



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

# Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsc](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsc)

Essay review

## Observation and “Science” in British anthropology before the “Malinowskian Revolution”

George Baca

College of International Studies, Dong-A University, Busan, South Korea

When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*

**The Making of British Anthropology, 1813–1871, Efram Sera-Shriar. Pickering and Chatto, London (2013). pp. 272, Price £60/\$99 hardcover, ISBN: 978 1 84893 394 1**

Cultural and social anthropology present a curious case in intellectual history. Early twentieth century reformers, of the likes of Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and even Emile Durkheim, helped forge a “modern” and “professional” image of anthropology through wholesale attacks on many of the discipline’s founding figures. On both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, these novel approaches to the study of anthropology dismantled the scientific status of social Darwinism and other forms of racial-determinism. In many ways, this sea change began in the 1890s with Franz Boas. As a German-Jew, he came to United States and simultaneously escaped Germany’s anti-Semitism and built the American school of cultural anthropology. With an acute understanding of the dangers of scientific rationalizations for racism and national chauvinism, Boas rejected the way social evolutionism depended on biological explanations of culture, which judged rather than assessed differences in behavior. In place of “race” and biology, Boas argued culture developed historically through interactions between groups and the diffusion of ideas. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, Boas’ signature concept of culture is better understood as an “anti-concept,” which ultimately succeeded in pushing “race” from “occupying the defining place in anthropological discourse” (Trouillot, 2003, pp. 100).

After World War I, Bronislaw Malinowski began his own overhaul of British anthropology. Malinowski was more audacious, professing himself the revolutionary leader of a “new” anthropology. Certainly, his experience during World War I lent itself to the spinning of a fantastic anthropological legend. With the outbreak of the war, Malinowski, as a Polish citizen, was

technically an enemy of the British state. He dodged British detention centers for a two-year field trip in the Trobriand Islands. With the arduous travails of fieldwork, learning the Trobriand language fluently, and attaining a comprehensive understanding of native social categories and beliefs, Malinowski returned triumphantly to the London School of Economics where he spent the next thirty years extolling the “secret” of social anthropological research (Kayberry, 1957; Leach, 1961). With the publication of the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), he crafted a viable mythology of a new discipline that had risen from the ashes of Social Darwinism and the theoretical shortcomings of Boasian anthropology (Stocking, 1992).

In *The making of British anthropology, 1813–1871*, historian Efram Sera-Shriar takes issue with the ways Malinowskian mythologies have obscured our understanding of anthropological practices during the Victorian period. He follows the path charted by John Urry (1972) and George Stocking (1992) in tracing the transformations of anthropological methods and theory during the late Victorian period. Stocking in particular showed how Edward Tylor, Alfred Haddon, C.G. Seligman, W.H.R. Rivers, and Edward Westermarck presaged many of Malinowski’s ideas about collecting ethnographic data and improving the scientific quality of anthropological research. Sera-Shriar does a service for the historiography of anthropology by following this story into the early and middle Victorian era. He digs through many important ethnological and anthropological debates, most long forgotten in the mist of Malinowskian mythology. In this way, Sera-Shriar provides the reader with the hope that in the long forgotten texts of early and mid-Victorian anthropologists we will find productive observational techniques. To this end, he focuses analysis on the “observational activity” of the early practitioners of the middle and late Victorian period (p. 10) to show these “scientists” were neither “passive” observers nor the misguided amateurs Malinowski would have us believe. Instead he argues the early practitioners were aware of the limitations in their methodologies and sought to raise the scientific standards of anthropology and ethnology.

E-mail address: [baca.george@gmail.com](mailto:baca.george@gmail.com).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2015.08.006>  
1369-8486/© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Please cite this article in press as: Baca, G., Observation and “Science” in British anthropology before the “Malinowskian Revolution”, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2015.08.006>

Sera-Shriar starts his journey in promising fashion by describing the intellectual biographies of two important figures in British ethnology: James Cowles Prichard (1769–1848) and William Lawrence (1783–1867). Both practitioners were prominent physicians who contributed to the founding of British ethnology. Rather than accept the common view of them as passive observers, he describes the ways Prichard and Lawrence employed medical expertise to critically engage the eighteenth-century comparative anatomy of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Georges Cuvier, and Carl Linnaeus, which led to more insightful conceptualizations of human diversity. Prichard combined Quaker theology with medical science to develop a monogenetic view of the human species, which led to influential refutations of polygenism and proslavery arguments in the New World (see Augstein, 1999). Similarly, Lawrence's framework was at odds with the common perception of early anthropologists in that he prioritized empirical facts over deductive theories. Moreover, Lawrence built his taxonomical system in terms of the way observable physical and cultural characteristics represented "variety" within the "species" (pp. 21). With these achievements, Sera-Shriar asserts both Prichard and Lawrence were "highly attuned to the problems associated with studying human variation ... and that the emergence of the discipline was rooted in concerns for scientific accuracy and credibility" (pp. 22).

Anachronistic understandings of early ethnology have made several generations of scholars reluctant to acknowledge that many British anthropologists, from the get-go, were concerned with accuracy. Sera-Shriar details these concerns by examining the work of ethnologist Richard King (1811–1876) and how he established the Ethnological Society of London (ESL) in order to improve the reliability of ethnographic data and advance methodological standards. Sera-Shriar's insights could be deepened, however, with critical analysis of these early practitioners of ethnology. One clear example is the way he lauds members of the ESL as developers of "science" without engaging the important insights developed by historians of science. This lack of scrutiny keeps Sera-Shriar from seeing the ways ethnological practices and their claims of science were complexly intertwined with Britain's industrialization and its related colonial project. Instead of analyzing these connections, Sera-Shriar is content to merely mention colonialism and leave it as if it were merely background noise while he venerates "scientists" like Richard King for foreshadowing Malinowski's concerns about data collection.

Sera-Shriar's evasion of how colonialism shaped observational methods is odd in light of the fact he cites Talal Asad, the preeminent anthropologist of colonialism, in his introduction. His discussions of anthropology and science could be strengthened by integrating Asad's insights about the relationship between anthropology and colonialism (see Asad, 1973, 1991). In relationship to Richard King's role in professionalizing the discipline, Sera-Shriar refers to colonialism euphemistically as he credits the ESL with organizing "a global exchange network of informants—including colonial officers, military surgeons and missionaries—whose task was to collect ethnographic evidence *in situ* and send their reports back to Britain, where ethnologists could use it in their inquiries" (pp. 53, emphasis added). Curiously, Sera-Shriar ignores the more germane question for his story: What was the *task* of Victorian ethnologists? Anthropological research was inextricably intertwined with the colonial project. Yet, as Talal Asad points out, anthropologists had a negligible role in "maintaining structures of imperial domination" as the knowledge "anthropologists produced was often too esoteric for government use" (Asad, 1991, p. 315). However, "the process of European global power has been central to the anthropological task of recording and analyzing the ways of life of subject populations" (Asad, 1991, p.315). It is within this crucible of expanding European power that

British ethnologists simultaneously developed observational methods and decidedly moved toward the racist approaches that Boas steadfastly criticized.

Instead of delving into how European power led anthropologists towards racial-determinism, Sera-Shriar celebrates King for "improving the quality of ethnological investigations by developing a society that was devoted to *establishing and promoting the study of human races*" (pp. 58, emphasis added). Consequently, he misses the more important question of how King helped establish and promote the social category of race in ways that fundamentally shaped observational methods. Sera-Shriar deepens this misunderstanding of racial conceptions, colonialism, and observational practices when he moves to the figure of Robert Knox, whom many regard as a central figure in turning British ethnology toward racial determinism (see Curtin, 1964; Dubow, 1995; Hall, McClelland, & Rendall, 2000). Instead of taking up the relationship between racism and observational practices, Sera-Shriar complains that most examinations of Knox "have emphasized his extreme racial and anti-Semitic views" and he offers an alternative approach to "move beyond his race discourse and focus on his observational practice" (p. 83). How is it possible to move beyond Knox's peculiar view of racial groups as if they were akin to separate species? An examination of Knox's methods cannot be detached from his racist conceptual models.

Once an auspicious anatomist, Knox's career went off the rails early. He held radical political views, drawing inspiration from the French Revolution and Jacobinism. His politics were at odds with the conservative establishment that dominated British academia. Knox's prospects worsened when he got caught up with the Burke and Hare murders as he unknowingly bought anatomical specimens from these notorious killers. Academic rivals and political enemies used the Burke and Hare controversy to push Knox out of the profession. Without institutional affiliation or support, Knox turned to what Evelleen Richards calls "public lecturing and hack journalism" to present his arguments about "race" (Richards, 1989, p. 377). So, I found it odd that Sera-Shriar chooses Knox to demonstrate that Victorian ethnologists improved scientific standards.

The major significance of Knox lay in the odd manner in which he succeeded in making race appear to be not only scientific but a compelling social category that transcended the boundaries of academia. Rather than studying race scientifically, or observing racial phenomena rigorously, Knox's so-called observational practices actually imputed meanings and prejudices upon phenotypic traits. Accordingly, he reduced all social and political phenomena to the biological category of 'race' (Richards, 1989, p. 391). In *The races of men*, based on public lectures, Knox asserts: "[R]ace is in human affairs everything, is simply a fact, the most remarkable, the most comprehensive, which philosophy has ever announced. Race is everything; literature, science, art—in a word, civilization depends on it" (Knox, 1862, p. v.). Accordingly, historian Philip Curtin argues Knox is the "founder of British racism and one of the key figures in the general Western movement towards a dogmatic pseudo-scientific racism" (Curtin, 1964, p. 377). Many of Knox's contemporaries were equally suspect, as one contemporary reviewer panned him:

Knox rushes to the consideration of certain points of the great inquiry with a mind full of violent prejudices and in a rash presumptuous headlong spirit overturning everything that stands in his way (cited on p. 104).

Despite Knox's marginalization, his belief that "race" determined everything—and racial groups were naturally in conflict—would become subsumed by the social Darwinism of Herbert

Spencer. Indeed, Knox portended many of the problematic aspects of social Darwinism that established the backdrop from which the likes of Durkheim, Boas, and Malinowski would pursue their “revolutions” against racism and speculative history in the social sciences. Rather than dealing with this conundrum, Sera-Shriar skips over these questions to present ethnologist James Hunt, along with Thomas Huxley, as a scientific reformer. He contrasts the work of Hunt and Huxley in order to highlight their differences as merely one of professional competition, thereby sidelining substantive disagreements over Darwinism, polygenism, slavery, and British colonialism.

Instead of examining how Hunt adapted Knoxian racism in order to counter Huxley’s Darwinian approach, Sera-Shriar tells us Hunt developed “rigorous theoretical and methodological principles” (pp. 112). With the death of Prichard in 1848, there was a power vacuum in the ESL and Hunt filled it. He used his authority to readmit Knox into the ESL and instituted a platform for Knoxian racism to flourish. Indeed, Knox’s ideas eventually inspired Hunt to create the Anthropological Society of London (ASL) and break away from the ESL. As the leader of the ASL, Hunt purged the radicalism from Knox’s approach and was able to “press” Knox’s biology into a racist doctrine harnessed to conservative political ends, which included proslavery debates and support for the confederacy during the US Civil War (Richards, 1989: 376–407). Unfortunately, Sera-Shriar misses the most important conceptual issue: How Hunt used Knoxian biology and anthropology to build “the intellectual and intuitional strength to resist incorporation into the Darwinian anthropological model proffered by Huxley, and to offer considerable professional opposition to the takeover of London science by the Darwinian ‘new guard’” (Richards, 1989, p.376). As George Stocking points out, Hunt “in a paradoxical and antithetical way was one of the most influential figures in English anthropology in the 1860s” (Stocking, 1971, p. 367). These are paradoxes Sera-Shriar neglects to consider. Hunt modeled the ASL after Paul Broca’s rather infamous d’Anthropologie de Paris (Richards, 1989, 413) and was determined to make anthropology politically relevant to state power and its colonial project:

It is frequently the habit of scientific men to exaggerate the importance of their own special study to the detriment of other branches of knowledge; but do I exaggerate when I say that the fate of nations depends on a true appreciation of the science of anthropology? ... Does not the success of our colonization depend on the deductions of our science? ... Is not the wicked war now going on in America caused by an ignorance of our science? These and a host of other questions must ultimately be resolved by inductive science (Hunt, 1866, p. lxxxi, xciii.)

This struggle between these rival bodies, represented by Hunt and Huxley, for ideological hegemony clearly shaped the way in which many of Knox’s racist principles became incorporated into the mainstream of Social Darwinism. These oversights about the relationship between industrial power, colonialism, and anthropology become incomprehensible in the final chapter when Sera-Shriar examines the importance of

Darwin’s *Descent of Man* and Edward Tylor’s *Primitive Man* in synthesizing British anthropology. When reading Sera-Shriar’s argument about how these two works served as a great synthesis of observational techniques that inaugurated the emergence of British anthropology, I was flabbergasted by his omission of Herbert Spencer and his dominant position that shaped the discipline in ways that set the stage that allowed for Malinowski myths to resonate. Astonishingly, Herbert Spencer is not mentioned once in the entire manuscript.

Sera-Shriar provides certain insights into the development of observational methods in Victorian anthropology, which correct some misunderstandings. These insights could be enhanced with a more critical approach that included analysis of how the rise of racist pseudoscience during the middle and late Victorian era shaped observational practices. The integration of the methodological insights of Talal Asad, and other sophisticated understandings of colonialism’s influence on anthropology, would allow us to see how the shortcomings of Victorian anthropology continued to press upon British anthropology after Malinowski. Though it is important to show these early scientists were neither dumb nor naïve, it is also important to illustrate the ways in which their views were shaped by imperial power and racist ideologies. One cannot ignore the relationship between theory and observation.

## References

- Asad, T. (Ed.). (1973). *Anthropology and the colonial encounter*. London: Ithaca Press.
- Asad, T. (1991). Afterword: From the history of colonial anthropology to the anthropology of western hegemony. In *Colonial situations: Essays on the contextualization of ethnographic knowledge* (pp. 314–324).
- Augstein, H. F. (1999). *James Cowles Prichard’s anthropology: Remaking the science of man in early nineteenth-century Britain*. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V.
- Curtin, P. D. (1964). *The image of Africa: British ideas and actions, 1780–1850*. Madison: University of Wisconsin.
- Dubow, S. (1995). *Scientific racism in modern South Africa*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, C., McClelland, K., & Rendall, J. (2000). *Defining the Victorian nation: Class, race, gender and the British Reform Act of 1867*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Hunt, J. (1866). Address delivered at the third anniversary meeting of the Anthropological Society of London. *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, lix–lxxxii.
- Kayberry, P. (1957). *Malinowski’s contribution to field-work methods and the writing of ethnography*. Man and culture: An evaluation of the work of Bronislaw Malinowski (pp. 71–91).
- Knox, R. (1862). *The races of men: A philosophical inquiry into the influence of race over the destinies of nations* (2nd ed.). London: Henry Renshaw.
- Leach, E. R. (1961). *Rethinking anthropology*. London: Athlone Press.
- Malinowski, B. (1922). *Argonauts of the western Pacific*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, in examining.
- Richards, E. (1989). The “moral anatomy” of Robert Knox: The interplay between biological and social thought in Victorian scientific naturalism. *Journal of the History of Biology*, 22(3), 373–436.
- Stocking, G. W. (1971). What’s in a name? The origins of the Royal Anthropological Institute (1837–71). *Man*, 369–390.
- Stocking, G. W. (1992). The ethnographer’s magic: Fieldwork in British anthropology from Tylor to Malinowski. In G. W. Stocking (Ed.), *Observers Observed: Essays on ethnographic fieldwork* (pp. 70–120).
- Trouillot, M. R. (2003). *Global transformations: Anthropology and the modern world*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Urry, J. (1972). “Notes and Queries on Anthropology” and the development of field methods in British anthropology, 1870–1920. *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 45–57.