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## The Status of the Concept *Custom* in Angloamerican Anthropology

### Summary

For the purpose of the colloquium on *custom* organized by the Institute of Folklore Research in Zagreb, the author has undertaken the task of recapitulating the use of the concept in angloamerican anthropological tradition. The task is thorny since *custom* is used there only marginally, not being an analytical category in the conceptual apparatus of that tradition. Thus, the present essay deals more with the alternative ways of perceiving everyday life and tradition than with the concept of *custom*.

The constitutive period of British anthropology is described as marked by rationalism and positivism, a sort of scientific optimism which reflected the age of British imperial expansion. Tylor already established the science of culture as an empirical discipline dealing primarily with *behavior*, cultural dynamics and change, while the realm of *custom* and tradition was left to conservative folklorists. Later functionalist-structuralist anthropology in Great Britain was not interested in the concept of *custom* as *survival* or *custom* as *an element of culture* either, since its

understanding of culture was integrative and organic. Only Gluckman used the term *customary forms*, but in a different sense: to differentiate ordinary, learned and traditional behavior from its innovative aspects.

The author then outlines the development of American anthropology and explains why it has always been preoccupied with cultural change, progress, socialization and individual freedom, rather than with continuity, tradition and origins. When at the turn of the century F. Boas set the course of American anthropology, it took a profoundly different direction than European, particularly German ethnology: culture was understood as a whole, as an integral manifestation of spirit, and not as an aggregate of different elements, "customs", etc. There was no need to look for cultural "origins" in order to legitimize the building of national state. Accordingly, the task of American anthropologist was to reconstruct the subjective perspective of the people under study and to describe dynamic processes of cultural adaptation, integration and innovation within existing cultural systems. This position has remained valid for several generations of researchers, although there is a great differentiation among them regarding the focus and methodology. It is significant to note, for the purpose of this review, that the concept of "custom" has remained marginal and without any analytical value.

The final section deals briefly with new developments in angloamerican anthropology. In the context of symbolic anthropology, ritual has become one of the most treated subjects, but in a new manner: not as a "survival" of the past, but as a paradigmatic event in any culture which carries "key symbols" for understanding that culture as a whole. The revival of historical anthropology, influenced by French and British social history, has drawn again the attention of anthropologists to "customs", rituals, festivals, folk movements and rebellions of the past - but this time as a means for the reconstruction of popular consciousness and illumination of the role of "ordinary" people as subjects of history.

In conclusion, the author notes that much of angloamerican anthropology in the 1980's has *practice* as its key concept. This concept is superior to *behavior* because it includes also the invisible, ideological and unintentional components of human action. Current research focuses on the relationship between human action and social/cultural systems whose asymmetrical power structures always restrain human experience.

(Translated by Olga Supek)