

Anthropology Outside The Classroom

Popular representation of 'other' peoples (and of one's own society) are greatly influenced by the work of social anthropologists. This can be demonstrated very specifically in the way that 19th century novels of adventure portraying 'primitive' peoples constantly have recourse to contemporary anthropological theory. At a general level such theory rested on European notions of Progress, Hierarchy and Racial Classification. More specifically anthropologists developed certain characteristic ideas about the nature of 'primitive' people which were also incorporated into popular fiction; theories of animism, fertility, dream-experience, fetishism, sacrifice, magic and totemism, developed by 'Emotionalist', 'Intellectualist' and early 'Functionalist' schools of anthropology, are used by popular writers to 'explain' the activities of fictitious 'primitive' peoples and to lend romance an air of scientific respectability. I have argued elsewhere (1975) that such writings provided for many readers a framework of thought within which information about other societies could be ordered and interpreted.

Many of the pre-suppositions of these 19th century anthropologists have been challenged during the course of this century. The principal change has been in the adoption of a more relativistic attitude to other societies and in the development of the field work method by which anthropologists live among alien peoples for a number of years, learn their language and study the way of life from 'within'. As a result the metaphors of the Chain of Being and of the Ladder of Progress have been put into historical perspective. The development of society is no longer considered comparable to that of the rifle, which was used by Pitt Rivers as the basis of his museum of man (now in Oxford). Where the Victorian anthropologist wondered how he, as a gentleman of some breeding, would talk and act in a 'primitive' society, the modern anthropologist attempts to interpret how the members of that society themselves see the world. How far such a task is possible is currently being debated by philosophers, linguists and anthropologists. But the approach pre-supposes respect for other modes of thought and action to the extent that the immediate response to alien experience is to question 'what does it mean to them?' rather than 'how strange it seems to me'.

These assumptions, which underlie current studies of 'primitive' society and of all society by anthropologists, are themselves being constantly challenged and are no more inviolable than we consider the now outmoded theory of 19th century anthropologists. The point here, though, is that unlike those earlier theories, which were constantly to the forefront of public debate in 19th century England and which underlay much popular writing, the ideas of modern anthropologists have, until recently, not been so closely involved in popular thinking. Modern popular literature of adventure continued to reproduce the ideas and stereotypes about 'primitive' peoples of 19th century novels and anthropology. The academic theory of that period was fossilised in much of the popular theory of mid-twentieth century England. Moreover, more academic and 'serious' writings, popular encyclopedias

and reference to anthropology by other academics, revealed the same tendency; 19th century theory concerning the nature of 'primitive' man and of society continued for a long time to provide a framework for discussion about non-Europeans, with all the moral evaluation that this implied. As recently as 1970, for instance, Pears Cyclopaedia had the following entry under 'Ideas and Beliefs - God and Man':-

The idea of gods came before the idea of God and even earlier in the evolution of religious thought there existed belief in spirits (see Animism). It was only as a result of a long period of development that the notion of a universal 'God' arose, a development particularly well documented in the Old Testament.

Such misconceptions are common in the work of literary critics too. Maurice Bowra in 'Primitive Song' (1962) attempted to trace the origin of modern literature in the same evolutionary terms, from the crude, collective 'art' of 'primitive' peoples. Literary critics of repute, like Bowra, had long since rejected the 'Battle of the Ancients and Moderns' and, acknowledging that the order in which Shakespeare, Homer and Dante, for instance, wrote their work did not seem to be reflected in their quality of their writing, rejected any attempt to trace the Progress of Good Literature. Within the context of European art and literature the evolutionary framework was seen to be unhelpful in judging matters of quality. But it was still applied to societies outside Europe. Primitive art was still viewed as an early and crude version of European achievement. Information from other societies was still being interpreted through a framework of thought that stemmed from the anthropological theory of an earlier period.

One reason for concern with anthropological theory and with the information about other societies filtered through it, is that it profoundly affects our ideas about the nature of art and society in our own culture. Less ethnocentrically it might be argued that what other people do is intrinsically interesting and important and that any attempt to understand it requires the current theory in that field.

It is the availability of current ideas that I would now like to consider and the extent to which these are being used outside the university. Since most people's theoretical framework for viewing themselves and other people is largely built up in school, that would seem the appropriate place to investigate. What perceptions of other societies are being purveyed in the classroom? And what do these perceptions owe to anthropological theory?

Most schools do not teach anthropology as such. There are few, however, which do not make use of some anthropological theory, whether in relation to information about exotic peoples or about their own community. The concepts of Race and Social Evolution are still employed in the school book without the challenge that they are submitted to in the wider intellectual society. The same is true of 'subjects' dealing less directly

with exotic experience. The literature used by teachers of English was often written at a time when other peoples were seen as 'inferior' and debased. This affects their value as literature, to the extent that the writer accepts such notions uncritically and consequently presents a distorted view of the 'truth' of human experience. Late 19th century 'exotic' novels are particularly prone, for example, to presenting other societies without that 'sense of proportion' which Conrad considered essential to the writer. An anthropological perspective can make a contribution towards the critical appreciation of such novels and towards that 'sense of proportion' that is as essential for the reader as for the writer. Many more explicitly anthropological teaching materials in schools, however, still fail to achieve this. The ILEA World History Units, for instance, continue to purvey 19th century theory in neat 20th century slide and folder packs. The folder on 'Belief' in the pack for Africa, for instance, states:

Religion controls every part of an African's life. He believes that the gods bring him good or bad luck. For this reason he must carry out many ceremonies to make sure that the gods are on his side... If the (hunting) trip is successful, some of the cooked food will be offered on the return. The Africans believe that this will bring them good luck.

Even were there not available numerous sophisticated accounts of different modes of belief in Africa, an intelligent child would (hopefully) be suspicious of such generalisations as 'The Africans believe', while anthropologists and Africans would question the concept of 'luck' and 'religion' presented.

The Folder on weddings exhibits a similar lack of proportion. There are only two photographs to illustrate weddings in Africa; one is of a 'traditional' ceremony, the other of a white Christian wedding. The text on traditional marriage, implicitly covering the whole continent, is taken from a book written in 1904 and refers to the marriage payment as 'buying a bride', a peculiarly western view of exotic marriage practices.

The main point I want to make in this context is that anthropology is being taught in schools, though under a variety of headings and with a range of quality of materials and that this has a profound effect on the quality of the 'subject' being taught. Many schools, or individual teachers, have become aware that this aspect of their subject could be improved upon and a lot of work has gone into Integrated Studies courses in recent years. In these instances anthropologists are often asked to help.

The RAI folder on Teaching Resources for schools lists 17 schools in which anthropology is taught, though a more recent estimate is 26. Over 60 teachers are listed as interested in, or already conducting some work in, anthropology in the classroom. The reasons for apparent expansion of interest in anthropology by schools are various. The introduction of Integrated Studies programmes in which traditional subject boundaries are broken down, has been one important factor. Young teachers, often with some knowledge of sociology or interest in anthropology, are

preparing curricula for such programmes of study and want to introduce some material on the 'underdeveloped' world, on Imperialism or on Race Relations. It was under the pressure of such people and their departments that the Royal Anthropological Institute instigated its Teaching Resources Project. The reasons given were that 'teachers were introducing anthropological perspectives into their courses, and museums and libraries were receiving more and more requests for anthropological material'. The most concrete result has been a Teaching Resources Folder, collating all the information so far available and listing it under such headings as 'Schools in which Anthropology is Taught', 'Non-University Teachers of Anthropology', 'Film', 'Museums' and an extensive, annotated bibliography. Various series of books for schools are being prepared and university anthropology departments are asked to provide speakers at local schools and to contribute to Teacher Training Programmes.

Besides this direct interest of professional anthropologists, the development of the perspective in schools is also related to more local political and social factors. Many graduates of anthropology have gone into teaching but have been forced to teach their 'A' level subjects since anthropology was not part of the curriculum. With the development of Integrated Studies courses they can now begin to use their degree more explicitly in the school. Anne Render, research assistant for the Teaching Resources Project, also, points out other reasons she discovered in her contacts with schools. Many teachers in traditional subject areas, she suggests, feel threatened by the challenge to subject specialism, which had provided an important source of identity. Anthropology, while seeming to be among the chief agents of this change, may also provide a solution. It may present a cohesive analytical framework in which a variety of 'facts' can be held together, a way of viewing the world, the material taught in the classroom and the students there, as an integrated whole. In this case it is not just the subject matter, the concern with exotic and 'primitive' peoples, that interests the teacher, but the perspective, the theoretical contribution of anthropology. It is similarly a legitimising agent in their conflicts over the distinction between 'liberal' and 'vocational' education by making the distinction unnecessary. By providing 'cognitive strategies' that enable the teachers themselves to come to terms with society, anthropology places them in a wider perspective, less localised and vulnerable.

An argument levelled against the teaching of anthropology in schools has been that where it is taught by middle class teachers to working class children it will merely confirm existing inequalities in the class system and also, most likely, perpetuate the stereotypes of immigrants and outsiders held by those children. In one sense this is an argument against any education; the class basis of education is well recognized. However, I would argue that anthropology, of all subjects, is best geared to providing the kind of critique of society that could lead to a breakdown of some class inequalities. The middle class teacher of anthropology is not necessarily concerned only to confirm the established values of his society; if he has any grasp of the subject at all

he is likely to use it to demonstrate the relativity of those values and a critical appraisal of them. To point out that this can only happen slowly is not to deny the worth of anthropology in such a task.

Anthropology, then, is spreading in schools and is likely to continue to do so for a variety of reasons, practical and theoretical. Having considered why anthropology is more evident in schools, we can now consider the kind of anthropology that is currently being introduced. The setting within which new curricula are put forward is well outlined by Peter Mitchell of Thomas Bennett School, Crawley;

Our decision to introduce social science into the curriculum came initially from an awareness that religious studies history and literature were between them inadequately meeting the need for children to be equipped to make their personal judgements about choices on moral, political and religious issues, with a clear understanding of the personal and social consequences of such choices. The other two (reasons) being;

- 1) The need to equip students to understand as completely as possible the nature of the society in which they are living as well as the societies amongst which they are living in a shrinking world and,
- 2) The need to understand the place of the individual in society; how social forces affect the individual and how individuals affect social change.

(Journal of Curriculum Studies, Nov. 1972)

He goes on to give reasons for introducing anthropology specifically;

It firstly introduces children to knowledge about pre-industrial non-European societies, putting emphasis on ethnographic data rather than on the interpretations of anthropologists.

(Ibid. P.137)

This raises the chief fears that professional anthropologists have with regard to the introduction of the subject into school. They are afraid that it will be taught in the same way that geography was; how many cars are made in Detroit? How many Nuer believe in ghosts? The richness and variety of social life will be reduced to simplistic, statistical analysis. On the other hand, the introduction of theory as though it were 'fact' carries its own dangers. One curriculum asks students to write formal definitions of 'polyandry' etc., an approach which also fails to come to terms with life as it is lived. As far as the anthropologist viewing schools is concerned, then, the teacher is more important than the material. Concerned as they are with the framework of thought, the view of society being presented, they feel that ill-trained teachers may continue to

confirm stereotypes even when teaching more 'up-to-date' material.

A further perspective on the debate concerning anthropology in schools has been offered by Edmund Leach as President of the Royal Anthropological Institute. He has stated that, whatever quality of teachers and material are involved, any anthropology taught in schools is 'damaging'. Ignoring the fact that some anthropology is being taught there anyway, and will probably continue to be so, he concentrates on the dangers of teaching there even the kind of anthropology in which he believes. His main argument is that it would undermine the assumed values of the child's society:

The study of social anthropology, by encouraging the comparison of contrasted systems of moral values, invites us to cast a jaundiced critical eye on the basic moral slogans which we are accustomed to accept as self-evident truth.

He considers it not a bad thing that school teachers should question the assumptions of their society but is less sure of their charges;

Whether their pupils ought to be subjected to the same kinds of doubt may be a rather moot point. It could be very confusing to learn about other people's moral values before you have confident understanding of your own.

(ATSS. 'Anthropology in the Classroom'
Vol. 3 No. 1. 1973)

He concedes that it might not be a bad thing for sixth formers to be able

to acquire a relatively detached view of the kind of indoctrination to which they are being subjected by being sent to school.

but is against extending it through the school.

It is difficult to envisage when Leach imagines the change comes in a school, from handing on received values to questioning them; and quite what role information from other cultures is to play if, given that it is being presented anyway and that children receive it also through television and newspapers, it ought to be presented in such a way that it does not make them question their own values. A great many teachers in schools, in fact, see their roles as being to question from the outset and they consequently hold up to enquiry the received perspectives on society available in current teaching material and encourage their students to do the same.

David Pocock has criticised Leach for his argument on relativity;

I would argue that social anthropology should be taught in schools precisely on the grounds that Leach seems to regard it as so dangerous. But first I should have something to say about this alleged 'moral relativity' which Leach presents as a total, fluid and almost arbitrary state of affairs. First of all I would present evidence that shows men to be ethically a good deal more uniform than Leach allows. There are 'Human values'; the relativity comes in when these are considered in their relational context e.g. there is no society in which adultery and homicide are not condemned even if they are condemned in wider or narrower contexts for good reasons which can be shown. Second I would argue that the young of all societies, including our own, have early experience of this kind of relativity... Part of all upbringing is the learning of appropriate behaviours in different contexts and I would go so far as to suggest that it is precisely the introduction of 'moral values... as if they were axioms' that cuts the child off from a sense of relativity, let alone an understanding of history or an appreciation of the epistemology of modern physics. On the second part of Leach's argument I would, as I think I have already suggested, argue myself that if young people learn early the historical and social dimensions of their world they will quite simply be more critical in the best and oldest sense of that word. They will, for example, understand the part that kinship and marriage have played and continue to play in their own societies and in others and appreciate that modification of this role does not amount to their abolition.

Why is it desirable that social anthropology is taught in schools? It is desirable because this more than any other social science provides knowledge of Man's being and potentiality. It is desirable because it provides a context for other social sciences which have for the most part yet to break out of the Euro-centred frame of reference; and what is true of the social sciences is also true of the humanities.

(Pocock. 1974)

Leach's latest speech on the subject takes a different stand from the earlier one. The Presidential address to the R.A.I. given by him on the 26th June 1974, dealt extensively with 'Popularisation and its Problems'. Leach there says that 'anything which can make people more genuinely knowledgeable must be an influence for the good' and as a consequence urges his professional colleagues to give others the advantage of their learning;

...specialised work can be made popular and comprehensible to lay public and, in my view, this is something that is supremely worth doing. It is also my view that the job can only be done properly by the professionals themselves.

The Medical Research Council's Molecular Biology Unit at Cambridge has acquired its supreme reputation in the field of basic genetics not simply because the place is

overcrowded with Nobel Prize winners but because several of the leading lights of the place are absolute past masters at the art of explaining to the lay public what they are up to. This is a model worth imitation. The R.A.I.'s task is to foster a communicative spirit among the top professional anthropologists right across the board. This does not imply a 'lowering of academic standard'.

(RAIN 4. Sept. 1974)

Prince Charles, Honorary Patron of the R.A.I. added his own reasons for popularising anthropology;

The more people understand about the background of the immigrants who come to this country, the less apprehensive they would be about them. To get on neighbourly terms with people of other races and countries you've got to get more familiar with them; know how they live, how they eat, how they work, what makes them laugh ... and their history... you can't remove people's apprehensions in one night but you can make a start by making them more knowledgeable.

(RAIN 4)

During the last few years many anthropologists have found themselves doing just what Leach and Prince Charles advocate. Prince Charles' reasons, however, suggest that the purposes behind the spread of anthropology are not always the same. A division can be observed between the 'social engineers' and the 'academics'. To the social engineers, anthropology is being asked to carry the moral burden of the pluralist society. It is hoped and believed that anthropology, well taught, will reduce racial tension, lead to greater human understanding, lessen conflict and establish the pluralist society on sound intellectual as well as moral grounds.

The anthropologists themselves tend to tread more warily and to make more limited claims for their 'subject'. They are concerned that standards of intellectual rigour are maintained and that the most up-to-date work and ideas are taught. The hopes that they entertain for such a task are expressed by Pocock in his belief that anthropology can provide a context in which to 'break out of the Euro-centred frame of reference'. And he suggests another aspect of the effect anthropologists think that their discipline might have when he adds that this is as important for the humanities as for the social sciences. We have seen how the anthropological perspective affects the teaching of literature, contributing to that 'sense of proportion necessary to writer and reader alike'. This is true also of history, geography, religious studies, drama and other subjects that do not deal directly with 'primitive' peoples. If anthropology is to be introduced into schools, for all the reasons cited it must be not just as a separate discipline with a separate subject matter, nor only in social science studies, but as a perspective informing all studies. In the field of modern education the aims of recent efforts by teachers and anthropologists to work together have been both to narrow the gap between popular and

'professional anthropological' notions of 'primitive' peoples and to provide a more broadly-based, critical and balanced conception of the nature of society as a whole. I would suggest that both of these aims are, to some extent, beginning to be realised. While the trend can be observed in some schools, it is most clearly evident in other areas where anthropologists have been involved in popularisation - publishing and film.

Such recent popular Encyclopaedias of Anthropology as 'Peoples of the World' and 'The Family of Man' are aimed at mass sales, emphasise glossy presentation and excellent photographs and are largely written by anthropologists or under their guidance. The problems that this gives rise to are brought out in the pages of 'RAIN', a journal newly brought out by the R.A.I. as part of its own popularising efforts. In No. 3 (July 1974) Jean La Fontaine wrote critically of 'Peoples of the World', a 20 volume series of articles and pictures, not yet released in England but geared to the school market. Her criticism concentrated on the editing and choice of material, on the incorrectness of many 'facts', the 'disastrous' captions of many photographs and the emphasis on the exotic and picturesque. Many of the articles were written by professional anthropologists and, apart from some suspicious editing, made some contribution towards a balanced view. But by being presented in this context they were not likely to challenge the uncritical image of 'primitive' peoples popularly held, and which the editors themselves often seemed to subscribe to. Her criticisms were taken up by Tom Stacey, who had conceived the series. He described the difficulties of producing such books;

Alas, as one finds out, it is only the very rare specialist who is capable of translating his knowledge for the layman. We were the first to rejoice whenever we found such a one. To combine anthropological expertise with marketing expertise involved us in constant compromise. We had qualified and experienced anthropologists in our team as well as trained and experienced editors; the kind of 'errors' your reviewer cited were seldom the result of our not being instructed but of the exigencies of the task facing us... your reviewer's complaints indicate that she was not according us the kind of understanding she would have applied had we been a tribal group of craftsmen under the study in the field.

(RAIN 4 Oct. 1974)

The terms in which the differences between professional anthropologists and popular publishers are here argued out suggest that the gap between them is, in fact narrowing. Stacey was very concerned to have experienced anthropologists in his team and to defend his project in anthropological terms. His books do provide a greater 'sense of proportion' than earlier encyclopaedias, a point admitted by many anthropologists including La Fontaine herself. This, then, is a step towards the more significant narrowing of the gap between professional and popular conceptions of society in general and of 'primitive' peoples in particular.

The same trend can be observed in the area of 'anthropological' film.. Brian Moser, founder and director of the 'Disappearing World' series has been concerned to hire anthropologists to map out the films and to film in areas where an anthropologist has been present for some time, knows the language and the people and can introduce the film crew to the society. The recent, highly successful series, is the result of such policy. Sub-titles are used so that the locals can be heard in their own tongue without too much interference from English commentary;

In every case we have tried to encourage our chief protagonists to speak for themselves; some are reserved, one or two are unbelievably talkative and it is through them that we should be able to learn something new about societies whose values and customs have often seemed strange and exotic though in fact they are logical and to be respected.

(Granada pamphlet 'Disappearing World'
1974)

Such an attitude on the part of film directors and such an example of close relations between anthropologists and film makers is relatively new. That it should be happening at the same time that popular publishers are also trying to establish closer relations with professional anthropologists and to present 'exotic' societies as 'logical and respectable' is significant. It coincides, also, with the efforts of the Royal Anthropological Institute to popularise and with the interest of teachers in schools and tertiary education in presenting material about non-European societies in a more balanced way.

Even more significantly, though, it seems to coincide with a shift in views about the nature of society as a whole. At a conference for teachers of anthropology in schools, held by the R.A.I. in 1974, some aspects of this shifting perspective were apparent. The teachers and anthropologists present did not talk of their discipline as being concerned with a particular subject matter - namely 'non-industrial society' - as many popularisers of anthropology were doing in the 1950's and 1960's. Rather they talked about perspectives - symbolic aspects of eating, the kinds of food that go together and are kept apart in our own society, rituals of seating, entry behaviour into rooms and body symbolism. Recent articles in Sunday magazines and in 'New Society' have dealt with body touching or with rituals of the classroom in anthropological terms and teachers at the conference were interested in how such approaches might be presented in their classes. That the assumptions and categories of thought of European life might usefully be compared with what anthropologists have discovered in systems of classification in other societies is a relatively new approach in the school. The arguments of anthropologists cited above, that their subject should be introduced into schools not as an autonomous discipline but as a perspective informing other disciplines, in social science and humanities alike, seem to be bearing fruit.

The examples above may justify us in discerning a trend of some significance; the gap between popular and professional conceptions of society in general, and of 'primitive' society in particular, seems to be narrowing through the work of film makers, publishers and teachers. In the same way that historians of the 19th century have pointed to an image of Africa that had hardened by 1850 and an image of anthropology that had rounded out by 1920, so future historians of ideas may pinpoint the significant change in the popular image of society as a whole in Britain to that period in the early 1970's when established anthropological perspectives began to be more widely adopted in popular films and books and in the schools.

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