

Anthropology and the Definition of Politics

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ABSTRACT

Political anthropology is a subfield of sociocultural anthropology, but like anthropology as a whole, it remains immune to precise delimitation [1]. The core of political anthropology is the comparative, fieldwork-based examination of politics in a broad range of historical, social, and cultural settings.

Keywords: Political anthropology; Ethnographic; Negotiate power

INTRODUCTION

Political anthropology is a subfield of sociocultural anthropology, but like anthropology as a whole, it remains immune to precise delimitation [1]. The core of political anthropology is the comparative, fieldwork-based examination of politics in a broad range of historical, social, and cultural settings. Today, it is common to see political anthropologists combine ethnographic work with history. Some analyze the symbolic forms and practices of a specific state bureaucracy, others a form of political activism, and yet others the perpetration of terror or torture, or the political effects associated with the everyday and ritual construction of a particular collective memory. The field of political anthropology has been, and continues to be, extensive, diverse, and shifting. Anthropologists have defined politics in different ways, depending on their general theoretical-analytical interests and research questions [2]. A typical anthropological point of departure today states that politics, or the political, must not be treated as a separate domain or

field, but must be investigated as articulation between power relations, cultural processes, and historical trajectories. As one contemporary anthropologist, Steven Gregory, put it in his *Black Corona* (1998, p. 13), “For my purposes, politics refers to a diverse range of social practices through which people negotiate power relations. The practice of politics involves both the production and exercise of social relationships and the cultural construction of social meanings that support or undermine those relationships [3].” The work that founded and gave shape to the classic, British structural-functional anthropology of politics in the 1940s and 1950s, *African Political Systems* edited by Meyer Fortes and Edward Evans-Pritchard, viewed a society’s political organization as those structures or relations that maintain “social order within a territorial framework, [4] by the organized exercise of coercive authority through the use, or the possibility of use, of physical force”

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