Knowledge and Society
Situating Sociology and Social Anthropology

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Frontiers of Sociology and Anthropology
Three Contexts

I propose to argue in this chapter that we cannot comprehend frontiers of social science disciplines independent of the political circumstances in which they arose and are practised. The two fundamental forces which mould and mutually influence disciplinary frontiers are colonialism and nationalism. I will examine this proposition with special reference to the cognate disciplines of sociology and anthropology.

Both anthropology and sociology emerged in the West, that is Europe, in two different phases of history and in drastically different political circumstances. It is exciting to examine the implications of the different trajectories of these disciplines and their impact in the different zones in which they are practised. There is no consensus about the time of origin of anthropology. Hodgen (1964) locates the beginning of anthropology in the Greco-Roman period and modern anthropology is nothing but the academic version of early anthropology in this view. In contrast, according to Harris (1968) it is the rise of cultural determinism which marked the shift away from biological determinism that moulded the rise of anthropology, an unsustainable view because cultural determinism crystallized only by the beginning of the twentieth century while the evolutionary school

of anthropology emerged much before. In spite of these divergent views regarding the crystallization of anthropology, there is consensus on two counts: one, anthropology flowered during the colonial era and two, the essence of anthropological perspective is that in order to understand one's society, one needs to study other societies.

It was therefore legitimate to conceptualize the subject matter of anthropology as the study of others, both in their physical/racial and cultural/social dimensions. But difficulty arises when anthropology constructs the other it analyses as inferior and this understanding is widely shared in the West, not only the geographical West but also its spatial extensions—the New World. However, the other need not be necessarily negative, it can be neutral, even positive (see Oommen 2002). The three others anthropology constructed and studied are the savage, the black, and the ethnographic other; the first two being specific others with definite geographic locales, while the third is a general and generalized other.

The Random House Dictionary uses the following adjectives to describe the savage: 'fierce, untamed, uncivilized, barbarous, unpolished, rude, wild, an uncivilized human being, a brutal or cruel person, a rude boorish person'. And the savage was assigned the lowest rung in the hierarchy of the great chain of being according to the Christian doctrine of monogenesis that endorsed a common origin for all human beings.

Although the savages existed in Europe also—the Samis of Scandinavia, the Highlanders of Scotland, etc.—it is the discovery of the New World which made it possible to locate them in a specific geographic frontier, situated away from Europe. The Red Indian or American Indian became the concrete expression of the savage other. The savages in the European periphery were liquidated or gradually got acculturated into the cultural mainstream. The homogenization project of the nation state played a crucial role in this context. In the twentieth century, according to White:

> ... the idea of the Wild Man [read savage] was progressively despatialized. This despatialization was attended by a compensatory process of psychic interiorization. And the result has been that modern cultural anthropology has conceptualized the idea of wildness as the repressed content of *both* civilized *and* primitive humanity (1972: 7, italics in the original).

If anthropology were to focus only on the savage other with its despatialization and interiorization, the idea of savage, the subject

matter of anthropology would have disappeared. But the construction of the Black other provided the required new lease of life for anthropology. I am not suggesting that these exercises—constructions of savage other and Black other—followed sequentially, but insisting that a new other had to be invented for the continuation of anthropology.

As in the case of savage, the idea of Black other too found wide acceptance in Europe as a negative other. We read in the Random House Dictionary the definition of Black invoking the following epithets: ' ... lacking brightness, soiled or stained with dirt, gloomy, pessimistic, dismal, sullen, boding ill, hostile, harmful, without any moral right or goodness, evil, wicked, indicating disgrace or liability to punishment, opposite to white, a member of a dark- skinned, negro ... '

Subsequently Black Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, came to be identified as the natural habitat of the black other. But the idea of Black got internalized by the Europeans in general and those of northwest Europe in particular with deep negative connotations. As Nash notes: 'In English image black became a partisan word. A black sheep in the family, a black mark against one's name, a black day, a black look, a black lie, a black guard, and a black ball all were expressions built into cultural consciousnesses' (1974: 162–3).

Although the institution of slavery did exist independent of race/colour, inferiorization of Blacks facilitated their subjection to slavery. The export of Blacks from Africa to the Americas as slaves has to be seen as a part of stigmatization and domination of the Black other. The belief that race/colour is linked with intelligence, culture, and capacity for institution building provided the rationale for perpetuating slavery. The Black other was perceived to be capable only of manual labour. The conditions of slavery reinforced the view that Africans are irrational, incompetent, and psychologically distinct; who never had a civilization and are not capable of creating one; a stark contrast to the western man. The Aryan myth further exacerbated this process of inferiorization of the Blacks. The attempt to link race, language, and culture completed the process and the doctrine of polygenesis justified the process of othering the Black.

However, the biological basis of human superiority anchored to race has come to be interrogated through researches in physical anthropology. The rising tide of democracy and the idea of equality ingrained in it facilitated the abandoning of the doctrine of racial

superiority. However, while the idea of race has been rejected the practice of racism persists in spite of the Herculean efforts of UNESCO and human rights organizations. The persistence of everyday racism is a testimony to that (see Essed 1991). Thus the diluted notion of the Black other is now identified with the non-West; the juxtaposition between the 'we' of the West and the 'they' of non-West persists.

This, however, does not mean that the other, the subject matter of anthropology, disappeared; the ethnographic other became the new focus. The process of othering has continued unabated. ' ... nineteenth century anthropology sanctioned an ideological process by which relations between the West and its other, between anthropology and its Object, were conceived not only as difference but as distance in space and time' (Fabian 1983: 147).

Similarly, Long notes that anthropological ' ... data on the Other that was to be interpreted come from those removed in time and/or in space. The problem of knowledge thus constitutes a structure of distance and relationships. Objectivity as a scientific procedure allied itself with the neutrality of the distancing in time and space' (1978: 406).

Thus it is clear that the object of study in anthropology was distant in time as the societies studied were still evolving and in the throes of evolution, as well as distant in space located as they were far from Europe be it the Americas, Africa, Australia, or Asia. And this interest in the other is nothing new in that the Greeks, Romans, Chinese, and Arabs did attempt to understand the customs of alien peoples whom they have conquered and colonized (see Needham 1959). But what was new is that the European colonizers invoked this knowledge as an instrument for controlling the colonized. It was not a device to quench the thirst for curiosity; not mere butterfly collection. The colonial government, for example, primarily used anthropological data collected in British India. The enormous expenses incurred for it were justified, as the data collected were required for the maintenance of law and order in the colonies. Thus, the non-West had become an object of study for the West and anthropology was the designated discipline for that purpose. However, the rise of ethnomethodology and the invoking of native categories contest the conventional view that these people have no ideas but are only capable of behaviour. The gulf between the anthropologist and the other is also being reduced by incorporating the voice of people into the repertoire of research.

The trajectory of sociology in the West is in stark contrast to this (see Chapters 6–8). Sociology was ineluctably linked to nation state right from the beginning. And the conceptual conflation between state and nation rendered sociology utterly state-centric. The geographical frontiers of the state determine the disciplinary frontiers of sociology.

Put so baldly many will register instant disapproval. Let me therefore dwell on this briefly. When we refer to French, German, British, Soviet, Swedish, US, or Indian sociology the reference is to states and not nations, because the entities referred to above are not nations or even nation states, but certainly states. The co-terminality between the frontiers of state and that of sociology is a product of historical circumstance as I have argued in Chapter 6.

The conceptual conflation between state and nation reinforced the state centrism ingrained in the discipline of sociology. This is evident in various attempts to analyse and understand 'national sociologies'. In a book entitled *National Traditions in Sociology*, published in 1989 there are two separate chapters on the two 'national traditions' of West Germany and East Germany. If the book were to be published after the fall of the Berlin Wall there would have been only one 'national tradition', relating to German sociology. In the same book there is only one Chapter on the 'national tradition' relating to the Soviet Union (see Genov 1989). Had the book been published after the dismantling of the Soviet Union there would have been several national traditions representing 'Soviet Sociology'. One can multiply examples but I hope the point is made: the frontiers of state and that of the discipline of sociology are inextricably intertwined.

The linking of the discipline of sociology with the phenomenon of modernity and the institution of nation state (and by implication the ideology of nationalism which produces it) has profound implications. Two self-evident propositions follow from attaching sociology to modernity. One, non-modern societies will not witness the birth and flowering of sociology; they will have only anthropology according to this view. This is a highly contestable proposition because a historical conjunction between modernity and the rise of sociology in the West need not repeat itself in the non-West. Two, sociology will wither away as modernity recedes into the background and globality forges ahead. One may note here that a particular discipline may emerge in specific historical conditions but its demise need not happen with the

disappearance of those conditions. The resilience of anthropology in spite of the death of colonialism, the womb out of which it emerged, is a testimony to this. The sane route to avoid ephemerality of disciplines is to constantly recast them so as to transcend particular historical conjunctions. Thus we can legitimately speak of sociologies of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern societies.

To link sociology with nation state also has three disastrous implications. First, those who did not succeed in creating their own nation states will not have their sociology; there is a French sociology but no sociology of Brittany; there is a British sociology but hardly any Welsh sociology; there is a Spanish sociology but no Catlan sociology. The Kurds are vivisected across several states; should it mean that there is no Kurdish sociology? In this rendition the fate of a nation's sociology is inextricably intertwined with its political fortune; no state, no sociology seems to be the dictum. Here anthropology is at an advantage because its disciplinary autonomy independent of the state existed from the beginning; indeed studying stateless peoples was its initial vocation.

Second, to link sociology with nation state is against the very grain of the discipline. The primary mission of sociology is to study social and cultural structures in all varieties of societies. That is, sociology has a disciplinary vested interest in diversity, both social and cultural. But the avowed objective of nation state in the West was to dismantle diversity and create homogenization. It is an unfortunate paradox that in spite of the fact that the souls of sociology and nation state pull in opposite directions they are chained together in one body, that of the body politic. This isomorphism of political and disciplinary frontiers is to the detriment of sociology and yet most sociologists are impervious to it.

Third, the discipline gets linked with the pathological dimension of nationalism. The three prominent pathological bases of nationalism are racism, religious fundamentalism, and linguistic chauvinism. And wherever sociology comes to be identified with these pathological versions of nationalism, sociology loses its humanistic value orientation. The way out is not to throw away the baby along with the bathwater. Sociology should consciously pursue emancipatory nationalism anchored to secularism, democracy, and humanism. For this, the discipline should distance itself from the state because in the contemporary world national pathologies are promoted and sustained through state power.

The conceptual decoupling of state and nation is an important device to create a sociology with emancipatory potentialities. Thus in a multinational state there are several national traditions but in reality they are collapsed into one national tradition, usually the dominant one, thereby relegating the dominated national traditions into oblivion. This leads to the 'cognitive blackout' of the weak and smaller national traditions as is widely known.

Anthropology and sociology underwent critical changes in the process of their transplantation into the non-West, particularly in the ex-colonial polities. The conventional distinction between the three worlds—First, Second, and Third—is highly misleading in this context. The differential specification here is between the ex-empire states and post-colonial states. For example, on the basis of a meeting of anthropology teachers from Oxford, Cambridge, and London, Radcliffe-Brown wrote:

> We agreed to use 'ethnography' as the term for descriptive accounts of non-literate peoples. The hypothetical reconstruction of 'history' of such peoples was accepted as the task of ethnology and pre-historic archaeology. The comparative study of the institutions of primitive societies was accepted as the tasks of social anthropology, and this name was preferred to 'sociology' (1952: 276).

Social anthropologists from other countries of Europe made similar distinctions. In contrast, the American conception of anthropology is that of a unified field of enquiry of humankind with culture as its central unifying concept, the uniqueness of the human species being its capacity to create and consume culture. American anthropological holism squarely recognizes the interrelations between the biological, mental, social, and cultural dimensions.

I suggest that there is a 'political' reason for perceiving sociology and social anthropology in a different vein in post-colonial societies as compared with Europe. As noted earlier, the distinction between sociology and social anthropology in Europe is made on the basis of 'us' and 'them'; the latter category of people were not only different physically and culturally but they were situated far away spatially in the Americas, Africa, Australia, or Asia. But the First Nations of the New World, different as they are physically and culturally, became a

part of the same 'nation' along with the colonizers. To carve out a distinct discipline to study co-citizens, although they are different, appear to be politically incorrect, even unethical. The fusion of citizenship and nationality, the merging of the political and cultural frontiers, was untenable even in those colonies where Europeans have immigrated, settled down, and replicated their culture and society. It is no accident that the idea of multicultural citizenship is formulated on the basis of the empirical realities of the New World, wherein the cultural and political frontiers are *not* conterminous (see Kymlicka 1995).

While there is a difference with regard to conceptualization of the disciplines of sociology and anthropology between the New World and the Old World of Europe, that distinction is more telling between Europe and the Old World of Asia and Africa. The common understanding in Europe that sociology focuses on complex societies and anthropology on simpler peoples is not endorsed by non-western sociologists and social anthropologists. Further, there is a persisting streak in Europe to view social anthropogy as a superior discipline as compared with sociology (see Chapters 2 and 7). While in the New World anthropology is holistic and culture-centric, sociology is segmental and society-centric. This academic division of labour without invoking any superiority–inferiority syndrome makes for a peaceful co-existence of these disciplines. In the post-colonial Old World of Asia and Africa, the relationship between sociology and social anthropology is one of ambiguity.

An important reason for this ambiguity arises from the shared interests of sociologists and anthropologists to 'integrate' the tribes into the mainstream 'national society'. I shall illustrate this point with reference to the Indian subcontinent by citing two examples. G.S. Ghurye was trained under W.H.R. Rivers, the British anthropologist, but he became one of the founding fathers of sociology in India. He held the view that the entire Indian population was gradually evolving into a single composite 'Indian race'. Further he argued that there is hardly any difference between lower castes and tribes on the one hand and the Hindu upper castes on the other and hence there was no justification for the state in India to provide for any ameliorative measures for their development. In fact, his position was that such steps would go against the process of integrating India into a 'nation' of one common race and culture (see Ghurye 1932, 1943).

In the same vein anthropologist B.S. Guha believed in the unity of the 'Indian race' and he concluded after discussing the issues involved in the administration of Indian Aborigines:

> The essential thing is to realise that the tribal and general population are inhabitants of the same country and their interests are closely interwoven for good or bad. The fostering of the growth of a common outcome and common interest should be the ideal for which both should strive. The administration of the primitive tribes should be so planned that the purpose is served by developing them as their own models and thought, but also gradually bringing them up as full and integral members of the country and participating like the rest in her joys and sorrows (Guha 1951: 44).

Three patterns clearly emerge: for the anthropologists of the Old World Europe, the object of study is a distinct and distant other; for the anthropologist of the New World also the object of study is different physically and culturally but belongs to the same 'nation' and are fellow citizens. For the anthropologist of the Old World of Asia the object of study is constituted not simply by co-citizens but who should also be integrated into a common national race and culture! Understandably, as the discipline of anthropology has emerged in different political settings and as sociology was born in nation states, these influence their frontiers.

I want to conclude this chapter by drawing attention to four implications of interlocking frontiers—disciplinary, political, geographic, and symbolic. Both modern sociology and anthropology arose in the West from the womb of the renaissance and yet their trajectories drastically differ. Anthropology's uniqueness stems from its construction of the human other as its object of study. But its mission varied over the centuries. If during the colonial period anthropology assisted the empire states to civilize the other, during the Cold War period it helped the nation state to modernize the other. At present, anthropology is in service of bringing the other into the global arena.

What is important for the present purpose is to note that there is no isomorphism between political, geographic, and disciplinary frontiers in the case of anthropology. The story of western sociology is entirely different; it emerged in the nation state which is geared to modernize itself. Sociology did address the issues of social reform and

amelioration of fellow citizens. That is, sociology functioned within the political and geographical frontiers of the nation state. These frontiers—geographical, political, and disciplinary—converged.

Western colonialism transplanted anthropology and sociology into the colonies but their characteristics in the colonies differed depending upon the nature of colonialism: replicative and retreatist (see Oommen 1996: 112). The replicative colonialism, which reproduced European Society in the New World, did keep the distinction between sociology and social anthropology. But if the former focused on the social structure of the mainstream of national society, the latter studied the native peoples of the national society *as well as* the tribes and peasants elsewhere through the regime of 'area studies'. Thus there was a blurring of the boundary between sociology and anthropology in the New World unlike in Europe.

The retreatist colonialism of Asia and Africa produced a different trajectory for sociology and anthropology; the object of analyses for both was co-citizens of post-colonial states. The frontiers of the two disciplines got substantially blurred. Initially social anthropologists focused on tribes and sociologists studied peasantry and urban social life. But this division was not neat and tidy and as social anthropologists expanded their objects of study to include peasantry and urban dwellers, the frontiers of the two disciplines, sociology and social anthropology, got fused. The attempt to fall back upon participant observation as the differentiating element of social anthropology also did not help to keep the distinction between the two disciplines for two reasons. One, as social anthropologists started studying peasantry and urban settlements they had used other techniques of data collection. Two, most sociologists opted for a collage of techniques of data collection.

The second implication of having shared frontiers for sociology and social anthropology in Asia and Africa can be discerned through the debate on indigenization. In Europe such a discourse is irrelevant in that these disciplines originated there; they are indigenous. But the claim of European sociologists and social anthropologists that the knowledge they produce is of universal applicability and validity is contested outside Europe. In the New World, however, the contestation is not sharp for two reasons: (1) replicative colonialism reproduced European society in these settlement societies and (2) the division of labour between sociology and social anthropology, that is, studying complex and simple societies, is maintained. However, the

distinction between sociology studying one's own society and social anthropology analysing 'other cultures' as in Europe got obliterated as noted above. In contrast, the eagerness to indigenize sociology and social anthropology was acute in the colonies of Asia and Africa because these are perceived as colonial transplants. The tendency was intensified during the height of anti-colonial movement (Mukherjee 1979: 229).

The third implication of common or differing frontiers is also evident in the practice of anthropology and sociology. Conventionally social anthropologists studied small-scale societies (for example, tribes) or small units in large-scale societies (for example, peasant villages). Given the 'method' they employ, namely participant observation, they develop a close and often long association with the people they study. It is not uncommon that social anthropologists revisit these tribes and villages several times in the course of their professional career; the people they study become 'their' people. And the norm seems to be that one social anthropologist studies one people. What is reported is often accepted and acknowledged as the 'truth' about that society. But if two social anthropologists have studied the same unit the findings may not be similar and even become controversial. Instances are the study of a Mexican village by Oscar Lewis, earlier studied by Robert Redfield and the study of Samoa by Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman.

However, the tradition of an anthropologist studying one tribe or village is confined to Europe and to the extension of European society in the New World. In the post-colonial states of Africa and Asia this tradition is not observed. For example, most social anthropologists of South Asia shift their object of research several times; they study different units and themes in the course of their professional career. This is proximate to sociologists the world over who study different units and themes in the course of their academic career. Thus there are different styles of practising sociology and social anthropology. If for sociologists everywhere, shifting the frontiers of their research is the norm, for the social anthropologists of Asia and Africa this is not uncommon. However, the social anthropologists of Europe and the New World seem to be adhering to the classical norm for social anthropology: one tribe/village/urban settlement, one social anthropologist. Indeed there are advantages of confining to the 'frontiers' of one's research unit as a lifetime avocation, but the

disadvantage is that these anthropologists often become victims of intellectual claustrophobia.

Finally, I want to allude to the 'frontier' shared by anthropology and western Christianity. The dilemma that western Christianity faced becomes pertinent here. In the early phase of colonialism in the New World, the western colonizers did not face any moral dilemma in slaughtering savages because Christian belief at that time was that savages were without souls and hence need not be treated with compassion. But by the early sixteenth century the Pope declared them to be fully human and this posed a moral problem as to how the savages are to be treated (see Hadden 1934). Coupled with this, the theory of Christian monogenesis accepted by early anthropology endorsed all human beings as having a common origin (see Hodgen 1964). However the theory of polygenesis, propelled by the secular doctrine facilitated the interests of the colonial states to continue with genocide and culturocide of the savages. anthropology came to the rescue of western Christianity in this context.

> In the Judeo-Christian orientation, the representation of divinity embraced all peoples, but created a distinction in the conception of the true self and the untrue self. Anthropology, in continuing this structural principle, embraced the humanity as a whole but made the contrast between the West and the non-west which corresponded to the dichotomy between the true self and the untrue self; the West shared in the attributes of the true self (Pandian 1985: 10).

Perhaps this shared symbolic frontier between Christianity and anthropology explains its persistence in spite of the death of colonialism and birth of sociology, a plausible replacement for it! But the regime of 'area studies' perpetuated anthropology during the heydays of nation state. In spite of globalization, anthropology seems to persist because of its symbolic connection with Christianity. That is, anthropology and sociology would remain separate disciplines in the West but in the rest of the world their frontiers would remain intermeshed. India provides an illuminating example of this.