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## MARGARET MEAD: SCIENCE OR SCIENCE FICTION?: REFLECTIONS OF A BRITISH ANTHROPOLOGIST

PETER M. WORSLEY

**T**HERE is little doubt that the American and British reading public gets its knowledge of anthropology almost exclusively from the works of Margaret Mead. Ruth Benedict runs a poor second, and Malinowski brings up a distant rearguard, with the rest nowhere. The professional (especially British) anthropologist, on the other hand, is liable to react to the mention of Margaret Mead's name with, at best, a smile, and probably with some more positive expression of distaste. Yet few of them have attempted to analyze her work, or to make it clear exactly what it is they object to. In view of her popularity this is an important task, to which this article can only be a small contribution.

Who is right—the specialist or the reading public? It is not merely academic caution that makes me reply “Neither.” If anything, I believe that the public is more right than the specialist. But what is it that people find so attractive in Margaret Mead's work?

Firstly, she writes with considerable vividness in a style which, though not to everyone's taste, enables her to bring a scene, a quarrel, a landscape, a whole society, before the reader's eyes. She also conveys a sense of excited participation in a research problem that many a detective-story writer might envy. “You and I,” she says, “are going to see if we can sort this problem out.” “And,” she tells the reader, “this problem is of enormous, immediate, urgent, theoretical and practical importance.” To solve it, too, the reader will have to leave stuffy Boston or Tunbridge Wells and fly with Margaret Mead to the romantic “South Seas.” The ration of romance is quite high: in an eleven-line thumbnail sketch of the Tchambuli people of New Guinea, for example, four are devoted to describing the “polished ebony” lake, where “purple lotus and great pink and white water lilies, white osprey and blue heron” abound.

Then there is the subject-matter. Mead deals with very important themes in a serious way. Above all, she deals with sex. But though she tackles serious questions, there is little doubt that she has played

upon the fact that many of her readers have a less than scientific interest in sex and in her work, aroused by titles and headings suggesting all sorts of salacious possibilities—"Fathers, Mothers and Budding Impulses" (*Male and Female*), "Experiences of the Average Girl" (*Coming of Age in Samoa*), or, in the work under review, the delightfully simple chapter-heading "Women, Sex and Sin." The readers attracted by these catchpenny devices must surely be as sorely disappointed as those who look for similar thrills in Malinowski's *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* or *The Sexual Life of Savages*. Nevertheless, these titles help to pull in the reading public, and the anthropologists may well lament that Malinowski and Mead have used up all the "best" titles.

But these common criticisms of Mead cover only a small part of the real reasons for her success. More serious readers are attracted not merely because she deals with sex, but because she relates her 'primitive' findings to civilized society. She always raises the analysis from the narrow confines of a study of the X tribe to a consideration of some universal problem, and suggests how the anthropological field-material sheds light on our own social problems.

And running through the bulk of her work is a warm liberal-humanist appeal which elicits a ready response from progressive and open-hearted readers. In the first place, she carries on the traditional anthropological attack on ethnocentrism by showing that "some aspect of human behavior could be organized differently . . . or . . . the extent to which cultures differ from one another" (*Male and Female*, p. 31.) These objects she achieves more successfully, in my opinion, than any other living anthropologist, no matter what one thinks of her methods, and to have done this is an important and positive contribution. To be specific, she has shown that adolescence is not necessarily a period of intense emotional disturbance (*Coming of Age in Samoa*); that childhood fantasies (about ogres, fairies, etc.) are not 'natural' to children, but are the product of adult expectations about childhood thinking (*Growing Up in New Guinea*); that the behavior socially expected of each sex, and the temperaments found, vary strikingly from one society to another (*Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*). All this is put over with optimism and confidence. She reassures, strengthens and encourages her readers: "this book is set firmly against pessi-

mism," she tells us (*New Lives for Old*, New York 1956, p. 5.) It has surely been an achievement of no mean importance to have played a major part in persuading a whole generation that the society we live in is not necessarily the only possible model, let alone the best, or that the apparently bizarre or irrational behavior of people in unfamiliar societies is perfectly rational and understandable, and represents just one more way of solving problems which are common to all human societies. And Mead's constantly reiterated plea for greater *freedom* in our view of the potentialities and gifts of each sex has been one of the major reasons why she has found a ready response from people who live in a rapidly-changing world where sex and family mores, too, are in the melting-pot, and where there has been a strong reaction against the mores of our parents and grandparents. Margaret Mead has especially attracted the interest of women, for she has stressed that women are particularly restricted and frustrated by narrow attitudes towards sex and by the practical discriminatory concomitants of those attitudes.

It is not surprising, therefore, that a friend of mine recently remarked that she found reading Mead's account of the Tchambuli in *Sex and Temperament* something of a liberating experience, since here Mead showed how the roles conventionally ascribed to men and women in our society are reversed. Tchambuli women are matter-of-fact and business-like, and play the decisive role in production, whereas the men are "aesthetic" and "temperamental," and play a subordinate economic role. Mead thus shows that the behavior of the sexes is culturally conditioned—another important blow to obscurantist ideas.

Looking at the list of Mead's virtues, we must admit that many an anthropologist's work could do with an injection of precisely these qualities. But unfortunately her virtues are also her vices, and the criticisms of her work by specialists are not based merely on jealousy at her success, or annoyance at the 'besmirching' of scientific purity by making anthropology accessible to the layman.

Anthropologists (especially in Britain) object on more solid grounds. They dislike the phoney sensationalism and lack of balance which mar Mead's style and approach. They consider that she exploits a quite unscientific interest in sex, and they believe that while the problems she researches into are extremely important,

they are often not quite the investigations into the motor forces of history that she makes them out to be. That Margaret Mead *can* write the sort of work the purist demands, she has shown in her study of *Kinship in the Admiralty Islands*. But she has chosen not to. The aggrieved specialist therefore condemns her writings as the work of the "rustling-of-the-wind-in-the-palm-trees-school"<sup>1</sup>, a critical point of view for which I have great sympathy. For the scientist, the palm-trees get between him and the social structure and culture of the society. It is impossible to satisfy oneself on a hundred-and-one important points about Mundugumor or Tchambuli society, because of the vagueness of the information, the plethora of irrelevant atmospherics, and the stamping of the material into Procrustean molds. At the worst, this becomes downright distortion. I am sure that many besides myself feel uneasy about the accuracy of Mead's picture in *Sex and Temperament* of Arapesh society, where both sexes are said to be gentle and maternal. As has often been pointed out, the 'peaceful' Arapesh looked a lot different in the paper on Arapesh warfare which Fortune published, and in which he *rejected* her account. Others have asked why the Arapesh—so gentle, kind and trusting in Mead's account—should be obsessed by fear of sorcery.<sup>2</sup>

There is thus a feeling of suspicion amongst anthropologists that the facts have been tailored or selected to fit a preconceived case. Again, in discussing initiation ceremonies among the Arapesh, the positive educational content of the ceremonies is stressed, together with the fact that the rituals represent a step forward in the youth's social progress—he is being educated into his new, more important social role. When describing Mundugumor initiation, however, Mead highlights the unpleasant and painful rituals which the initiates undergo in order to impress the experience on their minds. Plainly, if you select material in this way, you can make quite different pictures out of what, I suspect, is very much the same type of ritual in both societies. (And we may note that Arapesh initiates are whipped with stinging-nettles, are told that they will be swallowed by masked monsters who appear from the bush, etc.) But, of

<sup>1</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology* (Glemoe, Ill., 1951) p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> M. Fortes in *Man*, Vol. XXXVI, p. 173.

course, we have no check beyond such internal contradictions in the material, and the use of comparative knowledge, for most of these societies have never been studied by anyone else, and it is too late to try now. And one finds it hard to swallow the strange 'coincidence' of casually encountering three societies so conveniently illustrating Mead's *Sex and Temperament* theme.

Others find it hard to accept the reliability of the analysis of subtle interpersonal relations which Mead specializes in, since this is a type of research which demands the most intimate (and therefore lengthy) knowledge of one's informants, when one reads that Mead spent only three and one-half months among the Mundugumor, for example, and only 6 and 7 months respectively among the Manus and Arapesh (though Fortune also worked with these two latter peoples) and, moreover, had to work from pidgin English to a knowledge of the local tongues in that time. It is this sort of consideration that makes many rate her work as a kind of high-grade science fiction.

There has also been a marked antipathy towards American "cultural" anthropology by British anthropologists reared in the sociological tradition of Durkheimian positivism as transmitted by Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski. The protagonists of the "structuralist" school, no less than Marxists, regard Mead's work as an attempt to explain social phenomena in terms of a different order of events, i.e. in terms of the individual psyche. This is not to say that many have criticized her for her Freudian leanings. Indeed, where British anthropologists have any psychological theory at all, they have got it mainly from Freud. American anthropology, *per contra*, has droves of psychological enthusiasts, mainly Freudians. The enormous emphasis laid by these writers upon the early years of the child's life, to the virtual exclusion of his later experience, has provoked protests even from psychoanalytically-inclined writers such as Hsu, and earned them the title of "diaper-determinists." I am not equipped to discuss Mead's shortcomings from the psychological angle; here I concentrate on the sociological aspects of her work.

It is clear, however, that her Freudian interests have many effects on her work. Firstly, there is a constant tendency to interpret social events solely in terms of individual affect. Thus the Arapesh who bangs a slit-gong when he feels annoyed, or who hacks down his own valuable palm-tree, is not just "venting rage" on the environment.

He is doing much more. In a society with no specialized legal mechanisms, no courts, no judges, police, etc., one relies for support in legal disputes upon one's kin and upon public opinion. By creating a violent uproar, or by destroying valuables, you draw attention to your case; you indicate that there is something to be aggrieved about, that you are so confident of the rightness of your case that you welcome public inspection of it, and you indicate the extent of your righteous anger by showing that it is important enough to lead you to destroy valuables. So destroying a canoe or beating on a slit-gong are not merely expressions of personal fury; they are highly conventionalized modes of publicizing a case in stateless societies. They are thus *legal procedures* and not merely emotional outbursts. It is this sort of analysis that Mead's approach completely obscures.

Again, it is only a guess, but if we accept the accuracy of her picture of the aggressive, unsmiling Mundugumor, there would appear to be much more to this than merely the existence of a "given" traditional culture-pattern. The fact that the Mundugumor were "over-recruited," and had been involved in hostilities with Government in which men were hung and villages attacked by punitive expeditions, must surely have something to do with their behavior and with the broken-down state of their society.

Unfortunately, Mead's later writings contain more and more loose analysis and vague impressionism. Her association with Gregory Bateson marked the beginning of a closer utilization of psychoanalysis, as revealed in their Balinese and American studies.

She now became increasingly preoccupied with "national character," a field in which there were many parallel, often rather unpleasant, developments ("basic personality structure" studies, etc.) For although she has stressed that the individual's personality is a social (American: "cultural") product, she nearly always describes, in a functionalist manner, the ontogenetic process of the individual's initiation into the cultural norms of his society, how he learns the behavior society expects of him. Nowhere does she tackle the question of what forces are decisive in creating these social norms. They are taken as given, though in places she appears to suggest that they are rooted in the infantile experiences of the children of the society. Mead does not, that is, put forward any interpretative theory which

could account for change in the very structure of society. The structure is taken as given; we are shown how children "grow up," how they "come of age," how they pass through the life-stages, etc., but this *apparent* emphasis upon growth and development masks a fundamentally static, a-historical view of society.

Since Mead places no particular stress on any one institution or other "factor" as being decisive in shaping the social structure, she might well, under other circumstances, have fallen into the sort of cultural atomism that Sapir produced. But Mead was heavily influenced by her training under Boas, and more importantly, Ruth Benedict. Benedict's exaggerated holism (notably in *Patterns of Culture*), offspring of the unholy lineage of Nietzsche and Spengler, gave rise to a series of studies of the *Geist* of different societies, in which each society was declared to have a unique culture-configuration, the product of a particular "spirit" animating the whole. This theory was partly a product of the Great Depression, an era when Americans were led to question the very basis of their own society, the rightness of its official morality, the adequacy of its institutions; when they began to ask what made one society hold together and another disintegrate; and when, in order to find the answers, they started to compare their society with others. Benedict's approach was also an extremely exaggerated reaction against that kind of anthropology which saw societies as aggregates of "customs" ("shreds-and-patches" anthropology). Professor Fortes has pointed out that social theories which place no special weight on any one factor will tend towards such gestaltist, culture-pattern approaches. And in this sort of anthropology, "culture" tends to be reified. Cultures somehow "select" or "choose" social elements which they then combine in some unspecified manner. The spirit of the culture is therefore carefully investigated at the expense of more mundane pressures of, say, an economic or political order. Such research also avoids potentially dangerous ground.

With the discrediting of racist theories based on biology, in which Benedict herself played a big part, there now arose the danger of new holistic theories based on the uniqueness of culture-patterns, a trend dubbed "psycho-racism" by Soviet ethnographers.

Lest this be regarded as a wild imputation of political implications to an essentially scientific theory, it should be pointed out that



the relativism that anthropology used so devastatingly against prejudice, *a priori* assumptions, blind dogma, etc., had, and has, its own considerable limitations and negative features.

Indeed Mead herself is perfectly clear and candid about this. She points out that many anthropologists have fallen for the arguments of the ethical relativist ("their way of life is as good as ours"; "most people permit polygyny—therefore we must be wrong"). These ideas have been used to attack the notion of progress—"we can't say that our society is more advanced, or better, or happier than another; only that it is different from others. So don't interfere with them. Leave them with their hookworm and malaria, and their beautiful dancemasks. Who are we, with our atom bombs, to say they will be happier?" These insidious arguments often shade over into frank conservatism, a danger again fully recognized by Mead:

In concentrating upon the risks and dangers of purposefully induced change, we gave very scant attention to the other side of the coin, to what "western" or "higher" or "more developed" peoples not only did not force on other peoples but actually denied them (*New Lives for Old*, p. 44<sup>1</sup>).

It is not unfair to remark, I think, that she herself did much to strengthen such interpretations, possibly unwittingly. In 1943, for example, in an article which showed a considerable underestimation of the changes at work in South Pacific island communities, she was advocating the preservation of certain small island communities as anthropological laboratories. Her associations with the Cold Warfare research by Gorer into the swaddling of Mr. Molotov brought out the worst in Mead, but it does not seem to have left any serious after-effects.

When one comes to examine the practical implications of her work they are very hard to disentangle, rather slight, and extraordinarily vague, despite her strident insistence on the pressing need to find answers to the problems which she tells us are all-important. Her answers can hardly be anything other than vague, for the problems she deals with can ultimately only be tackled and the evils overcome by radical policies which themselves imply transformation of the economic, political and legal structure of society. To

Margaret Mead, however, this is an intolerable notion. The revolutionary, to her, is a "deviant" or a misfit in society. He has failed to "integrate" himself with society; he is prone to "fanaticism" and "sudden conversion." But Mead is not a blind conservative; she is a liberal reformer:

An expressed continuing *mild dissatisfaction* with one's culture or the functioning of a religious or political movement is essential if there is to be *continuous and orderly* adjustment and innovation in a changing society (*New Lives for Old*, p. 526-7, my italics.)

This sentence sums up her general position and the trend of her life's work so neatly that further comment would be superfluous.

The strengths and weaknesses of Mead's work are strikingly clear in this new work,<sup>3</sup> in which she checks her downwards progress with a return to something like her prewar work. The style has changed little. I find sentences like this unbearable:

Those who rear their children on the nostalgic memories of long-dead lilacs in the dooryard give their children's imagination thinner fare than tiny plastic jet-plane toys which crunch on the new scratch-proof floors with a sound out of which no one has yet written any music (p. 4).

The old saleswomanship is there. The story she unfolds is the story of her return to the Admiralty Islands of New Guinea after twenty-five years, of the impact of World War II on the Manus people, and of the postwar political and social changes there. This story is, she claims, unique. The plain fact is that a very similar situation obtained in the British Solomon Islands and elsewhere, in Melanesia, both during and after the war. Mead's research experience, however, was certainly unique. It is a pity she has made such slight use of her wonderful opportunity.

In this book we are spared the psychological gobbledygook which she holds in reserve, her work with "TAT's, Mosaics, Bender-Gestalts, Stewart Ring Puzzles, Gesell Infant Development Tests, Caligor Eight-card Redrawing Test, Minnesota Paper Form Board . . ." etc., etc. Here she is still struggling with some of the most vital

<sup>3</sup> *New Lives for Old; Cultural Transformation, Manus, 1928-1953*, by Margaret Mead, New York: William Morrow and Co., 1956. \$6.75. p. xxi, 548.

tasks facing the world. There is a flamboyant account of her work in the last few decades, showing how she has always been at the hub of world history, fulfilling her "responsibility to the democratic ethic." The reader is enlisted once more as an ally, and urged to have confidence, especially in the American Dream. The "priceless political heritage of political innovation and flexibility" gives American culture a stamp which Americans should be proud to publicize from the house-tops, instead of deploring and apologizing for their Way of Life to the outside world. But they should not interpret this in any radical sense.

The story of *New Lives for Old* is certainly important. We are given a sketch of Manus as she knew it in 1928. She describes again how the different communities of sea-farers and land-dwellers spread over the islands were linked by a complex system of trade. Reo Fortune's analysis of *Manus Religion* is used to good effect, and there is a readable, if superficial, general account of New Guinea-wide society in 1928.

The heart of the book is the story of the impact on the lives of the 13,000-14,000 Admiralty Islanders of a War in which the Japanese drove out the Australians, the Americans drove out the Japanese, and then—far more important—something like a million United States troops passed through the Manus base. The impact on Manus life was shattering. The Manus were deeply impressed by the generosity of the United States troops, and by their abundant supplies, and they found the troops democratic and humane as compared with the Whites of prewar New Guinea. The people consequently developed new ambitions and new wants. Eventually, under the leadership of a man named Paliau, they formed a political movement which soon embraced 5,000 people and started upon a democratic transformation of society. The previously separate and hostile communities now lived amicably together, in land-villages modelled on United States Army camps. The old competitive economy was abandoned in favor of cooperation; relations between the sexes were liberalized; the indigenous religion was abandoned.

These changes did not meet with the approval of Government or settlers. The councils which the people set up were said to be "premature"; their discipline and laws were "regimentation"; Paliau was a "dictator"; he was lining his pocket with the people's

money; the people had ungratefully revolted against the Mission and were following false prophets, and so on. Paliau therefore found himself in jail more than once (on one occasion charged with adultery—"the principal legal recourse against unpopular local leaders, rather like income-tax evasions in the United States" (p. 192)). So great were the repercussions that the matter finally attracted the attention of the United Nations Trusteeship Council. Finally, Government contrived the "Machiavellian" (Mead's term) scheme of splitting the Paliau-controlled area and giving him official control over a portion of the area, in a way which weakened his influence.

Interesting as Mead's account is, it is very sketchy, impressionistic, and inadequate. It may well be that she is leaving fuller analysis of the Paliau movement to her colleague, Theodore Schwartz, but there is a great deal that needs adding. Even bald official reports, leaving aside the abundant comparative material on related movements, indicate how much has been skated over, and how much irrelevancy has been included. Mead, for example, is strongly opposed, with considerable justification, to the mystical, apocalyptic cult-movement called "The Noise," which spread through part of the islands concurrently with Paliau's movement. Yet when one reaches p. 525 of this inordinately diffuse book, one is told that it was the revolutionary drive of the partisans of "The Noise" which "made it possible for the whole group to accept a new pattern." Mead approves of Paliau's movement as a "steady social experiment," but looks on "The Noise" as a mystical attempt to find an easy way out. But it is clear that part of her dislike for "The Noise," is that, though supernaturalist, it was also an extremely radical kind of supernaturalism. History cannot be so simply dealt with.

The sketch of the social background of such movements also has many serious gaps. One of the central beliefs in these apocalyptic cults is that the Europeans possess a "secret" which enables them to acquire "cargo" (European goods) without having to work for them. Mead gives one reason why this belief arose: the arrival of ships, the content of their cargoes, and the contents of particular crates, were unpredictable mysteries, capriciously ordained, in native eyes. But there is so much more to it than this! On the same simple level, there is the fact that Europeans received goods apparently without working in return for small pieces of paper, while natives worked

hard and long for small wages. The Whites therefore obviously possessed some special mystical powers, probably concerned with paper and writing. More fundamental than this is the great hunger of the islanders for material goods. There is the unpredictability of the *whole European order*, with its irrational booms and slumps, where extra effort may bring declining returns, and where Governments—German, Australian, Japanese, American military, Australian—come and go. And there is the important background of indigenous religious thought, which Mead herself notes but does not develop, especially its preoccupation with material rewards (see p. 85). Again, her account of the mission impact says nothing of the contradiction between Christian teaching and the actual lives led by Europeans in New Guinea, nor of how this moral confusion was enhanced by the presence of numerous missions in New Guinea bitterly struggling against each other in the name of the same God of Love and Brotherhood. These examples must suffice to show that Mead's account is a very inadequate attempt at the analysis of a movement of this kind.

Her account of the problems encountered and mastered by the islanders in building their New Way of Life after the War is full of interest, despite its ramblings—the difficulty of creating *a novo* political, legal, and other institutions, of reconstituting the relations between the sexes, of such new difficulties as the growth of what the French call 'parasitage familiale.' The material on the substitution of the indigenous religion of localized, "private morality" by a new universalistic creed and code of behavior based on Christianity is particularly stimulating. But one looks in vain for any general analytical theory.

The author raises important questions: Why was the European prewar belief that "nativistic" cults would disappear, so that slow change ("the slower the better") could go on, proved wrong? "What was there in the Manus people themselves that we had left out of our accounting?" But she does not answer these questions. Fifty pages further on, we are told that "there is no reason to believe that without a change in the external world . . . the Manus character . . . would ever have produced any fundamental change in their culture" (p. 159). There are several conclusions to be drawn from this. Firstly, Margaret Mead has *not* shown that change "in the Manus themselves" had anything to do with the upheaval in Manus society,

as she earlier implied. Secondly, she has skilfully given the illusion of raising and answering important questions, when she has only raised pseudo-questions, and not even answered them. Thirdly, the source of change in Manus was clearly external to the society. Fourthly, beyond showing how people adjust to radically changed circumstances, Manus has few lessons for other parts of the world, firstly because the impetus to change was an external one, and secondly, because it is unlikely that many communities are going to experience invasion on the scale of Manus—a ratio of one million invaders to 14,000 inhabitants. The question of fundamental change maturing internally is not dealt with.

The book ends with a melodramatic Hollywooden episode. The people of New Peri village, where Mead worked, had set up their own unofficial Council ahead of Government, and were becoming dispirited and frustrated at the failure of Government to make the Council official, and thus give it some practical assistance and effective powers. They are finally saved from collapsing into despair by the dramatic message rushed through just before Mead leaves the village, and which forms a climax to her descriptive section—"The council has gone through."

She concludes by some variations on the old themes, some of them acceptable enough. "Each culture has the right to survive"; we must not deny progress to the colonial countries. Her special conclusion from her Manus experience is that social change should be a change from one "whole pattern" of life to another, to avoid maladjustment. We have seen that she eschews any radical solution. What these "whole-pattern" changes mean, therefore, we are left to guess. Instead, there is another vague general appeal for freedom of action, thought and belief.

To sum up, this book is a very typical product of its author. It is written in a vigorous, impressionistic style that attracts many readers, but repels others, including the reviewer. The overt theory in it seems to me on the whole either weak or inadequate or bad, and there is absent in it any real integrative approach which could connect up a mass of impressions and fragments of frequently penetrating analysis. But pervading the whole, whatever her overt theories, is a warm liberal reformist enthusiasm that will remain with the reader long after he has forgotten the specific questions the author raises and the answers she gives.

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