THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AS RELUCTANT IMPERIALIST

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Current criticisms of the social anthropology of the colonial period acknowledge that more than a handful of individual anthropologists were of liberal or even radical political outlook. But they usually maintain that this fact is not relevant for analysis of the development of the subject or its place in the colonial situation. The context is represented as fostering an essentially conservative subject, shaped within the same political ideology as colonial domination itself and bolstering its interests to such an extent that the perceptions and problems of even the liberal-radical practitioner were falsely formulated. At best, it might be admitted, in the words for example of Kathleen Gough, that

Anthropologists in those days seem to have played roles characteristic of white liberals, sometimes of white liberal reformers, in other spheres of our society...living closely with native peoples, they tended to take their part to try to protect them against the worst forms of imperialistic exploitation...

Applied anthropology came into being as a kind of social work and community development effort for non-white peoples.¹

Not much attention has been paid to the implications of this admission. The dissent indicated among anthropologists is not usually considered important enough to qualify Gough’s picture of the subject as the “child of Western imperialism”.

But it can be argued that the appearance of a radical element

among anthropologists is neither unimportant nor irrelevant; on the contrary that it has been significant for the development of certain aspects of the subject; and further, that the very existence of social anthropology in the colonial period constituted a source of potential radical criticism of the colonial order itself. The occurrence of liberal views within the subject was therefore not an accident; it was entailed by the nature of anthropological research, which by definition reaches out geographically, linguistically and philosophically beyond the bounds of received western civilisation in search of alternative modes of understanding and living. Of course a good deal of trite and mediocre work has been produced in practice, and the promise of the anthropological perspective has rarely been fulfilled. But the critical questioning of the basis of social life implicit in anthropology has remained at the heart of the subject, and its growth within western culture during the colonial period necessarily constituted a source of informed critical comment, since it was ideally based upon experience of life on the reverse side of the colonial coin inaccessible to most other members of the dominant society. The subject was not spurned by the earlier generation of nationalist politicians; and though the structures of Empire have now collapsed and cleared the way for a more profound critical appraisal, a historical perspective reminds us of some of the contradictory aspects of the place of social anthropology in the colonial situation, the arguments it provoked and the resistance it encountered from the very body of official opinion and authority with which it is now sometimes assumed to have lived in a cozy conspiracy; or at least a web of unspoken understandings. As an individual, the anthropologist can often appear as a critic of colonial policy, of the philosophy of western superiority upon which it was based and in terms of which it was justified; and he was usually at odds with the various administrators, missionaries, and other local Europeans he had dealings with. He cannot often be seen unambiguously as a willing agent of colonialism. But he was nevertheless dependent upon colonial authorities for permission to carry out his studies, and sometimes for material support; and in the inter-war period at least, open political dissent was scarcely possible within colonial society. An anthropologist who turned out to be anything more than a mild social embarrassment could scarcely have been tolerated; and thus, for anthropology to continue at all, appearances of co-operation had to be kept up.

The place of anthropology in the colonial situation was in fact doubly ambivalent. On the one hand, as I have suggested, there was an ambivalence in relation to official authority, for although anthro-

poly was supposed worthy of support, its personnel and their activities were questionable; and on the other hand, in relation to the growing nationalist and revolutionary movements, anthropology, though initially regarded with sympathy, came to appear increasingly conservative. This double ambivalence, in my opinion, explains why social anthropology has been the object of more suspicion, accusation and blame from both sides of the developing colonial situation than the low number of its practitioners and their relatively small output would appear to justify. It would also appear to have had important effects on the growth of the subject, and its changing emphases. During the period of the twenties and thirties, there was undoubtedly tension between officialdom and the expanding subject of anthropology, making it natural for there to be a strong sympathy between the subject and the early development of nationalism; but later, particularly after the Second World War, the perspective of nationalist and revolutionary ideologies made anthropology merely a conservative ally of colonial control, itself increasingly liberal and progressive.

This essay draws attention in particular to the inter-war period. The first part discusses social anthropology as the problem child of the colonial encounter in Africa, the ways in which it constituted a body of radical criticism and how this was necessarily tempered. The second part considers the case of Malinowski's arguments from 1929 onwards for the involvement of anthropology in the "changing" African scene, some effects of these arguments on the development of the subject, and some responses to them from representatives of both colonial officialdom and the new African nationalism.

I

What can "radical criticism" mean in the context of colonial anthropology? Examples of explicit criticism will be considered in the second part of this essay, but firstly the implicitly critical character of much anthropological writing should be noted. A large proportion of the anthropology of the inter-war period is clearly partisan; in its choice of problems, and the very formulation of substantive analysis, it is often defensive of the weaker societies and cultures; of the sophistication of their language and thought, and of the "rationality" of primitive economics, politics, witchcraft, religion and so on. This defensive position extended on occasion to matters of native land rights, and treatment of migrant labourers in the new industrial areas and under the law. This intellectual and moral defence of the rights and dignity of peoples who had previously been
regarded, under the evolutionary racist theories of the nineteenth century armchair anthropologists, as scarcely human, was more than an academic reaction to earlier theories: it was at the same time a gut-reaction to the persistence of these ideas of cultural and racial superiority among the colonial rulers, local white settlers, and in popular opinion back at home. Although colonial anthropologists could rarely be described as radicals in an active political sense, which would have been almost impossible anyway, I believe that much of their work was given direction by radicalism of a moral kind.

For example, in the thirties the problem of witchcraft was discussed a good deal in colonial circles; on the whole it was accepted that natives possessed a different quality of mind, such that apparent irrationalities could scarcely be dealt with reasonably, but only through the application of laws against the practice or accusation of sorcery or witchcraft (see the special number of Afrika, 1935). The common assumptions of the practical men of the colonies, I would judge, were fairly close to those of armchair anthropologists of a previous generation, concerning the relative nature of thought and rationality in primitive society. Evans-Pritchard's argument in Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande (1937) was designed at least in part as a criticism and a refutation of such theories; and on another level, it could be seen as an answer to the prejudices over native mentality commonly held by those with colonial experience, which must have been the despair of many fieldworkers. This aspect of Evans-Pritchard's work appears clearly in the following quotations from an early Zande article, Sorcery and Native Opinion. The article begins as follows:

It is important to understand native opinion about black magic, not only for the anthropologist but also for the colonial administrator and missionary, if they wish to show to the peoples whom they govern and teach that they understand their notions about right and wrong. The native does not so much distrust European justice and education as he despairs of the administrator and missionary ever understanding, or attempting to understand, his point of view as expressed in laws and public opinion. This despair springs largely from the handling by Europeans of such matters as sorcery, with which both missionaries and administrators frequently have to deal. The native becomes convinced finally that the European is quite incapable of seeing the difference between right and wrong, between the proper use of a cultural weapon fully sanctioned by public opinion, such as white magic, and a heinous and cold blooded murder, such as the crime of black magic or sorcery.  

After a careful and detailed exposition of this crucial moral distinction as seen by Azande, and its significance for social and political life, Evans-Pritchard concludes with suggestions as to how administrators might benefit from understanding such questions. How far we may wonder could such hints be of much practical use to administrators? In any case, they scarcely mask the strong tone of criticism with which the article comes to a close:

In conclusion, we may address ourselves to those administrators and missionaries and doctors whose lives are spent amongst primitive peoples in Africa. If, as we think, a public opinion which classes some types of magic definitely as base and criminal, and others as virtuous and legal, whilst judging yet others with an uncertain voice, exists and functions not only amongst the Azande of the Nile-Uelle Divide but in many other savage communities, it behoves Europeans to be discreet in their dealing with it. Upon no other subject are Europeans in the tropics generally so ignorant and in no other sphere of native life is ignorance more likely to lead to infliction and destruction of good institutions. Such activities as those which we have described in this essay are, for reasons which we have set forward, more conformable to preservation than breach of the peace, to conserve than subvert stable administration. We may well leave the natives to decide between good and evil, morality and immorality, right and wrong, crime and law. Moreover, the European may well be advised to remember that such acts of magic, the performance of which are public enough to be brought to the notice of his office and to be proved to have taken place, are little likely to be condemned by public opinion as illegal or immoral. Lastly, we may all do well to reflect that the mind sensitive to tales of sorcery reveals its own crudeness, for it has often been shown that when two civilizations come into contact the lesser is always accused of sorcery by half-studied and ill-formed judgements of the greater.

This is not a position of ultra-relativism, of which colonial anthropologists have learned much.
The practical men, however approving they were in the abstract of lending support to anthropological research, must often have been puzzled and disappointed at what the anthropologists actually produced. They must even on occasion have been resentful of rebukes such as those of Evans-Pritchard in the passages just quoted, where the anthropologist thumbs his nose at the sacred civilising mission. Without doubt a good deal of tension existed, and I consider that some of the characteristic methods and theories of this period were the outcome, not of conspiracy between scholars and officialdom, but on the contrary, of competition and intrigue between them. Impressive claims had to be made by anthropologists for their subject. Because their resources, duties and even rights were so uncertain, and because their work was so often regarded as quaint (in backward areas) or as unnecessary meddling (in central and significant areas), anthropologists were frequently obliged to defend their activities. This could hardly be done on metaphysical grounds, or in terms of a conviction of political or moral obligation; the lines of defence were rather of a kind more likely to appeal to colonial officialdom. This is partly why there was such an insistent claim by anthropology to be a proper science; for the idea of science carries great respectability. Science represented to the crude colonial mind a great achievement of the modern west, and the idea of its application to native peoples, as objects, was promising. (Interestingly enough, literature in anthropology of the kind which I have suggested is motivated by moral radicalism often emphasizes the scientific character of native thought.) Thus it was good tactics for anthropologists to put forward the claim that their subject, at least the modern variety, was a dispassionate, scientific and important study of the variety of social forms, which deserved the respect and facilities granted to other sciences, like tropical medicine or geology, and like them had to be based on first-hand investigation. It was also prudent for them to add that, of course, it was a study which could yield valuable information for administrators and planners, who indeed would scarcely avoid serious mistakes without the benefit of its expert advice. This double claim gave anthropologists the advantage of being able to stress their practical value when approaching potential sponsors, and nevertheless to resist requests for direct assistance on the grounds that their subject was essentially an abstract science, from which practical men would have to draw their own conclusions. The separation of the objective scientist from the committed feeling man can thus be viewed as part of the strategy of colonial anthropologists in calming any suspicions of their personal motives which might damage their claims for official support and facilities. The following passage from Firth’s conclusion to We, the Tikopia (1936) illustrates some of the relevant emphases of the time:

A last word may be said about one practical aspect of anthropological study. In revulsion from the mere folklorist attitude of antiquarian anthropology, science today is in danger of being caught up by practical interests and made to serve them, to the neglect of its own problems. Social anthropology should be concerned with understanding how human beings behave in social groups, not with trying to make them behave in any particular way by assisting an administrative policy of a proselytizing campaign to achieve its ends more easily. The scientist gives generalizations regarding the nature of the working of institutions; it is not his duty to affix ethical values to them, nor by conniving at such an ethical evaluation to pave the way for their modification. Missionary, government officer and mine manager are free to use anthropological methods and results in their own interests, but they have no right to demand as a service that anthropology should become their handmaid. Nor can the standards which they invoke—'civilization', 'justice', 'the sanctity of human life', 'Christianity', 'freedom of the individual', 'law and order'—be regarded as binding; the claim of absolute validity that is usually made for them too often springs from ignorance, from an emotional philanthropy, from the lack of any clear analysis of the implications of the course of action proposed, and from confusion with the universal of what is in reality a set of moral ideas produced by particular economic and social circumstances.

This is not to say that the scientist himself may not have his own personal predilections based on his upbringing and social environment, his temperamental disposition, his aesthetic values. He may regard the culture of a primitive, half-naked set of people in an island of the Solomons as a pleasant way of life, giving expression to the individuality of its members in ways alien to western civilization; he may regard it as something he would like to see endure, and he may strive to preserve it in the face of ignorance and prejudice, pointing out the probable results of interference with ancient customs. This he does as a
giving them appointments on their establishments. Why should they expect the services of anthropologists on different terms? The question remains as to why anthropology had not been accepted more wholeheartedly by the colonial authorities. Some indication of the answer is implied in that part of Evans-Pritchard's article where he discusses his Libyan work. He contrasts his pre-war position in the Sudan with his position in Cyrenaica in the early nineteen-forties, where he was a full member of the British Military Administration, as Tribal Affairs Officer, with access to official documents, and entitled to play a part in policy-making. The significant feature of this contrast between his status in the Sudan and Libya lies perhaps in the fact that the Italians had recently been ousted by the British when he was in Cyrenaica: and thus a critical anthropological study of native affairs would reflect on the Italians, rather than on his sponsoring authority. With such a conjunction of interests between his sponsors and himself, it was possible for Evans-Pritchard to write a book of unusually committed characters The Sanusi of Cyrenaica (1949) in its treatment of an anti-colonialist national movement and its clearly anti-Fascist sympathies, is itself an answer to naïve radical criticisms of anthropology. In the older colonies, the anthropologist was rarely so trusted as to have access to archival materials and policy discussions which would be necessary for a historically significant study. One may well ask whether it would have been realistic to expect anthropologists to write books openly critical of any of the forms of colonial rule under which they worked.

The contradictory positions assumed simultaneously by the colonial anthropologist, that he is extremely useful to administration and at the same time that he must be free to pursue his specialist interests, arise out of the profound paradox of the subject in relation to its sponsoring authorities. Relatively peaceful and progressive colonial rule in the inter-war period was prepared to permit and even encourage field-working anthropologists to carry out personal investigations of a direct kind which had scarcely been possible previously, at least in the Old World. The "sociological" character of their work increased steadily, and with it a greater awareness of the relevance of the overall economic and political situation. The anthropologist of this period, more than the missionary, and more than the bush administrator, found himself speaking not only of, but for, the local populations he knew well. He tended more than others to

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6. R. Firth, We the Tikopia, 2nd ed. 1957, pp. 487-88.
know the common man, and to bypass the local chiefs and dignitaries. There was little possibility of a European traveller knowing the people intimately in the pre-colonial period: contacts in the nineteenth century for example, between the classic explorers and the local populations of Africa, were usually with kings and chiefs, or otherwise with servants and runaway slaves. The situation of a lone European living for months or years in an ordinary village without a retinue was only possible when benevolent colonial administration was well-established. And yet the situation of such study was often so demanding in personal as well as intellectual terms that a commitment to something stronger than data-gathering was surely required. The collection of facts from the grass-roots level of society in the industrial West has frequently grown out of, or resulted in, a radical orientation; and anthropological fieldwork in the Malinowskian tradition shared this character to some extent in relation to the colonial regimes. The colonial period thus paradoxically opened the way for the creation of a body of literature that itself reflected criticism upon the prevailing situation and the political philosophy which justified it. I see, therefore, the colonial anthropologist as a frustrated radical: and his claims to scientific status, the separation of his work from any apparent moral or political views, and the avowal of its practical usefulness, as largely determined by the need to make a convincing bid for the survival and expansion of his subject.

II

All these sides of the dilemma are clear in Malinowski’s efforts, from the late nineteen twenties to the end of his life, to extend the scope of scientific anthropology to embrace the study of social and cultural change in Africa. Indeed his dilemma is more complex; for whereas in the early thirties, he was arguing that scientific study was uninvolved and therefore of use to administration, his sympathies for developing African nationalism sharpened with time and in his later writings he comes to argue that scientific research must be politically committed. Malinowski’s writings on Africa are not in themselves a major contribution to the subject; but he was a most influential teacher, and his interest in the expansion of social anthropology into the area of modern African problems led to a large number of studies in this field by his students. The significance of his views is therefore greater than his actual published writings might suggest, for it is implicit in the work of others, particularly in the direction of “social change” and so forth. However “practical”

and administratively useful these studies might claim to be, and however conservative some later studies of this type turned out to be, it was the radical sympathies of Malinowski and his undoubted desire to shake up the placid colonial establishment which originally pushed anthropology in this direction.

An article of Malinowski’s in 1929 on “Practical anthropology” marked the beginning of a debate on the question of the usefulness of anthropology, and a long series of defensive articles by anthropologists which continued until well after the war. Many were published in Africa, journal of the International African Institute (founded 1926). One of the Institute’s main aims was “the closer association of scientific knowledge and research with practical affairs”, and a good deal of applied anthropology was encouraged and supported. In spite of this supposed collusion of anthropology and practical affairs, the tone of the debate which followed Malinowski’s initial provocative contribution suggested underlying frictions. Malinowski’s own previous work had been on the “traditional” community of the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia, but in his 1929 article he is staking out a much wider claim for the subject and its relevance. He challenges the practical men who dismiss the subject, and recommends it to their notice in terms they are likely to find acceptable. He emphasises that it is politically unbiased, and therefore scientific; and highly useful and up-to-date, since it is concerned with changing conditions. The modern “functional” type of anthropology is contrasted in these terms with old-fashioned antiquarianism, of whose uselessness the practical men were justifiably sceptical. I think that by “functional” in this context Malinowski meant little more than “sociological”, as against the approach of what he had referred to elsewhere as the “dusty museum-moth”. He writes:

The Institute stands in the first place for the practical application of scientific knowledge. It can reach on the one hand various Colossal interests in their practical activities, while at the same time has at its disposal the knowledge of theoretically trained specialists.

I think that in the very combination of practical and theoretical interests lies the proper task of the Institute. There is a gap between the theoretical concerns of the anthropology of the schools on the one hand, and practical interests on the other.

The gap must be bridged over, and in doing this the Institute can make itself very useful.

The practical man is inclined to pooh-pooh, ignore, and even to resent any sort of encroachment of the anthropologist upon his domain. On the other hand it is not always easy to advise the colonial administrator or missionary just where to find the anthropological information he requires. Now I think that the gap is artificial and of great prejudice to either side. The practical man should be asked to state his needs as regards knowledge on savage law, economics, customs, and institutions; he would then stimulate the scientific anthropologist to a most fruitful line of research and thus receive information without which he often gropes in the dark. The anthropologist, on the other hand, must move towards a direct study of indigenous institutions as they now exist and work. He must also become more concerned in the anthropology of the changing African, and in the anthropology of the contact of white and coloured, of European culture and primitive tribal life.

It is then the thesis of this memorandum that there exists an anthropological No-man’s land; that in this are contained studies of primitive economics, primitive jurisprudence, questions of land tenure, of indigenous financial systems and taxation, a correct understanding of the principles of African indigenous education, as well as wider problems of population, hygiene and changing outlook. Scientific knowledge on all these problems is more and more needed by all practical men in the colonies. This knowledge could be supplied by men trained in anthropological methods and possessing the anthropological outlook, provided that they also acquire a direct interest in the practical applications of their work, and a keener sense of present-day realities.  

Under the heading “Scientific control of colonial administration” he continues:

By the constitution of the Institute all political issues are eliminated from its activities. This can easily be done by concentrating upon the study of the facts and processes which bear upon the practical problems and leaving to statesmen (and journalists) the final decision of how to apply the results.

There follows a general statement of support for the concept of indirect rule; but unless anyone should think that anthropologists are politically biased in any way instead of being objective scientists, he adds:

But whether we adopt in our practical policy the principle of direct or indirect control, it is clear that a full knowledge of indigenous culture in the subjects indicated is indispensable.

He then defends the usefulness of functional anthropology (as against the earlier antiquarianism) for such questions as political organisation, law, language, land tenure, economics, and the changing native. His article ends with a plea for assistance from the IAI for promoting work in the “modern Functional School of Anthropology”.

The following year, 1930, two replies appeared in Africa. The first by Major Ruxton, formerly L.t. Governor of Southern Provinces, Nigeria, was sympathetic to Malinowski’s claims, indeed strengthening them for applied anthropology:

As there is a distinction between the pure and the applied chemist, so there should be one between the pure and applied anthropologist. The latter cannot exist without the former, but it is the latter who is required to advise on the practical work of administration, and the Institute can do much to evolve him. As the field of work of the pure anthropologist is that of yesterday, so that of the applied anthropologist should be today, preferably tomorrow.  

But the second reply from P. E. Mitchell then provincial commissioner in Tanganyika, and later Governor of Kenya etc., was extremely sceptical of the usefulness of anthropology, unless the subject could enable the “practical men” of the colonies to carry out their jobs better:

Professor Malinowski...writes...as an anthropologist, and he proposes that the anthropologist shall record the facts and the ‘practical’ man draw his deductions therefrom. How many anthropologists would agree that a division into anthropologists and practical men is satisfactory is open to doubt: but as I am certainly not an anthropologist I hope that I may speak for the practical man.

As Malinowski points out, anthropologists have largely occupied themselves with the past, or at least with the passing; and they have developed a technique of their own in recording and discussing in particular the curious or quaint in primitive societies. Thus if an inhabitant of a South Sea Island feels obliged on some ceremonial occasion to eat his grandmother,

the anthropologist is attracted to examine and explain the ancient custom which caused him to do so: the practical man, on the other hand, tends to take more interest in the grandmother...

Practical men are concerned first with making secure life and property and with the complex administrative arrangements which modern economic life demands and they are of all men least likely to underrate the importance of accurate knowledge. They certainly endorse the view that any organisation, for example the Institute, which assists them to that knowledge, must be of value in proportion to the efficiency of the service that it renders, and invaluable if it reaches that point of efficiency where the correctness of its statements of fact can be taken for granted and be made generally known. But that is the difficulty. He goes on to criticise the length of time taken by anthropologists and missionaries for their work to be completed—it is often out of date when it appears and has little bearing on the future; and the minute detail of anthropological observations, which makes the study of large areas out of the question. He compares the anthropological specialist to the laboratory scientist, and asks where is the general practitioner, who can tackle important and urgent problems when needed.

As Malinowski implies, the anthropologist has in the past mainly been interested in the ancient and the curious: he has studiously pursued knowledge of primitive mankind, and has occupied himself little, if at all, with the present and future. His method has been built up to serve his purpose; his technique is that of the laboratory and what he has been disposed to call his field-work has been the field-work of a collector for a museum. But now he is waking up to the splendid prospects of service to mankind which the science to which he has devoted himself holds out, and is casting round for the means of applying to practical things the knowledge which he possesses, or feels confident that he can acquire; and he stands a little dismayed before a world which hurries past him and seems to care little for the help which he can give.

Now it seems to me that the main difficulty lies in this, that the anthropologist is disposed to look out at the busy world from his laboratory window; and when he offers help, it is in terms of laboratory methods. He must learn to come down into the street and join in the life which he desires to influence if he is to play the part which he wishes to play, and which I am confident he can play with great profit especially to all those who are struggling with the complex problems of twentieth-century colonisation in East Africa. He suggests there is a need for the trained "general practitioner" as well as the laboratory specialist; such men do exist, but not in an organised body, or with organised training. In this category of "general practitioner" Mitchell includes all the practical men of the colonies: and not merely administrators and missionaries, but traders and commercial men—in fact one presumes he means the whole of the expatriate community, perhaps even the European housewife. Mitchell certainly makes it clear what sort of use he reckons ought to be made of social anthropology in the interests of colonialism—but how many anthropologists of that time, let alone now, would agree with him? In explaining what he means by a general practitioner of social problems, he writes:

For example, the planter who is engaged in working out a practical and just relation between white employer and native labourer is, in this sense, a general practitioner. By organising these men, by helping them to realise the community of interests which they have, but infrequently understand, by mobilising them in fact, the Institute can perform a function of the highest value...by harnessing in the service of our common humanity those who are intimately concerned, because they are a part of it, in the life of the countries in which they live. This is to my mind the direction in which effort should be made rather than the projection of the laboratory worker into the field, into the turmoil of everyday life, into an atmosphere of which he has had no experience and which he cannot be expected to understand.

Social anthropology is dismissed as purposeless unless made to serve the interests of practical colonialism:

In the relation of man with man and race with race; in those complexities which we call 'the State' or 'Government'; in the many-sided economic life of our modern world; in all that goes to make up the great problems of our time; in all this the acquisition of knowledge is a well-developed science, but in its pursuit we have rather overlooked the means of applying our


"Ibid., p. 220.
knowledge when we have acquired it. As I see it, its acquisition and application should be complementary branches of the same activity. Obviously the latter is impossible without the former: but the former if not followed by the latter is purposeless.

If anyone has had the patience to read this far, he will I hope have reached the same conclusions as the writer, that the true practical anthropology is that which devotes itself to enlisting and organising, as the complement of the scientific worker, those practical men, and there are many, who are ready to serve the community in which they live; at times we shall have urgent need of this specialist, but we must not, for that reason, forget the family doctor. It is clear from Mitchell’s article what kind of anthropology the colonial establishment would like to have seen—a real tool of imperialism. But anthropologists were not on the whole prepared to play this part. Later in the same year (1930) Malinowski published a reply to Mitchell in the same journal. In this he defends anthropology from the suggested close co-operation with practical men; he argues its essential requirement of independence as an objective science; and to my mind at least, this claim stems from a refusal to side unambiguously with the colonial attitude. He starts by bemoaning the mechanisation and over-rapid “progress” of the modern world, which is due to science. He admits that traditional anthropology represented an escape from this, but grants that it has to change, and become of use to the science of progress. He regrets this, however, and writes:

And now, after twenty years of anthropological work, I find myself, to my disgust, attempting to make the science of man into as bad and dehumanising an agency to man as physics, chemistry, and biology have been for the last century or so denaturalising to nature. In short, I am attempting to make anthropology into a real science, and science inevitably has to introduce uniformity and rationalisation into the phenomena with which it deals.

So that is Malinowski’s opinion of the kind of anthropology that the colonial establishment would like to see. But he goes on to explain that of course anthropology will change: and that the new functional method will be both scientific and of use to the practical man. He complains that Mitchell’s criticisms are out of date, that they may apply to antiquarian anthropology but not to the modern functional school; and that Mitchell has attacked anthropology on imaginary grounds—for example the reference to eating grandmothers in the South Seas, which Mitchell says should be called murder and dealt with accordingly. Malinowski suggests that even such judgements are not always unambiguous, and that right and justice may not all be on one side:

Fortunately or unfortunately, the custom, born in the imagination of Mr. Mitchell, does not really exist, so the functional anthropologist need not concern himself very much about it. But the practical man, who very often on equally imaginary grounds cries ‘Murder’ and hangs a native, might thereby provoke some other natives to retaliate and then we should have a punitive expedition in which the ‘practical man’ himself would act as the murderer. Mr. Mitchell’s example is imaginary, but unfortunately I could quote numerous cases from the South Seas in which the practical man, having ‘regretfully’ and unintelligently violated native customs by the mere right of his ignorance and moral zeal, has brought whole native tribes to grief. Let Mr. Mitchell read the report of the Goaribari massacres in New Guinea; the history of ‘black-birding’ in the South Seas; or even the data referring to the repatriation of the blackbirded Kanakas to the Melanesian homes; for that matter, the antecedents of any of the numerous punitive expeditions in the South Seas. Africa is not my special field, but I have a vague idea that ‘punitive expeditions’, wholesale massacres of natives by whites, strange retaliations in the names of ‘justice’, ‘prestige’, and ‘the white man’s honour’ did also occur in the Dark Continent, and that it is not only the coloured African there who deserves the title of ‘murderer’, nor is it the white European who should use such terms of abuse as marks of his own racial superiority.

The mounting intensity of Malinowski’s criticism finds more specific expression in relation to the problems of land tenure, which Mitchell suggested could not be dealt with realistically because of the length of time a full anthropological survey would take. Malinowski reminds Mitchell of the method of science:

Precision, thoroughness and accuracy do not consist in a blind and pedantic accumulation of useless evidence, but in a critical selection of the relevant by crucial tests. It is this spirit of

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9Ibid., p. 223.


11Ibid., p. 411.
relevancy as against mere accumulation, of critical selection
as against groping in the dark, that the scientific anthropologist
might bring to the assistance of the man who has a practical
interest in the control of human affairs.
My critic confidently affirms that 'the only method which can
be called practicable is that of question and answer and daily
observation of the lives of the people'. Has this method, unaided
by any guiding theoretical principles, given such brilliant
results? In the matter of land tenure, for instance, do we know
this subject in a satisfactory manner in any part of Africa?
Why is it that such serious blunders in the framing of policy have
been made as the individualising of land tenure in Uganda,
which avowedly led to the greatest difficulties; or the haphazard
methods of dealing with this question in West Africa, which
brought into being committees and commissions, the results of
which could not even be published? Was the question of land
tenure studied in South Africa and a wise policy laid down by
the practical men who were settling and organising that
country? Let Mr. Mitchell look for the answer in the Report
of the Natives' Land Commission, 1916.
And again, why is it that the fundamental principles of British
land policy in Africa have not been laid down in any consistent
manner? The decisions of the Judicial Committee of the Privy
Council regarding the native rights to land are contradictory.
In Southern Rhodesia it was held that natives had really no
rights to their land whatever. On the other hand, in Nigeria the
Privy Council ruled that the rights in land were vested in the
natives. What is more important for the present argument,
however, is that the judgement was based on an admission of
ignorance, since it was held that 'it was really a matter of
conjecture to say what the rights of the original "natives" were'.
Their Lordships' decision further stated that:
'The estimation of the rights of aboriginal tribes is always
inherently difficult. Some tribes are so low in the scale of social
organisation that their usage and conceptions of rights and
duties are not to be reconciled with the institutions or the legal
ideas of civilized society. Such a gulf cannot be bridged. It
would be idle to impute to such people some shadow of the
rights known to our law, and then to transmute it into the
substance of transferable rights of property as we know them'.

Hence the Judicial Committee plainly regard the question of
native land tenure as both beyond the scope of practicable
inquiry and below the dignity of legal recognition. On the
contrary, I maintain that there is no people 'so low in the scale
of social organisation' but have a perfectly well-defined system
of land tenure. It is absurd to say that such a system 'cannot
be reconciled with the institutions or the legal ideas of civilised
society'. To reconcile the two is precisely the task of Colonial
statesmanship.¹⁶
Malinowski also heaps criticism upon Mitchell's conception of there
being a community of interests between all practical men in the col-
ofices—including commercial men—which he invited the anthrop-
ologist to join and to advise; he takes this to be the "central miscon-
ception" of Mitchell's argument.
Why have these men not yet organised themselves nor achieved
any singularly constructive results? Let us look more closely at
the possibilities of team-work done by missionaries and settlers,
administrators and journalists, engineers and recruiters. And
here I should like to ask why does Mr. Mitchell not include
among them the native African, 'savage' and detribalised alike;
or the West Coast lawyer; or the black expert in yellow
journalism; and incidentally also the East Coast Indian? They
are also actors in the play; they also, no doubt, share in the
'community of interests'. Why does the idea of harmonious
co-operation between them appear hardly plausible? Because
we know that these groups, far from having any 'community'
of interests, are divided by profound, indeed irreconcilable,
differences. And why, again, is this the case? Because they have
depth-rooted personal interests at stake, which cannot possibly
be brought into harmony with each other. And this is not because
of any lack of goodwill or of knowledge. The dissensions
involved far transcend any intellectual effort or emotional
adjustment; they cannot be bridged over by mere goodwill,

The whole life-work of, say, an economic exploiter on the one
hand and a missionary on the other, develops in either case
an entirely different type of bias in the individual. The one has
vested his capital, his life-interest, and his work in some venture,
which may fail or succeed according as to whether he can secure
an adequate supply of native labour. However much he may
sympathise with the natives, he is bound to have more sympathy
with his wife and children, with his dream of success and
constructive enterprise, with the belief, shared by industrialists

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 414-5.
and financiers, that a maximum production of wealth is an unqualified blessing for the world at large...

To speak of a ‘community of interests’ between the recruiter and the missionary, or between the Indian trader and the white settler, is a travesty of facts. Above all, I doubt whether the idea of ‘the planter who is engaged in working out a practical and just relation between white employer and native labourer’ is not a sporadic phenomenon. On every question, whether it be land tenure and native reservations or the political power of tribal authorities, there must crop up deep-seated differences of opinion, influenced, not merely by self-interest, greed, or ruthless rapacity on the one side, and mawkish sentimentalism, wrong-headed dogma, or false humanitarianism on the other; but also by the fundamental assumptions as to what is good for the native and for the white man, and what is the aim of African development. And these assumptions are bound up with the very existence of the several classes of African workers, classes which, again, differ profoundly...17

As though feeling that he might have gone too far, for these passages are surely very strong words for 1930, Malinowski then soberly insists on the responsibility of administrators for the decisions they must take, although anthropologists can act in an advisory capacity. He anxiously emphasises that there is overall agreement on this question. But talk of economic exploiters, the land rights of natives in Southern Rhodesia, criticism of the Buganda land tenure agreement and so on must be taken as serious evidence of political dissent from colonial policies within the camp of social anthropology.

Malinowski’s position is further consolidated during the thirties. He appears increasingly concerned with political realities, and less with the need to put up a pleasing case to officedom. Significantly, the ideals of scientific integrity are evoked to justify the study of vital and relevant problems of an economic, political and legal kind in a review article of 1939. Malinowski is criticising the abstract “culture trait” approach of Herskovits to problems of change, in the latter’s book *Acculturation* (1938), and recommends instead British methods, as laid out in *Memorandum XV* of the IAI, which take political realities into account.

The contact anthropologist has to study the methods of recruitment and the wage system, the effects of the Colour Bar legislation and of the anomalous contracts of African labour, as well as of the Pass Laws. He must study these facts scientifically, objectively, and in relation to each other. He need not in his scientific work be concerned with any partisan or even practical issues. But his study will reveal to him that for the present the Europeans are in a position to dictate the legal and economic terms. The conditions thus imposed are found to produce definite effects. Thus, if he studies the budgets of a family dependent on wages, he will find that the income does not really balance with expenditure. Scientific field-work reveals that the wages received by a mine labourer do not compensate the tribal economy for the total loss caused by his absence. From this it would be his duty to draw the conclusion that a system which produces inevitable impoverishment in a native reserve must lead through malnutrition, disorganization, and demoralization to gradual demographic decay...

Those of us who advocate “practical anthropology” insist only on the study of vital, relevant, and fundamental problems. That such problems affect practical interests directly is not our fault. That a question does not become less scientific because it is vital and relevant will only be denied by one who imagines that academic pursuits begin where reality ends. Professor Herskovits has never laid himself open to such criticism in his field-work or in his treatment of actual questions. It is therefore both regrettable and incomprehensible that he chooses to attack practical anthropology as a matter of method.18

The increasingly political stand taken by Malinowski is an indication of his sympathy for the growing nationalist movements of Africa. Jomo Kenyatta’s presence at Malinowski’s seminars in London in the thirties, and Malinowski’s own visits to Africa, where he called on several of his own students engaged in field-work, must have opened his eyes to the explosive situation in what had been peaceful anthropological territory. In his Introduction to Kenyatta’s *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938) he touches on the dangers of totalitarianism; the current spread of political opinion in Africa; and the question of whether the minority of agitators “will be able to keep a balanced and moderate view of economic, social and political issues, or whether by ignoring them and treating them with contempt we drive them into the open arms of world-wide Bolshevism”. He mentions various events which are “uniting the world of

17Ibid., pp. 421-22.

18B. Malinowski, “The present state of studies in culture contact: some comments on an American approach”, *Africa* XII, 1939, pp. 27-47.
coloured peoples against Western influence and above all against Great Britain and the United States”, and introduces Kenyatta’s book on the Kikuyu people as a salutary eye-opener to the West:

Mr. Kenyatta has wisely refrained from using any such language as appears in my last sentences. He presents the facts objectively, and to a large extent without any passion or feeling. That some of this is contained in his presentation of facts is a help and not a hindrance. For if the present book does nothing more but to help us to understand how Africans see through our pretences, and how they assess the realities of the Dual Mandate, it will be rendering a great service...

Whatever may be thought of Kenyatta’s book today, it is beyond question that at that time he saw in social anthropology something that could be turned to use as part of the growing nationalist challenge to colonial rule; and his book was regarded both in nationalist and official colonial circles as a highly political document. In his Preface, Kenyatta thanks among others “the members of the Kikuyu Central Association, my comrades-in-arms of the past, present and future” (the Mau-Mau rising was still to come) and goes on:

In the present work I have tried my best to record facts as I know them, mainly through a lifetime of personal experience, and have kept under very considerable restraint the sense of political grievances which no progressive African can fail to experience. My object is not to enter into controversial discussion with those who have attempted, or are attempting, to describe the same things from outside observation, but to let the truth speak for itself. I know that there are many scientists and general readers who will be disinterestedly glad of the opportunity of hearing the Africans’ point of view, and to all such I am glad to be of service. At the same time, I am well aware that I could not do justice to the subject without offending those ‘professional friends of the African’ who are prepared to maintain their friendship for eternity as a sacred duty, provided only that the African will continue to play the part of an ignorant savage so that they can monopolise the office of interpreting his mind and speaking for him. To such people, an African who writes a study of this kind is encroaching on their preserves. He is a rabbit turned poacher.

But the African is not blind. He can recognise these pretenders to philanthropy, and in various parts of the continent he is

waking up to the realisation that a running river cannot be dammed for ever without breaking its bounds. His power of expression has been hampered, but it is breaking through, and will very soon sweep away the patronage and repression which surround him.\(^{20}\)

In the body of the book the Kikuyu people are presented as a people who have suffered conquest, subjugation and loss of land; for example:

Since the coming of the Europeans the warrior organisation has been rendered powerless... the spirit of manhood in the youth has been almost killed by the imposition of imperialistic rule which restricts people from moving and functioning freely in their own country. The European prides himself on having done a great service to the Africans by stopping the ‘tribal warfare’... But consider the difference between the method and motive employed in the so-called savage tribal warfare, and those employed in the modern warfare waged by the ‘civilised’ tribes of Europe, and in which the Africans who have no part in the quarrels are forced to fight... It would have been much better for the Africans to continue with their old tribal warfare, which they fought with pride and with the loss of a few warriors, rather than receiving the so-called civilising missions which means the subjugation of the African races to a perpetual state of servitude.

In the old order of the African society, with all the evils that are supposed to be connected with it, a man was a man, and as such he had the rights of a man and liberty to exercise his will and thought in a direction which suited his purposes as well as those of his fellow-men; but today an African, no matter what his station in life, is like a horse which moves only in the direction that the rider pulls the rein. The harmony and stability of the African’s mode of life, in political, social, religious and economic organisations, was based on the land which was, and still is, the soul of the people. The first step which the European civilising missions took to disorganise the Africans in order to exploit and oppress them, especially in South and East Africa, was to take away the best African lands...\(^{21}\)

Other writers who had been trained to some extent by Malinowski were carrying out sociological investigations of a kind which re-


revealed the hard facts of survival and subsistence in rural areas of Africa drained of manpower by the developing mining and industrial towns. Audrey Richards' *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia* (1939) is an outstanding example of this kind of work. She also confronted the dilemma of why there was suspicion and non-co-operation between anthropologists and officials, when the work of anthropologists ought to be practically useful. She contributed to the debate in *Africa* in 1944, with an article which surveys the previous fifteen years in which there was supposedly a good deal of development in practical anthropology, but in fact real co-operation and support from the authorities for the subject was disappointingly small. Among the positive achievements in the subject she notes the change in focus away from primitive communities: "Most of Malinowski's pupils, however worked among the larger African tribes of the greatest political importance and where European contact had been at its maximum." One might ask whether this could be one of the reasons why the official attitude was so lukewarm. Certainly, in giving the reasons why she judges that there had been only very moderate success for the IAI programme of closer association between research and practical affairs, reflected in the small number of research posts and the difficulty of financing research, she refers to suspicion of the social investigator. Both in such work in Britain, and in Africa.

The protests do not come from the individual questioned, for most people like to talk about themselves and to find that their views are considered important ... The criticisms in both cases come from those in authority: the Mayor or the M.P. of the English borough, the district commissioner or the missionary in Africa. These probably fear disturbances of some kind or other as the result of the investigation, and probably feel resentment at a stranger making inquiries in an area over which they have control.

In a footnote she points out that in South Africa, the Union Government as a wartime measure was refusing permission to anthropologists to enter Native reserves. The article goes on to discuss the personal misunderstandings and suspicions which dog an anthropologist's fieldwork, and diplomatically gives a reasonable explanation of the (scientific) reasons why the anthropologist "is bound to lead a life which is very strange in the eyes of other Europeans", having the reputation of "dancing round a tom-tom in a loin-cloth". This is all directed at officialdom; and ends with an implied appeal for greater research support. For earlier in the article Audrey Richards commented that "It looks as though the anthropologist had been advertising his goods, often rather clamorously, in a market in which there was little demand for them", and asked why. The fundamental answer to her question surely would lie in the gulf of serious mutual distrust between at least some brands of social anthropology and the authorities responsible for "good administration".

The debate over the use of anthropology, conducted in the pages of *Africa* for a couple of decades, does not appear to have led to greater understanding. On the contrary, there was in some respects a polarisation of opinion. For example, on the official side, in 1951 Sir Philip Mitchell was able to state his earlier misgivings about anthropology in an even more slighting manner than he had done over twenty years earlier. In a review of Lord Hailey's *Native Administration in the British Territories in Africa*, he writes of the contribution of anthropology as follows:

It has always been a matter of particular difficulty in colonial Africa to ensure that those who are responsible for the initiation of policy or legislation, or for important administrative action or decisions (and in African conditions a heavy responsibility may rest on very young shoulders) should be adequately informed not only of past events and old customs, but of current social, political and economic conditions, in their own country and in others offering useful analogies or experience. There was, especially during the nineteen twenties and thirties, a spate of special reports and investigations; at one time, indeed, anthropologists, asserting that they only were gifted with understanding, busied themselves with enthusiasm about all the minutiae of obscure tribal and personal practices, especially if they were agreeably associated with sex or flavoured with obscenity. There resulted a large number of painstaking and often accurate records of interesting habits and practices, of such length that no one had time to read them and often, in any case, irrelevant, by the time they became available, to the day to day business of Government.

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23Ibid., p. 291.
24Ibid., p. 293.
26Ibid., p. 292.
This clearly unfair jibe received a sober reply from Schapera, spelling out once more the case for the usefulness of anthropology and suggesting co-operation on the ground between anthropologists and administrators, but protectively retaining the right to investigate esoteric scientific problems. The terms of the debate were thus very close to what they had been for a generation: and this in itself suggests that a fundamental opposition of interest, sympathy and commitment between the camp of colonial officials, on the one hand, and of social anthropologists on the other, had not been overcome.

Indeed, Malinowski's position had hardened even further. His most powerful statements on the need for the work of the social scientist to be politically involved appear in the collection of his writings posthumously edited by Phyllis Kaberry under the title The Dynamics of Culture Change: an Inquiry into Race Relations in Africa (1945). There is a markedly more intense tone in these later writings, partly perhaps a sign of increasing disaffection with the apolitical, amoral natural science approach of those influenced strongly by Radcliffe-Brown, and of a deepening personal radical commitment. In the first chapter we read:

There is a moral obligation to every calling, even to that of a scientific specialist. The duty of the anthropologist is to be a fair and true interpreter of the Native... In reality, the historian of the future will have to register that Europeans in the past sometimes exterminated whole island peoples; that they expropriated most of the patrimony of savage races; that they introduced slavery in a specially cruel and pernicious form; and that even if they abolished it later, they treated the expatriated Negroes as outcasts and pariahs...

The Native still needs help. The anthropologist who is unable to perceive this, unable to register the tragic errors committed at times with the best intentions, at times under the stress of dire necessity, remains an antiquarian covered with academic dust and in a fool's paradise... Research in order to be of use must be inspired by courage and purpose...

Shall we, therefore, mix politics with science? In one way, decidedly "yes"...\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{27}I. Schapera, "Anthropology and the administrator", J. African Administration III, 1951, 128-35.


Malinowski develops his argument that in the context of Africa, where change is proceeding everywhere, there can be no division between the theoretical and the applied aspects of anthropology. He insists on the need for a broad prospective:

We are dealing with a subject matter which is in flux; the rapidity of change confuses observation and confounds policies. The growth of new unexpected forces and factors, such as African nationalism and the development of autonomous African churches, poses difficulties of description and analysis as well as of policy. In this new work the theoretician and practitioner must take account of wide issues of Western rule, economic as well as imperial; they have to be acquainted with the rudiments at least of economic, legal, and political theory and, with all this, of anthropological method.\textsuperscript{29}

In the subsequent chapter he claims that "the whole range of European influences, interests, good intention, and predatory drives must become an essential part of the study of African culture change." It is not merely a question of considering local Europeans as part of an integrated community with the Africans.

The treatment of the complex situation of change as one 'well integrated whole'... ignores the whole dynamism of the process... Above all, it obscures and distorts the only correct conception of culture change in such areas: the fact that it is the result of an impact of a higher, active culture upon a simpler, more passive one.\textsuperscript{30}

The "contact" situation is highly one-sided; in a list of its characteristics in the fifth chapter of the collection, Malinowski notes that Europeans have not given African people instruments of physical power, "firearms, bombing planes, poison gas, and all that makes effective defence or aggression possible". Nor do "we" give instruments of political mastery; nor do we share with them the substance of economic wealth and advantages. "Even when, under indirect economic exploitation as in West Africa and Uganda, we allow the Natives a share of profits, the full control of economic organization remains in the hands of Western enterprise".\textsuperscript{31} Nor do we admit of social, political or even religious equality. On the whole we are more generous with spiritual gifts, while withholding wealth, power and independence. And now for the justification of his stand in terms of science:
This argument may be mistaken by the superficial reader as an outburst of pro-Native ranting. It is nothing of the sort. All this is simply a statement of one of the most scientifically relevant factors in culture change as it occurs in parts of Africa. To ignore the fact that there is a selective giving on the part of the Europeans makes for a distortion of evidence, and this is a sin against science.\(^{32}\)

It is true that Malinowski was afraid of extreme nationalism and the political dangers of its spread, and was not committed to a revolutionary position. But he sketches clearly in these later writings the essential features of the developing political situation, makes plain his own sympathies, and justifies them in terms of the scientist’s duty. The colour bar for example “has to be put on the methodological map”, because of its theoretical importance in cultural change.

Indeed, the sooner we speak quite freely and openly about it and also with a complete scientific detachment, the better; for the educated Africans are rapidly becoming aware of, and exaggerating, the situation. The African is becoming an anthropologist who turns our own weapons against us. He is studying European aims, pretences, and all the real and imaginary acts of injustice. Such an anthropology is no doubt mutilated and misguided, full of counter-prejudices, and charged with bitter hostility. It is often blind in its intransigence and sweeping in its wholesale indictment. But it cannot be ignored by the man of science; and it would be better if the practical man did not treat it as a joke or as an insignificant and minor excrescence. For on the whole it contains a great deal of truth, and it foreshadows the formation of a public opinion, of a national and racial feeling which, sooner or later, will have to be taken into account by the practical contact agents.\(^{35}\)

And even more explicitly:
The various movements which have so far appeared have broken down largely because the Natives are not yet ripe for national, well-organized, collective action. By the time, however, when a European power in control may become politically embarrassed and when there is fertile ground for the combination of the Natives from the Lakes to the Cape, such a collective body of opinion may not be an irrelevant factor. The anthropologist should have as one of his duties, not to act as a spy, still less as an agent provocateur, but to study the growing forces of Bantu nationalism; to insist as all those with knowledge and foresight do, that an improvement in social and, above all, economic conditions, constitutes the only way out of the difficulty; and that no price is too high to pay to prevent inevitable disaster.\(^{34}\)

Malinowski does not face the question of how “inevitable” disaster can be prevented. In positive terms, he merely suggests some liberal reforms, and the need for the continuance of some elements from the traditional past. On these points he could certainly be said to stand close to official colonial policy and practice.

But I have quoted extensively from Malinowski and some of his contemporaries and his pupils, in order to suggest that taken as a whole, his views nevertheless constitute a point of view of greater political perception and radical significance than might at first be thought. Of course Malinowski was not trying to overthrow the system. His students’ grants would have soon dried up if that were the case. Of course his activities and writings, and those of his colleagues, were contained within the total colonial situation; how could it have been otherwise? But just as Malinowski himself rejected the concept of the “culture contact” situation as an integrated whole, we must reject the concept of the colonial situation in the inter-war period as an integrated whole. We must recognise that there were developing contradictions, not merely between the administrators and their philosophy of just rule on the one hand, and nascent nationalism and socialism on the other, but between each of these and social anthropology, caught in the middle and constrained from either side.

In the inter-war period, the main constraints were from colonial authority itself. A historical view of the subject should therefore give full weight to the ways in which social anthropology was a vehicle for criticism of that authority.

\(^{Ibid.\text{, p. 61.}}\)

In the preparation of this article, I have been indebted both to discussions at the Hull seminar and to helpful criticism from Natale Olwak Akolawin, Maurice Freedman and Godfrey Lienhardt also kindly read and commented on the manuscript.