

Anthropology and Europe

Those who worked on the creation of the European Association of Social Anthropologists are to be warmly congratulated. By coincidence, their labours were crowned with success at the very moment at which Europe was also being reunited, and Eastern Europe liberated. It will not be possible, and ought not be possible, to see the creation of a *European* association of anthropologists in isolation from the tremendous events which have changed the political and cultural map of Europe.

The bifurcation and reunification of Europe has in the past played a major role in the development of social thought. Since the Middle Ages, the bifurcation of Europe has occurred twice. The first time round, it was the consequence of the break-up of the mediaeval religious unity of Western Europe, brought about by the Reformation, and confirmed by the acceptance of that deep division at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and the enthronement of the principle of *Cuius regio eius religio*. Henceforth the Counter-Reformation was to share Europe with the Reformation.

The end of the wars of religion was, I suppose, the first occurrence of *détente*. Henceforth, the two systems were to indulge in co-existence and compete by peaceful methods, at least most of the time. In due course, it became fairly obvious who had won. The Principle of Economic Growth was not yet formally recognised as *the* foundation of social and political legitimacy, but in effect, it was already operating. The commercial and protestant societies of north-west Europe were surpassing the southern lands which under Counter-Reformation tutelage were reimposing, perhaps in harsher form, the old values and social principles.

Reflections on this inequality are known as the Enlightenment and constitute the effective commencement of modern social theory and investigation. The Enlightenment gave direction and meaning to the French Revolution. The fact that the Revolution led, first to terror and then to dictatorship, provided further food for reflection. Evidently, social *rattrapage* could not be achieved quite so easily, by the simple application of reason to society, which had been the Enlightenment recipe. A more sophisticated understanding of the social material which was to be transformed was required, it appeared.

Of these diagnoses of the failure of the French Revolution, of the attempts to do it better the second time round, Marxism was certainly the most influential and probably the most elaborate and best orchestrated. It incorporated the knowledge available in their time to the Founding Fathers, and thus presented itself as the culmination of current wisdom. Ironically, when it succeeded in possessing itself of a state, and eventually, a whole cluster of states, it succeeded, once again, in bifurcating Europe. Yalta was a kind of Westphalian peace, confirming that 'cuius regio eius socio-economic system'. The social theory, born of the consequences of the north-south division of Europe, ended by imposing an east-west one.

Once again, the two systems had to compete in peace. This time, they weren't

even persuaded of the need to do so by a very prolonged bloody war with each other. They had indeed fought a bloody war with a third party, but the main thing which persuaded them of the need for peaceful competition, and induced them to abide by its rules, was the fact that weapons by now were so terrible that an outright conflict would have destroyed both parties to it, and there could have been no victor.

This time, the outcome of the peaceful competition made itself felt and visible much more quickly – and more quickly than virtually anyone anticipated. For one thing, Vindication by Economic Success had not earlier been a recognised principle, and for another, economic growth was now incomparably more rapid, and relative failure became correspondingly more conspicuous. The majority of the population were no longer peasants living in self-contained communities, and capable of continuing production even if relatively isolated from the outside world. Now, the great majority, either side of the new curtain, were urbanised and industrialised, and the severing of communications appears to have had a disastrous effect on productivity. So the Bolsheviks failed to emulate the achievement of the Jesuits. *This* division of Europe lasted a mere forty years, or at worst, seventy.

The Reunification of Europe in 1989 is an event comparable with the French Revolution, and the Reformation, in its significance. It has been quite wrongly compared with 1848. To my knowledge, Metternich did not, in 1848, instruct Windischgratz, Radecky and Jelacic not to use any force against the rebels, and warn them that they must expect no support from him if they did so. The uprisings of that year had come from below and they failed; those of 1989 were triggered off and inspired from above, and they succeeded. They were the consequence of a, to my mind, wholly unprecedented recognition by the leaders of an ideocracy that their ideology had failed.

What matters about the momentous events of that year is not simply that Europe had been reunited, but that it was reunited in terms of a new perception of social reality. That perception does not as yet possess a clear outline. What it rejects is obvious; what it endorses less so. Perhaps it will never acquire a sharp outline: perhaps it is of the essence of the social order which prevailed in the peaceful competition which had lasted forty or seventy years, that it is not and never will be based on a coherent vision, but, on the contrary, will embody an untidy pragmatic compromise. Perhaps the End of Ideology thesis is vindicated after all. The theory born of the malaise of the first great bifurcation of Europe has both failed *and* engendered a new bifurcation, and that has now come to an end. We will have to re-think it all, even if the fruits of our thoughts will not provide material for a new Grand Ideology, even if the time of such ideologies is over. We shall see.

A social science such as anthropology cannot remain indifferent to these changes. It is, after all rooted in them. Social anthropology, at any rate as practised in Britain and in what may be called the intellectual sterling zone, is linked in its origins to the history of European thought and its internal divisions. British social anthropology, as a formal profession with its guild, its very effectively imposed standards, its idiom and its shared paradigm, really goes back to Bronislaw Malinowski and the functionalist revolution and the replacement of Frazer by Malinowski as the model anthropologist. This transformation which took place between the wars, was most intimately connected with another interesting bifurcation of Europe, one not identical with the ones mentioned so far, but not unrelated to them. This is the division between individualists/universalists and the romantics/holists.

Ever since the late eighteenth century, European thought had been divided between two traditions, the individualism exemplified by a line running from Descartes to Hume and Kant, and a romantic collectivism which arose in reaction to this, at first anticipated by Vico, but becoming really influential through the work of thinkers such as Herder and Hegel. The former tradition culminated in a vision in which the ultimate court of appeal for cognitive, and moral, claims was the individual consciousness, which judges whatever claims were made upon it by confronting them with its own data, or setting them against its own inescapable inner structure. This was, if you like, the Protestant doctrine of the sovereignty of conscience, articulated in secular, or semi-secular, philosophic dress. By contrast, the romantic tradition which arose in opposition to the Cartesians and empiricists, insisted that intellectual and moral life was a team game, that it was carried on by entire and ongoing collectivities, and that intellectual life, in all its aspects, could only be carried on in terms of a set of shared ideas and practices which could only be carried by a community, rather than excogitated by isolated individual minds. Real knowledge was a communal good and could not be privatised.

Both these traditions were liable to be in opposition to the remains of feudalism and baroque absolutism, but on behalf of different contestants: one, on behalf of a liberal individualism, an open society, and the other, on behalf of the newly emerging or re-emerging ethnic collectivities, affirming the new principle that political units should be based on 'nations'. The confrontation between the two trends was, for fairly obvious reasons connected with its history and composition, most sharply articulated in the Habsburg Empire. A dynastic state closely linked to the Counter-Reformation, to faith and hierarchy, was challenged both by the liberals and the nationalists. The liberals found their ideology in an atomistic individualism which was empiricist in its theory of knowledge: it can be no accident that the most eloquent and profound formulations of liberalism in our century come from Vienna, from the work of men such as Hayek and Popper, and that so many modern formulations of empiricism are rooted in the work of Ernst Mach. The nationalists, on the other hand, found their idiom in some kind of romantic celebrations of the communal life of the village and of a shared but idiosyncratic, rather than universal, culture.

This was the confrontation. The individualists had an acute sense of the need to validate claims in the individual's experience and not to be taken in by self-sustaining and woolly mythologies; the romantics, on the other hand, were acutely aware of the pervasiveness and unity and interrelatedness of *culture*. The individualists saw society and culture as the mere summation of individual aims and strategies; the romantics saw the way in which a culture spoke and acted *through* individuals, who found their time fulfilment in it, and they also had a fine sense of historic continuity.

Most of the participants in the debate took part on one side or the other. It is well known that every philosophical baby that is born alive, is either a little positivist or a little Hegelian. By and large, the babies that appeared conformed to this division of the world, and located themselves on one or other side of the big divide. But not Bronislaw Malinowski. Therein lies his uniqueness, and it is connected with the manner in which he established a new discipline and a new profession.

Through his entire background, his father's interest in Polish dialects, his long sojourns in Zakopane and observation of the *gurali*, his involvement with the *littérateurs* of the turbulent and romantic modernist movement, though all this he was receptive to the sense of culture and a sense of its unity. East European nationalist and

populist ethnographers did not go into the villages in order to test ideas about the early history of mankind: they went there to observe, record, codify, protect, strengthen, a national culture. Love rather than theoretical universality inspired them. But if with one part of his background, Malinowski belonged to the romantics, he was also a person whose dissertation was devoted to neo-positivism, to Mach and Avenarius. He was acutely sensitive to the Machian tendency to replace inferences to unobservables by constructions out of observables, and the two themes in Mach which specially struck him were, on the one hand, the need to relate ideas to their experiential base, and on the other, where such a base on its own was inadequate, to invoke the functional needs of the organism for an explanation.

It is the combination of these two elements which engendered the distinctive Malinowskian functionalisms in anthropology. The romantic hypostatization of culture was retained, but was justified, in quite a new way, by an empiricist epistemology. The sense of culture as an independent reality was detached from a worship of history: on the contrary, history was subjected to a severe empiricist critique. In primitive societies, where records are lacking, the historical speculations indulged in by the observer, on the basis of local beliefs and customs, was condemned as being, indeed, speculative and untestable. It was replaced by the most characteristically Malinowskian treatment of beliefs about the past as *charters* of current practices, as neat an example of the implementation of the Machian principle of replacing inferences to unobservables by functional services within the observable, as you could wish to find. The nationalist and populist practice of immersion in a culture, for the love of that culture, was turned into the main methodological tool of the new science, and endowed with a positivist rationale. The East European romantic moved from the Carpathians to the Trobriands, did much the same thing as before, but provided new reasons for so doing.

This served his scientific career: his holism and his positivistically based anti-historism (no speculative, baseless reconstructions of the past) enabled him to overturn Frazerian anthropology at both its central points – its magpie-like, context-less method of collecting data without bothering about the place they occupied in their cultures, and its assumption of an evolutionist explanatory schema. But it also suited his political predilection, his cultural nationalism and his political internationalism.

He was not the only Central European to react against the excessive use of history by nationalists: in a neighbouring Slav culture, T. G. Masaryk in effect defined his general position, which he called 'realism', as the avoidance of an exaggerated historicism in the pushing of national claims and formulation of policies. The difference between Masaryk and Malinowski was that the former went only part of the way in moderating, but not altogether abjuring, historicism, whereas Malinowski was uncompromising and total in replacing invocations of the past by invocations of present, synchronic function; and Masaryk did it all in the field in which the issue had arisen, in politics and social theory, whereas Malinowski so to speak sublimated it all into social anthropology. The suspicions about the current, political uses of the past, which must have arisen from his observation of the political practices which surrounded him, was displaced, and reappeared as a methodological principle in the dispassionate investigation of simpler societies . . .

There was, in a sense, no historic necessity for Malinowski to be the first one to link the cult of intensive, as it were immersive fieldwork with an empiricist justification. His predecessor and senior at the London School of Economics, Edward Wester-

marck, in many ways exemplified the same mixture as did Malinowski: as a Finnish Swede, he had more cause than Malinowski to detach himself from the local ethnic romanticism. (It is not entirely clear why Malinowski did so – there was nothing in his background which would push him in such a direction – but the fact is, he did.) Westermarck, like Malinowski, was attracted by British empiricism, and much given to the practice of fieldwork: but he continued to be magpie-like in method and evolutionist in theory, and the fusion of empiricist philosophical background and fieldwork practice did not, in his case, as it did in Malinowski, engender the new functionalist style.

It was thus that the characteristically British style of social anthropology was born: the blending of the field research practice born of East European populist nationalism, with the philosophical premises supplied by radical empiricism . . . This paternity has continued to be dominant till this day: the basic profile of the profession and its paradigm has not really changed. Levi-Straussian structuralism provided new reasons for continuing the old synchronicist idiom, based on questionable analogies with linguistics: what works for phonetics does not work for society. It also favoured a shift of attention, away from social structure to culture, a shift in any case encouraged by the end of colonialism and the erosion or inaccessibility of structures. The late intrusion, or return, of Marxism to anthropology, did not really mean that anthropologists found Marxism useful; rather it meant that Parisians who were Marxists anyway, decided to attend, for once, to some ethnographic facts. And finally, there came the interpretive or hermeneutic twist in anthropology.

This was linked, with a curious time lag, to decolonisation, and to the expiation of European colonial guilt. The argument was that the lucidity sought, and sometimes attained, by Malinowskian anthropologists, in constructing models of alien societies, was itself a tool or a form of domination, and that its practitioners were insufficiently worried about the manner in which they were imposing their own vision on their material. Clarity of style and thought were themselves declared suspect. Descartes had led to Kipling; Kipling, therefore not to Descartes. Clarity was henceforth to be abjured and replaced by an awareness of the fact that there is indeed an investigator, whose own culture imposes itself in the very concepts he uses, and that he must lay himself bare before he can dare present his findings. If his findings are clear, then he is probably a positivist-dominator. Atonement for the sins of domination is best displayed by laying bare one's soul, and the soul had better be a complex and tormented one, externalising itself in correspondingly tortured prose. The impoverished masses of the Third World may now find consolation in the thought that their erstwhile oppressors and exploiters are now suffering the agonies of obscurity of style.

This kind of hermeneutic turn in anthropology, especially in its later and extreme avatars, is simply idealism in a new idiom: the assumption, not always applied consistently, is that conceptual constraints, not physical or economic ones, are what really makes societies into what they are. This method is objectionable for various reasons, including, precisely, the fact that it prejudices the question of the relative importance of conceptual and coercive constraints, in favour of the former. It is claimed, for instance, that it is what the state *means*, rather than what it does, which apparently matters, and which is highlighted. In small print, we then also read that after all, it could not be what it is (and hence, presumably, mean what it means), if it were not also capable of coercing . . . Or again, practitioners of this style justify the tortuousness of their own

presentation by the fact that the world has become more complex, since the days of the first generation of Malinowskian functionalists. It has indeed: but to say this is to concede that an external social reality is after all available for exploration and characterisation – for you have just characterised it. So the other cannot be quite so excruciatingly inaccessible – which is *also* claimed . . . It can also be said against this movement that, ironically, it does not really advance the understanding of the role of ‘meaning’ in social life, by using it as an irreducible ultimate category, and a means of self-titivation rather than of analysis.

There is a further and perhaps the most important objection to this kind of vision. It pretends, in the name of expiation of past sins of domination and inter-cultural inequality, to maintain and establish that all forms of cognition are equal, that the explication of one in terms of another is inadmissible, and it encourages a style in which indulgence in the exquisite torment of inability to transcend the chasm which separates investigator from his object, replaces any attempt to say anything very coherent about the object. But this affectation of cognitive equality is indeed but an affectation. *The* central fact about our world is that, for better or for worse, a superior, more effective form of cognition does exist. It was, inevitably, born within the womb of one culture, for anything must begin somewhere; but it is perfectly obvious by now that it is not linked to any one society, culture or tradition, but accessible to all mankind, and, as it happens, it appears that it is industrially implemented most effectively at present within cultures within which it had *not* originated . . . But the simple fact is that a form of knowledge exists, known as science, which seems to possess a number of astonishing characteristics: it grows continually, it is open-ended, yet at the same time there is an extraordinary degree of consensus amongst its practitioners, a consensus *not* imposed by coercion; it transcends any one culture, and is liable to undermine the favoured beliefs of all of them; and it is being universally though perhaps not wholeheartedly and consistently adopted, for the simple reason that it leads to exceedingly powerful technology, such that those not possessed of it become helplessly weak, and subject to a humiliating ‘relative deprivation’.

Such is the central fact of our world. Those who, in the pursuit of an exaggerated and somewhat belated expiation, would deny it, consequently start out from a premise *so* far removed from the actual reality of our situation, that their thought can be little other than self-indulgent delusion. We cannot change facts, even if inter-cultural equality were incompatible with a given fact: Sartre, for instance, was wrong when he argued that it was legitimate to deny facts, so as to save a French working-class suburb from despair. Likewise, we are not entitled to deny blatant facts, even *if* it were the case that this is a precondition of saving Bongo-Bongo from despair or humiliation. But in fact, it is not anything of the kind. On the contrary, inventing an absurd philosophy in the interests of pleasing the natives of Bongo-Bongo is, in reality, an insulting, offensive act of condescension. We do not lie or commit self-deception on behalf of those whom we seriously respect.

Perhaps this self-indulgent subjectivism had deep social roots. Mankind has, in the matter of *belief*, passed through a number of stages. First there was a period when humanity had rituals and legends, but no theory, no theology. Then came a time where, for some cultures at least, the centre of gravity of religion shifted to theory, to *doctrine*. Finally then came a time when the unique doctrine separated itself from any claims to a transcendent source or authority, but came to refer exclusively to *this* world, and to be validated by procedures and forms of inquiry unambiguously *of this*

world. This in turn engendered a world of sustained cognitive and economic growth, one within which social arrangements came to be legitimated largely by the fruits of such growth, but no longer by any overall Vision of Things.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment who supposed that because Revelation offered one social vision, therefore Science would offer another one, only this time the *right* one, were mistaken. Revelation offers one vision and science offers, not another, but none. Some noted it, and called it the End of Ideology, but even they got it a bit wrong. They supposed that post-ideological man would be a person of sound pragmatic common sense. Perhaps indeed he is, in his professional and business dealings; but in his private life, he may be wildly self-indulgent and uncritical. He is used to being surrounded by gadgets with intuitively obvious controls, and he more or less expects a similarly user-friendly universe, and he may well be most receptive to the slogan that *Anything Goes*. The 'post-modernist' outburst of subjectivism in the humanities and social sciences may be a reflection of this rather wider mood, of the, as it were, Californisation of the West. If so, we may have to learn to live with it for a long time.

The newly created *European Association of Anthropologists*, is liable to become the forum on which, once again, the previously separated segments of Europe will interact. Last time round, in anthropology, if I read the situation correctly, East European love of ethnic culture and the desire to record and save it as an integral whole, blended with Western European empiricism as a method, *and* with the ideas borrowed from biology, to engender, in the first instance, the functionalist school, and then the whole tradition which followed on it. What will be the eastern and western elements this time round, assuming that a fertilisation will indeed occur?

It is impossible to predict the crystallisation of ideas before it happens: if one could predict it, it would already have happened. One can perhaps make some negative observations: East Europeans, after forty or seventy years of sustained dictatorship, will hardly be tempted to embrace a form of idealism which insists that coercion is essentially conceptual. They know only too well that, though it may manifest itself conceptually, the point at which it applies its lever to recalcitrant subjects is far more earthy and brutal. Nor are they likely to embrace eagerly the doctrine of the equality of all belief systems: they know that what brought them liberty was, precisely, the fact that the doctrine of social organisation, of social and of other knowledge, to which they had been forcibly subjected, turned out in the end to be manifestly, conspicuously inferior to its rival. So it is *not* the case that *anything goes*. Don't try to tell an East European that Marxism will do just as well as anything else, simply because anything goes.

For these various reasons, I would not expect, at least logically, the intellectual reunification of Europe to favour the present mood of indulgent hermeneutic-subjectivist excess. But logical expectations are not always fulfilled, and my prediction may well be falsified by events. We shall see.

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