

Anna Grimshaw  
& Keith Hart

ANTHROPOLOGY AND  
THE CRISIS OF THE  
INTELLECTUALS



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**Anna Grimshaw &  
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Part I - From the 1890s to 1945

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## About the authors

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Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart are co-editors of *C.L.R. James American Civilization* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1993).

## Introduction

### Anthropology and the World We Live In

The fourth decennial conference of the British (officially "Commonwealth") Association of Social Anthropologists, held in July 1993, was the largest ever gathering of its kind. Four hundred anthropologists came to Oxford from all over the world to hear papers on "The Uses of Knowledge: Global and Local Relations". In addition, a dozen fringe sessions explored topics ranging from aesthetics and sexuality to Christianity and Japan. The main theme echoed a major pre-occupation of the world we live in, the shifting relationship between levels of society, and it expressed the contemporary challenge posed to anthropologists by their claim to know something special about human societies.

At roughly the same time as this gathering, Edward Said was completing a series of six radio talks. His 1993 Reith Lectures, "Representations of the Intellectual", raised many questions pertinent to anthropology's place in the modern world. We propose to explore this juxtaposition of public events, for we believe that the unease which lurked beneath the professional facade of the Oxford conference was symptomatic of a much deeper crisis facing all intellectuals today. Indeed, we would go so far as to argue that anthropologists experience the crisis of modern intellectuals most acutely, given the form which their twentieth century project has taken.

It might be said that anthropology has been in crisis for as long as anyone can remember — certainly since the wave of independence movements shattered its empirical base and posed serious intellectual and political challenges to many of its fundamental assumptions. Anthropologists themselves have made many attempts to address this crisis and to find new practices suitable to a changed world order. But the problem of whether anthropology can survive as a discipline in the twentyfirst century stubbornly remains as pressing as ever. Some

professionals feel that millenarian predictions of the end of anthropology are tired and repetitive; others deny that there is any crisis at all — except an uncontrolled outbreak of navel-gazing; a number look for new areas to colonise (documentary film, literature, tourism); while others seek a solution to the politics of anthropology through the invention of new writing strategies.

To some, this pamphlet may appear to be covering old ground, offering yet another spurious history of anthropology's twentieth century development or merely perpetuating the sterile inward-looking preoccupations of an elite in decline. We believe, however, that the questions faced by the discipline have a new urgency in an era when the Cold War's certainties have suddenly passed. In particular, students want to know what the point of anthropology is; and they are highly sceptical of the answers they are given. They look to anthropological knowledge as a possible bridge between themselves as individuals and the world they live in; and for the most part they are disappointed. Their teachers seem old and out of touch; the discipline's models of enquiry and its canonical texts belong to a previous era.

Our impetus then comes from the desire to address a younger (and broader) audience, one drawn to the universalism of anthropology and yet so often frustrated by its narrow specialisation and arcane professional language. This pamphlet series is animated by a commitment to rediscovering what was new and radical in anthropology at the turn of the century. For we believe that it is possible to draw on elements of that period to reinvent anthropology as a project which is more open to the movement and complexity of the world in which we live. In other words, any future revival has to be anchored in an understanding of the past.

Accordingly, we attempt to trace in this essay a particular movement through time, while pursuing the argument at several

levels. Our starting-point is to locate the roots of anthropology's crisis in the collapse of its central paradigm, scientific ethnography. The intellectual authority that modern anthropology originally claimed, resting on objective reports of first-hand experience gained with exotic peoples through the practice of "fieldwork", has been seriously undermined. Today no-one accepts uncritically the truth claims of the classic monographs. Indeed, for many ethnography has become a sort of creative writing rather than a scientific exercise. The realism of conventional accounts is considered to be as limited in its formal scope as its content is often deceptive. Moreover, objectification of other people is linked to political hierarchy, an uncomfortable reminder of anthropology's affinity for the world's dominant classes, beginning with its association with European colonial rule.

Growing dissatisfaction with anthropology's scientific paradigm was given a focus in the publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus eds. 1986). But its contributors, while claiming to solve some of anthropology's epistemological and political problems through the adoption of new textual strategies, failed to deal with the more fundamental question of intellectual practice in the world. This was a point not lost on many of the book's critics. For, as some of them claimed, *Writing Culture* advocated a kind of activity (writing) that served only to increase the power and authority of the anthropologist. This is the nub of the issue. Anthropology as an academic discipline has to be seen in the broader context of contested intellectual monopolies in modern society. Its crisis stems from the challenge posed to professional knowledge in general.

People today are sceptical of the experts whose impersonal knowledge governs so much of their lives, and they increasingly seek to acquire what they need by other means. Moreover, bodies of specialised knowledge have to be stable to be useful; but the rapid movement and integration of the modern world

constantly subvert any intellectual strategy based on fixed rules and tunnel vision. Popular resistance to dominance by experts is manifested in negative beliefs which bid fair to replace their legitimating predecessors as common currency — that scientists endanger the environment, doctors are bad for your health, economists' predictions are wrong, the law is an expensive farce and so on. Professors, who have long been known to be inarticulate and incompetent, are now suspected of having nothing to say at all. Certainly, the number of people who depend on humanist intellectuals as the arbiters of civilisation and taste is dwindling.

Anthropologists suffer more than most from their own variant of this problem; for they have always derived their intellectual authority from direct experience of social life. In consequence, their "expert" knowledge is essentially commonplace — what everyone experiences, albeit in different forms, as a member of human society. From the beginning, anthropologists' claim to special expertise rested on reporting the activities of unknown peoples to both lay and academic audiences at home. That is, they knew the exotic other and their readers did not. Within that framework of bridging the gap between civilised and primitive, they emphasised the salience of the everyday. It is true that they did play up an arcane algebra of kinship as their unique professional tool of analysis; but in general ethnographers traded in common sense, relying on the unchallengeable monopoly afforded by fieldwork in foreign places.

The accelerated integration of world society since the second world war has severely embarrassed this project. Apart from political difficulties which have rendered many former colonies less accessible, the knowledge of fieldworkers is increasingly subject to challenge from a wide variety of sources, not least the people studied themselves. Even worse, artless communication of commonsense knowledge can be derided as mere gossip or dismissed as redundant. In a world of television, credit cards and

mass travel, the idea that genealogical charts offer a sure guide to social structure is, to say the least, unconvincing. It is, therefore, not surprising that anthropologists today, even more than most other branches of the academic division of labour, find themselves in a quandary when asked to explain how they contribute to understanding the world we all live in.

The growing challenge to intellectual authority takes us to the political core of the modern world. As anthropologists, we know only too well how seriously compromised we are by the equivocations — and worse, collusions — of our predecessors. But their alignment with encroaching and oppressive centralised powers was not a question of individual failure; rather it must be situated within a complex of social and political forces. Nor should we distance ourselves from such questions by stressing the discipline's colonial past at the expense of its continuing dependence on state power at home.

It is clear that anthropology's drive for professional status and acceptance by the academy sacrificed much that was new and radical in its twentieth century origins. Specifically, accommodation to bureaucracy compromised the discipline's commitment to a conception of science which was open to the democratic impulse of a world in movement. The resulting muddle of progressive rhetoric and reactionary conformity has many analogues in modern intellectual life. Indeed, we are reminded of the more general accusation of betrayal that can be levelled at the intellectuals of the twentieth century, today just as much as earlier. Given this history, it is pertinent to ask what role intellectuals can play as the century draws to a close; or are they, in truth, a class for whom the world no longer has any use?

Having looked hard at our discipline's flawed history, we remain convinced that anthropology can draw creatively on elements of its intellectual tradition to illuminate the world we live in at present. The pressing issue for the anthropological project,

however, is to discover how it can be reconnected to the democratic impulses of a world now emerging from a phase of state dominance which originated in the first world war. If the forms of understanding which emerged at the turn of the century were new, transcending the limitations of the old categories, what they have subsequently become can no longer give expression to most people's needs. That we know — for it underlies the uncertainty, the fear and the violence which haunt contemporary society.

In many important ways anthropologists today face anew the task of the early twentieth century pioneers. The enduring legacy of such figures as Rivers and Boas stems from their intuitive response to a moment in history when it seemed that people could remake society to meet their own expanded needs. Our own moment is a creative one too, for the struggle to find new forms — social and political, intellectual and aesthetic — is the animating force of contemporary world society.

We propose, therefore, to divide the discussion into two main parts: the first from the 1890s to 1945; the second from 1945 to the present. These two phases are framed by momentous historical events — two world wars, the Russian revolution and independence from colonial rule. This is the wider context which moulded academic anthropology and, we contend, set up fundamental contradictions at its core as a twentieth century project. But our attempt to locate anthropology's historical potential in the period when the modern world was born is motivated by the belief that we stand today at a similar crux, whose uncertainties may be illuminated by reflection on its counterpart.



### A Note on Method

Our ambition in this essay is to sketch an argument, to suggest movement and connections across a broad landscape, rather than to present a carefully worked out thesis anchored in systematic detail. We hope that our readers will be able to find their own place in this interpretation and to make creative points of connection between their individual experience and the broader historical canvas. For it is our fundamental contention that anthropology is about extension, a movement between the specific and the general, the particular and the universal.

With this in mind, we have attempted to ground our argument about anthropology and the crisis of modern intellectuals in an examination of the British school. Given the weight we attach to the paradigm of scientific ethnography, it can be said that the tradition identified with Malinowski and his heirs still remains the most illustrious example of this form of intellectual practice. Moreover, we ourselves were trained within this school. It is not our intention, however, to indulge a parochial nationalism, equating anthropology's universal development with our own narrow experience. The British school was long ago assimilated to an international project whose dominant figures in recent decades have been American and French. Rather we wish to place ourselves concretely within our own specific antecedents and present circumstances, with the aim of seeking out the universal resonance of that history. Readers with different trajectories may or may not be able to find some part of themselves in our account, thereby modifying its tentative universality, while increasing the complexity of its particular relevance.

The interpretation we offer here, both in its general ideas and in its selective detail, originally grew out of reflections on our diverse experiences of anthropology in Cambridge and

elsewhere. The gender and age differences between us were amplified by our being located on opposite sides of Cambridge's moiety system — Fortes/Goody vs. Leach, Africa vs. Asia, social structure vs. symbolism. These differences proved a creative source for exploration; but we quickly found ourselves drawn into an examination of the changing social and political circumstances which framed our academic training and divergent careers. What we shared, however, was a context. This was the disintegration of the scientific ethnography paradigm and the fragmentation and confusion which followed, as anthropologists sought out new avenues for expressing their professional interests.

Although the differences between our experiences and understanding of anthropology's dilemma can never be fully resolved, this essay attempts to situate them within a shared vision and method. The intellectual movement we have hit upon, in the course of over twenty drafts of this essay, seeks to combine synthesis and analysis, width and depth, art and science. Although the process of discovery involves continuous interaction between these poles, we have tried to build our argument outwards from concrete particulars to the widest abstractions. Somehow, all of us must devise ways of inserting ourselves meaningfully into the most inclusive versions of human history. This essay follows a movement which we believe has general salience in today's world.

The second volume of the series, *The American West*, covers the period from 1840 to 1890. It is a comprehensive history of the West, from the early days of exploration and settlement to the late nineteenth century. The book is written in a clear and engaging style, and is suitable for both students and general readers. It covers a wide range of topics, including the fur trade, the gold rush, the cattle industry, and the development of the railroads. The book also discusses the impact of the West on the rest of the United States, and the role of the West in the nation's history.

While the first volume covers the period from 1492 to 1840, the second volume covers the period from 1840 to 1890. This volume is a continuation of the first, and covers the same period of American history. It is a comprehensive history of the West, from the early days of exploration and settlement to the late nineteenth century. The book is written in a clear and engaging style, and is suitable for both students and general readers. It covers a wide range of topics, including the fur trade, the gold rush, the cattle industry, and the development of the railroads. The book also discusses the impact of the West on the rest of the United States, and the role of the West in the nation's history.

The two volumes, written by two different authors, provide a comprehensive and detailed history of the United States. The first volume covers the period from 1492 to 1840, and the second volume covers the period from 1840 to 1890. Together, they provide a complete history of the United States from its founding to the late nineteenth century.

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## PART ONE

### From the 1890s to 1945

The third volume of the series, *The American West*, covers the period from 1890 to 1945. It is a comprehensive history of the West, from the early days of exploration and settlement to the late nineteenth century. The book is written in a clear and engaging style, and is suitable for both students and general readers. It covers a wide range of topics, including the fur trade, the gold rush, the cattle industry, and the development of the railroads. The book also discusses the impact of the West on the rest of the United States, and the role of the West in the nation's history.

### The Birth of Modern Anthropology

For many years the intellectual revolution which launched the profession of academic anthropology in Britain was attributed to a single figure — Bronislaw Malinowski. Indeed he himself had few hesitations about claiming authorship of this great moment. At its core lay the development of scientific ethnography, a modern intellectual practice based on fieldwork. The date widely given for anthropology's revolution, 1922, was the year in which Malinowski's first monograph, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, was published, for it contained all the elements central to his claim to have founded a new academic discipline. Here Malinowski laid down the principles of a scientific anthropology. Although the book contained a foreword by Sir James Frazer, it was in fact an explicit rejection of the speculative and popular version of anthropology embodied in *The Golden Bough*.

So what was this scientific ethnography which constituted the revolution in anthropology? It was a synthesis of object, theory and method, giving the infant discipline an unusually coherent basis for its subsequent reproduction. The distinctive object of enquiry was primitive society, conceived of as isolated, self-sufficient peoples found largely in the distant fringes of empire. The theory was "functionalism", roughly speaking the idea that customary practices are best understood in terms of their contribution to the society's integration as a working whole. This meant that everything was open to investigation by what constitutes the only valid discovery of the new discipline, its fieldwork method. It should be emphasised that by scientific ethnography we mean the whole package and not just its empirical method.

Malinowski, it has been claimed, integrated the earlier division of labour between the amateur traveller and academic synthesiser through the creation of a new type, the fieldworker-

theorist. Thus he advocated a model in which theoretically trained professionals would spend a prolonged period of fieldwork in one exotic, "primitive" location and produce a scientific report based on objective findings. It consisted largely of normative generalisations about the people studied. This practice came to be called "participant observation", in contrast to the previous norm of interviewing paid informants. The claim was that the ethnographer had not only "been there", but had taken an active part in what he described. Moreover, Malinowski's ethnographer worked alone; you might say he was "a lone ranger with a note-book", unlike the survey teams of scientists who had initiated professional anthropology along the lines of natural history expeditions.

Malinowski called his revolution functionalist in order to stress that his ethnographic science was about the coherence of what people do together in the here and now, not a means of collecting evidence for the speculative reconstruction of an imagined past. Thus, he placed great emphasis on the importance of situating customs within the single social context in which they were found. Malinowski denied the relevance of history to his science, choosing rather to depict primitive societies as self-sufficient, unchanging wholes marked by a high degree of cultural homogeneity within a narrowly circumscribed territory; and in this way ethnography's object of study, the village, became a sort of scaled-down version of the nation-state.

Undoubtedly there was much that was new in this kind of anthropological practice. In place of Victorian notions of world society as a unified hierarchy of unequally developed races, the Malinowskian ethnographers promoted a broader vision of human equality. It was plural and relativist, above all hostile to claims of racial inferiority. Through their emphasis on what made sense in exotic societies, these functionalist anthropologists extended the conception of rational humanity,

simultaneously questioning western arrogance and demanding intellectual respect for "primitives".

Malinowski's version of scientific ethnography began as a moment of personal freedom. Its social impact, however, was amplified by the democratic impulse of the twentieth century. It involved a rejection of official narratives of power in favour of an emphasis on people's capacity for self-organisation; and having exposed existing categories of knowledge as mere prejudice, it placed what people really do in the world above what others think about them. By abolishing the gap between the library and life, it enabled humanist intellectuals to join the people on terms (almost) of the latter's making. Finally, in privileging the real and the mundane over the extraordinary and the spiritual, it brought the ethos of scientific democracy to the study of human societies.

The method of scientific ethnography required the invention of a new literary form. Here, too, Malinowski's lead was decisive. Like the novel in its heyday, the fieldwork-based monograph adopted the style of realism, of being close to life; but, unlike the novel, it abjured any fictional devices, claiming to be an absolutely factual report and explicitly engaging in analytical argument. The distinctive innovation of scientific ethnography was to make ideas seem to emerge from descriptions of real life. We may call this contradictory illusion the "synthetic *a posteriori*", being a hybrid construct of Kant's famous distinction between the mental forms we bring to an enquiry, the synthetic *a priori*, and the empirical inferences we make subsequently, the analytical *a posteriori*. The habit of deriving concepts from specific field locations meant that the epitome of gift-exchange became the Trobriand *kula* or the Northwest Coast *potlatch* and politics without the state was embodied in the lineages of the Nuer or the Tallensi. Following Malinowski then the intellectual authority of anthropologists rested on their ability to make interesting theoretical arguments (about

rationality, kinship, politics etc.) through convincing accounts of their own extensive empirical observations.

The myth of Malinowski as the revolutionary hero of British anthropology has been widely debunked — for example, it is common knowledge that many of the key elements in modern anthropological practice which were attributed to Malinowski's individual innovation can be found much earlier, especially in the work of Boas, Haddon and Rivers; it is recognised that Malinowski was much less successful in putting into practice his scientific principles than he was in expounding them; his texts have been exposed as modernist collages, in contrast to his own description of them as objective accounts of social reality; his claims to be a dispassionate, objective observer convince no-one. In short he has come to be seen as a purveyor of fiction and a fraudulent self-publicist whose fieldwork diaries posthumously revealed the strain between his professional and private personalities. The charges against him go on piling up. Indeed it might be said — and we argue so — that he should be blamed for many things that are wrong with the discipline today.

The thrust of our argument differs somewhat from that presented by previous critics. Rather than being concerned with a re-assessment of Malinowski as a flawed human being, as a revolutionary hero subsequently fallen from his pedestal, what we contend is that Malinowski was the agent of a **counter-revolution**. This intellectual move reflected the universal triumph of the state over popular forces in the aftermath of the Russian revolution and the first world war, nowhere more thoroughly than in Stalin's grotesque despotism. Thus Malinowski adopted the progressive rhetoric of science and democracy while actually undermining what was original and radical in the birth of anthropology as a modern project. He did this at a time when the status of intellectuals underwent a fundamental shift, from their role as independent creative

individuals, free-thinkers, to their incorporation into state bureaucracy.

Our contention thus hinges upon a particular interpretation of the world in which Malinowski operated. By locating him as an intellectual more securely in that social and political context, we can begin to trace the origins of anthropology's contemporary crisis; since the contradictions embodied in Malinowski's practice, and perpetuated in the work of his successors, are those that beset us today.

A glance at other events contemporaneous with the publication of *Argonauts* reveals some of the contours of the world in which Malinowski claimed to have launched his scientific revolution. 1922 saw the publication of his rival, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's *The Andaman Islanders*. It was the year in which Proust died; so too did the pioneering Cambridge anthropologist, W.H.R. Rivers. The appearance of Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* transformed the literary landscape; Wittgenstein published his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; and audiences everywhere flocked to see Flaherty's film about Eskimo life, *Nanook of the North*.

But we should recognise that 1922, in turn, has to be understood within a broader context. It is a critical moment in modern history, containing in itself all the reverberations of unprecedented social and political upheavals; but also anticipations of the Cold War and the rise of the welfare state. 1922 stands poised between a period of war and revolution and one marked by increased state power and bureaucratic consolidation.

The last few decades of the nineteenth century had seen the emergence of centralised nation-states in the political form which would enable them to dominate the twentieth century (America, Russia, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan); and a

revolution in production, transport and telecommunications which created a genuine world market for the products of a booming industrial capitalism. Millions of people were on the move worldwide in response to the expansion of the international economy. Imperialist rivalry intensified as competing industrial powers struggled for control of a newly integrated world society. In the years immediately preceding the first world war the contradictions embodied in a unified global transformation reached a new peak. Industrial production had driven this process, concentrating workers into rapidly expanding cities where they constituted the first mass consumer markets and organised themselves for more effective political representation. But at the same time they came up against the resistance of national ruling elites. The brutality with which these elites suppressed this increasing pressure from below had to match the strength and organisation of the burgeoning popular forces. The social struggle for democracy took on an increasingly international and revolutionary form which the slaughter of "The Great War" displaced from Europe's industrial heartlands to its Russian margins.

Modern anthropology was born into this world. We believe that it should be understood above all as a response to the rise and visibility of ordinary people as a force in history. In making people everywhere their object, the early pioneers saw the necessity of breaking with old patterns of scholarship and of devising new methods of study. In this the new anthropologists, like Boas, Haddon and Rivers, shared many of the concerns of their intellectual contemporaries. They recognised that the world was in flux, that old ideas and the categories which had previously held it in place were fast breaking down. Their orientation, though, was towards science, rather than towards literary modernism, as the intellectual counterpart to the momentous economic and political changes sweeping through world society.

The work of these modern anthropologists, whose great innovation was fieldwork, was animated by a belief that the world was ultimately knowable, that beneath a surface chaos it would be possible, using all the advanced techniques available to them, to identify the principal variations in human life, if not yet to deduce universal laws. Perhaps it seems hard to believe now, given the sour pessimism of our age, that science was then thought by many to hold the key to social progress. But the movement for democracy had long regarded science, the disciplined pursuit of secular knowledge, as an important tool. For, ideally, science was concerned with the extension of human capacities; it was egalitarian in its effects; and it ruthlessly exposed mystical grounds for the maintenance of social inequality.

Yet, as we know all too well, there is nothing inherently progressive or reactionary about science (or for that matter, literary modernism). For what happened in the course of the twentieth century is a living part of our own history — the appropriation of science in the name of democracy became a way of consolidating power at the top and suppressing popular movement from below. As the balance of power shifted decisively away from the people and towards the state in the period marked by Stalin's accession to power, the intellectuals found themselves squeezed too. The creative freedom individual intellectuals had once enjoyed was now irretrievable, and they retreated into a defensive and arcane version of civilisation. A new kind of intellectual class now came into its own. It was distinguished by its service to the state in the guise of a popular and progressive agenda.

Anthropology was deeply marked by this moment. Rivers died at the same time as the free-thinking intellectual; and Malinowski succeeded him at the helm of modern anthropology.

### Rivers and Malinowski

"Rivers is the Rider Haggard of anthropology; I shall be its Conrad" (Malinowski to Brenda Seligman, cited in Firth ed. *Man and Culture*, 1957).

"In Rivers, ethnology found its Galileo, and Mauss was its Newton" (Levi-Strauss *Structural Anthropology*, 1958).

It is perhaps not surprising that Malinowski banished history from his "revolution" in anthropology, for history would have exposed Rivers, and not Malinowski, as the real creative force (we are tempted to say "as the Lenin") in the early years of the British school's modern development. Moreover, as the above boast makes clear, Malinowski did not shrink from any opportunity to denigrate his illustrious predecessor in order to advance his own claims.

A closer look at Rivers's career as an early twentieth century intellectual reveals someone quite different from the second-rate novelist of Malinowski's cheap remark. The scope of Rivers's work, his desire to come to terms with a world in rapid movement and his commitment to the development of new methods, mark him as a distinguished figure of his time. Beginning as a physician and psychologist, he was responsible, with his friend Henry Head, for a world-renowned experiment in neuro-physiology. He became an anthropologist through joining the Cambridge expedition to the Torres straits in 1898, where he focused on perception. He pioneered the genealogical method which became the hallmark of British kinship studies and the central platform of social anthropology's claim to be a specialist discipline; he wrote *The Todas* (1906), a fieldwork-based monograph written with a view to the unity of the social whole; and he stressed the importance of long-term intensive fieldwork, especially as a contributor to anthropology's handbook of

method, *Notes and Queries*, in 1912 (a year before Malinowski submitted a library-based thesis for his doctorate).

Rivers's distinctive contribution to the new anthropology was his emphasis upon method. Above all, he was committed to openness and accountability. His primary concern was to generate replicable, "objective" findings which could be used reliably by others; and transparency in method, for the sake of scientific reproduction of knowledge, was his watchword. Rivers responded to the growing integration of the world by developing a universal scientific approach to the study of humanity, starting with the basics of perception and kinship. At the same time, he was not content with a fieldwork-based ethnography divorced from world history. Unfortunately his "diffusionist" speculations on this score gave ammunition to those who subsequently wished to downgrade his massive contribution to anthropological method. Our point is that Rivers's attempt to link ethnography to history, however unsatisfactory, was a more realistic response to the world than that of his anti-historicist successors.

Rivers was swimming in the currents of a transitional age, as the old order was giving way to the forces of industry and the rise of the people. Recognising that new methods were needed to grasp the complexity of a world in movement, he embarked on an exploration of the human condition in its individual and global dimensions, while always seeking out ways of improving the quality of techniques of enquiry. He sought to know the world as it had never been known before; and this placed him at odds with the commonsense categories which had sustained the Victorian age. It made him critical, experimental and, above all, methodologically rigorous. This must be the basis of any claim for his Galilean status, a claim made by Levi-Strauss, perhaps this century's greatest anthropologist, who notably fails to include Malinowski in his shortlist of founders.

Rivers lived the life of an independent scholar. His politics, if any, were revealed in the inspiring humanity of his social conduct, for which there is much personal testimony. Like his American and French counterparts, Franz Boas and Marcel Mauss, he devoted a lot of energy to building social relations within the scientific community. Although Rivers only became explicitly involved in the progressive politics of his day right at the end of his life, we believe that his invention of anthropological science was radical. It was in sympathy with the embryonic stage of society struggling to emerge, in that his intellectual innovations, born of the industrial age, swept away established habits of thinking and knowing, opening up new vistas of human possibility. It is not surprising, therefore, that, like Boas, Rivers was shocked by the first world war into active support for the popular forces of the left seeking to resist the growing powers of state bureaucracy which threatened to dominate the post-war world. The same cannot be said for Malinowski and his followers.

It was fortunate indeed for Malinowski that Rivers died when he did, for it enabled him to assume the leadership of a new and still developing intellectual practice. But it must be acknowledged that Malinowski's strategic move to consolidate his (and the discipline's) professional status took place in a political climate very different from the one which had stimulated Rivers's original work. Power was ebbing away from the popular forces for democracy and becoming ever more concentrated in expanded state bureaucracies. Thus if Rivers's anthropology took shape in the relatively open atmosphere of the early twentieth century, when established structures were being dislodged and conventional categories questioned, with the modernist explosion a brilliant counterpart to international revolutionary politics, Malinowski's anthropology was moulded by society in retreat. It contained at its core a static version of the world.

Our approach rests on the belief that Rivers and Malinowski were not just isolated intellectuals engaged in individual private scholarship, but were part of a class at a critical juncture in modern history. As anthropologists with one foot in the academy and one in the world, it could be said that they were even more exposed than other intellectuals to the broader currents of history. Perhaps then it is unfair of us to contrast them as the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary of modern anthropology, for they were each located on both sides of society's increasingly polarised movement. But our case against Malinowski also hinges on what we feel was a fundamental duplicity at the centre of his intellectual practice. He elided the key distinctions on which Rivers had sought to build a new anthropology, collapsing the individual into the collective, fact into theory, life into ideas, the specific into the general.

We can now see that while Malinowski was claiming a new agenda for anthropology, he was in fact smuggling nineteenth century literary scholarship and pseudo-science in through the back door. Indeed, his contradictory practice is widely recognised by anthropologists today. What Malinowski said he was doing and what he actually did were often seriously at variance; but he devised various strategies for disguising these gaps and discrepancies. He sought to intimidate non-professional critics; he developed a cult of his own personality; he encouraged the trend for ethnographers to assume authorship of the tribes whose names adorned their books; and he surrounded himself by a select handful of disciples (in Ernest Gellner's terms, "the LSE fieldwork clique") who absorbed the mysteries and promoted themselves and their leader against the outside world.

Many of the problems lurking beneath the surface of anthropology today stem from the deliberate obscurity surrounding the methods employed by Malinowski and his followers. How, for example, did ethnographers "see" social

patterns in isolated events? For they often denied the influence of western intellectual traditions and there was marked reluctance to discuss field methods openly, leaving unresolved questions about the genealogy of ideas, linguistic abilities, political interventions and the way that field encounters were translated into normative written statements. This generated a guilty mystery at the heart of fieldwork and writing up which made training idiosyncratic and the intellectual reproduction of the profession difficult, even while its members maintained a rhetoric of growing professionalism. Moreover, the rule of style underpinning the scientific texts of Malinowskian anthropology — the appearance of deriving ideas from life — might be good democratic propaganda, but it is fundamentally false and it leaves a methodological black hole at the centre of professional practice. For generations, anthropologists have had to measure their intellectual standing against the secret hoard of their "fieldnotes", whose shortcomings they would never dream of exposing to the world this side of the grave.

It has to be said that Malinowski bears chief responsibility for this state of affairs. Had Rivers lived to be an influence on the interwar period his passion for accountable methods of discovering the world would surely have constituted a serious challenge to Malinowski's dominance. Incidentally, Rivers's death was also a boon to Radcliffe-Brown who took over most of his ideas without adequate acknowledgement and built his career through a series of visits to universities all over the world, employing a verbal routine which found its way only selectively into written prose. He took Rivers' worst feature — a passion for classification — and built it up at the expense of explicit fieldwork methods. It is a measure of the degeneracy of the interwar British school that Malinowski was thought to represent the empirical counterpart to Radcliffe-Brown's "theory". Next to Rivers' Galilean endeavours to record the world's complexity, it might be said that the twin "founding fathers" were merely



scientific poseurs, peddling second-rate fiction and statist propaganda as a gloss on shoddy scholarship.

When this kind of anthropology forms the very basis of a so-called modern discipline, one ostensibly committed to advancing human knowledge on sound and open methodological principles, it is something of an understatement to say that we have been left with a serious problem of credibility. No wonder, as Geertz commented in *Works and Lives*, the children of Malinowski are depressed, uncertain and plagued by doubt.

### Anthropology and Colonialism

We have highlighted the radical potential embodied in the anthropology born at the turn of the century. It seemed to promise an expanded vision of humanity and world civilisation, thereby breaking with the previous limited conceptions which had culminated in the rigid Victorian racial hierarchy. We have also argued that recognition of people everywhere as the animating force of modern society stimulated the development of new methods of enquiry. The old forms of library scholarship could no longer contain the movement and complexity of people's lives. Rivers's advocacy of fieldwork, the distinctive method of modern anthropology, made first-hand exploration of society central to any understanding of the human condition. For us, this fundamental shift in anthropology's vision and method was an expression of the deeper currents transforming world society.

The relationship between anthropology and colonialism allows us the chance to examine more closely the consequences of our argument. For it reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of our case against Malinowski; and casts light on the critical question as to whether anthropologists are any more culpable than other intellectuals in their capitulation to state power. We

have contrasted Rivers and Malinowski in order to highlight the marked differences in their practice as modern anthropologists, differences which, we contend, become crucial in the broader context of shifting political power. The implication then is that the kind of anthropology associated with Malinowski and his successor as leader of the British school, Radcliffe-Brown, was compatible in many important ways with a bureaucratic class on the rise. In particular, the secrecy which surrounded method, the elisions of key concepts and a functionalist orientation reproduced a version of the world according to those who ruled both at home and abroad.

Certainly anthropology stands condemned forever in many parts of the world as the intellectual handmaiden of colonial rule. Its most vehement critics would dismiss our radical claims for the modern anthropological project on the grounds that there is little to choose between its nineteenth and twentieth century versions. Both, it has been asserted, were driven by racism and imperialism.

At first glance the case against anthropology seems overwhelming. We cannot dispute the fact that western imperialist expansion forced the pace of the integration of world society; and anthropology, an attempt by western intellectuals to make sense of this emergent phenomenon, reflected such a moment of expansion. Although modern anthropology dispensed with the racial hierarchy of the Victorians, it retained "primitive society" as a central notion. "Primitive society" — as a living analogy of our own preliterate past, it revealed a simplified version of the advanced societies — was invented as an object, the exotic other, for the benefit of "our" subjective interest. There was room neither for exchange nor self-inspection.

But perhaps the most damaging consequence of scientific ethnography was its habit of splitting up complex and mobile populations into isolated localised groups conceived of as

unchanging homogeneous entities. This fitted well with colonial policies of divide-and-rule. It fragmented colonial peoples and negated their collective participation in the movement of modern history. But by denying them a significant past, the anthropologists also denied their subjects an alternative future, for few ever confronted the question of possible independence from colonial rule until long after it was an accomplished fact. This egregious complicity with an eternal model of empire has haunted the profession long after independence was achieved by colonial peoples.

In many cases accommodation to the prevailing powers was even more direct. For at various stages in their bid to win professional status and government support for the new science, British academics had tried to convince the authorities that anthropology was a suitable training for colonial officials. They also offered their services to the administration of subject peoples, and were often directed to work in areas which had proved relatively intractable to conquest. The system of indirect rule developed for British colonies in Africa placed a premium on discovering principles of local self-organisation which might be incorporated into governmental structures. Thus ethnographers portrayed themselves as creative mediators between indigenous societies and their colonial rulers in the interest of peaceful co-existence.

At this point, however, the story of anthropology's relationship with colonialism becomes more complicated — as many anthropologists of the colonial period would strenuously assert. For, despite the overblown rhetoric of the Malinowskian synthesis, its claim to be committed to democracy through the advancement of knowledge about the world's peoples was not wholly without substance.

Whatever their flaws, the monographs of the British school were more subtle than being mere handbooks of the empire. For

anthropologists promoted through their writings a sense of primitive peoples' common rational humanity and social coherence; and by implication called into question official propaganda concerning the superiority of western states and markets. Profound rejection of Victorian racism was the bedrock of their modern discipline; and the British ethnographers aggressively promoted a new relativism in which self-contained societies were admitted to the universe of an expanded human rationality. As individuals, most were ambivalent about colonialism. They knew well the racism and reaction in local colonial society, even as many home officials recognised the need for reform. They were often accused locally of being nothing more than meddling do-gooders with metropolitan links to the idealists in the Colonial Office. But even if few anthropologists took their reservations about colonialism so far as to work actively for native independence, many made vigorous representations on behalf of "their" people.

As this shifting pattern of alliances shows, the relationship between anthropology and colonialism is far from straightforward. For the fact is that the new fieldworker-theorists, with their transhumant life-style, were outsiders wherever they went. They were migrants from other disciplines, and often from other places (Viennese musician, South African Jewish psychologist and so on). Not surprisingly, they fell back on the small cliques of people like themselves that were growing up in the British universities. And this is surely the most salient social feature of the British school in the interwar period. It is less that they adapted to colonialism (which they did) and more that they clung to a marginal foothold in the academic institutions of their home societies. Viewed from this perspective then, the functionalist model of primitive societies can be understood to be as much about the reproduction of the ruling ideology of states established in the industrial world after the first world war, as about a response to colonial realities.

The idea of society as a rule-bound, self-sufficient entity, an eternal anonymous collectivity, where all the people in a given territory are the same and no individual person makes a difference — this model could only have been plausible, even when applied to the “exotic other”, in the kind of place that Britain became between the wars. Here we have the nation-state in microcosm; society as an abstract, impersonal machine; the ideology of a functionally integrated division of labour which fed the home-based propaganda of the period. (It is perhaps most strikingly captured in the 1930s documentary films associated with the group around John Grierson.) For, if the goal of the Malinowskian synthesis was always to show that primitives are like us in their difference, the accompanying message was that our shared foundations of a passive social life are universal and inescapable. The task of anthropology was to pour balm on the class contradictions of state capitalist society at home, as much as to mediate with increasingly restless colonial subjects abroad.

It is nevertheless hard to pin down the scientific ethnographers. Just as their adaptation to colonialism is demonstrated, they emerge as apologists for the state at home. Then, when we look more closely, we have to recognise that in many important ways the interwar anthropologists were beholden to no-one. They were interlopers, mavericks, making a living from epater les bourgeois, shocking conventional middle-class opinion with a radical subversion of received ideas (Malinowski's speciality). This marginality was the source of their strength and creativity. Given the “peculiar” character of their work, straddling the divide between ideas and life and cross-cutting established disciplines, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and their proteges could be said to have held on to a “free-thinking” intellectual life-style longer than many of their contemporaries.

The problem with such a hypothesis, however, is that the interwar anthropologists were, at heart, non-conformists who

aspired to a state pension. Their most reliable ticket to that end, as they clearly saw, was not the colonial service but a university post. And it was in the drive for professional status that anthropology's strength as a marginal and eclectic pursuit came to be seen as the opposite — the source of its weakness and a serious obstacle to gaining intellectual respectability in the universities.

We contend then that the struggle for academic acceptance by the interwar anthropologists steadily undermined the discipline's original creative sources. The decisive shift was initiated by Malinowski; but it was successfully completed by Radcliffe-Brown. It was reflected in the growing emphasis on anthropological theory. The publication of *African Political Systems* in 1940, shortly before Malinowski's death, was the key moment and it paved the way for the discipline's academic expansion after the war.

The British school has long linked Radcliffe-Brown to Malinowski as twin founders of scientific ethnography between the wars. But this has tended to obscure the replacement of one type of anthropology by another. By adding the “structural” to functionalism, Radcliffe-Brown eliminated any interest in the individual aspects of behaviour, choosing to focus exclusively on conformity to social rules. By contrast, Malinowski, even if he seriously blurred the distinction between individual and society, retained the idea of individual manipulation in his approach to social life. But, unlike the idiosyncratic empiricism of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown's impersonal, abstract system was suitable for decontextualised comparison and classification. In this way, it could provide a basis for the consolidation and reproduction of specialist knowledge which underpinned the discipline's claim to professional status.

Thus Radcliffe-Brown, with his henchmen Evans-Pritchard and Fortes who came to control the Oxbridge departments after the

second world war, succeeded in replacing Malinowski at the centre of the school, leaving the latter to be remembered as the inventor of scientific ethnography's fieldwork method, while the former was credited with authorship of the theory which gave rational coherence to the empirical study of primitive societies. Both, however, had made distinctive contributions to the incorporation of anthropologists, as intellectuals, into an expanding state bureaucracy — Malinowski by reinventing the “primitive” as a nationalist merger of society and the individual (with all the secrecy of method that involved), Radcliffe-Brown by his absorption of individual behaviour into an anonymous system of rule-bound control.

Despite these efforts, the position of social anthropology in the universities was not secure until well after the second world war. During the interwar years there were too few scientific ethnographers in the universities to constitute a self-sufficient primitive society of the kind promoted in their books. In consequence, they had to accept a motley array of missionaries, administrators and the merely curious in their classes; they wrote for a general audience when they found publishers for their monographs; and they gave radio talks and public addresses. All the while, though, they were preparing for a day in which they could close themselves off as a self-sustaining segment of the intellectual bureaucracy.

## PART TWO

### From 1945 to the Present

### The Lingering Death of Scientific Ethnography

Anthropology's contemporary crisis stems from the belated collapse of scientific ethnography. The publication of *Writing Culture* in 1986 was an important moment, symbolising as it did the final demise of this central paradigm. For Marcus and Clifford's volume of essays, perhaps more than any other critique, served to focus debate within the discipline about fundamental assumptions, and it provoked anthropologists into taking positions for or against its central arguments. But our primary concern here is less with recent challenges to the paradigm of scientific ethnography, and more with the curious fact that it survived for so long at the core of the discipline. Indeed the very circumstances in which anthropology achieved academic consolidation after the second world war contained developments which posed a serious challenge to its professional foundations. Most dramatically, independence movements which swept through the British colonies shattered forever the notion of "primitive society"; and the superpower rivalry of the Cold War profoundly questioned assumptions about science as a progressive project.

There are many pitfalls in trying to advance ideas about a phase in modern history which is still essentially in movement. Certainly, our examination of anthropology during its period of postwar consolidation is clouded by our own participation in it. Not surprisingly then we feel somewhat hesitant about aspects of the argument, since they implicate our teachers as much as ourselves in a critique of academic practice. But our aim in this second part of the argument is to reach a position from which the uncertainties afflicting the anthropological project at present can be seen in a constructive light. As with the first sections, though, it involves a process of uncovering the different layers which lead us outwards from the collapse of scientific ethnography to broader themes concerning the role of intellectuals in modern life.

We begin by looking again at the central features of scientific ethnography, and at the contradictions contained within that paradigm. For, in the context of a rapidly changing world society, these contradictions were stretched to breaking point, forcing individual anthropologists to carve out areas of private creative freedom at the same time as they sought to reproduce the discipline through its classical techniques. We felt this discrepancy keenly in our own training as anthropologists, even if we were not fully conscious at the time of the root cause of our intellectual dissatisfaction. But the problem has not disappeared from contemporary anthropology, as anyone facing a class of sceptical students knows.

Scientific ethnography has, from the outset, contained an unresolved relationship between individual and society. But if we look more closely, we can see that the changing relationship between these two poles of the paradigm is connected to the shifting pattern of twentieth century intellectual activity, as the independent, eclectic free-thinker was gradually superseded by a new type, the state-employed academic. Thus we find that Rivers held individual and society apart as separate entities (psychology and ethnology); Malinowski merged them into a fictitious hybrid (Trobriand man, a construction akin to nationalist stereotypes); while Radcliffe-Brown eliminated the individual altogether, thereby reflecting the complete identification of society with the state. Although the question of the human subject gradually re-emerged in British anthropology during the postwar period, what is perhaps more striking is that it did so in the context of a radical separation between the two poles of the paradigm. Thus the social object became the focus for one clearly defined group of anthropologists seeking to re-introduce history; while another group, drawn to the exploration of culture, found itself increasingly concerned with questions of subjectivity.

This division, as we have already noted, ramifies at different levels. Most significantly it became reproduced, during the postwar period, in a separation of the sphere of individual creativity which anthropologists seek in their work from their commitment to the collective reproduction of the discipline. The problem of how to bring them back into some sort of constructive relationship now has a new urgency. It haunts contemporary anthropology, as the 1993 decennial conference in Oxford revealed. Through this dialectic is refracted not just the particular crisis faced by anthropologists (and intellectuals more generally), but a crisis central to the modern world. It is encapsulated most starkly in the unequal relationship between each of us as a distinctive personality and the vast anonymous bureaucracies which dominate the world we live in.

Scientific ethnography became enshrined at the core of the "new" anthropology in the years after the death of Rivers. Although their emphases were different, both Malinowski and later Radcliffe-Brown used the paradigm to lay claim to an academic status for anthropology and to demarcate a specialist area of professional expertise. Thus scientific ethnography became identified as writing objective reports of locally-circumscribed, exotic peoples after prolonged immersion in their societies.

A major problem with this paradigm was that it elided distinctions between a number of key concepts and practices. We contend that the mystery and secrecy that replaced Rivers's commitment to open and democratic methods were partly a response to these fundamental confusions, as much as they were linked to the drive to secure a professional niche for a new discipline essentially based on commonplace knowledge.

The work of anthropologists of the classical British school reveals then a systematic blurring of subject and object, the individual and the collective, the particular and the universal;

and this is matched by a confusion between ideas and life, theory and fieldwork, ethnography as writing or observation, literature or science. Thus, at the same time as anthropologists were assuming human universals, they were emphasising cultural particulars; while claiming that scientific ethnography was built on going to see for yourself, i.e. advocating the derivation of ideas from life, they were anxiously building a university-based intellectual tradition (known as "theory"); and while insisting that the normal condition of "primitive society" was people's integration of social life on their own terms, they reified the separate functional categories which underwrite professional specialisation — politics, economy, religion and the like.

All these contradictions were, of course, partially an expression of the changing social and political circumstances of anthropology's postwar expansion. It was a period which saw an exacerbation of the discipline's anomalous situation, straddling uneasily the division between ideas and life, the academy and the world. For, while the model of scientific ethnography was being undermined by colonial independence, it was, simultaneously, being strengthened by a boom in the welfare state which confirmed its centrality as the profession's method. So, even if its "objects" had turned themselves into historical subjects and were undermining scientific ethnography abroad, anthropology as a professional university-based discipline differentiated itself from other expanding social sciences (particularly sociology) by emphasising its traditional synthesis of object, theory and method.

Anthropology's leading practitioners thus found themselves caught in a dilemma. They were forced to adapt their anthropology to the changes they encountered in fieldwork; and yet, as members of a professional association, their claim to authority and expertise was built upon the scientific ethnography paradigm. Thus increasingly a gap opened up between the

spheres of individual creativity and professional reproduction. Those who had secure jobs were able to withdraw from the world into an academic universe of committees, seminars and libraries, while insisting that their successors go through a fieldwork initiation whose procedures were implicit, mysterious and ultimately the responsibility of the state, not the teachers themselves.

The careers of Jack Goody and Edmund Leach reflect some interesting features of the discipline's trajectory in the postwar period. Both men, responding distinctively to the changing social and political circumstances of their work, took anthropology in new directions. But although each of them pursued a separate, and in many ways opposed, intellectual line, they ended their university careers engaged in a form of library scholarship far removed from the kind of scientific ethnography founded by their acknowledged ancestors. Moreover, Leach's and then Goody's retirement from the Cambridge department coincided with a watershed in anthropology's postwar history. Growing awareness that it might have been unwise to rely on the state's benevolence was matched by increasing insecurity about fundamental methodological principles. The postwar boom, which had extended scientific ethnography long beyond its natural sell-by date, was over. It became widely recognised in the 1980s that the paradigm was in tatters. Anthropology entered a period of anxious introspection.

A glance at the publications of Jack Goody over a period of almost four decades reveals the evolution of his anthropology from the narrow Radcliffe-Brownian concerns of his immediate postwar fieldwork to a project of Frazerian scope and detail. The changing character of his work reflects different attempts at resolving problems of classic scientific ethnography posed by the changing nature of the world in which he lived. At first this took the form of reconciling a functionalist model of society with the political history of Ghana's independence phase; later it

involved an attempt to re-introduce universal society through a comparison of cultural particulars on a vast scale. In particular, Goody was confined by the space/time dimensions of anthropology's central paradigm. African independence had forced him to move from a style of ethnography associated with colonialism into a form of history more adapted to the needs of new nations. Eventually he embraced a comparison of African and Eurasian civilisation which implicitly addressed the gap in "development" between the rich and poor areas of the world. Increasingly, too, Goody engaged in debates with other segments of the social sciences, history and literature, thereby consolidating anthropology's claim to a distinctive body of knowledge and professional expertise which could stand alongside established disciplines within the universities.

Goody's move towards global comparison, however, was at the cost of an original commitment to "life", to direct engagement with people in the world. Furthermore, while the intellectual scope of his anthropological project continued to expand, many key concepts and aspects of methodology remained unelaborated from the period of his immersion in scientific ethnography. Thus, it might be suggested that Goody's later work was built on the same failure to examine closely the relationship between subject and object, ideas and life, individual and society; and that he avoided confronting the epistemological problems contained at the core of a shared professional paradigm by turning his anthropology into a personal, highly idiosyncratic pursuit of knowledge. Ironically, this transition was achieved when Goody was playing a prominent role — as a teacher and research supervisor and eventually as head of the Cambridge department — in the professional reproduction of the discipline.

It is much more difficult to present Edmund Leach's anthropological career as a consistent trajectory. His work, always provocative, eclectic and unpredictable, is perhaps best characterised as a series of starts and stops and abrupt about-

turns, rather than as a progressive evolution. One constant, however, was his dissatisfaction with anthropology's professional paradigm; and in this he was driven less by its lack of fit with the world than by his own perception of scientific ethnography's epistemological shortcomings. For Leach could not be reconciled to an empiricism which placed what people do above what intellectuals think. This drew him into a long flirtation with Levi-Strauss's universal rationalism in which his Malinowskian roots were eventually overthrown in favour of biblical hermeneutics. In the process he advanced British anthropology's growing preoccupation with cultural ideas; and, just before his death in 1989, he lent support to an extreme subjectivist position in debates over ethnography's status.

Although Leach was in a position to lead a critique of anthropology's paradigm of scientific ethnography, he remained largely aloof from the social reproduction of the discipline. This anomaly is not hard to understand, since it was precisely Leach's independence which gave him the freedom to criticise, while his contemporary, Goody, was more committed to the professional institutions which inhibited him. Between them Leach and Goody combined the poles of freethinking individual and professional academic which defined the range over which British anthropologists swung in the post-war period. But despite starting from quite dissimilar — even opposed — positions on the subject-object axis, they each ended up substituting a literary anthropology for one based on fieldwork, while insisting to their students and the outside world that the latter was the cornerstone of their common tradition. Their work symbolised a retreat into academic seclusion which had as its counterpart a shift in anthropology's focus from social life to cultural abstraction. Moreover, the core intellectual practices of both men remained opaque and unexamined, even secret, leaving ethnography as a mystery to be negotiated by largely uninstructed initiates.

This was the situation in professional anthropology until recently. We lay the blame at Malinowski's door. For he took the modern anthropology of Rivers, with its open and explicit methodology, and turned it into a practice filled with epistemological confusion and contradiction. He obscured serious difficulties faced by anthropologists in reconciling their needs — as individuals for areas of creative self-expression and collectively for a set of methodological principles to underpin the social reproduction of their discipline. As long as the state acted as a benevolent patron, this question was left largely unaddressed. By the 1980s, however, the state had turned; and it was increasingly perceived in the academy to be a hostile force.

For at some stage in the 1970s it became apparent that the twentieth century's experiment with state dominance was running up against its limits. The experiment had originally become general in the context of war and revolutionary upheavals. Its subsequent development was shaped by the struggle against Fascism and Stalinism, culminating in the nuclear nightmare of the Cold War. But the resurgence of popular pressure from below, beginning in the 1950s and 1960s with the movements for colonial independence and civil rights, subverted the ability of state bureaucracies to control society from above; while the accelerating integration of world markets, and especially an explosion in international flows of deregulated money during the 1970s, undermined their management of national economies.

The end of the welfare state boom coincided in Britain with Margaret Thatcher's rise to power; and, for more than a decade now, anthropologists here, like other academics, have been forced to learn that their hardwon membership of the state-made elite no longer carries any guarantees of privilege. This period of professional insecurity seems to have reinforced a tendency towards anthropology's fragmentation into a number of barely communicating subdisciplines, often defined by their proximity



to “relevant” specialisms — economics, medicine, development, ethnic relations, women’s studies and so on. Even more seriously, an acute crisis of reproduction — the supply of jobs for young anthropologists simply dried up in the 1980s — removed the last supports from the discipline’s public paradigm; and the internal debate over object, theory and method intensified.

It was in this climate of growing uncertainty that *Writing Culture* was published. Although they have been frequently represented as the romantic antithesis of scientific ethnography, the authors of *Writing Culture* sought only to extend ethnography beyond the rigidities of an undialectical objectivism. To this end they advocated a more fluid and two-sided approach to anthropological practice, recasting subject-object relations in ways not envisaged by the traditional model. In particular, the volume seeks to restore the art of writing to the centre of the ethnographic enterprise, suggesting experimental methods for establishing more reciprocal, egalitarian and reflexive relations with the subjects and readers of ethnography.

Many professional anthropologists strongly dispute any claim that this volume was an important moment; but for younger anthropologists it transformed the landscape of intellectual debate within the discipline. Specifically, it allowed people to give expression to unease about the mysteries of training and the muddled epistemologies underpinning academic practice. The strength of the volume undoubtedly lies here, in its open confrontation with the methodological and political consequences of the scientific ethnography paradigm.

The positive programme advocated in *Writing Culture* is seriously flawed, however, by the refusal of the essayists to locate their intellectual activities within an adequately conceived context of social history. It is bad enough to tie innovation to the form most closely associated with traditional scholarship

(writing); but, by leaving their own social circumstances largely uninspected, the contributors to Clifford and Marcus’s book only served to reproduce the contradictions of their beleaguered profession in a largely unselfconscious way. For the contradiction between the individual and collective needs of anthropologists is a central thread running through *Writing Culture*. On the one hand individuals are encouraged to explore their own creative subjectivity as idiosyncratically as they like; but, on the other, the social context for all this — whether academic institutions or “the modern world system” — is left vague. Hence Paul Rabinow’s uneasy joke that the methods advocated in *Writing Culture* are best carried out by professors with tenure.

### Anthropologists as Modern Intellectuals

The gathering of anthropologists at the 1993 decennial conference in Oxford was evidence enough of the major presence that the discipline now enjoys in the universities. The tone of proceedings, however, was far from triumphalist. This was hardly surprising given the increasing political pressure on academic life from outside, combined with a fundamental re-examination, from within, of the discipline’s modern foundations. It might be said that the main speakers, with their carefully prepared and densely argued texts, sought to ensure minimal disturbance from audience participation; while contributions at the more spontaneously assembled fringe sessions, particularly those on Bosnia and the new reproductive technologies, were open and engaged with movements in world society. The conference contained in microcosm many of the contradictions embodied in the discipline since its modern beginnings — ideas and life, the local and the global, the specialist and the allrounder. But, above all, it served as a reminder of the urgent need to discover ways of integrating

intellectual practice with social life. This connection was (and still is) the source of modern anthropology's creative impulse.

It is surely ironic that at the time of the Oxford conference, Edward Said, one of the discipline's sharpest contemporary critics, was calling for the type of modern intellectual which anthropology had originally seemed to promise. His model, whether Said would admit it or not, stands as a metaphor for the anthropologist. For, in his Reith Lectures, Said emphasised the creative possibilities of migration and marginality. The kind of intellectual he advocated was an awkward outsider, someone never settled in any one place, but continually restless, always crossing boundaries, questioning established truths and certainties — a figure at once involved in and detached from the affairs of the world.

Said's position clearly reflects his own experience of being at once inside and outside powerful traditions and institutions; but it is a position that many anthropologists (and other intellectuals) would identify with today. What Said reminds us of, too, is how narrow professionalism constitutes one of the major threats to modern academic life. For him, the increasing concern with specialisation, with disciplinary boundaries and expert knowledge, leads to a suspension of critical engagement and, ultimately, to a drift towards the legitimation of power and authority. Thus, in Said's view, the creative possibilities of exile should be matched by an endorsement of the values and practices of the amateur. The amateur, a person motivated by affection and genuine commitment rather than by the goals of professional reward and recognition, becomes a potential source of rejuvenation, injecting a new radicalism into the restriction and routine of the academic world.

For all its attractiveness, however, Said's advocacy of the intellectual as critic is fundamentally flawed. The image he presented in his Reith lectures is essentially subjective and

idealised, one too closely modelled on his own particular intellectual practice in the modern world. If Said, in his radio series, drew attention to the West Indian revolutionary, C.L.R. James, as a leading example of the kind of intellectual he had in mind, he certainly drew back from placing intellectuals within the contradictions of modern society, as James did, for example, in one of his most original works, *American Civilization* (1993). For James saw clearly the historical process which had aligned the intellectuals with power and placed them increasingly at odds with popular currents in society.

Said's blindspot then is politics. He fails to anchor his thesis about intellectuals in any serious discussion of the political realities of the modern world. But this world has profoundly shaped intellectual practice, transforming it from an area of free individual creativity into ever more constricted roles shaped to fit the specialised needs of bureaucracy. Indeed such a transformation stands as a powerful symbol, expressing many aspects of the world in which we live. The issue, in the aftermath of the Cold War, is whether intellectuals choosing to reject bureaucratic conformity have significant social forces at their backs or are condemning themselves to lives of fruitless isolation.

Writing about modern civilisation at the mid-point of our century and at the onset of the Cold War, James identified a growing conflict between the vast anonymous bureaucracies which concentrate power at the top of modern society and the aspirations of people everywhere for the extension of democracy into all areas of their lives. James believed that the contradictions reverberating from this central conflict had reached their sharpest expression in the United States, especially in the lives of blacks, women and industrial workers. It was, as he called it, a struggle for civilisation or barbarism — meaning that the modern world would either develop so as to enable the full and free expression of individual creativity within new and

expanded conceptions of social life (**democracy**) or it would contract, leaving a fragmented and repressed subjectivity stifled beneath coercive bureaucratic structures (**totalitarianism**). For James, it was not just a crisis faced by America. This was the crisis of modern society as a whole.

The question of the intellectuals went, for James, to the centre of this world; and in *American Civilization* he devoted a long section to an analysis of their changing role. He believed that as a class intellectuals had been caught up in the expansion of state bureaucracy, a process matched by the growing power and presence of people as a force in world society. But, unable to recognise that ordinary people's lives (rather than their own ideas) contained the force for modern civilisation, the intellectuals found themselves adrift, and often compromised, oscillating endlessly between an introspective individualism and service to the ruling powers.

Anthropologists, as modern intellectuals, cannot be separated from the unfolding historical process which James so clearly identified at the time he was writing *American Civilization*. As members of a professional class, we certainly no longer enjoy the freedom and independence of our predecessors, individuals like Rivers who entertained undergraduates to breakfast in his college rooms, worked only for three or four hours a day, experimented on himself and colleagues and pursued an eclectic range of intellectual interests. Rather we are confined within narrow specialisms by the oppressive bureaucracy of our jobs.

Thus any understanding of the contemporary crisis in anthropology — doubts over what it is as a discipline, what its methods are what constitutes the basis of its knowledge, whose interests it serves, what the relationship is between individual work and collective reproduction — has to be situated within the broader crisis of legitimacy in the modern world. The traditional role of the intellectual as a critical, independent witness standing

unequivocally for truth and justice has been seriously compromised by specific social alignments in the course of the twentieth century. Anthropology's much debated inability to shrug off its tainted association with colonial rule is only one example of such an alignment. For the stark and uncomfortable fact is that intellectuals today, like all professionals, are viewed with scepticism. They are perceived of, at best, as a self-serving elite concerned only with addressing each other or, worse, as the allies of power. Moreover, the assimilation of the bulk of intellectuals as wage slaves and pensioners of the state not only undermines the independence of their work; but it also sharply separates their specialised intellectual activity from social life.

These central questions, the relationship between ideas and life, intellectuals and the public, knowledge and power, were in fact addressed by an anthropologist more than two decades ago. Edmund Leach reflected on the culture of the intellectuals in his own Reith lectures of 1967. Although he was not speaking directly to an anthropological audience, his radio series *A Runaway World?* contained much that was relevant to the discipline. At the time, Leach's lectures achieved considerable public notoriety and he himself, in a postscript to their publication, acknowledged them to have been a *succes de scandale*; but they were largely ignored by his colleagues in the anthropology profession. Indeed Leach's Reith lectures are still more or less unknown to anthropologists today. If they were prescient then, they are highly pertinent now. His lectures cast light on many of the issues at the centre of contemporary anthropology's anxious introspection; but they serve, too, as a reminder that the discipline's problems are inseparable from more fundamental problems of intellectual practice.

Responding to the challenges of the society in which he lived, Leach recognised a world in movement. It was marked, above all, by the interconnectedness of people and things. The title of his lectures, *A Runaway World?*, captured well the mood of

optimism and fear which characterised the 1960s, as established structures, norms and values appeared to be fast breaking down. The problem, for Leach, was one of disjunction, of reconciling the reality of change with conventional notions and cultural categories which guaranteed order. But he saw clearly that this movement in the world would only seem alien and frightening to people whose moral categories were based on habits of separation and division; and, in his view, intellectual commitment to an ethos of scientific detachment and to the stability of simple paired ideas (good/bad) were at the root of modern society's malaise. Leach called for an intellectual practice based upon movement and engagement, connection and dialectic. In short he was insisting on the re-insertion of ideas into social life.

Perhaps it is not surprising that his message fell on deaf ears, since the 1960s were years of unprecedented expansion for academic anthropology. But, despite all the individual and idiosyncratic adjustments that anthropologists were forced to make in adapting to a changing world, the problem of the discipline's standing as a branch of modern knowledge would not go away. If anthropologists in the course of the twentieth century have moved ever closer towards identification with the state and bureaucracy, they have also retained a commitment, however attenuated, to the discipline's original recognition of people everywhere as the force making and re-making world society. This contradiction has deepened as anthropologists, peddling an uncertain mixture of expertise and gossip, have struggled to maintain an increasingly tenuous posture, with one foot in the academy and one in the world.

The solution to anthropology's dilemma over how to re-invent itself as a vital activity on the eve of the twentyfirst century surely cannot be found in increased specialisation, in the discovery of new areas of social life to colonise with the aid of the old professional paradigm; nor can it be found in a return to

literary scholarship disguised as a new and open dialogical form. It requires new patterns of social engagement, extending beyond academic boundaries into the widest reaches of world society.

### Conclusion

"Time would pass, old empires would fall and new ones take their place, the relations of countries and the relation of classes had to change, before I discovered that it is not the quality of goods and utility that matter, but movement; not where you are or what you have, but where you have come from, where you are going and the rate at which you are getting there." (C.L.R. James, *Beyond A Boundary*)

We have been concerned in this essay to chart a journey, to trace anthropology's evolution as a modern project within the shifting political contours and social movements of the twentieth century. In particular, our perspective emerges from self-conscious recognition of our own place in this trajectory. But the arguments we have presented here are animated by a desire for more than just a means of making sense of personal experiences. For we have sought also to discover what remains of value in a discipline which has become severely compromised as an intellectual practice. We acknowledge that today it is easy enough to produce a devastating critique of anthropology; but it is much more difficult to come up with concrete suggestions for the future of a project which somehow has to rediscover the sources of its original vitality. For this surely is the critical question to be answered — not what we are against, but what we are for.

One of the starting points for such a task has to be inside the discipline itself. Certainly, we cannot escape from our own intellectual formation within it, nor can we ignore our current role, as teachers, in its reproduction. But if, as we have

suggested, anthropology's crisis stems from an ever-widening division between the individual and the collective at the heart of modern society, then its future depends on finding ways of reconnecting the two poles of the dialectic without forcing one into the other. This can neither be achieved at the level of ideas, by merely thinking, nor by the invention of new forms discovered in the privacy of an intellectual's study. Rather we believe that anthropologists must find their way back into an active and open engagement with the world. Central to this aim is the question of method.

Our argument in this essay has hinged upon a particular interpretation of anthropological method. The innovative quality of Rivers's work derived from his commitment to exploring human society as a whole, in its global and its individual dimensions. Such a project, he recognised, required the development of new methods; and the essence of his practice was a spirit of openness. But, just as important, the example of Rivers reveals the potentially creative connection between individuality and community, for he saw that pursuit of his own eclectic interests entailed working for a collective scientific project. Rivers, in short, unified within his intellectual personality both the professional and the amateur. As we now know, the ethos of Rivers's successor, Malinowski, was somewhat different. He was apparently no less committed to anthropology's reproduction as a collective project; but he achieved this through a process of mysterious initiation which transformed the fledgling science into an exclusive cult. For the opacity of Malinowski's method came from his determination to carve out a personal (and jealously guarded) space through the skilful manipulation of nineteenth century literary forms.

Not surprisingly, then, much of the inspiration for our projection of anthropology into the future stems from the early days, when it was remade in the brilliant moment of modernism. It was a moment full of creative possibilities, as all the old structures and

habits of thinking were fast giving way to new developments in world society. If today's anthropologists are not to be, as Leach put it, "petrified observers of a runaway world", then we have to rediscover that spirit of open, eclectic experimentation and expansive social connection which briefly flourished at the beginning of this century, before it was banished by Malinowski's counter-revolution. For, as we all know from our own recent experience, the state can no longer be relied upon to support Malinowski's academic project in the style to which it became, for a time, accustomed.

We would want to take from anthropology's early modern phase two principal features: first, **fieldwork**, and second, its **universality**. The one is still celebrated as an icon by most professionals, while concern for the other has fallen out of fashion. Although fieldwork was the great discovery of Haddon, Rivers and Boas, it has to be disembedded from the form it later took in the paradigm of scientific ethnography. At its core it simply means "to go and experience for oneself". There is nothing in this practice which requires anthropologists to write about exotic tribes abstracted from the history of modern civilization. But anthropology's uniqueness as a discipline lies in basing its method not so much on the artificial constructs of academic study as on direct experience of what people actually do and think. Over the years this commitment to go out and live has worn rather thin; and the balance now once more decisively favours the world of books.

For a time during the 1960s and early 1970s, when the world was shaken by popular movements, British anthropologists flirted with stronger notions of universality, involving the human mind and world history; but of late they have returned to a narrow particularism, embodied in subdisciplines whose sole aim is to colonise a fresh segment of human experience, often one carved out by neighbouring professions (medicine, development, literature). We hold that social life, for all its

confining divisions, is integrated and that the process of integration is ultimately global. It is anthropology's great merit that it has the scope to increase our self-consciousness of human unity in diversity. This universality, however, must be conceived of anew, not as a form of western dominance nor as a thoughtless merger of the general and the specific, but as a process of extension from the particulars of individual and collective experience.

It is entirely conceivable that the next century will have no place for a class of specialist intellectuals, called "anthropologists", with a mission to tell people what is going on in their world. But, if the line between expertise and commonsense is increasingly being called into question, anthropologists, who have never been comfortable on either side of that divide, might be able to devise creative ways of acquiring and disseminating knowledge out of their combination. For academic anthropology has never succeeded completely in eliminating the early ethos of the amateur from its professional practices. Moreover, it might be said that, compared with the other sciences and humanities, anthropology has remained in important ways an anti-discipline — taking its ideas from anywhere, striving for the whole, constantly reinventing procedures on the move. Thus, as the boundaries defining specialist disciplines give way, anthropology contains within itself many elements of a more flexible, constructive approach to learning about the world. These are its strength and creative source.

Above all, we believe that the problem of devising new forms of anthropological enquiry has to be solved at the level of social practice, not ideas. In particular, it is time for anthropologists to rethink the wisdom of having committed the future of their collective project so completely to the institutions of academic bureaucracy. It is in this spirit that we launch the Prickly Pear pamphlet series.

## A Guide to Further Reading

On the History of British Social Anthropology  
 A. H. H. Green, *The History of British Social Anthropology* (London, 1968)  
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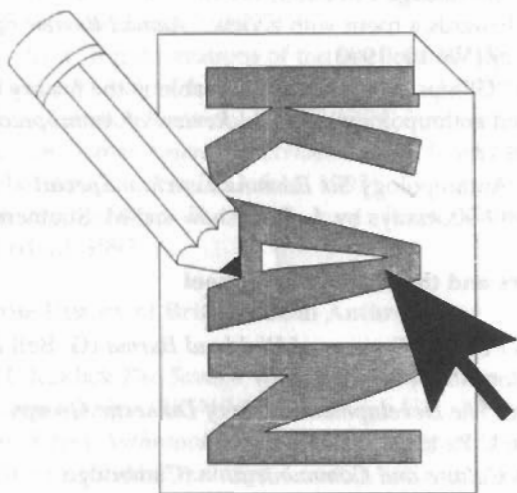
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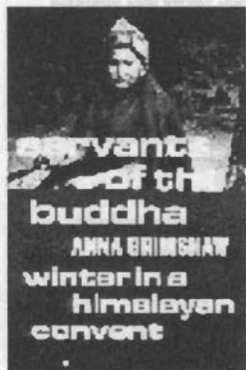
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