"ANTHROPOLOGY WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE IVORY TOWERS"

I want in this paper[1] to make a temporary bridge between the thinking of theoretical anthropologists conducted as it is within the cosy confines of this most prestigious university, and that of the many lecturers and teachers in colleges and schools outside, as well as the mass of intelligent lay public with little formal education who nevertheless aspire to know what you, in your ivory towers, are doing, and what you have to say to them about Man, the social animal. There are analogies in the position held by university courses in anthropology in the past with the idealistic struggles of lesser institutions of learning today, to spread sweetness and light among the masses, which I think bear consideration. I intend, therefore, to exploit what I believe to be my marginal position in social anthropology to talk about the educational implications of the subject.

It was in this University, not far off a century ago, that anthropology was first thoroughly established as a subject by that rationalist Quaker, Edward Tylor. The Oxford diploma is not only the oldest one-year course, but it is the original postgraduate diploma course which was ever initiated; and one which, as Marett remarked when he held the Oxford chair for one year in 1934, many other university courses later used as a model. Today, a year's postgraduate course alone can hardly cover the tremendous field of knowledge into which social anthropology has blossomed since Radcliffe-Brown taught here first about 35 years ago. It can only be an introduction to the research degrees for which this University is famous. What a world of difference, one might think, will separate the student attracted to such a course from those for whom the raw, new upstart courses of the colleges and institutes of education, the colleges of further and of adult education, and the polytechnics, cater. Yet in a curious way, these parvenue institutions have inherited some of the cast-off purposes of the late 19th century, and have been seized with the same moralising fervour as earlier inspired this University. They have tried to introduce not only adults and adolescents, but in some cases even children, to "the study of man and civilization, not only as a matter of scientific interest, but because we have in it the means of understanding our own lives and our place in the world ... and to guide us in our duty of leaving the world better than we found it." If you do not recognise that quotation, let me continue it: "In times when subjects of education have multiplied, it may seem at first a hardship to lay on the already heavily-pressed student a new science. But it will be found that the real effect of anthropology is rather to lighten than increase the strain of learning. So it is with the science of man and civilisation, which connects into a more manageable whole the scattered subjects of an ordinary education."

Those words with which Edward Tylor began his little introductory book on Anthropology in 1881, have been used as a coda with which to end one of the most modern introductions to Social Anthropology, that which Godfrey Lienhardt published in 1964, and they are still relevant.

In the interim, some twenty years ago, your Emeritus Professor,

Evans-Pritchard, in introducing some published talks given by the B.B.C. in 1952, somewhat sourly observed that students of other subjects and people interested in different kinds of scholarship tend usually to think of anthropology in terms of theories put forward about 50 years ago. "New knowledge," he then said, "is very slowly absorbed outside the small circle of specialists who create it ... laymen cannot be expected to read all the large monographs and all the innumerable papers in learned journals; so it is the duty of anthropologists to present to the public from time to time in more popular form, conclusions they have reached and the problems they are seeking to solve."

Perhaps this remark, in its implications of academic "noblesse oblige", dates somewhat. Perhaps it is the conclusions rather than the methods which need public interpretation. It might appear that the lay public today falls upon those large volumes, and devours, quite undigested, both the cooked and the uncooked, both the wild and the cultivated forms of anthropological thought, almost as soon as the specialist has published them. Nevertheless, he makes the point, which I wish to stress, that there are traditional moral obligations of some force and standing in this subject which demand a fairly constant stream of communication, which I believe should also be in more than one direction, between the universities and the intelligent lay public, between both teachers and students, and from places of learning well outside the spires of Oxford, or Cambridge, the towers of London, or even the great blocks of Sussex, let alone the ordinary buildings of Manchester, or Edinburgh or Durham. And even more so is this interpretation necessary today than 50 years ago, when no shop could have sold a book on, say, Frazer or Malinowski by the thousands, as they recently have done for one on Lévi-Strauss by Edmund Leach, or on ritual by Mary Douglas.

Now in some quarters, while it is admitted that there ought to be this communication, to the outside world _from_ the universities, it is often not considered that there should be any necessary counter-communication. The relationship between what goes on within the universities and without has been differently conceived at different times, and discussion of it is nothing new. Nevertheless, it is a discussion which needs to be continually kept alive, as conditions both within and without the universities change, so necessarily affecting the relationship. Sir Eric Ashby recently pointed out that it was the wealth of Oxford and of Cambridge which enabled them to preserve a great deal of freedom both from the state and (in their more vigorous phases) from the church. This power was used to allow each master: "freedom to do his own thing" - Sir Eric's use of the modern jargon of the left. But he goes on: "If academic freedom was not often questioned in nineteenth century England, it was because no one much cared what professors taught or wrote; it was a freedom which did not matter."

Today it does matter. It is of concern at every level. The pressures of public opinion range from the most recondite at the apex of the system, where professional councils award research money, and direct students to where they may pursue their particular form of research, through those of intermediate prestige, business and other foundations whose funds endow new chairs or pay for library buildings, till we reach the third estate of longhaired, unshaven and untaught (I did not say unteachable) students who loudly demand that their course have some social relevance. By their physical actions of sitting down, shouting down, or breaking down, this new group may succeed in disrupting the conventional structures of university teaching, at least temporarily, in some places. Although a new risk in the university, what I wish to stress is that these kinds of things have been happening before, but at a different level in the educational hierarchy. School teachers, appalled at the aggression and intellectual

indifference of schoolchildren, have sought teaching posts in colleges
and institutes of education; some already there, harassed by the demands
for formal teaching and lack of time for their own research and writing,
take wing further up to full university posts. But the dilemma which
drives them all is the difficulty of reconciling the desire to learn
more oneself with the obligations to teach more to others. This is a
direct outcome, isn't it, of the explosion of student numbers, and of
educational opportunity at all ages, and for both sexes and all social
levels, something very few of us could seriously deplore or seek to alter.

There has been a kind of inflationary demand for knowledge in all fields,
but particularly in the fields of the behavioural sciences, which, like all
inflationary demands, can be seen as devaluating the whole category of goods
demanded, by eliciting a stream of substitutes of less and less value from
the original scarce good. Can one defend such a dilution? Is it possible
to popularise without debasing a subject or unduly distorting its methodo-
logical principles?

The R.A.I. called a special series of meetings in 1964 to discuss the
teaching of social anthropology outside university departments, and even then
opinion was divided between what Paul Stirling called the Mandarins - who
wanted anthropology for Mature Minds only, and the Missionaries - who felt it
had a Message for Everyone. But no doubt as an indirect result of their
deliberations, a friend recently reported to me that her school age daughter
has been taking part in a Project on Witchcraft, and moreover that, based to
some extent on Lucy Mair's popular study, it was well conceived and reasonably
carried out.

Now although such a course would have been impossible without the help of
professional popularization, whatever of value was learnt certainly was not
presented an "anthropology".

So the first thing I want to say about anthropological teaching in the
market place, is that it has mostly to be done indirectly. Most people think
of the subject as having concern only and mainly with primitive peoples, who
are to be studied in order to show how much wiser and better we in the
civilised world now do things. It is accepted as a subject of study for
overseas students, mainly for giving an outline of the facts of social
structure it is expected that they will meet, but not necessarily as a
systematic way of looking at that structure.

Perhaps one of the main reasons for this viewpoint lies in the unfortu-
nate dominion which Margaret Mead's work has had over that of all other
anthropologists in the field of popular education. In fact, her name seems
to be the only one known to the "educationists"; and students, with no prior
knowledge of the structure of simple societies or of the methods or general
aims of social anthropology in general, have been introduced to these
books by the thousand in training colleges. It is not surprising that they
have swallowed the story of Samoan girlhood or New Guinea childhood whole,
much as they might some novel, and have acquired absolutely no general
principles from them at all.

It is, therefore, true to say, and I think one can be glad about this,
that pure theory of social anthropology as such is not, in general, taught
badly or wrongly by unqualified people, as it very often is in the case of
sociology. Anthropology, if it is taught, is taught "by stealth" as to the
schoolchild who does not say she is doing an "anthropology course", but a
study of witches. So it is also in the new degree courses for teachers and

general studies courses. Many aspects of the new syllabuses in education clearly call for handling by someone with an anthropological point of view, but they do not, I think, get that kind of approach very often. So I will now try to show you (i) what I personally believe a social anthropologist should try to get across to non-specialist students, (ii) how one can try to get it across, and (iii) what the student reaction is.

(i) The Main Aim

The most fundamental insight to be gained should be that the behaviour of man in society is patterned, and that the social patterns have some meaning. Also that there is always a sense in which the patterns hang together and relate to each other. The social constraints on behaviour are not only essential to our development as "persons", but they also explain, or excuse if you like, the limitations on what each person can do with his own personality. It is the extent to which individual freedom to behave and to interact with other individuals is limited, and our power to change the imperfect conditions of our own lives, which I believe it is important that students understand. The American-inspired 'culture and personality' school of thought has laid undue stress, to my mind, on how socialisation is supposed to make us feel differently, rather than just behave differently, in different cultures. The stress on psychological conditioning which this viewpoint emphasises is naturally onerous, especially to the young; it degrades their sense of personal integrity and individual power and personal responsibility. Almost exactly the obverse conception is stressed by a purely sociological analysis which may seem to point to the possibility of a complete emancipation of the individual by altering the structure of his society in such a way as to free him of the so-called artificial restraints of class or caste, the bonds of sexual role, kinship obligations, and so on. This point of view is naturally more attractive to the young, suggesting to them that social re-organisation, political or idealogical revolution can free a man to do or to become just what he pleases. And it is undoubtedly one of the attractions of current sociology courses.

But neither viewpoint is, in my opinion, quite valid, although each stresses an aspect of the eternal dilemma of the human condition. Cultural conditioning stresses the impotence of persons. Sociological analysis stresses man's omnipotence to free himself by changing the social system. Neither represents accurately the reality of our social world. But some conception of the compromises which men everywhere have had to make can most effectively be understood by the study of social anthropology, because it examines behaviour in many different types of society, and recognises the difference between what is done and what is supposed to be done. It can lift our vision beyond immediate problems, and suggest a valid philosophical acceptance of the inconsistencies and vagaries of social life.

Some answer, even faltering or tentative, to the question of what life means is one of the most urgent demands of the intelligent and idealistic young today; whether they be children in school, subject to cramming with all sorts of technical expertise to fit them into a society so huge and impersonal they often feel they are being treated as things and not people; or privileged students with time in universities to gain some detachment from, and insight into, the system before they also are overpowered by it.

The relevance of what the young had to learn in our own past as in other cultures could be justified by the immediate exigencies of the situation. In social systems which changed more slowly, or in which sheer poverty dominated life, disease, disaster and lack of technological mastery of the environment gave the young little time or opportunity to question the "relevance" of what they had to learn .. A Malay peasant in Kelantan who

did not learn to fish or grow rice starved. A Tikopia who did not learn the traditional respect for the gods relinquished his rights to the protection and collaboration of his kin and his neighbours. A Trobriander who did not see the relevance of kula exchange must have opted out of the main stream of social, economic and ritual relationships. Whether the Bemba girls understood the "relevance" of their chisungu initiation rites or not, to refuse to go through with them would be to refuse marriage and the only viable life for women at the time. To question the values and fail to gain the skills of the industrial economy of nineteenth century England was to court starvation if you were poor, social ridicule if you were rich.

But today, the impersonal and impartial structure of the welfare state, even in marginally welfare-orientated societies in the West, gives the young economic support of a kind even if they do not conform; education has enabled them to question and challenge both the structure and the purposes of society and the relevance of these purposes to their own education. When wealth has provided leisure to ask questions, and science seems to offer the power to provide solutions, questioning is natural; and not only intellectual questioning, but organised political and physical testing of the system is now possible in a way it has rarely been before.

If one can learn how other people, in other societies, have dealt with the problem of law and of law-breaking, of conformity and deviance, of respect for the gods and for desecration of the temples, of the rites and duties - as Maurice Freedman has called them - or the constraints and advantages, or sheer impossibilities or marriage, of the uses of art, and the meaning of ritual and of religion, one can perhaps see new meaning in what were otherwise regarded as useless patterns of our own social life.

In talking of the anthropologist's vision, Lévi-Strauss says that such observations only become possible by virtue of the distance from which they are glimpsed. How do we get students who have not been in the field, students who have no time to read "The Gift", or "The Argonauts", or to learn the complicated methodology of kinship studies, to see these structures of social control and their purposes, and to comprehend something of this world view?

(ii) Method

The first priority is that, whatever the subject be called, it must be made attractive. The necessity to make the students like what they are doing initially is not only that one learns better if so motivated, but also because learning social anthropology can be a very disturbing experience. We all know about culture shock. If we do not actually suffer from that, all field workers have suffered self-doubt, loneliness, anxiety, depression, or frustration partly because, alone of all of the research workers, he must eat, sleep and play, as well as work, in his laboratory. There is an analogy in the feelings experienced over a first field trip with the experiences incidental to a course of psycho-analysis. There is a very good reason why it should be so. In each case, the individual has to go through some kind of regression. He has to re-orientate all his predilections, learn even to speak all over again, he has to learn how to behave, he has to ask for many of the things which he owned before; he has to acquire a new status, new friends, play new roles, suspend judgment on nearly every issue which he perceives. This is what enables him to record, understand and analyse what goes on before him with as few preconceptions as possible.

The young student who comes first to college expects to increase his knowledge by receiving "nubs" of it, as it were, directly from his tutors. He

opens his intellectual mouth and often expects the tutor to feed hunks of information into it, rather as keepers at the zoo feed penguins. The students believe they know what they want, although they may have differing expectations of the way they are to get it. They may see the tutor as exhorting hard and painful labour as the price for these rewards, or they may see him as a friendly, public-spirited person willing to give away his treasures to any that will politely ask for them.

This is not, however, what really happens in any learning situation, although it may sometimes appear to happen. If nubs or hunks of knowledge are really tendered to the student like this, he will not be able to use them or "digest" them in the terms of the analogy; either he will reject them - vomit them up so to speak - or they will pass painlessly away from him in the process of rendering them back again in an examination. Why? Because that system leads the student to juggle with words and with phrases which he has picked up on the course without truly understanding to what sort of reality they refer. I have seen it happen often in the teaching of sociology, that what is learnt is a string of words, a kind of jargon or jingle which does not illuminate the reality of social relations, but prevents them from being seen. Labels, which should enable one to distinguish conceptual categories, can easily be used as a shield to prevent one having to go through the painful process of looking at them oneself. So words are bandied about without any proper conception of the things to which they relate. Social relations cannot be seen like cells under the biologist's microscope - one has to learn to see them through their effects.

The teacher's task, then, is to help the process of seeing things in a new way, of undoing lifelong habits of judging in ways learned in childhood, and yet without destroying self confidence too much.

This is where the analogy lies with the traumas of the field experience; students must unlearn much of what they bring to the course in order to benefit from the relearning which is offered to them. Unlearning makes one vulnerable. The teacher has to balance the extent he must allow vulnerability to allow relearning, with the danger that, if the student is made too vulnerable, he will withdraw, and reject all that he might acquire, by refusing to go on thinking and observing in the new ways which are required of him. So that if the subject is initially not made very attractive, or if the goals don't seem worth while, the student will give up.

It is easy to seem to be rather metaphysical in trying to describe the hazards of teaching in this way, but although it may be true that all real new learning is at the cost of abandoning preconceived learning, in the sociological field it is giving up the early convictions and moral preconceptions of one's childhood which may cause shock and confusion, and considerable emotional strain may result. I tell my students that they may expect to be more confused and uncertain than when they arrived before they get to the end of the course, but that somewhere about two thirds of the way through light will dawn.

Lévi-Strauss recalled that Marcel Mauss referred to anthropology as an "original mode of knowing rather than a source of particular types of knowledge", and he describes the field research situation as the paradigm of that concept. He describes in his inaugural lecture, "the field research with which every anthropological career begins (as) the mother and wet nurse of doubt, the philosophical attitude par excellence. This anthropological doubt does not only consist of knowing that one knows nothing, but of resolutely exposing what one thought one knew, and indeed one's very own ignorance, to the buffetings and denials which are directed at one's most cherished ideas and habits by other ideas and habits which must needs contradict them to the highest degree."

I think you will see why I compared the difficulty of learning the perspectives of social anthropology with those experienced in psycho-analysis, which can also be regarded as a "mode of knowing". And I am not in the least confusing the two, any more than Lévi-Strauss confuses the two, when I say, that, in their effects, both may be very similar both in difficulties encountered and the rewards gained. These are, for instance, the emotional and intellectual assurance which can come from having subjected oneself to rigorous self-examination, either on the couch or in the loneliness of the field worker's tent, from having looked at oneself either through the spectacles of the psychiatrist or the oddly distorting spectacles of friends and informants in the other culture. Each acts as a mirror, at once illuminating and disturbing, in which one sees oneself through alien eyes and one's behaviour mirrored by the behaviour of others.

So the student must be persuaded not only to look into those revealing mirrors, but to maintain his regard there, analysing what he sees. I try to get the class into the position of a group with its own system of norms and sanctions, and I try to get the students to do in the tiny temporary isolation of the class situation what the anthropologist does in his really isolated field over a much greater length of time. I try to get one student to hold up a mirror to another and then to get them all examining what happens in the class as a micro-social system. I challenge and get them to query every generalisation about behaviour and every moral judgment which they make - quite ruthlessly at first. A very illuminating - if dangerous - method of getting students to think about what is meant by social control, and what is the meaning of a positive and negative sanction, is to ask them to consider seriously why they come to class or lecture at all, what would happen if they did not, why or whether they have any freedom in this matter, how they manage the system if they see themselves as not having freedom, and so on. Nothing which they regard as certain is allowed to go unquestioned, including the relationship of students and tutor to each other.

Now I don't wish you to get the idea that I practise what I believe is called psycho-dynamics, or group therapy; but there is something analogous with that perhaps, in that one makes the situation - which Malinowski was always exhorting his students to look into - of the classroom as the social laboratory in which the work of examining social relations can go on. Of course, this cannot be done without benefit also of reading, attending some formal lecturing, and writing in addition.

What I have found useful is to tie in closely what one is giving in lectures, in classwork, and tutorials and reading. For example, after a lecture to show how some concept, like "the family", "crime", "disease" is more complicated than seems at first blush, and is capable of different interpretations in different societies, I get students each to read one of the Spindlers' whole-society series of small semi-popular monographs. Then they are to try to write a report on this without using technical terms, to pinpoint something in it which particularly catches the fancy as bizarre, odd or inexplicable. Whatever this is, does not matter; the next exercise is for the student to try and read and think and find out for himself an explanation of the situation in which this bizarre custom occurred and any possible explanations he can come up with to account for it. This exercise must be carefully discussed with him as soon as possible so as to show where he is remotely on the right track, and where he can be clearly made to understand that he is on a track already shown to lead nowhere useful or in a dead end. In a sense I suppose one allows students to go through, very quickly and under supervision, those original explanations and "errors" of analysis which some of the earlier armchair theorists perpetrated, with the advantage that we can now show not only where they may have been mistaken, but why we know that they were mistaken.

The sugar on the pill, so to speak, at any rate in my field, is that the student nearly always has some personal hang-ups, about authority, or sexual relations, or religion, or social class or what-have-you, and that these will, without his knowing it, influence what he finds to be "bizarre" in the other culture; and his need to solve his own perplexities, whether directly intellectual or not, is the motive which keeps him at it, doing the further reading, thinking and writing around the subject, until he has got absorbed with the intellectual chase, and lost track maybe of his original question in the enthusiasm of asking more.

What happens then is that a great potential for attitude change is engendered, and, if the proper materials are put before the student, he is on the road to learning how to find out for himself the things he originally imagined the tutor would feed to him. He learns to look for his own intellectual nourishment, and also to be more tolerant of other people's tastes and habits.

(iii) Reaction

This is the third area I said I would describe, the students' reaction. At first there is confusion, perhaps rage and indignation. But one warns them about this, and holds up encouragement. In the end, students come to feel that they have a new perception of social relations, which is going to alter all their new learning, teaching and social behaviour quite considerably. One can perhaps not do more in a one year course than to send students out of it feeling differently about things than when they first arrived, thinking differently - even if not brilliantly, and behaving differently.

I have tried to describe what I think anthropological insight, gathered through exploitation of a synthetic or artificially created field work situation and followed by theoretical analysis, can do to bring detachment and objectivity about one's most personal and subjective points of view, even for the outsider to the subject. In a slight paraphrase of Edmund Leach's words: the anthropologist can provide "a new set of hypotheses about familiar materials" - in this case not just about myth, but about "the way we live now". The student can "look again at what he thought was understood and begin to gain entirely new insights .... Faced with the challenge of a new point of view he is able to see the familiar in quite a different way, and to understand something which was previously invisible." The student who has never been in the field, or before doubted the correctness of his ethnocentric morality, begins to grasp that "the order which we perceive in the world is something we impose upon it and that man has choice to order the world in different ways." At the least, it will be salutory for him to know that other people have ordered it in different ways, and that there is no one specific way of ordering a good world for us here and now.

You will notice that although the anthropologists have always seen themselves as working within their ivory towers to solve problems of their own conceiving, in fact the kinds of attitudes they held and the sorts of problems they attacked were much influenced by the intellectual atmosphere around them. Rationalism and relative moral arrogance dominated thought in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the middle of this century there followed a preoccupation with absolute objectivity in the observation and collection of facts by early field workers, bent on establishing a clearly structured picture of societies "as they really were" and deliberately rejecting comparisons or value judgments. This coincided with the period of retreat from colonialism.

In the last decade or so there has been a return to generalising studies of man's ways of structuring his conceptions of reality; it accompanies a period

of philosophic doubt about our own way of living and anxiety about the implication of change – not now seen as always "forward and up". For these reasons the anthropologist has a great deal to offer the perplexed, doubting, agnostic and alienated young today. What is more relevant, in an age of conflict and fear, of disorder and anxiety about death, than to know how other people have handled these situations, what solutions they have offered, and, even more importantly, where, like us, they have been baffled by failure and tormented by the gap between the ideal and the actual?

To me, anthropology provides the detachment, protective armour, and modicum of hope which some others find in politics and yet others get from religion.

I will end as I began with the words of Tylor, the missionary teacher: "Anthropology can provide that carrying frame for mountaineers, whose extra weight more than compensates the convenience of its holding together and balancing the load of knowledge." But as for the original knowledge – that must come from such as are young and are still in touch with field research. Hopefully, they will never entirely forget the practical implications even of some of their most theoretically orientated researchers.

<div style="text-align:right">Rosemary Firth.</div>

(1) This paper is an abbreviated version of a talk given to the Friday Seminar at Oxford during the Hilary Term, 1971.

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