



Understanding Culture : An Introduction to Anthropological Theory

Philip Carl Salzman

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Are cows sacred to Indian Hindus because they stand for nature and life, as symbolic analysts explain, or because they pull plows and fertilize the land, providing people with food, as cultural materialists argue? Do Muslim Sufi Orders incorporate the lower classes and stabilize the cultural status quo, as functionalists would assert, or are they dynamic forces reshaping society and culture, as processualists claim to illustrate? Are witchcraft accusations a scapegoating of the powerless by the elite to maintain their ascendancy, as materialist class theorists argue, or are they social expressions of psychological tensions arising from conflicts in relationships, as functionalist psychological anthropologists have argued? Understanding culture means understanding and appreciating the diverse theories that offer different perspectives on culture.

Salzman's text explores six major streams of anthropological theory: interdependence in human life (functionalism); agency in human action (processualism and transactionalism); determining factors (materialism and political economy); coherence in culture (configurationalism and structuralism); transformation through time (history and evolution); and critical advocacy (feminism and postmodernism). Each theoretical approach is initially presented in its own terms, to show its assumptions, aims, and accomplishments. Each approach is elucidated and illustrated through the arguments and ethnographic examples offered by original theorists and astute practitioners.

The introductory and concluding chapters of *Understanding Culture* frame the diverse theoretical positions and the debates among them within the broader philosophical opposition between explanation and explication. A caution is offered about presentism, the reflex acceptance of currently popular theories and easy dismissal of earlier theories, because an informed appreciation of a wide range of theoretical approaches is beneficial for understanding cultures. Includes glossary of major terms, brief biographies of major culture theorists, and suggestions for further reading.

Also by Philip Carl Salzman and available from Waveland Press: *Classic Comparative Anthropology: Studies from the Tradition* (ISBN 9781577667100). Title of related interest also available from Waveland Press: Garbarino, *Sociocultural Theory in Anthropology: A Short History* (ISBN 9780881330564).



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