, UK
[16] Kristen Hastrup cited by Erkisen, p.vi
[17] ib., p.26

prior ethnographers, to produce a monograph which can contribute to the current academic discourse. Lienhardt reworks Geertz' analogy to say that the relationship between theory and ethnography is something akin to an elephant-and-rabbit stew in which the elephant of ethnography is added along with the rabbit of social anthropological theory – "The art, as he sees it, consists of bringing out the flavour of the rabbit"[18].

Parallel with this, and repeated by anthropologists throughout volume 7 of *Methodology and History in Anthropology*: 'Anthropologists in a Wider World' is an attitude of mind. To be open-minded is not to be methodologically vague in social anthropology, but it is to be typical. To be receptive to developments in the field, having determined as Evans-Pritchard wrote "precisely what one wants to know"[19] and to then adapt one's research according to the serendipitous occurrence, the unexpected revelatory alignment of an entire cosmology, and in addition to treasure the *faux pas* as an instructive moment – these too stake their claims to being methodological aspects of social anthropology in their own right.

[18] ib., p.18
[19] ib., p.16

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