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anthropology
National and transnational studies

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Special fields of anthropology > National and transnational studies

With anthropology's historical orientation toward non-European societies, after the end of World War II many anthropologists were confronted with successful national movements, as the old colonial empires of Asia and Africa gave way to newly independent states.

The new states gave rise to new questions in anthropology: What are the cultural dimensions of political movements in general? Do national movements, does nationalism, have particular cultural dimensions? Are national movements constituted culturally? To answer these questions, anthropologists borrowed the idea of "modernization" from political science and linked it to familiar anthropological objects, such as family and kin groups. In the 1960s the University of Chicago's Committee on the Comparative Study of New Nations, which was composed of sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists, published *Old Societies, New States*, a collection of essays examining case studies of old cultural forms blending with new political institutions.

Modernization theory, however, was an intellectual project that developed in the shadow of the Cold War, and it was often more prescriptive of what might be than analytically descriptive of what was. Debates in later years focused on the shortcomings of the theory, and then the study of nationalism moved to the discipline of history, where the 19th-century roots of national movements were examined.

In the early 1980s Benedict Anderson, a political scientist, made the extremely influential move of analyzing nations as "imagined communities." His argument that nations, like religions, are based on the relation of this world to the next allowed anthropologists to relate ideas of meaning and solidarity or culture and community to political movements. The 1980s then become a very productive time for the anthropological studies of nations. Yet these studies were formulated around ideas of a national culture, and this concept, other scholars argued, needed to be questioned. Ranajith Guha and the anticolonial historiographers of the subaltern studies collective argued on the one hand that nonelite groups share neither the political space nor the

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cultural world of national elites, and other anthropologists argued on the other hand that the idea that culture could be tied to a place such as a country was conceptually flawed.

Arjun Appadurai, a pioneer in the latter argument, went on to develop in a series of influential essays the anthropological field of transnational studies, which is based on an idea of culture not tied to a place but rather in flow. By thinking of these flows as making up "scapes" such as "mediascapes," these works allow anthropologists to understand the relationshipbetween, say, between, say, satellite TV or the World Wide Web and a country's national development. This approach also enables new anthropological inquiries into a rather old phenomenon, that of diasporas. Interconnections in the 21st century work in new ways radically different from the old, and the study of diasporic groups and the countries they call home highlights for anthropologists another fascinating 21st-century question: What are the boundaries of the nation?

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