Social Anthropology at Oxford University

Social anthropology uses very practical, empirical methods to investigate some quite philosophical-looking problems about the nature of human life in society. How far can we generalize about the forms of social life that we find around us, or in the historical record, and the part these forms play in consciousness, knowledge, and the quality of personal and interpersonal experience? By ‘social forms’, we have traditionally focused on a wide range of the world’s distinctive, often small-scale patterns of social life. These typically have included concepts of family, gender, and kinship organization; the production and circulation of necessities and luxuries; moral and religious ideas and ritual practices; notions of the human person and of health and illness; cosmological ideas about space, time, the relation between human, animal, and spiritual existence; the life course and rites of passage; and the role of the creative arts in social life. We have asked, and still ask, questions of the major theorists in the social sciences (such as Marx, Durkheim, and Weber) as to the connection between these domains of social life, as reflected in the widest possible set of ethnographic comparisons. We have also developed some distinctive theoretical approaches within social anthropology, many of which arose in response to original field investigations in parts of the world scarcely written about before the early twentieth century (for example, those by Malinowski, Marcel Mauss, Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss). We amassed a large body of field-work based literature on the social and cultural life of peoples within the former European empires and this work remains an important source of ideas for today’s anthropology.

Since the 1960s and the ‘end of empire’, social anthropology has been transformed in several ways. It no longer concentrates on ‘remote’ areas for their own sake, but has extended the scope of its empirical investigations to communities anywhere; it has moved from rural locations to include towns and cities; it grapples with issues of global impact on local society and the workings of states, the politics of nationalism and ethnicity, the operations of international bodies, the world religions, conflict and violence, and the powerful communication media. It some ways its research has become more like that of the mainstream social sciences. However, social anthropologists still seek to make connections between the conventional domains of politics, religion, culture, gender, economic development, and so on; and they give high priority to the portrayal of individual knowledge, feeling, and values as this ‘private’ sphere relates to the public one. It is recognized that good research among our fellow human beings demands personal empathy and imagination on the part of the scholar: fieldwork is now seen as less of an objective enquiry, and more of a conversation. The writing of ethnography too is understood to have a very subjective quality. At the same time, academic social anthropology retains its older, and fundamental, scientific and comparative attitude to the essentially social nature of human beings.
All teaching staff at ISCA have long experience of fieldwork as well as comparative and theoretical writing. Among the social anthropologists are specialists in the ethnography of Africa, South Asia, SE Asia, China, Japan, the Middle East, South America, and Europe.

Please note that in 2007, as well as general anthropology as detailed above, tutors are available for the following specialist areas: the anthropology of Gender and Feminist anthropological theory, anthropology of childhood and street children, anthropology, gender and development.

**Material Anthropology and Museum Ethnography**

The Pitt Rivers Museum houses one of the world's finest collections of ethnographic and archaeological artefacts and ethnographic photographs. It also holds a unique place in the history of British anthropology, for it was here that Sir Edward Tylor was appointed to hold the first lectureship in anthropology in Britain. Lecturer Curators and other Museum staff teach an innovative one-year M.Sc. and two-year M.Phil. programme in Material Anthropology and Museum Ethnography (MAME) which draws on the Museum's collections and history as well as on curatorial research interests.

The Material Anthropology and Museum Ethnography course uses anthropological perspectives to develop a critical understanding of the creation, function, histories, politics, and contemporary meanings of objects; the representation of cultures in museum displays and other public venues; shifting relations between source communities and museum; problems of landscape, place, and space; art and aesthetics; visual anthropology and issues of representation, including photographic representation. Students also attend lectures in social anthropology to link their work to the broader history of the discipline. The course offers a structured first year of lectures and tutorials followed by individual study and the writing of a thesis.

*Photograph of interior of Pitt Rivers Museum by Drew Davey. Copyright PRM, 2001.*