

HAS SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY A FUTURE ?

Much has been written and said recently about our subject's present unhappy condition and future prospects, if indeed it has any.¹

If several recent pronouncements are to be believed, the outlook is gloomy. Needham thinks that social anthropology, 'which has in any case only a nebulous and unconvincing definition', 'is falling apart' (p.39). Its only hope, he argues, is to 'disappear' by way of a 'progressive dissolution', its disjecta membra being absorbed by philosophy, sociology, history, art, political science, psychology, and so on. Needham sees this cannibalistic orgy as an 'iridescent metamorphosis'. Jairus Banaji, too, sees social anthropology as 'dissolving': for him 'British social anthropology has been slowly and steadily disintegrating, its future distracted between disparate sectors of the "human" sciences' (pp. 71-72). Others have expressed similar pessimism. An anonymous reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement wrote in 1964 (4 June) that 'by the 1970s, the discipline (of social anthropology) will have to join forces with sociology or become an anachronism'. According to Levi-Strauss, 'Anthropology will survive in a changing world by allowing itself to perish in order to be born again under a new guise' (1966, p. 126). And if it should dissolve, he writes, 'this would not be for the benefit of any so-called social sciences (in his opinion 'there is no such thing as sociology'), but rather of the humanities; linguistics, philology, archaeology, history, philosophy' (1967, p.359).

All these authorities, and others, consider that the discipline of social anthropology is in a state of grave crisis. But is it ?

It is worth noting, to begin with, that social anthropology is not alone among the 'so-called social sciences' in undergoing at the moment such a crise de conscience: sociology (which malgré Lévi-Strauss unregenerately continues to exist) seems to be going through a comparably agonizing self-appraisal, to judge from some recent pronouncements by its exponents. Thus in a new academic weekly called Faculty (which appeared - and as quickly disappeared - towards the end of 1970) D.G. MacRae, the distinguished L.S.E. sociologist, published an article with the intriguing title (for which of course he may not have been responsible!) "How sociology found itself and lost itself in a lifetime". Although he concludes on a modestly hopeful note, he remarks that sociology has failed to satisfy all the hopes, in fact more 'practical' than theoretical, held out for it in the 1950s. The crises of the 1960s, he writes, 'found sociology apparently lacking in prescience, competence and conscience'. And in a recent review in the New York Review of Books (11 March, 1971) entitled 'Has Sociology a future?', the sociologist Tom Bottomore refers to 'yet another diversion [in modern sociology] in the shape of Alvin Gouldner's "reflexive sociology", or, as Bottomore puts it, 'the sociologist contemplating his own navel'. He goes on to refer to W.G. Runciman's view of 'the present confused state of sociology in which he (Runciman) can find neither a distinctive method nor a distinctive interest'.

So social anthropology's self-concern is not unique. None of us can afford to be complacent about the state of our discipline, but I cannot persuade myself that its present state is as bad as Needham, Banaji and company say it is. On the contrary, it seems to me to be alive and reasonably well in Oxford (as indeed the existence and quality of this journal might suggest) and in a number of other places. The dialogue between what Edwin Ardener in his Malinowski Lecture calls 'the new anthropology' (concerned with categories and concepts rather than with consequences and systems of action, with cognitive structures and 'programmes' rather than with functions, and with paradigms rather than

'syntagms') and the older 'structural-functionalism', not to mention other perhaps hardly less interesting dialogues, are, one might think, symptoms of vitality and growth, not of morbidity. And the fact, disquieting to some minds which seek some single, 'proper' way of doing anthropology, that different social anthropologists do, more or less interestingly and illuminatingly, a variety of different things, does not seem to me to be a weakness in what we are constantly and no doubt correctly told is an eclectic discipline. In The Concept of Mind Ryle described modern psychology as 'a partly fortuitous federation of inquiries and techniques', which neither has nor needs a locally trim statement of programme (quoted in Zangwill 1956). This state of affairs does not seem to bother psychologists, perhaps because they see more clearly than social anthropologists do that there is no reason why workers in what is nominally "the same" field should not study quite different, perhaps mutually incommensurable, kinds of problems. As Paul Heelas justly remarks (p.55), "for all scholarly ends it hardly matters what we label ourselves".²

If I am wrong, and the subject is on the way out, experience over the past few years suggests that, at least as an academic discipline, it is more likely to be taken over by sociology, than to be dispersed among a variety of established humanistic specialisms, as Lévi-Strauss and Needham suggest. One might of course hope that it would continue to interact with these, as it does now. And even this fate is, I believe, very much less likely now than it was even a few years ago. This is partly because of sociology's own dwindling assurance, mentioned above. But it is due also, and more importantly, to the growing recognition that social anthropology's new directions are away from rather than towards sociology, if, with the Dictionary of the Social Sciences, we define the latter subject as 'the scientific study of the social behaviour or social action of human beings'. I think that few social anthropologists today would define their subject as 'a branch of' sociology, as Mair did in 1965: even some sociologists now recognise that the two disciplines are different. Thus MacRae, in the article referred to earlier, remarked that the two disciplines 'were - not necessarily are - so close that there was nothing to stop the social anthropologist from doing sociology' (as in fact many did). The words 'not necessarily are' are significant, for they indicate MacRae's awareness that the growing edges of social anthropology are (as they have been for some years) increasingly on the non-'sociological' side.

Professor Evans-Pritchard has for long had reservations about the suitability of social anthropology for undergraduate courses, partly because so far the major contributions in the subject have been made by scholars who received their first training in other fields. There is much force in this opinion, but I would hold that enough social anthropology, some parts of it admittedly more valuable than others (and much of it due directly or indirectly to Evans-Pritchard himself), has been produced during the past half-century or so, for it now to be called into question. As long as seven years ago an anonymous reviewer in The Economist (not, I think, a professional social anthropologist) wrote: 'Social anthropology has come of age; it is a subject with a systematic body of knowledge developed enough to be presentable in the language of educated discourse' (13 June, 1964). I think that today this opinion can be defended, and that an undergraduate course in social anthropology, intelligently devised and taught in conjunction with allied disciplines, can not only inform but educate to an academic standard appropriate to a first degree. The teaching of social anthropology in schools does, however, give rise to grave, though not insuperable difficulties. Unless the subject be very carefully and sensitively taught, the impression which could be created by the tone, and more

especially by the titles, of some early classics might well do very much more harm than good. But whether we like it or not the demand for such courses exists and is growing, and one way or another it will be met.

In these days, when - it seems to me - interesting and sometimes original studies in social anthropology are being published from time to time (as well as, inevitably, a lot of rubbish), it is fair to ask exactly what it is that social anthropology's critics are complaining about. It is certainly possible to deny that any worth-while work is being, or has recently been, produced, but I do not think that this view can be sustained. Leaving aside the cosmic scholarly undertakings of Lévi-Strauss and his followers, whose attempts to establish the fundamental structures of human thinking can hardly, whatever one may think of them, be described as uninteresting or trivial, many more modest researches are, I believe, steadily advancing our understanding of human society and culture, both in concrete socio-cultural contexts (which is where research must anyway begin) and in general. And this I take to be what social anthropology is fundamentally about. In the course of the past two or three years I have reviewed - and therefore read - about half a dozen new books in the social anthropology of Africa, and I have learned something of interest from all of them, and a good deal from one or two of them³). Without claiming more than a superficial knowledge of most of the various areas of social anthropology, I can say that ever since I came into the subject there has always been something interesting going on in it somewhere. Is others' experience so very different? And how much more than this is it reasonable to expect?

I think that part of the difficulty is that social anthropology's critics are not always very explicit as to what it is that they think the subject ought to be doing. One cannot altogether avoid the impression that they are, perhaps unconsciously, looking for a kind of father-figure, a Messiah, who will lead them into a Promised Land with a new and revolutionary view of the human condition, in which all the old problems and ambiguities will disappear. They are dissatisfied with the piecemeal and for the most part gradual advance which must characterize by far the greater part of the development of any discipline. There have been, and no doubt will be again, revolutions (as well as rebellions) in anthropology, but revolution can hardly be sustained as a permanent condition. Working historians do not regard their subject as moribund because new philosophies of history are not continually being produced. They just get on with the job of writing history. There does not seem to me to be any very good reason why social anthropologists should not follow their example.

A further and more recalcitrant difficulty lies in the nature of the subject itself. Some social anthropologists find it hard to accept the untidy but (in my view) unescapable division of interest in social anthropology between the study of social relationships, 'action systems', on the one hand, and the study of classifications, symbols, and values, 'belief systems', on the other. As has been pointed out often enough, the two interests involve very different kinds of approaches and problems, but the study of either level very commonly - I would say necessarily in the case of the first - involves constant references to the other. If social anthropology were 'nothing but' the study of human social systems (and it is this 'nothing but' approach that I am criticising) then indeed it would be no more than 'a branch, or kind, of sociology', as Radcliffe-Brown and some of his successors have thought. And if it were 'nothing but' the study of category-systems, beliefs and values, it might well be regarded as a branch of philosophy, or psychology, or morals. In fact as it is practised it is, in large measure, all of these things.

We are all now well aware that in recent years the pendulum has swung away from the consideration of causes and 'functions' to the study of categories and meanings - to cognitive as opposed to 'social' structures⁴). This, as I understand it, is a central theme, fascinatingly developed, in Ardener's 'The new anthropology', though he emphasises that both paradigmatic and syntagmatic models have their places in our subject - the important thing is not to confuse them. In fact from the beginning anthropologists have been interested in, and have written about, ideal, conceptual data; it was only the (for a time) seductive charms of the organic analogy of the functionalists that persuaded them that they were not. It was not until the 1950s, partly through the impact of Evans-Pritchard's 1951 Marett Lecture, that this interest in concepts and categories began to become respectable again, at least in Britain. There were many references to this shift of interest in the 1950 and 1960s; I myself remarked in 1955, without any sense that I was saying anything original, on the current trend towards 'the study of systems of ideas and beliefs not exclusively from the functional point of view, but also as systems in their own right', calling for new types of analysis. Firth (1957), Pocock (1961) and a number of others have made the same observation, at greater or lesser length.

With this new and vigorous emphasis on social anthropology as essentially concerned with concepts and categories, with cognitive rather than 'social' structure, a concern with causal relationships has in some quarters become unfashionable, not to say downright unrespectable. But it seems to me evident that since what people do and say has consequences as well as meanings, we are bound, unless we take a needlessly restrictive view of our subject, to take account of both aspects, despite the untidy dualism, referred to above, which this involves. In fact we mostly have done so, though some have been more attracted to one dimension, others to the other. Indeed the pendulum may be thought to be beginning a counter-swing. I have already mentioned Barth, who, with his 'transaction' (a form of 'action') model has had a good deal of influence in some quarters. In a recent article (1970) Ruth Finnegan, whose specialism has been oral literature, writes (p. 193): 'Interesting as are ideologies, symbols and constitutional charters, the time is surely past when sociologists or historians or political scientists are content only to study such topics. They are also interested in the actual relations of individuals and groups, the interplay of power and the empirical facts on the ground'. So the pendulum swings; a motion which at least suggests that the clock has not run down. Of course, as Heelas, commenting on Ardener, points out, the ground - or earth - where empirical facts are supposed to be found does not exist in any simple sense. But what does? For practical purposes Dr. Johnson's rebuttal of Berkeley's immaterialism is valid.

If we concede that social anthropology as it is practised has, whatever it 'ought' to have, both a sociological component (in so far as it looks at social action, choosing and decision-making, causes and consequences both intended and unintended), and a logico-philosophical, linguistic, hermeneutic and perhaps ultimately psychological component (in so far as it analyses human concepts and categories, the structures they exhibit and the conditions that underlie them), then we shall have to be a bit clearer than we generally are about social anthropology's relationship with sociology. I have said elsewhere (1964, pp.29-31) that it is more than sociology, as that term is usually understood, or at least defined, in that it studies ideas, beliefs, etc., as well as other aspects of culture such as art and oral literature, in their own right as well as in their relationship, if they have any, to systems of social action. But it seems to me that there are enough differences between what social anthropologists do qua sociologists and what sociologists do, even though some of these are

differences of emphasis, to justify keeping the two subjects distinct, at least for the foreseeable future. It may be useful to list here (but not to develop) six of what seem to me to be the most important of these differences.

First, although the two disciplines share a number of intellectual ancestors, their origins and histories were very different, and these differences have important implications, (some of which I touch on below) for the kinds of subjects they are today. Sociology grew from a philosophical interest in the nature of human society itself, combined (in Victorian England) with a practical concern with the problems of urban poverty and industrialization; anthropology looked outward at so-called 'primitive' peoples, first to provide supporting evidence for conjectures about the early stages in human history, later to learn about these peoples themselves.

So, secondly, the kinds of societies that sociologists and social anthropologists have worked in have for the most part differed sharply. Sociologists have mostly confined themselves to Western, industrialized societies, while social anthropologists have characteristically worked in remote and 'exotic' ones, usually small in scale, and in which most social relationships are face to face. That is, they have mostly worked in the context of 'communities', in Maciver's and Page's sense of that term (1950, pp. 8-9) which itself owes something to Tonnies' concept of Gemeinschaft. This is not of course to say that social anthropology as 'micro-sociology', can only be done in small-scale, 'simple' societies: as Banton (1964) has well said, 'the justification of social anthropology lies not in any claim to a distinctive subject-matter, but in the significant problems it has discovered, and the lines of explanation it has opened up'. But it is none the less true that significant problems and lines of explanation are likely to be different in different contexts.

The 'otherness' of the societies and cultures that social anthropologists have mostly studied has meant, thirdly, that they have from the beginning been centrally concerned with problems of translation and understanding - the hermeneutics of the subject - problems which are very much less acute, though they certainly exist, for sociologists. This interpretative process continues to be a primary concern of social anthropologists, as it is not for sociologists, who have been accustomed to work in milieux not totally unfamiliar to them⁵). As Gellner has put it: 'Concepts and beliefs are, of course, of particular concern to social anthropology. Sociology can sometimes be a matter of ascertaining facts within an institutional framework which is taken for granted. The anthropologist can virtually never take anything for granted in this way....' (1962, p.153).

Fourth, it is a further consequence of the 'otherness' of social anthropology's traditional field that it could only be at all adequately studied by intensive fieldwork, by 'getting down off the verandah', in Malinowski's phrase, and living and working as far as possible as a member of the community being studied. This kind of 'total immersion' has neither played nor plays a comparable part in sociology. As already noted, usually the sociologist is already, in a sense, in the society he studies; the anthropologist has to get into it, and this can be difficult and even painful, as well as rewarding. It can be, and has been, argued that social anthropologists make a fetish of fieldwork, and certainly there is a danger of this. (The term 'fieldwork' is anyway particularly inept, but it is hard to think of a better one). Data have, however, to be collected, and this task, nowadays, calls for professional skills. As I have elsewhere remarked, 'if social anthropologists do not do their own fieldwork, it is certain that nobody else will do it for them'.

A further consequence of the 'otherness' of social anthropology's traditional field is (fifthly) that social anthropology has - so far - made much less use of quantitative methods than sociology has. This is partly because you cannot usefully quantify until you know what you are quantifying, and the understanding of familiar social and cultural data, a long and full-time job, is the social anthropologist's central concern. Also, it is plain that people's categories and classifications, a main interest of social anthropologists, are less susceptible to quantification than their patterns of social behaviour are. It is possible to over-stress this difference between the two disciplines, as Edmund Leach perhaps does when, speaking of 'field sociology', he says (1967, p.77) that 'sociologists count things' (as opposed to understanding them), and rather implies that this is all they do. In fact sociologically minded social anthropologists are increasingly counting things too.

There is a sixth, final and rather important practical point to make. However one may estimate the degree of overlap which currently exists - or should exist - in theory between the two disciplines, as a matter of fact they are, for the most part, taught in universities as two quite separate and distinct subjects. Even when they are taught together in the same department, it is common for signs of fission to appear. It is only necessary to compare the entries under 'sociology' and 'social anthropology' in any bookseller's catalogue, or the bibliographies appended to introductory books in the two subjects, to see how very distinct in practice the teaching of them is. A limited quantitative analysis of a random sample of three introductions to sociology (Sprott 1949, Bottomore 1962 and Johnson 1961 - selected because I happened to have them in my study) revealed that less than 10 per cent of the very considerable number of books cited were what would usually be classed as social anthropology. Likewise, the coverage of works usually considered as 'sociology' in two popular introductions to social anthropology (Firth 1956, Lienhardt 1964) was barely over 10 per cent. So whatever may be thought desirable in principle, in fact the degree of overlap between the two disciplines, in regard to what students in each are expected to read, may well be of the order of approximately ten per cent. To suggest, as John Barnes does in an interview recently published (Listener, 5 August, 1971), that there is 'no distinction at all' between sociology and social anthropology seems hardly exact. They are, indeed, the closest of companion disciplines, sharing many common interests, and it would be both foolish and impracticable to attempt to draw a hard and fast line between them. But as things stand at present, they are clearly distinguishable from each other with regard to their histories, their characteristic methods and their main theoretical concerns, and only confusion can result from pretending otherwise.

I think, then, that the term social anthropology denotes a viable subject, grounded in a substantial and growing body of comparative data and theory, and oriented towards a wide and increasing variety of problems, on the levels of both 'action' and 'meaning'. This is enough to provide social anthropology with an identity, and to signal in the very broadest terms the lines of its development. It is neither possible nor desirable to be much more precise than this.

Let me conclude by taking a brief 'outside' view of social anthropology; from the point of view, that is, of some other disciplines, whose practitioners increasingly acknowledge that they have learnt something from social anthropology, as social anthropology has certainly learnt much from them. A few examples may make the point. Some professional philosophers (Winch, MacIntyre) have enthusiastically taken up Evans-Pritchard's famous study of Zande thought, and a recent collection of essays edited by the sociologist Bryan Wilson (1970) brings philosophers and social anthropologists

together in a debate on the kind of thinking involved in myth and magic. Two important recent books on witchcraft in England by the historians Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane acknowledge indebtedness to recent anthropology as well as to Evans-Pritchard's classic study. Both of these authors recently participated with social anthropologists in a symposium on witchcraft and sorcery (published as Douglas 1970). Theologians, lawyers and classicists have derived, and acknowledged, help from social anthropology, and continue to do so. Social anthropologists have collaborated even more extensively with the other social sciences, not only, or even pre-eminently, with sociology, but also (for example) with political science, social psychology and economics. The connection with linguistics is manifest. Even without a detailed inventory of recent cross-disciplinary bridges, an inventory which might in fact be very useful, there is ample evidence, for those who wish to take note of it, of social anthropology's contributions in a variety of contexts and over many years to longer-established disciplines. There is no reason why such contacts should not continue and increase. We need not wait for social anthropology's dissolution (as the Lévi-Strauss quotation given earlier in this paper might suggest) before the humanities can benefit from its findings. By their own account they are doing so already.

A dialogue must necessarily cease when one partner to it has been ingested by the others, and social anthropology's demise, and its fragmentation and assimilation into other disciplines, must evidently bring these processes of cross-fertilization to an end. This would seem to be a pity. So long as the exchanges involved are thought to be worth while by the parties to them, so long would there seem to be a strong case for resisting the death wish which the subject has generated in some of us, and for sustaining social anthropology, at any rate for the foreseeable future, as a distinct and separate discipline.

But not too separate. Social anthropology will indeed have no future if it is to be locked up in the ivory tower to which the protagonists of the purest and highest scholarship have sometimes seemed to wish to confine it. Such purists have sometimes given the impression that, in their view, social anthropology is not, and need not be, of the slightest practical use to anybody. Sometimes they even appear to be rather shocked that its findings should be made available in plain language to ordinary people. There are evident dangers in popularization. But the dangers of isolation and in-breeding are even greater. If social anthropology is prepared to 'come down off the verandah', and to rub shoulders with other disciplines and with other human concerns, practical as well as academic, without worrying too much about its state of intellectual and moral health, then, I suggest, the outlook for our subject is a good deal less bleak than some people seem to think.

John Beattie.

- 1) It might, for this reason seem unjustified to add yet a further note on the topic, especially as in a recent issue of this Journal (II, 1, Hilary 1971) Paul Heelas has provided a very fair summary of three of the most recent statements (Needham 1970, Banaji 1970 and Ardener 1971). These brief comments are offered only as a modest attempt to clarify - perhaps simplify - some of the issues involved.
- 2) There is, however, one context in which labels, even provisional ones, are, unfortunately, indispensable, and that is in the context of teaching the subject. The philosophically-minded social anthropologist may, if he can afford it, decline to concern himself with pedagogics and with the awkward practical problems which teaching involves; the professional teacher of the subject cannot. Students, both graduates and undergraduates, and even sixth forms, want to learn anthropology, and unless it is decided (as it cannot effectively be) that they shall not be allowed to do so, someone has to do the job of preparing curricula, deciding what shall be included and what excluded, and so on. And these matters cannot be determined in a vacuum; courses and curricula already exist, and it is the amending and expanding of these, rather than the composition from scratch of ideal curricula based on conceptions of what the subject ought to be, that is our practical concern. Of course if anthropology passes away it will no longer be there to study. But I am arguing that this is unlikely.
- 3) For the information of the curious, they are: Man in Africa (eds. M. Douglas & P.M. Kaberry), 1969; Tradition and Transition in East Africa (ed. P. Gulliver), 1969; Oracles et Ordales chez les Nzakara (A. Retel-Laurentin), 1969; Witchcraft, Sorcery & Social Categories among the Safwa (A. Harwood), 1970; Kalahari Village Politics (A. Kuper), 1970; African Elite (J. Vincent), 1971; and Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa (J. Goody), 1971.
- 4) Of course not all contemporary social anthropologists go along with this trend. Fredrik Barth, for example, pleads for 'generative models' to explain process; individuals pursuing goals and making choices: his model derives from games theory, not from Chomsky and the grammarians.
- 5) This needs some qualification, but as a statement of historical fact it is essentially true.

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