

Three Theoretical Perspectives in Political Anthropology

	Structural Functionalism	The Process Approach	
		Process Theory	Action Theory
Goals	To show how particular institutions serve to maintain the equilibrium of the whole society	To define the processes involved in political competitions and in implementing public goals	To describe individual strategies for gaining and maintaining power
Unit of Analysis	A society, tribe, social group, etc., usually treated as an ideal whole: this group was considered for analytical purposes as a closed system insofar as little regard was paid to the wider environment	The "political field," a flexible and relative concept referring to any area in which political interaction takes place; may involve a part of society or extend beyond social or ethnic boundaries	The "political arena," an area in which individual actors or small groups vie for political power. Political arenas may be, or be comprised all or in part of, factions, patron-client relations, parties, elites, and other informal para-political groups
Analytic Approach to Time	Synchronic: society is viewed as though outside of time, in ideal present	Diachronic, or "in time": analysis may focus on actual history or on ideal processes of change through time	Diachronic, but often focused on the actions of individuals within the duration of the anthropologist's fieldwork
Attitude toward Change	In some writings, there was simply no interest expressed in change; society was treated in a purely structural fashion; in other writings, change (in the sense of adaptive adjustments of the parts) was emphasized, but the whole was seen to be in equilibrium	Conflict, tension, and change are viewed as the normal condition of society	Change within a political arena is virtually constant, though there may be a relative stability of the wider system
Key Terms	Structure, function, equilibrium, integration	Process, competition, conflict, power, legitimacy, support	Strategy, manipulation, decision making, roles, goals, games, rules
Examples	<i>African Political Systems</i> , ed. by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard <i>The Nuer</i> , by Evans-Pritchard	<i>Political Systems of Highland Burma</i> , by Leach (transitional) <i>Political Anthropology</i> , ed. By Swartz, Turner, and Tuden	<i>Schism and Continuity in an African Society</i> , by Turner "Political Anthropology: Manipulative Strategies," by Vincent, in <i>Annual Review of Anthropology</i> 1978

Adapted from Ted C. Lewellen, 1992