

Our Genius for the Equivocal

Jonathan Benthall

'... un génie de l'équivoque qui pourrait servir à définir l'homme.'

Merleau-Ponty

Anthropology: *plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state?*¹

In 1987, Sir Edmund Leach, the most influential British social anthropologist of his generation, startled a conference in Norwich of the Association of Social Anthropologists by declaring that ethnographic monographs were essentially fictions, expressing the personality of the author. When asked what should be the goal of the anthropologist, he replied, 'To write another *War and Peace*'. This and some similar papers were published by him and have come in for much criticism: for instance, from a leading anthropologist of the next generation, Adam Kuper, who has regretted that Leach made such a concession to fashionable post-modernism, the 'literary turn' in anthropology, shortly before his death (Kuper, 1999: 15–35).

For what it is worth, I was present at that conference and knew Leach well. It was clear to me then that his intellectual powers were failing as a result of the brain cancer which was already causing him grave distress, and to which he was finally to succumb in 1989. During those final agonizing years, he had a tendency to express a point of view with all his habitual vigour, but with a loss of sensitivity to context. When at the height of his powers, he had been notable for his sense of intellectual progress as a dialectical path, in which theoretical energy was accumulated at the furthest end of the pendulum's swing – a more exhilarating place to be than on the common-sense middle ground. Whereas so many successful intellectuals exaggerate their theoretical position in order to stake out a personal territory, one of Leach's strengths was that he usually alerted his hearers and readers to the presence of counter-arguments that might cut right across what he was trying to persuade them of. This was of course an eminently scientific habit of mind, however colourful its products could be.² Leach was best known as an advocate of structuralism *à la* Lévi-Strauss and as a social commentator, but he was trained as a mathematician and engineer and he was far from being a purely literary intellectual. Leach disdained any application of mechanical models to the explanation of human phenomena; but when I think of how his mind worked I am sometimes reminded of the process, puzzling for non-scientists, whereby a refrigerator can cyclically convert heat into its opposite.

Whereas the socio-cultural and the biological sub-disciplines of anthropology have been growing further apart in the last decades so that now there is an epistemological gap

between them, Leach saw it as a priority that dialogue should be maintained. Hence his unstinting support for a society which still adheres to the ideal principle of a unified anthropology, the Royal Anthropological Institute, from whose directorship I have just resigned after being appointed by Leach twenty-six years ago when he was President. Alas, the forces separating biological from socio-cultural anthropology have been strong, and I see this as one of the major problems which the discipline as a whole faces, though a few individuals such as Tim Ingold of the University of Aberdeen, and Georges Guille-Escuret, guest-editor of the present issue of *Diogenes*, and Robin Fox of Rutgers University are fighting to maintain a measure of unity.

Socio-cultural anthropology straddles the humanities and the sciences, gathering talents from almost every disciplinary background. Its only competitor in this respect is geography, which has admittedly made a major contribution to the furtherance of environmental sciences, but which intellectually has tended to soak up ideas from other disciplines passively. Anthropology, by contrast, has consistently been an exporter of ideas to other disciplines: history, demography, development economics, social medicine, theatre studies and theology, to name but a few. Some predicted that it would not survive the collapse of colonial empires in the late twentieth century and the apparent dwindling in the number of indigenous 'tribal' societies that could be studied; but it continues to survive and even expand.

Anthropology has perhaps gained an adventitious advantage in the academic marketplace through the decline of prestige which sociology has suffered since the mid 1970s. There is always an extensive overlap between sociology and social anthropology, and some sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Peter Worsley have been among the most penetrating thinkers of their day. But sociology has not lived up to the hopes vested in it during the 1960s. Why? One reason was an excessive subservience to theoretical Marxism which held sway in some quarters. Many of my generation were fascinated by Marxism, and it took us varying lengths of time to realize that it could all too easily become like an elaborate arcade machine where you pressed some buttons to ask a question, there was much flashing of lights, and the answer came out, always much the same. Society as it existed was being compared with an ideal classless society that has never existed. A second reason is that sociology in a country such as Britain became all too often restricted to concerns which were part of the national political agenda and hence intellectually parochial. For instance, the sociological study of racial and ethnic relations in Britain required the substantial input of insights from social anthropologists in the 1970s, such as Michael Banton, to rescue it from a number of simplistic assumptions, such as the idea that white racism was a historically unique phenomenon resulting from the period of European imperialism, or the idea that differences of skin colour are inevitably more politically divisive than other differences. In other words, sociology was damaged by a lack of science.

Socio-cultural anthropology has benefited from a number of its major practitioners' being excellent writers – Frazer, Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard having set a high standard among the ancestors. A minority of anthropologists today have accentuated the literary or poetic element in ethnographic writing. The most distinguished work coming from this tradition is truly remarkable, one example being Lila Abu-Lughod's sensitive and sophisticated presentation for an anthropological readership of the stories and conversations exchanged by Egyptian Bedouin women (Abu-Lughod, 1993). Again, Nancy

Lindisfarne has condensed her ethnographic fieldwork among urban families in Syria into a series of short stories which have been published in Arabic translation, impressing readers with the depth of her insights (Lindisfarne, 1997).³ Less impressive, however, has been a spate of books with little ethnographic content, much fashionable jargon, and excessive information about the authors themselves in the guise of 'reflexivity'. Such books date rapidly.

At the other extreme, one can point to a number of social-cultural anthropologists who explicitly adopt natural science models for their research. Pascal Boyer is unusual in that he draws on cognitive psychological research to seek to ascertain invariants in religious experience (Boyer, 1994). One of his hypotheses is that supernatural events, such as a ubiquitous god listening to prayer, must conform to all the normal conditions of everyday experience, with a single exception in each case: thus, for instance, in some traditions a god's physical likeness may have to be approached within hearing distance in order for him to listen.

Many other anthropologists do not think of themselves as natural scientists, but engage nonetheless in the fundamental procedure of natural science which is to test observations and inferences against hypotheses. Thus, the late Louis Dumont's contributions to Indian social anthropology (e.g. Dumont, 1970) dominated a whole generation's thinking about caste and stratification in India. He proposed that structural racism as we know it in the West had derived paradoxically from the West's ideological suppression of a deep-seated human need for social and ritual hierarchy which was, by contrast, celebrated in Indian civilization, making possible the apparent stability of the caste system across centuries. For three decades Indianists have been arguing with this model – one criticism being that it reflected the Brahmins' world-view, and the cultural policies of British imperial administrators – but arguing productively.

As in the history of natural science, so the progress of anthropology has been punctuated by the presence of strong intellectual personalities. Dumont who died in 1999, Leach who died in 1989 and Ernest Gellner who died in 1995, were three such. About all three it has been said by current leaders of the profession that their detailed theoretical positions, inevitably subject to correction and review in the light of new evidence, were of much less importance than their ability to identify crucial questions and advance provocative arguments.

Whatever humanistic accoutrements it may sport from time to time, anthropology therefore participates in the dialectically cumulative progress of science. For instance, there can be little doubt that our understanding of such theoretical issues as the prevalence of egalitarian ideologies in economically self-sufficient hunter-gatherer societies (Woodburn, 1982), or the common elements governing cultural identity and cultural boundaries in our contemporary world (Harrison, 1999), there has been progress.⁴ At a more prosaic level, the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) have been developed since the 1950s in association with Yale University to disseminate descriptive information on the ways of life of several hundred social groups from all over the world. HRAF's explicit project to found a 'laboratory' has been criticized on the grounds that the descriptions embody too many limitations and theoretical biases to have validity as a source of comparisons.

The 1950s were also the period when, it must be acknowledged, there was a measure of inappropriate mimicry of some aspects of scientific methods. The zenith of this was

at the Social Relations Department at Harvard, where Clifford Geertz now looks back in retrospect on 'social science in full cry; headier and more confident than before or since . . . a big-push effort to construct a unified, generalizing science of society from which could emerge a practical technology for the management of human affairs' (Geertz, 1995: 100, 104). At around the same time, Claude Lévi-Strauss – one of the most original minds ever to work in anthropology – was undoubtedly bedazzled by the glamour of cybernetics and the new information technologies which were developing in the United States.

Disappointment with the undoubted slowness of progress in social science, and with the lack of spectacular breakthroughs which appeal to journalists; distrust of the tendency of natural science to team up with the big battalions of government and industry, rather than working as a force for liberation and an open future; rejection of pretentious pseudo-scientific jargon – these are among the factors which have caused some contemporary anthropologists to want to cut the anchor which ties them to science.⁵ In the remainder of this article I shall try to show that they are misguided.

Re-examining received knowledge

The most important point is that anthropologists, more than any social scientists, are enjoined by disciplinary tradition to subject not only the values of their own social background and education, but also their professional practices, to continuous questioning. The period of returning home after a period of fieldwork is often one when a researcher is forced to examine his or her assumptions quite ruthlessly, while the foci of debate among active researchers have changed radically in recent years. No discipline can have subjected itself to such a thoroughgoing autocritique since the 1970s,⁶ yet it has retained a sense of its history and traditions as a cumulative process. A reflexive examination of the ethnographic process itself, as an episode of reciprocal exchange between the researcher and the researched, has been incorporated into the discipline as a necessary exercise in order to minimize distortions and blind spots.

One exemplary recent work is Sharon Hutchinson's *Nuer Dilemmas*, a study of what has happened to an agro-pastoralist group of the southern Sudan among whom Evans-Pritchard did fieldwork in the 1930s when they were relatively isolated, resulting in his three classic monographs which are a mainstay of anthropological teaching. During the intervening sixty years, the Nuer had experienced massive political changes with the end of British colonial rule in 1955, two long civil wars, Christian conversion and Islamic dominance from the north. Where Evans-Pritchard looked for the sources of unity and equilibrium, Hutchinson focuses her attention on conflicts of interest between various age, gender, wealth and status groups, questioning the very notion of 'the Nuer' as a unified ethnic identity. For instance, Evans-Pritchard rarely considered the viewpoint of Nuer women. To some extent, Hutchinson has been possessed by the scholarly *zeitgeist*, and she was obviously prepared when she set out on her research to cast a sharp eye on the extent to which Evans-Pritchard had played down the transformative effect on the colonial encounter. However, she also pays tribute to the richness of his ethnographic descriptions. She was able to cross-check her book by having its main chapters read by a diverse group of six university-educated Nuer. Hutchinson's deep respect for the people she has worked with, and her articulate concern for their extremely dangerous

and uncertain future (Save the Children Fund were among the sponsors of her research), does not derogate from her book's achievement as an exercise in social science, a persistent testing of received ideas against new evidence.

Reflexivity certainly highlights self-contradictions or irrationalities which are built into the analysis of all social institutions. What, for example, is 'social reality'? However, it is also clear that science and mathematics rest on cognitive quicksands; as soon as one begins to think of Cantorian transfinite arithmetic, Gödel's proof or post-Einsteinian physics, the head begins to spin. Why should social science be different? We have to stretch planks across the quicksand as best we can. Both natural scientists and social scientists can all too easily lapse into routine positivism. Science properly conceived is a process which includes the constant re-examination of received knowledge.

Comparative methods

Another key feature of anthropology is the comparative principle, which unites it with all serious scientific endeavours. (Actually this is the principle which could begin to reintegrate socio-cultural with evolutionary anthropology, because the latter is essentially concerned with making comparisons between *Homo sapiens* and other forms of animal life.) Unfortunately, the waters are a little muddied by the presence in the anthropological literature of one of the ruins of Victorian theory, the 'comparative method', which was partly inspired by the successes of historical linguistics, and which relied on the identification of cultural traits and their ordering in supposedly universal categories regardless of context (cf. Stocking, 1995). The later tradition of anthropology exemplified by HRAF, mentioned above, seems to have relied principally on comparative anatomy as its fallacious scientific model (cf. Barth, 1999: 78–81). In reaction, 'holism' became the trademark of American anthropologists, and 'functionalism' that of the British; but the overriding long-term goal of comparison has never been abandoned – even if only lip-service is often paid to it – except by some anthropologists during the recent period of literary post-modernism. It is likely that if this trend were to have continued without a backlash, anthropology would have lost a great deal of its institutional support, and its practitioners would have had to compete in the same market as creative writers.

When the Victorians founded their comparative method, the shelf life of anthropological theories was longer than today, because well-documented facts were so few. The lack of durable theories was acknowledged by Evans-Pritchard and Gellner in the 1960s, but both held that it would be wrong to desist from the quest. Gellner added that it was possible for social anthropologists to do work of scientific value even if they did not set out explicitly to test a 'hypothesis': 'the reason is that socio-anthropological method . . . already contains in itself, implicitly, a set of questions and even hypotheses (often negative) which, if a researcher does his job at all competently, lead to results which are not merely fairly reliable, but above all usable for further and comparative work' (Gellner, 1973: 144).

The revival of an explicit emphasis on comparison is well exemplified by a recent collaboration between anthropologists and political scientists (Bowen and Petersen, 1999), which argues in favour of controlled comparisons of a few cases – comparison being, in the co-editors' words, 'at the heart of the matter for social science'. One of the co-editors,

the Indonesianist anthropologist John R. Bowen, gives a three-level contrastive analysis with data drawn from different parts of the Islamic world, of ways in which the annual Feast of Sacrifice, at which the prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son at God's command, is celebrated (Bowen, 1999). The lowest level of contrast is within the central highlands of northern Sumatra, between village traditionalists and urban reformists. A second level contrasts this antinomy with the tension between religious traditionalists and modernists in a neighbouring coastal region, where the modernists seek to transcend village life on pan-Islamic principles rather than reform it. Bowen's third and highest level of contrast is at the other end of the Islamic world, Morocco, where he adduces evidence of another pair of variant forms of sacrificial ritual recorded by ethnographers: the one unequivocally patriarchal, the other leaving more space for women's roles. Bowen's innovative essay finds its complement in an outstanding study of Islamic sacrifice in general funded over several years by the French government (Bonte 1999).

A science of meaning and values

I now approach perhaps the most difficult part of my topic: the fact that socio-cultural anthropology is deeply concerned with questions of meaning and value. One of its most impressive achievements is to show that many traditional cosmologies are thoroughly worked out explorations of the universal riddles of human existence: Lévi-Strauss, for instance, has argued that Amerindian myths are richer and more subtle than the speculations of psychoanalysts (Lévi-Strauss, 1985); and more recently Barbara Glowczewski (1999) has mapped the intricate connections between Australian Aboriginals' religious, aesthetic and ecological domains of experience as sub-sets of a self-organizing system. Whereas it used to be said that kinship or ritual were the core of the subject, most anthropologists would now probably say that it is 'meaning'. Surely, you may say, these questions take us away from the scope of science and into that of the humanities?

Yes, anthropology is the most humane of the sciences, as has often been remarked, but I would argue that at no point is it desirable for anthropologists to abrogate their scientific role. Others will advance a variety of solutions to the dilemma, but I would like to conclude by suggesting that the most promising bridgehead is phenomenology, and in particular the embodied phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty's masterwork *La phénoménologie de la perception* has had a considerable influence on anthropology, especially medical anthropology, as indeed on social science in general.⁷ Lévi-Strauss dedicated his *La pensée sauvage* to Merleau-Ponty in 1962. Christina Toren (1993) has made imaginative use of his work to help argue her theoretically radical claim that, in a given society, children's understandings of the world are significantly different from adults' understandings, and sometimes direct inversions. Thus, Euro-American children between three and a half and five years old may interpret 'racial' categories as evaluative rather than perceptual, because adults pass on affective and evaluative judgments through bodily signals which are out of their conscious awareness or control; the child forces us to address the dissimulation inherent in conventional adult 'racial' categories.

Merleau-Ponty has not yet, however, been accorded the canonical status among anthropologists which he deserves. He provides a critique of empirical science for giving

us not an account of human experience so much as telling us what God would think of it (1945: 296). The alternative he proposes is not some mystical anti-science, but an expanded definition of science which treats human meanings as integrated with the perceived world: '... l'on peut dire à la lettre que nos sens interrogent les choses et qu'elles leur répondent. ... Les relations entre les choses ou entre les aspects des choses étant toujours médiatisées par notre corps, la nature entière est la mise en scène de notre propre vie ou notre interlocuteur dans une sorte de dialogue' (*ibid.*: 371, 372). Again, 'Il est impossible de superposer chez l'homme une première couche de comportements que l'on appellerait "naturels" et un monde culturel ou spirituel fabriqué. Tout est fabriqué et tout est naturel chez l'homme, comme on voudra dire, en ce sens qu'il n'est pas un mot, pas une conduite qui ne doive quelque chose à l'être simplement biologique – et qui en même temps ne se dérobe à la simplicité de la vie animale, ne détourne de leur sens les conduites vitales, par une sorte d'échappement et par un génie de l'équivoque qui pourrait servir à définir l'homme' (*ibid.*: 220–222).

Merleau-Ponty opposed the reductionism of psychoanalysis and Marxism which were current alternative orthodoxies in the 1940s. But his arguments would be equally valid against reductionisms such as evolutionary psychology or neo-Darwinism which are so popular today. His text offers a rigorous expansion of the concept of science, and hence an alternative to reductivist science which need resort neither to theological dogma nor to an anti-scientific expressionism. A scientific anthropology can therefore be one which also sets a supreme value on human intentionality and potential. This is not inconsistent with anthropology's traditional elective affinity with marginal groups whose human potential has been in some way suppressed, nor with its reputation as the most 'green' of the social sciences.

It is fallacious to think of any science as a disembodied, purely intellectual endeavour. Edmund Leach was a many-sided researcher, writer, teacher and institutional leader. The final falling short of his contextualizing powers, when his body began to fail him, should make one appreciate all the more both his own personal contribution to anthropology, and also his recognition that whatever the achievements of an individual anthropologist's life, he or she can never be more than embodied episodes in a dialectical and institutional tradition.

Jonathan Benthall
Royal Anthropological Institute

Notes

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1. 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, / The proper study of Mankind is Man. / Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state, / A Being darkly wise, and rudely great ...' Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle II.
2. Cf., in the best retrospective article yet published about Leach, 'Leach rightly mistrusted both exaggerated relativism, with its self-indulgent epistemological agonizing, and hyper-coherent cultural accounts that fail to recognize the ambiguities and contradictions with which people live' (Fuller and Parry, 1989: 14).
3. The full collection, translated into Arabic by Mamdouh Adwan, has appeared as *Al raqs fi dimashq (Dancing in Damascus)*, Dar al Mada Press: Damascus, 1997.

4. Other examples are given in Lett, 1996.
5. For a useful discussion, see Grimshaw and Hart 1995.
6. Sociology embraced reflexivity, however, several years before anthropology, cf. O'Neill, 1972: 167ff.
7. e.g. O'Neill, 1972, 1985; Benthall and Polhemus, 1975; Schepher-Hughes and Lock, 1987; Harré, 1991; Tilley, 1994; Jackson, 1996; Gell, 1999. Brenda M. Farnell (1994) attempts to overcome, with the help of Harré's 'corporeal psychology', what she sees as limitations in Merleau-Ponty's theories to understand the person as an agent that moves.

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Biographical note

Jonathan Benthall was born in Calcutta in 1941. He has been Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) since 1974 and Editor of *Anthropology Today* since 1985. In 1993 he was awarded the 'Anthropology in Media' Award by the American Anthropological Association. He is an Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Anthropology, University College, London. He is resigning from the RAI in the summer of 2000 to devote himself to scholarly and practical activities in the field of organized charity, especially in the Arab-Islamic world.

His publications include *Science and Technology in Art Today* (1972), *The Body as a Medium of Expression* (co-edited with T. Polhemus, 1975), *Disasters, Relief and the Media* (1993), and several recent articles on Arab-Islamic topics.