REVIEW ARTICLE

UNPACKING ANTHROPOLOGY

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EDWIN ARDENER, *The Voice of Prophecy and Other Essays* (ed. Malcolm Chapman), Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1989. xxviii, 256 pp., References, Index, Tables, Figures, Frontispiece. £35.00/£14.95.

I

THIS is the posthumous volume that Edwin Ardener had once said (to this reviewer) would be the only form in which his most seminal essays would be published collectively. In fact, it did seem at one stage that the volume, or something like it, might after all appear in Ardener's lifetime. But, as if returning to the original prophecy, Ardener died suddenly (in 1987) and the volume was indeed mainly prepared after his death. As is common with scholars who die in the prime of their intellectual life, there have been many obituary tributes. There has already been so much said, including, in this volume, Chapman's introduction and postscripts by two other students of Ardener's, Kirsten Hastrup and Maryon McDonald, that it is difficult to avoid repetition. Let us then re-cast the exercise of the review in different terms, a task Ardener might have appreciated, and 'unpack', as he used to say, this volume in an exploratory way, discovering things about it as we define it.

II

Starting near the end with Hastrup's postscript, we find an exposition of Ardener's approach that is as clearly expressed as Ardener's own appeared elusive. It focuses on three of Ardener's notions: semantic density, event richness and historical density, which are neatly glossed as to do respectively with language, space and time. It is subtly expressed but also the most polished summary statement I know of the trajectory in Ardener's thought, shorn of all the inevitable untidiness that went into it, and one of which Ardener himself would have been incapable, so reluctant was he to stay for more than a moment with anything that looked like a definitive statement. As McDonald says, Ardener avoided the -isms and, as Chapman notes, he saw himself as ghosting between the interstices, difficult to pin down if you wanted a precise formulation. He regarded character-izations that began to assume theoretical status as always provisional, and no sooner had we begun to understand what a p-structure was in relation to an s-structure and how they derived from the idea of template, than we were carried on into language shadows, simultaneities and world-structures and, most intriguingly of all, as in the final chapter here ('"Remote Areas"—Some Theoretical Consider-ations'), into such expressions of everyday English language as 'remote areas', whose excavation tells us more than any analytical term, but which may itself, as Ardener sadly warned, eventually suffer the fate of taking on analytical status.

Chapman has done a remarkable editorial job and has also provided an introduction that retains the freshness of Ardener's creative provocations. The volume comes across as autobiographical in multiple and unintended ways. The book is of and about Ardener's work and achieves that task well, but Chapman also comes through as an intelligent and sensitive interpreter whom one would like to emerge from the shadows, just as Hastrup and McDonald establish their own legitimacy (the latter seeming to reflect in her comments on Ardener's empiricism something of her own remarkable experiences working in Brittany—a kind of many-mirrored imaging of Breton authenticity). This is not to say that there has been a merging of student and master, but that among the very few anthropologists who would let themselves be *visibly* captured by Ardener's prose and thence by his ideas, most were his students. Of course, a very much larger number have over the years moved in his direction, though rarely aware of the influence and even more rarely acknowledging the triggering insight.

All this relates directly to the book's title and, most importantly, to the heart of Ardener's mission. The title is bold and risky, as Chapman notes, but is probably right because it forces us to focus on prophecy as an epistemological problem rather than as to do with fortune-telling or the like. As Ardener says, prophets do not foretell: they tell us what is already there, but at the time we cannot understand them. They see before them what for others is neither visible nor communicable in existing language but which, through non-verbal means, eventually makes surface sense as the underlying logic of events and tendencies begins to be articulated in a style that informs common understanding. But it is

not that the language catches up with the underlying pattern. It is that the new language and the pattern are indissolubly formed through each other.

It has become commonplace nowadays to scoff at naïve ideas of language as referential, as principally a means by which objects are concretized and labelled. To use Ardener's early phrase, we now all accept that the linguistic and the social penetrate each other and even that the linguistic constantly 'contaminates' the social, a general view towards whose contribution Ardener acknowledges (p. 39) the work of Needham, whose *Belief, Language and Experience* (1972) also became an important landmark. But it is not always widely known how and why we arrived at this position. For this reason, it is good that Chapman included (a shortened version of) the introduction to the 1971 ASA volume, *Social Anthropology and Language*, for it has almost undergone the full cycle of datedness, and seems ripe for re-release at a time when much of a whole new generation knows only the panic of 'relevance' and seems to be rebuilding the wall that separates the practical from the conceptual.

We have to abstract what is valuable, and it is still useful to remind ourselves of the three levels at which Ardener saw language and anthropology as being related—the technical, pragmatic and explanatory—in order both to dispose of them, as he himself did, but also to pause over historical traces that may again become interesting. For instance, Ardener was at the time writing with great adulation of Saussure and against older, reconstructionist philological work. At that time, the 'master exemplar' was *langue* and *parole* and attendant oppositions, each having relational rather than intrinsic value. 'Living philology' of the Henry Sweet kind was regarded as the non-relational interest of a Malinowski who sought meanings only or mainly 'in context'. Yet, while Ardener continued to regard meaning as resting on relational notions of opposition, his last works seem also to point in the direction of a kind of philology, as the chapter on remote areas suggests: like the apparent inarticulateness of the prophet, the everyday term or phrase (odd-job word?) hovers over an assemblage of possible actions, thoughts and language, which may or may not be realized.

It would have been instructive to have Ardener address within his scheme Lienhardt's insight (1988: 107), with which I concur, that African (and, I would say, especially Bantu) languages have extraordinarily transparent etymologies. I find that it is sometimes possible to trace complex vocabulary back to an apparently original meaning. The transparency is sometimes evident to the speakers, who therefore have their own, non-Western epistemological framing that, through its visibility, invites referential thinking; not with regard to objects, however, but to conceptual-semantic archetypes. Many Africanist ethnographers must have witnessed and marvelled at how a diviner or other sage unravels a complex semantic domain and poignantly reveals an alleged root. In such situations, less is hidden from us and we are that much closer to the apparent origins of ideas, so that the 'word' can and does take on great intrinsic significance that does not have to be explained relationally, although relational significance can be found in it too. It is at once archetype, realization and expression.

III

Here we come to what I regard as an interesting tension in Ardener's work. A paper that is not in the volume, but which must stand as progenitor of the rest, is the celebrated one (1970) on zombies and witchcraft, and their co-variation with poverty and economic boom, which was first presented publicly in 1967 and published in the ASA volume on witchcraft, but which in part is found in even earlier work. Here was born the idea of the template, the underlying assemblage of ideas that can only be given partial realization at any one time, giving the impression of surface differences, which are, nevertheless, cut from the same template. It is an idea that, unlike Geertz's (1966: xx) neat but throwaway usage in his famous paper on religion as a cultural system, was nurtured over the years and took increasingly fruitful form during the rest of Ardener's career. The tension I see in Ardener's work is between the similarity that this notion shows to a standard structuralist account and the empirical flexibility that it implies and that threatens to break the constraints of any structure.

This tension entered Ardener's own conceptualizations and language. Apart from learning in the first chapter (the ASA volume introduction 'Social Anthropology and Language') that it is not the Prague School model of phonemic opposition and distinctiveness that anthropologists should be emulating, but rather that of relational opposition and distinctiveness in general, we are introduced in the second chapter ('The New Anthropology and its Critics', the 1970 Malinowski lecture) to the idea of underlying programme, qualitative generativeness as opposed to quantitative predictability, and then in later chapters (principally chapter 5, 'Some Outstanding Problems in the Analysis of Events', which was first presented and circulated widely in 1973) to the distinction between paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures. Ardener called the latter p- and s-structures, not just as an exercise in abbreviation, but because he wished to emphasize that they were not quite the same as the Saussurean and later Lévi-Straussian concepts, though very much related to them. But what was the difference and why the hesitancy?

The difference is three-fold: of scale, of his perception of otherness, and of his vision of loose as against tight boundedness. For Lévi-Strauss, it is the great mythological and marriage schemes of the world to which we address our analyses. For Ardener, it is the nooks and crannies of existence: alleged witches hiding under blankets in tin-roofed houses; differences between Ibo and English handshakes; women returning from the Bakweri forest to scream at their husbands under the general complaint of 'bush'; or the irony of retired Americans and other incomers maintaining and refurbishing the traditions of the Hebrides. Ardener re-established the apparently trivial as of exemplary significance and dissolved otherness as a matter to be created (rather than discovered), as much at home as abroad.

The tension, then, is that Ardener commonly resorted, especially early on, to a vocabulary of obvious structuralist derivation (including, from among his terms not mentioned so far, 'black box', 'linear chains', 'output', 'binary distinctions'

and so on), yet was practising a methodology on the small things of life that could be found anywhere and at any time, were experientially unbounded (not at all like a structure) and among which the surface/deep or signifier/signified distinction was of the loosest kind. In this empirical respect he was closer to Barthes than to Lévi-Strauss, though he disagreed with Barthes' view that semiotics should be part of linguistics: Ardener sided with Saussure, who argued for linguistics as part of a wider semiotics.

Now it is certainly clear that Ardener subscribed to a general semiotics, in the sense that he wished to relate the different communication media through which ideas and actions inform each other. This indeed is his idea of the 'simultaneity': signification straddles different channels and alters as it is understood, explained, renounced etc. We change that which we interpret in the very act of interpretation, but it is change that is ultimately 'generated' by the phenomenon of which we have become part through our act of interpretation. This view is now familiar and has reached us in more episodic and less systematic fashion via Geertz. I say systematic because Ardener was clearly very conscious of what he had written beforehand, so that ideas are referred back and connected very precisely. Through this continuity of conceptual overlap, however, Ardener gradually substituted lateral homologues for hierarchical levels of the appearance/essence type. As the chronologically ordered chapters proceed, they rely less and less on the basic structuralist idea of surface and deep and turn instead to, at most, a distinction between the hidden and the evident (in events) that twists inside out periodically, producing what Ardener calls parameter collapse and which is probably akin to what others have called paradigmatic change. Thus, the study of marriage as an institution that legally contains among other things sexuality can so easily become the study of 'outside' marriages and thence of 'prostitution', which reverses the paradigm by showing sexuality now as 'containing' the law in the sense of commonly being outside and beyond it.

IV

Chapman was right to arrange the chapters in the chronological order of their first appearance rather than of their actual publication. For it is in this way that we can see the shift from quasi-structuralist language to a use of vocabulary that becomes increasingly everyday and descriptive. It is indeed a shift from 'genre to life', which is how Ardener describes, in the penultimate chapter ('Social Anthropology and the Decline of Modernism'), the decline of modernism and its successor.

Yet there are distinctive sub-themes that punctuate the flow at different points, and, while it is against the spirit of his work to abstract them as separable, they are bound to be addressed as such. Thus, the issue of how to measure events and people when these same phenomena never remain sufficiently fixed to be

measurable by set criteria, is especially treated in the chapters on population and ethnicity—'Language, Ethnicity and Population' (first published in *JASO*) and 'Social Anthropology and Population'—but recurs in others. It is not just that human populations have the capacity, unlike animal species or plants, to redefine themselves (to call themselves by different 'ethnic' names) at the very point at which you put them in a category to be counted. This is one problem. Another more fundamental problem is that human 'groups' are also constantly re-evaluating the criteria by which they identify themselves. The demographer presupposes a standardization of his/her data by resort to what appear to be such universal measures as gender and age, and so irons out the creases that would otherwise appear in the concepts that lie behind such measures. As Ardener says, the outrageous or anomalous become susceptible to a levelling-out operation. In other words, before we measure we have to define the unit of measurement, and to define it means taking into account peoples' own definitions as well as our own, which, as we know, are affected significantly by this very process. Ardener was well aware of the pitfalls of statistical 'truths', having worked in this area in his early studies of fertility and divorce. He saw the above, later, chapters as keeping us on constant alert for this mutual relatedness of measurement and definition, and to the fact that to measure is always to raise problems of definition. It was, as with other sub-themes, a challenge to the tendency in social science to privilege an alleged underlying statistical objectivity and to separate it from what some might present as surface deviatory behaviour.

The same concern comes across in the chapters—' "Behaviour": A Social Anthropological Criticism' (another first published in *JASO*) and, to a lesser extent, '"Social Fitness" and the Idea of "Survival"'—that reject both naïve and sophisticated arguments alike that animal and human behaviour can be understood as commensurately similar. In many ways, however, Ardener presents the problem as that of the impossibility of translating across cultures according to a universally understood code: for different cultures, read animal and human, and see this as allegorical. The argument for the incommensurability of cultures, echoed by Feyerabend and others, is well taken as a methodological starting-point. But how would Ardener have reacted to the extraordinary bio-genetic changes that are now envisaged within science, whose implications are of patterns that go far beyond our facile distinction between human and animal? These after all are theories that in their experimental practice are wreaking havoc with even our own anthropological ideas of kinship: who is the mother of the child, or to whom does the child 'belong', and what now the significance of oppositional patterns of relatedness? Are we far from the factory-like production of babies for whom the sentiment of kinship could only arise through adoption, and could a notion of incest, and therefore of kinship *rules*, have any significance in such a system? As Strathern (1992) has been showing recently, bio-power indeed.

V

The mention of power raises a perennial criticism of Ardener's work, which is that, in its concern with the apparently small things of life and with semiotics as itself one of the allegedly small things, it failed to grapple with issues of tyranny, of great historical changes, and with the common questions of statehood and people. I think it is perfectly true that with Ardener's approach you can, so to speak, paint yourself into a semantic corner and, with great finesse, do no more than counter such charges with the claim that it is precisely the small things that both make up the large and act as a conceptual basis for it. Ardener would probably have accepted this point, to judge by the pleasure he took when I once remarked that his work on 'the woman question' was really a political statement, or at least a study of the mainsprings of power differences. Certainly his three papers focused on 'the woman question' ('Belief and the Problem of Women', 'The "Problem" Revisited', 'The Problem of Dominance'; chapters 4, 8 and 12 here) reached out to a much larger audience than any of his others and played a major part in pre- and post-feminist debates. The last seemed most directly addressed to feminism and, using the origins of women's dominance by men as a 'vehicle', formulated the argument that minor, often biological differences, can become socially and then culturally elaborated to form the basis of class, ethnic and other major social divisions, but that human consciousness need not remain so 'false' and unquestion- ing that we are condemned to be permanently enslaved by such predispositions. ·The ending here, with its curious slide into an uncharacteristic universalizing plea for a happy ending, is clearly weak and seems to reinforce the claim that there is a need for some kind of accommodation with history, a task that may well be that of Ardener's posthumous volume on Cameroonian coastal society over the last three centuries that we are promised.

VI

Perhaps the best way to read the volume is to not take too seriously the earlier, though quite long-lasting structuralist-like concepts but to focus instead on the unfamiliar use of familiar terms. For example, we learn so much more about the problems both of prophecy and of how apparently different events are related to each other through the idea of 'blank banners' ('Social Anthropology and Language'; chapter 1) and its cognate, 'hollow categories' ('Social Anthropology and Population': chapter 7). The former describes that moment of hesitancy in the mobilization of a 'movement' when people gather for a purpose they know to be important to them but for which they lack the language to express it. The latter idea catches admirably the conceptual awkwardness of ethnic self and other classifications, which often seem to come from nowhere: an ethnic group suddenly

becomes a highly visible unit; a former such group seems equally suddenly to have no substance, for its members seem mostly to belong elsewhere; in-between such apparent transformations are the areas of doubt, uncertainty and reformulation, as those who were 'dying out' seem now to have regathered while those who were many and strong are now said to be dispersed or 'lost'.

The notion of 'event richness' is especially interesting. It seems at first sight scandalous to suggest that the Bakweri are event-rich, in that everything that happens seems to them to be unique and so to have new and special significance, and that the Ibo, on their own admission, are event-impoverished, by virtue of the fact that they lead routine lives laced with occasional excitement whose outcome is, however, seen to be broadly predictable within a narrow range of possibilities. One is reminded of Gluckman's (1962: 34) equally scandalous remark that technologically simple societies have more ritual than complex ones. But, as an aspect of self-definition and therefore of experience, such distinctions seem inescapable, although to go beyond this broad generalization to other more interesting statements makes increasingly imaginative demands that may well result in the analytical complexity that suffocates the inspirational value of using 'natural' language.

VII

This takes us on to the question of whether it is at all legitimate to ask where Ardener's work leads. He himself abandoned the structuralist load that he had had to carry first (at a time when few others were believers). In turning to non-structuralist vocabulary, he makes it quite clear in the later chapters that the very process of unpacking ordinary 'natural' language subverted its openness: instead of *experiencing* the difference between a remote and non-remote area, we shall, after reading the last chapter, *classify* it on the basis of ossifying criteria. This is part of the contamination of the social, not so much by language, as Ardener put it, but by analytical terms. The salvation, however, is that new everyday terms and phrases are coined continually in every society and are consubstantive with and perhaps constitutive of events and thought-tendencies within it. There is, therefore, always more ethnography where that came from.

Ardener, it is true, used only ethnographic snippets in his papers, and it is highly questionable whether he could have said more, theoretically or epistemologically, in a full-length ethnographic monograph than he did say, with such economy, in his short papers. I certainly benefit from rereading his essays, but I am also always left with a nagging worry that he offers us only succulent tastes of a meal that we shall have actually to cook ourselves. Perhaps that is a fair division of labour. Or perhaps it reflects the gap between anthropological theory and ethnographic narrative rather than any failing on Ardener's part. I

would still have liked to have seen Ardener write the Bakweri monograph, if only to learn what difference, if any, it might have made. I suspect none, which is no reproach, but a recognition of the need to distinguish frankly between the ethnography that painstakingly produces the insight and the elegant crystallization of the latter for more general consumption.

Others, including Chapman, Hastrup and McDonald, have written the book-length ethnographies that we still demand as evidence of apprenticeship in our trade, and these books are certainly highly regarded in the subject. The question that needs to be asked is how much one can tell nowadays from reading them that these and subsequent ethnographies have been shaped by Ardener's ideas. We know their tutorial provenance and can certainly see a distinctiveness. Yet, if Ardener's view of the prophet is correct, and if he was one himself, then his ideas will have passed, or will in due course pass, into common and unacknowledged usage, and as time goes on we shall not be able to recognize such distinctiveness. Prophets, after all, are unintelligible when they begin to speak, but, once their ideas are absorbed, become banal. By this definition, then, prophets only become so in retrospect, after their ideas have had their effect and become commonplace. It may be reassuring to suggest that, by this latter criterion, Ardener was not a prophet, for though he developed a language for empiricizing what we may identify as a structuralist and then post-structuralist trend in social anthropology that was often difficult to understand, and although many of his ideas have indeed percolated into the body of anthropological assumptions, there remain, especially in the essays gathered in this volume, intriguing suggestions and insights that will take a good few years yet to unpack and that remain far from banal.

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