

Introduction to
Anthropology:
Holistic and Applied
Research on Being
Human

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MODULE 13: POLITICS, ECONOMICS, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Structures: Organizing Our World (and the Inequalities that Entails)

“**Structure**” is the anthropological term for the building blocks of culture. These building blocks include the subjects of this module (politics and economics), as well as the topics of the adjacent modules (social organization, religion, and kinship). You may have noticed that there are often correlations between religious views, political affiliations, and socio-economic class among your friends and acquaintances. This also tends to be true when we look more broadly across the spectrum of humans. In all societies, structures are generally self-reinforcing, with one aspect of a culture lending support to another while being supported by a yet another. In this way, structures are like the walls of a building (the choice of the term “structure” is not accidental) (see Figure 13.1). Like a building where the walls support each other and are protected by a roof, anthropological structures lean on each other and are protected by other structures to form a self-supporting, self-contained culture that can withstand exterior forces. It’s also worth noting that both buildings and anthropological structures are the product of human ingenuity, and their designs can vary widely from group to group.

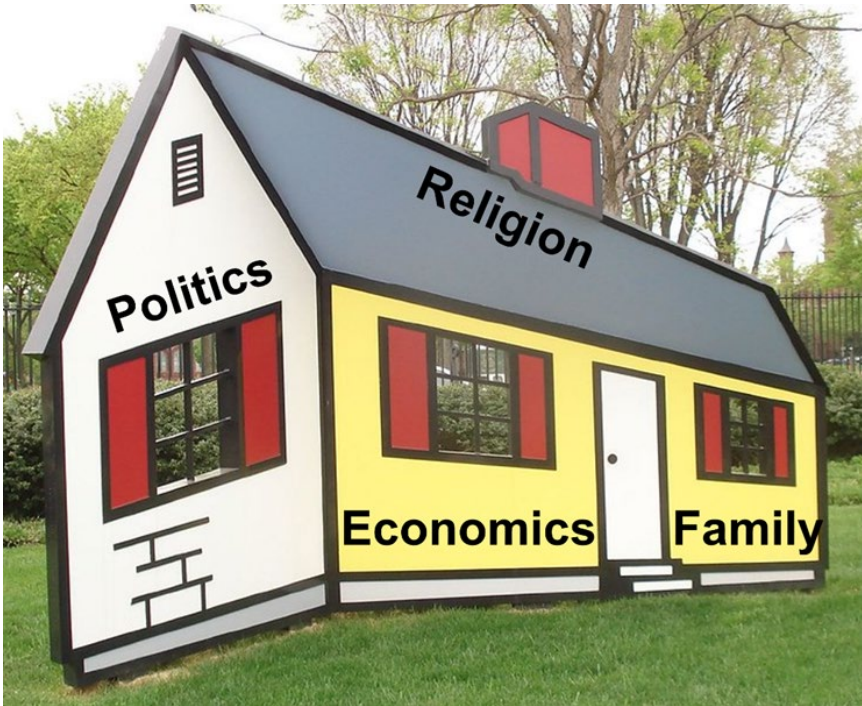


Figure 13.1. Anthropological structures work like the walls and roof of a house to support and protect each other. Image modified from Flickr/Stefano A.

If you haven't really spent time thinking about whether you're worshipping the right god, what it would be like if you could marry the cousins from your father's side but not your mother's, if time is circular, or what it would be like if we didn't make transactions based on currency, you are not alone. Most social structures are so deeply engrained into our cultures and learned from birth that we tend to see them as fixed or natural. If we do consider them, we often only consider their margins. For example, we might discuss the pros and cons of capitalism, but rarely consider what it would be like if we got rid of markets entirely.

That we don't regularly notice these structures, yet they organize so much of our lives, which makes them immensely important. It also means that these structures can encode significant inequalities in such a way that many people in the culture don't even notice them. These inequalities, called **structural**

inequalities, are a core part of the fundamental building blocks in a culture. Because the structures overlap and reinforce each other, structural inequalities also do the same. Whereas the analogy of a building works for understanding anthropological structures, a cage is a better analogy for structural inequalities: a single wire will not keep a bird from flying, but multiple wires arranged in specific ways and reinforcing each other can trap a bird (see Figure 13.2). One of the jobs of Anthropology is to analyze the structures of a society to determine who is disadvantaged and to shed light on these inequalities so that they can be addressed.



Figure 13.2. Structural inequalities combine to trap people. Image modified from Max Pixel.

Together, structures—including how we organize ourselves (i.e., political and social structures), feed and support ourselves (i.e., economic structure), relate to the universe (i.e., religious structure), and form families and relate to those around us (i.e., kinship and marriage)—help define our culture,

distinguish one culture from another, and most importantly, allow members of a culture to function as a group. Incorporating what you have learned in other modules, we can see how structures might work in practice: developing agriculture allows people to become sedentary. Sedentism often leads to ideas of owning land. Owning land and storing crops (initially to buffer against droughts, pests, and failures, and eventually to accumulate wealth) begins to lead to social stratification. Similarly, agriculture allows for the development of craftspeople and other specialists who are supported by the surplus food and wealth derived from that agriculture. These specialists (blacksmiths, millers, potters, politicians, soldiers, etc.) are paid different amounts based on how society values their contributions, and they take their place within the developing social hierarchy. Agriculture and craft specialists tend to lead to groups of people living in denser populations. Denser populations, with more and more unrelated people living together, can lead to the development of laws and social systems.

Generally, the denser the population and the more strangers in a community, the more complicated the social organizational system (for example, a chiefdom or state, see Module 10: Sociopolitical Classification). Wealth and dense populations attract foreign merchants, and competition for resources might attract foreign emissaries, so that many towns and cities also have outsiders coming and going, which may lead to external politics. Included but unsaid in this scenario are cultural rules regarding who controls wealth, how jobs are valued, who can hold specific jobs, the barriers to obtaining those jobs, and a myriad of other subtle means to reinforce social, ethnic, gender, and other hierarchies. The scenario described above is just one of many ways that anthropological structures can work together to shape a culture. Further, the development of a political structure is also present throughout this example.

Economics

Anthropologists tend to discuss economics in general terms. Rather than using the specific vocabulary of any one economic system, anthropologists think about the **economic structure** of a society in terms of how the members of that society make a living. How do they produce and consume goods, how do they circulate goods, and what constitutes “work” in that

society? Economics can be discussed at multiple scales from the individual to international trade, with a society's or country's economic system somewhere in between. The society scale of economics, however, is linked with individual decisions about production and consumption that feed into and are influenced by the larger scales.

Production is the creation of a good or commodity and includes growing, collecting, extracting, crafting, and manufacturing. Regardless of how something is produced, its production requires labor, resources, and technology. There must be sufficient people in the place where the commodity is found or made. Those people must have access to sufficient resources (e.g., land, metals, oil.), and there must be sufficient technology to hunt, gather, harvest, make, and transport the product. All these **means of production** must work together for successful production. For example, farming expanded in the Midwestern United States during the 19th century as good soils (the resource) and large-scale farm machinery (the technology) became available, along with an influx of immigrants from more densely populated portions of New England and Europe (the people). However, agricultural production in the Midwest only really accelerated with the advent of canals and railroads (technology) capable of carrying the produce to markets (people) before it spoiled.

The means of production also intersect with other anthropological structures that influence a culture's development. For example, during the mid-first millennium CE, the Mediterranean Sea witnessed a fundamental change in ship construction that reverberated through the economic, political, and religious structures of the Roman world. Shipbuilders transitioned from building ships shell-first (the vessel being sculpted one hull plank at a time) to skeleton-first (frames being used to define the shape of the hull and provide much of its strength) (see Figure 13.3). This transition has been recorded in more than a dozen shipwrecks and is one of the biggest changes in ship construction prior to the adoption of steam engines, but the ships are only one part of the story. There was also a temporary decline in slavery during this period, partially related to the rise of Christianity. Earlier shipyards could enslave and utilize highly skilled shipbuilders for a relatively cheap amount, but the cost of skilled workmen increased the cost of ship construction. This period also saw the decline of the Western Roman Empire

and with it, a loss in shipbuilding infrastructure. Combined with the decline of slavery, this led shipyards to embrace cost-saving measures such as skeleton-first construction as one trained shipbuilder could layout the frames, and a crew of laborers could then assemble the ship. Iron for objects like nails also increased during the first millennium CE. With relatively inexpensive nails, it was possible to fasten the hull planks to the frames of a skeleton-first ship, which was a major change from the shell-first ships that were often built, like fine cabinetry, without nails. In summary, we can see the technological change in the artifact (ships), but that change is indicative of changes in culture that include religion, labor, economics, and the availability of resources. No culture exists in a vacuum, so changes in one aspect of a culture can almost always be linked to other changes in that culture and interactions with neighboring groups. In this case, the change from shell to skeleton ship construction is interesting, but for an anthropologist, understanding how the technological change relates to other changes in the culture and its environs is the real goal.

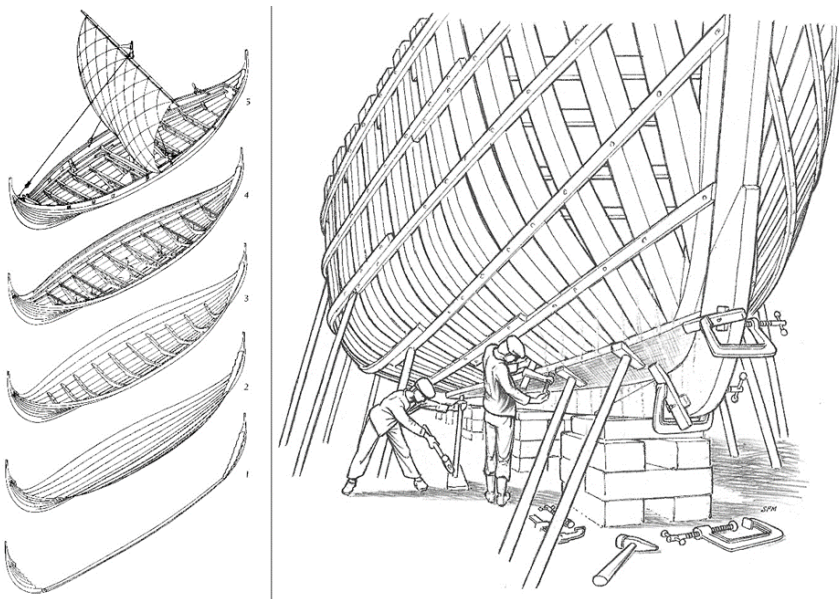


Figure 13.3. Shell-first construction sequence on left and skeleton first ship during construction on right. Image modified from Ford et al. 2020.

The collection of commodities and the production of goods varies from

culture to culture, but this collection and production is generally called **work**. The study of work is a major aspect of how anthropologists approach economics. Anthropologists study how work is integrated into other aspects of life, such as the idea of work-life balance in modern Western cultures or the flow between work, socializing, and family responsibilities throughout the day in foraging societies. Anthropologists also analyze how work decisions are made. These decisions include how a culture balances decisions about the effort versus reward for different types of hunting and gathering, including both the caloric cost benefit, but also the risk and social value of different types of food. The study of work can also include power and gender relationships within a work environment, including who is doing what and how the benefits are distributed.

Once a commodity or good is produced or procured, it can be bought, sold, traded, given, or transported. Anthropologists lump all these ways to move goods under the term **circulation**. The circulation of goods is very important, and not just because it's a major factor in economics. Goods seldom move alone; they are very often accompanied by ideas, technologies, allegiances, diseases, and genes. In some cases, circulation is a pretense for these and other important human exchanges, and sometimes these exchanges are ancillary to the circulation of commodities, but in all cases, they are an important component of circulation. Circulation can be divided into three types: **reciprocity**, **redistribution**, and **exchange**. These types of circulation are not mutually exclusive, and some economic systems combine all three.

Some non-industrial (i.e., non-market) societies base their economic system on the exchange of gifts rather than buying and selling using currency. Anthropologists call this economic system reciprocity. In reciprocity circulation, individuals give away goods and commodities and trust that they will receive goods and commodities in return. Three kinds of reciprocity are recognized: balanced, generalized, and negative. In **balanced reciprocity**, an individual gives a gift with the assumption that they will receive a gift of equal worth in return and within a specific time limit. The return may not be immediate, but it is expected, and the giver may withhold future gifts until the exchange is balanced. The worth of the item may be monetary, but it may also be calculated in terms of effort, social worth, emotional worth, or prestige. Examples include most gift exchanges (e.g., Christmas or birthday)

as well as simple barter transactions in lieu of currency, such as a homeless person offering “will work for food.” In **generalized reciprocity**, the accounting is not as rigorous; neither the giver nor recipient keep an exact ledger of value, nor do they stipulate the amount or duration of return. Rather, they trust that over the long-term the relationship will have an equal amount of giving and receiving. For example, if you are at a pub with a friend and you buy him a drink, you probably expect him to buy you one in return sometime in the future. Now, imagine that he insists on buying you a drink at the same time instead. Doing so suggests that he doesn’t wish to become involved in a continuing reciprocal exchange with you. In a sense, it’s a rejection of your relationship and not just an economic transaction. Finally, **negative reciprocity** occurs when there is an attempt to receive a gift of greater value than was given (which may involve coercion or competition, and an imbalance in power). For example, in the series *Gilmore Girls*, Rory Gilmore’s grandparents offer to help pay her private school and Yale University tuition, but in return for weekly dinner visits. Obviously, the tuition was worth more than Rory’s visits, and Rory’s grandmother frequently held power over Rory and her mother because of the negative imbalance between them.

A famous example of reciprocity is the Kula Ring: a trade system practiced (pre)historically by the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea (see Figure 13.4). Long, dangerous sea voyages were undertaken to perform this circular trade system. A trader traveling in a clockwise direction would give necklaces of red shells (**soulava**) as gifts to his trading partner, and a trader traveling in a counterclockwise direction would give armbands of white shells (**mwali**). On the surface, the Kula Ring appears to be simply an exchange of gifts, but it represents much more. The Kula Ring is strategic and confers prestige on the giver, while also solidifying bonds between trading partners that serve as a valuable “safety net” in times of need. While Kula gifts were exchanged with the assumption of generalized reciprocity (to be repaid in the future), the regular trade goods that accompanied the Kula Ring were bartered for via balanced reciprocity. When asked why they undertook these long distance (and dangerous) trading expeditions, Trobriand Islanders emphasized the social gain the gifts entailed.

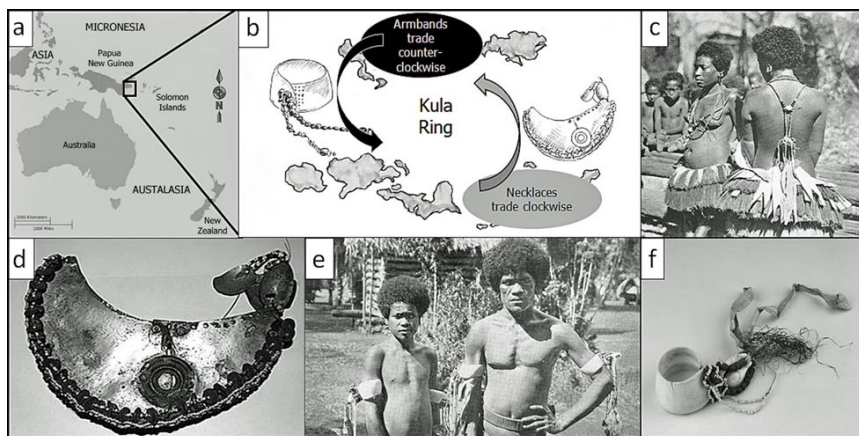


Figure 13.4. Location of Trobriand Islands north of Australia (a), schematic diagram of the Kula Ring (b) historic photographs of women wearing soulava necklaces (c) and men wearing mwali armbands (e) and close-up images of soulava (d) and mwali (f). Used with permission from Homsey-Messer et al. 2020; figure 27.2.

Redistribution tends to be less personal than reciprocity. In redistribution, one person or group of people has the authority to gather goods, commodities, money, or labor from members of the group and redistribute those items. This form of circulation is most common in societies that produce and store surplus commodities, such as agrarian and industrial societies. Redistribution also implies basic inequalities in the society. Someone must have the power to take commodities and redistribute them, possibly disregarding the wishes of the person who produced the commodity, and presumably, for the greater good. Redistribution can be evident at the family level: the head of household redistributes an animal so that everyone is fed, or in the form of a joint bank account where everyone's paycheck goes into a single account that is used to pay rent, utilities, groceries, etc. At the group level, redistribution can be combined with reciprocity to move significant amounts of goods. In the highlands of Papua New Guinea, for example, Big Men leaders participate in a complex form of reciprocity where the intent is to give away more than they receive. This system, called a **moka**, inspires leaders to amass large numbers of pigs and then give them away during a celebration, which causes a redistribution of the pigs and garners more prestige for the leader.

In the Western World, charity and income tax systems are examples of redistributive exchanges. The charity or government collects from individuals and then uses the aggregate to undertake projects that are too large for any one individual to accomplish. In the modern United States, taxes are collected as money taken directly from income, but historically in the United States and currently in other countries, taxes take various forms. They can be agricultural produce that is held by the government in case of famine, distributed to those in need, or exported to build relationships or profits with other governments. Similarly, labor can also be redistributed, such as requiring annual service to build infrastructure or a required period of service, such as mandatory military or state service.

One of the most elaborate examples of redistribution is the Potlatch practiced by Native American cultures (e.g., Kwakwaka'wakw) of the Northwest Coast region of North America. The potlatch was a complex system of competitive feasting and gift-giving intended to bring prestige and status of the giver, and thereby, garner more followers than their competitors. It could take many years to accumulate the surplus items and food needed to be redistributed at a big potlatch. A potlatch host (i.e., Big Man) would invite guests for several days of feasting and entertaining; the climax of which was the dramatic giving of gifts like food and commodities such as blankets, canoes, slaves, and rare copper artifacts. The feast and gifts placed guests in their host's debt. Anthropologist Lee Cronk refers to this as being able to "flatten people with their generosity." The Canadian government outlawed potlatches in 1884 partly out of the mistaken belief that the Kwakwaka'wakw were bankrupting themselves. Ironically, little wealth was being lost; rather, the potlatch was a redistribution of perishable goods and items of high value. Those who "gave away" their wealth in potlatches were later the recipients of many potlatch gifts. The Canadian government finally legalized potlatching in 1951; today, they occur openly among the Kwakwaka'wakw and other indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast to commemorate important family and clan events like baby showers, weddings, anniversaries, and the memory of dead relatives.



Video 13.1. Check out the video *Discussion of potlatch history and significance.*

The third form of circulation is **exchange**. This is the most formal and structured form of circulation and can range from bartering to the sale of goods in a market. Barter is the exchange of goods or services without money. While it can be like reciprocity, bartering is generally immediate and doesn't imply any long-term relationship between the exchangers. In other situations, goods are exchanged for currency. Currency has the advantage of being flexible, it doesn't go bad, it doesn't take up much space (or any physical space in the digital world) and can be used repeatedly in many situations. Far more people are willing to exchange a service for money than for a pig or a dozen eggs because, sometimes, you just don't want a dozen eggs. The circulation of goods and commodities for currency tends to take place at markets. Markets can be a physical place like a farmers' market or business district, or they can be abstract, such as the stock market. Markets are often designed as spaces where formal encounters with agreed upon rules that allow strangers to do business can take place, and both parties are reasonably assured that they are being treated fairly. However, even in the most abstract and impersonal markets, social interactions tend to creep in. Examples are the seller rating systems in eBay and Amazon. As stated above, the structures and institutions of a society are all interconnected, with each influencing the others.

Politics

Political structure goes beyond presidents, senators, and governors; it applies to the systems that people use to organize and govern themselves. So, while political parties, offices, elections, and laws are aspects of political structure, they are the *product* of political structure and not the root of it. As with economic structure, anthropologists tend to consider politics at multiple scales and use terms that refer to all political systems. Political systems can range from very loose and informal to extremely structured with professional politicians. On the continuum of Bands, Tribes, Chiefdoms, and States (discussed in Module 10), Bands have the most flexible and egalitarian

political structure while States represent the most formal and hierarchical. Political leadership in Bands is transient meaning that leaders don't hold permanent positions or offices, nor do they accrue wealth and power over other people. Informal leadership is situational in that it varies according to circumstance; the Band will call on the appropriate leader when needed in a specific situation. For example, some individuals may be particularly adept at solving disputes, and this person may be chosen to deal with that kind of problem should it arise. Overall, Band leadership is very fluid, or what anthropologist would call **decentralized**. One Ju/'hoansi San leader characterized leadership among Bands this way as: "All you get is the blame if things go wrong" (Scupin and DeCorse 2016).

Tribal political systems are also decentralized, and authority is distributed among a number of individuals or among groups—called sodalities—based on kinship, age, or gender. Examples include elder women among the Haudenosaunee (i.e., Iroquois) and male warriors among the Maasai in Africa. These groups are responsible for interacting with other groups and maintaining order but have little coercive power or formal authority. Other Tribes are organized around a **Big Man** system, in which leaders achieve status and de facto leadership through gift-giving and generosity (see "Reciprocity" above). Big Men lead by example, diplomacy, and persuasion rather than coercion, and a leader who resorted to coercion would not maintain their leadership for long in an egalitarian political structure. The Trobriand Islanders are good examples of a society led by Big Men, as well as the relationship between political authority and religion, as seen in the video clip below.



Video 13.2. Check out the video *Examples of Big Men societies in "Yam I am."*

In contrast, Chiefdoms and States have what anthropologists describe as **centralized** political systems. Both have permanent political offices and formal rules of succession for establishing and maintaining political authority. Chiefs constitute an **ascribed** status, meaning that their power is inherited (usually for life) rather than achieved through personal

accomplishments. That said, there is little to no evidence that chiefs maintained absolute power over their subjects; rather, they ruled through control over economic production and the allocation of goods. This political legitimacy was bolstered by religious beliefs and rituals (see Module 18: Religion). The political structure of States is far too variable to describe here, but all follow a general system of centralized bureaucracy, permanent political office (though who holds the office may change), formal rules of succession, and a codified legal system for dealing with criminal offenses.

Regardless of the specific type of political system, all political structures serve three main purposes: internal order, infrastructure, and external relations. **Internal order** helps people work together. This could be by knowing who is in charge or having a system to determine who is in charge. For example, it could be a matter of listening to the person with established expertise on a topic (e.g., where to forage or how to settle disputes), deferring to the oldest living female, or relying on a lineage traced back to someone chosen by a divinity. **Infrastructure** provides for the needs of the community. In some societies, this could be balancing the development of roads and pipelines with environmental preservation, and in others, it might be redistributing wealth through taxes or having a system to care for the elderly and infirm. **External relations** enable societies to interact with other groups. This interaction can be through setting the priorities for what can be gained by interacting with other groups and establishing who is designated to these interactions. Part of this is defining who “us” is, which is most often in opposition with “them.” Political structure is a means to operationalize this difference by helping to define “us” and “them,” and by establishing a structure for “us” to interact with “them,” while also governing how we behave towards the rest of “us.” Basically, political structures serve to organize people for the greater good and structure group actions for group benefit, but it also protects the rights of the governing class, while keeping the rest of the populace in a subordinate status. In other words, political authority and legal codes, such as the famous Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, were designed to allow those in authority to access to resources and maintain their rule. In these cases, there is hierarchy and inequality built into the political structure so that some individuals have disproportionate authority. Societies that fulfill all the roles of a political structure without hierarchy are referred to as **anarchist**.

The **Nuer** and **Dinka** of South Sudan, Africa offer an example of just how important political structure can be, and how political structure and other structures overlap. During the 19th century, the Nuer and the Dinka had many similarities: they inhabited the same environment, farmed millet (a type of cereal plant) and maize (i.e., corn) and herded cattle, and both had a population of approximately 100,000. Beginning in circa 1820, the Nuer expanded into Dinka territory and would have eliminated the Dinka if the British hadn't intervened. (It is important to note that this was not an altruistic act on behalf of the British; they were involved in their own colonial enterprise in the region at that time). Given the similarities in Nuer and Dinka societies, it might seem odd that the Nuer were able to move so efficiently against the Dinka. However, the political structure of the Nuer gave them a distinct advantage over the Dinka. The Nuer maintained larger herds, but the Dinka had smaller herds and slaughtered cattle more often. Consequently, the Nuer were less densely populated and needed more land per person to support their larger herds but congregated in large, dry season settlements. The Nuer reckoned kinship and group membership through the male line, which spread through many small groups that met up at these dry seasonal settlements. In contrast, the Dinka based their groups on small, wet-season encampments. The result was that Nuer tribes could number about 10,000, while Dinka tribes tended to be approximately 3,000. These larger tribes allowed the Nuer to conquer the Dinka because they could call on more people in a time of need. It wasn't that the Nuer conquered the Dinka so much as specific Nuer tribes conquered specific Dinka tribes. Since they inhabited the same environments and had similar lifestyles, the Nuer quickly adapted to Dinka lands and then moved on to attack the next Dinka tribe. Thus, even a small difference in political structure (in this case how group identity is defined) can have major ramifications for a culture. How the political structures of the Nuer and Dinka relate to their family and economic structures is also noteworthy. The social structures of a culture are nearly always interrelated. Bloodshed in South Sudan has reoccurred in modern times and is traceable to historic conflicts between the Nuer and Dinka, as well as external political influences.

Social Structures and Inequality

Economic, political, and other structures are interrelated. A society with a market economy and taxes (exchange and redistribution) can accumulate wealth within the government, and that wealth can be used to pursue the roles of the political system by building infrastructure, which provides for those in need, funding wars, supporting police forces, building alliances, bolstering the status of rulers, etc. To promote internal order, the societies create laws to govern how the economy and taxation systems function. It is not a coincidence that writing, historically, developed in States with increasingly complicated economic systems as writing offered a means to track commodities and record laws. Similarly, religion is also often integrated into the political and economic systems in immensely powerful feedback loops. If everyone believes in the same gods and believes that those gods are manifested in, or have given power to, the rulers, those rulers have significant power to motivate and control people (see Module 18: Religion). If everyone believes that a good harvest or the outcome of a war is tied to the mood of the gods, then everyone is linked through ties of economics, politics, *and* religion. Many religions also collect donations or tithes from their members, which function very much like tax, and in some cases are synonymous with taxes or flow into the same coffers. These forms of integrated relationships are less common today but were the norm for many early States. The separation of church and State enshrined in the amendments to the United States Constitution was explicitly laid out because it was a novel idea in the mid-18th century.

These overlapping structures, which in many cases allow individuals or groups to amass power, lead to hierarchy and inequality in many societies. Economic systems that permit the amassing of wealth lead to **class hierarchy**. That hierarchy is often replicated in politics with power tied to wealth and wealth tied to power. Further linkages between wealth, religious authority, and political power give some an advantage over others. Similarly, these different systems can be used to construct ideologies that support and maintain the power structure that extends beyond politics, religion, and economics by valuing the work and lives of some more than others based on gender, ethnicity, or other identities. These inequalities can be compounded by societies that limit access to education (both explicitly and tacitly) or

highlight some abilities to the detriment of others. The forms of inequality vary from place to place, but what is important to understand is that many societies are organized so that the overlapping structures that form the culture and make it function smoothly also place some members at a disadvantage. These structural inequalities are often hard for members of the society to see, especially those members who benefit from them, because they are so integrated into the society as to be invisible unless someone (often an anthropologist) carefully dissects the overlapping structures of the society.

Inequalities linked to political and economic structures are also present at the global scale (see Module 11: Culture Changes and Globalization). Wealthy nations, referred to as the **Core**, tend to dominate international politics and economics at the expense of poorer nations, called the **Periphery**. Raw materials from the Periphery flow to Core nations where they are turned into finished products that are then sold throughout the world, including the Periphery, at much higher costs. In this way, the Core profits from materials extracted in Periphery nations without placing its people or environments in danger, and while providing a greater benefit for the Core than the Periphery. This imbalance is perpetuated through international trade agreements, Core investment in Periphery nations and commodities, privatization of resources, conversion of traditional means of production to Western means of production, tax incentives, and many other ways that almost always advantage the Core. These policies have other effects that go way beyond economics and politics such as high birth rates, low life expectancy, and widespread starvation even in nations that produce large quantities of food.

The tensions at the Mexico-U.S. border and associated debates over immigration, border walls, and trade agreements are a familiar result of Core-Periphery conflict, but a more insidious example is the cell phone. 19 of the 28 major minerals used in cell phone production come from Periphery nations. Among those minerals are Cobalt (used in lithium-ion batteries) and Tantalum (used in capacitors), which are mined in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The DRC is situated in south-central Africa and contains one of the richest mineral deposits on earth but is among the poorest nations in the world (107 out of 171). In the DRC, miners (some of them children) excavate these minerals by hand without the benefit of mechanical equipment, protective gear, or standard safety precautions. They work long

days (much longer than an American, eight hour workday) in mines that often collapse for pay that forces them to go into debt for basic food. Further, workers are also exposed to toxic metals that lead to breathing ailments and birth defects. The miners are paid so little that even after the mineral has been shipped around the globe, incorporated into a cell phone or other device such as a computer or electric car, the price is still low enough that the device is affordable. Meanwhile, the company that produces the device receives significant dividends. By outsourcing the health, safety, and environmental responsibilities to Periphery nations where workers are paid little, Core nations and the companies that they support continue to gather more wealth, which helps them open other regions to exploitation.

It can be easy to say that the structural inequalities of economic systems, political systems, and other structures are “just the way it is” and to be overwhelmed by their complexity and feel powerless to alter them. However, these systems are the results of human ingenuity and humans have developed other systems that are fairer and more equal. Many cultures, such as the Piaroa, Tiv, and Zapatista, reject hierarchical social structures and strive to balance freedom and equality for their members. The intent of these groups is for political power to be shared so that some individuals are not freer than others and for wealth to be shared so that all can enjoy the freedom. Freedom in these contexts is not unbounded personal freedom, but freedom tied to equal freedom across the group. None of these systems are perfect; some lack gender equality or are harsh towards outsiders, and none of them are particularly efficient for large-scale governance, but they do indicate that the status quo that most of us are used to isn’t the only way to organize social power structures. No one system is inherently better than others as each system has its strengths and weaknesses. The responsibility of all citizens is to be aware of the options and make an informed decision about whether the pros outweigh the cons in their systems.

Summary

Structures are the building blocks of culture. They include political and economic systems, family structures, religion, and others. The structures of a society tend to be self-reinforcing and integrate to form the society as a whole. The vocabulary that Anthropologists use to examine structures is

designed to be applicable to a wide range of societies so that we all cultures can be discussed on an equal footing. This chapter discussed economic, political, and social structures: economic structures describe how members of a society feed and support themselves and includes discussions of work and production. This also includes how goods are circulated, and what work, production, and circulation mean for the social rules of a society. Political structures pertain to how groups organize and govern themselves, and all political structures provide for internal order, infrastructure, and external relations. However, some political structures are hierarchical and use the rules of politics to maintain the hierarchy. Social structures, in general, can be used to create and maintain inequalities in a society. Structures can also be used to give one society advantages over another, as in the Core-Periphery relationship. Anthropology shows us how to analyze these inequalities and provides examples of cultures that are not based on inequality.

Review Questions

- **T/F.** Cultures are fundamentally structured with inequalities in such a way that people within that culture do not notice them.
- **T/F.** Political structures design group actions for group benefits, while also legitimizing social hierarchies with differential resource access.
- **T/F.** Reciprocity is the most formal form of circulation and is less personal than redistribution.
- **T/F.** Even in market systems that are designed to be impersonal, social interactions tend to influence exchanges.
- **T/F.** No one politico-economic system is inherently better than the others.

Discussion Questions

1. What economic system do you live in? Even if you live in a system dominated by exchange circulation, you can likely identify examples of reciprocity and redistribution (and even potlatching) that are embedded within your social structure. For example, weddings and Superbowl parties are often very potlatch-like. Provide at least one example of reciprocity, redistribution, and potlatching. Then, explain your examples. For reciprocity, try to look beyond the “altruistic gift” and see the underlying relationship and strategy in the act.
2. What economic system is capitalism? Think about what makes capitalism good and/or bad? Are there ways other than capitalism to structure an economic system? What are the pros and cons of a different system?
3. How is hierarchy built into political systems? How do those in charge justify their continued power? How do the social structures of politics and economics relate to other social structures?
4. Like cell phones, fast fashion is another insidious example of the Core-Periphery conflict. Watch “The True Cost” and reflect on the social inequality described, at both the individual and global scales. Who is at fault: Core Nations? The Periphery nations for taking in work? The multinational companies supported by the Core? Humans, for demanding new and continuous “fast fashion” trends? How might this conflict be resolved to achieve greater equality to Periphery Nations and quality of life for garment workers?

Activities

- The Gift:** Think of a gift exchange that you were involved in that is memorable to you. Take some time to think of one; quality is more important than quantity here. Possibilities include: holidays, birthdays, Valentine's Day, or even treating a friend to a meal or giving money to a street performer. The following questions should guide your thinking:

 - What was the relationship between you and the person exchanged with?
 - How was the gift given? What was said or implied during the exchange?
 - Was this exchange a response to a previous exchange? Was reciprocation expected?
 - If reciprocation was expected, when did (or will) it take place?
 - Was it an example of generalized, balanced, or negative reciprocity?
 - Did the exchange cause strengthening or strain to the relationship?
 - Once you have done this for yourself, have a friend tell you a story about one of *their* gift-giving exchanges. Ask them the same questions you answered above.
- Penny Game:** If you are an instructor, an activity that we highly recommend embedding in your class is Cathy Small's (1999) brilliant "Penny Game: An Exercise in Non-Industrial Economics," published in *Strategies for Teaching Anthropology*, edited by Patricia Rice and David McCurdy. You can read Small's original for details, but essentially, the game uses pennies as exchangeable wealth to demonstrate reciprocity, which is an economic system that many students struggle to recognize as complex and strategic. Rather, they tend to view any system based on "gift-giving" as simplistic and naive, assuming that traditional societies are simply "being nice." This misconception stems from their own cultural perceptions of gift-giving as freely given with no strings attached and no ulterior motive behind it (a false perception most commonly encountered by Westerners that is addressed in this activity). A modified, shorter version suitable for larger classes can be found in *Experiencing Archaeology: a Laboratory Manual of Classroom Activities, Demonstrations and Mini-labs for Introductory Archaeology*, by Homsey-Messer et al., Berghahn Books, 2019.

Key Terms

Achieved status: An achieved position within society, and the associated rights and responsibilities, resulting from an individual's actions, talents, work, charisma, and accomplishments throughout their lifetime; compare to **ascribed status**.

Anarchist society: A society that fulfills all the roles of a political structure without hierarchy.

Ascribed status: A position or inherited status in society, with the associated rights and responsibilities, determined without individual initiative or choice, and passed down from generation to generation (e.g., by being born into a particular family like the Royal Family in Britain or by being female); compare to **achieved status**.

Balanced reciprocity: A direct type of reciprocal exchange when an individual gives a gift with the assumption that they will receive a gift of equal worth in return, within a specific time limit or with the expectation of an immediate return.

Big Man: Individuals in some tribal societies, sometimes tribal elders, who achieve higher status and power owing to personal entrepreneurship and skillful use of social obligation, rather than to inheritance of wealth.

Centralized political systems: A political system where authority is concentrated at the higher level with a small number of individuals, as opposed to being distributed at various lower levels of government.

Circulation: The ways goods are moved once they have been produced or procured, including, being exchanged, bought, sold, traded, given, or transported.

Class hierarchy: Economic distinctions between individuals or groups in societies or cultures, a product of systems that permit the amassing of wealth.

Core nations: Powerful, wealthy, and industrial nations that exercise economic and political hegemony over other regions.

Decentralized political systems: A political system where power is dispersed over a legislative body, including citizens and elected representatives, so that no single authority makes all the decisions and power is not maintained by a few.

Dinka: People of the Nilotic ethnic group living in South Sudan, Africa, closely related to the Nuer.

Economic structure: How the members of society make a living using the changing balance of trade, output, incomes, and employment from different economic sectors.

Exchange: The transfer of goods and services from one member of society to another.

External relations: The aspect of political structure pertaining to how a group interacts with other groups.

Generalized reciprocity: A type of reciprocal exchange with the assumption that an immediate return is not expected and that the value of the exchange will balance out in the long run.

Infrastructure: The basic physical and organizational systems and facilities needed for the operation of a society or enterprise to provide for the community.

Internal relations: The aspects of political structure governing how people within a group work together.

Means of production: All of the elements, including facilities, raw materials, and human labor, that contribute to the production of goods and services.

Moka: An example of a combined system of redistribution and reciprocity at the group level in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Big Men leaders amass large numbers of pigs and then give them away during a celebration, which serves to redistribute the pigs and garner more prestige for the leader.

Mwali: Armbands of white shells given by a trader as gifts to his trading partner when traveling in a counter-clockwise direction, while participating in the Kula Ring.

Negative reciprocity: Occurs when there is an attempt to receive a gift of greater value than what was given or to receive something for nothing, the opposite of reciprocity.

Nuer: People of the Nilotic ethnic group living in South Sudan and Ethiopia, Africa, closely related to the Dinka.

Periphery nations: Nations that have very little control over their own economies and are dominated by or dependent on the core industrial economies.

Political structure: The systems and institutions that people use to organize and govern themselves.

Potlatch: A form of redistributive and ceremonial exchange found among many Native American groups in the United States and Canadian northwestern Pacific coast. Two groups of clans would perform highly ritualized exchanges of food, blankets, and ritual objects to convey status and prestige to its participants.

Production: The organized system for the creation of a good, commodity, or service.

Reciprocity: The sharing of goods and services among people, or gift giving among equals, generally practiced by tribe level societies.

Redistribution: A system that involves the exchange of goods and resources through a centralized organization, generally practiced by chiefdom level societies.

Social structure: The patterned interactions and internal, institutionalized relationships between groups of a society.

Sodality: Groups based on kinship, age, gender, and other principles that provide for political organization.

Soulava: Necklaces of red shells given by a trader as gifts to his trading partner when traveling in a clockwise direction, while participating in the Kula Ring.

Structural inequality: Systems created by institutions that offer an unfair, biased, or prejudicial distinction between different segments of the population in a specific society.

Structure: The building blocks of culture, including politics, economics, social organization, religion, and kinship.

Work: The cumulation of commodity collection and production.

Suggested Readings

Bodley, John. 1998. "The Price of Progress." *Victims of Progress*, McGraw-Hill. [http://web.mnstate.edu/robertsb/380/PriceOfProgress.pdf\(opens in a new tab\)](http://web.mnstate.edu/robertsb/380/PriceOfProgress.pdf(opens in a new tab))

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Graber, David. 2004. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Prickly Paradigm Press.

Lappé, Frances Moore, and Joseph Collins. 1977. "Why Can't People Feed Themselves?" *Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity*. Random House. [http://staffwww.fullcoll.edu/jmcdermott/Cultural%20Anthropology_files/Why%20Can%27t%20People%20Feed%20Themselves.pdf\(opens in a new tab\)](http://staffwww.fullcoll.edu/jmcdermott/Cultural%20Anthropology_files/Why%20Can%27t%20People%20Feed%20Themselves.pdf(opens in a new tab))

Project Linked Fate. 2019. *Structural Inequality*. <https://projectlinkedfate.org/deliberate/think/>

Videos

Potlatch 1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_gYjQw9Bf4

Friendship Over Fear. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/07/south-sudan-friendship-over-fear-video>

Yam I Am. <https://vimeo.com/84492441>

Ongka's Big Moka. Charlie Nairn, 1974.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyQ8rW25Iy8>

Race – The Power of An Illusion: How the Racial Wealth Gap was Created. 2003.

Larry Adelman. <https://vimeo.com/133506632>

The True Cost. Morgan, Andrew, Michael Ross, Lucy Siegle, Stella McCartney, Livia Firth, Vandana Shiva, and Duncan Blickenstaff. **The True Cost**, 2015. Turabian. Available on Netflix; trailer available on YouTube.