

BOOK REVIEWS

Population and its Problems: A plain man's guide (Wolfson College Lectures 1973) Edited by H.B. Parry, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974. vi, 422 pp. £6.75

Little has been written in criticism of the academic movement which has grown up around our ignorance of the social side of increased fertility. Demographers, outside of Oxford, have come to have their own foundations and research centres; the respectability of this positive science is well-earned by a statistics whose formality is appreciated by its practitioners. The sociology of population, however, has raced ahead to become a regular part of the proselytation of development without pausing for conceptual retrenchment of its comparatively informal methods. Anthropologists, insofar as they have ignored the topic, are a party in this. The 'Problems' follow from this ill-defined space between the demographers' calculations and the typically alien societies to which those are supposed to refer.

This space is a blur in the plan and language of the lectures. Scattered 'Problems' are put forward in the confident spirit of a movement which condescends to provide 'a background of critical scientific evidence' for 'the plain man':

It seems most useful to restrict our survey to those aspects of demography [very widely construed] where generally acceptable quantitative scientific knowledge could be assembled and where, if present, important lacunae in our knowledge might be defined. (Parry, p.3).

The import of the first three lectures, although carefully understated by each of the authors, effectively does away with this. Varley, writing about the voles and great tits of Wytham Wood, cannot find substantial analogies that would enable us to extend the methods used in studying animal populations to the human variety. Ardener shows that the familiar vocabulary of 'determinants', 'densities', 'populations' and the like readily generates nonsense unless tied to a theory of ethnography. Brass points out that the demographic transition, a centre-piece of social studies of population, is 'extremely doubtful' as an 'empirical description of the world's demographic history'. The situation is all too familiar: the categories, the ideal of infrastructural explanation, and the goal of empirical generalizations that frame most work on population simply do not, of themselves, hold.

This polite clearing is not taken up in any of the later papers, although from those comfortable if worn 'truths' they do note an impressive number of topics about which 'we know lamentably little' or which have even 'made for greater humility and... started a search for a better theory of fertility' (Ohlin). It is worth noting that from the fourth lecture all of the papers are frankly developmental. The series concludes with an amazingly untroubled account of family planning programmes, the movement's black eye.

The book is an introduction to what is going on, but the sub-title should be understood as a defence against things critical.

Phil Kreager

Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village

Juliet du Boulay

Oxford Monographs on Social Anthropology. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974. viii, 269 pp. illus. £6.

In 1966 Juliet du Boulay went looking for a traditional Greek village and found one. In fact Ambéli "turned out to be, in its main characteristics, exactly what I had been looking for..." - with a priest and local council, small, remote, airy, beautiful, and above all, in accordance with Miss du Boulay's desires, 'traditional'. It was also, by that, both exceptional and dying.

Certainly Miss du Boulay never hides the historical transience of her 'traditional' society; certainly there is much to be said for documenting the mores of such outposts of tradition before they dissolve into the Western mainstream; but the predilection for 'village studies' in the anthropology of complex societies - a predilection clandestinely born of the necessities for field work - carries with it its own traditionalism.

Let me first state unequivocally that Miss du Boulay's book is a fine piece of ethnography - sensitive and perceptive, as it is usually said (and just how so can be judged from her excellent chapter on marriage). But there is a sense of déjà lu: solidarity of the household in the face of the village; of the village in the face of its neighbours; balances of loyalty and love, malice and distrust; honour and shame. Maybe 'peasant society' is a viable category. But that is not the real question. Let me venture anthropology's occasional achievement as momentarily rendering man alien to himself (though that, as we now know, can be done by foul means and fair). Still it remains a precondition for understanding. Easy to do if the society under study is truly 'exotic'. Common-sense concepts become ineffectual; might finally be discarded along with the Human Nature to which they refer. The problem then is to make sense of the 'senseless'. At least some ground is cleared and new questions, radical questions, demand to be posed.

The trouble with Greek villages is that they are not beyond the pale. Different - yes; but not so different that when ably described (and Miss du Boulay can describe very ably) they cannot be intuitively understood by mere reference to our own experience, or at least the experience of our own traditions. The problem then is to undermine the reason of the 'reasonable'. And that is difficult.

In such situations anthropological explanation, when attempted, exists on a peculiar middle ground. On the one hand 'logical' schemata are constructed which any reasonable man would reject as sheer embellishment (I mean someone who is not an anthropologist or sociologist); on the other hand, even such schemata tend to

rely on a reasonable man's ready acceptance of concepts which are in fact highly problematic. Thus: "... since common subscription to the same values prohibits the making of too many deviants, at the same time as inhibiting the rise of new standards according to which new roles might be created, these roles are limited in number and very clear-cut." Tautology? Then elsewhere and throughout we learn that meals, fields, houses, have a 'symbolic' value. I feel sure that Miss du Boulay is right. I feel sure she is using the word correctly. It is, in context, the natural word to use. But, is it not precisely the nature of 'symbolic' value which needs investigation? What do we mean by it?

I do not wish to be over-critical. Miss du Boulay has called her book 'Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village', and that is an honourable title and it has been honourably fulfilled. The scrupulous compilation of data aside, one does feel that one has experienced through her writing the life of Ambéli. Whether social anthropology as a science of man and society has been advanced is a question which now, in all fairness, must be directed towards the ethnographic tradition as a whole, not towards Miss du Boulay.

Roger Just.

Kédang: A Study of the Collective Thought of an Eastern Indonesian People. R.H. Barnes. Oxford, Clarendon Press, Oxford Monographs on Social Anthropology, 1974. xiv, 350pp. £7

This monograph is the result of over 18 months field research in the district of Kédang on the island Lembata (Lomblen) in eastern Indonesia. As an ethnographic study, its special distinction lies in the author's remarkably successful attempt to elicit principles of order which underlie the totality of Kédangese thought and action. In this endeavour Barnes has chosen to approach his subject from the perspective of the representations of the people themselves. Thus a conventional arrangement of topics is discarded in favour of a discursive analytical treatment which accords with the cultural evaluations of the Kédangese, with the distinctions they make between various areas and aspects of their experience, and with the way in which they relate these one to another.

Instead of a first chapter on 'kinship' or subsistence economy, Barnes starts by considering the symbolic value of the physical setting of Kédang. He then proceeds, through an analysis of village organisation and house form, to a discussion of Kédangese orientation, in which he shows how particular ideas about space are a function of certain general linguistic concepts of orientation. It is only after his exemplary analysis of space and time, which topics the author rightly regards as being the most fundamental to any ethnographic enquiry, that Barnes turns to consider the more sociological aspects of Kédangese culture.

It may come as something of a surprise to the reader, when he learns that Kedang society is ordered by an asymmetric prescription, to find that a discussion of marriage, alliance, and relationship terminology is left until the very end of the book. This strategy, however, can be seen to result from the nature of the object under study, rather than from some previously conceived method or theory. It is by now an established idea, especially as regards prescriptive systems, that the particular facts of terminology, descent, alliance, and marriage may be properly understood only in relation to a logical structure of complete generality to the society in question. The great merit of Barnes's monograph is that he actually demonstrates how such an understanding can be obtained.

Because of both the nature of the object of study and the author's excellent treatment of it, Barnes's work is an original and valuable contribution to a number of topics of current anthropological concern: prescriptive alliance, dual symbolic classification, orientation, transition, and the symbolism of numbers; and in this respect it should be of great interest to all students of social anthropology.

G.L. Forth

After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation.

George Steiner. London, Oxford University Press. 1975. viii, 507 pp. £8.

The immense diversity of human languages is surely the supreme anthropological mystery. How can we account for this basic fact about the human species? What is language? What is translation? Are either language or translation the sorts of phenomena for which we may hope to formulate systematic theories?

These are some of the problems to which Steiner's fascinating book is addressed. There are some sections on relatively clearly demarcated topics such as the history of the linguistic determinism hypothesis, and on the debate over universals in linguistics. But above and beyond them exists a very complex and sometimes personal journey through a field of basic yet scarcely definable issues. The author has not made it easy for us always to follow his path, but his fantastic erudition has provided documentation to help us with the more abstract discussions.

Steiner begins his explorations of language, translation, and meaning by suggesting that what is normally regarded as translation - translation between different languages - is only a concentrated form of the general problem of understanding. An inquiry into the question of translation is really an inquiry into language in general. All human communication involves interpretation, so translation is concerned not only with semantic exchange between languages, but also exchanges within a single language, and with those between language and non-linguistic sign systems. There is an activity we call understanding when we listen to another human being talk, or when we read a text.

We can speak of translation in terms of trust, of loss of creation, and restitution - the hermeneutic circle represents a simultaneous increase and decrease in semantic entropy - but can we give a systematic account of the processes involved? What sort of answer do we expect to the question 'What is translation?'. For as long as man has existed he has translated, yet this is an activity performed with very little theoretical equipment; over the centuries there have been strikingly few helpful suggestions as to what a good theory might look like.

For Steiner the question whether a theory is possible here is related to the issue of whether language is a subject for which we might expect a 'science of language' to be feasible. Steiner has grave doubts about this, and is extremely unhappy about a great deal of modern linguistic theory. There is, of course, the odd difficulty that a theory of language has to be stated in language. But it is equally striking that so many of those who have written about language - linguists and philosophers alike - are not true friends of language. Ambiguity and violations of grammar are not linguistic pathologies but parts of the genius of language. What is abnormal about hypotheticals and counter-factuals? It may be possible to regard animal signalling as an information system, but human language is not just for stating facts. Our languages allow the luxury of fiction - the creation of 'alternatives of being'. Possibly we may see a survival value here. Perhaps creatures who know they must die need to be able to speak of other worlds: language is a human institution which allows such articulation; it has futurity embedded in its tense structure.

What then is the problem of Babel? Perhaps we should think not of the human species but of the human individual, for is not the difficulty of linguistic diversity one refraction of individual difference? Language and rules are public, yet as individual human beings we are all ultimately alone in the world. This is not to argue for the philosophical concept of 'privacy'. All we know about human beings shows such a notion to be nonsensical. We may build shared semantic worlds out of the resources of a public institution, but because each human being is himself and not someone else, we all speak slightly differing tongues. Whenever two people converse, they have to interpret. They must hope; they must trust. But an inescapable and ultimate indeterminacy of meaning remains. This trust and indeterminacy are both shared; they are equally components of being human. We are all alone, but not totally since we all have this solitude in common. In language we can try to connect, even if it is just to give expression to our sense of significant loneliness.

Malcolm Crick.

Books Received

Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion. T.O. Beidelman. London, University of Chicago Press. 1974. xiv, 92pp. £4.50 (paperback £1).

A Bibliography of the Writings of E.E. Evans-Pritchard. Compiled by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, amended and corrected by T.O. Beidelman. London, Tavistock Publications. 1974. 26pp. £2.25

African Traditional Law in Historical Perspective. The Radcliffe-Brown Lecture in Social Anthropology, 1974. Max Gluckman. London, Oxford University Press for the British Academy. 1975. 45pp. £0.75

The Iban and their Religion. Erik Jensen. Oxford Monographs in Social Anthropology. London, Clarendon Press: Oxford University Press 1975. xii, 242 pp. £4.50

The Winds of Tomorrow: Social Change in Maya Town. Richard A. Thompson. London, University of Chicago Press. 1975. x, 182pp. £6.25.