

REVIEW ARTICLE

TENSIONS AND ONOMASTICS

Banton (1964) 'Social Anthropology has been distinguished by intellectual brilliance'.

Recently, programmatic statements have been made by three members of the Institute. (1970, 1970, 1971) They relate to whether or not British Social Anthropology has arrived at a critical stage of its history. Needham's paper contains an outline of those criteria necessary to evaluate the claims disciplines make when called upon to justify their autonomous identities. Needham suggests that of these criteria—exclusive subject matter, special methods of analysis, distinctive body of theory, achievements (if these be related to a distinctive intellectual approach) — a 'unitary and continuous past so far as ideas are concerned' is of primary importance. Social Anthropology's apparently weak claims to being a distinctive discipline are readily indicated on the application of these criteria. Furthermore, since 'the more scholarly and technically expert an investigation, the less feasible can it be to retain that panoptic vision which has been the source of strength to Social Anthropology and which can even be regarded as all that really defines it' (44) what limited identity the subject once had is on the wane.

This, for Needham, is not a matter of conjecture but of historical fact. It is clear that social anthropology, in an 'accelerating' manner, is 'splitting up', to the extent that a decisive prediction is justifiable — 'both the personnel of anthropology and their ideas will [and this is 'almost inevitable'] become dispersed among other academic subjects' (44). This is what is happening, and what can be reasonably predicted. But Needham's paper is also about what ought to happen. His final sentence runs — 'If social anthropology takes this course (of progressive dissolution as members merge with other disciplines) it will not need to face disintegration; it will undergo an iridescent metamorphosis' (46: my emphasis).

This raises a problem: Needham is suggesting 1) that anthropology is, and can be expected to, disintegrate, and 2), as his title also indicates, the subject is facing a divide — a choice between disintegration and metamorphosis. I think that what he must have in mind is this. Whatever the case, social anthropology as an institutionalised discipline will disintegrate. But if we welcome this and actively affiliate with other disciplines that which is most worthwhile in our subject will be retained. If, on the other hand, a tortured and labourious rearguard fight is engaged in, the subject will tend to become more inward looking and will have to face the prospect of being totally discredited. So the alternatives are — accept disintegration with open arms in which case all that will disappear will be the title of the subject and certain moribund aspects, or attempt to prevent the inevitable which would result in a more total dissolution.

It is perhaps strange that given his prediction Needham should write 'it will not need to face disintegration'. 'It' cannot refer to the situation after 'iridescent metamorphosis' (46) precisely because we have to face disintegration to achieve this new situation. What, presumably, Needham means by 'it' are those aspects of anthropology which are worth saving, in which case what social anthropology need not face is the danger of being discredited. So, since metamorphosis can only come out of dissolution, it would perhaps have been clearer if Needham had written instead: 'it will not need to face becoming part of intellectual history'. The choice is between positive and negative disintegration, between rebirth and death. It is also curious that if anthropology can invigorate other disciplines (that is implied by the term 'iridescent'), why should we

move out 'it'? Or, to put it another way, if 'it' refers to that of value in the subject, why face dissolution? What, in terms of Needham's proposal, does not have to be faced is discredit. However, if this occurred, other scholars would, so to speak, 'move in' (as anthropologists have into such fields as the rather inward looking, traditionalist subject of European mythology) and so effect precisely that move Needham is arguing for - but from the the opposite direction.

One suspects that it is not so much the failure of our subject to live up to the listed criteria which encourages Needham in his argument (after all, the same problem affects most of those social sciences with which we might amalgamate), but the intellectual poverty of many anthropologists and their investigations. I do not suppose that many thoughtful anthropologists would disagree with this assessment of the subject as taught in many British Universities. A number of participants do appear to be mesmerized by the heap of relatively simple 'discoveries' that constitute the core of their tradition, and tend to spend their time re-arranging the building blocks, not to speak of exposing their theoretical poverty through demystifying and mystifying such techniques as 'structuralism'. But Needham's conclusion, to which I will return, that unless we actively participate in disintegrating our discipline through affiliating with researchers in other fields, disintegration will occur without 'iridescent metamorphosis' appears to be more debatable.

Banaji also speaks of a 'future distracted between disparate sectors of the human sciences' and likewise relates this to the 'arrested' intellectual development of British Anthropology'. Much of his paper is taken up with outlines of the roots of the various theoretical failures that have occurred in the course of this history. Many of the criticisms are well known to anthropologists, but Banaji's observations become more interesting as he progresses into the less crystallised realms of modern anthropology. Unfortunately the scope of his article does not extend to cover the proposed alternative - a Marxist science of social formations. His evaluation of the impact of structuralism suffers in that one strand of structuralist thought is virtually ignored. For Banaji, structural techniques 1) treat social facts as part of a system of communication and 2) regard social phenomena as projections of unconscious processes. It is then claimed that the procedure, in this strong sense, has been either ignored, or 'progressively dismantled' by British Anthropologists. One suspects that this is not an all-together fair summary. Think, for example, of Dialectic in Practical Religion (edt. Loach). And Banaji underestimates the significance of Needham's work if he regards it as only the "excessively restrictive and aseismic use of the structural method" in the total structural analysis of prescriptive alliance systems. Furthermore, has not the structuralist impact been equally uneven in the context of French Anthropology?

But my main objection is that another revolution has occurred, one that Banaji only mentions in passing ('to the growing emphasis placed on a hermeneutic as opposed to a structural mode of analysis'). The tradition, traceable to such as Evans-Pritchard, Collingwood and Weber and which we can label 'structural hermeneutics' is still of the foremost importance in British Anthropology, and in fact, from a remark that Lévi-Strauss made whilst recently in Oxford, he himself would agree that the primary task of the anthropologist is as much to make intelligible odd customs and beliefs as it is to discern unconscious generating mechanisms.

On first sight Ardener's paper might also appear to substantiate those two claims that anthropology is facing disintegration; he speaks of an epistemological break of such a fundamental order that the two primary styles of investigation popular today operate in different conceptual spaces'. But although mention is made of the chaotic stage of the 'new anthropology', a characteristic which

can be traced to the insecurity felt by those who are rather tentatively moving beyond the canons bounds and limitations of traditional empiricism, he clearly is not suggesting that this hesitancy represents anything more than a passing phase. In direct contradistinction to Banaji's treatment of Needham, Needham is presented as one of those select few who have fully grasped the implications of the new style. No mention is made of any relapse in British Anthropology from the purity of continental endeavours. Instead, the epistemological security of the new approach is emphasized by its relation to recent tendencies in other disciplines which also seek modes of interpretation supplementary to positivism.

Ardener, succinctly and with considerable plausibility, justifies the logical stature of analysis in terms of programmes and paradigms, and goes a long way towards demonstrating that the 'earth' of the old style empiricists plea - 'come back down to earth' does not exist in that simple sense. This formulation clearly clarifies and strengthens the anthropological response to modern marxist theorising. In any case, it is not clear, for Banaji, whether anthropology will retain its distinctiveness or whether it will become assimilated into the marxist sciences - the former is implied in his phrase - 'Marxist Anthropologists', the latter in his plea for a science of social formations. What Ardener does is to indicate that at least in certain crucial respects the thought of such Marxist philosopher as Althusser is developing in a direction surprisingly akin to that already marked out by the 'new anthropology'.

This is not the place to attempt to fill in the details of Ardener's programmatic statement, which will be soon in print. For those who want to gain some picture of the interplay of the two planes of analysis, syntagmatic and paradigmatic, perhaps one of the most useful books to read is Leach's Pul Eliya, since the crucial theoretical status of ecology is therein realised. And, in another vein, Hossa's The Glass Bead Game more than adequately suggests the delights and pitfalls of paradigmatic analysis. What must be emphasized is that this Malinowski Memorial Lecture in the first comprehensive statement to appear in the anthropological literature devoted to analysing the tensions latent in our subject in terms more adequate to the reality. The notions structuralism/functionalism are supplemented, on another plane (so no direct correspondences should be looked for) by the terms syntagmatic and paradigmatic.

But what relation does Ardener's paper bear to Needham's? In the first place, what would be the adverse effects of 'progressive dissolution'?

1) Needham himself, in his introductory remarks on the future of kinship, maintains that it is impossible to treat one such topic in isolation, but this view would appear to exist in tension with an opinion we have already noted - that disintegration is already occurring because the Maussian epistemologic vision is more or less a myth.
2) As his own contributions to structural analysis suggest, a 'totalized' view of certain social phenomena remains a most profitable stance to take.

3) If the state of anthropology in Germany is anything to go by, many positive benefits do appear to be acquired through scholars interested in the same problems working together within a common terminology and stock of ideas. It does not matter where such ideas come from; what does count is that major problems are tackled systematically - as, for example, by the Annae Sociologique School.

4) A possible objection to this last point is that there are no distinctively anthropological problems. If Lévi-Strauss is anything to go by, there are. 'The distinctive feature of anthropology among the human sciences is to look at man from the very point where, at each period in history, it was considered that anything man-like had ceased to exist' (Lévi-Strauss 1966:127). Needham does not appear to take full cognizance of the fact that many concerns are unique to and constitutive of anthropology, in that no other disciplines are investigating such matters.

The positive effects of dissolution have already been hinted at - in the face of the intellectual poverty of some branches of anthropology, Needham's suggestion for wiping the slate clean by absorption into more distinguished disciplines might appear to be the only answer. And it is almost certainly true that some branches of the subject (Needham mentions economic and political anthropology) could with advantage become affiliated to their 'mother subjects'. If Ardener's paper is to be taken as a correct portrayal of recent developments in anthropology, then the first of these arguments is considerably weakened. As Needham must well know, since he has taught so many of them, there is a new generation of students being trained, at least at Oxford, in the style as outlined by Ardener. That one of our most distinguished and sensitive thinkers should, as a result of an all too justified concern at the current state of the subject, recommend the particular course of action that he does is understandable. Nevertheless, it is difficult for the younger generation of us to give up just when the dialogue between the new anthropology and structural-functionalism is so rapidly gaining momentum.

What will happen to this debate if the more able minds retreat to other disciplines? Debates are generally worthwhile and, since they belong to particular historical moments, they cannot be transplanted to alien contexts. In any case, if disintegration does occur, the residue that will be left behind will probably be those elements most likely to discredit the subject. If anthropology can be reinvigorated from within through the internal working-out of the ideas of such as Winch (1), the structural linguistics, semiologists and others developing the 'new paradigm', is the need for assimilation with other branches of knowledge so urgent?

To return to labeling. The articles under review can all be treated as attempts to isolate and so label techniques, subjects, paradigms and theoretical approaches. It seems to me that when what is at stake is the nature of different styles of investigation, the organisational devices so applied to characterize the approaches must be selected with the utmost care; in this manner Ardener is able to transform our view of what is already going on. But when it comes to labeling disciplines, a very different situation prevails. In the mesh of social sciences, labels should retain their distinctive character as such when they are applied to either disciplines or topics such as kinship. After all, to say that 'there is no such thing as Kinship' (Needham:34) is a measure of analytical success. Why should we expect, a priori, there to be anything distinctive about the particular social sciences, when what is isolatable, what we work on, is a series of problems in accordance with a series of techniques?

If the problem and techniques of anthropology were to become 'weak' Needham's viewpoint would come to bear more weight. But, as it is, he attempts to back up his case, as founded on an in part justifiable dissatisfaction, by demanding of a label a set of criteriological demands which it should not be made to bear. It is unfortunate that academic, institutionalized, boundaries are arbitrary but it only heightens their importance to apply such criteria. And then to speak of the disintegration of anthropology serves only to make the label more concrete than it really is. This could work, for example, to encourage those tendencies within anthropology that should be eroded, to react and thereby acquire a false sense of identity.

Surely, for all scholarly ends it hardly matters what we label ourselves and the institutional situation of a discipline is not of all that significance in the actual task of advancing knowledge. To stress the identity of 'social anthropology' can be as misleading as basing arguments on the weak denotative powers of the title. What is important are the limits of theoretical paradigms, as

as discussed by both Ardener and Banaji, not the limits of disciplines. In fact, if emphasis be placed on the latter, the map of the paradigms becomes correspondingly distorted; a situation which has prevailed for too long. The role of titles becomes increasingly less as one moves away from paradigms - problems to subject - matters and disciplines. The former, generate the latter, so if Levi-Strauss (1966:127) is correct (the traditional problems of anthropology "are assuming new forms while none of them can be said to be exhausted") there is no fear that the institutionalized reality of anthropology will become hollow, time consuming and money wasting. Bearing in mind 'different conceptual spaces' Ardener would no doubt agree with Levi-Strauss' comment - 'Anthropology will survive in a changing world by allowing itself to perish in order to be born again under a new guise' (1966: 126) but that is not the same thing as an 'iridescent metamorphosis' of the variety suggested by Needham. Perhaps the time for pessimism is past - who today could agree with Worsley that 'no more powerful alternative to structural/functionalism has been generated within anthropology itself? (2)

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References:

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Notes

- (1) Ardener's paper, it should be noted, gives full weight to the views expressed by Winob.
- (2) The ideas expressed in this article have gained from conversation with Malcolm Crick.

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