

# Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter

Edited by Talal Asad

# Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter

# **Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter**

**Edited by Talal Asad**

**Ithaca Press: London  
Humanities Press: Atlantic Highlands, N.J.**

**First edition printed & published  
by Ithaca Press and Humanities  
Press**

**Reprint 1975 by Ithaca Press  
and Humanities Press**

**© The Authors 1973**

***Printed in The United States of America***

**ISBN 0-903729-00-8 Library Edition**

**ISBN 0-903729-01-6 Paperback Edition**

**U.S.A. ISBN 0-391-00391-7 Paperback edition**

# Contents

- + 9 Talal Asad: *Introduction*
- 21 Part 1: General Studies
- 23 Peter Forster: *A Review of the New Left Critique of Social Anthropology*
- 41 Wendy James: *The Anthropologist as reluctant Imperialist*
- 71 Stephan Feuchtwang: *The Discipline and its Sponsors*
- 103 Talal Asad: *Two European Images of Non-European Rule*
- 121 Part 2: Case Studies
- + 123 Helen Lackner: *Colonial Administration and Social Anthropology: Eastern Nigeria 1920–1940*
- 153 James Faris: *Pax Britannica and the Sudan: S F Nadel*
- 173 Richard Brown: *Anthropology and Colonial Rule: Godfrey Wilson and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, Northern Rhodesia*
- + 199 John Clammer: *Colonialism and the Perception of Tradition in Fiji*
- 223 Roger Owen: *Imperial Policy and Theories of Social Change: Sir Alfred Lyall in India*
- 245 Roy Willis: *An Indigenous Critique of Colonialism: The Fipa of Tanzania*
- + 259 Abdel Ghaffar M Ahmed: *Some Remarks from the Third World on Anthropology and Colonialism: the Sudan*
- 273 Philip Marfleet: *Bibliographical Notes on the Debate*
- 285 Index

## INTRODUCTION

### Talal Asad

British functional anthropology began to emerge as a distinctive discipline shortly after the First World War through the efforts of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, but it was not until after the Second World War that it gained an assured academic status in the universities. Compared with the two decades before the Second World War an enormous quantity of anthropological writing was published in the two decades after it. Within this brief period its claim to academic respectability was virtually unchallenged. By 1961 a prominent sociologist could write that "social anthropology is, among other things, a small but I think flourishing profession. The subject, like social work and unlike sociology, has prestige".<sup>1</sup> A few years later a political scientist contrasted social anthropology favourably with sociology, declaring that unlike the latter, but like the other bona fide social sciences, social anthropology "had built up a body of knowledge which cannot readily be described as anything else".<sup>2</sup>

Functional anthropology had barely secured its enviable academic reputation when some serious misgivings began to make themselves felt from within the established profession. In 1961, Leach claimed that "functionalist doctrine [has] ceased to carry conviction".<sup>3</sup> Five years later Worsley wrote his trenchant critique under the signifi-

<sup>1</sup>Donald G. Macrae, *Ideology and Society*, London, 1961, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup>W. G. Runciman, "Sociologese" in *Encounter*, December, 1965, Vol. XXV, No. 6, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup>E. R. Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology*, London, 1961, p. 1.

cant title "The End of Anthropology?" By 1970 Needham was arguing that social anthropology "has no unitary and continuous past so far as ideas are concerned", "Nor is there any such thing as a rigorous and coherent body of theory proper to social anthropology".<sup>4</sup> A year later Ardener observed that, "something has already happened to British anthropology (and to international anthropology in related ways such that for practical purposes textbooks which looked useful, no longer are; monographs which used to appear exhaustive now seem selective; interpretations which once looked full of insight now seem mechanical and lifeless".<sup>5</sup>

The plausibility of the anthropological enterprise which seemed so self-evident to all its practitioners a mere decade ago, is now no longer quite so self-evident. A small minority, apart from the names just mentioned, has begun to articulate its doubts in radical terms.<sup>6</sup>

### What has happened to British social anthropology?

At the organisational level nothing very disturbing has happened. On the contrary, the Association of Social Anthropologists flourishes as never before; it holds annual academic conferences whose proceedings are regularly published in handsome hardcover and paperback editions. Monographs, articles and text-books by writers calling themselves anthropologists appear in increasing number. A prestigious series of annual lectures on social anthropology has recently been launched under the auspices of the British Academy. The subject is now taught in more university and college departments than ever; the profession is even negotiating to introduce it as a sixth-form option in schools. Seen in terms of its public activity, there is no crisis in social anthropology.

On the whole, professional leaders of British anthropology are not impressed by alarmist talk about crisis.<sup>7</sup> They would maintain, if pressed, that as the older ideas of social anthropology became exhausted, it was natural that one should turn to fresh sources of supply.<sup>8</sup> So they prefer to talk of increasing specialisation, which

<sup>4</sup>Rodney Needham, "The Future of Social Anthropology: Disintegration or Metamorphosis?", in *Anniversary Contributions to Anthropology: Twelve Essays*, Leiden, 1970, p. 36 and p. 37.

<sup>5</sup>Edwin Ardener, "The New Anthropology and its Critics" in *Man* N. S. Vol. 6, No. 3, September 1971, p. 449.

<sup>6</sup>The most interesting of these include Banaji, "Crisis in British Anthropology", *New Left Review*, No. 64, 1970, Copans, "Pour une histoire et une sociologie des études Africaines", *Cahiers des études Africaine*, No. 43, 1971, and Leclerc, *Anthropologie et Colonialisme*, Paris, 1972.

<sup>7</sup>See for example I. M. Lewis, *Introduction to History and Social Anthropology*, London, 1968, p. xv.

<sup>8</sup>It is this line of reasoning that Firth adopts to explain and endorse the

they see as a sign of the intellectual vitality of the profession.<sup>9</sup> And more positively, they affirm that classic functionalist assumptions are still viable.<sup>10</sup>

Yet we would be well-advised not to be too easily persuaded by such bland assurances. After all, it is a tendency of establishment leaders to maintain at least the myth if not the reality of smooth continuity. There can be no doubt that at the ideological level something has indeed "already happened to British anthropology" as Ardener put it, although this event is better seen as a disintegration of the Old Anthropology rather than as a crystallization of the New.

There was a time when social anthropology could and did define itself unambiguously as the study of primitive societies. "The scope of any science", wrote Nadel shortly after the Second World War, "is to obtain and extend knowledge. In social anthropology as it is commonly understood we attempt to extend our knowledge of man and society to 'primitive' communities, 'simpler peoples', or 'pre-literate societies'... If an anthropologist asks naïvely why, if we are only interested in studying society writ large, we should turn to primitive cultures rather than our own civilization ... the answer is simply that our own society is not the only one, and its phenomena not the same as those found, or apt to be found, in primitive society".<sup>11</sup> Statements of this kind do not indicate a very sophisticated concern for the definition of a problematic, but they reflected an element of pragmatic truth, and it was this that gave social anthropology a practical plausibility. When Evans-Pritchard published his well-known *Introduction to Social Anthropology* in 1951, it seemed reasonably clear what the subject was about. "The social anthropologist", he explained, "studies primitive societies directly, living among them for months or years, whereas sociological research is usually from documents and largely statistical. The social anthropologist studies societies as wholes—he studies their oecologies, their economics, their legal and political institutions, their family and kinship organizations, their religions, their technologies,

recent anthropological interest in Marx, in his British Academy lecture *The Sceptical Anthropologist? Social Anthropology and Marxist Views on Society*, London, 1972.

<sup>9</sup>See for example the Introduction by Max Gluckman and Fred Eggan to the first four volumes in the ASA Monographs series.

<sup>10</sup>See for example Social Science Research Council's *Research in Social Anthropology*, London, 1968.

<sup>11</sup>S. F. Nadel, *The Foundations of Social Anthropology*, London, 1953, p. 2.

their arts, etc., as parts of general social systems".<sup>12</sup> The doctrines and approaches that went by the name of functionalism thus gave social anthropology an assured and coherent style.

Today by contrast even this coherence of style is absent. The anthropologist now is someone who studies societies both 'simple' and 'complex'; resorts to participant observation, statistical techniques, historical archives and other literary sources; finds himself intellectually closer to economists or political scientists or psychoanalysts or structural linguists or animal behaviourists than he does to other anthropologists. To describe this state of affairs in terms of scholarly specialization is surely to indulge in mystification. The 'cognate disciplines' of politics, economics, etc., have been in existence from long before the classical functionalist phase of social anthropology. The question that must be asked is, why was it only comparatively recently that they have been discovered by anthropologists? Why is it, for example, that in 1940 anthropologists could write: "We have not found that the theories of political philosophers have helped us to understand the societies we have studied and we consider them of little scientific value";<sup>13</sup> and in 1966: "We consider that the time is ripe for a dialogue, if not for marriage between anthropology and the other disciplines concerned with comparative politics".<sup>14</sup> What made the time ripe? How was it that the separate disciplines (economics, politics, jurisprudence, etc.) which reflected the fragmented self-understanding of bourgeois society, with its own historical contradictions, were ready to inspire anthropology?

The answer I would suggest is to be sought in the fact that since the Second World War, fundamental changes have occurred in the world which social anthropology inhabits, changes which have affected the object, the ideological support and the organisational base of social anthropology itself. And in noting these changes we remind ourselves that anthropology does not merely apprehend the world in which it is located, but that the world also determines how anthropology will apprehend it.

The attainment of political independence by colonial, especially African countries in the late '50s and the early '60s accelerated the trend, apparent since the war, of socio-economic change, involving

<sup>12</sup>E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology*, London, 1951, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup>M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, (eds.), *African Political Systems*, London, 1940, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup>M. J. Swartz, V. W. Turner, A. Tuden, (eds.), *Political Anthropology*, Chicago, 1968, p. 9.

these countries in the planned development of national networks of communications, electrification and broadcasting; the promotion of education and of rural improvement projects; the shift of political power from 'tribal' leaders to the nationalistic bourgeoisie. Mainly as a consequence of nationalist expectations, scholars began to recover an indigenous history.<sup>15</sup> Some nationalist writers denounced the colonial connections of anthropology. Thus increasingly the larger political-economic system thrust itself obtrusively into the anthropologist's framework, as did the relevance of the past, both colonial and pre-colonial. At another level, mounting criticism of the functionalist tradition in American mainstream sociology contributed indirectly towards the undermining of functionalist doctrine in British social anthropology.<sup>16</sup> Since it had never adequately clarified the distinction between a totalising method (in which the formation of parts is explained with reference to a developing structure of determinations) and ethnographic holism (in which the different 'institutions' of a society are all described and linked one to another);<sup>17</sup> and since it had in general confused structural determination with simultaneity, concrete developments in the world outside pushed functional anthropology until it collapsed into micro-sociology. So it is that today most anthropologists have chosen to re-orient themselves in relation to a multitude of fragmentary problems—political, economic, domestic, cultic, etc.—at a 'small-scale' level, and have found in this state of fragmentation their sense of intellectual direction provided for them by their relevant 'cognate discipline'. These changes in the object of study and in the ideological supports of social anthropology might by themselves have led to a disintegration of the discipline, but the same post-war period witnessed a significant development in the organisational base of social anthropology which saved it. In 1946

<sup>15</sup>Partly by challenging the functional anthropologist's dogma that only written records could provide a reliable basis for reconstructing history. Cf. J. Vansina's *Oral Tradition, a Study in Historical Methodology*, London, 1965, originally published in French in 1961. The general tendency of functional anthropology was to assimilate indigenous history to the category of myth—i.e. to view it in terms of instrumentality rather than of truth in the classical non-pragmatist sense.

<sup>16</sup>Leading sociologists in America,—e.g. Parsons, Merton, Homans—had always taken an active and sympathetic interest in British social anthropology, and their writings in turn were a source of inspiration and support to functional anthropologists. The attack on American structural-functionalism by such writers as R. Dahrendorf and C. Wright Mills was therefore bound to affect the doctrinal self-confidence of British social anthropology.

<sup>17</sup>That this distinction remains unclear to many anthropologists even today is apparent from the over-confident remarks of Levi-Strauss in his polemic

the Association of Social Anthropologists of the British Commonwealth (ASA) was founded with under 20 members; by 1962 the membership had risen to over 150, "even though election to membership required normally both the holding of a teaching or a research post in the Commonwealth and the attainment of either a post-graduate degree (usually a doctorate) or substantial publications".<sup>18</sup> Once this base was in effective operation, social anthropology as institutionalised practice could dispense with the doctrinal specificity it had previously insisted on. Professional distinctiveness could now be maintained through an established network of vested interests—for which the ASA was a co-ordinating agency—rather than by any particular doctrines or methods. Anthropology was now truly a 'profession'.

Ironically, the same forces that were contributing to the ideological dissolution of classical functional anthropology had also contributed to a strengthening of its organisational base. Thus Fortes notes that during the Second World War in Britain, "economic, political and especially military necessities aroused a new and lively public interest in the African and Asiatic dependencies of Britain and her allies. The plans for post-war economic and social development in these areas generated under pressure of war-time experiences included big schemes of research in the natural and social sciences. The boom in anthropological studies thus foreshadowed began after Radcliffe-Brown had retired from the Oxford chair [in 1946]".<sup>19</sup> It was in the year of Radcliffe-Brown's retirement that the ASA was founded by scholars who were already members of the long-established but far less exclusive Royal Anthropological Institute. An exclusive 'professional' organisation was clearly far better placed to exploit the new funding possibilities for research in the changing power-pattern of the post-war world.

It is not a matter of dispute that social anthropology emerged as a distinctive discipline at the beginning of the colonial era, that it

against Sartre: "It is possible that the requirement of 'totalisation' is a great novelty to some historians, sociologists and psychologists. It has been taken for granted by anthropologists ever since they learnt it from Malinowski". *The Savage Mind*, London, 1966, p. 250. What anthropologists learnt from Malinowski was ethnographic holism, not the method of totalisation.

<sup>18</sup>M. Gluckman and Fred Eggan, "Introduction" to *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology*, London, 1965, p. xii. By 1968 the Association had about 240 members (Social Science Research Council, *Research in Social Anthropology*, London, 1968, p. 79.)

<sup>19</sup>M. Fortes, (ed.) *Social Structure*, Oxford 1949, p. xiii.

became a flourishing academic profession towards its close, or that throughout this period its efforts were devoted to a description and analysis—carried out by Europeans, for a European audience—of non-European societies dominated by European power. And yet there is a strange reluctance on the part of most professional anthropologists to consider seriously the power structure within which their discipline has taken shape. The typical attitude is well represented by the following passage from Victor Turner's Introduction to Volume Three of *Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960*, (Cambridge, 1971), in which the problem of the relationship between anthropology and colonialism is trivialised and dismissed in the space of two short paragraphs:

It used to be argued by officials of the *ancien régime* that anthropologists, immersed as they were in the specificities of African life, came to accept the structural perspective of their informants, became their spokesmen, and by their words and works impeded the efforts of district and provincial administrators to govern efficiently. Some were even accused by white settlers and European civil servants of being 'Reds', 'socialists' and 'anarchists'. It is now asseverated by African leaders and administrators, down to the district level, that anthropologists before independence were 'apologists of colonialism' and subtle agents of colonial supremacy who studied African customs merely to provide the dominant white minority with information damaging to native interests but normally opaque to white investigation. Thus yesterday's 'socialist' has become today's 'reactionary'. Sir Alan Burns (1957) and Frantz Fanon (1961) are improbably allied.

It is true, of course, that in their personal capacity anthropologists, like everyone else, have a wide spectrum of political views. Some are known 'conservatives'; others lean far to the 'left'. But as professionals, anthropologists are trained, over almost as many years as doctors, to collect certain kinds of information as 'participant observers' which will enable them, whatever may be their personal views, to present as objectively as the current level of their discipline's development permits, a coherent picture of the sociocultural system they have elected to spend some years of their lives in studying, and of the kinds of processes that go on in it. It is their ultimate duty to publish their findings and expose them, together with an exact description of the means by which they were obtained, to the international public of their anthropological colleagues and

beyond that to the 'world of learning'. Eventually, news of their work and analyses, through their own 'popular' writings or through citations, résumés (not infrequently bowdlerised) and digests by non-anthropologists, seeps through to the general reading public. Time thus winnows their reports and rids them of much that is biased and 'loaded'. There is no point in special pleading or tendentious argument; there are professional standards against which all reports are measured, and, in the end, the common sense of the common man. (pp.1-2)

But to speak about 'professional standards' and the authority of 'common sense' is surely no less naïve than are wild remarks about anthropology being merely the handmaiden of colonialism. There are today no clear-cut standards in anthropology, there is only a flourishing professional organisation; and the common sense of Western common man, himself an alienated and exploited being, is hardly reliable as a critical test of anthropological knowledge. And yet the easy assurance of Turner's remarks is itself an indication of the kind of commonsense world that the typical anthropologist still shares, and knows he shares, with those whom he primarily addresses.

We have been reminded time and again by anthropologists of the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment in which the intellectual inspiration of anthropology is supposed to lie.<sup>20</sup> But anthropology is also rooted in an unequal power encounter between the West and Third World which goes back to the emergence of bourgeois Europe, an encounter in which colonialism is merely one historical moment.<sup>21</sup> It is this encounter that gives the West access to cultural and historical information about the societies it has progressively dominated, and thus not only generates a certain kind of universal understanding, but also re-enforces the inequalities in capacity between the European and the non-European worlds (and derivatively, between the Europeanized élites and the 'traditional' masses in the Third World). We are today becoming increasingly aware of the fact that information and understanding produced by bourgeois disciplines like anthropology are acquired and used most readily by those with the greatest capacity for exploitation. This follows partly from the structure of research, but more especially

<sup>20</sup>See for example E. E. Evans-Pritchard, op. cit., M. Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, London, 1969, R. Firth, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup>C. Levi-Strauss was one of the first anthropologists to note this important fact, although he has barely gone beyond noting it. See *The Scope of Anthropology*, London, 1967, pp. 51-2.

from the way in which these disciplines objectify their knowledge. It is because the powerful who support research expect the kind of understanding which will ultimately confirm them in their world that anthropology has not very easily turned to the production of radically subversive forms of understanding. It is because anthropological understanding is overwhelmingly objectified in European languages that it is most easily accommodated to the mode of life, and hence to the rationality, of the world power which the West represents.

We must begin from the fact that the basic reality which made pre-war social anthropology a feasible and effective enterprise was the power relationship between dominating (European) and dominated (non-European) cultures. We then need to ask ourselves how this relationship has affected the practical pre-conditions of social anthropology; the uses to which its knowledge was put; the theoretical treatment of particular topics; the mode of perceiving and objectifying alien societies; and the anthropologist's claim of political neutrality.

The colonial power structure made the object of anthropological study accessible and safe—because of it sustained physical proximity between the observing European and the living non-European became a practical possibility. It made possible the kind of human intimacy on which anthropological fieldwork is based, but ensured that that intimacy should be one-sided and provisional. It is worth noting that virtually no European anthropologist has been won over personally to the subordinated culture he has studied; although countless non-Europeans, having come to the West to study its culture, have been captured by its values and assumptions, and also contributed to an understanding of it.

The reason for this asymmetry is the dialectic of world power. Anthropologists can claim to have contributed to the cultural heritage of the societies they study by a sympathetic recording of indigenous forms of life that would otherwise be lost to posterity. But they have also contributed, sometimes indirectly, towards maintaining the structure of power represented by the colonial system. That such contributions were not in the final reckoning crucial for the vast empire which received knowledge and provided patronage does not mean that it was not critical for the small discipline which offered knowledge and received that patronage. For the structure of power certainly affected the theoretical choice and treatment of what social anthropology objectified—more so in some matters than in others. (We should in any case avoid the tendency found

among some critics and defenders of social anthropology of speaking as though the doctrines and analyses labelled 'functionalism' were parts of a highly integrated logical structure.) Its analyses—of holistic politics most of all, of cosmological systems least of all—were affected by a readiness to adapt to colonial ideology. At any rate the general drift of anthropological understanding did not constitute a basic challenge to the unequal world represented by the colonial system. Nor was the colonial system as such—within which the social objects studied were located—analysed by the social anthropologist. To argue that the anthropologist's expertise did not qualify him for considering fruitfully such a system is to confess that this expertise was malformed. For any object which is subordinated and manipulated is partly the product of a power relationship, and to ignore this fact is to miscomprehend the nature of that object.

Clearly the anthropologist's claim to political neutrality cannot be separated from all that has been said so far. Thus the scientific definition of anthropology as a disinterested (objective, value-free) study of 'other cultures' helped to mark off the anthropologist's enterprise from that of colonial Europeans (the trader, the missionary, the administrator and other men of practical affairs); but did it not also render him unable to envisage and argue for a radically different political future for the subordinate people he studied and thus serve to merge that enterprise *in effect* with that of dominant status-quo Europeans? If the anthropologist sometimes endorsed or condemned particular social changes affecting "his people", did he, in this ad hoc commitment, do any more or any less than many colonial Europeans who accepted colonialism as a system? If he was sometimes accusingly called 'a Red', 'a socialist' or 'an anarchist' by administrators and settlers, did this not merely reveal one facet of the hysterically intolerant character of colonialism as a system, with which he chose nevertheless to live *professionally* at peace?

I believe it is a mistake to view social anthropology in the colonial era as primarily an aid to colonial administration, or as the simple reflection of colonial ideology. I say this not because I subscribe to the anthropological establishment's comfortable view of itself, but because bourgeois consciousness, of which social anthropology is merely one fragment, has always contained within itself profound contradictions and ambiguities—and therefore the potentialities for transcending itself. For these contradictions to be adequately apprehended it is essential to turn to the historical power

relationship between the West and the Third World and to examine the ways in which it has been dialectically linked to the practical conditions, the working assumptions and the intellectual product of all disciplines representing the European understanding of non-European humanity.

The papers that follow analyse and document ways in which anthropological thinking and practice have been affected by British colonialism, but they approach this topic from different points of view and at different levels. All but Roger Owen's were presented first at a Seminar held in Hull in September 1972. Although each contributor has had the opportunity to revise his paper in the light of discussions that were held at the Seminar, no editorial attempt has been made to impose any unity on them, or for that matter to ensure that together they represent a comprehensive coverage of the problem. They stand as individual contributions to an argument that is only just beginning, and in which as yet only a handful of anthropologists are seriously interested. (It should be noted that in over a quarter of a century since it was founded, the ASA has never regarded colonialism as a topic worthy of a conference.)

The group which met wishes to thank the University of Hull for providing funds and facilities for the Seminar. Most especially, we wish to thank Ian Cunnison, Head of the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Hull, without whose active help and constant encouragement the Seminar would probably not have taken place. It was he who canvassed Anthropology Departments in various Universities for possible contributors, and undertook most of the organisational duties in preparation for the meeting.

March 1973