An Apparent Paradox in Mental Evolution

One aspect of the current interest in feminist studies is the allegation that history has tended to ignore the contributions of women, irrespective of their worth, even when they did manage to penetrate the male-dominated professions. If one takes this premise seriously, then there is a case for reviewing the early anthropological journals to see whether there were any examples of 'sexism' at work. The term 'sexism' was deliberately coined to suggest a similar discrimination to that of 'racism'. It is interesting to find, therefore, that both sexism and racism were instrumental in the formation of the Anthropological Society.

According to J.W. Burrow, 'The immediate cause of the secession' of Sir James Hunt and a number of other leading members from the Ethnological Society who then founded the Anthropological Society in 1863, was 'the decision of the ethnologists to follow the example of the Royal Geographical Society and admit ladies to its meetings'. (1966:121.) Even if this was little more than a pretext, it served as a focus for controversy between the two societies, and the anthropologists believed that science and history were on their side; 'Sooner or later it will be learnt that the glory of scientific men will consist in the patient record of observed facts rather than in the fatal facility of being able to attract a crowd of both sexes to listen to equivocal science and still more equivocal pleasantries' (ibid: 125n5).

Burrow also put the record straight with regard to racism. J.L. Myres' paper 'The Influence of Anthropology on the course of Political Science' (1909) put forward the reason for the foundation of the Anthropological Society as a revolt of those who upheld the unity of mankind against the pro-slavery propaganda of the polygenist Ethnological Society. 'This is quite untrue. James Hunt, the president and most active member of the new society, was an ardent racialist, and so favourable to slavery as to be suspected of some sinister American or West Indian interest' (op.cit: 121). Moreover, the Ethnological Society was an offshoot of the Aborigines Protection Society, and its president, Crawfurd, condemned slavery.

In view of this beginning, it must have been with some trepidation that women ventured to give papers to meetings of the Anthropological Society, even more so, if the paper was intended to criticise the accepted view of the mental inferiority of 'savages'.

Anthropologists and psychologists conceived of mental evolution and the growth of intelligence as being closely allied to the evident evolution of altruism and the development of ethical behaviour. Thus, primitives, children, and women were envisaged as illustrating a continuum from instinctive to intelligent, rational behaviour. Since the maternal instinct was thought to account for any altruistic sentiments in women, there was some confusion as to where they should be placed on this scale. There were those who wished to credit the development of all humane behaviour to the initial example of maternal care; but the majority classed the maternal instict as yet another example of instinctive action, and placed women as closer to animals because of this. Further confusion arose where there appeared to be a malfunctioning of the so called 'maternal instict' in ethnographic examples of the practice of infanticide, and mothers eating their own children (JAI 1872:78).

The superstitious practices recounted in the early ethnographies were accepted as complete justification for the 'scientific' view of their mental inferiority. Missionaries and travellers who had spent long periods exposed to these customs were more inclined to look for parallels in civilised societies, and their accounts stimulated the vogue for research into spiritualist practices.

Many of the more scientifically oriented members of the Anthropological Society criticised what they considered to be a useless digression of 'psychology' into the spiritual beliefs and practices of the savage. Mr. Dendy, after hearing the Rev. H. Calloway's paper on 'Divination etc. among the Natives of Natal' (JAI 1872:185) stated that he found it a most boring paper, that it was neither true nor new, and that such clairvoyance should be ridiculed as a pseudo-philosophy. Some years later, on the occasion of Herbert Spencer's paper 'The Comparative Psychology of Man' (JAI 1876: 301-315) Mr. Hyde Clark praised this approach to the study of psychology, which he felt had been held back by people wanting to talk about spiritualism and mesmerism (ibid: 316). Still later Ferrier's paper 'The Functional Topography of the Brain (JAI 1888:26-28) produced a similar response from Dr. Lauder Brunton, Sir James Chrichton Browne, and especially Mr. Hyde Clark, who had been elected chairman of the section for Comparative Psychology some years previously and had been unable to act, as the members had taken to spiritualist practices (ibid:31).

Tylor continually made detailed investigations into the prevalent spiritualistic practices in Britain and America as a part of his major interest in 'animism'. But for early anthropologists with a strong religious background, and experience abroad, like the Rev. Calloway, the interest in dreams, sympathy, and what he called 'presentiment' or premonitions, the phenomena were considered worthy of study for the light they threw on the Christian religion. Self-mesmerism for the purpose of clairvoyance, and the different methods of divination, especially through contacts with spirits affected by drugs and fasting were explained in his paper: 'As it is necessary in order that one mind should act on another that the two minds should be in a certain relation to each other, so a mind can only be influenced by good or evil spirits when it is in a state of sympathetic relation with them' (JAI 1872:180). He found that these practices interfered with his evangelism. His ideas prompted Mr. Jackson to hope that, 'Soon the dreams, divinations and ghosts of those nearer home as well as Kaffirs, will be considered subject for enquiry. Psychology of the savage does not differ from that of civilised man nearly so much as one might have supposed (ibid:185).

However, this was not the generally accepted view. The problem of the relationship between instinct and intelligence, irrational and rational behaviour remained until well into the next century. Yet there was one paper in these early journals which did attempt to come to terms with the issues. It was read by Galton in 1891, and written with fastidious scholarship by Lady Welby. This paper, 'An Apparent Paradox in Mental Evolution' (JAI 1891:304-325) attempted to put the irrational beliefs of savages into a new perspective. She questioned the established view that the savage was closer to nature, and more governed by his instincts than rational man, and most important, she challenged the understanding and the methods of investigating savage beliefs and ceremonies, offering an alternative which none of the members of the British Association, or the Anthropological Society, seem to have understood. The view she put forward challenged the evolutionary method of understanding primitive beliefs, and questioned their function as useful

adaptations. She wrote of their beliefs as exact parallels to those of modern men of science, who were also believers, and 'the authoress could not with propriety assume, off hand, that such men's religious belief was absurd' (ibid:326). The originality of her approach lay in her synthesis of ideas concerning language, symbols, and metaphor, 'emotional experience', and her decision to look at primitive cosmologies in their own right.

Lady Welby's contribution was almost obscured by her humble and tentative style and the exhaustive documentation of the current authorities. Their theories presented her with a paradox. According to evolutionary doctrines, the development and purpose of instincts was to enable animals and man, through these drives, to react correctly to environmental stimuli. But in the case of the animal 'man', who uses his brains to supplement his instincts, he gets the wrong answers to his questions, which result in such phenomena as animism and wasted efforts to placate the spirits and the dead. She drew attention to Spencer's comparison of the mind of the savage to that of a child who invested the natural world with spirits and animates objects for drama. (This idea of the 'natural' anthropomorphism of children had great tenacity despite the much later efforts of those such as Margaret Mead, who were motivated to disprove the false psychologism (JAI 1932:173-189)). Lady Welby did not find the analogy between children and primitives satisfactory, since education enabled children to discard the products of their imagination, whereas the savage stereotyped his fantasies, and they became like 'other habitual tendencies organised and perpetuated' (op.cit:306).

In order to understand how the over-developed imagination worked, she made use of the medical books explaining the location and function of the different powers of the mind: M. Foster's Central Nervous System; Maudsley's Cerebral Cortex and its work; Spencer's Principles of Psychology; William James' Principles of Psychology; Chrichton-Browne's Hygienic Uses of Imagination; and she was especially impressed with Bastian's use of symbolism in Brain, Organ of the Mind. If it was the imagination of primitives which led to their erroneous beliefs, Lady Welby thought it necessary to find a model of the way it worked. Since the senses linked the individual brain to the environmental stimuli through the nerves and the ganglion, and returned along other lines to the appropriate muscles, she found this process a convenient analogy to explain the act of imagination. But a touch of 'emotional experience' generally appeared to go to some emotional centre apparently at random, and thus set the wrong mental muscles in motion.

According to Mercier, 'conduct is the adjustment of the organism to its environment' (ibid:318). However, she could find nothing in his books, The Nervous System and the Mind, and Sanity and Insanity, to account for the highly developed fantasy of the savage which prevented him from adapting and learning from the environment like the ordinary rational man. 'When he (the lunatic) attempts to think out an elaborate course of conduct he falls into a state of confusion... he fails.... to estimate the comparative value of circumstances' (ibid:318). Lady Welby thought that the analogy between the mind of a lunatic and a savage was as misleading as that between the child and the savage. The confusion between rational understanding and imagination and emotion remained. She thought that savages would have died out if they did not possess logical powers which would enable them to adapt to their environment, and this was not the case. She based her understanding of primitive practices on Tylor's Primitive Culture (Vol.I), Frazer's Golden Bough (Vol.I), Max Müller's Physical Religion, and Dorman's Origin of Primitive Superstitions. She concluded that man also possessed, unfortunately, a 'middle centre' for emotion and imagination, which would explain wild beliefs and practices contrary to logical reasoning.

Man was accustomed to the discrepancy between reality and his sensations, and made allowances for these. Lady Welby quoted William James: 'From the day of our birth we have sought every hour of our lives to correct the apparent form of things, and translate it into the real form by keeping note of the way they are placed or held.' However, 'In no other class of sensation (than visual) does this incessant correction occur' (Principles of Psychology, Vol.11: 259-60).

Lady Welby noted, 'The average man is a slave to "habit" which has roots in physiological process' (op. cit:327). This was the vital point in her argument. The difference between the emotional and imaginative thinking of the savage, on the one hand, and the logical thinking of the civilised man, on the other, implied that there was a change in the way the mind developed; otherwise, she thought it would be necessary to investigate the primitive cosmology underlying those views and judge its relationship to reality as they understood it. She postulated two hypotheses:

(i) 'Either we are to suppose an absolute break and reversal in the evolution of mind; a stage of gratuitous incoherence in which the developing imagination has let go all the organised reactive power which up to that stage had made its owner what he was, and proceeds to create a burlesque of the universe....', or she thought, one should at least ask whether -

(ii) 'we have, if not to assume that there be in primitive cosmology and natural history, an underlying element of true "mental shadow" of outward fact; an unbroken continuity of response in consciousness answering to the unbroken series of structure, function and organic reactions; a mine of valid suggestion, carried on within us and prompting more and more definite expression' (ibid:321). If there was an inherited 'responsive control' she thought this faculty should not have been lost: 'We have less instinctive power now....after.....weakening our ties with outer nature' (ibid:322). Lady Welby thought we might gain a better understanding of emotion, imagination and instinct by understanding what prompted the beliefs and ceremonies of savages who might not have lost this instinctive power.

Thus, for Lady Welby, the study of savage ceremonies and beliefs was not as the missionaries sometimes held, to throw light on Christian faith, nor to understand good, evil, prophecy, spiritualism and dreams, but in order better to understand the human mind itself, and how it works. For her the 'grotesque parodies' and 'ludicrous ceremonies' were 'failures of "translation"; failures to express worthily things which lie deep down at the centres of human experience, were true then and are true now, form part of natural order, and may soon for the first time be able to find scientific expression. If so, what is first needed, here as elsewhere, is an accession of power rightly to interpret "myth, ritual, religion", and mysticism in general. And this, not according to any dogmatic ghost-theory, dream-theory, sun-myth theories, or any other preconceived assumption....and in relation to its own merits....and the new school of psychology' (ibid:322-3).

Her notion of the 'new psychology' included not only the work of James, Spencer, Bastian and Shand, but also the study of language and symbols, and especially the use of metaphor, both by civilized and primitive man. She quoted from the Prefatory note to Part III of the Oxford New English Dictionary (known to the scholars of the period as Murray's), to explain the importance of the continual innovation of creative language as a psychological process:

'The creative period of language, the epoch of "roots" has never come to an end. The "Origin of Language" is not to be sought in a far off Indo-European antiquity, or in a still earlier pre-Aryan yore-time, it is the perennial process around us' (ibid:n.323). She thought that the clue to understanding reality lay in our use of language and metaphor especially: 'Cultured man connects "dreams" as he does "reflection" with an "inner" which he has acquired metaphysically - in an advanced mental stage. But to early man if not "outer" reality the dream would only be "inner" in the mucous membrane or the digestive cavity sense. And this sense of "outer" and "inner" may well be launched with us into the world of mind at its earliest stage' (ibid:314).

Lady Welby realised that metaphor was open to abuse as a method of understanding, but she thought greater attention should be paid to our own and the savage's use of symbols, as the choice of these symbols was of fundamental importance.

'Of course the tendency to right reasoning is quite different from a tendency to right organic response to a stimulus ... but the real question seems here to be where does the literal use of the phrase end and the metaphorical begin ... As to "breath" taken to represent and express the "dead" or the "double" it seems, on the usual assumptions, absurd. But question these, and of course there may be good reason for its symbolic selection, as there may be important realities which it symbolises better than anything else within reach could do... Are we quite sure that our tacit assumptions are invulnerable? Have we begun far enough up in the stream of experience "or penetrated far enough into the secret springs of mind" to justify them?' (ibid:328-9).

Her interest in studying savage myths and practices however 'grotesque' they might be as 'translations' and 'expressions' of a symbolic nature with a 'logical consistency' of their own, can be seen in this context as both proto-Freudian, and a forerunner of modern approaches to their study. However, it is evident from the discussion which followed her paper, and her reply to this in writing, that her paper was misunderstood (ibid:323-329). Pollock did not understand her use of the word 'translation'. She tried to reformulate her explanation that savages did not theorise in the 'modern way' but strove hard to use the function of expression to convey primordial impulses 'exploding' into fundamental organic energies. Thus the 'generic resemblance of belief' became part of the point proposed - 'and intimates links with the starting points of life' (ibid:328). She saw myth, religion, and rituals as a form of 'expression' used by savages 'conveying to each other certain primordial impulses within them as strongly as the nerve or blood currents, and as insistent in demanding outlet or prompting "explosion" as the most fundamental of organic energies' (ibid:328).

The points raised in the discussion were along familiar evolutionist lines. Pollock thought that archaic man reasoned incorrectly because he did not have the superior facts 'as we do'. Lewis commented that we did not know enough about the imagination of animals to know if there was a 'break' in evolution. Galton thought that superstition and illusion had proved useful in creating bellicose 'fanaticism', and Pollock thought savages' delusions would prove fatal when there was effective competition, and as the theory of the survival of the fittest was put to the test. Galton politely noted the novelty of her ideas to psychology and sociology, and that there appeared to be a break in evolution between instinct and reasoning, exemplified in the perverse imagination of savage minds. Mrs. Stopes, who was hearing the paper for the second time,

tried to be constructive. She suggested that the questions put forward by Lady Welby should be presented one at a time. Was there a break in mental evolution, and if not, was the evolution of an individual like the evolution of a race? The fact that she took this attitude suggests that she had a preconceived picture of the mental evolution of a child, and was specifically referring to Lady Welby's remarks about the education of civilised children, and the fact that savages stereotyped their fancies which became like 'other habitual tendencies organised and perpetuated'.

This attitude to primitive cosmologies can surely be seen as an early formulation of Lévy-Bruhl's idea of collective representations. One need not go further in pressing the point that she wished to look at the 'consistencies' in primitive beliefs and practices, which were evidently irrational and illogical to the scientific mind. The symbolic 'translation of things which lie deep at the centres of human experience', and 'the recent developments of the study of language, its growth and development on the figurative and psychological' (ibid:323) were just two of her contributions to the new approach that she urged. Since the development of anthropological theory allows for the retrospective adoption of founding fathers, perhaps one could nominate Lady Welby as a founding mother, and go on to try to find reasons why she thought as she did, and why she was misunderstood.

This allows me to attempt to put forward a line of argument which derives from a feminist approach. Firstly, it is interesting to see whether there were many other women represented in the first two decades of the JAI, and whether their interests were in any way similar. Miss A.W. Buckland presented two papers on drugs, surgery, and the superstitions of savages (JAI 1879:239-253; 1881:7-20), and Mrs. Sophia Bryant gave an account of intelligence tests which she had devised, which are typical of those in use today (JAI 1886:3-50). This common interest in the intelligence of children and primitives, and their practices, could be fortuitous. But if the early work on 'Ethnic Psychology' by Dunn (JAI 1875:255-265) and 'The Comparative Psychology of Man' by Spencer (JAI 1876:301-315) are admitted to provide the most general view accepted at that time by the Anthropological Society, then the spectrum of mental evolution ranged from lunatics, primitives, children, women to rational man. The women discussed the three other inferior groups, but did not mention their own vested interest in verifying or discrediting these views. Spencer's section on the relative mental nature of the sexes went into minute detail about the biological and social reasons for the mental differences, which he took for granted. The views on illogicality, emotionalism, lack of mental plasticity, incuriosity, laziness, lack of coherent or abstract thought, and so on, were applied to women and primitives alike. W.L. Distant's 'On the Mental Differences between the Sexes' (JAI 1875:78-85) reasoned that civilised women's brains were comparatively smaller than their menfolk as they had become playthings and ornaments. He compared this with the reduced brain of the domestic rabbit.

If they were to fight their own case the women had to put themselves forward as ethnographic examples, which was neither modest nor good tactics. In trying to direct interest and research towards a reassessment of the mentality of children and primitives in contradistinction to lunatics, they were moving in the right direction. They had to 'ape' the methods of their superiors in presenting a scholarly, logical and erudite treatment, and in the case of Lady Welby, it almost camouflaged her novel ideas. There are several interrelated factors which may have something to do with why and how she developed these ideas,

apart from the overt reasoning of her argument.

Firstly, she was a member of a group characterised as illogical and emotional, who were not expected to be familiar with the learned conventions of scientific and rational debate. It is perhaps legitimate to speculate that once she had mastered the latter, she would not necessarily feel that her previous life had been irrational and emotional, nor her psychology governed by bodily afflictions. The language of the educated male may or may not have provided her with a good lexicon for translating the apparently random, intuitive and vague statements of her own sex, and analysing them to make logical sense. Presumably she had to think of her previous understanding and interpretation of women's behaviour, or infants, or children's, as inferior. This understanding may have been tacit, instinctual and intuitive, and other such words that we use to describe 'things which lie deep at the centres of human experience, not yet scientifically understood, were true then and are true now, form part of natural order, and may soon for the first time be able to find scientific expression'.

Secondly, it might just be possible that the education received by the erudite men of the Anthropological Society had begun early enough to equip them with permanent blinkers that would prevent them from straying from the rational, logical, scientific way. Such a view of life was sufficiently distorted to prevent George Eliot's Mr Casaubon from ever glimpsing it at all. The educated women, on the other hand, moved in circles where they did not always converse with those of similar education, and could not dismiss their illogicality and irrationality on grounds of class, as men could. A betrayal of this code was dramatic, as in the example of Jane Austen's Emma who used the weapon of logicality to ridicule Miss Bates. In this case she was contravening the accepted code of mutual sympathy which permitted the real meaning of the conversation to be extracted from the random sentences.

Thus, as a member of an inferior human group, with the experience of understanding and conveying significant communications which were not usually amenable to scientific analysis, Lady Welby was, perhaps, herself, aware of the problems of trying to 'translate' and also to justify an unrespected cognitive code. It was to be expected that the trained minds of the Anthropological Society would be more resistant to accepting such a line of argument, at least in a pre-Freudian era. It is also, perhaps, both significant and arguable that a large number of women anthropologists have shown a definite preference for psychological studies and cognitive anthropology.

Juliet Blair.

REFERENCES

Articles in the JRAI (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute) or its predecessor the JAI (Journal of the Anthropological Institute). Page numbers are cited in the text. Works cited by Lady Welby are not included here.

Bryant, Mrs. S. 1886 'Experiments in Testing the Character of Schoolchildren' JAI

Buckland, Miss A.W. 1882 'Surgery and Superstition in Neolithic Times' JAI

1879 'Ethnological Hints afforded by the Stimulants in Use among Savages and among the Ancients' JAI

Burrow, J.W. 1966 Evolution and Society, Cambridge.

Calloway, Rev. H. 1872 'Divination and Analogous Phenomena among the Natives of Natal' JAI

Crawley, A.E. 1895 'Sexual Taboo; a Study in the Relationship of the Sexes' JAI

Dunn, R. 1875 'Some Remarks on Ethnic Psychology' JAI

Ferrier. 1888 'The Functional Topography of the Brain' JAI

Howitt, A.W. 1887 'Australian Medicine Men; or Doctors and Wizards of Some Australian Tribes' JAI

Mead, Dr. M. 1932 'An Investigation of the Thought of Primitive Children with Special Reference to Animism' JRAI

Myres, J.L. 1909 'The Influence of Anthropology on the Course of Political Science' California Publications in History, Vol.4.

Spencer, H. 1876 'The Comparative Psychology of Man' JAI

Tregear, E. 1896 'Sexual Inferiority' JAI

Welby, Lady 1891 'An Apparent Paradox in Mental Evolution' JAI