

OBSERVING 'LES OBSERVATEURS DE L'HOMME'
IMPRESSIONS OF CONTEMPORARY FRENCH ANTHROPOLOGY IN CONTEXT

In Paris only a few square miles from Passy across the Seine to the Quartier Latin separate the main centres of French anthropology. Within this *hortus conclusus* theoretical divisions thrive by proximity. In the busy corridors of research centres anthropologists rub shoulders with historians, psychologists, economists - even sociologists.

Present trends are defined in the negative, as 'post-structuralist'.¹ Paris is in the throes of a *crise de succession*; for in the last five years most of the elder *maîtres à penser* have been removed from the scene: Sartre, Barthes, Lacan, Benveniste, Althusser etc.

The typical contemporary practitioner of the *sciences de l'homme* could be a philosopher-turned-anthropologist-turned-sociologist (Bourdieu or L.V.Thomas), or a socio-economist with bio-cultural leanings (Morin), or a historian with an ethnological outlook (Le Goff) - nor do these exhaust the existing permutations....If a blanket term is needed, '*observateur de l'homme*' (from the name of an 18th-century learned society)² is comprehensive enough for my present purpose.

The following fragmentary considerations represent an attempt to set down my impressions of a recent visit. For five weeks, in May-June 1982, I went to enquire about French anthropology and so attended seminars at various centres in Paris.

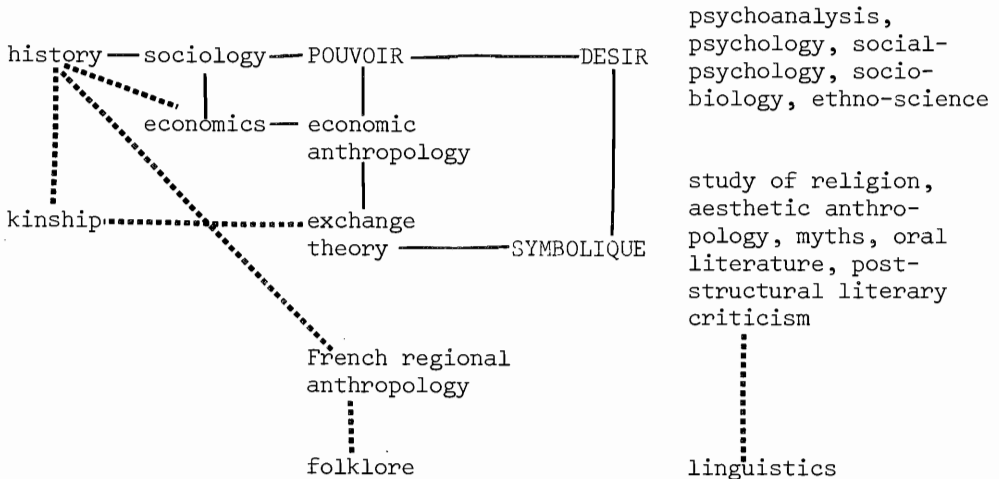
¹ 'Post-structuralisme', as used in France, is a general term, a negative definition implying that, as yet, present trends are only offshoots of a once coherent whole.

² The greater part of the members of the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme were naturalists who investigated 'man' as a *genus*. However 'lest it be thought that the *observateurs* were sexist (*sic*) the Société published works such as *Histoire naturelle de la femme*.' (See B.Kilborne, *European Journal of Sociology*, Vol.XXIII [1982], p.77.)

What methods, I may be asked, did I employ 'in the field'? At first I wandered through the corridors of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (henceforth MSH) with the diffidence one acquires on the looking-glass paths of Oxford. I had tried, in fact, *d'enfoncer des portes ouvertes*. Too many people to thank individually gave me advice, instruction and friendship.

As I was told, Mitterrand, respecting his promise, has given new impetus (and more funds) to the social sciences but it is feared that this is merely a temporary respite. '*Il ne se passe rien ici,*' people sighed in the MSH, while several telephones rang simultaneously on their desks and stocks of new projects collapsed under their own weight.

In a rather desparate bid for clarity I have re-drawn (below) the contentious margins of the anthropological sphere of influence.



I have not included philosophy in the diagram as it is too pervasive in the terminology (or in the aspirations) of most French researchers.

Alternatively, classification may be attempted by area. Institutionally there are groups such as the Centre d'Etudes Africaines, the ORSTROM (Organisation pour la recherche scientifique et technique d'outre mer), or the Centre de recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-est et le Monde Insulinidien. For Far Eastern specialists there is the long-established and prestigious Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient. Among the newest centres there is the innovative Centre d'Etudes sur le Japon Contemporaine.

More generally, anthropologists conduct research in the following organisations: Collège de France; Ecole de Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), 6th section or MSH and 5th section

dedicated to 'religious sciences'. For material culture, ethnography and ethno-science there are various *équipes* in the Musée de l'Homme; specialists in French regional ethnography are most frequently affiliated to the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires. Within the University there are many courses of interest to anthropologists but only Paris X (Nanterre) and seven provincial universities have a complete degree programme.³ For a French anthropologist it is also possible to work within organisations such as the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) as a researcher rather than a lecturer. There have been numerous institutional reforms since *les événements de Mai* which, in fact, often merely re-shuffled academic groups already in existence or absorbed the *contestation* within the system. A young researcher who, after years of struggle, is accepted by the CNRS will enter an *équipe de travail*, chosen according to theoretical interest, geographical area or personal ties. Frequently, however, researchers in fact work alone; thus the administrative sub-divisions of the *équipe* are, at times, castles of file-cards.

For the point of view of theory the above diagram, an uncertain polygon, is an attempt to square the Parisian anthropological circle. Beyond the three terms which seem to me the recurrent intellectual landmarks there extend the bewilderingly complex ramifications of theoretical cross-fertilisation.

Pouvoir and *désir*, i.e. contemporary re-interpretation of Marx and Freud, are key words in current debates. The ranking of intellectual disciplines can be deduced emphatically by the display order in fashionable bookshops: *psycho* comes first, followed by the once pre-eminent *philo*, then, thanks to Lévi-Strauss, *ethno* - what Augé (*The Anthropological Circle*, Cambridge 1982, p.126) calls a new 'Holy Alliance', constituted by Nietzsche, Reick, Bataille and Deleuze - has come into being.

These liberators of desire and the self have infiltrated hereto unsuspected domains, as is shown by a random sample of recent titles: *Economie libidinale* by the philosopher J.F.Lyotard (Paris 1974), or J.Baudrillard's *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris 1976), or J.Kristeva's latest collection of articles, *Desire in Language* (Oxford 1982).

Of the three main trends outlined above only *pouvoir* and the *symbolique* have developed, if somewhat lopsidedly, on both sides of the Channel. After Leach, Needham, and Douglas have gradually re-thought their *coup de foudre* for French anthropology only a few figures (e.g. Goody) or Marxist anthropologists have maintained the French connection. From Oxford R.H.Barnes has recently taken up the Parisian challenge, confining himself, however, to the restricted discourse of kinship.

³ I am unable to estimate the number of students of anthropology in France. Certainly there is widespread interest in the subject and access to the *séminaires* is limited; students are chosen on the basis of their *dossiers*. It may be added that there is a very high rate of drop-outs within the Hautes Etudes in general and anthropology in particular.

Is Oxford's resistance to desire due to our lingering monasticism?

Why, for that matter, have the French been so influenced by psychoanalysis? In a number of recent publications psychoanalysts have expressed concern with origins (an approach ignored or dismissed by historians or philosophers such as Foucault). The questions most commonly asked may be simply phrased as follows: 1. Why (and when) did humanity go wrong? (i.e. a search for the cause/origin of repressive social institutions). 2. When and where did the concept of the self emerge? ('*Le moi*' is seen as a social construct historically determined).

What exactly is *désir*? 'A dynamic psychic state, an internal movement...conducting irresistibly towards the object from which one expects...satisfaction and pleasure.' More simply: '*le corps a ses raisons et les raisons s'appellent désir*' (R.Dadoun, 'Desir et corps', in C.Delacampagne, *Philosopher*, Paris 1980, p.95).

The repression of *désir* leads to social illusions. The noble savage once again comes into his own as an example of the *raison du corps*. In the work of several anthropologists and psychologists societies at the subsistence level become test cases for a general theory of *involution* in which forms of exploitation (e.g. of women by men) engender, almost literally, the evils Western societies are heir to, viz. the State, Capitalism, technology, patriarchy, even writing and the codification of language.

This summary of the 'anarchist' position (P.Clastres, J.Lizot) is, admittedly, rather reductive. Marcus Colchester, in the last issue of *JASO* (Vol.XIII, no.2, 1982), argued that concern with political ideology has led Clastres and Lizot to generalise beyond their data. I am concerned here with a prior question: the shaping of the cultural environment which helped to form these ideas. Nineteenth-century evolutionism, as mediated through Marx and Freud, colours contemporary thought. The philosopher Deleuze and the psychoanalyst Guattari, in their well-known *L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris 1972), present a three-stage version of cultural evolution (or perhaps of development since the first stage, savagery, is dealt with sympathetically). For M.Izard there is a tripartite development in Yatunga society: '*droit*' in agricultural *pré-étatique* society, '*pouvoir*' the state society in formation, and finally '*force*', the state provided with a government.

In a different perspective, the intellectual re-evaluation of Catholicism, R.Girard (*La violence et le sacré*, Paris 1972) has also turned to the origins (or more exactly to our attitude, nostalgia or terror, towards the origins) in search of the hidden meaning of all rites. The problem is formulated differently but the solution takes us back to our starting point: the mechanisms of social control. For Girard, in primitive societies, internal violence is exercised by the expulsion or sacrifice of a scapegoat which is defined as 'different' or 'monstrous'. Our modern judicial systems are the perfected result of this original impulse. Violence, mediated by ritual, is the wellspring of power in its social expression.

The second question mentioned above, viz. when and where did the concept of the self emerge, stems from reflection on psycho-

analytic problems from a historical point of view. The best-known statement of the contingency of man as a concept is probably contained in Foucault's work (e.g. *Les mots et les choses*). L. Dumont in a series of meditations (*On Value*, Oxford 1981; *Homo Hierarchicus*, London 1970), has also re-mapped the conditions of the emergence of individual man as a cardinal modern value. It seems to me that literary criticism in the mode of Barthes and Derrida or the depersonalization in the *nouveau roman* can be considered moves in the same direction.

Why have the descendants of Descartes doubted the doubting entity itself? A partial answer lies in the discovery of non-Western and/or primitive societies; anthropology may lead to the eclipse of man.

Contemporary re-thinking of the social sciences has brought other scholars to enlarge the scope of anthropology in an attempt at an all-inclusive coherence. E. Morin, for example, in a series of books (*Le paradigme perdu, la nature humaine*, Paris 1973, or, with M. Piattelli-Palmarini, *L'unité de l'homme: invariants biologiques et universaux culturels*, Paris 1968) has called for a 'bull-dozérisation' of the traditional interdisciplinary boundaries in the name of a 'psycho-bio-anthropo-sociologique'. He emphasises the feed-back (*boucle recursive*) of anthropological and sociological findings on biology and psychology which structure in turn the object of the investigation of these sciences.

An unusual attempt at psychological-mathematic synthesis has recently been made by Bernadette Bucher ('Ensembles infinis et histoire-mythe', *L'Homme*, Vol. XXI [1981]). She has applied to anthropology the theory of 'infinite sets' as developed by the Chilean Matte Blanco. The original of these vertiginous measurements of the soul may perhaps be found among the volumes of the library of Babel....⁴

Marxism continues to be a constant of French anthropology. Since the waning of the influence of Althusser (at its height from 1965 to the 1970s), Marxist anthropologists have become increasingly divided. Departures from orthodoxy are often described as 'structuralism camouflaged by Marxist terminology'; positions range from the hard-core anti-structuralists such as Meillassoux and Rey, with a background in applied economics, to Terray, once a 'dynamic functionalist' and a student of Balandier, to M. Godelier, originally a philosopher, then associate of Lévi-Strauss and now adviser to Mitterrand.

Pouvoir, as we shall see, shades into our third term, *symbolique* (which means both 'symbolic' and 'symbolism'), and is used either as an adjective diffusing the materiality of the noun to

⁴ Actually Bucher, author of *La sauvage aux seins pendants* (Paris 1977), has attempted to re-draw, with considerable ingenuity, the boundaries between consciousness and the unconscious. For Matte Blanco (if I have understood him correctly) certain properties in a set of infinite cardinal numbers will also hold good for the corresponding psychological characteristics in his novel mode of classification.

which it refers, or as a noun lending the concreteness of a label to a shadowy domain of reference. An example of the ambiguities of its usage is Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the '*capital symbolique*' which, strictly speaking, can be 'a capital of symbols' or 'symbolic capital'. The relations of communication and knowledge, for Bourdieu, are relations of power based in form and content on the non-material entities such as honour accumulated by agents within the system. In *La distinction* (Paris 1981) he investigated with copious, but never tiresome, statistical breakdowns the minutiae of the transmission, in French society, of this intangible 'symbolic capital'. The dematerialisation of capital, the deconstruction of the text and the 'dispensability' of the self have led to the definition of society in terms of objects.

Le système des objets, J. Baudrillard's first book, appeared (not by coincidence) in 1968. Further works, progressively more complex and gnomic, return to the theme of the object which exists however only as concept, as a vehicle for exchange relations, itself a basic dimension if not a definition of society. In his most recent book, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris 1976), Baudrillard, citing as anticipators of his principles the owner of the 'Crazy Horse' striptease joint and the philosopher Chuang Tsu, states that there are *no* natural needs and *no* use value behind the basic mode of exchange. Both Mauss and McLuhan, he maintains, presented more radical hypotheses than Marx.

L. Dumont and De Coppet⁵ are holding a series of seminars on exchange theory. The themes of this year's programme include generalized exchange in the perspective of Mauss and in relation to the place assigned to the dead in the perpetuation of the social structure.

In Dumont's view several key themes recur within an elaborate historical re-thinking of the nature of society. Non-modern and modern societies are contrasted in terms of what may be called ordering strategies (i.e. holistic and non-holistic); for Dumont there is no order without hierarchy. Power, in the form of permanent structure of authority inhibits ceremonial exchanges which can be prestations in form of service as well as of objects.

Linguistics and anthropology is far too large a field to examine here. It will suffice to mention the evolution of a well-known figure such as Julia Kristeva from the formalism of her early articles towards the exploration of the further reaches of the unconscious. More traditional themes such as oral literature (cf. *JASO*, Vol. XIII, no. 1, 1982) are still fashionable.

D. Sperber has questioned anthropological methods of gathering data and describing or interpreting conversations with informants (De l'interprétation en anthropologie', *L'Homme*, Vol. XXI, 1981). J. Favret-Saada in her *Deadly Words* (Cambridge 1980) has shown that in some cases events are changed simply by communicating them. For her informants in the Bocage anyone talking about witchcraft

⁵ For a much-needed clarification of issues such as reciprocity in the context of the analysis of ritual see D. De Coppet, 'The Life-giving Death', in S. C. Humphreys, *Mortality and Immortality*, London 1981.

was automatically involved in the interchange of supernatural power and imputed with an ulterior motive. (One of the villagers said that all the villagers were liars....) Favret-Saada disagrees strongly with what she calls the post-structuralist ideal of a 'totally a-topical theorising subject'.

The connections between anthropology and history are increasingly stressed in the current mending of the structuralists' *rupture* yet the relationship remains an uneasy one. The history of anthropological theory, after all, reveals several ways of negating history -- moreover Lévi-Straussian anthropologists all too recently proposed as the object of the discipline the study of societies defined by its absence (*les sociétés sans histoire*). Now, however, several anthropologists work in close collaboration with historians. Françoise Heritier, for example, is using the extremely elaborate and complete documentation of kinship notation invented by a parish priest and used in several parishes in southern Italy to reconstruct developments over several centuries.

The medievalist J. Le Goff has recently defined his main interests as the place of the *imaginaire* in history and the relation between beliefs (*croiances*) and society. In the recent *La naissance du Purgatoire* (Paris 1982) he traces the emergence in medieval Europe of the concept of an intermediary state in the after-life, related to socio-economic change, from a binary system (Paradise - Hell) to a ternary system including Purgatory. Le Goff is also the editor of the *Bibliothèque d'ethnologie historique*. This series is mainly concerned with regional French history but there is much to interest the anthropologist such as M. Vovelle's *Les métamorphoses de la fête en Provence* (Paris 1975), an account of the changes of traditional rituals during the French Revolution and the restoration.

The new interest in rural areas, *la France profonde*, is for some, an unadventurous *répli sur l'hexagone*. This trend can also be seen as an attempt to deal with ethnic consciousness. Interaction rather than the definition of difference is the aim of government-promoted research concerning minorities in France (e.g. immigrant workers).

It is to be feared that the Mitterrand regime will continue Giscard's much decried preference for applied research. Future monographs may then describe the narrow world of African workers in Paris rather than evoke, as did Griaule after Ogotemmel, a magnificently complex vision of the universe.

It may seem obvious to include the study of religion in the *symbolique* but this merely leads to begging a number of questions. Problems of definition (to what extent is religion a discrete category?) may be increased by including religion in a wider domain. The controversy moreover extends to the definition of its various aspects (Dumezil once remarked that after twenty years of study he still could not distinguish myths from folktales).

When glancing through recent publications it appears that more attention is now being paid to ritual; myths, temporarily at least, have thought each other into exhaustion.

To my knowledge one of the most complete and innovative, as also the most baroquely complex, recent French monograph on ritual

is R.Guidieri's *La route des morts* (Paris 1979), an examination of funerary rites among the Melanesian Fatelaka. M.Augé among others has written extensively on religion. His most recent book is *Génie du paganisme* (Paris 1982). There are frequent references to Chateaubriand (lately rediscovered) on Christianity, but rather than an apology of paganism (here defined as polytheistic religion) Augé carries out an investigation of its various modes and typical figures (sacrifice, the hero).

Various other tendencies are represented in P.Smith and M.Izard (eds.), *La fonction symbolique* (Paris 1979), a collection of articles by scholars mainly associated with Lévi-Strauss and/or the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale of the Collège de France. The volume includes among others D.Sperber on the rational nature of symbolism, F.Héritier on symbolic aspects of kinship, and P.Smith on ritual. Studies of the *symbolique* most frequently centre on language but occasionally also include art (cf. Kristeva's *Desire in Language*).

The *groupe de travail* directed by R.Guidieri at Nanterre are concerned with the aesthetics of traditional societies; a meditation on the object which may concretise the cultural and eidetic imperative of the representation of supernatural entities or, as in modern Western societies, be reified as 'primitive art'.

The above remarks are merely the incomplete observations of a self-confessedly naive explorer of the luxuriant Parisian anthropological jungle. This reconnaissance, if nothing else, suggests the risk of isolation of Oxford anthropology; even the most violent disagreement is better than the cessation of dialogue. In particular, why have we left it to Cambridge to establish a co-publication programme with the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme?

Many of the trends outlined in these pages are to be found in other intellectual *milieux*. The breaking of interdisciplinary and institutional barriers has become a *parcours obligé* for many contemporary academics. Now that, nominally at least, *l'imagination* (or at least *l'imaginaire*) is *au pouvoir* the system, along with the concept of power itself may be deconstructed from within.

As we have seen, a basic methodological *démarche* underlines structuralism, psychoanalysis and Marxism: the claim that a hidden mechanism (the variously interpreted modes of *pouvoir*, *désir* or the *dispositif symbolique*) is both the mainspring and the explanation of human society.

If I have described problems in preference to the approach of individual authors, the recurrent devaluation, if not the abolition, of the writer in favour of the text makes this the only possible means of interpretation.