

Social Anthropology – Mechanized or Humanized ?

LOUIS FELDHAMMER

We have found that where science has progressed the farthest, the mind has but regained from nature that which the mind has put into nature. We have found a strange footprint on the shores of the unknown. We have devised profound theories one after another, to account for its origin. At last, we have succeeded in reconstructing the creature that made the footprint. And lo ! it is our own.

— Sir Arthur Eddington ¹

Wrong thinking in the natural sciences is lamentable but, sooner or later, will be rejected. Wrong thinking in the social sciences may escape this fate; thus it is not merely lamentable but dangerous. This contrast is primarily one of subject matter, and the consequences which flow from it are both profound and pervasive.

Anthropology is now accepted as a legitimate and “respectable” member of the scientific establishment. But the achievement of this status has not been without cost, for in the attempt to make man’s social behaviour a proper subject for scientific inquiry, there has been a general adoption of certain prevailing assumptions whose theoretical and practical effects have now — and for a long time past — been an obstacle to further understanding.

It is hardly our purpose here to review the history of social anthropology, but it must be noted that its theoretical orientation has deep roots in the pervasive mechanism of the Newtonian Revolution and in the rationalism and empiricism of the Enlightenment (Matson 1964:19-45). Men have always been interested in knowing and understanding the social behaviour of their own kind, and it was the great breakthroughs of the natural sciences which led to a desire to emulate its achievements in this realm. Thus, a situation quickly developed wherein it became clear that only through the

¹ Quoted in Werner Heisenberg, “The Physicist’s Conception of Nature” (1958, p. 153).

use (and praise) of the “scientific method” could any study put forth a claim to intellectual legitimacy. From the view that human behaviour is amendable to study by the “scientific method” it is only a short step to the position that all that we need for successful discovery about ourselves and our social institution is an adequate system of empirical generalizations and enough precise data to fit into them.²

When such a position is taken and, for the most part, stoutly defended by social anthropologists the resulting image of man is often a startling one. This is how it is expressed by a leading scholar whose power in the academic world of American anthropology should not be underestimated:

... the data of culture and social life are susceptible to exact scientific treatment as are the facts of the physical and biological sciences. It seems clear that the elements of social organization conform to natural laws of their own with an exactitude scarcely less striking than that which characterizes the permutations and combinations of atoms in chemistry and of genes in biology (Murdock 1949:183).

The above passage must not be mistaken as an expression of an extremist position, but rather as a statement which gives voice to the contemporary dominance of naturalism, objective empiricism, and “scientism” prevalent among social anthropologists. There can be no misinterpretation of a position so clearly and straight-forwardly stated; what is really puzzling is that it should be held, with seemingly no diminution in its general acceptance, for over two centuries. It is puzzling because the history of any science is the history of the replacement of one theory by another which is able to account for or explain the phenomena which remained anomalous under the preceding orientation. The philosophical naturalism of all the social sciences never offered anything resembling an understanding of man’s behaviour; within its framework man remains an

² The entire emphasis on field work and its *raison d’être* in social anthropology is, of course, nothing if not an expression of this attitude toward man and his social universe. The recipe is as follows: a large collection of “data” added to a base of “objective” observation, stir patiently, result — the truth. So far, because the cake never quite comes out, there has been a lot of complaining about, and much tinkering with, the oven. The “comparative method” is a good illustration of this kind of philosophical naivety — as though doing the same thing more than once will necessarily result not in the compounding of error, but in the avoidance of it!

anomalous mechanism. But it persists, being reduced to a sterile formalism in economics, an avoidance of ethics in political science, a pathetic and second-rate statistician's shop in sociology, a logically fallacious system of thought called "structural-functionalism" in anthropology, and over the whole absurd circus there lies the strong desire to be "value-free" and avoid at all costs an entanglement with anything men consider to be crucial in their lives and the universe.

Why? Because of an approach which is based on a really terrible idea, the idea that man is a mindless being under the control of circumstances in much the same manner as "atoms in chemistry." When social scientists speak of themselves and their fellow-men as though they were describing inanimate objects then the consequence is immediate and direct; it is the consequence so feared by Weber, namely, "mechanical petrification."³ Furthermore, it is of the very crux of the matter to note that in the realm of social thought what is under analysis is ultimately ourselves, so that when social anthropologists study societies populated by creatures who are fundamentally involuntary, irresponsible, and mechanical the effects are particularly disastrous. They are disastrous on both those who are studied and those who do the studying. Both have the capacity to know and to assess the "findings"; both observer and observed are an integral part of the same totality — they are engaged with one another, and both are influenced by the act of perceptual analysis. This is so much the case that not only do we find that "laymen" believe, and actively support, the view that reality is determinate, mechanistic, and casual but the professional practitioners are themselves led to view their own selves in a similar framework. That this is nothing if not disastrous can be substantiated with ever increasing ease by a glance at any of our social institutions, from the academic to the local community.⁴

The traditions of social anthropology have been strongly coloured by Comte's famous goal, "*Savoir pour prévoir, prévoir*

³ It is not without significance that when social scientists deal with the works of Max Weber they invariably choose to emphasize his ideas on "objectivity" and the ethically neutral character of social science.

⁴ In a world where mechanical values are apotheosized at the expense of humane values we all suffer a severe loss. "What has been lost is the capacity to experience and have faith in one's self as a worthy and unique being, and at the same time the capacity for faith in, and meaningful communication with, other selves, namely one's fellow-men" (May 1960:122).

pour pouvoir," a statement reflecting the optimism and faith in unending progress so typical of the nineteenth century. Yet more than one hundred years later anthropologists are engaged in criticizing the theoretical orientations of their colleagues on the grounds of their "predictive power" — they are still looking for the Eldorado of prediction and control. All this when the natural sciences have long since established that, *in principle*, exact prediction is impossible and we are faced with the mysterious, i.e., the non-inductivist, worlds of the atomic, quantum and relativity theories.

Much of this discussion centres around what we referred to earlier as the attempt to legitimize social anthropology as a "scientific" endeavour and, notwithstanding the relative success in this regard, there is an unending stream of writings trying to establish its undefiled purity once and for all. So we find in Max Gluckman's latest book a section with the heading "Social Anthropology: Science or Art?" (1965:301-303) Mr. Gluckman suggests six qualities which clearly differentiate social anthropology from art and give it its rightful claim to be called a science. These are 1) explicitness as against implicitness, 2) insistence on the obvious as against avoidance of the obvious, 3) numerical assessment as against avoidance of figures, 4) recapitulation as against variety, 5) accurate definition as against evocativeness and, finally, 6) the quality of cumulativeness as against its absence.

Now here we have much more than an odd interest in a non-problem but a real confusion of thought. Here we are made aware again of the price that has been paid for clinging to the legacy of Galileo and Newton. There are several points to note. Is it true that art is not explicit? Does it really avoid the obvious? If it is all that interested in variety why do its themes and motifs recur again and again? As for "numerical assessment" this is the old bug-a-boo that mistakes quantities for precision of thought and sees social reality as something which is essentially aggregative.⁵

⁵ For example, social anthropologists are forever telling their students that Durkheim's "Suicide" is a classic example of empiricism and the use of "quantitative analysis" in problem-solving. (After all, the book is full of numbers arranged in tables.) This is a clear implication that Durkheim got his controlling ideas, particularly his powerful insight of anomie, from a diligent perusal of the vital registers of Europe. But this is a fairy-tale requiring too much effort to be believable. The sad truth of the matter is that anthropologists are among the

The quality of "accurate definition" is completely misleading. After all, anthropology literally means the study of man — query, define man; answer, "a featherless biped." Well, the definition is accurate enough, but it is also meaningless. And this is the crucial point; in the realm of social thought it is absurd to pretend we want impossibly accurate definitions when what we are really after are meaningful ones. And meaningfulness may or may not require the element of "evocativeness" — either way it has no bearing on whether it is science or art. Finally, the matter of cumulateness refers to engineering, not to science. Science is concerned with the same fundamental questions as always, just like art. It gives an appearance of cumulateness for a variety of reasons — technological complexity for one, and historical ignorance for another. When asked to name one new fact about man which behaviouristic psychology has contributed I was told: "Reward is more effective than punishment in the learning process." But the history of the West abounds with identical sentiments going to its beginnings. Another reason is that it seems to offer answers which are verified; this is felt to be so, notwithstanding the fact that only the propositions of logic and mathematics are even remotely capable of proof. Furthermore, far more men identify with, and thus have "verified" (in the true subjective sense), the social realities found in, for example, a line of Shakespeare than in all the dull professionalisms of the typical learned monograph.

It is clear, therefore, that much of the thinking concerned with social anthropology as science or art is really dealing with the difference between an activity which is professionalized and one that is not. Professions are inevitably bureaucratic — they have departments, various levels of apprenticeship, standardized requirements of proficiency, rules of behaviour, and so on. Now creative thought occurs within professions as well as out of them, although the history of ideas indicates that it may be a lot easier for the creative imagination to function outside the traditional bureaucratic framework.

last remaining groups of intellectuals who still generally believe, and teach their students, nonsense such as that Darwin got the idea of natural selection from his observations during the voyage of the "Beagle".

Professionalization is accompanied by bureaucratization. Bureaucracy requires method, but creative thought is not methodical. Creative thought is based on the insight while method is based on the "system", namely the elevation of the routine into a position of importance. Creativity shuns systematics. It is false to assume that creative thought in the sciences is qualitatively different from that of the arts simply because its expression takes rational and logical forms. The same kind of creative imagination is at work in both art and science. The systematics of the "scientific method" is an obstacle to a fuller comprehension of ourselves and of our fellow-men. "It is only as an artist that man knows reality" is the remark of a mathematician not of a painter (Morse 1959:58).

Finally, I would like to refer to one more element which has effected the character of social anthropology since its beginnings in the nineteenth century. It was my personal critical reaction to this element which gave the original impetus to the ideas expressed earlier in this paper. It is always present, sometimes clearly visible, sometimes just beneath the surface and, increasingly of late, buried beneath a heavy layer of restrained intellectuality. This is its romanticism. The historical fact that anthropology had its origins as a study of "leftovers", or as someone once put it, "the investigation of oddments by the eccentric" (Kluckhohn 1959:11), is clearly of some relevance; it tended to reinforce the romantic impulse.

Now I am not criticizing an interest in the strange and novel; it seems to me that a capacity to be excited by the exotic and the different is exactly what makes social anthropology so much more interesting than most social studies and is a perfectly legitimate reason for engaging in it. But romanticism has certain adjuncts and in anthropology it has always tended toward a general feeling of over-sensitivity for the preciousness of the native's culture. It also reveals itself in such things as the innumerable references to "my (or his) people." This need not be of great concern if it were not for the fact that, more often than not, it seriously blurs many analyses of social change, particularly with regard to those factors involved in the process of modernization. Specifically, the underlying romanticism in much anthropological work results in an over-emphasis of the essential retentiveness and conservatism of a people's cultural traditions and in the view that this factor is of universal

and crucial importance in the political and economic processes involved in industrialization.

It would be stupid, of course, to deny any role to indigenous traditions in social change. What I do deny is that they are necessarily always of great significance — or indeed that, in some instances, they are even very important at all. This fact cannot be emphasized enough. A corollary thesis is that insufficient attention has thus far been paid to the *choices and alternatives* offered to the members of a society in the context of social change — in short, with the *possibilities* which are available within the situation itself.

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