

GRASSHOPPERS AND SLUGS

Fearing myself stuck at the pre-1961 stage of butterfly collecting in social anthropology (see Needham 1978), I decided to take myself in hand and so read with consuming interest some of the more esoteric passages in the latest number of JASO, starting with the piece on Godelier by Jan Ovesen. Here I'll try and say what I've gleaned and how it all seems to a poor tired mind long since gone to biological seed. A futile exercise, perhaps; it's boring, I know, to have to listen to biologists with their tiresome clichés about natural selection, but I'll do my best to keep your interest.

Well, 'kinship' it seems, is an empty category. Needham, I think, told us this at an ASA conference in Bristol many years ago. So it goes without saying that 'matrilineage' is empty too (Leach 1961, Needham 1974) and I should have known better. Likewise with 'incest', as I discovered personally in October 1976 — two years after Needham had demolished the concept — when I somewhat rashly attempted to give a paper on the subject (albeit in monkeys) at the Oxford Institute of Social Anthropology. Now Ovesen reviewing Godelier and using this as a platform to launch a critique of the Marxist concepts of infrastructure and superstructure, concludes after what I found to be a very thoughtful analysis, that 'it seems to me that the net result is to make nonsense out of the notions of infrastructure and superstructure' (1978:10).

In place of a simple duality: infrastructure - superstructure, Ovesen sees Godelier as wanting to have a sort of equilateral triangle of infrastructure, superstructure and ideology with one of these in each corner and arrows between each corner and the others. But Ovesen disagrees and wants to jettison the whole scheme in favour of a far more basic reversion to categories and category systems as the final units of analysis for nature (infrastructure), society (superstructure), and ideology (something to do with power).

The same idea is reiterated by Malcolm Chapman in his piece in JASO. Discussing the debate about 'structuralism' he joins others to criticise it for theory-building: not just those who from a marxist viewpoint see it as failing to put first things first, but also those who attack all efforts to discover 'fundamental' principles in human social life, including fundamental characteristics of the human mind. Together with Crick he prefers to see categories as more free floating altogether - bits of ice forming a pack, they can get bigger or smaller, get shoved out or grow, but at any time they more or less fit together. Levi-Strauss thus gets a hammering. So does Loizos, whose 'normative' analysis, is made to sound positively dinosaurian ('Am I alone, I wonder', writes Chapman 'in finding in the word "norm" a drug to make my heart sink?' (1978:39)). There are no fundamentals, nor even cross-cultural regularities, just the arbitrariness of Saussurean signs, the 'loom of language' as Frederick Bodmer once put it, carving up the (to us) ever-hidden 'real world' and presenting us with the pieces to juggle with as best we can. With the return to language as the arena of debate we are firmly on Edwin Ardener's terrain, 'kneedeep in polarities' of our own kind (not theirs, whoever they are), where cross-cultural translation is inevitably imperfect and in a strict sense impossible (he told us so at the Oxford ASA meeting some years ago); much of Chapman's thinking clearly derives from Ardener (1973, 1975). Peeping below or behind language Ardener finds a 'sluggishly moving continuum of social perceptions' and that's as close to a 'fundamental' process as I can find anywhere in the debate.

Some, (and here I come on to the piece by Maryon McDonald) clearly don't want to go peeping below, they just want to wander among the scintillating flowers of the word-garden. And why not? Why be 'ernsthaft'? No-one forces us to be. Marvin Harris gets a pasting for being a stickler for empiricism, for holding out for science. Why should scientific categories be holier than others? OK, OK, McDonald clearly has great fun with words, as my hero Jean-Paul Sartre always did (and we don't need to look at the later Sartre, standing, as I cannot forget seeing him in a newspaper photo, on an upturned dustbin outside the Renault factory near Paris like a Jesus-freak with the workers flowing past him to the near-revolution of '68).

I was thinking of all this, and the radio was playing Steve Hilage and Genesis and things like that, and time was flowing over the edge of category-April-11 into category-April-12, and I fell to wondering why I gave up social anthropology in 1959 and went to the freezing cold Dunstable Downs to watch rhesus monkeys. At the time I told my supervisor Michael Chance it was because I found humans too complicated and hoped monkeys would be simpler. Today I find my subsequent discoveries the subject of a demonstration by Edwin Ardener of how the human mind thinks, and I agree with him.

I agree with Malcolm Chapman, too, about his 'shimmering surface of a poetics' (derived from Thom) and was surprised and gratified to learn that Evans-Pritchard thought he'd have done his job better as a poet. We humans have arrived in a new world, quite different from the ones our pre-human ancestors inhabited, and the ones our contemporaries in other species inhabit now. They, now, can and do exist purely: we live contorted, tainted lives.

Perhaps then it was the quest for purity, for a more real reality, that led to the monkey? I don't know. But I have two questions for the social anthropologists, and here I will stop. First, are you content to give up on 'reality'? If not, I suggest you'll have to turn to developmental psychology and (groans) biology. You can ask me why I suggest this if you want, but I'd like your views first on my question. Second, how do you imagine that your World III, your ephemeral chimera of the signified, relates to the atomic particles of which all physical matter is constructed; and if it doesn't, what's it made of? This one really intrigues and puzzles me.

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