

Arguing with villagers: opposition to the idea of the lazy inhabitant of Elmdon

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Abstract. I present an argument Marilyn Strathern makes against characterizing Elmdon villagers as innately lazy. It looks as if the eventual direction of this material is going to be a rational actor model.

Draft version: Version 2 (18th August 2022, “third sentence”).

The time has come to cook

The contents of this book.

The book *Kinship at the core* records the findings of a collective project of fieldwork in an English village. The project involved sending students from Cambridge University to a village in Essex, namely Elmdon. Aside from the foreword and the epilogue, the book is written by the now distinguished anthropologist Marilyn Strathern. It seems to me that there is an argument in the third chapter, “Elmdon as a community,” and I wish to make this more clear for readers.

Verbal analysis 1. This is a quotation from page 37:

Public-minded people among newcomers and villagers alike grumble at Elmdoners’ lack of enthusiasm for involvement in village affairs... An innate apathy is being invoked, as in a real Elmdoner’s observation that “People aren’t interested. They talk and do nothing.” Statements of this kind belong to a larger set of stereotypes about villagers. “Unenterprising,” said a farmer; “apathetic”, said a middle-class in-comer. (1981: 37)

Before proceeding to identify Strathern's argument, I should say that the evidence given does not clearly support the claim that people in Elmdon represent people in Elmdon as *innately* apathetic or unenthusiastic, or lazy – I used this word in my title because of its dramatic effect! It supports the claim that they represent villagers as apathetic and unenthusiastic; but that leaves open the question of whether this is innate.

Verbal analysis 2. Later, on page 39, Strathern describes the cricket and the football clubs. I wish to make another verbal point, before introducing her argument. Here is a quotation:

Under the name 'Elmdon', cricket and football teams alike play other villages. Yet within the village they hold rather different positions. Wives complain that whereas men often come straight home after a football match, cricket lasts till the pubs open and both sides end the day with a drink.... Cricket is more of a 'village' event in that it mobilises residents on a wider basis; but football is perhaps more self-consciously 'real Elmdon', and has a 'club' dimension of some strength. (1981: 39)

The third sentence seems (slightly) ambiguous about what the complaint is. Is the complaint that it is annoying that men often come straight home after a football match? (Why can't football last longer?) Is it annoying that cricket lasts so long - the natural reading? Or do the wives actually complain about both?

Strathern's argument. On page 41, Strathern writes:

Apathetic and unresponsive as villagers are said to be about some matters, there is a large area of social life – centering on the pub and sports club – in which they are active. (1981: 41)

Readers can easily miss this argument. I take her to be arguing as follows:

(1) If villagers are innately apathetic, they would not be active in the sports clubs.

(2) They are active in the sports clubs.

Therefore:

(3) They are not innately apathetic.

There is a worry here about what we are to do with the fact that the players are male, however. Anyway, I wish to sketch my guess at what Strathern's alternative is.

Alternative explanation? From pages 46-49, Strathern depicts Elmdon villagers themselves as invoking two different models of the village in Elmdon, in their discourse. One model is a community model, which represents the village as a community and appeals to a norm that villagers should prioritize the interests of the community as a whole. The second model, as I understand it, conceives of the village as composed of discrete interest groups, such as along class lines.

There is a suggestion that the cricket and football clubs appeal to interests so as to generate activity, and furthermore that this is in theory doable elsewhere. It is just that at the moment the incentives are not present to produce activity. My guess is that Strathern is herself going to favour a rational actor model to account for inactivity or activity, as an alternative to attributing innate apathy or unresponsiveness.

Reference

Strathern, M. (with a foreword by A. Richards and an epilogue by F. Oxford). 1981. *Kinship at the core*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.