THE POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHICAL GENEALOGY
OF EVANS-PRITCHARD'S *THE NUER*

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IN an earlier article (Free 1990), I noted how contemporary views of anthropology as writing—exemplified in Clifford and Marcus's *Writing Culture* (1986) and Geertz's *Works and Lives* (1988)—have tended to ignore the relation between text(s) and world(s). When they do refer to any world it is a unitary, monolithic one: for example, Geertz deals in *Works and Lives* with Evans-Pritchard's work as the outcome of the world of the Oxbridge common room, while Rosaldo in his essay in *Writing Culture* deals with Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* as a product solely of colonial domination. Both gloss over the political dimension of Evans-Pritchard's work—Geertz, by denying any politics, and Rosaldo, by stereotyping Evans-Pritchard's political position as that of a colonial dominator. Both thus ignore the political divisions within the colonial world and Evans-Pritchard's position within it. Furthermore, although many of the essays in *Writing Culture*

do make substantial reference to philosophical writing, they avoid any mention of the specific philosophical genealogies of any particular works. In dealing with *The Nuer*, the essays of both Marie Louise Pratt and Renato Rosaldo avoid any reference to philosophy, restricting themselves to the literary aspects of written texts. Similarly, in *Works and Lives*, Geertz (1988: 8) sees anthropology as simply situated within or between a dichotomy of 'literary' and 'scientific' discourses. The importance of specifically philosophical aspects of and background to anthropological texts is ignored. It is as if this philosophical background and philosophical writing in general have been moved from a form of writing into oblivion, as an irrelevant and minor subtype of literature.

Wendy James has pointed out (1973: 49) that Evans-Pritchard's *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* was 'a book of unusually committed characters...in its treatment of an anti-colonialist national movement and its clearly anti-Fascist sympathies'. Evans-Pritchard's political position was far from being that of an apologist for colonialism, or for that matter that of a typical representative of Oxbridge England. Here I shall attempt to uncover the highly interrelated philosophical genealogies and political positions inherent in Evans-Pritchard's best known text, *The Nuer*. In so doing I shall attempt to point to the flaws and omissions that are necessarily aspects of any purely literary approach.

1. *The Explicit Absence of Philosophy*

Perhaps the fundamental complication in dealing with the philosophical background of *The Nuer* is Evans-Pritchard's attitude towards the citation of other texts. Pitt-Rivers points to this in the preface to the second edition of his *The People of the Sierra* (1971). Scandalized by the request of his publisher to cut out the 'erudition', Pitt-Rivers went to consult his teacher: 'Professor Evans-Pritchard...reassured me that such scholarly trappings are mainly either mystifying or redundant: the reader who is not much acquainted with the theories invoked is not much enlightened by the references to them, and he who is should be able to see their relevance for himself' (Pitt-Rivers 1971: xi). Thus it would not be surprising to find seemingly innocuous statements in *The Nuer* that have a reference back to philosophical, sociological or anthropological writings. But in looking for such back-references one can never be sure when one is reading a reference into the text that was not originally intended. Thus the following may be regarded as broad speculative interpretations.

Let us start our mystification by looking at a few seemingly innocuous sentences quoted by Rosaldo (1986: 94) as 'speaking of absences rather than presences', as showing that 'the Nuer lack the obvious (to a Western eye) institutions of political order':

The Nuer cannot be said to be stratified into classes. (p. 7)

Indeed, the Nuer have no government, and their state might be described as an ordered anarchy.   Likewise they lack law, if we understand by this term judgements delivered by an independent and impartial authority which has, also, power to enforce its decisions. (pp. 5-6)

The lack of governmental organs among the Nuer, the absence of legal institutions, of developed leadership and, generally, of organized political life is remarkable. (p. 181)

The sentence in *The Nuer* that immediately precedes the second quotation above is: 'He [the leopard-skin chief] is a sacred person without political authority' (p. 5). Just as such statements concerning the lack of the leopard-skin chief's juridical authority can be traced to an empirical negation of the applicability of the Durkheimian conception of moral authority (see Free 1988: 74), statements concerning the lack of law or of legal institutions can be traced to an empirical rejection of Durkheim's characterization of 'segmentary', 'mechanical' societies as giving rise to 'repressive law'.

Similarly, the statement concerning social class conjures up the first sentence of *The Communist Manifesto*: 'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle' (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848]: 79) of which it is a direct contradiction and, moreover, Engels' footnote to that sentence (ibid.) which points to the existence of primitive communist societies.

2. *Rousseau and the Pastoral*

A central theme of Rosaldo's essay in *Writing Culture* is that of 'the pastoral': *The Nuer* is seen as written in 'the pastoral mode'. (This is a theme to which Clifford returns in his essay in the same volume where he claims (1986: 113) that salvage anthropology is 'appropriately located within a long Western tradition of pastoral'.) It would be largely fruitless to enter into a definitional argument concerning the appropriateness of the word 'pastoral'. A more important question than what pastoral means is what the usage of the term does or enables one to do in this specific argument. Nevertheless, Raymond Williams, whose *The Country and the City* (1980) is cited by Clifford as an authoritative work on the pastoral, points to 'the confusion that surrounds the whole question of "pastoral" ' (ibid.: 14) and says that 'the first problem of definition, a persistent problem of form, is the question of pastoral, of what is known as pastoral' (ibid.: 12). However, these definitional problems do not seem to daunt the writers of culture from writing of 'the pastoral mode', or from continuing to extend its usage from poetry to anthropological writing. What do they achieve by this?

Aside from the derogatory connotations of 'pastoral' for the post-romantic—though possibly not post-modern—mind, the use of the word 'pastoral' to refer to *The Nuer* creates a thread of continuity, and obscures any discontinuity, from that book back via the eighteenth century to Virgil and Hesiod. Williams's *The Country and the City* is partially directed against 'the bluff' of such 'confident glossing and glozing of the reference back' (Williams 1980: 18-19), against 'the long Western tradition of the pastoral' (Clifford 1986: 113) within which Clifford locates salvage anthropology and Rosaldo locates *The Nuer*. *The Country and the City* largely concerns changes in 'the structures of feeling' (Williams 1980: 12) or the evolution of an eventual structure of feeling in the historical social relationship(s) between country and city, rather than 'a "structure of feeling"' as Clifford (1986: 112) quotes Williams (1980: 12).   Indeed, Williams states—of the regressive series of retrospective writings concerning the country that he refers to—that: 'Old England, settlement, the rural virtues—all these, in fact, mean different things at different times and quite different values are being brought to question.   We shall need precise analysis of each kind of retrospect, as it comes' (ibid.).

Furthermore, the chapter dealing explicitly with 'pastoral' in *The Country and the City* is entitled 'Pastoral and Counter-Pastoral' and points to William Crabbe's rejection of the 'neo-classic pastoral' (ibid.: 13-34).   Moreover, the pastoral is seen in terms of the city and the country, rather than all aspects of the relationships between the country and the city being subsumable under the label 'pastoral'. Even if there had been no appeal to the authority of Williams by Clifford, these rather salient points would have to be considered as they demonstrate considerable differences, even within 'literature', between writing concerning the country in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and that of the twentieth, let alone between the earlier literature and twentieth-century ethnographic writing.[1]   Moreover, differences in what is called 'pastoral', which may range from a eulogy of the country to the satirical or ironic critique of the writer's own society, are ignored in the application of a single term.

Nevertheless, once Rosaldo has extended the usage of the word 'pastoral' to cover *The Nuer* and Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1978), he writes:

> Yet a question remains. Why use the literary pastoral to represent, presumably in a documentary rather than a fictional mode, the lives of actual shepherds? The pastoral mode, after all, derives from the court, and its shepherds usually turn out to have been royally dressed in rustic garb. As a literary mode, it stands far removed either from late medieval French shepherds or contemporary Nilotic cattle herders. Instead it embodies a distinctive sense of courtesy that Kenneth Burke

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1.   Such 'appeals to authority' are one of the most common tropes in anthropological, academic and indeed everyday discourse. Their usage merges with the operations of pedagogic authority within academia and appeals to the authority of academia outside of it—the television expert, for example.

has aptly characterised as 'the rhetoric of courtship between contrasted social classes'... In earlier literary epochs this courtship occurred between nobles and commoners, lords and vassals, and masters and servants. The displaced modern pastoral analogously emerges in interactions between town and country, middle class and working class, and colonizer and colonized. (Rosaldo 1986: 96)

Even if we were to accept that *The Nuer* is derived from the eighteenth-century pastoral—Rosaldo points (ibid.: 95) only to those few statements about the courageous, generous, democratic, egalitarian and independent qualities of Nuer character to support his assertion that *The Nuer* is written in the pastoral mode—we need not accept that this derivation entails an embodiment, that a historical link involves any identity of substance, or hypostatized essence. Nor do we have to accept that 'the pastoral mode' is an embodiment of 'the rhetoric of courtship between contrasted classes'. Williams (1980: 17) points to the fact that Virgil, whose poetry can perhaps be seen as strictly pastoral in an original, classical sense, was the son of a smallholder who wrote to protect the land and its customary farmers from confiscation.

If we look for a philosophical reference-point for Evans-Pritchard's so-called pastoral statements about Nuer character, one candidate is what has become known as Rousseau's 'noble savage'. One could, perhaps, see Rousseau's philosophy as pastoral in some aspects, but any association with Marie Antoinette's shepherdess games might have been lost on him as he moved from house to house, on the run from her father-in-law's and husband's secret police.

Let us look in more detail, then, at the quotations concerning the Nuer 'character' cited by Rosaldo as evidence for the 'pastoral' nature of *The Nuer*, to see exactly of whom or of what mode of writing they are reminiscent. Rosaldo (1986: 95) quotes a number of statements said to display the 'pastoral mode':

> Such a life nurtures the qualities of the shepherd—courage, love of fighting, and contempt of hunger and hardship—rather than shapes the industrious character of the peasant. (p. 26)

> Some outstanding traits in Nuer character may be said to be consistent with their low technology and scanty food-supply.... The qualities which have been mentioned, courage, generosity, patience, pride, loyalty, stubbornness, and independence, are the virtues the Nuer themselves extol, and these values can be shown to be very appropriate to their simple mode of life and to the simple set of social relations it engenders. (p. 90)

> The ordered anarchy in which they live accords well with their character, for it is impossible to live among Nuer and conceive of rulers ruling over them.
> The Nuer is a product of hard and egalitarian upbringing, is deeply democratic and easily roused to violence. His turbulent spirit finds any restraint irksome and no man recognizes a superior. (p. 181)

First, we should note that there are other statements that do not fit so easily into the 'pastoral mode', such as Evans-Pritchard's characterization of the Nuer as 'the war-like Nuer' (p. 20) and, in the paragraph following the last of Rosaldo's citations, the assertion:

That every Nuer considers himself as good as his neighbour is evident in their every movement. They strut about like lords of the earth, which, indeed they consider themselves to be. (p. 182)

A statement that does nevertheless continue:

There is no master and no servant in their society, but only equals that regard themselves as God's noblest creation. Their respect for one another contrasts with their contempt for all other peoples. (ibid.)

This is juxtaposed, perhaps not without irony, with his representation of colonial society, in particular his relationship with his servant. Furthermore, in the passage omitted from the middle of Rosaldo's second quotation comes this section:

I again emphasize the crudity and discomfort of their lives.   All who have lived with Nuer would, I believe, agree that though they are very poor in goods they are very proud in spirit.   Schooled in hardship and hunger—for both they express contempt—they accept the direst calamities with resignation and endure them with courage.   Content with few goods they despise all that lies outside them; their derisive pride amazes a stranger. (p. 90)

It has been claimed that 'Durkheim has been the medium, so to speak, by which Rousseau has left his mark on modern social science' (Wolin, quoted in Lukes 1973: 3).   Nevertheless, the ambivalence of the statements cited above towards 'the pastoral' indicates a direct link with Rousseau and what has become known as his 'noble savage'. Thus, for example, the equality and independence of the Nuer hark back to Rousseau's pre-social man, who loses his equality and independence as society progresses.   The pride of the Nuer could be seen as having one of its origins in Rousseau, for whom—in 'The Second Discourse'—man, once he had first gained his 'new intelligence'

would in time become the master of some [animals] and the scourge of others. Thus, the first time he looked into himself, he felt the first emotion of pride; and, at a time when he scarce knew how to distinguish the different orders of beings, by looking upon his species as of the highest order, he prepared the way for assuming pre-eminence as an individual. (Rousseau 1973 [1755]: 77-8)

Rosaldo claims (1986: 95) that 'Evans-Pritchard overextends his assumptions and verbally locates the Nuer in a mythic (past?) age', and cites this statement as an example

> Taken with the earlier list of the uses of cattle we can say that the Nuer do not live in an iron age or even in a stone age, but in an age, whatever it may be called, in which plants and beasts furnish technological necessities. (p. 87)

Both this and the statement quoted previously contrasting the qualities of the Nuer with those of peasants can be seen to have their, perhaps only primary, origins in Rousseau's statements (1973: 83) concerning the origins of inequality in societies founded on iron and corn:

> From the moment that one man began to stand in need of the help of another, from the moment it appeared advantageous to any one man to have enough provisions for two, equality disappeared, property was introduced, work became indispensable, and vast forests became smiling fields, which man had to water with the sweat of his brow, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow up with the crops.
> Metallurgy and agriculture were the two arts which produced this great revolution. The poets tell us it was gold and silver, but, for the philosophers, it was iron and corn, which first civilised men, and ruined humanity.

One might note here Rousseau's ironic allusions to 'the pastoral'. Nevertheless, Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* is not the wholesale application of the ideas of Rousseau to a Nilotic people. For Evans-Pritchard, society does not necessarily lead to inequality, rather the Nuer are without great inequalities in cattle. Similarly, much of *The Nuer* can be seen as written with reference to the following passage from Rousseau (1973: 81-2). Once man began to live in a state of society, 'a value came to be attached to public esteem', and,

> As soon as men began to value one another, and the idea of consideration had got a footing in the mind, every one put in his claim to it, and it became impossible to refuse it to any with impunity. Hence arose the first obligations of civility even among savages; and every intended injury became an affront; because, besides the hurt which might result from it, the party injured was certain to find in it a contempt for his person, which was often more insupportable than the hurt itself.
> Thus, as every man punished the contempt shown in him by others, in proportion to his opinion of himself, revenge became terrible, and men bloody and cruel. This is precisely the state reached by most of the savage nations known to us: and it is for want of having made a proper distinction in our ideas, and seen how very far they already are from the state of nature, that so many writers have hastily concluded that man is cruel, and requires civil institutions to make him more mild....

The final reference in this passage is to Hobbes, and the passage concerns one of the problems addressed by *The Nuer*, that of political order. However, Evans-Pritchard does not respond to it in Hobbesian terms, Rousseauist terms, or even Durkheimian terms of 'restitutive law', rather he sees 'the principle of contradiction' and the values of kinship, ultimately the segmentary lineage system, as

providing the principles of 'ordered anarchy'. His response is even less Hobbesian than Rousseau's, or Durkheim's.

3.   *The Philosophical Genealogy of the Early Chapters of* The Nuer

Before we deal more fully with the political and 'allegorical' aspects of *The Nuer*, let us first look at it chapter by chapter to see precisely what its philosophical and anthropological background and references are. The genealogy of the segmentary lineage system has been well covered by Kuper (1982), so I will ignore those later chapters with which the book as a whole so often seems to be equated.

3.1   The genealogy of space and time

Evans-Pritchard describes the third chapter of *The Nuer*, concerning time and space, as a bridge between the two parts of the book—the first two chapters concerning cattle and ecological relations and the last three concerning social structure or social systems. One of the immediate ancestors of this piece of writing is mentioned almost explicitly in the text, when Evans-Pritchard states that he is not mainly interested in the 'influence of social structure on the conceptualization of the oecological relations. Thus, to give one example, we do not describe how Nuer classify birds into various lineages on the pattern of their lineage structure' (p. 94). The immediate ancestry of this is Durkheim and Mauss's *Primitive Classification* (1963 [1903]). However, to devote a whole chapter to 'Time and Space' alone, whilst ignoring classification and other categories of thought points to a stress on time and space not present in *Primitive Classification*. In *The Nuer*, time and space are at the origin of the discussion of values, conceptualization and social structure, which are treated in terms of them. The stress on time and space thus speaks more directly of Kant than of Durkheim and Mauss. It is perhaps noteworthy that in his *Emile Durkheim* (1973)—a book that was originally a thesis supervised by Evans-Pritchard—Steven Lukes links *Primitive Classification* to Kant and more directly to the neo-Kantian philosophy of Renouvier and Hamelin (ibid.: 435). It is Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1929 [1781,1787]), and not Durkheim and Mauss's *Primitive Classification*, that begins its discussion of human consciousness and epistemology in the 'transcendental aesthetic' with a discussion of space and time. For Kant, time and space are not only prior to his categories of thought in textual terms, but also together are 'the pure forms of all sensible intuition, and so are what make a priori synthetic propositions possible' (1929: 80). Behind Kant, as Lukes (1973: 435) among others notes, lies David Hume. This is particularly true of the concepts of space and time. For Hume, space and time are, together, one of the 'seven general heads which may be considered as the sources of all *philosophical* relation' and are 'after

identity the most universal and comprehensive relations' (Hume 1978 [1739-40]: 14); and contiguity in time and place is one of the bases of Hume's discussion of causality. Thus space and time stand at the base of Hume's 'science of Man' upon which 'even Mathematics, Natural Philosophy and Natural Religion, are in some measure dependent' (ibid.: xv).

Evans-Pritchard's discussion of time and space, following Durkheim's, is thus formed in relation to the philosophical positions of Kant and Hume on these matters. For Hume, the ideas of time and space derive, via impressions, from experience. For Kant, time and space are a priori 'representations' which 'underlie all outer intuitions' (Kant 1929: 68).

Durkheim, and Durkheim and Mauss, deal with time and space in the introduction to *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Durkheim 1976 [1915, 1912]) and *Primitive Classification*. Although in the latter they do not give the same priority to time and space as Kant, in both they outline a position which they see as different to these two earlier philosophical positions. They contradict the 'logicians', who 'consider the hierarchy of concepts as given in things' (Durkheim and Mauss 1963: 4) and 'psychologists', who 'think that the simple play of the association of ideas, and of the laws of contiguity and similarity between mental states, suffice to explain the binding together of images, their organization into concepts classed in relation to each other' (ibid.). In their discussions of Zuñi and Sioux space and time they claim that 'not only do the division of things by regions and the division of society by clan correspond, but they are inextricably interwoven and merged' (ibid.: 47). This can be compared to Durkheim's statement that 'the social organisation has been the model for the spatial organisation and a reproduction of it' (Durkheim 1976: 12). After attempting to show that the classification of things by spatial regions developed out of the classification of things according to clans, Durkheim and Mauss (1963: 66) state that 'when it was a matter of establishing relations between spatial regions, it was the spatial relations which people maintained within their society that served as a starting point'. Thus, they claim some sort of causal priority of social organization in the conceptual organization of space. Evans-Pritchard takes up the priority given to time and space by Kant. Much of his discussion is derived from Durkheim and Mauss's discussion of categories as corresponding to social structure. Thus, central to his discussion of socio-spatial and socio-temporal categories is the concept of structural distance: 'the distance between groups of persons in the social system, expressed in terms of values' (p. 110). This concept is not so much determined by the age-set, lineage and political systems as at the centre of them, giving rise to the numerous spatial representations and the correspondence between the political and lineage systems: 'structural distance in the lineage system of the dominant clans is a function of structural distance in the tribal systems' (pp. 261-2). However, what he adds to the legacy of Durkheim and Mauss are conceptions of ecological distance and time. These are not inherent in the ecology itself, nor in material space, nor are they flat or rationalistic: they are empirical, deriving from relations to 'the world'. Thus, although 'oecological

time-reckoning is ultimately, of course, entirely determined by the movement of the heavenly bodies' (p. 102), rather than being the ideal time of Kant, Evans-Pritchard states that it is 'a series of conceptualizations of natural changes and...the selection of these points of reference is determined by the significance which these natural changes have for human activities' (p. 104) and 'is a conceptualization of collateral, co-ordinated, or co-operative activities' (ibid.).[2]

Furthermore, he states: 'though I have spoken of time and units of time the Nuer have no expression equivalent to "time" in our language, and they cannot therefore, as we can, speak of time as though it were something actual' (p. 103). Therefore, our ideality of time in the abstract does not seem transcendent and is not an empirical reality for the Nuer. Similarly: 'oecological distance, in this sense, is a relation between communities, defined in terms of density and distribution, with reference to water, vegetation, animal and insect life, and so on' (p. 109). Once again, space is not a material nor an ideal, nor for that matter sociological, a priori, but rather relative and empirical, founded in collective experience.

3.2 Marx and *The Nuer*

Let us turn, now, to the first two chapters of *The Nuer*, concerning 'Interest in Cattle' and 'Oecology', i.e. Nuer 'Modes of Livelihood' rather than their 'Political Institutions' as the book's subtitle terms them. I have already noted how statements in *The Nuer* concerning Nuer character may be traced to Rousseau's 'Second Discourse', which concerns what has become known as the noble savage. One of the central themes of this is the relation between government and inequality. Thus, Rousseau (1963: 97) states: 'The differing forms of government owe their origin to the differing degrees of inequality which existed between individuals at the time of their institution.' Marx later returned to this theme, perhaps the best-known statement of which in Marx's work occurs in his 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1976b: 3): 'The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis, on which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.' It is also one of the central themes of *The Nuer*. Evans-Pritchard puts what corresponds to the relation between base and superstructure at the centre of *The Nuer* when he states, for example, that Nuer values 'can be shown to be very appropriate to their simple mode of life and the simple set of social relations it engenders' (p. 90). Could one

2.   The stress on 'activity' in Evans-Pritchard's account of time is reminiscent of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx and Engels 1970: 121-3), rather than Durkheim and Mauss's (1963) version of Kantian ideal time and space, although it could also derive from Durkheim (1976: 10-11) where he claims that 'a calendar expresses the rhythm of collective activities'.

not see this as a restatement in the case of the Nuer of Marx's statement of the relation between base, superstructure and consciousness?

So let us now look for other similarities between Marx's work and *The Nuer*. Evans-Pritchard deals with 'Modes of Livelihood', Marx with 'Modes of Production'. The first chapter of *Capital* concerns 'The Commodity', the first chapter of *The Nuer* concerns cattle, which could perhaps be seen as the central commodity of Nuer society. Marx begins his analysis of the commodity with the distinction between use and exchange value; by the third page of the first chapter of *The Nuer*, cattle are 'an essential food-supply and the most important social asset' (p. 18) and later are said to have 'great economic utility and social value' (p. 40). Marx claims that 'a use-value, or useful article, has value only because abstract human labour is objectified or materialised in it' (Marx 1976a: 129); following a section concerning the distribution of cattle, Evans-Pritchard devotes the following three sections to their use, stating that 'Nuer value their cows according to the amount of milk they give' (p. 21). In the following two sections Evans-Pritchard deals with labour and refers us forward to the second half (sections 5-10) of the second chapter, in which labour is dealt with in terms of the relation of food-supply to the environment, or of the relation of use-value to nature in Marxist terms. Marx ends his chapter on the commodity by describing 'commodity fetishism'—by which 'nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves...assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx 1976a: 165) and in which value 'transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic' (ibid.: 167). For Evans-Pritchard, 'Nuer tend to define all social processes and relationships in terms of cattle. Their social idiom is a bovine idiom' (p. 19). The penultimate section of this first chapter concerns Nuer cattle vocabulary, which shows cattle as 'the superlative value of Nuer life' (p. 48). The final section of the first chapter deals with the importance of cows in the political structure.

However, Evans-Pritchard does not apply the ideas of Marx wholesale to the Nuer. He can be seen as providing a critique of them. Thus: 'I may sum up by repeating that economic relations amongst the Nuer are part of general social relationships and that these relationships [are]...mainly of a domestic and kinship order' (p. 92). He seems to be stating, to put it in Marxist terms, that amongst the Nuer relations of production are part of, not divisible from, other social relations. Indeed, such a statement could be traced back to a critique of the applicability of the concept of exchange value and its replacement by that of social value or social uses in the first chapter of *The Nuer*. The concept of social value, then, lies at the centre of the later chapters on the political and kinship systems. It is this concept that then permits Evans-Pritchard to understate, in the later chapters, the importance of cows in the political system.

Nevertheless, one might be tempted to say that it was the distinction between base and superstructure that led Evans-Pritchard from statements such as 'kinship is customarily defined by reference to these [cattle] payments' (p. 17), to a lineage system devoid of cattle and a political system where cows take a secondary place

to homicide, being mentioned in four pages of parenthetical small type (pp. 165-8) in which cows are seen as a cause of homicide. However, the movement between base and superstructure, from 'Interest in Cattle' to 'The Lineage System', is also a movement from a materialism to an idealism of the forms of value in which 'it does not follow that behaviour always accords with values and it may often be found to be in conflict with them, but it always tends to conform to them' (pp. 263-4). This movement is replicated in each of the first three chapters: from cattle and their uses to their social value; from ecology to social relations; and from ecological time and distance to structural distance.

Let us here briefly mention one final possible reference back, namely to anarchist ideas. *The Nuer* concerns a stateless society and in it traces of William Godwin's anarchism can perhaps be found. In particular, those references to a simple political society could perhaps have their origins in Godwin's description of simplicity as a feature of his proposed anarchist society (1976 [1793]: 553), rather than testifying to the backwardness of the Nuer.

4. The Nuer *as Political Allegory*

Let us now look at the possible allegorical aspects of *The Nuer*. It is perhaps easy to read Rousseau's Second Discourse, on the origins of inequality, as a portrayal of 'a state of nature' of 'the noble savage' and his rise to 'civilization'. However, Rousseau begins it (1973: 45) by stating:

> The philosophers, who have inquired into the foundations of society, have all felt the necessity of going back to a state of nature; but not one of them has got there.... Every one of them, in short, constantly dwelling on wants, avidity, oppression, desires, and pride, has transferred onto the state of nature ideas that were acquired in society; so that, in speaking of the savage, they described the social man. It has not even entered into the heads of most of our writers to doubt whether the state of nature ever existed...we must deny that, even before the deluge, men were ever in the pure state of nature; unless, indeed, they fell back into it from some very extraordinary circumstance; a paradox which it would be very embarrassing to defend, and quite impossible to prove.
>   Let us begin then by laying all facts aside, as they do not affect the question. The investigations we may enter into, in treating this subject, must not be considered as historical truths, but only as mere conditional and hypothetical reasonings, rather calculated to explain the nature of things, than to ascertain their actual origin....

This suggests to me that 'the noble savage' can be best read as a statement that neither language, inequality, violence nor evil is natural or innate; as a statement about the possible forms of society and the causes of inequality and government;

as a conscious myth or allegory rather than just an 'origin myth'. Rousseau's Second Discourse is directed against what he sees as Hobbes's arguments for absolutism, namely that in 'the state of nature' man is in a state of anarchic violent barbarism and therefore needs an absolutist state to protect himself against it, and that an absolutist state is to be accepted like the authority of a parent. Assuming that each generation calls on the ghosts of the past for their own purposes, let us look now at what possible allegorical purposes Evans-Pritchard could have had in conjuring up the ghost of Rousseau.

The Nuer was published in 1940, and was presumably written between 1937 and 1940. Britain went to war with Germany in 1939, and *The Nuer* may have been written either before the outbreak of war or just after it. As an empirical restatement of Rousseau's arguments against absolutism, it may be seen as an ideological attack on Fascism and the absolutist state. Parts of it are a clear, if allegorical, statement against Fascism in, or at the end of, a time in which such well-known names as Paul de Mann, Celine, Heidegger, Pound, Eliot and D. H. Lawrence were at least ambivalent towards it, and at the end of a period in British political history that involved such 'characters' as the British Union of Fascists, Oswald Mosley, Lord Rothermere and the *Daily Mail* with its 1934 headline 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts'. I mention these just to point out that the attitudes of many European intellectuals, and also some of those in positions of power, were somewhat ambiguous towards Fascism, and that support for it extended into British intellectual and political life, although by the time of the publication of *The Nuer* after the outbreak of war, attitudes may well have changed.

Let us now turn towards the question of colonialism. A perhaps crude rendering of Hobbes's philosophy is uniquely suited to providing a colonial ideology or justification for colonialism, a view we can indeed find in statements of British colonialists. Take, for example, a statement by Cecil Rhodes to the South African Parliament:

> I will lay down my own policy on this Native question. Either you have to receive them on an equal footing as citizens, or to call them a subject race. Well, I have made up my mind that there must be class legislation, that there must be Pass Laws, and Peace Preservation Acts, and that we have got to treat natives, where they are in a state of barbarism, in a different way to ourselves. We are to be lords over them. These are my politics on native affairs, and these are the politics of South Africa. Treat the natives as a subject people, as long as they continue in a state of barbarism and communal tenure; be lords over them, and let them be a subject race.... The native is to be treated as a child and denied the franchise; he is to be denied liquor also; and upon the principles of the honourable member of Stellenbosch himself, I call on him to go with me on this. (Quoted in Alvai and Shanin 1982: 72-3)

Given some recent statements on Evans-Pritchard's relation to colonialism, one might be surprised to find that he does not expound such a neo-Hobbesian view; indeed he expresses an anti-Hobbesian view. Just as Rousseau's argument against

Hobbes can be seen as an ideological resistance to absolutism, Evans-Pritchard's implicit references to Rousseau can also be seen as an ideological resistance to the colonial utilization of Hobbes. *The Nuer* is, in that respect, anti-colonialist and in the line of Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* (1987 [1902]), which was an explicit attack on the Hobbesian version of Darwinianism to be found in Spencer's evolutionary sociology and Thomas Henry Huxley's 'very incorrect representation of the facts of Nature' (Kropotkin 1987: 17).[3]

There are other statements in *The Nuer* that could also be read as implicitly anti-colonialist. For example,

> ...it is impossible to live among Nuer and conceive of rulers ruling over them.
>
> The Nuer is a product of hard and egalitarian upbringing, is deeply democratic, and easily roused to violence. His turbulent spirit finds any restraint irksome and no man recognises a superior. (p. 181)

Such a statement suggests to me a wish that the Nuer should be left to their independence rather than a desire for their colonial exploitation. Similarly, the situation about which the Byronic 'Operations on the Akobo' (1973) was written, and which Geertz totally ignores (Free 1990), also perhaps points to Evans-Pritchard's opposition to Fascism. Prior to the Second World War, and Evans-Pritchard's operations, Abyssinia had been invaded by Mussolini in a war of self-aggrandizement that was termed by the British left, amongst others, as an act of Fascist aggression. It was also one of the last acts of European colonialism in which a previously independent African state was annexed. Here the interests of British colonialism were not only anti-Fascist, but also anti-imperialist.

5. The Nuer *and Colonial Domination*

Let us now look at other links between *The Nuer* and colonialism. Rosaldo states (1986: 96) that 'it seems fitting that a discourse that denies the domination that makes its knowledge possible idealizes, as alter egos, shepherds rather than peasants'. There seem to be a few fairly common interrelated ideas concerning the relation of anthropology to colonialism underlying this statement.

The first claim is that it idealizes, or idealized, 'the natives'. We have already seen that Evans-Pritchard's presentation could not be seen as a simple 'pastoral'. But there is a logical flaw in this aspect of the statement anyway, namely, that if

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3. Thomas Huxley's view was promoted in the manifesto *Struggle for Existence and its Bearing on Man,* issued in 1888 at the zenith of colonialism, in the same period as Rhodes' speech (Hewetson 1987; Kropotkin 1987: 12-20). Kropotkin's influence may have reached Evans-Pritchard via Radcliffe-Brown (Kuper 1983 [1973]: 34).

you are going to say that *The Nuer* is an idealization of the Nuer, you would have to say that you have some access to the reality of the Nuer. The only other available access to the realities of Nuer life in the 1930s is, as far as I am aware, the statements of colonial officers. These would be equally conditioned by their, at least slightly different, existential interests possibly to produce a neo-Hobbesian view of the Nuer. Without any access to the realities of Nuer life, you could only be reiterating prejudices, that are perhaps 'neo-Hobbesian', without any impressions of the Nuer at all. Any such statements must be pure rhetoric and moreover could be seen to support the political position of Cecil Rhodes and any of his political successors.

A second aspect of Rosaldo's statement is the claim that *The Nuer* denies colonial domination, and that perhaps—Rosaldo does not seem to state this, but it could be an argument levelled against anthropology—it thus idealizes the Nuer's relations to the colonial power. However, Rosaldo himself points to the numerous statements in the introduction to *The Nuer* concerning colonial domination, and furthermore Evans-Pritchard links centrally the prophets to the 'new conditions of Arab-European intrusion' (p. 191). He also explicitly relates how 'a Government force surrounded our camp one morning at sunrise, searched for two prophets who had been leaders in a recent revolt, took hostages, and threatened to take many more if the prophets were not handed over' (p. 11). This could be an understatement, but it is not a denial—perhaps such a distinction is 'very British'. Thus, Evans-Pritchard could possibly be said to play down the importance of colonial domination for the Nuer, or its violence. Here again, if you are going to assert without reference to any other account of the Nuer at that time, that colonial domination was of more importance for the Nuer than Evans-Pritchard states from his impressions, do you not risk claiming purely rhetorically that colonialism was an irresistible monolith? Rosaldo's statement (1986: 97) that 'the pastoral mode becomes self-serving because the shepherd symbolizes that point beyond domination where neutral ethnographic truth can collect itself' comes dangerously close to such a moral, political and purely rhetorical position. On the other hand, if you are going to state that Evans-Pritchard should have dealt more fully in *The Nuer* with colonial resistance, you are suggesting he should have been more of a spy. If you suggest that he could have dealt more fully with colonial resistance, you are denying the conditions of knowledge or are just being patronizing about the Nuer—suggesting, more or less, that they were politically stupid.

This discussion thus brings us towards an affirmation of a third aspect of Rosaldo's statement, its concern with the importance of the existential conditions of knowledge: that colonial domination did more than just make the anthropology of that period possible—in some sense of the word, it conditioned it or was an integral aspect of it. Let us deal with two connections between anthropological fieldwork and power that are in no way necessary or even constant.

First, that of seeing or looking, in anthropology and power. Evans-Pritchard states that

> As I could not use the easier and shorter method of working through regular informants I had to fall back on direct observation of, and participation in, the everyday life of the people. From the door of my tent I could see what was happening in camp or village and every moment was spent in Nuer company. (p. 15)

Renato Rosaldo (1986: 92) remarks of this that 'in retrospect, the fieldworker's mode of surveillance uncomfortably resembles Michel Foucault's Panopticon, the site from which the (disciplining) disciplines enjoy gazing upon (and subjecting) their subjects'. For Foucault (1977: 195-228), the Panopticon is an image of power, or discipline, for the twentieth century. Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon was a prison consisting of a central tower from which a ring of outer individual cells are permanently visible, while the observer in the central tower cannot be seen from the cells. It abolishes the crowd—Goya's howling masses—and replaces it with a multiplicity of numerable, supervisable individuals who are no longer communicating people but merely objects of information, with no horizontal links through the walls of the Panopticon. Through it power functions independently of any one person exercising it; it renders the actual exercise of power unnecessary as the prisoners themselves bear it. It is 'a machine for dissociating the see/being-seen dyad' (ibid.: 201-202). It is here that, for Foucault, the sciences of man—he mentions 'psychology, psychiatry, criminology, and so many other strange sciences' (ibid.: 226)—have their origin.

However, in itself, Evans-Pritchard's fieldwork was not panoptic. Indeed, even before the end of the 'door-of-my-tent' sentence he is writing that 'every moment was spent in Nuer company', and earlier he states:

> As I became more friendly with the Nuer and more at home in their language they visited me from early morning till late at night, and hardly a moment of the day passed without men, women or boys in my tent.... These endless visits entailed constant badinage and interruption and, although they offered opportunity for improving my knowledge of the Nuer language, imposed a severe strain. Nevertheless, if one chooses to reside in a Nuer camp one must submit to Nuer custom, and they are persistent and tireless visitors. The chief privation was the publicity to which all my actions were exposed, and it was not long before I became hardened, though never entirely insensitive, to performing the most intimate operations before an audience or in full view of the camp. (pp. 14-15)

This does not point to any dissociation of the seeing/being-seen dyad, nor to the Nuer becoming individualized objects of information rather than communicating people. Indeed, Evans-Pritchard states that 'as soon as I started to discuss a custom with one man another would interrupt the conversation in pursuance of an affair of his own or by an exchange of pleasantries or jokes' (p. 14). At worst, the Nuer become 'sources of information' and are represented as 'the Nuer' or in terms of the social values of their system, rather than as individuated objects. The application of the image of the Panopticon to *The Nuer* ignores the invisibility to

Evans-Pritchard of certain aspects of Nuer life; it writes the Nuer out of *The Nuer*, replacing them with prisoners; and it ignores their resistance and the role they played in the construction of *The Nuer*. It is as if anthropology did at some stage possess a key of pure seeing that rendered social life visible. This brings us again to 'the conditions of knowledge'.

Let us dissociate seeing from a necessary connection to power. Foucault (1973) points to 'the gaze', and in 'surveillance' (*surveiller*) (1977) explicitly links seeing to power.[4] However, seeing is not inextricably, necessarily or even constantly linked to power. There are different ways of seeing than 'the gaze' or *surveiller*, than looking over, inspecting or supervising. The importance of seeing or looking as the origin of resistance, rather than power or domination, surveillance or discipline, is suggested by the poetry of Blake and Shelley, for example, even if this poetry is pre-Panoptic or perhaps on the cusp of Panopticism. In Blake's 'The Garden of Love', seeing is a resistance to the power of the organized religion of the time, while in Shelley's 'The Masque of Anarchy', seeing is part of the rhetorical resistance to 'God, and King, and Law'. Both poems show that seeing need not always be 'surveillance', need not necessarily be simply a function of power, but that it can be an aspect of the resistance to power. Foucault himself, in his essay 'The Eye of Power', in *Power/Knowledge*, talks of 'the Rousseauist dream' of a 'transparent society that opposed the darknesses of royal power in the eighteenth century (1980: 152). In his conclusion to the essay 'Truth and Power' in the same volume he is ambivalent about any necessary relationship between power and truth. He writes, 'it's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time (ibid.) .

6. *The Existential Conditions of* The Nuer

Let us now turn to the more concrete existential conditions of *The Nuer*. There are first the material and political conditions that made it possible. Evans-Pritchard points to these, rather than away from them. He states in the first sentence of the Preface: 'my study of the Nuer was undertaken at the request of, and was mainly financed by, the Government of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, which also contributed generously towards the publication of its results' (p. vii); and he later states in his Introductory: 'when the Government of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan asked me to

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4. *Surveiller et Punir* is the title of the original French (1975) edition of *Discipline and Punish* (1977). However, according to the translator's note, 'the verb *surveiller* has no adequate English equivalent'. For a discussion of the translation, see that note.

make a study of the Nuer I accepted after hesitation and with misgivings' (p. 7). He has already, on the first page of the introductory to *The Nuer*, stated:

> A later source of information about the Nuer are the *Sudan Intelligence Reports* which run from the reconquest of the Sudan in 1899 to the present day, their ethnological value decreasing in recent years. In the first two decades after the reconquest there are a few reports by military officers...several political officers contributed papers on the Nuer. Two of these officers were killed in the performance of their duty.... (p. 1)

These comments may be disarming, but for me when I first read the book they raised the question of exactly what his relationship to the colonial powers was, rather than offset them, as Rosaldo claims they do.

Similarly, Evans-Pritchard points towards the conditions of knowledge in the political situation of his fieldwork, rather than obscuring them:

> It would at any time have been difficult to do research among the Nuer, and at the period of my visit they were unusually hostile, for their recent defeat by Government forces and the measures taken to ensure their final submission had occasioned deep resentment. Nuer have often remarked to me, 'You raid us, yet you say we cannot raid the Dinka'; 'You overcame us with firearms and we had only spears. If we had had firearms we would have routed you'; and so forth. When I entered a cattle camp it was not only as a stranger but as an enemy, and they seldom tried to conceal their disgust at my presence, refusing to answer my greetings, and even turning away when I addressed them. (p. 11)

And in the paragraph preceding that in which he gives the example of his conversation with Cuol (of which Rosaldo claims Evans-Pritchard finds 'that the fault in this unhappy encounter lies with Nuer character, rather than with historically specified circumstances' (1986: 91)), Evans-Pritchard states that 'the Nuer are expert at sabotaging an inquiry' and that 'questions about customs were blocked by a technique I can commend to natives who are inconvenienced by the curiosity of ethnologists' (p. 12). Above all, what Evans-Pritchard seems to do in the introduction to *The Nuer* is not to dissociate ethnography from the colonial conditions of knowledge in order to convince a reader of its truth, but to attempt to dissociate the aims and values of ethnography from the purposes and values of colonial domination. In this light, objectivity can be viewed as a keystone of a moral and social attitude that distanced anthropology as much from the colonial interests of the society of which it was part as from the colonized societies from which anthropology is always already socially distanced.

The two conditions of *The Nuer* Evans-Pritchard does not explicitly point to are those of colonial society in the Sudan and Egypt and of Oxford of the late 1930s. However, Jaques Maquet, who at least had some empirical impressions of the relationship between anthropology and colonialism, does attempt to grapple with this relationship in his 1964 article 'Objectivity in Anthropology'. For him,

anthropologists were 'scholars whose material and professional interests lay in their home countries but who participated in the privileges of the dominant caste during their stay in Africa' (Maquet 1964: 48). But he also states:

> These characteristics of their existential situation were perfectly compatible with holding progressive views.... The anthropologists' existential situation was perfectly compatible with the participant-observer attitude that some of them assumed, not so much for purposes of research but rather out of their deep sympathy for the society they were studying. Moreover, since their activities were marginal relative to those of the production-conscious European caste, who looked upon the anthropologists' work as a romantic waste of money, the anthropologists were orientated toward nonconformist attitudes critical of the colonial order. (Ibid.)

But he also notes that the position of the anthropologist depended on the political stability of the society, which an attitude of 'mild conservatism' would have defended. He sees this as an objective, though not necessarily perceived interest and claims that it was not in fact advocated. He further notes that the valorization of traditional cultures was a socially useful trend for the colonial regimes as they balanced traditional and progressive forces in decolonization.

As to whether the valorization of traditional cultures stemmed from its political uses, or was made possible by them, or whether those political uses of anthropology were merely *ad hoc*, or even whether anthropology in some way revealed this political strategy I can make no comment. Nevertheless, I would suggest that colonialism did condition *The Nuer* in yet another way. In its Hobbesian and racist attitudes, colonialism set the agenda for a concern with the study of the state or politics and even with witchcraft and rationality—and behind that, these themes were set in the Enlightenment. But these colonial attitudes also set the agenda for their empirical falsification, just as the colonial nations set the agenda for national liberation movements.

7. *Conclusions*

I have suggested that recent articles portraying anthropology as writing have ignored the philosophical genealogy of *The Nuer* and thus also the political position of Evans-Pritchard's work. The world in which writing happens is dealt with by both Geertz and Rosaldo as *the* world—a singular unitary world without divisions, least of all political divisions. This type of writing about writing displays a kind of functionalism far beyond Radcliffe-Brown's. It is no longer even a matter of the relation of parts to a whole, but merely the presentation of a whole undivided, with any particular text as an example of it. When this whole world is linked solely to power, and not also to resistance, the illusion of an

indestructible colonial monolith is reborn.   Furthermore, in equating Evans-Pritchard with Cecil Rhodes, or in ignoring Cecil Rhodes and Oswald Mosley, the British past is effectively whitewashed beneath the quaint myths of dreaming spires, of 'the folk model of Anglo-Saxon democracy' (Kuklick 1984: 71), and of 'The least He that is in England...has a life to live as the greatest He' (Geertz 1988: 71).

In these literary approaches to anthropology, the stress on a work of anthropology as a literary creation ensures that any consideration of the specific philosophical genealogies of specific works is obscured and that the ancestry of anthropology and the social sciences in moral philosophy is overlooked. Furthermore, the lack of any reference to the worlds in and of which anthropology is written ensures that the complex political background of any text is hidden beneath the concentration on internal relations between texts. The political resistance to both colonialism and Fascism implicit in Evans-Pritchard's work has been consistently overlooked in recent writings about his writings. This may be partially due to stereotypes of Evans-Pritchard, but it is also due to the obliteration of the philosophical roots of anthropology in some recent attempts to deal with it purely as literature.

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