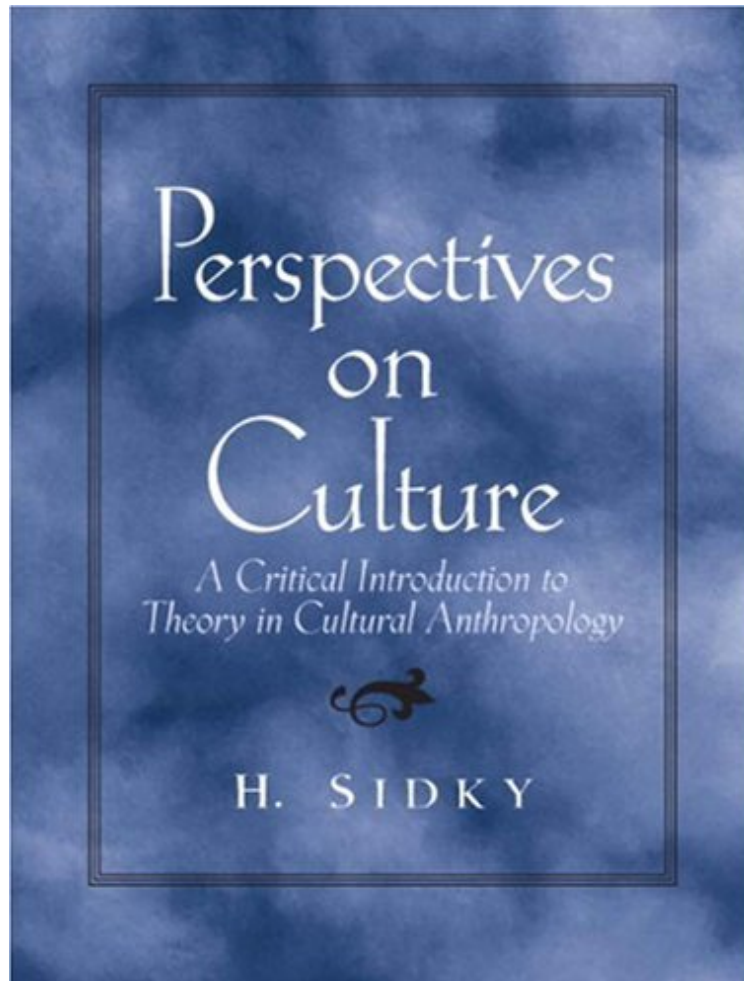


(Pdf free) Perspectives on Culture: A Critical Introduction to Theory in Cultural Anthropology

Perspectives on Culture: A Critical Introduction to Theory in Cultural Anthropology

Homayun Sidky

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anthropology: epistemological questions, evolutionism and the beginnings of anthropology during the nineteenth century, the Diffusionists, historical particularism, functionalism and modern anthropology, structural-functionalism, French structuralism, ethnoscience and cognitive anthropology, symbolic anthropology and the interpretation of culture, scientific anthropology, materialist and Marxist anthropology, postmodern anthropology, and anthropology in the 21st century. For individuals seeking reliable, valid knowledge about humankind, human behavior, and the evolution and operation of sociocultural systems.

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Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. This book provides a critical introduction to theory in cultural anthropology from the perspective of the philosophy of science. Anthropological paradigms are assessed in terms of their central assumptions, the kind of knowledge or understanding they yield, and how closely those understandings approach the anthropological goal of obtaining reliable, objectively valid knowledge about humankind, human behavior, and the evolution and operation of sociocultural systems. In my discussion of anthropological theory I take an historical approach. This is indispensable because new theoretical perspectives often continue to utilize ideas, concepts, and analytical categories that were part of the paradigms that were displaced (cf. Orlove 1980: 237). New paradigms are molded by a dialectical relationship with earlier paradigms that affect the manner in which their epistemological and theoretical principles are expressed (cf. Barren 1984; Erickson and Murphy 2001: xi; McGee and Warms 2000: 2). A continual dialogue exists between past and present perspectives and often what seems new, upon close scrutiny, turns out to be a reformulation of previously worked out ideas and approaches. For this reason, rejecting "disciplinary origins and traditions" (Marcus 1992: viii-ix), as some anthropologists have done, is a particularly egregious blunder. Those who do so are condemned to repeat past errors. There is much that we can learn from the efforts of the anthropologists who lived and worked over the course of the last one hundred years. Their works were full of flaws, but they do not deserve blanket condemnation. These works require critical analysis, not sweeping denigration and dismissal. We can learn from our predecessors' ideas, debates, mistakes, and successes, and insights may be gained from the problems and cultural puzzles they chose to tackle. Numerous examples of such anthropological puzzles are presented throughout this book in order to illustrate the various theoretical operations associated with particular research strategies and to familiarize the reader with key anthropological concepts and ideas. One learns how to assess different claims to knowledge by systematically working through them. Present-day anthropological findings that have a bearing upon the problems that engaged earlier researchers are included at various points in the discussion. This will allow the reader to gain familiarity with contemporary anthropological thinking on the topics and issues that preoccupied our predecessors. The primary objectives of this book are threefold: To familiarize the reader with anthropological knowledge and a range of theoretical perspectives developed over the course of the last one hundred and twenty years To introduce readers to epistemology, the branch of inquiry that deals with the nature and the sources of knowledge To enable readers to develop the analytical skills necessary to assess competing theoretical perspectives, to critically evaluate different claims to knowledge, and to be able to distinguish between scientific, pseudoscientific, and nonscientific accounts of sociocultural phenomena Without the ability to evaluate different kinds of knowledge, students of anthropology are ill equipped in their efforts to assess the often contradictory claims and conflicting accounts of the world that they will encounter in the course of their studies. Such an understanding is especially needed at the present when American anthropology is in a state of disarray as a result of the "culture wars" between exponents of scientific anthropology, who are striving to build increasingly more accurate empirical understandings of the world, and cultural constructionists, other wise glossed as postmodern interpretive anthropologists, who are absorbed with thick descriptions and the pursuit of discourses immune to appraisal or validation. This book teaches students the valuable lesson that "the problem of knowledge" is not insoluble. The critical conceptual tools are already there for anyone who wishes to use them. Obtaining reliable understandings of the world is not easy, but it can be done. I would like to thank the following colleagues who reviewed this work in manuscript form for their thoughtful comments and suggestions: E. Paul Durrenberger, Pennsylvania State University; Ratimaya Bush, Wright State University; Barry A. Kass, Orange County Community College, State University of New York; Charles Harper, Creighton University; James G. Flanagan, University of Southern Mississippi; Mark Moberg, University of Southern Alabama; and Geraldine Gamburd, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. H. Sidky Miami University