

## THE BRITISH TRADITION IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

Donald G. MacRae

A title of this kind implies several assumptions and raises some questions. Given that there is a specifically British tradition in Social Anthropology--and the phrase itself is very British--we may ask what is this tradition; is it legitimate; is it important; whence has it come; what is its future, and so on. We will also ask, if we are wise, more fundamental questions: what is a tradition in social science, and what is the significance of traditions?

A tradition may perhaps be taken as a kind of institution. Patterns of thought and behavior, no matter how established in the first place, form a tradition as they form all institutions. But traditions are loose sorts of institutions: where some institutions lay down in advance every act, every detail, every word--are in fact prescriptive and ritual--others permit or demand interpretation and permit choice. Such permissiveness within very wide limits is one of the most characteristic features of a tradition as of several other kinds of institution.

In addition traditions acquire their legitimacy and the sanctions of their authority from time. This prestige of time, the authority of antiquity, is a persistent and odd fact of social psychology. Bacon's maxim, "Antiquitas saeculi, juventus mundi," might seem a cogent anti-antiquarian principle, but though legitimation by novelty is not even uncommon, it is less frequent and less cogent in practice than its converse. One result of this is the invention of a false past to justify a tradition--rather like the faking of genealogies which is so common among some peoples--or, more often, the selection of facts to falsify history and suggest immemorial antiquity. I hope I shall engage in neither of these.

But time of itself is not enough to legitimate a tradition--certainly not a scientific one. Success of some kind is also required (we will examine some of the varieties of success rather later), and one might even say that for a tradition to survive and flourish it must also be functional: if you like a functional constituent of culture. It is this which makes the existence of tradition and of "schools" within traditions, a necessary constituent of all science and scholarship. This point needs no elaboration; nor, I am sure, does its converse: the fact that any tradition in the world of learning which goes unexamined and unquestioned is bound to become decadent, sterile and in the end pernicious.

Now one form of questioning is by comparison. Anthropology flourishes in both the United States and the Commonwealth. If we leave aside so far as is possible physical anthropology, archaeology and the study of material culture we are left with what is on the whole referred to in America as Cultural and in Britain as Social Anthropology. It may help to define the

British tradition and to criticize it if we begin, rapidly and superficially enough, by comparing these. I have tried to list in parallel columns a number of descriptive adjectives and affiliations which seem to me typical and frequently used of the two traditions. Here, subject to a proviso or two, is the inventory:

	<u>British</u>	<u>American</u>
Descriptive adjectives	Social	Cultural
	Structural	Historical
	Sociologicistic	Psychologicistic
	Analytic	"Holistic"
Affiliations and interests	Administration	Biology
	Economics	Archaeology
	Politics	Linguistics
	Kinship	Symbolic systems

Such a listing is, of course, arbitrary. I am well aware of the many exceptions and qualifications to which any such a crude procedure is subject--for example the importance of Indian administration and affairs to the development of American anthropology, of Darwinism to the growth of British investigation, etc. Nor am I unmindful of the fact that neither propositions in the social sciences nor those about them are often of a simple true/false, either/or variety. Far more often and more profitably are they of a more than less kind--and my inventory is of this species. In providing it I have perhaps gone some way to defining what the British tradition is today and how it differs from other possible ways of approaching the same field.

It is easy to give this tradition its historical roots. Behind all modern anthropology lies the legacy of the culture history of the eighteenth century--of Montesquieu, Voltaire and Condorcet; of Diderot who is too often neglected; of Vico and Herder who are in some sense peripheral. But the foundation is the age of reason and British social anthropology is specifically British--I am as a Scot and lokal-patriot, even inclined to say specifically Scottish. Hume in religion, Adam Smith in economics and comparative morals, Adam Ferguson in politics and kinship, Lord Monboddo in the anticipation of biological evolution and anthropological diffusionism--damnosa hereditas!--are the true progenitors of an unbroken lineage.

The continuation of their concerns before and throughout the time of Darwin and Spencer can be seen in a variety of writers. Lane's Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians and the extensive comparative studies of Maine, are only highpoints in a range of proto-scientific speculation and ethnographic results of pro-consular leisure in the rapidly expanding British empire and of increasing missionary endeavor. It is easy to praise a Lane, a Meadows or a Maine and to dismiss the present importance of the rest of this material, but it often possesses a candor, a directness and a clarity which are some guarantee of objectivity--and when these men wrote acculturation had not proceeded very far, and that too was an advantage. (The importance of this was brought sharply home to me in West Africa. Sources on Ashanti a century older than Rattray proved sometimes more useful than his classic and remarkable work.)

A short paper like this is no place to discuss the rise and decline of social Darwinism or to assess its contribution, though the stimulus given to anthropological researches is beyond all question. But something must be said of that Spencer whom no one reads, all abuse, and to whom all are indebted. It is not the macro-sociology of Spencer that matters today. What is important as I have pointed out elsewhere is his conceptual apparatus--"structure," "function" and "institution" all derive their modern usage from him--and his analysis of the movement of societies from "undifferentiated homogeneity" to "heterogeneity" which gave so central a clue to Durkheim's study of the role and significance of the division of labor in society. And from Durkheim the theory of nearly all modern British social anthropology descends through two major lineages.

Before examining these lineages and the contemporary situation something should be said in passing of the age of Tylor and Frazer. Their direct influence has been small and, indeed, Tylor through the concept of culture has played a larger part in American than in English work. But they simultaneously brought social anthropology into the universities and to the attention of the public. Marrett certainly continued their concerns, but their real influence was perhaps on classicists from Gilbert Murray to Cornford, and in the excitement they engendered. Jane Harrison has described this charmingly:

We Hellenists were in truth at that time a "people who sat in darkness," but we were soon to see a great light, two great lights--archaeology and anthropology. Classics were turning in their long sleep. Old men began to see visions, young men to dream dreams. I had just left Cambridge when Schliemann began to dig at Troy. Among my own contemporaries was J. G. Frazer, soon to light the dark world of savage superstition with a gleam from The Golden Bough. The happy title of that great book . . . made it arrest the attention of scholars. They saw in comparative anthropology a serious subject actually capable of elucidating a Greek or Latin text. Tylor had written and spoken; Robertson Smith, exiled for heresy, had seen the Star in the East; in vain; we classical deaf-adders stopped our ears and closed our eyes; but at the mere sound of the magical words "Golden Bough" the scales fell--we heard and understood.

The Tylor Festschrift and the symposium on Anthropology and the Classics are other witnesses to this influence, and the Golden Bough has become a very successful paperback. Perhaps Frazer is due for an academic revival, but he will probably have to wait for it. His technical contribution was small, and it is technique that gives prestige more certainly than any other factor in British social anthropology today. His friend and predecessor, Robertson Smith, has perhaps survived better owing to the fact that his work still concerns both theologians and orientologists.

With Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski we enter the modern world, though the lush prose of the latter is sometimes more eloquent than successful and has an odd nineteenth century ring. Essentially, Radcliffe-Brown had the more sociological, Malinowski the more psychological approach to data. Yet in the perspective of history they look increasingly similar in their

contributions however different in their personalities and pupils. Durkheim's concern with segmentary organization, with mechanical social solidarity, with the concept of function, and--less centrally--with collective representations and religion provide the framework of their thought. However much the name "functionalism" may be repudiated, it not unfairly describes their position.

It can, I think, be rapidly summarized. It is the doctrine that all institutions and practices in society subserve needs of which the actors in society are not themselves necessarily aware nor capable of describing correctly. These needs may be biological, psychological, or social--this is never clear in Malinowski who shifted his ground: for Radcliffe-Brown, more Durkheimian, they were essentially social and structural. Probably this is true for Malinowski also, for to both writers the perpetuation of a given social system as such was the central end of social action. There is an intermeshing of functions into a unique institutional-functional configuration for each society which is self-sustaining and self-perpetuating--an idea particularly attractive to Malinowski, derived perhaps ultimately from Burke in the eighteenth century. Societies are seamless, consistent, logical. Historical questions cannot therefore expect answers of much explanatory value, hypothetical history is (rightly) condemned, but it is difficult to understand how any kind of endogenous social change can take place within the terms of such an analysis.

As a sociologist I think functionalism a form of error--though not all error; far from it! --and if it is error it is at least fruitful error. Functionalism has one thing in common with the more sophisticated forms of Marxism: it concentrates attention on the non-obvious, the latent and difficult in social structure. And it is far more flexible, more realistic than Marxian in every respect save its anti-historicism. In the field it has found its justification, though there it may have tempted some workers to stress social unity and ignore schism in an unrealistic fashion. Yet it is hard to think of a better tool for research among peoples without documentation to whom quantitative techniques cannot be applied.

And with fieldwork we enter on another element of the tradition. Haddon, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski all pioneered what has become almost a rite de passage and a caste mark. To become a social anthropologist one must have done fieldwork in an approved way; to be recognized as one this fact should have appropriate monographic record. Professor Evans-Pritchard's inaugural lecture in Oxford most clearly establishes the ideal--and therefore rare--pattern of the ritual. And it has proved itself in two ways: the scientific contribution has been and continues to be great; bound together by ritual and recognition anthropologists in Britain form a formidable academic clan, divided into two descent groups, fierce and active in internal feud, but united in a common pride, for a common scientific endeavor, and for defense against all external attack.

To drop the metaphor this means that social anthropology is, among other things, now a small but I think flourishing profession. The subject, like social work and unlike sociology, has high status. It is associated with colonial administration--traditionally a career for a gentleman, and entrance into the profession and acceptance by it confers status in Britain whatever

the social or geographical origins of the entrant. This, too, is an aspect of the tradition, and a fact tending to its perpetuation.

And the tradition is alive. There are certain obvious threats in the future and the present, but they are not I think serious: certainly when I survey my anthropological friends and colleagues (it would be invidious to name them) I feel confidence in their power to adapt, and the writings of the leaders of the clan suggest that adaptation to meet these threats is already well under way. One threat is external: the fact that the old world of anthropology is becoming used up: the monographs have largely been written, and culture change and industrialization proceed apace. The world of "under-development" is open to everyone, not merely to anthropologists. Secondly there is the inadequacy of functionalism. This is only partial, but it is increasingly apparent, and a revision of theory is perhaps overdue. Yet neither of these is very serious.

Whether or not fieldwork can hold its old place the anthropologist can bring highly specific skills to social research in the underdeveloped territories; he can try to give his work a temporal articulation by documentary research--the amount of documentation about primitives is underestimated and underexplored--and he can seriously engage in comparative sociology. In fact, in a lively and encouraging way, all these things are already going forward.

In the study of modern society through his concern for kin relationships and his skill in small societies--rural or specialized urban industrial groups--the anthropologist can contribute independently of and in supplementation to the sociologist or social administrator. His feeling for the gemeinschaftlich is particularly important in stressing what the other specializing most neglect, and there should be no bar to any contribution to our understanding of the complex and imperfect factors of industrial society. Work in these directions should of itself revivify theory without the recourse to a neo-marxism which is sometimes evident. And for those who are disconsolate at the prospect of change within tradition there will still, for a long time, be monographs (important and yet fully traditional) to be written!

Yet I expect, and believe I see taking place on the one hand, a new rapprochement of social anthropology and sociology--a tendency always present; on the other a new concern with the past and with culture history and the practical and theoretical problems of the comparative method. Whether this should be regarded as a restoration or as a renewal of the tradition is a point which hardly matters. Certainly I believe the American and British traditions are growing more alike. We should not forget that they can be seen not just as reflecting differences and errors, but also as evidence of a division of labor, and that both still flourish into our new and different age.

#### ENDNOTE

- (1) A paper read to the third annual meeting of the Kroeber Anthropological Society, May 16, 1959, Berkeley, California.