

# British anthropology and the idea of the ‘primitive society’, c. 1920-1970

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My PhD thesis is a study of British social anthropology. It is told through shifting concepts of the ‘primitive society’ between the 1920s and the 1970s. Broadly speaking, academic anthropologists in Britain ceased to see ‘primitives’ as evolutionarily backward and increasingly began to relativize concepts of culture and society. Despite this general shift in social scientific discourse, anthropologists’ ideas about the ‘primitive’ were often conceptually incoherent. Was a “primitive society”, James Ferguson asks, “Pre-industrial? Pre-literate? Pre-modern? Pre-westernized? Pre-complex-organization?”<sup>1</sup> Social anthropologists in the British tradition were supposed to be post-evolutionist but their discussions of the relative ‘primitivity’ of their subjects point to the latent assumptions of development nested within their functionalism. These tensions between relativism and evolutionism are explored in the five main chapters of my thesis.

The first chapter is about economics. The second chapter concerns questions about magic and the rule of law. The third touches on questions of kinship and the fourth and fifth turn anthropologists’ theories back on British society in studies of post-war sociology and historiography respectively. The aim is to see how social anthropologists transformed notions of the ‘primitive society’ and then to explicate the ways in which their ideas were grasped by other social scientists to make sense of their own particular disciplinary problems. The Rockefeller Foundation, through the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM), and later the Social Sciences Division, played a significant role in both of these transformations.

## I

One of my major interests in coming to the Archive Center was to research the history of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (IILAC). The LSRM was one of its major funders. Through the Institute

a group of anthropologists at the London School of Economics were able to undertake their fieldwork in Africa. These social scientists studied under Bronislaw Malinowski. They were taught in his seminars to see the societies they travelled to as distinct wholes made up of parts functioning to maintain their integrity – both the whole of the society and the welfare of each of the individuals making it up. These seminars, their attendees, and Malinowski's texts transformed British anthropology. The IALC, and its funding from the LSRM, helped to 'select' social anthropology from amongst a number of its disciplinary competitors. Malinowski was subject to institutional and intellectual competition in the late 1920s, especially from the diffusionist theories of Grafton Elliot Smith at University College London. Trying to explain why Malinowski's brand of functionalism won out, and is still taught to students at universities today, is one of the research questions underlying my doctoral research.

Explanations for the rise of Malinowski's style of social anthropology tend to stress functionalism's utility for colonial governance. But on closer inspection, the social theory that Malinowski and his students produced was out of step with the actual workings of British imperialism. To take only one example, anthropologists tended to see witchcraft beliefs as functioning parts of the legal rules underpinning the societies they studied. This clashed with colonial institutions that dismissed magical beliefs as meaningless superstitions. Introducing the history of Rockefeller philanthropy into this story enables us to see two things more clearly. Firstly, that it was the institutional connections between Malinowski's LSE and the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures that explains the rise to prominence of his brand of functionalism. Secondly, the theoretical attempts by functionalists to understand the customary laws of non-state societies does have some ideological connection to these institutions, but it is less a story of any necessary harmony of anthropological ideas with imperialism than part of a burgeoning project in the social sciences to account for the sociological grounds of the rule of law. The attempt to reform politics through social science was a marginal phenomenon in the inter-war

British Empire.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of applied social science, like Malinowski, often considered their theories as part of a strategy to lobby for the protection of indigenous rights and societies in a colonial world that often relied on the politics of *force majeure*.

An emphasis on international welfare and criticisms of governance based on bare-faced power politics certainly made Malinowski's ideas conducive to the Foundation's idea of social science and global order. Moreover, connections between Malinowski's students and the IALC's senior figures such as Frederick Lugard and Joseph Oldham further strengthened his disciplinary prestige. The sociologist Randall Collins explains victory in intra-disciplinary turf wars as a struggle over limited academic "attention space".<sup>3</sup> Malinowski was a master of grabbing attention and working his connections to ensure that his students were able to pursue their research and to reproduce his own theories.

LSRM funding bolstered Malinowski's prestige, it ensured that his students could travel to the field and it multiplied the influence of his functionalist agenda. Explaining the links between these transformations in anthropology's disciplinary history demands that we understand the relations between foundation funding and discipline building as connected, although semi-autonomous, phenomena. We need to understand the role of non-anthropological figures in the support of the social sciences like Frederick Lugard and Joseph Oldham. We also need to explain why one kind of social science won out over other possibilities in a past filled with contingency – in the late 1920s, Grafton Elliot Smith was perhaps the pre-eminent British anthropologist, rather than Malinowski, and a rival Oxford African Institute was a serious threat to the primacy of the IALC. If Elliot Smith had been able to build up a significant number of anthropological followers or the Oxford Institute had been funded, the British anthropology's disciplinary history would look very different.

## II

My intention in coming to the Archive Center was to see the other side of correspondence and reports I had studied in British archives. I also wanted to get a sense of RF officers' ideas of anthropology and of the social sciences more generally. One of the most interesting things I found was to see quite how different the officers' ideas were from British anthropologists'. Social anthropology in Britain tended to shift throughout the 1920s and '30s away from physical anthropology of the kind pursued by Elliot Smith towards the sociology of figures like Malinowski.<sup>4</sup> Yet when the RF stopped funding 'cultural anthropology' in 1934 to focus most of its Social Science funding on economics, physical anthropology continued to be backed in German and US universities. The story of twentieth-century anthropology is often triumphantly told in Whiggish terms. A biological, racial science was supposed to have been displaced by a 'culturalist', relativist paradigm by the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> In fact, both existed side-by-side, sometimes quite comfortably, for quite some time. Histories of anthropology are often written by anthropologists. They tend to present anthropology's history in disciplinary terms, sometimes overlooking broader social trends and intellectual linkages. Putting the history back in to the history of anthropology is one of the main intentions of my thesis. I hope to demonstrate that anthropologists' works were part of larger debates in Britain and its Empire, and that these debates functioned in both 'metropolitan' and 'peripheral' contexts. In this last respect, the Archive Center contains papers relating to two key figures in this feedback loop: Keith Thomas and Karl Polanyi.

Polanyi's *Great Transformation*, first published in 1944, was written up in America with an RF grant.<sup>6</sup> His argument about how the modern market system grew out of a world of social reciprocity relied on his reading of social anthropologists, chief amongst them Bronislaw Malinowski and Raymond Firth. Rockefeller philanthropy underwrote both his ability to write the book and the

sources he relied on. Keith Thomas published *Religion and the Decline of Magic* in 1971. In the vein of another social and cultural historian, R.H. Tawney (a recipient of Foundation funds through the LSE), Thomas tried to explain the emergence of a distinctly modern culture of rational calculation and a secular, or at least Deist, cosmology out of an older social background. Unlike in Tawney's work however, Thomas argues that it was magic, rather than Thomist theology, that was waning in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The sources he used to understand the social functions of magic and witchcraft were largely anthropological. Thomas attended two conferences held by the Committee on Comparative Politics and sponsored by the Social Science Research Council in the years before publishing his book.<sup>7</sup> It is possible to find some of the interests of Lucian Pye, Sidney Verba, and fellow-travellers like Walt Rostow, in the opening pages of *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. I hope to make these links more explicit when I write up my final chapter.

### III

The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial files and Rockefeller Foundation's Social Science files were the main source of my research during my two weeks at the Archive Center. But general correspondence, accounting books and officers' diaries formed key parts of my findings overall. Rockefeller philanthropy helped to connect like-minded social scientists interested in pressing social questions across huge distances. RF grants nurtured relationships between officers and academics that helped to set the agenda for whole disciplines. An extended period of research in the Archive Center has thrown light on all of the planned chapters of my thesis. Yet while the Archive Center holds swathes of material relevant to a thesis on social anthropology, putting Foundation funding at the heart of the history of British anthropology and its reception poses risks. Intentions to favour certain kinds of projects need to be interpreted in light of their effects. Mistaking

intentionality for historical causality is easy if Foundation records are not read alongside material from other archives.

As my research at the Archive Center progressed it seemed that the best way to understand the role of funding of inter-war social science was to think in terms of side-constraints rather than control over research outcomes. Only certain kinds of projects would be funded, to be sure. But the grants offered significant leeway to the grantees to decide on the way their money should be spent. Liberals with agendas of social reform tended to be favoured. But applicants could succeed with strong support from figures already known to Foundation officers, or if they framed their projects in ways that were amenable to the Foundation's own agendas.

This can be clearly seen in the decision to fund the research that became Karl Polanyi's *Great Transformation*. Polanyi's work was financed on the back of positive references, but when reviewing the finished monograph officers were sceptical of his findings.<sup>8</sup> In terms of the funding of social science research in Africa, the decision not to back the Oxford Africa Institute reveals that the Foundation preferred projects with liberal internationalist, free-market politics. The Oxford Institute seemed too closely aligned with settler interests in Kenya and South Africa.<sup>9</sup> There were considerable side-constraints on who could access funding: not just from the socialist left, but the nativist, protectionist right. Polanyi's grant, however, demonstrates that work from different political positions might get backing with the right connections and the right pitch. Skilful local actors tended to be those who could turn the Rockefellers' internationalist concerns in line with their own interests. A nuanced history would have to explicate the linkages between the Foundation's motives and the, sometimes very different, motivations of actors seeking their patronage.

Another example of successful Foundation grants working at cross-purposes with grantees' motives can be found in the papers relating to the Australian National

Research Council. LSRM officers were keen to fund anthropology under the rubric of 'biology' in the late 1920s. Edwin Embree, head of the LSRM, favoured craniometry and physical anthropology for understanding racial differences (the purpose of anthropology for many in the Foundation), making Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's Rockefeller backing seem rather strange. Radcliffe-Brown was first and foremost a social scientists working in the tradition of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. His interest in social relations presumed a difference between the 'social' and the 'biological'.<sup>10</sup> Not only were the Foundations' preferred methods different, but the desired ends – to further research into racial differences and eugenics – were wholly unmatched with Radcliffe-Brown's own interests.<sup>11</sup> Yet through the ANRC, Radcliffe-Brown's approach to anthropology gained a foothold within the discipline. When he moved to the University of Chicago, also with the backing of the Rockefeller philanthropies, his ideas gained a wider audience.

Despite the eventual triumph of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown's agendas in the British academy, significant differences existed between those on the receiving end of philanthropic funding. Grantees were united, however, by their sense that the social sciences could and should be used to inform political best practice. The Foundations thought about social science in terms of "social technology". Social technology could work to control and stabilise the world of the capitalist west. Under Edwin Embree, the LSRM pursued a broadly eugenist vision of control and stabilisation of racial superiority. After the reorganisation of the philanthropies and the creation of the RF social science division, economics, and especially research on business cycles, became the main focus.

RF officers attempted to develop links between experts, policy makers and the public. But they were constantly aware of the limits of their influence and the forces other than 'social technology' shaping the world. This was especially so in the inter-war years, an era characterised by Richard Overly as the 'Morbidity Age'.<sup>12</sup> Intellectuals worried about population bottlenecks, financial crises and resurgent



militarism. To some, the social sciences offered the hope of a world transformed in the direction of purposive control of humanity's future. The Rockefeller philanthropies expanded the reach and audience for these views. By understanding the broad shape of this world-view it is possible to discern family resemblances amongst officers' reports and the grantees they funded. Anthropologists' claims to be able to influence colonial politics in line with the ideals of social planning reflect a broad change of policy in the 1930s away from 'indirect rule' towards 'development'. These claims also represent a shift in the way that anthropology was being funded. Rockefeller philanthropy rewarded anthropologists like Malinowski who could talk the language of social technology.

In the modern academy it is often easy to assume that academic knowledge makes a difference *de facto*. International religious organisations, state bureaucracies and patterns of international trade and consumption shaped the past at least as much as the intentions of social scientists intent on applying their expertise. Just as it is important to triangulate Foundation papers with other archives, so too it is vital to understand disciplinary histories as part of larger transformations in national and international history. The growth of the social sciences went hand in hand with the growth of academic authority and academics often disagreed vociferously with each other over the nature of society and the relevance of various social facts.

The shift from evolutionism to relativism in the history of anthropology cannot be told as a story of a straight line from biology to sociology. Nor can this shift be explained as a concomitant rejection of racism and eugenics. By reading the canonical works of British social anthropology from the 1920s to the 1970s it would be easy to come to this conclusion. Foundation records reveal a more complex story. The connections between biology and sociology did not come apart cleanly. What changed was the growing sense that the social sciences could, and should, inform political decisions. The post-war expansion of the university sector in Britain strengthened this tendency. Yet even more important than the

policy-orientation of social scientists was the growing popularisation of social scientific ideas. The Rockefeller philanthropies played a role at all of the different stages of this story.

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<sup>1</sup> James Ferguson 'Anthropology and its Evil Twin - 'development' in the constitution of the discipline' in *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley, 1997) eds Frederick Cooper and Randall M. Packard, 170 n.

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<sup>2</sup> On this count see Erik Linstrum, *Ruling Minds – Psychology in the British Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Randall Collins, 'On the Acrimoniousness of Intellectual Disputes', *Common Knowledge*, 8/1 (2002), 47–70

<sup>4</sup> For a recent history of the discipline in Britain see Henrika Kuklick 'The British Tradition' in ed. Henrika Kuklick, *A New History of Anthropology* (Oxford, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> The classic account that reads this shift in terms of a move away from 'biologism' and racism is Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Folder 3694, Box 310, Series 200S, Rockefeller Foundation Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Archive Center [henceforth RAC]

<sup>7</sup> Folder 8780, Box 730, Series 1: Subseries 74, Accession 2, Social Science Research Council Record Group 2, RAC

<sup>8</sup> See general correspondence and Anne Bezanson's review of the manuscript of *Great Transformation* in Folder 3694, Box 310, Series 200S, Rockefeller Foundation Record Group 1.1, RAC

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Buell to Edmund Day, May 8th 1930, Folder 673, Box 51, Series 401F, Record

Group 1.1, RAC

<sup>10</sup> Maurizio Meloni, 'The Transcendence of the Social: Durkheim, Weismann, and the Purification of Sociology', *Sociological Theory*, 2016

<sup>11</sup> See Leonard Outhwaite's 1934 interview of Radcliffe-Brown in Folder 844, Box 91, Series 100. S, Rockefeller Foundation Record Group 1.1, RAC

<sup>12</sup> R. J. Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilization* (London, 2010)