

# Anthropology is *not* ethnography

Professor Tim Ingold FBA gave the 2007 Radcliffe-Brown Lecture in Social Anthropology. In these edited extracts from his lecture, he reveals the differing views on what anthropology and ethnography are, and recalls some of the heated past debates about these differences.

THE OBJECTIVE of anthropology, I believe, is to seek a generous, comparative but nevertheless critical understanding of human being and knowing in the one world we all inhabit. The objective of ethnography is to describe the lives of people other than ourselves, with an accuracy and sensitivity honed by detailed observation and prolonged first-hand experience. My thesis is that anthropology and ethnography are endeavours of quite different kinds. This is not to claim that the one is more important than the other, or more honourable. Nor is it to deny that they depend on one another in significant ways. It is simply to assert that they are not the same. Indeed this might seem like a statement of the obvious, and so it would be were it not for the fact that it has become commonplace – at least over the last quarter of a century – for writers in our subject to treat the two as virtually equivalent, exchanging anthropology for ethnography more or less on a whim, as the mood takes them, or even exploiting the supposed synonymy as a stylistic device to avoid verbal repetition. Many colleagues to whom I have informally put the question have told me that in their view there is little if anything to distinguish anthropological from ethnographic work. Most are convinced that ethnography lies at the core of what anthropology is all about. For them, to suggest otherwise seems almost anachronistic. It is like going back to the bad old days – the days, some might say, of Radcliffe-Brown. For it was he who, in laying the foundations for what was then the new science of social anthropology, insisted on the absolute distinction between ethnography and anthropology.

He did so in terms of a contrast, much debated then but little heard of today, between *idiographic* and *nomothetic* inquiry. An *idiographic* inquiry, Radcliffe-Brown explained, aims to document the particular facts of past and present lives, whereas the aim of *nomothetic* inquiry is to arrive at general propositions or theoretical statements. Ethnography, then, is specifically a mode of *idiographic* inquiry, differing from history and archaeology in that it is based on the direct observation of living people rather than on written records or material remains attesting to the activities of people in the past. Anthropology, to the contrary, is a field of *nomothetic* science. As Radcliffe-Brown declared in his introduction to *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* – in a famous sentence that, as an undergraduate beginning my anthropological studies at Cambridge in the late 1960s, I was expected to learn by heart – ‘comparative sociology, of which social anthropology is a branch, is ... a theoretical or *nomothetic* study of which the aim is to provide acceptable generalisations.’ This distinction between anthropology and ethnography was one that brooked no compromise, and Radcliffe-Brown reasserted it over and over again. Returning to the theme in his Huxley Memorial Lecture for



A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Fellow of the British Academy

1951 on ‘The comparative method in social anthropology’, best known for its revision of the theory of totemism, Radcliffe-Brown insisted that ‘without systematic comparative studies anthropology will become only historiography and ethnography.’ And the aim of comparison, he maintained, is to pass from the particular to the general, from the general to the more general, and ultimately to the universal.

On the other side of the Atlantic, however, a very different call was being put out by Radcliffe-Brown’s contemporary, Alfred Kroeber, for an anthropology that would be fully historical. The historical approach – in Kroeber’s words – ‘finds its intellectual satisfaction in putting each preserved phenomenon into a relation of ever widening context within the phenomenal cosmos.’ In 1935 he had characterised this task, of preservation through contextualisation, as ‘an endeavour at descriptive integration’. As such, it is of an entirely different kind from the task of theoretical integration that Radcliffe-Brown had assigned to social anthropology. For the latter, in order to generalise, must first isolate every particular from its context in order that it can then be subsumed under context-independent formulations. Kroeber’s disdain for Radcliffe-Brown’s understanding of history, as nothing but a chronological tabulation of such isolated particulars awaiting the classificatory and comparative attentions of the theorist, bordered on contempt. ‘I do not know the motivation for Radcliffe-Brown’s depreciation of the historical approach,’ he remarked caustically in an article published in 1946, ‘unless that, as the ardent apostle of a genuine new science of society, he has perhaps failed to concern himself enough with history to learn its nature.’

In Britain, Kroeber’s understanding of what a historical or *ideographic* anthropology would look like fell on the sympathetic ears of E. E. Evans-Pritchard. In his Marett Lecture of 1950, ‘Social anthropology: past and present’, Evans-Pritchard reiterated, almost word for word, what Kroeber had written fifteen years



*E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Fellow of the British Academy*

previously about the relation between anthropology and history. This is what he said:

I agree with Professor Kroeber that the fundamental characteristic of the historical method is not chronological relation of events but descriptive integration of them; and this characteristic historiography shares with social anthropology. What social anthropologists have in fact chiefly been doing is to write cross-sections of history, integrative descriptive accounts of primitive peoples at a moment in time which are in other respects like the accounts written by historians about peoples over a period of time...

Returning to this theme over a decade later, in a lecture on 'Anthropology and history' delivered at the University of Manchester, Evans-Pritchard roundly condemned – as had Kroeber – the blinkered view of those such as Radcliffe-Brown for whom history was nothing more than 'a record of a succession of unique events' and social anthropology nothing less than 'a set of general propositions'. In practice, Evans-Pritchard claimed, social anthropologists do not generalise from particulars any more than do historians. Rather, 'they see the general in the particular.' Or to put it another way, the singular phenomenon opens up as you go deeper into it, rather than being eclipsed from above.

The problem is that once the task of anthropology is defined as descriptive integration rather than comparative generalisation, the distinction between ethnography and social anthropology, on which Radcliffe-Brown had set such store, simply vanishes. Beyond ethnography, there is nothing left for anthropology to do. And Radcliffe-Brown himself was more than aware of this. In a 1951 review of Evans-Pritchard's book *Social Anthropology*, in which the author had propounded the same ideas about anthropology and history as those set out in his Marett lecture, Radcliffe-Brown registered his strong disagreement with 'the implication that social anthropology consists entirely or even largely of ... ethnographic studies of particular societies. It is towards some such position that Professor Evans-Pritchard and a few others seem to be moving.' And it was indeed towards such a position that the discipline moved over the ensuing decade, so much so that in his Malinowski Lecture of 1959, 'Rethinking Anthropology', Edmund Leach felt moved to complain about it. 'Most of my colleagues', he grumbled, 'are giving up in the attempt to make comparative generalizations; instead they have begun to write impeccably detailed historical ethnographies of particular peoples.' But did Leach, in regretting this tendency, stand up for the nomothetic social anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown? Far from it. Though all in favour of generalisation, Leach launched an all-out attack on Radcliffe-Brown for having

*Edmund Leach, Fellow of the British Academy*



gone about it in the *wrong way*. And the source of the error, he maintained, lay not in generalisation *per se*, but in comparison.

There are two varieties of generalisation, Leach argued. One, the sort of which he disapproved, works by comparison and classification. It assigns the forms or structures it encounters into types and subtypes, as a botanist or zoologist, for example, assigns plant or animal specimens to genera and species. Radcliffe-Brown liked to imagine himself working this way. As he wrote in a letter to Claude Lévi-Strauss, social structures are as real as the structures of living organisms, and may be collected and compared in much the same way in order to arrive at 'a valid typological classification'. The other kind of generalisation, of which Leach approved, works by exploring a priori – or as he put it, by 'inspired guesswork' – the space of possibility opened up by the combination of a limited set of variables. A generalisation, then, would take the form not of a typological specification that would enable us to distinguish societies of one kind from those of another, but of a statement of the relationships between variables that may operate in societies of *any* kind. This is the approach, Leach claimed, not of the botanist or zoologist, but of the engineer. Engineers are not interested in the classification of machines, or in the delineation of taxa. They want to know how machines work. The task of social anthropology, likewise, is to understand and explain how societies work. Of course, societies are not machines, as Leach readily admits. But if you want to find out how societies work, they may just as well be compared to machines as to organisms. 'The entities we call societies', Leach wrote, 'are not naturally existing species, neither are they man-made mechanisms. But the analogy of a mechanism has quite as much relevance as the analogy of an organism.'

I beg to differ, and on this particular point I want to rise to the defence of Radcliffe-Brown who, I think, has been wilfully misrepresented by his critics, including both Leach and Evans-Pritchard. According to Leach, Radcliffe-Brown's resort to the organic analogy was based on dogma rather than choice. Not so. It was based on Radcliffe-Brown's commitment to a philosophy of process. On this he was absolutely explicit.



*Claude Lévi-Strauss, Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy*

Societies are *not* entities analogous to organisms, let alone to machines. In reality, indeed, there are no such entities. 'My own view', Radcliffe-Brown asserted, 'is that the concrete reality with which the social anthropologist is concerned ... is not any sort of entity but a process, the process of social life.' The analogy, then, is not between society and organism as entities, but between social *life* and organic *life* understood as processes. It was precisely this idea of the social as a life-process, rather than the idea of society as an entity, that Radcliffe-Brown drew from the comparison. And it was for this reason, too, that he compared social life to the functioning of an organism and *not* to that of a machine, for the difference between them is that the first is a life-process whereas

the second is not. In life, form is continually emergent rather than specified from the outset, and nothing is ever quite the same from one moment to the next. To support his processual view of reality, Radcliffe-Brown appealed to the celebrated image of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, of a world where all is in motion and nothing fixed, and in which it is no more possible to regain a passing moment than it is to step twice into the same waters of a flowing river.

What his critics could never grasp was that in its emphasis on continuity through change, Radcliffe-Brown's understanding of social reality was thoroughly historical. Thus we find Evans-Pritchard, in his 1961 Manchester lecture, pointing an accusing finger at Radcliffe-Brown while warning of the dangers of drawing analogies from biological science and of assuming that there are entities, analogous to organisms, that might be labelled 'societies'. One may be able to understand the physiology of an organism without regard to its history – after all, horses remain horses and do not change into elephants – but social systems can and do undergo wholesale structural transformations. Yet a quarter of a century previously, Radcliffe-Brown had made precisely this point, albeit with a different pair of animals. 'A pig does not become a hippopotamus ... On the other hand a society can and does change its structural type without any breach of continuity.' This observation did not escape the attention of Lévi-Strauss who, in a paper presented to the Wenner-Gren Symposium on Anthropology in 1952, deplored Radcliffe-Brown's 'reluctance towards the isolation of social structures

conceived as self-sufficient wholes' and his commitment to 'a philosophy of continuity, not of discontinuity'. For Lévi-Strauss had nothing but contempt for the idea of history as continuous change. Instead, he proposed an immense classification of societies, each conceived as a discrete, self-contained entity defined by a specific permutation and combination of constituent elements, and arrayed on the abstract coordinates of space and time. The irony is that it was from Lévi-Strauss, and not from Radcliffe-Brown, that Leach claimed to have derived his model for how anthropological generalisation should be done. Whereas Lévi-Strauss was elevated as a mathematician among the social scientists, the efforts of Radcliffe-Brown were dismissed as nothing better than 'butterfly collecting'. Yet Lévi-Strauss's plan for drawing up an inventory of all human societies, past and present, with a view to establishing their complementarities and differences, is surely the closest thing to butterfly collecting ever encountered in the annals of anthropology. Unsurprisingly, the plan came to nothing.

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