

BOOK REVIEWS

J.P. Parry. Caste and Kinship in Kangra. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1979. 353pp. £12.50.

Parry's book invites comparison with Adrian Mayer's classic Caste and Kinship in Central India. Partly for historical reasons, it is a better book, its better documentation reflecting the mass of scholarship (about half of Parry's exhaustive references) published between the writing of Mayer's preface in 1958 and Parry's in 1976. The increasing sophistication of this scholarship has placed Parry in a position to argue more carefully. What allows these advantages to blossom, though, is Parry's colourful, informal, ironic and wholly modern style. This style is not just attractive in itself; it is related directly to Parry's important theoretical contribution. I shall devote this review to characterizing the relation between the two.

Let me briefly, and quite unfairly, caricature a contrasting style manifest in the ethnographic conventions of an earlier generation. There, once the conditions of fieldwork had been discussed in a foreword, the anthropologist's presence was resolutely effaced, no doubt in keeping with the conventions of scholarly writing in general, but with the effect that an unquestioned, authoritative objectivity was achieved. The informants were quoted either en masse ("they said", "the people believed"), or anonymously ("a villager asserted", "a chief told me"). These quotations merely ornamented the discursive argument of the anthropologist, while their style of presentation fostered the view, which was perhaps spelled out explicitly elsewhere in the work, that the object of study was a collectivity with an irreducibly substantial, unitary, given existence the lineaments of which were discovered and described as an archaeologist might discover and describe a stone ruin. There was little place for the ambiguity, negotiability, and complexity of daily face-to-face life. In short this ethnography claimed to be objective in two senses: the observing subject was, as far as possible, suppressed, and the society studied was treated on the analogy of a concrete object comparable to other similar objects.

In contrast, Parry's ethnography might be characterized as ironic in the following senses. The observer is brought implicitly into the frame; the ambiguity and negotiability of everyday life is given a place not only in ethnographic representation but also in positive theoretical statements; and the object of study loses its (false) concreteness. The first two points are neatly illustrated in the following passage, which caps about fifty pages of discussion of the hierarchization of the circulating connubium and the putative presence of alliance in North India. Parry is trying to discover whether the affine of the affine of the affine, as reported by Vatuk, is actually considered an affine:

Faced with my intransigent insistence in taking her through some of the more mind-bending extensions Vatuk lists for Uttar Pradesh, Mata Ji's exasperated last word on the subject was to invoke the proverb 'nanan da narnoi tamak toi', 'the HZH of the HZ is just a drumstick (without a drum)'. Since nobody can hear him there is no need to bother about him. (p.309)

In other words, his informants, for certain clear reasons 'adamantly repudiated many of the terminological corollaries of such a principle [that there is a connection between those linked by more than two marriages]' (p.310).

The point is made, but much more is conveyed. The anthropologist has stepped into the picture: he has read Vatuk, and in that light he 'intransigently insists' on cross-examining Mata Ji. We learn something of his relationship with Mata Ji, a relationship close enough to bear the strains of insistence and exasperation. Most importantly we have a clear view of the nature of the anthropologist's evidence, and we are inclined to believe him because we believe that he has measured precisely the give in his informants' patience and, therefore, the significance of their assertions in this, to them, improbable matter. In other words, the Kangra of 1971, in which the anthropologist questioned his friends, is brought into the text, and brought in systematically throughout.

But it is not merely that Parry has a particularly vivid if informal style, for this style resounds in what we conventionally (and I am sure quite wrongly) distinguish as theory in opposition to ethnography. One of Parry's most important conclusions is that the segmentary principle should be taken much farther than it has been so far. He concludes that

... the whole system [of marriage] operates not in terms of firmly delineated groups which exist as substantial entities, but rather in terms of a whole series of shifting categories which are capable of almost infinite segmentation ... Each is simply a slightly different way of talking about the hierarchy, and in different contexts different frames of reference are appropriate (p.279).

The foundations of this argument are revealed as Parry continues: 'there are ... no corporate groups engaged in the exchange of women. There are simply a large number of harrassed fathers being bombarded with gratuitous advice from all sides ...' (p.280).

To illustrate the force of this let me compare it with a colourless theoretical paraphrase: "there are no corporate groups engaged in the exchange of women. There are simply a number of individuals." In adopting the paraphrase we have lost nearly everything essential to the point. The 'gratuitous bombardment from all sides' evokes Parry's rich ethnographic material, which argues that these fathers, far from deciding with perfect knowledge, are sometimes even willfully deceived; that their decisions are intersubjectively established and by no means wholly their own; and that all this occurs in a rich medium of often conflicting viewpoints and opinions. The detail that the fathers are 'harrassed' implies the presence of the anthropologist not as an objective observer, but as a wry commentator on a scene in which he too, however peripherally, is implicated (standing in the corner, as it were, while Uncle Chanda Singh tells Father what he really should do). In other words, Parry uses one well accepted anthropological generalization, segmentation, to dissolve another, marriage groups, but he does so by referring to a dense, colourful, difficult, dateable, polysemic and actual world.

We may be lulled into accepting this merely because this is how we think the world is: we like our characters authentic, not sincere, our plots vraisemblable, and our endings ambivalent. But the real key is that, however we like our stories, 'almost infinite segmentation' successfully represents a more complex world than the groups or categories of generalized exchange, and 'almost infinite segmentation' is best represented in turn by detailed reference to actual persons. It would be a serious misreading of Parry to take it that he intended the reader to be distracted or dazzled by these colourful references, but what he certainly did intend was that the "facts on the ground" (a phrase which in other writers suggests Mr. Gradgrind's tyrannically meaningless "hard facts") take on strength enough to turn anthropological discourse from its habitual course. I think he is successful in this.

A great deal of the book, however, is devoted to solving a problem which is created by this achievement: if there is nothing but a series of shifting categories, what principle determines the use of one category rather than another in a particular situation? Parry's answer, in general, is that the category is chosen for the context by the viewpoint of the speaker. There is a good deal of unresolved tension, however, between the position that the speaker is a maximizing individual plain and simple, and the position that the speaker is more complex and in some sense partly altruistic. Thus on the one hand Parry writes that, in marriage choice, fathers make decisions 'with a view to maximizing their personal prestige in the eyes of their neighbours and immediate competitors in the status game' (p.280). Yet the transactionalism of this statement seems an exaggeration, for Parry shortly after this passage points out that the "we" -- not the "I" -- of marriage transactions is a small segment measured meticulously against neighbours and agnates, while the "they", the bride-takers, tend to be a larger segment, a clan or a local sub-clan. This (and other evidence) indicates that at least a measure of altruism, of wider reference, tempers the maximizing of personal prestige.

The solution would be to have it both ways, in keeping with Parry's complex vision, and this, I believe, is what, in the last analysis, he does. Let me illustrate this from Parry's discussion of motives in household partition, a discussion in which an oversimplified economic explanation might so easily be proffered. He distinguishes three analytically separate sorts of explanation. The "underlying" cause is simply that all households are eventually disrupted by the eventual predominance of conjugal family concerns over the joint family. The "predisposing" causes are a thoroughly discussed series of economic events which may so imbalance the conjugal families' contributions to, and calls on, the joint family that partition may be favoured by one party or another. The "immediate" cause is quarrelling between members of different conjugal families. But not even the immediate cause is simple. Parry writes:

The direct causes of the split will appear to be the product, either of personal conflict between household members, or one of individual taking a unilateral decision to realise his short-term advantage by cutting loose from the joint household, or -- most probably -- of both (p.194).

H.L. Seneviratne. Rituals of the Kandyan State. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1978. 190 pp. £12.50.

This excellent book is a monograph in the strict sense: a detailed and perhaps exhaustive study of a narrow, well-defined topic. Its title is slightly misleading. It deals with the rituals surrounding the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy in central Ceylon. Possession of the Buddha's tooth relic was essential to legitimate a Sinhalese monarch from at least the twelfth century; the temple built to house it was connected to the palace and the king frequently attended its rituals. The Kandyan kingdom, which had ruled central Ceylon for three centuries, ended in 1815 when the city was taken by the British. However, most of the Temple's arrangements survived both this political shift and the next one, when Ceylon became independent as a united country in 1948. Change has come, but very gradually, for the most part unintended and even unobserved. The Temple's ritual complex thus holds a double interest: in it we can witness elaborate rites of a state long dead and we can also use it as a focus for studying changes in the distribution of power and the symbolic language of Sinhalese society. While Seneviratne's title suggests only the first approach, almost half the book - and the half that is likely to appeal to a wider audience - is devoted to the second.

After providing, with clarity and concision, the necessary introduction to Kandyan society, Seneviratne describes the orientation of the relevant buildings and their internal disposition, the elaborate organisation of the Temple functionaries, and the Temple's rituals, daily, weekly and annual. Only specialists in Ceylon studies may wish to attend to every word in these pages, but they are not to be slighted on that account. There are very few such painstaking and authoritative descriptions of ritual in the entire literature on South Asia, and this work may serve as a model of careful ethnography. The daily and weekly rituals, which Seneviratne characterizes as 'rituals of maintenance', are cast in the form of attendance on a king's person. That is at the same time to say that they follow the Hindu pattern of attendance on a god in his temple. The very name of the Temple is literally 'Tooth-relic Palace'. The last kings of Kandy came from Hindu South India, where kings were divine and temple worship treated gods like kings; but Tamil Hindu influence on Sinhalese culture is far older than this last dynasty. That the object of veneration is here not a god but the Buddha's tooth, and the chief officiants Buddhist monks, is anomalous from the point of view of Theravada Buddhist orthodoxy, but within a Dravidian cultural context it appears as a normal variation on a familiar theme.

The maintenance of the Tooth and the king's associated legitimacy and well-being led to righteous rule, which resulted in the harmony of nature and society as manifest especially by adequate rainfall. In the biggest annual ceremony, the Asala Perahâra or Pageant, a magnificent parade symbolically demonstrated in its arrangement the hierarchic integration of the Kandyan state under the king's hegemony, and at the same time helped to make that a reality by compelling the rulers of the outlying provinces to come and participate.

The king was captured, and a British writer in 1849 expected the Pageant soon to wither away. Not only has it survived; each year it grows grander and draws larger crowds. In the second half of the book Seneviratne asks how and why. A romanticized view of a glorious national past - what Dudley Senanayake called the 'tank and temple' mentality - is not the whole answer. Most of the Temple rituals now have

no function but to cater (to a very limited extent) to religious sentiment, and their performance correspondingly tends to be sloppy, whereas the Pageant now fills the national press for a week and has earned a place on the international tourist calendar because it has assumed new functions. In particular it gives the Kandyan aristocracy a chance to indulge in pomp (often at the expense of the sacred insignia of which they ostensibly appear as the humble guardians) and to use this display of their prestige to further their individual struggles for real political power. Dr. Seneviratne is very discreet, but there is quiet humour in his description of the tussles between aristocrats and bureaucrats over arrangements for conducting the Pageant. Finally, he does not rest content with having found a functional fit between modern society and the present Pageant but discusses the tension between contemporary demands for the abolition of privilege and the enactment of a pageant of inequality. Further changes are on the way. These latter chapters should greatly interest not only orientalist and conscientious tourists, but also all students of political and cultural change in the Third World.

Richard Gombrich.

Pierre Macherey. A Theory of Literary Production. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1978. 326 pp. £4.95 (paperback).

A Theory of Literary Production was first published in France in 1966 as an attempt to work through in relation to literature the implications of Althusser's early theorising of ideology (as outlined in For Marx). Many of the difficulties of the book can be ascribed to a wider discursive tradition whose precise concepts and elaborated mode of argument pose particular problems to strangers in the field. Anthropologists should not, however, be daunted by the prospect of exploring new fields of discourse, nor should they be ignorant of the insights to be gained from such an exploration.

One of the attributes of an ideological concept, according to Althusser, is that:

While it really does designate a set of existing relations, unlike a scientific concept it does not provide us with a means of knowing them. In particular (ideological) mode, it designates some existents but does not give us their essences. If we were to confuse these two orders we should cut ourselves off from all knowledge, uphold a confusion and risk falling into error.

The distinction which he drew here between the ideological concept which can represent an 'existent' but cannot 'think' it and a theoretical concept which can provide us with a scientific knowledge of such an existent is of crucial importance for all practitioners of social anthropology, a discipline which has continually striven towards the production of theory but which has remained shackled by the conventions of a tradition of literary representation. It is also a distinction which lies at the heart of A Theory of Literary Production. Macherey

examines the problems involved in describing and accounting for both the kind of knowledge which can be produced within one of the ideological apparatuses, literature, and the relationship of this knowledge to scientific knowledge. Evidently there are some common areas of interest here and one of the tasks of this review is to demonstrate the range of levels at which these two disciplines - literature and social anthropology - intersect.

Macherey's book is made up of three sections, the first concerned with the elaboration of a theory of literary production, the second with a critique of Lenin's interpretation of Tolstoy and a critique of structuralism as practised by Barthes (pre-1966) and Lévi-Strauss, and the third with analyses of the works of Verne, Defoe, Borges and Balzac. The second section is by far the most stimulating and challenging to the layperson for it is here that the concepts which have been so tediously refined (theoretically) and exposed (in the analyses) can be seen operating in practice, thrown into relief through their dialogue with alternative positions.

In his confrontation with structuralism, a confrontation which directly challenges the epistemological premises of post-Lévi-Straussian anthropology, we can begin to see the outlines of Macherey's own epistemological position. Structuralism, as Macherey sees it, is based upon the two concepts of 'order' and 'totality'; it implies a coherent structure latent within the apparent disorder of manifest reality. It therefore falls into what he calls the 'interpretative fallacy' of positing a hidden essence or meaning behind or within the object which is the source of our knowledge of it. Given this limitation structuralism cannot bring anything new to the object, it cannot transform it, but can only present us with a reproduction of it, a mimicry of reality. In contrast to this, Macherey's materialist position entails an understanding of the object in its difference from other objects, examining those absences and silences that limit its reality and that form the necessary conditions of its existence. According to Macherey, this theory thus provides the possibility of an 'authentic knowledge' of the object without 'denying its presence':

A science is not an interpretation of its objects, it is a transformation, an attribution of significations which the objects themselves did not initially possess. The transformation effected by theoretical knowledge leaves the object-reality intact; it does not probe its origins or its depths, it endows it with a new dimension. (p.150)

Taking as an example Lévi-Strauss' analysis of myth, he discusses the implications of the structuralist analysis which deals only with what is said, and ignores that which is not said, the result being, he claims, that the myth is construed in relation to an intention, and thus can only be the object of a psychology and not of a true logic. The contradictions which Lévi-Strauss claims are resolved by such myths can therefore only be located at the level of psychology; they are 'imaginary' contradictions. He adds: 'It is impossible to think the real presence of a contradiction, it can only be conceived as an absence.' (p.153)

It is these 'real' contradictions which cannot be thought that form the central focus of Macherey's understanding of literature. Literature, for him, is not a coherent totality, representing a hidden meaning; it does not simplistically reflect the ideology of its time. It is produced within history, from a particular social position, and as such

gives us a unique glimpse of society at that time. In this glimpse we encounter various ideologies produced within that society. Expressed in literary form such ideologies have their own 'flawed coherence', yet by reading them in relation to that which they elide, that which they do not mention, the contradictions represented by them in the text can be seen to be evoked by the real contradictions within society. Thus

The spontaneous ideology in which men live ... is not simply reflected by the mirror of the book; ideology is broken, and turned inside out in so far as it is transformed in the text from being a state of consciousness. (p.133)

It is this ability of literature to evoke the historical contradictions of an age through the medium of ideology which gives it, for Macherey, a unique epistemological status. Through literature the truth may be revealed, although it may not be theoretically known:

Thus we can gauge the distance which separates the work of art from true knowledge (scientific knowledge) but which also unites them in their common distance from ideology. Science does away with ideology, obliterates it; literature challenges ideology by using it. If ideology is thought of as a non-systematic ensemble of significations, the work proposes a reading of these significations, by combining them as signs. Criticism teaches us to read these signs. (p.133)

Macherey presents us with a challenging problematic. Anthropologists concerned with the "reading" of cultural phenomena cannot fail to take note of the complexity which the shift to an Althusserian epistemology can reveal. With hindsight however, given more recent developments within semiotics, A Theory of Literary Production does represent certain limitations and indeed the practice of social anthropology itself must call attention to the most important of these.

Even an 'Althusserian' anthropology engaged in the production of "theory" is embedded in a form of discourse not unlike that of literary representation, and certainly within the mainstream of anthropology the "truth" that is being revealed is derived from an uncomfortable blend of theoretical practice and literary creation. Clearly Macherey's work has a great deal to contribute towards our understanding of the real significance of our own work, but we in turn must question him as to the adequacy of a theory based upon the theoretical autonomy of 'literature'. Without a more comprehensive theory of the processes of signification within ideology and within theory the confusion between the two, indicated above by Althusser, cannot be wholly dispelled.

Joanna Lowry.

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