

Ecology and the Sacred: Engaging the Anthropology of Roy A. Rappaport, as well as a special issue of the journal *American Anthropologist*, guest edited by Aletta Biersack, suggest the breadth and depth of Rappaport's ongoing influence. Rappaport's ideal of creating a holistic, engaged anthropology, both scientific and humanistic, and committed to understanding and solving the problems that continue to challenge humanity, may be more important than ever in an increasingly frictional world.

Brian A. Hoey

See also Bateson, Gregory; Fried, Morton; Material Production, Theories of; Religion; Sahlin, Marshall; Systems Theory; University of Michigan; Vayda, Andrew P.

Further Readings

- Biersack, A. (Ed.). (1999). Ecologies for tomorrow: Reading Rappaport today [Special issue]. *American Anthropologist*, 101(1), 5–122.
- Darnell, R. (2002). Roy A. Rappaport, 1988–1989. In R. Darnell & F. W. Gleach (Eds.), *Celebrating a century of the American anthropological association: Presidential portraits* (pp. 277–280). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Hoey, B., & Fricke, T. (2007). From sweet potatoes to God almighty: Roy Rappaport on being a hedgehog. *American Ethnologist*, 34(3), 581–599.
- Messer, E., & Lambek, M. (2001). *Ecology and the sacred: Engaging the anthropology of Roy A. Rappaport*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

Rational choice theory is an umbrella term for a variety of models explaining social phenomena as outcomes of individual action that can in some way be construed as rational. “Rational behavior” is behavior that is suitable for the realization of specific goals, given the limitations imposed by the situation. The key elements of all rational choice explanations are individual preferences, beliefs, and constraints. *Preferences* denote the positive or negative evaluations individuals attach to the possible outcomes of their actions. Preferences can have many roots, ranging from culturally transmitted tastes for food or other items to personal habits and commitments.

Beliefs refer to perceived cause-effect relations, including the perceived likelihood with which an individual's actions will result in different possible outcomes. For example, a village head may believe that raiding a neighboring village A has a higher probability of success than raiding a neighboring village B. *Constraints* define the limits to the set of feasible actions (e.g., the amount of credit one can get imposes a budget constraint on those considering buying a house).

Key Assumptions

Key ideas of the theory can be traced back to the writings of moral philosophers such as Adam Smith. The theory's core was subsequently developed by what is now referred to as neoclassical economics. Three assumptions are important: (1) individuals have selfish preferences, (2) they maximize their own utility, and (3) they act independently based on full information. These assumptions have also met increasing criticism from within economics, resulting in adjustments and the birth of “behavioral economics.” This branch uses insights from psychology and the cognitive neurosciences to refine the oversimplified and highly stylized conceptualization of *Homo economicus*. Rather than dismissing deviations from the model as cognitive anomalies that would cancel each other out when aggregated to the collective level, behavioral economics and related fields attempt to develop a more realistic behavioral microfoundation.

There are many different variants of rational choice theory. Depending on the degree to which they adhere to the assumptions of the neoclassical model, rational choice explanations come in “thin,” strictly neoclassical, versus “thick,” sociological versions, in which these strict assumptions are relaxed. They differ on three dimensions: (1) the type of rationality, (2) preference, and (3) individualism assumptions.

Rationality

“Thin” versions of rational choice theory (neoclassical economics) assume *full rationality*: Individuals are fully informed about all their decision alternatives, the probabilities of their outcomes, and their consequences, and there are no cognitive limitations in the perception or processing of this information. Individuals base their decisions on cost-benefit

calculations and choose the alternative that generates the highest expected utility. Models of *bounded rationality*, for example, those proposed in 1957 by Herbert Simon, relax these assumptions: Selective attention limits the amount and kind of information, and limited information-processing capabilities lead to satisficing rather than maximizing: Individuals tend to accept solutions that are “good enough.” More recently, Siegwart Lindenberg has proposed “thick” models of *social rationality* that specify under which conditions gain-maximization and other rationality traits contained in full- or bounded-rationality approaches will guide human decision making, and under which conditions other processes, such as learning or automatic responses, will guide behavior.

Preferences

In the “thin” version of the rational choice approach, preferences are exogenously given and stable, and individuals are *selfish egoists* striving toward the maximization of material gain. Selfishness can take the form of opportunism (self-seeking with guile), in which individuals break the rules to realize their objectives. “Thicker” variants of the theory assume that individual behavior may be motivated by *social preferences*; that is, they have a concern for the well-being of others. The benefits individuals strive for are not restricted to material gains but can be psychological or social (like prestige or behavioral confirmation).

Individualism

All rational choice explanations are reductionist: They share the assumption that explanations of societal-level outcomes (e.g., institutions, group structures, collective action, warfare, etc.) need to be grounded in a microlevel behavioral theory of individual action. This analytical strategy is also called “individualism.” In the “thin version” (*methodological individualism*), social structures are not relevant as constraints on behavior (since all the necessary information is contained either in the objective prices of goods or in the subjective meanings). “Thick” versions (*structural individualism*) consider social and institutional embeddedness as major conditions affecting individual decisions and behavior. As a result, structural individualism models social phenomena through a three-step social mechanism

explanation: (1) a macro-micro step, or “situational mechanism”; (2) a micro-micro step, or “action generating mechanism”; and (3) a micro-macro step or “transformation mechanism.”

Rational Choice Theory in Anthropology

Along with structural-institutional theory, on the one hand, and cultural theories, on the other, the rational choice approach constitutes one of the three major metatheoretical paradigms in the social sciences. Though originally developed in economics, rational choice reasoning is now applied in other subdisciplines of the social sciences, though applications in the field of social and cultural anthropology are still rare. Here, economic anthropologists hotly contested rational choice arguments during the “formalism vs. substantivism” debate in the 1960s and 1970s. Currently, rational choice reasoning in anthropology seems to be largely restricted to the domains of economic, ecological, and evolutionary anthropology. For example, James Acheson uses rational choice theory to explain the differences between the Maine lobster industry and the New England ground fishery in their ability to solve collective-action dilemmas resulting in overexploitation. The volume *Kinship, Networks, and Exchange*, edited by Thomas Schweitzer and Douglas R. White, contains several contributions drawing on rational choice theory to explain, for example, the emergence of social and economic structure in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea or the pattern of cattle exchange among the Pokot in Kenya.

Rafael Wittek

See also Economic Anthropology; Evolutionary Anthropology; Evolutionary Psychology; Formalism/Substantivism; Game Theory; Gift Exchange; Human Universals

Further Readings

- Acheson, J. (2002). Rational choice, culture change, and fisheries management in the Gulf of Maine. *Research in Economic Anthropology*, 21, 133–159.
- Coleman, J. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Ensminger, J. (1998). Anthropology and the new institutionalism. *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*, 154, 774–789.

- Lindenberg, S. (2001). Social rationality versus rational egoism. In J. Turner (Ed.), *Handbook of sociological theory* (pp. 635–668). New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Press.
- Schweizer, T., & White, D. R. (Eds.). (1998). *Kinship, networks, and exchange*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittek, R., Snijders, T. A. B., & Nee, V. (in press). Rational choice social research. In R. Wittek, T. A. B. Snijders, & V. Nee (Eds.), *Rational choice social research*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

REDFIELD, ROBERT

The American anthropologist and sociologist Robert Redfield (1897–1958) was a leading theorist of social development and change who exercised a wide-ranging influence among American social scientists from the 1930s through the early 1960s.

Biography and Major Works

Robert Redfield was born in 1897 in Chicago, Illinois. His mother was the daughter of the Danish consul in Chicago, and his father was a prominent attorney. Redfield grew up in comparatively affluent surroundings. His early education was conducted by private tutors, and from the age of 13 through high school, he attended the University of Chicago Laboratory School. On graduating from the Lab School in 1915, he matriculated in the College at the University of Chicago. He struggled to establish direction in his first years in college, but after some interruptions, including driving an ambulance in France in 1917 for the American Field Service, he graduated from the College in 1920. At his father's strong encouragement, he earned a JD from the University of Chicago law school in 1921. On graduating, he took to practicing law in downtown Chicago, but after 2 years, he found law highly unsatisfactory.

While at the University of Chicago, Redfield married a fellow student, Margaret (Greta) Park, whose father, Robert E. Park, was a prominent member in the University of Chicago's sociology department. Redfield's father had died while Redfield was in his last year of law school, and Robert Park came to fill the role of a father figure. Park perceived Redfield's dissatisfaction with his law career and exerted a valuable influence in helping Redfield see opportunities

beyond law. In one particularly important act, Park provided Greta and Redfield the funds to take an extended trip through postrevolutionary Mexico in 1923. Park believed that exposure to a society in the grip of active social reconstruction could be a mind-expanding experience and could possibly serve as a springboard for Redfield to reorient his life. The trip proved to be just that, and on returning home, at Park's encouragement, Redfield chose to leave behind the practice of law and undertake graduate study in social science.

In the fall of 1924, Redfield enrolled in the doctoral program in sociology and anthropology at the University of Chicago. His trip to Mexico had kindled an interest in the processes of social change, and this interest came to dominate his work over his entire career. Redfield conducted his dissertation research in Mexico, undertaking a study of social change in the small village of Tepoztlán. Two primary influences shaped Redfield's thinking regarding the dynamics of social change: (1) the culture-civilization debate of the 1920s, a searching dialogue among transatlantic writers and intellectuals following World War I, probing the issue of whether the transition from a supposedly less developed "culture" to "civilization" represented actual progress, and (2) Robert E. Park, who was his closest intellectual mentor and served as a personal conduit for the fundamental ideas of the "Chicago school" of sociology, which focused in large part on the empirical study of social dynamics within the urban setting. On completion of his dissertation study of Tepoztlán in 1928, Redfield graduated with a PhD degree and accepted an offer from Chicago to become an assistant professor in the department of sociology and anthropology.

Shortly after being hired at Chicago, Redfield published a slightly modified version of his dissertation, as *Tepoztlán, A Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life* (1930). Redfield followed his study of Tepoztlán with a much broader set of interrelated community studies on the Yucatán peninsula, which focused on comparative studies of a village, town, and city. Like his earlier work, his goal in the Yucatán studies was to use empirical research to further develop the theory describing the processes of social change. Redfield conducted his studies in Yucatán over the course of the 1930s and published the culmination of his work in 1941, *The Folk Culture of Yucatán*.