

Malinowski's work in fact fell into disrepute after the war. His exhaustive study of a particular community was useless for the development of political and kinship typologies which became the current interest. 'Culture' was out, and 'structure' became the only reputable subject of study. This rigid distinction between culture and structure is itself breaking down, as statements made at a recent Cambridge conference on anthropology showed. But whatever the contemporary fashion, I believe the corpus of Malinowski's field material will remain compulsory reading for students, and a treasure-house for sociologists, psychologists and linguists. The beautiful clarity and precision of some of Radcliffe-Brown's structural studies excites intellectual admiration, but there is a creative touch in Malinowski's finest descriptive passages which still sets the young field worker raring to go.

A. R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN

(1881-1995)

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Modern social anthropologists frequently refer to Radcliffe-Brown, but as often as not they do so only to point out how wrong he was. For a scholar who spent a lifetime as a professional social anthropologist his written output was small, and many of his ideas were second hand. Such fieldwork as he did was mostly of the old-fashioned, 'questionnaire' type; he worked through interpreters and not through the vernacular languages, and his writings about the peoples he studied quite lack the detailed immediacy and vividness of his contemporary Malinowski's. Nevertheless, with Malinowski, he is rightly regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern social anthropology. Why?

Alfred Reginald Brown (the 'Radcliffe', his mother's maiden name, was added later) was born in Birmingham in 1881. He read mental and moral science at Cambridge, and also studied anthropology there under Rivers and Haddon. From 1906 to 1908 he engaged in anthropological fieldwork in the Andaman Islands, and in 1909-10 he lectured both in Cambridge and at the London School of Economics. In the latter years he went to Western Australia, where he carried out what would nowadays be called an ethnographic survey among some of the aboriginal peoples of the area. After the First

World War, which he spent mostly in Australia and Tonga, Radcliffe-Brown went to South Africa, where in 1920 he was appointed to the new chair of social anthropology at Cape Town. His most celebrated book, *The Andaman Islanders*, was published in 1922. Four years later he returned to Australia to occupy the new chair at Sydney [University], and in 1930 he published his second important work, *The Social Organization of Australian Tribes*. In the following year he left Australia to become professor of anthropology at Chicago, where he remained until 1937, except for a brief visit to China in 1935. In 1939 he came as professor of social anthropology to Oxford, and there he stayed, with an intermission of two years at Sao Paulo, Brazil, until he reached retiring age nine years later.

Even after that he kept moving, teaching at Alexandria, London, Manchester and Grahamstown, South Africa. He came back to England in 1954, and died in London the following year, aged seventy-four. As well as the two books mentioned above, Radcliffe-Brown produced a number of lectures and articles, some of the more important of which were republished during his lifetime as *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1952); others in two posthumous volumes. He married in 1910 and had one daughter.

Radcliffe-Brown's peripatetic career gives the first clue to his importance and influence: he really put social anthropology, as a university subject, on the world map. As a young man he was a forceful and unconventional personality (At Cambridge he was known as 'Anarchy Brown') and a vivid if sometimes didactic conversationalist. In his prime he was a stimulating and exciting teacher, as I can myself well remember, having attended a course of his lectures at Oxford in the autumn of 1939. He was also said to have been a good listener, at least until he was affected by illness and old age, and observers have spoken of his patience and sympathy with both informants and administrators in the field. So he was admirably qualified to act as both prophet and proponent of 'the newer anthropology' (or 'comparative sociology', as he wanted to call it), and he did so with remarkable success in all five continents.

But his reputation rests not only on his personal charm and his brilliance as a teacher; in fact he possessed a good deal less charisma than Malinowski, and he never founded or wished to found a 'school'. He sought students, not disciples. His chief contribution to social anthropology derives from his clear and systematic thinking (perhaps sometimes a bit too systematic) about the subject and its problems, and from his brilliantly lucid and incisive style of exposition. It owes little to his fieldwork, which in originality and depth was far inferior to Malinowski's. He never got to know an Andamanese or aboriginal community 'from the inside', but he gave a new clarity to his subject, and a new precision to the problems it studies, which have done much to establish it as a respectable and autonomous member of the social sciences. Radcliffe-Brown is often wrong, but at least we nearly always know what he is saying.

When Radcliffe-Brown started publishing in the early 1920s, social anthropology in England was in something of a muddle. The evolutionary theories of the Victorians had for the most part been replaced by diffusionist hypotheses. But the trouble with both of these approaches was that with pre-literate societies there was usually no way of testing their conclusions, since they referred to past events for which there could be little or no valid evidence. Also, and more importantly, the increasing amount and higher quality of reports from the field were bringing home to anthropologists the fact that 'primitive' societies were not just ragbags of savage customs, each of which could be understood only by somehow tracing it back to an earlier form or to diffusion from elsewhere. It was now becoming apparent that such societies were real working systems, which demanded to be understood in their own right.

But how? Radcliffe-Brown had the answer. One of the most formative influences on his thinking had been the French sociological tradition which had begun with Montesquieu and had developed, through Saint-Simon and Comte, into the mature sociological system of Émile Durkheim. Like his French predecessors he believed that societies are systems. This means that they must be made up of parts, related systematically to one another and to the whole society, in accordance with general principles which, as soon as we know enough, we shall be able to discover. In other words, societies have 'structures' (Radcliffe-Brown defines 'structure' as 'the complex network of actually existing relationships in any society') And their component parts 'particular social usages', have (or may have - Radcliffe-Brown is less dogmatic on this point than his theory would seem to require) *functions*, a function being defined as 'the contribution which a partial activity makes to the total activity of which it is a part'. Thus societies are quite like the physical organisms studied by some natural scientists, even though they are not altogether like them; Radcliffe-Brown himself points out some of the more obvious differences. So what social anthropologists should aim at is a 'natural science of society'. By systematically comparing societies of diverse types, we shall eventually achieve a body of scientific knowledge about all human societies everywhere, expressed in unexceptionable general laws.

Nowadays all this looks pretty naive to most of us, and few modern social anthropologists regard their discipline with such simple optimism, or even as being quite this kind of enterprise. To begin with, in spite of his philosophical training (or because of it?) Radcliffe-Brown did not really understand what science is about, or what might be the nature of the 'general laws' which he supposed it to be seeking. He wrote as though he thought that scientists simply aimed at recording 'regularities' of the form 'all As are Bs'. He quite failed to see that what is essential to a scientific law is not that it states a regularity but that it explains one, by means of some new synthesis.

Again, we now see more clearly that human societies differ from the mindless systems which most natural scientists study in that their compo-

ment members are, or appear to be, influenced by shared concepts, beliefs and values. And the understanding of these requires methods quite different from those used by natural scientists, methods which are interpretative as well as analytical, and which are in this respect much more like those used by historians and philosophers than they are like those of physicists or zoologists. This was plain enough to Durkheim and his school, but although Radcliffe-Brown himself used such interpretative methods, as any good social anthropologist must, he was so obsessed with his view of social anthropology as a natural science that he failed to develop their methodological implications. It has taken years of protest by Evans-Pritchard and others to make the study of such 'ideal' or conceptual phenomena, sometimes dismissed by rigid structuralists as 'culture', respectable again.

Finally, it has been pointed out often enough that the static (or homeostatic) view of society which is implicit in the Radcliffe-Brown approach affords no adequate -- or indeed any -- model for understanding social change, for if a system is really 'functional' *any* change must disrupt it. Radcliffe-Brown was not as oblivious to these difficulties as has sometimes been asserted, but his somewhat doctrinaire approach to the question of what the social sciences are about effectively prevented him from facing up to them. But here, as elsewhere, the crucial thing is that his clear, if mistaken, theoretical statements have enabled others to see some of the problems more clearly and so deal with them more effectively.

It remains true, however, that very often social and cultural institutions *are* functionally interconnected, and the discovery of these not always obvious causal links provides a highly important means of understanding them. The recognition of this was the real 'revolution' in anthropology, and despite their differences Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown were equally its authors. It formed the basis for Radcliffe-Brown's clear and still valid distinction between ethnology, the branch of anthropology which is concerned with how things came to be as they are, and social anthropology, which is concerned with how they work and what they mean at the present time.

This distinction is still often blurred, with consequent confusion. As Radcliffe-Brown conceived it, social anthropology was 'ahistorical' rather than anti-historical; where historical evidence was available, he quite explicitly admitted it, but in most of the societies studied by anthropologists up to that time there just wasn't any. In such cases historical conjecture was usually profitless, but this did not mean that they could not be profitably studied as going concerns. Both historical and functional methods were legitimate, but they were *different*; this was Radcliffe-Brown's central point. It is above all the recognition of this, with its corollary that the field anthropologist should live in the society he studies and observe what actually happens, instead of just asking people what they think happens or ought to happen, that has made possible the modern social anthropological monograph, based on the writer's own intensive fieldwork.

Hardly anybody now accepts Radcliffe-Brown's ideas about theory and method, though his clear statements of them have helped others to think up better ones. But his work in some of the more specialized fields of social anthropology has been more positively influential, in the sense that further progress has been along the lines he laid down, rather than in opposition to them. Three fields in which his contribution has seemed to me to be particularly significant are those of ritual, of social control, and of kinship.

Radcliffe-Brown's first and most celebrated book, *The Andaman Islanders*, is in effect an attempt to test in the field the Durkheimian hypothesis that the primary function of ritual is, by giving expression to the collective 'sentiments' of a society, to contribute to social cohesion, and so to the maintenance of a social system through time. But in later writings he went further; he claimed that ritual might express more than merely man's dependence on society; even more basically it expresses his dependence on his whole environment, physical as well as social. Nowadays most students of ritual would go even further still, and would say that ritual may express any notion which is of shared value and 'concern' in a society. But what is of major importance in Radcliffe-Brown's statement is his emphasis on the fact that ritual is essentially *expressive*; it is a way of saying something as well as of doing something. Once this is recognized, it becomes possible to see (as Evans-Pritchard pointed out more clearly later) that magic and religion are not, as Tylor and Frazer had thought they were, just misguided and ineffective attempts to be scientific.

For Radcliffe-Brown, there are two important things to be found out about any ritual procedure; first, what it means to the people who have it, and second, what its social consequences are. Even though he did not see as clearly as he might have done that the first of these kinds of inquiry calls for methods not allowed for by his brand of functionalism, his clear statement that there are these two kinds of questions to be answered opened the way for the deeper studies of magical and religious behaviour later carried out by Evans-Pritchard, Nadel and others.

Though Radcliffe-Brown did no fieldwork explicitly devoted to the problem of social control, he provided a characteristically clear and precise framework for its investigation in smaller-scale societies. Taking, first, its political aspect, he adapted the classical formulations of Weber and others, and defined political organization as being concerned with 'the maintenance or establishment of social order, within a territorial framework, by the organized exercise of coercive authority through the use, or the possibility of use, of physical force'.

Though there is little that is original about this formulation (and in any case a little reflection shows it to be inapplicable to those many societies in which some sort of order seems to be maintained without 'the organized exercise of coercive authority') it does at least provide social anthropologists

with clear criteria for determining what they should regard as political, and for distinguishing different types of political control.

In the study of what used to be called 'primitive law', Radcliffe-Brown's contribution has been both more original and more important. He saw, as some of his contemporaries, including Malinowski (whose *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, brilliant though it is, simply adds to the confusion), failed to do, that terms like 'law', properly applicable to the complex judicial institutions of Western society, are a good deal less appropriate if they are applied to the varied means whereby social order may be maintained in 'primitive' societies. Durkheim thought that 'primitive' societies were dominated by a kind of prototypical 'criminal law'; 'civil law' being characteristic of more advanced societies. Malinowski reacted against this one-sided view with the equally one-sided claim that simpler societies (by which he meant the Trobriand Islanders) were on the contrary just as concerned with 'civil law', that is, with relationships of economic and other kinds of reciprocity. (In fact his own evidence showed that they weren't.) But the trouble with both of these approaches was that they attempted to comprehend the unfamiliar mechanisms of small-scale, preliterate societies in Western terms. Radcliffe-Brown saw this clearly, and he offers a concise and very much less culture-bound method of classifying and understanding these institutions.

This is his theory of social sanctions. A sanction is 'a reaction on the part of a society or of a considerable number of its members to a mode of behaviour which is thereby approved or disapproved'. Sanctions can be classified as positive and negative (rewards and punishments), as organized and diffuse, and as primary and secondary (depending on whether action is taken in case of a breach of rule by the whole community or its recognized representatives, or by the injured party, with popular approval). In this schema the sanctions of the criminal law of Western society are neatly subsumed under the rubric of 'organized negative sanctions'. But they are only one kind of sanctions, and some societies manage very well without them. This schema enables field workers to take adequate and coherent account of such factors of social control as the blood feud, ritual beliefs and procedures, and public opinion, factors which can be referred to as 'law' only at the cost of clarity and common sense.

In the study of kinship, finally, for many students Radcliffe-Brown introduced clarity and order into what had hitherto been something of a jumble of ethnographic *minutiae*. His first important work in this field was his comparative analysis of Australian kinship usages and terminology in *The Social Organization of Australian Tribes*. But he went on to review the kinship systems of the peoples of other continents, especially Africa, and the results of this review are admirably summed up in his long introduction to the symposium *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, which is still indispensable reading for students.

Here again his great merit was that he discerned very clearly the essential elements in the welter of kinship material which was pouring in from the field in increasing quantities. Like an expert jigsaw-puzzle solver, he saw quickly and clearly what went with what, and which were the essential features of the pattern. It can be and has been argued that phrases like 'the unity of the sibling group', 'the unity of the lineage', and 'the equivalence of siblings' add little or nothing analytically to our understanding of kinship relations. But in fact they do sum up in a phrase essential elements in certain broad types of relationship which had not hitherto been so explicitly, or at least so succinctly, stated.

It was known, for example, before Radcliffe-Brown wrote that in some societies membership in particular descent groups was more important, and important in more contexts, than the particular kinship links which join two individuals, though the implications of this were not always fully appreciated. But by picking out this essential 'group' element in many relationships and giving it a name, Radcliffe-Brown highlighted its importance, and so helped to provide a firm base for the great advances in kinship and lineage theory later made by Evans-Pritchard, Fortes and others.

It has often been said, and with some justice, that Radcliffe-Brown's chief contributions were made at the beginning of his career, and that most of his later writing did little more than reiterate, sometimes modify, themes already stated. It is therefore worth noting that in the field of kinship studies at least he made a significant advance on an earlier position of his own, though he is not always credited with it. In his celebrated early essay, 'The Mother's Brother in South Africa' (Chapter I in *Structure and Function*) he argued that the intimate, privileged relationship often found between men and their mother's brothers in societies where membership in patrilineally organized groups is important, is due to an extension of the warm, friendly feeling that a man has for his mother, or her male siblings. In accordance with the principle of the equivalence of siblings these men are in some sense and in some contexts thought of as 'interchangeable' with her, as being the same *kind* of relative.

Later anthropologists have rightly criticized this view, pointing out that there is little if any evidence for such affective transference, and that in any case it does not seem to apply in matrilineal societies, where although no doubt children love their mothers just as much, the mother's brother and not the father is the figure of authority. They have advocated a more 'structural' interpretation of this usage, based on the recognition of the differential group membership of the persons concerned. But they have not always mentioned that Radcliffe-Brown himself, in a later essay (reprinted as Chapter V in *Structure and Function*) made exactly the same point, that the essential thing about the relationship is that although men and their mothers' brothers in patrilineal and exogamous societies are closely related, they belong to different and distinct lineages. Thus their relationship involves both separation and at-

tachment, and the joking relationship is admirably adapted to cope with this ambivalence.

Social anthropology has turned into something very different from what Radcliffe-Brown expected, even, probably, from what he would have wished. We are really hardly any nearer to the formulation of empirically based 'general laws', applicable to all human societies everywhere, than we were when he first formulated this as the chief aim of social anthropology, in the 1920s. On the other hand, our understanding of the cultural and social institutions of simpler, smaller-scale societies has advanced enormously in the decades since then. It has done so both on the contextual, 'functional' level, and in the interpretative study of symbols and meanings.

Much of this advance we owe to scholars who have either been pupils of Radcliffe-Brown (as many of the present senior generation of social anthropologists have), or have been influenced by his writings. He is still important, not because of his originality as a theoretical social scientist (his ideas about what society is show little advance on Durkheim's), but rather because of his capacity to formulate concisely and clearly some of the issues in the major fields of anthropological inquiry which are as important in our day as they were in his. His genius was for seeing the essential aspects of things, the provision of 'guiding formulations', in Redfield's phrase, rather than for the discovery of new and hitherto unsuspected syntheses, the 'laws' which he was so anxious to find. Although he quite failed to do what he set out to do, the conceptual tools which his clear thinking provided in many fields of social anthropology have been indispensable in the later development of the subject to which he devoted his life.