Anthropology is primarily an engagement with ‘difference’ and ‘diversity’ and focuses on problems of cultural translation. As such it offers a critique of the universalization of Western models and provides thus a basis for a comparative historical sociology.

Ethnographical data derived from fieldwork form a big part of anthropology, but the study of other kinds of material, historical, textual, visual, also benefits from an anthropological perspective. A necessarily fragmentary approach to social life, in which the intensive study of a fragment is used to gain a perspective on a larger whole, offers a greater potential for social science than the analysis of large data, undergirded by game-theory and rational choice-theory. One should not confuse this attention to ‘the micro’ with any form of methodological individualism which assumes that ‘the macro’ emerges from the actions and motivations of individual actors. The study of a fragment cannot be generalized to the level of ‘society as a whole’ or Weberian ‘ideal-types’. The construction of the individual as a rational actor in order to be able to make large-scale generalizations is part of a modern ideology of individualism and the very opposite of a comparative approach as proposed here. What I will call generalism, namely the assumption of integration of nations and civilizations or the assumption of society as an integrated whole is different from anthropological holism which implies the drawing of larger inferences from the intensive study of fragments of social life. This approach derives from Durkheim’s emphasis of studying ‘social facts’ which he conceived to be different from other facts; and especially from Mauss’s focus on the ‘total social fact’, that is simultaneously legal, economic, religious, and political. Mauss’s example of such a ‘total social fact’ is ‘gift-exchange’, a phenomenon that can be used to elucidate important aspects of social life by comparing a number of very different societies. The other major inspiration is Weber who tried to understand the specificity of historical developments through comparison. Anthropology has always taken the body (its symbolism, its functions, its gender) as a focal point of the study of society. However, from Durkheim onwards, the anthropological contribution to the study of embodied practice emphasizes the social and provides a critique of socio-biological determinism by showing that it is full of Euro-American prejudice. An anthropological emphasis on ‘the body’ and its disciplining requires an attention to configurations of power that cannot be replaced by psychological experiments or tests.