

Slide 1

Anthropological Reflections: 1959 – 2019

David Parkin

President, Director and colleagues, I thank you and the Royal Anthropological Institute for the honour in awarding me the (inaugural) President's Lifetime Achievement Award. It gives me great pleasure as does having friends and colleagues here, including those three who have spoken already and have given of their time despite their enormous burdens.

Slide 2: *From Social anthropology to Anthropology*

Persistence of the 'social'

Diversification and 'Closed Systems and Open Minds'

1959 was when I first engaged with social anthropology as an undergraduate at SOAS and the LSE which in those days taught jointly. Sixty years later I am learning how much more there is to know and I often wonder what my great lecturers would make of the subject now: people like Raymond Firth, Daryll Forde, Maurice Freedman, Lucy Mair, Isaac Schapera, Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, Philip Gulliver, Aidan Southall, Abner Cohen and, those still with us, Adrian Mayer, Freddy Bailey, Jean La Fontaine and others.

We can certainly find continuity through the various changes in social anthropology but we might fix on different kinds of continuity: is it the then method of intensive small group

analysis through participant observation in the languages of the people over at least a year living in a locality or diaspora? Is it some version of the comparative method leading to generalization or has this changed or become irrelevant? What continuity if any is evident in, for instance, earlier social anthropology and modern science and technology studies (so called STS), the digitalization of social communication, or the bioinformatic revolution? And do such interests increasingly merge boundaries to the extent that we might be asked whether **social** anthropology has lost its distinctiveness and is now imperceptibly merged with a wider social science and not just a case of having become Radcliffe-Brown's 'comparative sociology'? And I know that there have been many debates on this issue. But a quick recap might be useful.

Certainly, some do see the subject as sociology while most, I suspect, see social anthropology as fundamentally distinct.

And, of course, universities, funding bodies and other competing institutions also feed these epistemological differences. And yet there is an, often faltering, **tradition** of social anthropology which is as much visceral as theoretical and methodological. We do see and feel the world differently from others!

There clearly **has** been re-shaping and merging of social anthropology and yet the lengthy, intensive, linguistically informed focus surely remains as an ideal, even though, perhaps increasingly, the research location is a view from afar or one based entirely on literature as well as that of the traditional humble field.

It is sometimes anthropology as meta-philosophy (the philosophy of other peoples' own practical philosophies); or

the centrifugal and centripetal tensions of transnational populations; or anthropology as ‘science’ as against anthropology as the ‘humanities’. Over at least the last three decades we have gone round and round with the methodological issues involved in all this.

Nevertheless, perhaps as a reaction to the fact that **social** anthropology has both absorbed and partly been absorbed by other disciplines, I have noticed that we increasingly refer to our work as just **anthropology** *tout court*, by which we mean the greater inclusion of material culture, ecology, linguistics, philosophy and biologically related concerns including evolution.

Not quite the demarcated American four-fields approach but an overlapping of these interests. We now separately identify medical, linguistic, visual, evolutionary, environmental, cognitive, LGBT, legal and museum **anthropologies** and we

recruit new faculty to such specialist positions to an extent that might have been anathema to those earlier great scholars I mentioned who, in the UK and Europe, had fought for the prefix 'social', wishing to uncouple it from the North American 'cultural' focus.

Hence, the post-war Association of **Social** Anthropologists complementing the wider purview of the much older Royal Anthropological Institute. But the division was not that clear-cut and the well-rounded social anthropologist was expected to include **some** of these diverse interests under the label of social anthropology alongside so-called biological anthropologists and museum ethnographers. Max Gluckman's 1964 book, *closed Systems and Open Minds*, was an impressive juggling act encouraging us to bring in ideas from other disciplines but not to stray beyond the limits of our naivety in those other disciplines.

The separation then of the social from the cultural might seem to us now as overdrawn, false and unnecessary, though we still hover over the distinction, through use of the adjectival 'cultural' as well as 'social, sometimes abridging them as 'the social-cultural'. But we also normally accept that the social encompasses the cultural.

In other words, the social continues to be our analytical starting-point but includes the ideational, the material, the technological, biological and linguistic.

Slide 3

The on-going project of continuous incorporation within

the expanding subject of Anthropology

The paradox of holism and specialisation

In other words, it is not really a separation or fragmentation of these interests **but an on-going project of continuous incorporation within the expanding subject of anthropology.**

I think there has for some time been increasing acceptance of the view that this socially driven but more **holistic** remit of anthropology in the UK and elsewhere in Europe is good for the subject and that it is both exciting and more closely meets the challenges of the modern global episteme. But this holism can still and I would say must continue, **in the last instance**, to draw on those methodological criteria of long-term,

intensive, population-specific study in the languages of that population.

Slide 4:

The self-assessing anthropocene

Reflexivity – two senses?

Recursivity

Relativism

A difference between then and now is that anthropological problems are now set in separately identified **empirical** contexts. Such contexts include trans-global populations and ‘super-diversity’, changing human-machine techno-environments, post-humanism, transformative LGBT identities ([lesbian](#), [gay](#), [bisexual](#), and [transgender](#)), trans-languaging (not the same as multilingualism), inter-digital communication and ethics as pulled between regional and global doxa as well as between pragmatic demands and humanitarian concerns. All these in the shadow of the so-called Anthropocene (i.e. part of

the Holocene geological epoch as humanly recognised). These new contexts also inform challenges raised, most recently, by the so-called ‘ontological turn’, with its rejection of cultural representationalism and the old dichotomies of nature/culture, universalism/relativism, subject-object and body-mind which I thought had been dissolved by the nineteen eighties but seemingly not. That said, the new ontologists have reaffirmed the vital importance of detailed ethnographic investigation as the essence of our discipline.

Like ‘political correctness’ postmodernism of the seventies and eighties was decried and ridiculed but did at least force us to de- and re-construct our concepts, including the many binary fixations, and some of what is being done today is the heir to that time,

And that, it seems to me, is where we are at in 2019. In what I would call the **self-assessing anthropocene**, which is the

outgrowth of the 1980s' discovery of **reflexivity**, itself much influenced by feminist anthropology and by a kind of post-marxist inter-subjectivity - i.e. the view that we are always part of that which we observe and create – that curious link, through reflexivity, to both phenomenology and existentialism – **i.e. that we consider peoples' experiences and not just their perceptions of their world, and that we consider also their human dilemmas and their ways of surmounting them.**

The reflexivity of the 1980s surely has two (partially overlapping) senses. One is the straightforward sense you find in some 1970s/80s ethnographies in which anthropologists reflect personally on their position among the people they study and on how this may change how they see themselves and the world in general (e.g. Karla Poewe/Cesara Manda Reflections of a woman anthropologist 1982; Paul Rabinow Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco 1977).

A second sense of reflexivity I take from Halliday's simple linguistic example, e.g. 'this sentence is six words long' – an example of language talking about itself. It is also an aspect of society talking about itself, i.e. it is that which we observe telling us and perhaps revising for us the ideas we initially came to the field with. It seems to be akin to the idea, as expressed by proponents of the recent 'ontological turn, of 'recursivity' which Paolo Heywood defines as "The notion (or "methodological imperative") of having ethnographic concepts feed back and affect analytical ones..." The ethnographic concepts are those which do not make sense to the ethnographer within her own conceptual schema, e.g. that a tree is spirit. And because this concept is counter-intuitive, it makes one rethink one's own conceptual schema and so is a "transforming concept".

I do think that, as part of post-structuralism, this is what cross-cultural semantics has always tried to do (i.e. start with the

indigenous semantic cluster and work out from it in order to understand it in one's own terms as being another's truth and therefore another's world and as transforming one's own world. This then is **meaning** leading to the **naming** of objects and so giving them **presence** or being. Or, put another way, this is epistemology giving rise to ontology, which is a position rejected by proponents of the ontological turn whose ontology excludes the route from epistemology.

I note here the connection with the rationality and relativity debate in anthropology and philosophy of the 1980s (e.g. Lukes and Hollis), a key reference for which is the 1985 ASA monograph, *Reason and Morality* edited by Joanna Overing.

Then as now, we are urged to clear our minds of *a priori* assumptions about newly empirical phenomena. I would say that a distinction implied here is really that between intuitive and counter-intuitive understanding of empirical phenomena.

We are wary of the intuitive and instead grapple with the counter-intuitive. I am reminded of the 1960s debate (see Firth 1966 et al) about “twins as birds” among Nuer and “birds as vegetables” among Tikopia being in each case supposedly metaphorically equivalent to each other but implying indexical attributes of a wider single semantic cluster (divinity in the case of Nuer and social group differentiation in the case of Tikopia).

My own approach has been to suggest that starting from this kind of aporia or puzzle (i.e. that ‘twins are birds’ or ‘that tree is spirit’) is a form of **relativism** as the **provisional** starting point (*I emphasise ‘provisional’*) though not the conclusion of investigation. Relativism here is not the antithesis of **universalism** but the possible and provisional route to it or, more likely, to broad generalisation.

Slide 5

Post-WW 2 1950s to 1970s

Big Picture

Kaleidoscope

Structuralism (L-S)

Individualism (Firth)

Marxism (Althusser et al)

Transactionalism (Barth)

Rescuing universalism (from

More Weber than Marx

Fascist abuse)

So, how did we get here? In general we are aware, often too painfully, of how post-WW2 de-colonisation demanded of anthropology that it re-set its aims and responsibilities, both intellectual and ethical, and that it recognise the cultural humiliation of so-called subject peoples resulting from colonisation of which anthropology had often been part (recall here the dramatic influence of Talal Asad's 1973

Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter). But beneath that general reframing, how have perceived inequalities, crises and theoretical trends and fashions entered our perspectives?

I go back to the late fifties and early sixties and what I summarily see as the emerging battle of two paradigms which seemed largely new at the time but clearly were novel re-growths of previous ruminations on the macro and micro. On the one hand was structuralism and Marxism, both of them dependent on texts, either those of the written Book (e.g. Das Kapital or The German Ideology) or of oral books or texts as in peoples' oral histories or myths recorded in the field by often much earlier ethnographers. The impact of Levi-Strauss's 'thought structuralism' was palpably enormous as was that of Althusser's Marxist structuralism and of other mainly French Marxists, that of the American Leslie White's history of thermodynamic revolutions, and including Steward

and Sahlins' cultural evolution, and in UK people like Joel Kahn, Maurice Bloch and Stephan Feuchtwang.

It is true that Levi-Straussian 'thought structuralism' and Marxism followed separate paths for the most part. But they did have in common what one can call the Big Picture, that is to say: to seek universalist explanations of socio-cultural evolution and socio-cosmic rationality. Levi-Strauss in particular seems to have wanted to do two things: first, to return us to the view of Boas and others that so-called different cultures were each a product of local genius and could not be ranked; second, that comparing them revealed not just local but universal human genius, products of the universal human mind. Universalism in post-WW II France was more popularly reinforced by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Sartre/de Beauvoir's existentialism, both of which addressed the human condition and not just its socio-cultural representation.

My point is that structuralism and the French drive towards universalist explanation were here delivering us from the abusive treatment of Boas' egalitarian schema by the 1930s and 1940s Fascist, especially Nazi, propaganda and policy.

The Fascists did not lay out cultures equally as understandable in their own terms and environments. Instead they ranked cultures and peoples and then demeaned and persecuted those at the bottom of their false culturalist hierarchy.

Subsequent Marxist anthropology opposed this by building on the human-universalising agenda, in London as well as Paris, through studies that combined field and textual theory and so gave the humanly universalising Big Picture a strong empirical grounding.

The second paradigm was more of a Kaleidoscope than Big Picture, with myriad interacting images. Some might call it methodological individualism. It was the micro to the macro.

Here Max Weber rather than Marx was the mid-wife.

Raymond Firth published his influential *Elements of Social Organization* in 1951 which stressed the rationality of individual actions and motivation in contrast to the wider rule-based structure of society and which grew to some extent out of both Malinowski's approach and Firth's own economics training. Edmund Leach was influenced by it before his structuralist interests.

In 1966, Frederick Barth's *Models of Social Organization* focused even more on a kind of methodological individualism, to the extent indeed of seeing social interaction as made up of reciprocal and strategic transactions. Thus was born 'transactional analysis' or simply 'transactionalism'.

This swept through much of UK anthropology with, for example, work by Bruce Kapferer in 1972 among the younger generation. It paralleled sometimes earlier concepts like action set and social network analysis by Barnes, Bott, Epstein,

Gulliver, Mayer, van Velsen and others. Network analysis is also implied in modern biocultural notions such as ‘Dunbar’s number’ and thrives outside anthropology.

I myself applied transactionalism to explain how verbal exchanges were strategically deployed to define or conform to recognized roles and statuses. The coupling of exchange and language was reinforced by bringing in Marcel Mauss and Sahlins on reciprocity and gift-giving in a 1972 volume on farming entrepreneurs in Kenya. These farming entrepreneurs had to calculate how customarily generous they could be without bankrupting themselves, so that they would remain with enough wealth to buy up the land and property of others around who had overspent on customary ceremonies and obligations.

I talked about the marxisant concept of the ‘mystification of social inequality’ but I talked also about the equivalent of the

Weberian Protestant Ethic, of how asceticism, through saving, created wealth and subsequent recognition of God's grace, but also created class differentiation and a hierarchy of authority and status, and laid out the alternative choices that people had to make in order to survive and sometimes profit.

Slide 6

The Manchester School

Earlier: Marx > Weber via political-economy (RL Institute)

*Later: Marx >< Weber via 'situational analysis/selection'
and Social Networks.*

My colleague at SOAS, Abner Cohen, launched an elegant critique of both paradigms, accusing the Big Picture structuralists of forgetting about the micro-histories of social process and accusing the Kaleidoscopic transactionalists of forgetting the macro-effects of wider politico-economic forces on social organization. He spoke of a 'dialectic' of individualised symbolism (the personal cognitive and conative) and of collective power, of what seemed like superstructure and infrastructure, and was often represented

by other anthropologists as therefore Marxist or at least marxisant. But I think he really represented a middle position between the macro and micro paradigms.

Abner Cohen's heritage was in fact that of the so-called Manchester School which **had** Marxist leanings but was jokingly called 'Maxist' after its charismatic leader, Max Gluckman. But the Manchester School was sometimes as much Weber as Marx with its emphasis on 'situational analysis' or 'situational selection', i.e. understanding and making choices, and on 'concomitant variations' of social principle. And of course there were collective representational echoes also of Durkheim

I found and still find the early methods of the Manchester School invaluable. The key reference which I have always urged upon students is Gluckman's 'An analysis of a social situation in modern Zululand' (in South Africa) first published

as early as 1940. It described the building of a bridge and how European and Zulu workers and their different sub- and occupational groups had to cooperate but would sometimes come into conflict. It was a partial microcosm of South Africa at the time.

Methodologically, then, a social event or crisis could be looked at closely and its elements unravelled to reveal the underlying social conflicts and principles which make up the society beyond the event. It sounds simple now but made new sense at that time.

A social situation is then a starting-point for understanding a social formation. It avoids the mistake of starting from prior assumptions about that particular society. For instance you do not start a study of a city of migrants by assuming that the migrants' rural so-called traditional backgrounds determined how they interacted with each other in town.

First you had to look at their specifically urban roles such as industrial worker: as Gluckman famously put it: “A miner is a miner” in the first instance not someone from one cultural region as against another, a cultural difference which might be important but only after you had observed it in urban interaction on the factory floor or in the copper mine.

I used this situational approach in a book on Kampala city, Uganda (1969). Members of the Manchester school, including Cohen, Mitchell, Epstein and others had themselves worked in African cities using this approach which sat between micro-transactionalism and macro-structural/historical determinism. Weberian indeed, sprinkled with some Simmel and Coser and later shading into phenomenology as being about experience (Kapferer again) and about existentialism (Epstein via Anna Freud) as overcoming life-world challenges.

Slide 7

Communication, Language and Meaning

Edwin Ardener - Neo-Saussurian langue and parole

Post-structuralism'

Hymes, Gumperz, Searle – speech acts

By the mid/late 1970s the two paradigms, the Big Picture and Kaleidoscope, were being questioned. How do people think and communicate with each other in the context of the wider macro influences and interpersonal micro strategies? An ethnic diaspora might include local face-to-face interaction but it also presupposed efficient communication at a distance and therefore a bigger social canvas, for how else could the diaspora retain its distinctiveness? How else could people keep in contact with each other in a diaspora? And what ingenious means of communication had to be invented to

circumvent the political and geographical barriers to communication?

This problem of communication was the entry point for looking at language, cross-cultural semantics and, a little later, cognition as well as entrenching phenomenology.

Goffmanesque concepts from the fifties (e.g. 1956 *The presentation of self in everyday life*) were sometimes brought back. Goffman's emphasis on everyday acts was paralleled in linguistic work by Searle in his study of speech acts (1969 and 1979), itself built on Austin (1962 *How to do things with words*).

The work of Gumperz and Hymes on what they called 'the ethnography of speaking' through speech acts and events was also crucial, as has been very recently since 2010 the 'linguistic ethnography', as it is called, of Ben Rampton and others and the concept of 'superdiversity' of Steve Vertovec

and Karel Arnaut of the Max Planck Institute on religion and ethnicity with which I have been associated post-retirement.

But going back to the earlier interest in cross-cultural semantics, most importantly for UK anthropology was the work of Edwin Ardener of Oxford which is to this day under-recognised as a unique, ethnographically informed approach to semiology which some call post-structuralist but which still relies on Jakobsen's recognition of language as resting on phonemic and grammatical 'distinctive features' and on the Saussurian structuralist distinction between langue and parole, (i.e. the over-arching paradigmatic and the constituent syntagmatic,) i.e. between langue as universal grammatical possibilities and parole as unique, individual utterances realising those possibilities.

I found myself increasingly interested in this work and the paths leading from it. I had always revered the significance of

language but this was a new way of looking at it. It helped that, beforehand, I was able to join a year-long survey of languages in Kenya in 1968-69 under Wilfred Whiteley.

Although Whiteley was a scholar mainly of Bantu languages, as was I, he in fact encouraged me to work on both a Nilotic language, DhoLuo (related to Nuer), of which I had some previous knowledge, and on some Bantu languages, principally Swahili and Giriama, which I was also working in.

The result was a book (1978) on the Luo of Kenya on what might be regarded as ethnicity, on a people whose polysegmentary lineage system defied all expectations and lasted two or three generations of urban settlement. Being able to continue with their lineage system even in town, was made possible, but also transformed, by how people used their Luo language. Sadly the book did not benefit from Richard Fardon's brilliant, theoretical work on the subject from the

perspective of transforming “identifications” (collection of earlier essays in 2014 and two ethnographic monographs).

My 1978 book on Luo was expressed in terms of communicative engagement, ‘cultural debate’ and ‘cultural self-perpetuation’ – emphasizing ‘key’ vernacular words phrases as instantiating the politics of action – words having socio-material effect, building on the earlier view of the materiality of language and by extension all communication – a kind of post-Sapir/Whorfian perspective but with an emphasis on lexicon rather than grammar and phonology.

There is no doubt that this was a personal tournant and has remained, now morphed into an interest in semiosis as the coordinated use of the five different sensory modes in human communication (i.e. voice, hearing, touch, taste and smell).

Because these bodily senses are part of communication alongside verbal language, the link between linguistic

anthropology and the body in medical anthropology was developed.

To this day a number of us are looking at medical or healing encounters as problems of juxtaposed semiotic communication on one hand and medical diagnosis, prognosis and cure on the other hand. Alex Pilleen, Elisabeth Hsu and I collaborated on an EASA workshop on this topic a few years ago, helped by the fact that both those colleagues have expertise or training in both linguistic and medical anthropology. My work on Giriama and Swahili (1980s/1990s onwards) is always on some aspects of healing and communication, increasingly in the context of religious hegemony whether of animism or Islam.

Indeed, working among Muslims in coastal East Africa was also really about working on two underlying social formations beneath a surface Islamic unity.

Swahili language on the East African coast is diglossic (like English with its underlying difference of Latinate and Anglo-Saxon registers, e.g. Walter Scott): if in Swahili you talk about Islam, social hierarchy, legal authority and architecture, the vocabulary comes out as heavily Arabic-derived within a Bantu grammatical structure and other Bantu vocabulary; however, if you talk about farming, cattle herding, making artefacts, building homesteads and displaying animistic beliefs and ritual, the vocabulary is much more of Bantu (Giriama) origin with sometimes very few words of Arabic derivation.

This revelatory and yet closeting nature of language through underlying but opposed registers continues to fascinate: when, why and how does language and the semiotics of which it is part, open up and close? It is an area I try to address, as has incidentally Alex Pillein in a recent article in *Current Anthropology*.

I have not been able to return to fieldwork in East Africa recently but I intend and hope to do so. Meanwhile I am enjoying short visits to parts of China and realising that with a little help from friends, especially Chinese, one can do some minimal ethnography or at least begin to see things from different perspectives, despite limited knowledge of the language.

Colossal Chinese investment in East Africa, as part of its One Belt One Road Initiative, has spawned the ambitious idea of looking at Swahili-speaking workers from East Africa interacting with Chinese locals in Shanghai or Guanzhou, ideally with regard to healing.

It is the geographical reverse of Elisabeth Hsu's pioneering study of Chinese practitioners of Chinese medicine in East Africa. I find it amazing that we can nowadays look

anthropologically at China in Africa and Africa in China as one rather than separate fields.

I am meanwhile looking at the aesthetics and commercialisation of tea production in China, itself sometimes regarded as herbal healing much steeped in elaborate language use. It is exciting not least because I can see the striving and potential impact on us of young Chinese anthropologists, reflecting what has been going on elsewhere globally, and complementing the work of African anthropologists and historians.

Slide 8

From -isms to turns – incremental was-ms?

Polythetic threads of continuity

Evolution of a discipline

Meanwhile, East Africa to East Asia and back again?

There have, then, been numerous anthropological so-called intellectual “turns” or “-isms” over the last sixty years. Thus, after structuralism, Marxism and transactionalism, there were, from the nineteen seventies onwards, the anthropology of development, interpretive anthropology (after Geertz), the writing critique of Clifford and Marcus (1980s), semantic anthropology or the semiotic turn, the Foucauldian turn, the Bruno Latour turn, the environmental and materialist turn including that of museum collections and ecology, the biocultural turn, the study of bureaucracies and formal

organizations and (the most recent?), the ontological turn. I have even seen reference to the animistic turn. And I have not even mentioned Pierre Bourdieu and Roland Barthes.

Yet, while these “turns” do sometimes subsume earlier approaches, they are never more than incremental parts of anthropology at any given time, even if for a while they dominate. For, throughout the chronology of anthropology, they have been continuing threads, a kind of polythetic continuity. If it **is** polythetic, which after all is a term drawn from evolutionary classification, then at some point in the future anthropology may indeed evolve into something unrecognizable to my ancestors of sixty years ago. But I think not` and hope not.

A digression.

The ‘ontological turn’ proponents question “the anthropological articulation of human differences” as either epistemological or ontological (Heywood page 4 after Donald Davidson) and conclude that they are ontological.

However, DP argues

1) that epistemology is about how to know things and that coming to know things means naming them.

2) But once you name things you create them by giving them ‘being’ or ‘presence’, which is an ontological move.

3) Epistemology thus shifts through identification and naming to ontology. Epistemology thus presupposes ontology, and ontology is preceded by epistemology, either alone or through translation.

