

Human Origins: The Case to Include Social Anthropology

Alan Barnard

Universidad de Edimburgo

In many countries social or cultural anthropology is practised as an independent discipline, quite separately from its related disciplines. The disciplines assumed to be related traditionally include prehistoric archaeology, biological or physical anthropology, and linguistic anthropology or anthropological linguistics. The differences in name often imply subtly different understandings of the nature of the subjects. For example, whereas “biological anthropology” implies a broad biological understanding of humanity, the older term “physical anthropology” tends to suggest a narrower vision, namely one focused on fossil anatomy, to the exclusion of modern genetics.

“Social anthropology” is the more common term in Europe, whereas “cultural anthropology” is the more usual designation in the Americas. My preference for the former term reflects the reaction against the idea of “cultures” as monolithic, countable entities on both sides of the modernist/postmodernist divide, especially in the United States of America in the 1990s [Kuper 1999; Abu-Lughod 1991]. However, it also reflects a different perception of the interrelated ideas of “society” and “culture”. In Europe, especially in the British Isles, society is the main concern, whereas anthropological traditions throughout the Americas have always been more firmly rooted in culture. It is as if there is not a single notion of “anthropology” but a plurality of “anthropologies”. Why then should one aim to reduce these to a single discipline? That, in a way, is our problem.

The problem arises precisely when anthropologists seek to explain things like society and culture across the boundaries anthropology has drawn for itself. This is especially true in studies that seek to explain

evolution, or indeed most anything involving temporal comparison. I was not always in favour of a unified discipline, but I am now. It is essential in order to look for answers to the great questions that the discipline was, in the nineteenth century, formed in order to explain. It is time to return to such questions because we now have the means to do so, and not simply because the fashion of the discipline is now turning in that direction. Thus for both theoretical and empirical reasons a return to some fundamental principles of anthropology is called for.

EVOLUTION AND DISCIPLINARITY

The genus *Homo* is about 2 300 000 years old. The human species, modern *Homo sapiens*, is only about 200 000 years old. Symbolic thought and language probably first occurred in eastern or southern Africa perhaps 130 000 to 120 000 years ago [Barnard 2012: 12-14]. Modern humans first migrated from Africa not long before or shortly after the volcanic explosion of Toba, in modern Indonesia, about 74 000 years ago. Because of the ensuing “volcanic winter”, that explosion led to a severe bottleneck in population size across the globe [*e.g.* Oppenheimer 2004, 2009].

Although the exact dates have long been disputed, such sources tend to date the first migrations across the then-existing Bering Land Bridge to the Americas about 25 000 to 22 000 years ago. Agriculture then evolved, independently, in the Americas and in the Near East, beginning roughly 12 000 years ago. There is no doubt that biological and cultural evolution influenced each other, and that biological evolution did not cease when culture, seemingly, took over as a dominant evolutionary force.

Adam Kuper and Jonathan Marks [2011] argue for a wider anthropological science that accommodates both biological interests and social ones. This is, in fact, a view that I now share. However, this is not the same thing as favouring the complete assimilation of one field into the other: a view that I was once accused of fostering. Biology and social or cultural aspects of the discipline do represent quite different areas, with legitimately quite separate research interests and research programmes. In reality, I have never argued otherwise, but my suggestion of a branch of modern social anthropology encompassing evolutionary ideas [Barnard 2011: 149-51] seems to suggest this to some people. Yet what is important is to recognize that biology and culture both contribute to the making of humanity, and in that sense, that anthropology ought to be a single science, albeit necessarily a fragmented one.

This is true on both sides of the Atlantic, but particularly in Europe. It was of course not always the case, since modern anthropology certainly grew from unified disciplines such as a wider “anthropology” that was once recognized as such in both the United Kingdom and Mexico, coincidentally about the same time: in the 1860s [Galliard 2004 (1997): 10-11, 15-23, 255-60].

Elsewhere, disparate subjects like, in the German language, *Völkerkunde* (implying a plurality cultures but not of biological entities) and *Anthropogeographie* (implying an ambiguous relation between geography, evolution, and diffusion), and varying degrees of association of the subject with folklore and cultural history (in some countries, also even sociology). In North America, ultimately such interests did give rise to the Boasian tradition, whereas in Europe things were more complicated: functionalism rose from ethnographic studies by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (then A. R. Brown) and Bronislaw Malinowski shortly before and during the First World War. That tradition competed with evolutionary and diffusionist interests, and subsequently the work of students of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, whereas the rise of Nazism for a time put an end to prospects on the Continent [Barnard 2000].

In a sense, it is a wonder that anthropology as we know it came into existence at all! That is part of the problem, and it has been my problem in trying to establish (or re-establish) a European tradition taking into account the recent developments across a range of now quite separate disciplines. I see social anthropology as we have it today as part of this movement, but not necessarily as the subdiscipline quite at its centre.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Archaeology is perhaps the most obvious subdiscipline to expect, with regard to engagement with a wider anthropology. It is also a particularly strong field in Mexico, right from the beginnings of anthropology there. However, the most relevant sort of archaeology happens to be that rooted in African Palaeolithic and African Middle Stone Age (MSA) studies. African archaeology exhibits its own periodization, and the MSA lasted roughly from 300 000 until 50 000 BP. It was preceded by the Early Stone Age and followed by the Later Stone Age. The latter label, which dates from the 1920s, was chosen precisely because it was a little vague [Goodwin and Van Riet Lowe 1929]. This was, of course, two decades before the invention of radio-carbon dating, in 1949, at a time when what we now refer to as “relative” dating was truly relative.

Today, the main concern in the archaeology of the Middle Stone Age is with the earliest stages of *symbolic thought*, and with the dawn of language, which may or may not coincide with it. At least on the former (symbolic thought), we have some good evidence. The clearest comes from South Africa. For example, there is a site called Blombos Cave, 100 metres from the Indian Ocean coast (sea level has changed very little in the intervening decades). This site has yielded beadwork made from shells and several pieces of etched red ochre as old as 100 000 BP [*e.g.*, d'Errico *et al.* 2005; Henshilwood 2009]. We know that the ochre was brought to the site from several kilometres away, then carved and stored. Elsewhere, the earliest ostrich egg shell fragments, in Namibia, are dated at 83 000 BP [Miller *et al.* 1999]. There is also evidence of ochre use between 270 000 and 170 000 BP in Zambia [Barham 2002] and ritual burial as early as 320 000 in Spain [Bermúdez de Castro *et al.* 2004]. Claims for the earliest rock art go back even earlier [*e.g.*, Bednarik 1996], although such claims are disputed. The point is that early dates have become quite commonplace in recent years, and all of them reflect the use of symbols, and even the expression of ideas through language. And all of this, of course, predates the migration of humans to the Americas. It also predates the invention of agriculture by tens of thousands of years.

The common culture that humanity once shared was a hunter-gatherer one. Hunter-gatherers do not accumulate, but find ways to redistribute their property through sharing as well as exchange. Although the details have been questioned, the idea of an “original affluent society”, popularized by Marshall Sahlins [1972], was a prehistoric reality. Typically, the hunter-gatherer or foraging mode of thought involved quite different sets of values from those of Western or other recent societies. The accumulation of wealth is considered antisocial, while giving it away is idealized. This is not the same as performing charitable acts in other societies, but involves formalized giving within the family or the community. Likewise, followership is favoured over leadership. Following others shows deference to the whole community, while seeking to lead shows self-interest. In kinship, the entire society is classified as belonging to kin categories, and there is no such thing as *not* being “kin”: everyone stands in some kind of classificatory “kin” relation to everyone else. The very notion of “society” entails this. People are seen as free individuals, and the land they occupy as sacrosanct: associated with inalienable rights of primordial possession [Barnard 2001: 13-28]. As has been shown in numerous ethnographic studies, such a notion of sociality persists among hunter-gathers to this day.

Beyond hunter-gatherer ideology lies the Neolithic. For me, this was *and is* (since non-hunter-gatherers inherit this post-hunter-gatherer ideology too) a step backwards in social evolution. I am not saying that we as a species have not advanced a great deal since the Neolithic. But rather, that we have also lost a great deal! Language emerged in hunter-gatherer times, and with it came mythology and totemic thought [Lévi-Strauss 1962]. This showed humanity an order in the universe that was, until relatively recently, still understood in small-scale societies in Australia and throughout the Americas. Hunter-gatherers are not stupid: typically, they are multilingual, and in their collective thought they developed ritual and religious ideologies, mechanisms to disperse wealth and overcome material shortages, and an appreciation of egalitarian sociality and “primitive communism”. Very recently, I met a former hunter-gatherer in Botswana who speaks languages in *five* different language families: his eloquence in these many languages (I presume he speaks at least two additional languages within these five families) is matched only by his generosity of spirit. As Sahlins points out, hunter-gatherers sacrifice the accumulation of property in favour of the accumulation of free time. Although violence among individuals may be common [Lee 1979: 370-400], warfare and collective violence generally, is not. As the epigraph in Richard Lee’s *The !Kung San* asks, “Why should we plant, when there are so many mongongos in the world?” [1979: v]. In the long run, it is agriculture that leads to collective violence, not a shortage of food.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND SYMBOLIC THOUGHT

Most practitioners of social or cultural anthropology, and indeed of the whole of the anthropological sciences, are ethnographers. But what is the point of ethnography, apart from contributing to our understanding of human diversity and the details of how humans behave? The functionalist tradition of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown [1952] and others always emphasized society as consisting of four systems: economics, politics, religion, and kinship. Although other theoretical perspectives have seen things a little differently, this functional paradigm still makes clear the systematic relations within and between these elements. As the late Sir Edmund Leach (pers. comm.) used to say, fieldwork has only one tradition: the functionalist tradition.

For example, *marriage* is in essence an institution within the kinship system. Yet it also has impacts within the others: in the economic sphere it

affects the transfer of property through dowry and bridewealth, in the political sphere it reflects the power base, particularly in the case of relations between kin groups and in arranged marriages, and it also very frequently has religious dimensions. Were it not for ethnography, the full extent of human diversity would be unknown. The recognition of descent is an obvious example. Basically here there are four kinds of descent: matrilineal, patrilineal, double (through both mother and father, with children belonging to one matrilineal group and one patrilineal one), and cognatic or bilateral (with no recognized descent groups). There are also rarer types, where gender is important: parallel (where women trace descent through women, and men through men) and cross or alternating (where women take membership in the group of their father, and men take membership in the group of their mother). Such differences are not trivial, but reflect both the organization of societies and the cultural understanding of individuals who live within these societies.

Similarly, rules of residence often, though not always, mimic rules of descent. In the early twentieth century, some argued that residence rules determined group formation in an evolutionary sense [*e.g.*, Murdock 1949]. At the very least, there are logical relations between rules of residence and the structure of descent groups. In a patrilineal society, repeated virilocality (postmarital residence with the husband) serves to keep men of group together. They bring their wives into the group, and subsequently their sons remain in the same place. The Tiv of West Africa are an example. In a matrilineal society, repeated uxoricity (postmarital residence with the wife) similarly keeps women together while dispersing the men. A well-known example is the Bemba of Central Africa, among whom women cultivate the soil. On the other hand, avunculocal residence (residence with the man's mother's brother) has the opposite effect: it enables men of a matrilineal group to live together, while dispersing the women through whom they are related. The Trobrianders of Melanesia are an example: men rather than women maintain power in within the village, and particularly so when a man succeeds in *violating* this rule and keeping his sons with him in spite of the norm [Barnard and Good 1984: 67-87].

In all of these cases, political relations are bound to property relations. They are also embedded in symbolic relations: everything humans do has a symbolic dimension. For this reason, we as a species cannot live through biology alone. The most common forms of kinship structures on earth are not ones like ours, based on genealogical proximity and distance, but ones based on things like alternating generation equivalences and rules that assume that to be related through a same-sex sibling link implies a

closeness that being related through an opposite-sex sibling link does not. In the *majority* of human societies, on virtually every continent (apart from Europe and in societies closely related to European ones), the incest taboo is usually defined to allow marriage between cross-cousins (children of a brother and a sister), but not between parallel ones (children of two brothers or two sisters) [Barnard 2012: 41-43].

ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

As I have already hinted, in theory anthropology is made up of four branches, in no particular order: (1) biological or physical anthropology, (2) social or cultural anthropology, (3) anthropological linguistics or linguistic anthropology, and (4) prehistoric archaeology. The term “anthropological theory” all too often, even in my own work, refers at least mainly to the theory common within social anthropology. It is worth some reflection as to why this should be the case.

The fact is that theoretical perspectives within social anthropology are more diverse than in other branches of the wider anthropology. It is as if biological anthropology, for example, is a “proper science”, whereas social anthropology is merely a pseudoscience. In my view, this is unfortunate, since it suggests that the differences within social anthropology are fabrications and those in other areas of anthropology represent testable hypotheses in a search for scientific truth. In reality, the differences between the branches of the subject are more nuanced. It is true that an avowed postmodernist may (pretend to) reject all objectivity, but it is not true that differences of opinion cannot be accommodated within larger theoretical frameworks. Thus the search for objective truth in such a paradigm is not nonsense.

Take, for example, as Lawrence Kuznar [2008: 46-55] has argued, the fact that a hundred years of research in hunter-gatherer studies has *not* resulted in no progress at all. On the contrary, the Hobbesian image of forager life was overturned several times over as anthropologists accumulated knowledge of actual foraging practices, and debated these in successive conferences and scientific papers. Early twentieth-century notions of foragers or hunter-gatherers as male-dominated and living in patrilineal bands were overthrown when empirical data showed they were not. In fact, bilateral descent is more common, and women’s roles are at least as important as men’s. Numerous studies have shown that high-protein diets, including especially meat, are common among hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherer

diets are more varied than those of non-hunter-gatherers, and except in times of drought, nutrition is good. Exchange networks function to redistribute property, accumulation is devalued, and (as Sahlins reminds us) property is sacrificed in favour of free time. Sharing has been shown to be a strategy for avoiding risk, and meat is valued rather than sought as a dietary necessity.

These findings are largely social anthropological ones, but the data gathered reflects input from many areas, including human biology (in studies of nutrition), linguistics (in the form of data on knowledge and classification of plants), and even (in consideration of time depth of these practices) archaeology. This suggests that there are grounds for optimism: anthropologists working together, with a diversity of perspectives and interests. Nor indeed are related disciplines excluded: the impact of human genetics in evolutionary studies is obvious. Among the great contributor to such studies, for example, has been Stephen Oppenheimer whose training and expertise [*e.g.*, 2004] lies in that field. It is difficult to see how exactly genetics and social anthropology could be united under a single theoretical perspective, but it is by no means beyond the realms of plausibility that they should agree to the same larger framework. By this I mean, agree that the genetic domain is genetics and the symbolic domain lies clearly within a social and cultural domain beyond that. This latter domain is, of course, social anthropology, and a mutual recognition of this is necessary for both disciplines.

CONCLUSION

Let us look forward to the time when, as Kuper and Marks [2011] say, we do attend each other's conferences and read each other's papers. I hope that time is not too far off. In *Social Anthropology and Human Origins*, I suggested that there are several ways in which to envisage a social anthropology of human origins: (1) as a specialization within social anthropology itself, (2) with social anthropology being brought within related disciplines such as primatology, evolutionary psychology, and a broadly-conceived prehistory, (3) as a method within a unified interdisciplinary field of human origins studies, and (4) as a separate subject in its own right. The last two are unlikely, not least because they might require a reorganization of university departments. The second already happens to some extent. The first, though, is most likely, but for one serious problem: social anthropology is

utterly dependent on ethnography and also on comparison. This is no bad thing at all, but it does require some thought as to how it might be achieved.

Obviously, an ethnographic focus on hunter-gatherers is desirable, but taking into account other perspectives, such as broadly evolutionary ones within psychology, may reveal insight as well. It is also worth some reflection that little over twenty years ago evolutionary linguistics did not exist. Today it is thriving: there may be a lesson here for social anthropology. After all, social anthropology's subject matter is essentially symbolic thought, especially as revealed through language. If this does not lend itself to evolutionary treatment, then what does? Symbolic thought is a significant force within virtually every branch and theoretical perspective within archaeology, as well as within social anthropology. Virtually every theoretical perspective in the history of social anthropology has considered it too, though because of postmodern approaches since the 1970s it has fallen into relative obscurity. In my view, all is not lost: social anthropology has everything to gain by recalling this interest.

Thus there is no reason for social anthropology not to be a core part of the subject, and to re-establish itself, possibly at the very centre, of a newly invigorated but broad-based discipline. And this should not be seen as a threat to any other field, for all are needed in what I would like to see (if I can risk the phrase) as a *new anthropology*.

REFERENCES

Abu-Lughod, Lila

1991 Writing against Culture, in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, Richard G. Fox (ed.). School of American Research Press. Santa Fe, NM: 137-62.

Barham, Lawrence S.

2002 Systematic Pigment Use in the Middle Pleistocene of South-Central Africa. *Current Anthropology* (43): 181-90.

Barnard, Alan

2000 *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

2011 *Social Anthropology and Human Origins*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

2012 *Genesis of Symbolic Thought*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

Barnard, Alan and Anthony Good

1984 *Research Practices in the Study of Kinship*. Academic Press. London.

Bednarik, Robert G.

1996 The Cupules on Chief's Rock, Auditorium Cave, Bhimbekta. *The Artefact* (19): 63-72.

Bermúdez de Castro, J. M., M. Martínón-Torrez, E. Carbonell, S. Sarmento, et al.

2004 The Atapuerca Sites and Their Contribution to the Knowledge of Human Evolution in Europe. *Evolutionary Anthropology* (13): 25-41.

d'Errico, Francesco, Christopher Henshilwood, Marian Vanhaeren and Karen Van Niekirk

2005 *Nassarius kraussianus* Shell Beads from Blombos Cave: Evidence for Symbolic Behaviour in the Middle Stone Age. *Journal of Human Evolution* (48): 3-24.

Galliard, Gérald

2004 [1997] *The Routledge Dictionary of Anthropologists* (translated by Peter James Bowman). Routledge. London.

Goodwin, A. J. H. and C. Van Riet Lowe

1929 The Stone Age Cultures of South Africa. *Annals of the South African Museum* 27 (7): 1-289.

Henshilwood, Christopher

2009 The Origins of Symbolism, Spirituality and Shamans: Exploring Middle Stone Age Material Culture in South Africa, in *Becoming Human: Innovation in Prehistoric Material and Spiritual Culture*, Colin Renfrew and Iain Morley (eds.). Cambridge University Press. Cambridge: 29-49.

Kuper, Adam

1999 *Culture: the Anthropologists' Account*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge.

Kuper, Adam and Jonathan Marks

2011 Anthropologist unite! *Nature* 470 (7333): 166-68.

Kuznar, Lawrence A.

2008 *Reclaiming a Scientific Anthropology* (second edition). Altamira Press. Lanham.

Lee, Richard Borshay

1979 *The !Kung San: Men, Women and Work in a Foraging Society*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude

1962 *La Pensée Sauvage*. Plon. Paris.

Miller, G. H., O. B. Beaumont, H. J. Deacon, A. S. Brooks, P. E. Hare, and A. J. T. Jull

1999 Earliest Modern Humans in South Africa Dated by Isoleucine Epimerization in Ostrich Eggshell. *Quaternary Science Reviews* (18): 1537-1538.

Murdock, George Peter

1949 *Social Structure*. Collier-Macmillan. New York.

Oppenheimer, Stephen

2004 *The Real Eve: Modern Man's Journey out of Africa*. Carroll & Graf. New York.

2009 The Great Arc of Dispersal of Modern Humans: Africa to Australia. *Quaternary International* (201): 2-13.

Radcliffe-Brown, A. R.

1952 *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Cohen & West. New York.

Sahlins, Marshall

1972 *Stone Age Economics*. Aldine. Chicago.