

REVIEW ARTICLE

Review of J.P.S. Uberoi: *Mind and Society: From Indian Studies to General Sociology*, ed. Khalid Tyabji, Delhi: Oxford University Press 2019, 346 pp. ISBN 9780199495986

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Summarizing the work of J.P.S. Uberoi is exceptionally challenging, for many reasons: his work questions core modern concepts and structures, as well as the received history of science, philosophy and religion that have moulded the ways we think; also, it is a body of work that has not received the attention it deserves.

This book is a selection of essays spanning 45 years (1968-2013), and it makes a good introduction to Uberoi's work, which is of a significance that could yet have a transformative influence on social anthropology; even though its radical and ambitious outlook in many ways runs counter to the direction that the discipline has taken since Uberoi studied anthropology in Manchester in the 1950s and published his first book, *Politics of the Kula Ring: An Analysis of the Findings of Bronislaw Malinowski* (1962), a chapter of which won him the Royal Anthropological Institute's Hocart prize. Malinowski's analysis of the system of symbolic exchanges among Trobriand Islanders is one of the most detailed expositions of an economic system that is radically different from our own. The brilliance of Uberoi's first book is that it analyses the Trobriand political system that functioned alongside these exchanges: the Trobriand Islanders' long boat journeys represented a political as well as an economic system, which Malinowski seriously neglected, as the internal evidence of his 1922 monograph partly indicates.

To summarize the barest outline of his life, Uberoi studied electrical engineering at University College London, before switching to social anthropology in Manchester through the influence of the sociologist Basil Bernstein, a switch that opened doors into a deep understanding of the relationship between *Science and Culture* (the title of his second book, 1978). Inducted into the Manchester School of anthropology by Max Gluckman, Victor Turner and others, he did fieldwork among Tajik communities in northern Afghanistan before switching to the Australian National University at Canberra, where he completed his

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PhD. From 1968-1999, invited by M.N. Srinivas, he taught sociology in the Delhi School of Economics ('D School'), becoming its longest-serving professor and a teacher of genius. Here, with Veena Das and others, he started a European Studies Programme, a rarely attempted corrective to the Orientalist tradition that 'defined' the East, as well as a necessary prerequisite to decolonizing Indian academia from unexamined concepts so as to forge a genuine Indian sociology.

In Khalid Tyabji's words, in his Forward to the present book (xi), Uberoi's work represents 'the only Indian approach to academic scholarship that has seriously attempted to undertake the swarajist programme of considering modern Western civilization in its entirety from an independent, decolonized, Indian perspective'. In this regard, there is very little to compare his work with, and few have had the courage to follow his initiative in analysing Western modernity from an Indian perspective; though one recent work of scholarship, written in the vicinity of Oxford, that echoes Uberoi's project from a similar perspective to Uberoi's far-reaching anthropology of science is Jeremy Naydler's *In the Shadow of the Machine: The Prehistory of the Computer and the Evolution of Consciousness* (2018).

Uberoi's volume is divided into three parts. The first, 'Of Universal Knowledge', sets the scene in terms of the sometimes polemically expressed aim of 'defying the European monopoly of the scientific method of knowledge'. The first essay, 'Science and *Swaraj*', was published in the second issue of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1968), and forms a kind of prelude to Uberoi's three books on the relationship between science and society (1978, 1984, 2002), in each of which he shows how the scientific method formulated in the West needs to be analysed as part of Western culture, rather than as separate and independent from it. A central argument is that 'the sciences of the expert and the military-industrial complex are everywhere in alliance with, or constitute the other half of, the politics of the elite', while 'the opposite, non-dualist attitude ... was driven underground, especially after the failure of the radical Reformation and the so-called peasants' war in Germany (1526).' (14-17). The key moment when science was institutionalized in Britain Uberoi sees as the creation of the Royal Society in London in 1660, coinciding with the Restoration of the monarchy that ended the Commonwealth, which he interprets as the hierarchical social order being internalized by the scientific order.

In this initial essay, Uberoi quotes Lévi-Strauss, speaking on 'urgent anthropology', that 'Anthropology is daughter to this era of violence', there being a distinct lack of any real 'reciprocity of perspective' between exploiters and exploited (or dispossessors and dispossessed). Alongside this is a response to this urgent anthropological theme by Ralph

Beals to the effect that the erstwhile human subjects of anthropology require yet more study since ‘they were clearly apt to disappear shortly’. As Uberoi comments, ‘This formula is the new bland euphemism of international social science for genocide committed and connived at by rich and powerful governments’ (5). This prefigures the argument in Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s seminal work *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (2012/1999), which attacks the objectifying tendency in anthropology for the unconscious part it has played in the power structures imposed over indigenous people, precisely by pretending to be objective.

Uberoi’s European studies highlight an ‘underground’ European tradition that evolved from ancient thinkers such as Pythagoras, via Paracelsus and others, to Goethe’s scientific method, which challenged Newton’s method to connect nature with man as a partner, rather than as an object of domination and objectifying study, which Goethe (and Uberoi) see as the Newtonian approach. Goethe’s method regarded the experiment, and the human body or senses, as mediating between subject and object. Subjectivity is largely excluded from modern science and relegated to the ‘Arts’. By contrast, Goethe emphasizes training one’s subjectivity as an observer in terms of that most challenging of all branches of *scientia*: self-knowledge. Without cultivating knowledge of the self, how can we become aware of our own unexamined beliefs and prejudices, inherited from (to use Durkheim’s phrase) the collective representations through which we were socialized?

Self-knowledge is generally recognized to be one of the hardest of attainments, yet the educational system (including the teaching of anthropology) gives little guidance. Without training one’s subjectivity, how can one conduct objective observation and analysis, since one’s use-of-self-in-relation-to-others is the instrument through which one chooses which informants to cultivate and which pieces of information to pursue and to define as ‘data’?

Part One ends with essays on the use of science in agriculture, the split between the sciences and the arts in the University systematization of knowledge, and the place of students in the social and political structure of university life.

The first essay in the second part, ‘Of Modern World Culture’, offers a radical reassessment of the three key theorists of social anthropology and sociology, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, considered here in reverse order. Uberoi sees Weber’s methodology as being haunted by a Hamlet-like failure to choose between or transcend the Western mainstream’s dichotomy between rationality and empiricism, as well as because of its lack of a concept of a social system. Durkheim’s understanding of the power of symbols is vitiated

by a failure to extend this symbolic analysis to uncover the ‘false consciousness’ underlying unequal power relations, as in colonialism. On Marx, Uberoi focuses on the dialectical methodology used to analyse the alienation of labour. The last essay in Part Two extends these insights to advocate a greater emphasis on the role of labour in the community: ‘Whenever and wherever Marx considered the organization of labour he was essentially optimistic about the future, but... when he considered the system of property he became pessimistic and gloomy...’ (195). Another essay, on sociolinguistics, follows P.B. Pandit’s work to show how India’s norm of multi-lingualism was belittled by successive scholars and planners, who continue to advocate ‘linguistic assimilation’ on the assumption that ‘cultural homogeneity [is] necessary for national advancement’ (92-3). Pandit’s work, as cited by Uberoi, mainly focuses on state and major languages (i.e. the seventeen languages represented on India’s currency notes), while tribal (and other sub-state-level) languages in India face linguistic genocide, since they are largely excluded from schools, in contravention of India’s Constitution, which is supposed to guarantee every child’s right to education in his or her mother tongue.

Other essays here summarize structuralism from an Indian perspective (first published under the title ‘For a Sociology of India’, 1974), critique Frazer’s foundational influence on social anthropology by offering an analysis of civil society as a mediation between King/State and the individual, and analyse the position of the industrial worker in post-war Britain.

At the centre of this Part is an essay entitled ‘The Three Lives of Things in a Post-modern Economy’, first published as ‘Sociology of Commerce and Industry’ in 2008. It was preceded by an article entitled ‘Technology of Obsolescence’ (1989), which introduced the prevalent practice of ‘built-in redundancy’:

The iron law which prevails today is that contemporary technological innovation displaces and replaces old with new technology after an ever-decreasing interval of time. How much longer can such a system of power and desire, utility and fashion continue to sustain...?

This rule seems to apply across the spectrum of the manufactured goods that are emblematic of ‘modernity’. Above all, it is apparent in military hardware, where technological innovation moves increasingly rapidly, and new weapons systems, requiring increasingly costly manufacture, become obsolete ever more swiftly.

The 2008 essay in the present volume takes these insights much further, highlighting

‘dual-use technology’ for war and peace and the pre-eminent place of military technology in today’s world economic system in an arms race that never even slowed down after the ‘Cold War’ (1945-1990). This essay juxtaposes commerce to industry, arguing that they are not so much complementary, as Saint-Simon, Marx and mainstream orthodoxy maintain, but essentially contradictory, as Thorstein Veblen argued: in technical matters, industries work together; but ‘as business units they are competitors in a strategy of mutual defeat’ (Veblen 1925/1964: 13). On the subject of obsolescence, summarizing the shifting variables in terms of the ‘machine life’ or ‘use value’, ‘market life’ (‘exchange value’) and ‘vogue life’ (‘social or fashion value’), Uberoi’s summary encapsulates the problem:

In other words, the system of technology, in the traditional sense of engineering, says that the machines are good for 20 years; and economics as the ‘science of scarcity’ says that they should be paid up with interest in 10 years and then scrapped; but the sociology of fashion will declare them to be out of date and wish them replaced within 5 years. (151)

Uberoi quotes President Kennedy: ‘We’re in an arms race with ourselves – and we’re winning!’ – along with some hard evidence to show how the arms race combines with ever-shortening spans of obsolescence to form a system of ‘creative self-destruction’ (146, building on economist Joseph Schumpeter’s phrase) at the heart of present-day capitalism: ‘This accelerated development of armaments is therefore the most potent single evil, peril and bad example that faces the world today’ (148). At least a third of the world’s skilled scientists, technicians and engineers are employed in the arms industry by some estimates, while the world’s middle- and low-income countries have been drawn in as suppliers of raw materials and cheap skilled labour, not to mention ‘as gullible customers of its products and designs, mostly those outdated or discarded and obsolete’ (149). This is a systematic feature of the arms industry and trade. For example, during Britain’s Falklands War with Argentina and its wars with Iraq in 1990 and 2003, the RAF faced an older generation of planes that Britain had sold to Argentina and Iraq, and therefore easily shot down.

At the same time, corruption in arms deals is systemic, being at the centre of the world’s black economy (Feinstein 2011; reviewed by Padel 2010), and these deals boost the rising financial burden of unrepayable debt owed by ‘developing’ or ‘underdeveloped’ countries to countries termed ‘developed’ – part of the control imposed over ‘developing’ countries, and populations everywhere, through debt (Rowbotham 1998). In fact, retaining an arms industry at its centre seems to be the key structural feature of those countries that are defined by the

IMF/World Bank as 'developed'. The arms industry and trade is at the heart of the world economy. Yet, as Uberoi puts it, 'This simple truth is hidden from us everywhere': thus, Abdul Kalam, India's 'missile man', has helped to 'create a self-delusional sense of security and a fictitious modern, strong and progressive self for India' (146-152). Why aren't students of economics and other social sciences encouraged to analyse critically the central role played by the arms trade and unrepayable debt in the world system of relations?

In other words, Uberoi is highlighting a scientific *culture* that produced the schism or compartmentalization at the heart of our modern epistemology and value systems, which has allowed, for example, 'the backroom boys' (arms scientists) to develop their weapons of mass destruction without apparently troubling their consciences. In the practice of the 'hard sciences' and engineering/technology, this manifests itself in an even more extreme dehumanization that Uberoi calls 'the end of modernity' through the twin violence of Auschwitz and the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. 'Post-modernism', in this sense, could be said to be born from these acts of violence, in which the full destructiveness of science and technology was turned on fellow human beings.²

Part Three, 'Of the Indian Modernity', focuses particularly on Sikhism, the subject of *Religion, Civil Society, and the State: A Study of Sikhism*, Uberoi's fourth book (1996), which starts with a strong critique of standard sociological efforts, showing Uberoi's use of structuralist methodology. Two outstanding essays reproduced in the present volume are 'Sikhism and Islam: A Structural Analysis', and 'Religion, Civil Society and the State in India' (a chapter from the 1996 book). The latter starts with a structural analysis of the Hindu and Muslim cultures of medieval India, showing the elementary significance of the *Sannyasi-Brahman-Raja* triad in the Hindu scheme, and its relationship with the trinity of Sufi, Ulema and Sultan, or *Tariqat-Shari'at-Hukumat*, in the Muslim order, corresponding to 'religion', 'civil society' and 'state'. Of great interest in its own right, this formed a prelude to Uberoi's analysis of Sikhism, engaging with his own culture (of special interest, since his father was a Sikh spiritual teacher of considerable influence) to bring out the essence of Sikh history and values, including emphases on civil society and martyrs (topic of the penultimate essay in the volume), both of great significance to India as a whole.

The final essay, 'Metaphysics of the Indian Modernity: The Theory of the Name', searches the origin of Indian modernity in the *bhakti* tradition that started in the sixteenth century and its later synthesis with Sikh thought.

² This argument is extended much further in Uberoi's *The European Modernity* (2002).

This third part would have done well to incorporate Uberoi's 1972 essay 'The structural concept of the Asian Frontier',³ still used for anthropological teaching on frontiers in the South Asian context, which emerged from his Afghanistan fieldwork. Rather than looking on frontiers in South Asia as peripheral, he suggests that they embody 'the principles of mutuality, reciprocity and exchange'. As for 'the message of the frontier', this highlights 'the virtues of liberty', calling to mind James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) characteristic of cultures in Burma/Myanmar, and also of many cultures in Northeast India.

Uberoi's writings are not necessarily comfortable to read, challenging assumptions, often polemically, that we often prefer to hold on to. I consider my own books (Padel 1995 [new edition 2010a], 2010b, 2013) to have been quite deeply influenced by his thinking, since he played the role of assistant supervisor to my Oxford D.Phil when I was affiliated to Delhi University in 1982-86, especially in his emphasis on 'studying up' or 'reverse anthropology', and the analysis of a broad, overarching social structure.

The essays in *Mind and Society* have the power to stimulate anthropologists in new ways, outlining a method of social analysis with huge potential for decolonizing the collective mind, not just for Indian society, but world-wide. Uberoi's method offers a way to ensure 'that international intellectual exchanges are based on mutuality, reciprocity and equality, and not on the old patterns of dominance and dependence among nations (63-4).

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