

## A. R. Radcliffe-Brown

### The Structures of Society



A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Adam Kuper (1977:1) has noted, "has come to stand for a phase of British social anthropology which is currently out of fashion." Kuper suggests that such judgments are only partly deserved and rest on caricatures of Radcliffe-Brown's positions. One such misjudgment yokes Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown with the theoretical bond of functionalism, and thus, for example, Bohannan and Glazer (1988:294) note "Seen from today's vantage, it is a little difficult to appreciate what the two were arguing about professionally." Yet when a 1948 article (Gregg and Williams 1948) placed Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in the same theoretical camp, Radcliffe-Brown responded with strident outrage:

The authors arbitrarily apply the label functionalist to certain writers on anthropology and sociology . . . they build up an imaginary picture of something they call functionalism which they then present as a body of views held by all the persons they decided to call functionalists. All the canons of scholarly integrity are ignored.

Malinowski has explained that he is the inventor of functionalism, to which he gave its name. His definition of it is clear; it is the theory or doctrine that every feature of culture of any people past or present is to be explained by reference to seven biological needs of individual human beings. . . . I reject it entirely, regarding it as useless and worse. As a consistent opponent of Malinowski's functionalism, I may be called an anti-functionalism. [Radcliffe-Brown 1949]

In the face of such strident opposition, it seems irresponsible to treat the theories of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown as minor variants on the functionalist theme.

Another criticism holds that Radcliffe-Brown conceived of social anthropology as an ahistorical inquiry resulting in a static view of societies unconcerned with diachronic change (e.g., White 1966). There is merit and confusion in such claims. On one hand, Radcliffe-Brown distanced himself from those anthropologists who, "thinking of their study as a kind of historical study, fall back on conjecture and imagination, and invent 'pseudo-historical' or 'pseudo-causal' explanations" (1977a:13). Radcliffe-Brown leaves these anthropologists unnamed, but Tylor's discussion of animism would fit this description (see p. 61). Radcliffe-Brown's distinction between historical and scientific explanations was extended by his American students, including Robert Redfield (1962 [1937]:xi) who wrote that:

Radcliffe-Brown's signal contribution is . . . derived . . . from his emphasis on a strictly nonhistorical, sharply scientific method in anthropology. The objective of social anthropology is the formulation of general propositions as to society. The social anthropologist deals with classes of social phenomena; early [sic] he names the class with which he deals—sanctions, totemism, Omaha type of kinship system, or whatever; the particular society or institution with which he deals is then of significance only as it represents or modifies the class, type or declared general proposition. History, on the other hand has a logical nature essentially different; its nature [citing Kroeber] ". . . an endeavor at descriptive integration."

This is an extraordinary statement for its time (1937), a clear contrast to the historical particularism of Boas, Kroeber, and others who considered explanation as primarily a historical reconstruction of specific cultural complexes. The notion that one could extract a concept—such as the Omaha type of kinship system—from its specific social context and make that abstraction the object of inquiry did not sit well with Boas or his students. Radcliffe-Brown observed (1952:50), "My objection to conjectural history is not that it is historical but that it is conjectural." Elsewhere, Radcliffe-Brown (1977a:13) condemns conjectural history as "worse than useless," but adds, "this does not in any way imply the rejection of historical explanation but quite the contrary." Radcliffe-Brown's concern was to create a social anthropology which was generalizing and thus a science.

Kuper notes that Radcliffe-Brown has receded from the anthropological spotlight in Great Britain and the United States, although his

influence on different anthropologists is evident, e.g., Evans-Pritchard, (Chapter 12), Lévi-Strauss (Chapter 17), and Victor Turner (Chapter 18), among others. The repercussions of Radcliffe-Brown's approach are expressed by those who emulated him and those who vehemently disavow his work. Paradoxically, as Kuper (1977:1) notes, Radcliffe-Brown "remains influential, but, increasingly, indirectly."

## Background

Born in 1881, Radcliffe-Brown was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge. The biographical sketches published after his death (Eggan and Warner 1956; Fortes 1956) contain scant information on Radcliffe-Brown's early years or personal life, possibly reflecting a "streak of aloofness" and somewhat reserved nature (Fortes 1956:153). Remembered as warm and gentle by his friends and students, he was considered condescending and pompous by others, particularly by Boas' students. This was complicated by Radcliffe-Brown's tendency to cite the work of his students and ignore the work of others—which effectively slighted all research conducted in America prior to his arrival at the University of Chicago in 1931. It is amazing how unpopular he was with American anthropologists. Mead called him insufferable, sulky, and rude. Benedict wrote, "He seemed to me impenetrably wrapped in his own conceit." Even recent commentators Bohannan and Glazer (1988:295) discuss how Radcliffe-Brown changed his name from "Brown" to the "double-barreled Radcliffe-Brown" with the implicit suggestion of pomposity. Leslie White describes "two traits of Radcliffe-Brown—the tendency to assume originality for himself, and to ignore or depreciate the work of others . . ." (White 1966:32). These personal reactions may have limited Radcliffe-Brown's influence on some, but his contribution to the development of anthropology remains.

Under Haddon's direction, Radcliffe-Brown conducted fieldwork from 1906 to 1908 on the Andaman Islands, a chain of islands off the southern coast of Myanmar (Burma). Radcliffe-Brown finished his thesis in 1909, which was a descriptive account of traditional culture influenced by the work of Haddon and Rivers. In the year after completing his thesis, Radcliffe-Brown became aware of the work of Durkheim and Mauss and began rewriting his thesis to explore this newly-found theoretical position. Although *The Andaman Islanders* was not published until 1922, it became the vehicle through which French comparative sociology shaped the course of British social anthropology.

Radcliffe-Brown conducted ethnographic research among the Kari-  
era and other aboriginal groups in western Australia from 1910 to  
1912. He then returned to England and became an overseas education  
officer during World War I. After the war, Radcliffe-Brown occupied a  
number of academic positions, frequently establishing new anthropol-  
ogy departments: University of Cape Town (1921–1926), University of  
Sydney (1926–1931), and the University of Chicago (1931–1937). Next,  
he returned to Oxford where he remained until his retirement in 1946,  
after which he taught in Cairo and South Africa. Radcliffe-Brown died  
in England in 1955.

Radcliffe-Brown's impact is evident in the writings of his students.  
When he left the University of Chicago, his students presented Rad-  
cliffe-Brown with a volume titled *Social Anthropology of North American  
Tribes* (Eggan 1962). That group—including Fred Eggan, Morris Opler,  
and Sol Tax—all became important figures in American anthropology.  
Robert Redfield (1962 [1937]:ix) wrote in the introduction:

Professor Radcliffe-Brown brought to this country a method for the  
study of society, well-defined and different enough from what pre-  
vailed here to require American anthropologists to reconsider the  
whole matter of method, to scrutinize their objectives, and to attend  
to new problems and new ways of looking at problems.

Radcliffe-Brown called that approach "social anthropology."

## Social Anthropology: Defining A Field

Radcliffe-Brown distinguished "social anthropology" from ethnology.  
In a 1951 lecture, Radcliffe-Brown pointed out that Boas had set two  
research objectives: 1) the reconstruction of the cultural history of a  
particular people or region, and 2) the "investigation of the laws gov-  
erning social life." Noting that Boas had referred synonymously to the  
field of inquiry as "ethnology" or "anthropology," Radcliffe-Brown  
proposed that the terms should mark different lines of inquiry, sug-  
gesting that anthropologists:

. . . refer to those investigations that are concerned with the recon-  
struction of history as belonging to ethnology and to keep the term  
social anthropology for the study of discoverable regularities in the  
development of human society in so far as these can be illustrated or  
demonstrated by the study of primitive peoples. [1977b:54]

The observation of regularities and search for general laws characterizes Radcliffe-Brown's social anthropology. Although Boas recognized the potential existence of laws of human behavior, in fact most of Boas' efforts went to the explication of particular cultural developments. Radcliffe-Brown's 1951 lecture was a response, 55 years after the fact, to Boas' (1896) *The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology* in which Boas attacked the Victorian evolutionists (see pp. 48–50). Boas had argued that focused, intensive fieldwork was essential, not loose comparisons based on uneven published sources. Radcliffe-Brown responded that comparative studies were also necessary and that library research was useful when it supplemented ethnographic fieldwork. Radcliffe-Brown (1977b:54) complained that the modern anthropology graduate student setting out for fieldwork, "is told that he must consider any feature of social life in its context, in its relation to the other features of the particular social system in which it is found. But he is often not taught to look at it in the wider context of human societies in general." This is what Radcliffe-Brown proposed to do.

Social anthropology was grounded in the comparative method; its goal was the elucidation of lawlike generalizations about human society. Radcliffe-Brown considered social anthropology to be a subdiscipline of comparative sociology—a discipline which he traced to the French social theorists such as Montesquieu and Comte, but most directly to Durkheim. Social anthropology differed from comparative sociology in scope but not in intent. Radcliffe-Brown wrote:

Comparative sociology, of which social anthropology is a branch, is here conceived as a theoretical or nomothetic study of which the aim is to provide acceptable generalisations. The theoretical understanding of a particular institution is its interpretation in the light of such generalisations. [1977a:13]

"Nomothetic"—from the Greek *nomos* for law—refers to the structure of scientific explanation. Scientific laws—like the Law of Gravity or the Second Law of Thermodynamics—are generalizing propositions about the relationship between two or more factors. They are not idiographic explanations of a particular occurrence, but are broadly relevant to all cases which express that relationship. Thus, Newton's Law of Gravity was not an explanation of why a particular apple fell out of a particular tree one day (to use the apocryphal example), but a statement about all bodies of matter which have mass and distance.

Radcliffe-Brown envisioned an anthropology that could discover scientific laws about human society, cross-cultural regularities between "structure" and "function."

## Structure and Function

Radcliffe-Brown's notion of social structure made his comparative approach possible; they were his unit of comparison. Social structures, Radcliffe-Brown argued, are the relations of association between individuals, and they exist independently of the individual members who might occupy those positions, much in the way that "hero," "heroine," and "villain" define a set of relationships in a melodrama regardless of the actors who play those roles. Social structures are not abstractions; unlike "culture," they exist and may be directly observed:

We do not observe a "culture", since that word denotes, not any concrete reality, but an abstraction, and as it is commonly used a vague abstraction. But direct observation does reveal to us that . . . human beings are connected by a complex network of social relations. I use the term "social structure" to denote this network of actually existing relations. [Radcliffe-Brown 1952b:190]

Social structure includes all interpersonal relations, the differentiation of individuals and groups by their social roles, and the relationships between a particular group of humans and a larger network of connections.

Although Radcliffe-Brown contends that social structures are concrete realities, they are not what an individual fieldworker observes in a specific society, which Radcliffe-Brown describes as "social forms."

This is confusing and an example is in order. If I am conducting a study of cooperative work groups in a peasant community, over the course of my field work I will observe (hopefully) a number of cases of different groups of people getting together at various times to work in different people's fields. I will take notes on the participants, their efforts, and the interpersonal dynamics of the group. At that point, in Radcliffe-Brown's terminology, I would be describing *social forms*. But if I recorded "as precisely as possible the *general* or *normal* form of this relationship, abstracted from the variations of particular instances, though taking account of those variations" (Radcliffe-Brown 1952b:192, emphasis added) then I would be describing the *social structure* of corvee labor. We will sidestep the issue about whether, thus defined, social structure is a result of observation or an inferred creation;

obviously, Radcliffe-Brown considered social structures to be empirically knowable and concrete.

This notion of structure, as Adam Kuper (1977:5) observes, "is perhaps the main contemporary stumbling-block to an understanding of what Radcliffe-Brown was saying." Part of the confusion stems from alternate uses of the word "structure," most notably in Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology (see Chapter 17). For Lévi-Strauss (1968:279) "The term 'social structure' has nothing to do with empirical reality but with models which are built up after it." Radcliffe-Brown wrote to Lévi-Strauss:

As you have recognized, I use the term "social structure" in a way so different from yours as to make discussion so difficult as to be unlikely to be profitable. While for you social structure has nothing to do with reality but in models which are built up, I regard the social structure as a reality. When I pick up a particular sea shell on the beach, I recognize it as having a particular structure. I may find other shells of the same species which have a similar structure so that I can say there is a form of structure characteristic of the species. [1977c:42]

Thus we can identify certain social structures—exogamous moieties, joking relationships, corvee labor, cross-cousin marriage, and on and on—compare those structures as manifested in different societies, and then attempt to understand the underlying principles that account for these different social structures. Almost inevitably, Radcliffe-Brown's explanation of social structures leads to a consideration of function.

For Radcliffe-Brown, the function of cultural institutions was the role they played in maintaining society, *not* the satisfaction of individuals' needs as Malowinski argued. Like many theories of human society, the notion is based on the organic analogy, referring to activities meeting the needs of the structure. Extrapolated to the social realm,

the continuity of structure is maintained by the process of social life, which consists of the activities and interactions of the individual human beings and of the organized groups into which they are united. The social life of the community is here defined as the *functioning* of the social structure. The *function* of a crime, or a funeral ceremony, is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it makes to the maintenance of structural continuity. [Radcliffe-Brown 1952c:180; original emphasis]

And

Such a view implies that a social system . . . has a certain kind of unity, which we may speak of as a functional unity. We may define it

as a condition in which all parts of the system work together with a sufficient degree of harmony or internal consistency, i.e., without producing persistent conflicts which can neither be resolved nor regulated. [Radcliffe-Brown 1952c:181]

Such passages have led to the reasonable criticism of Radcliffe-Brown's view as overly static and synchronic. In a footnote to the above quotation, Radcliffe-Brown rather offhandedly comments, "Opposition, i.e., organised and regulated antagonism, is, of course, an essential feature of every social system," a scant recognition of social conflict. Radcliffe-Brown acknowledges the changes traditional societies underwent due to the imposition of European colonialism, but he did not actually analyze such postcolonial changes. Rather, Radcliffe-Brown laments the scarcity of unaltered traditional societies and the absence of precontact historical data and retreats into another attack on pseudohistory (Radcliffe-Brown 1952c:183–184). Clearly diachronic study was not Radcliffe-Brown's preferred mode of inquiry; his contribution was in the analysis of social structures.

### Eaglehawk, Crow, and the Cult of the Ancestors

Radcliffe-Brown observed that "The only really satisfactory way of explaining a method is by means of illustration," and two examples make that clear—his analyses of exogamous moieties and of Andaman Islanders' ritual. Exogamous moieties are kin systems in which a population is divided into two social divisions and a man of one moiety must marry a woman of another moiety. Radcliffe-Brown began his analysis with the case of aboriginal groups in the interior of New South Wales in which moieties were matrilineal, exogamous, and the two divisions were named after their respective totems, the Eaglehawk (Kilpara) and the Crow (Makwara). How to explain this? Radcliffe-Brown argues that neither conjectural history nor diffusion provide satisfying explanation and turns to a comparison of social structures. Radcliffe-Brown examines other cases from Australia and finds many cases of exogamous moieties—some patrilineal, others matrilineal—named after birds. Further, other forms of dual organization (such as a system of alternating generational divisions in which you, your grandparents, and your grandchildren are members of a social group different from your parents', children's, and great-grandchildren's) are also named by pairs of birds. A search for more cases finds examples of moieties named by other pairs of animals (two species of kangaroos, for example).

Radcliffe-Brown pursues a series of progressively broader questions, from "Why Eaglehawk vs. Crow?" to "Why all these birds?" to:

What is the principle by which such pairs as eaglehawk and crow, eagle and raven, coyote and wild cat are chosen as representing the moieties of a dual division? The reason for asking this question is not idle curiosity. We may, it can be held, suppose that an understanding of the principle in question will give us an important insight into the way in which the natives themselves think about the dual division as part of their social structure. [Radcliffe-Brown 1977b:57]

Radcliffe-Brown analyzes stories about Eaglehawk and Crow and other moiety referents to gain insights into native thinking. It is a search for systems of classification similar to those discussed by Durkheim and Mauss (see Chapters 4 and 9). The common element in all these tales may be distilled into a single theme: "The resemblances and differences of animal species are translated into terms of friendship and conflict, solidarity and opposition. In other words the world of animal life is represented in terms of social relations similar to those of human society" (Radcliffe-Brown 1977b:59). Eaglehawk and Crow are both meat eaters but Eaglehawk hunts and Crow steals. Other examples of oppositions between related entities are black cockatoo vs. white cockatoo, coyote vs. wildcat (in California), upstream vs. downstream, and so on. They are all associated with exogamous moieties, leading Radcliffe-Brown (1977b:61) to conclude that "wherever, in Australia, Melanesia or America, there exists a social structure of exogamous moieties, the moieties are thought of as being in a relation of what is here called 'opposition.'"

Radcliffe-Brown presented his analysis of exogamous moieties as an example of the comparative approach and the conceptual utility of social structure. Moving from the specific case to increasing levels of generalization, Radcliffe-Brown posed a series of interesting questions, not just about the societies of New South Wales, but about human societies in general.

Radcliffe-Brown's concern with society in general is clear from a 1945 lecture on "Religion and Society" in which he contrasted totemism and ancestor worship (1977d). He narrowly defines ancestor worship as the worship of a deceased ancestor or ancestors by an associated descent group such as a lineage or clan. Offerings of food and drink are made to the ancestors, which are usually conceived of as sharing a meal with the ancestors (Radcliffe-Brown 1977d:113-114). The rites of ancestor worship also reflect a sense of dependency between the worshiper and the ancestors—ancestors will give him children and well-being,

provide blessings if propitiated, send illness and disaster if ignored (Radcliffe-Brown 1977d:125). Not surprisingly, ancestor worship is most developed among societies where unilineal descent is most important:

In such a society what gives stability to the social structure is the solidarity and continuity of the lineage, and of the wider group (the clan) composed of related lineages. For the individual, his primary duties are those of lineage. These include duties to the members now living, but also to those who have died and to those who are not yet born. In the carrying out of these duties he is controlled and inspired by the complex systems of sentiments of which we may say . . . are centered [on] the lineage itself, past, present and future. It is primarily this system of sentiments that is expressed in the rites of the cult of the ancestors. The social function of the rites is obvious: by giving solemn and collective expression to them the rites reaffirm, renew and strengthen those sentiments on which the social solidarity depends. [Radcliffe-Brown 1977d:114]

Note that Radcliffe-Brown has done more than engage in idle speculation; he has proposed testable hypotheses: "Does ancestor worship only occur in lineage-based societies? Are the sentiments expressed always those of dependency? Does ancestor worship diminish when traditional social forms weaken?" He also produced a broader theoretical statement about "the social function of religions, i.e. the contribution they make to the formation and maintenance of a social order" (Radcliffe-Brown 1977d:104).

## Conclusion

Radcliffe-Brown's analysis of social structure and function redirected anthropological inquiry to the institutions of human life and to the role such institutions play in the maintenance and reproduction of society. Today these concerns are not as central as they were between 1930 and 1960 when British social anthropology was at its peak, and consequently Radcliffe-Brown's stature has declined (again, see Kuper 1977). An examination of the two principal social anthropology journals in the United Kingdom and the United States, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (formerly *Man*) and *American Ethnologist*, respectively, shows that Radcliffe-Brown was cited only four times in articles published in 1995, usually just to be criticized (Dean 1995; Gupta 1995; Harrison 1995; Keen 1995). Over the last decade, Radcliffe-Brown tends to be

cited either when a specific social dimension is discussed—like descent theory (Shapiro 1988) or brother–sister relationship (Joseph 1994)—or in matters relating to Australian kinship systems, e.g. Cowlishaw's (1987: 229–230) brief critical assessment of Radcliffe-Brown's contribution to studies of Australian aborigines.

Adam Kuper (1977:2) writes of Radcliffe-Brown, "the profound yet second-hand nature of his influence on modern anthropology may constitute a real difficulty for the contemporary reader." This suggests that the ideas of Radcliffe-Brown deserve open-minded rereading. ♦

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