



# Understanding Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theory

*Philip Carl Salzman*

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## **Understanding Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theory** Philip Carl Salzman

Are cows sacred to Indian Hindus because they stand for nature and life, as symbolic analysts explain, or because they pull plows and fertilize the land, providing people with food, as cultural materialists argue? Are witchcraft accusations a scapegoating of the powerless by the elite to maintain their ascendancy, as materialist class theorists argue, or are they social expressions of psychological tensions arising from conflicts in relationships, as functionalist psychological anthropologists have argued? Understanding culture means understanding and appreciating the diverse theories that offer different perspectives on culture.

Salzman's Understanding Culture explores six major streams of anthropological theory: interdependence in human life (functionalism); agency in human action (processualism and transactionalism); determining factors (materialism and political economy); coherence in culture (configurationalism and structuralism); transformation through time (history and evolution); and critical advocacy (feminism and postmodernism). Each theoretical approach is initially presented in its own terms, to show its assumptions, aims, and accomplishments, and each is elucidated and illustrated through arguments and ethnographic examples offered by original theorists and practitioners.

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