Social Anthropology in the British Tradition

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English summary

In the first part of the full text of the lecture in Spanish, I discuss the issue of whether it is still possible to talk about a distinctive "British Tradition" in social anthropology today, and if so, whether there are significant continuities between what constitutes "British social anthropology" now and what Adam Kuper terms the "modern British school" founded by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. Kuper's own view is that the latter had a life of only fifty years (from the 1920s to the start of the 1970s), after which British social anthropology ceased to constitute a "distinct intellectual movement at the international level", and the perspectives of the founders no longer defined the projects of a new generation of anthropologists in the UK. As someone who entered the profession in 1973, in an apparent moment of paradigmatic crisis that for my generation actually seemed more of an opportunity than a problem, I am just old enough to have known some of the leading protagonists of Kuper's celebrated history, all of whom were then reaching the age of retirement from their academic posts, but participated enthusiastically in the efforts of a new generation to transform the subject via reflection on its colonial past and the other critiques that were emerging through the Seventies and into the 1980s (from feminists, French-style structuralists and Marxists, and, increasingly and somewhat before the publication of the key works of the so-called "postmodern" turn in the USA, epistemologically, to which the increasing influence of post-structuralist writers such as Bourdieu and Foucault added additional dimensions in the 1980s). Of course, one of the reasons we have to take the study of the history of the discipline seriously is that the iconoclastic tendencies of the young and ambitious frequently result in a somewhat distorted reading of the alleged sins and inadequacies of the ancestors, and it is certainly quite important to recognize that a good deal of innovative work that anticipated later trends was actually developing while Kuper's "modern school" was still relatively unchallenged.

Given the theme of the conference, however, my approach in the lecture has been to pay less attention to intellectual history and changing theoretical paradigms, objects of analysis, regional specializations and research problems, and to follow the lead of Edmund Leach and more recently Jonathan Spencer in examining the institutional and sociological history of the discipline's development in Britain and its consequences: this is probably the best way to understand the international relations that British anthropologists have forged, or failed to cultivate, at different moments in the discipline's development and it is certainly of critical importance for understanding anthropology's current situation in the UK, in relation to other social science and humanities subjects and in relation to a state funding regime upon which the discipline became increasingly dependent from the 1960s onwards. I begin by considering the implications of a polite but quite strong critique of British social anthropology made by G.P. Murdoch in 1951 in American Anthropologist, in which Murdoch argued that the British did not really deserve to be included in the "international scientific community of anthropologists" because they did not employ the culture concept and were really sociologists. Although part of this critique seems intellectual, it is also about how to define a specifically *anthropological* project that

the profession could sell to governments and the public as well as advance within the academic political field of university institutions. At first sight this little spat (to which Raymond Firth responded in his typically charming and diplomatic way) might seem an irrelevance, because the 1963 Decennial conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists (founded in 1946) was actually co-organized by Max Gluckman and Fred Eggan, and even involved the participation of Clifford Geertz (rather bizarrely treated as "one of us" for the occasion). But maybe the attempted rapprochement had more to do with Manchester (many of those that Gluckman trained subsequently left for the USA) than the orientation of the profession as a whole, and the 1973 Decennial, organized by Edwin Ardener (my own supervisor) sought "New Directions" for British anthropology that were more orientated to ideas emanating from France than those coming from the United States. Nevertheless, although Kuper saw the future of British social anthropology as lying in the more cosmopolitan framework of Europe, particularly following the establishment of EASA in 1989, what has actually happened is a more thoroughgoing process of internationalization of the terms of reference of British anthropologists, in which US anthropology has become a major element alongside continuing engagement with European work, much of which conforms, of course, to the key principles that the "modern British school" held dear. Intellectually, however, British social anthropologists today are as likely to be inspired by European social theorists and philosophers (Merlot-Ponty, Heidegger, Agamben, Deleuze, Badiou, Žižek, etc) as they are by the work of European anthropologists, all of which reflects the liberating effects of the end of the disciplinary "boundary policing" process in which the leaders of the "modern British school" often engaged. The result has been an open, intellectually pluralistic and certainly far more cosmopolitan British social anthropology.

In the light of these developments, we could perhaps question how there could be any real continuity from the past given that, as Spencer puts it, the things that make British social anthropology, "British", "Social" and "Anthropology" seem to have changed so radically over the past three and a half decades and continue to change. Spencer's answer is that British social anthropology has, contrary to Kuper's essentially intellectualist account, managed to conserve its national and international identity as "a relatively small and coherent group of professionals" through a series of "institutions, practices and particular rituals", such as the weekly departmental seminar. Although the discipline remains small relative to the other social sciences, with some 200 staff in permanent posts (and 125 on temporary contracts) today as compared with 50 before the first expansion of the higher education system in the 1960s (the second in 1992, was a very different event, since the number of students increased massively while the level of resourcing was actually cut), it has retained an impressive level of coherence as a "community of practice" with a strong capacity to mobilize collectively when its vital interests seem threatened. However, there is a downside to the legacy of the modern British school, whose leaders opted for relative marginality by refusing to accept the possibility of anthropology being taught in schools and confining the subject to a comparatively small number of departments in elite institutions. Although the subject has diversified a little in terms of where departments are now located, Spencer has shown that a handful of elite departments still play an important role in the subject's reproduction. All of this became problematic as the higher education system entered a phase of restructuring, beginning with the Thatcher years, which slashed budgets and created considerable

anxiety about the future, although it has been the (neoliberalizing) "New Labour Governments" that have provoked the most serious challenges in the longer term, since the renewed expansion of the higher education post-1992 actually created new opportunities that a new generation of disciplinary leaders exploited with some success. One example of this is the embrace of applied anthropology and particularly the anthropology of development, which led to the creation of some extremely successful vocational Masters programmes, something that the old guard (especially Leach) had viewed with undisguised horror. Despite the spectres of neoliberal restructuring, cultures of endless evaluation and audit, and the creeping privatization that increasingly places the burden of financing higher education on students and their families, the 1993 and 2003 Decennials of the ASA were far more upbeat events than the rather dismal 1983 event. We are now a discipline that "exports" half of its doctoral graduates to multi- or inter-disciplinary programmes and our current intellectual pluralism has enabled us to communicate the fact that we have something distinctive to say to other disciplinary communities and to a certain extent to the policy-making sectors of government, though not, as I go on to demonstrate, to the public at large (at least in a manner about which we can feel comfortable).

To demonstrate that there is evidence that it is still possible to discern a specifically "British" approach to research and argument in anthropology, I cite the conclusions of the international panel commissioned to conduct the 2006 International Benchmarking Review of Anthropology for the Economic and Social Research Council, chaired by Don Brenneis, who will be talking more about the implications of this kind of exercise and evaluation cultures in general tomorrow. The panel listed a large number of areas in which British anthropologists – or better British resident anthropologists, since more than 30% of our current academic staff are not British nationals – could be said to be playing a leading role internationally. Their report also suggested that we were rather better at getting our message across to policy-makers and non-academic professionals than we sometimes imagine, in terms of international comparisons. All this suggests that British social anthropology has been relatively successful in reinventing itself. Nevertheless, we now face dilemmas that I think are of more than national significance.

In the Thatcher years, we complained bitterly that the Research Councils neglected international research, especially beyond Europe. Today the situation is different, because of the post-9/11 environment and the increasing "securitization" of social science research at home and abroad. Shortly after the ESRC International Benchmarking review was published, I found myself as ASA Chair leading a campaign against an ESRC-led research "venture" which involved collaboration with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office that seemed to us to be Project Camelot revisited. In this case, we were able to mobilise support from the sociological and development studies communities to get the proposed programme withdrawn and restructured and although the revised version was still not formulated in a way we found wholly satisfactory, the pressure exerted was sufficient to ensure that nothing dangerous was actually funded. The problem has not, however, completely gone away, and new schemes on risk and security have emerged that couple questions of crime, immigration, terrorism and poverty in ways that applicants are allowed to challenge (with as yet unknown chances of funding success) but which raise many ethical as well as analytical difficulties. In many ways we are back to the dilemmas of the Vietnam period and the mindset that made one anthropologist who worked in the

Tribal Research Centre in Thailand, the late Delmos Jones, become increasingly worried about the use to which his subsequent work on poor communities in the USA might be put. Another problem is the public image of anthropology, on which we now find ourselves increasingly engaged with the current taste of programme makers for "reality TV" focused on the exotic. We are currently trying to have a dialogue with programme commissioners about ethical codes for such programming, but there is also the fundamental problem of whether we want to "sell" anthropology by means of the strong public interest in such programmes. Here we have examples of new "opportunities" that are pretty repugnant to most of the UK profession but perilous because of the increasing problems created by our current almost total dependence on state funding for research and postgraduate training. In the written version of the lecture I offer more detail on these issues and some further examples of how the funding regime is changing in ways that will create difficulties in the future for anthropology that may be replicated in other European countries, as a follow-up from the existing adoption of UK-inspired audit and evaluation processes and academic standardisation procedures. UK anthropology would be better able to confront these problems if we could do better in communicating what modern social anthropology is actually about to a broader public and both ASA and the Royal Anthropological Institute are working hard on trying to address this problem. ASA has introduced a bog that has addressed issues such as immigration and the academic consequences of the war against terror as well as the restructuring of the academic field by the neoliberal state. RAI has grasped the nettle of trying to bring anthropology to schools. In these respects the British tradition is evolving in ways that the founding fathers would not have approved, through new types of attempted engagement with the public, but with the mainstream media working against us and the academic publishing industry increasingly problematic (as a result of both economic pressures and the pressures created by evaluation cultures that are turning to metrics), making an impact in a cacophony of alternative media voices whilst coping with the pressures of professional life, is certainly a challenge. As a small "research intensive" discipline concentrated in "research intensive" universities we do exceptionally well in academic evaluations, but academic evaluation success does not, alas, guarantee funding and disciplinary reproduction in the present climate.