Some Reflections on the Decennial A.S.A. Conference

It will be a good many months before the proceedings of the 1973 A.S.A. conference held at Oxford are published, so it has seemed a useful function to provoke some interim discussion. My remarks are almost entirely critical, and it may be wondered why such points were not made during the conference itself. But it would have been an outrageous rudeness to interrupt what for many of the audience appeared to be a rather festive break from academic pursuits with a string of hostile comments, especially from one not a member of the Association. The more so as some evidently felt that delicate stage in the domestic cycle of our academic community called for eulogy rather than honesty.

The proceedings were concluded by four speakers giving their 'overviews'. Fortes made his speech as retiring president of the A.S.A. He was followed by Firth, and he by Salisbury. Grillo spoke for the youngest generation of members, and ended by expressing the view that the retiring 'giants' would long be worshipped by their successors. Although declaring that he represented nothing, Grillo's words were actually very representative indeed. Firth cheerfully declared that the seniors no longer had the power, but the sentiments generated by this ritual occasion seemed to suggest that the intellectual structure of the community remains more or less the same despite their retirement. As Ardener wrote of Kuper's Anthropologists and Anthropology, 'the final scene is a crowded tableau of familiar and, no doubt, well-loved faces with the older generation nodding approval in the wings. Cheers drown any distant sound of dissidence'. Very accurate, save that the 'giants' were doing their nodding from the very centre of the stage.

No doubt it was appropriate that the summing up should be restricted to members of the A.S.A., but this did mean that the voice of the youngest generation of anthropologists, those not yet members, was not heard. Yet obviously some of those new students will be teaching anthropology long after many of the present A.S.A. members have ceased to do so, and it would have been useful to have heard their verdict on proceedings which presumably had something to do with the future of the discipline. After all, the appearance over the past few years of a number of student anthropology journals suggests a considerable amount of enthusiasm among those now learning the subject. Perhaps one may suggest that this display of energy has not a little to do with the rather evident scarcity of critical and theoretically interesting work in our more well-known periodicals. Below, then, are recorded some of the reactions of just one student onlooker, to attempt to rectify a gap in the conference proceedings.

The general title of the eleven sessions was 'New Directions', and this, as many of the speakers in the last session pointed out, was something of a misnomer. Whatever the contents of the conference had been, such a 'déja vu' line was almost inevitable; any new departure by being shown to be 'old hat' could be converted into a tribute to the prescience of the departing seniors. What was disturbing was the legitimacy of the 'déja vu' feeling, for, in fact, little that was new was presented. One might even suggest that the first series of conferences in 1963 were more forward-looking; irrespective of the actual value of the papers in the volumes on 'models', the 'distribution of power', 'religion', and 'complex societies', these subjects would appear to offer more scope to innovation than sessions on 'transactionalism', 'fieldwork', 'African development', and the like. Many commented on this lack of novelty, but none expressed the view that it augured badly for the development of the discipline. And such new ventures as there were, for instance, Pocock's 'personal anthropology', or Ardener's paper on 'events', were regarded as poetic (by Stirling), and indeed,

Ardener's as mystical (by Leach). Signs of new directions were thus generally treated as not-well-formed utterances. But if innovation was rare, we should recall that most of those whom we associate with the pioneering movements of the last decade (many having developed out of Lévi-Strauss' work) were not giving papers. Leach and Douglas were vocal only from the floor; Needham was in America; and our most senior innovator, Evans-Pritchard, after 'opening' the proceedings one day late, kept as far away from the conference as possible. He told me when it was over that he had been very disappointed with most of the papers that he had received.

A painful aspect of the proceedings was the treatment dished out to Lévi-Strauss. After a very ably presented paper by Terry Turner, for instance, an atmosphere of hilarity descended on the occasion. With the benefit of field-work, Turner offered a reanalysis of a myth which Lévi-Strauss had dealt with in the Mythologiques, and pointed to a number of errors in his handling of the material. This induced a considerable amount of sniggering, which was especially odd in that Turner's own basic approach did not seem to be terribly different. Turner denied this saying that all he had gained from Lévi-Strauss was the general idea of the 'logic of the concrete'. But this, surely, was tantamount to admitting that he could not have made his analysis had Lévi-Strauss not opened up the field in such a provocative fashion. One was grateful to Douglas for pointing out the fact that all Turner had done was to 'add wheels to Lévi-Strauss' bicycle'.

In a different tone, Ardener concluded his paper on 'Some outstanding problems in the analysis of events' with the reflection that the terminology of structuralism might now impede our progress. He was, in short, trying to sketch the lineaments of a post-structural epoch. But, although some may now be thinking their way beyond Lévi-Strauss, there are dangers in suggesting that the discipline as a whole is now post-structural. After all, many anthropologists have not yet even reached the structural phase, and it is inconceivable that those who are still happy to announce themselves as unregenerate functionalists or as structural-functionals should have any idea of what 'neo-' anthropology is without a prior and genuine encounter with structuralism. It may well be therefore, that post-structural declarations at the moment will cause events to happen at a velocity which will be tactically unwise. And in this respect the rudeness of some of the rebuttals of Lévi-Strauss in recent writings by the few most influenced by him may harmfully reinforce the prejudice of the more conservative that they were right never to have shown any interest in his work. Neo-anthropological trends are anthropophagous; post-structuralism is obviously an anthropology which has consumed Lévi-Strauss. However we evaluate Lévi-Strauss' work in the future, it is undeniable that his genius and energy has made possible the transformation of social anthropology in this country. If some regard him as 'good to eat' then it should not be forgotten that it is because he has been so 'good to think with' that we now possess the strength to go beyond him. So if the time has come to depart from Lévi-Strauss, we shall have to do so remembering his vital historical role for the development of our subject. It is with a sense of gratitude, and not in a carnival spirit, that these moves must be made.

Fortes, one of those willing to declare himself an unregenerate functionalist, observed in his final address that we now had a unified discipline, no longer British anthropology, French anthropology and American anthropology. Which particular experiences during the conference induced such a view was not obvious. It seemed fairly clear that the differences between these traditions remained as great as ever, and it is in no way regrettable that it should continue to be so, provided the naivety which some have advocated we adopt with respect to other disciplines is not extended to other schools of our own. Unfortunately, this latter type of

insularity has also been very characteristic of the British tradition, and it is likely to be crucial for our future development that some are able to foster links with anthropological work being done in other countries, or at least, able to translate their advances into terms from which we can benefit. Evans-Pritchard has been the means by which we have gained greatly from the rich tradition of the Année Sociologique, but many of our shortcomings revealed in the course of the conference will only be made good if we broaden our scope still further. The 'closed system' mentality which has been the conventional wisdom for the last generation has taken a heavy toll, and we can only hope that it will pass into our history as our seniors leave the stage. For the fact is that the structural-functional era has left the British community with such a level of education and scientific illiteracy that most are hardly qualified to criticize intelligently, let alone make a positive contribution to such fields as 'mathematical anthropology' or 'ethology'. Needham's 'radical' anthropology, seeking for universals and investigating elementary experiences, obviously makes us highly dependent on other fields of scholarship. As he said in 'Percussion and Transition' our position is that we hardly know even how to state the problems. Likewise, to the extent that ethologists are after universals by examining the 'nature'/'culture' distinction, their work is of great potential value, no matter the quality of that already published. Yet the number of British anthropologists who possess the requisite background in the biological sciences is very small and reaction to their work too often tends to be either uncritical enthusiasm or an ill-informed dismissal of such beastly innovators.

In these fields, and in others, we shall thus need to cultivate some of the skills of other anthropological traditions. For instance, the absence of a distinguished Marxist tradition in this country will make us dependent upon that group of French scholars, represented at the conference by Godelier and Terray, if we are to assist in constructing a science of 'social formations'. For 'oral literature', too, we are not particularly well equipped to make much progress. Such interests in this country seem to have died more or less at the time Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown became dominant, and were virtually absent until the mid '60's. We may welcome this renewed interest, but it is possible that we shall first have to familiarise ourselves with the immense American contribution to the field before we can ourselves go ahead confidently. It may, in fact, be that these recent developments and the deficiencies which they expose will forge new links with American anthropology, for the survival there of the general cultural framework equips its members with a range of competences which we, for the most part, lack but which are perhaps becoming vital. The field of mathematics might here be mentioned since there was one conference session devoted to mathematical approaches. It seems that for many this still means 'advanced statistics', but this is to take what may be a very unproductive view. As Leach said in his Malinowski lecture, and Lévi-Strauss even earlier in 1954 in his paper 'The Mathematics of Man', it is more likely that we shall gain more by aiming at qualitative exactitude, for quantitative approaches to social phenomena may let everything of significance escape. Thus, as Lévi-Strauss has said, we should be misguided to mimic the mathematics of the natural sciences, and should go straight to bolder forms of mathematical thought which can handle non-metrical precision. The transformational sets of the Mythologiques may be seen, in part, as a demonstration of this view. Clearly, then, before setting out on mathematical approaches, we must first decide which sort of mathematics it is that we want. One suspects that mere increased use of statistical tests of significance and suchlike in writing up field material will prove to be simply a distracting game.

This commentary has obviously been mainly concerned with the future of the discipline, but it is not out of place to end with some reflections

on our past. One of the things which is perhaps most regrettable about the career of Evans-Pritchard is that his good manners prevented his sufficiently making clear those deep differences of outlook which separated him from his colleagues. Certainly, history is not the biography of great men, but we now run the risk of seeing him reduced to the level of his contemporaries by those unsympathetic to the movements which he lead, who may now take on the role of writing the intellectual history of our discipline. For the Times obituarist (14th Sept.) Evans-Pritchard rose to his peak with the publication of African Political Systems in 1940, surely one of the least exciting books with which he was ever associated. And for Kuper in Anthropologists and Anthropology he was just an 'Oxford structuralist' like Gluckman and Fortes. It is clear that not only our future but also our past are still in the balance.

Evans-Pritchard was never one to force his views on others, but some of his distinguished colleagues seem less willing to admit that the times are changing. One has heard it often said that he used to teach theology, and that some of us now indulge in philosophical bunk and airy metaphysics. No doubt when Gluckman complains (T.L.S. 3rd Aug.) that those chosen to represent the state of anthropology-Evans-Pritchard, Douglas, Needham and Leach (T.L.S. 6th July) - being mainly concerned with underlying intellectual patterns, do not really represent the subject, a show of hands would probably show him to be correct. Very probably the views of Gluckman himself would command more assent. Most, like him, would be irritated by that endless worry by some about what we can 'know' of other cultures (Gluckman brackets verstehen after 'know' possibly not understanding what the word means) and prefer just to get on with the job instead. But the point, of course, is just what sort of a 'job' anthropology is. Social scientists presumably feel little attracted by the version of anthropology which makes worries about the nature of the act of translation and understanding basic. The legacy of Evans-Pritchard must be preserved and his position in our history safeguarded. Hopefully our retiring seniors will not add their authority to the forces which would sap the strength of such new departures as we have already seen. If they decide to lead such reactionary movements rather than hand over gracefully, a considerable number of their colleagues are likely to applaud. And in that event, it is to be hoped that there will be a sufficient number of dissidents to swamp their enthusiasm.

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