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ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE VIEW FROM AFAR

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WHEN Peter Rivière asked me to fill in for him for this week, he suggested that I should discuss some modern trends in anthropology—particularly in America—represented by five books it has fallen to me to review for the *Times Literary Supplement* in the last few years (see Lienhardt 1985, 1988, 1989); perhaps because I had a grounding in literature and literary criticism, though that has only made me less sympathetic. First came two volumes of the ongoing 'History of Anthropology' series edited by George Stocking: *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork* (Stocking (ed.) 1983) and *Functionalism Historicized: Essays on British Social Anthropology* (Stocking (ed.) 1984a); then came Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Geertz 1988); and finally James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* (Clifford 1988)

Editors' note: Text of a talk given on 21 November 1989 in a course on 'Aspects of the Development of Anthropological Thought' organized by Peter Rivière for students at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Oxford. The title refers to that of a collection of essays by Lévi-Strauss published in 1985 (see References). In addition to referring to a number of well-known anthropologists, Lienhardt also makes reference to the writer, teacher, and literary critic William Empson (1906–1984) and to the literary and social critic F. R. Leavis (1895–1978). Lienhardt was a student of Leavis's at Cambridge and reviewed a number of books for Leavis's journal *Scrutiny*; hence Lienhardt's reference here to his 'grounding in literature and literary criticism'. Only very minor changes have been made to the copy of the text surviving in the author's papers, including those on it in the author's own hand. The footnote and the references have been supplied.

and Bernard McGrane's *Beyond Anthropology: Society and the Other* (McGrane 1989).

Of these authors, only Geertz, who is probably the most influential of American anthropologists, has any experience of actually doing anthropology. Stocking is a historian, and more or less admits that he and his students (of whom Clifford, also a historian by training, may well be one) turned their attention to the history of anthropology because they were getting short of more conventional historical fields to investigate for their D.Phils. He regards his research among social anthropologists in Britain as a kind of anthropological fieldwork, refers to them humorously in a tribal vocabulary and, rather against his principles as a historian when writing about his tribe, he can be somewhat coy about revealing his still living sources: 'Some professional gossip among critics of "structural functionalism" would have it that he [Radcliffe-Brown] did not really understand Durkheim; one disaffected disciple even remarked to me that Radcliffe-Brown, as a lower-middle-class Birmingham boy, could not *really* be expected to have read French' (Stocking 1984b: 106; original emphasis).

Like a fieldworker also, Stocking may bear scars from his anthropological travels. When he came to Oxford, he was so intent upon getting material from an informant, who happened to be Professor Evans-Pritchard, that as they were walking together down St Giles' he failed to notice a lamp-post, and we had to take him to a doctor to repair a gash in his head. Nevertheless, he persisted, and his own contributions to those volumes give one of the best, if disconnected, accounts of the development of British social anthropology, with a good grasp of the changes in theoretical orientations, and interesting details about the human and institutional relationships behind the scenes. He is interested in the distribution and source of academic power to hire and fire: Malinowski's determination to found a colony of functionalists in Oxford, for example, and appoint Raymond Firth as professorial viceroy. But nevertheless, this kind of history can produce a kind of paralysing self-consciousness, inhibiting perhaps the most reflective of younger anthropologists from writing lest they should appear to have ignored everything that has gone before. Hence endless 'footnotes' in the texts of American books written as D.Phils.—always looking over their shoulders and fearing to be caught out.

Nietzsche, to whose interest in the relationship between the individual and society, between individualism and socialism, these authors (along I may say with Radcliffe-Brown) make some reference, wrote an essay which they do not refer to, 'The Use and Abuse of History' (Nietzsche 1965 [1873]), in which he argued that an excess of history, then represented by David Strauss and German historicism, could corrupt lively intelligences. It could discourage some by leading them to think that everything they had to say had been said before in one way or another and that they themselves were mere epigone, the inferior successors of great men. It could flatter others to persuade themselves that they had better and juster ideas than those of their predecessors.

One of my own difficulties in welcoming any of these books with unqualified enthusiasm has been for somewhat similar reasons. Those anthropologists who have spent some time in the subject, and are in any case self-confident, can take in what suits them from very intelligent (with the possible exception of McGrane, whose *Beyond Anthropology* might perhaps better have been called 'Just Beyond a Graduate Thesis'—though he may go further) and wide-ranging accounts they have given of their eclectic field, which lies somewhere between a cultural history of anthropology and anthropologists and a kind of anthropology of anthropologists, the 'observers observed' as Stocking has it. But on the other and obverse point made by Nietszche, that too much knowledge of the history of anthropology can encourage every new generation to think itself intellectually and morally superior to any of its predecessors, Clifford (and McGrane) may have something to answer for. For them, no anthropologist can be trusted. Mao Zedong's idea that the vitality of a really progressive society depends upon a condition of constant cultural revolution rather than evolution, a rejection of deadening ancestral traditions, has been put into practice, more or less politely, by anthropologists long before Mao was thought of. Audrey Richards, for example, experienced it, in her own way as she became an ancestor. When I wrote to her saying that her contribution (Richards 1969) on Malinowski to the 'Founding Fathers' series of essays was a useful and stimulating contribution to the teaching of the subject, she replied from Cambridge, where Leach was then a live wire: 'How nice of you to admire my humble article. I am unused to praise, being generally regarded as a hum-drum old thing with a *descriptive mind.* Can I say worse?' The critique of anthropology and anthropologists made by Clifford and his colleagues (which I must emphasize is in many ways thought-provoking and sensitive) is only the latest contribution to this endemic revolutionary ardour.

The received wisdom on earlier stages of our revolutionary crises is familiar to any students who have taken a course in the history of the subject. First came the unsystematic, often prejudiced and sometimes sensationalist accounts of 'savages' given by travellers, missionaries, and officials. Then came Tylor, that mole undermining the established order from within, and Frazer (I am referring particularly to Britain). Both, while influenced inevitably by Darwinian theories of evolution, argued for the psychic unity of mankind, which established that although some 'races' were lower and some higher in the evolutionary scale, their beliefs and customs could be paralleled among ourselves (especially among family gardeners, rustic villagers, and the remote people of Scotland); for indeed, as Darwin said on seeing the wild Tasmanians on the shore, 'Such were our ancestors!'

Persuaded, particularly by Frazer, that it may be necessary for good and efficient government in the colonies that the governing powers should understand what their savage subjects were really like, colonial governments then came to fund the beginning of professional anthropological fieldwork. This on the whole showed that when one lived among them, savages properly understood were in many ways more like ourselves than had yet been thought, and that evolutionary theory applied to living societies was unscientific, a deplorable example of chauvinism

and ethnocentricity. Then came Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, both insisting that there was a specifically social and cultural anthropology, and that although social evolution might be a component of sociological theory about 'primitive societies' it must be kept distinct from biological evolution ('up from the ape' anthropology, as it might be called, after the title of a book by the eminent American physical anthropologist E. A. Hooton, a textbook in Cambridge when I was a student; see Hooton 1931). So came Malinowski's general theory of social function, applicable to every society. Widely different social institutions were merely local formulations of answers to the need to socialize animal appetites, like eating or copulation. St Paul spoke of marriage in much the same way.

Rather different was Radcliffe-Brown's belief in a 'natural science of society', of which he hoped to become the Newton. These two, first regarded as dangerous revolutionaries in their time, were deposed very soon after their deaths (Malinowski's in 1942, Radcliffe-Brown's in 1953). They had not found the kind of universal laws about human society which they had sought and promised. Much of what they wrote about 'theory' was dismissed as tautological commonplace, and pretentious at that. Evans-Pritchard successfully led a coup to establish social anthropology as a form of historiography, leaving Radcliffe-Brown's followers (Adam Kuper, for example) to bandage their wounded as best as they could. Leach attacked on a different front, accusing Radcliffe-Brown (an admirer in fact of the anarchist Prince Kropotkin) and almost all of his own contemporaries of being conservative reactionaries, whose doctrines made no allowance for the obvious fact of social dynamics, the changing structure of societies from generation to generation. Evans-Pritchard, to his just and lasting annoyance, was represented as one such reactionary in *The Political Systems of Highland Burma*, where Leach suggested that the then remote and egalitarian Nuer pastoralists ought, if properly described, to have exhibited signs of the upward social mobility of some of the subjects of Burmese kingdoms, and that Evans-Pritchard should have sought the 'maximization' of their resources, political and economic, which Leach thought a central human characteristic (see Leach 1970).

Then, quietly at first, a foreign leader, Lévi-Strauss, built up a following among these warring British factions. Eventually reconciling Evans-Pritchard to having him share some of the battle-honours, he became for a time a widely acclaimed leader of the British avant-garde. On the principle of 'if you can't beat them, join them'—or perhaps rather, assimilate them—Lévi-Strauss was given an honorary D.Litt. at Oxford. Engineers, agriculturalists, and such other practical men, were asking (me, for example) what 'structuralism' was. They got some kind of answer in the Wolfson College Lectures on Structuralism, the first being given by Leach (on either the Virgin Birth or King Solomon, I can't remember which; see Leach 1973).

There is, in fact, in relation to this succession of revolutionary crises, an interesting parallel between the view of British anthropology taken by Lévi-Strauss in a paper called 'An Australian "Atom of Kinship"'—I guess it was written in the 1960s when Leach's *Rethinking Anthropology* appeared (Leach 1961)—and a

passage in Geertz some 30 years later.[1] The article appears in Lévi-Strauss's collection of previously relatively inaccessible papers published in English under the title *The View from Afar* (Lévi-Strauss 1985: 63–72). It refers to one of Radcliffe-Brown's ideas and his own that somewhere and sometime, given more and more rigorous scientific procedures, some anthropologist (himself perhaps) might split the social atom as physicists had done with the physical. Lévi-Strauss, viewing from not very far the British anthropological scene, wrote:

> A new fashion has been spreading among our English-language colleagues as they repudiate all the achievements of our discipline, revile its founders and the scholars who succeeded them, and insist that it is necessary to 'rethink' anthropology from top to bottom, that nothing from its past remains valid. This rancour has been vented by turn on Frazer, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and several other anthropologists. (ibid.: 63)

He then goes on to defend Radcliffe-Brown's contribution to the controversial study of Wikmunkan kinship; but 'everbody must feel unwilling to enter the feverish atmosphere' (as William Empson once wrote of F. R. Leavis in a letter responding to Leavis's criticism; see Empson 1935: 65) of those Wikmunkan controversies, or indeed any such controversies about kinship.

At least the quotation brings me nearer to what I am supposed to be talking about. Clifford Geertz is (or was) the leading anthropologist to encourage the new movement, so to call it, of which James Clifford has now become the leader; among the tributes to Clifford's enterprise on the dust-cover of *The Predicament of Culture* is this from Geertz: 'Clifford is original and nearly unique. He is one of the few persons who connects history, literature and anthropology. He's had an enormous impact because he provides a new perspective on the study of culture that would almost certainly not have been generated from within anthropology itself.'

I do not know when Geertz wrote this; but Geertz is not getting younger, and like Lévi-Strauss has also come to disapprove of some of the features of a younger generation of not so much anthropologists as *anthropologisants*—anthropological fellow-travellers up to a point, I suppose one might call them. In the last chapter of *Works and Lives* he surveys what he sees as the difficulties of doing anthropology in the modern world. (I may say without really digressing that he, like Clifford and his followers, thrive on representing the subject and all their readers as being in a state of acute crisis, anxiety and alienation. Clifford calls his predicament of culture 'the predicament of ethnographic modernity': 'ethnographic because [we find ourselves] off centre among scattered traditions; modernity since

1. *Editors' note:* From the acknowledgements in *The View from Afar* it seems that Lévi-Strauss's paper 'The Atom of Kinship' was written in the mid-1970s, shortly before the death of T. G. H. Strehlow (in 1978), for whom it was written (Lévi-Strauss 1985: 299).

the condition of rootlessness and mobility [we confront] is an increasingly common fate' (Clifford 1988: 3).)

Geertz writes as follows, having said that the certainties of the earlier period of Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss, and Ruth Benedict 'now seem very far away':

> What is at hand is a pervasive nervousness about the whole business of claiming to explain enigmatical others [that is, people from 'other cultures'] on the grounds that you have gone about with them in their native habitat or combed the writings of those who have. This nervousness brings on, in turn, various responses, variously excited: deconstructive attacks on canonical works, and on the very idea of canonicity as such. (Geertz 1988: 130–31)

(This is what Lévi-Strauss sharply rebuked.) And he continues: '*Ideologiekritik* unmaskings of anthropological writings as the continuation of imperialism by other means; clarion calls to reflexivity, dialogue, heteroglossia, linguistic play, rhetorical self-consciousness, performative translation, verbatim recording, and first-person narrative as forms of cure' (ibid.: 131). To this he adds a footnote: 'For an interesting collection of the very good and the very bad, the knowledgeable and the pretentious, the truly original and the merely dazed, see now J. Clifford and G. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*' (ibid.: 131, n. 2; see Clifford and Marcus 1986).

But that dizzy-making prescription for curing a disease of anthropology, by allowing for every kind of self-consciousness, even the self-consciousness of very ignorant and silly selves, is what Clifford and Geertz themselves have presented us with, by assuming in the first place that we are all forever anxious, disorientated, and morbidly introspective. It may have something to do with taking their cultural bearings from intellectual life in New York. I have been to New York only once, when with Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, and other names known to the *New York Review of Books* I attended a lunch given to intellectuals by the Exxon Foundation, which showed some inclination to provide money to encourage the formation of an enlightened, well-informed, and politically sound way of forming public opinion. There was much talk of 'raising consciousness' and 'sharing insights'. It was a very nice lunch, with a little good wine; but I can imagine that if it had been followed by a long evening drinking in Greenwich Village with an intelligentsia, I should have been as fuddled by the morning with 'pervasive nervousness' as the anthropologists described in the passage from Geertz I have quoted above.

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