

Bringing back Frazer, avoiding the charge of relativism

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Abstract. This paper examines the debate between Marilyn Strathern and I.C. Jarvie. Writing in 1987, Strathern argues that the time is ripe for reincorporating Sir James Frazer. Jarvie thinks Strathern does so in a way that treats revolutions in anthropology as not involving scientific progress. There is a familiar defence against this charge while pursuing the same, or much the same, line of argument.

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If you so wish, bring your kings

To the room of out of context things

I wish to return to an intense debate of 1987. In an article for *Current Anthropology*, the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern argues that the time is ripe to reincorporate the previously unreadable Sir James Frazer. The article is followed by invited comments, one of which is by the philosopher of social science I.C. Jarvie. He forcefully depicts Strathern as treating revolutions in anthropology as not involving scientific progress. He writes:

Strathern's project is to reconceptualise the revolution in anthropology. What was formerly presented as a change in ideas and methods is now to be seen as the invention and diffusion of a new genre of literature. In place of writing in the style of the grand historical speculations of Frazer, the revolution fostered the

close-textured synchronic fieldwork monograph of Malinowski... The *real* question in all this is what has happened to truth. (1987: 273)

But one can make the same argument as Strathern, or much the same argument, and by a familiar move respond to the charge of denying scientific progress in revolutions, which in the title I perhaps inaccurately referred to as the charge of “relativism.”

Here is the argument, which I shall call *the ripeness argument*. “There was revolution in British social anthropology in the 1920s, which, amongst other things, emphasized context for understanding rituals. If you want to understand a ritual in a society, say, you need to understand how it fits into an overall whole of institutions, roles, and practices in that society. One brand of functionalism that came with the revolution emphasizes how this totality functions to meet a set of universal human needs whereas another brand emphasizes how each component serves to maintain the total structure formed by the components. Either way, Frazer was severely criticized for ignoring context. When Frazer attempts to understand a ritual, he takes a description of it and ignores much or all of the surrounding social context and compares the ritual with seemingly similar rituals from other societies. Frazer was soon enough regarded as unreadable and writing in the time before social anthropology was done properly. But the 1980s brought postmodern theories into anthropology which attacked functionalist anthropologists’ idea of relevant context. It is impossible to adequately draw boundaries regarding what is part of the relevant context for interpreting a ritual, say, and what is not, and material from just about anywhere cannot be excluded as irrelevant for interpreting a ritual. With this influence, the time is ripe for reading Frazer again and bringing him back onto curriculums.”

With this argument, one can respond to the charge of denying scientific progress by a

familiar move: saying that revolutionary theory B, which succeeded theory A, solves more scientific puzzles than theory A, and revolutionary theory C, which succeeded theory B, solves more scientific puzzles than theory B, and so there is progress; but this is consistent with theory C being more similar to theory A in how it represents the fundamental features of reality.¹ Applied to social anthropology, theory A and theory C both represent relevant information for an anthropologist writing about a ritual as from locations far from the ritual, whereas theory B does not and yet theory B was a legitimate successor in terms of puzzles solved over the earlier theory A. One might even have a table with a puzzle count. The effort below is not exhaustive and insufficiently favourable to functionalism, I think, but may be helpful as an illustration:

Theory	Puzzles solved, by internal standards
Frazerian evolutionism	(i) Appearance of same rituals in unconnected societies – same evolutionary stage or remnants. (ii) Depicting the unity of mankind – primitive rituals are rational behaviour given the evidence.
Malinowskian Functionalism	(i) Appearance of same rituals in unconnected societies – same functional role in each society; not actually the same if different functional role.

¹ I take this move from Thomas Kuhn (1996), but it may originate elsewhere. I guess it came from Wilfrid Sellars.

	<p>(ii) Avoiding misleading comparisons across societies – pay attention to functional role given the total system of institutions in a society.</p> <p>(iii) Depicting the unity of mankind – common human needs met by different functional systems (see Jarvie 1967: 12).</p>
Postmodern anthropology	<p>(i) Appearance of same rituals in unconnected societies – “Talk of unconnected assumes the boundaries of societies are not artificial constructions by the observer.”</p> <p>(ii) Avoiding misleading comparison across societies – “Usual criteria for misleading are misleading; every interpretation is a misinterpretation.” (See Searle 1994: 641-642)</p> <p>(iii) The unity of mankind – “This is an effect of discourse.”</p> <p>(iv) Paying attention to the role of the ethnographer – “Anthropological works are from a perspective involving power relations.” (See Visweswaran 1988: 30)</p>

Although I have introduced a familiar kind of defence for Strathern, the attack does not surprise me. Before saying why, it is worth noting that the ripeness argument above has occurred to Strathern. Below are two quotations:

- (i) “Frazerian” anthropology is a synonym for undisciplined raids on ethnographic data without respect for their internal integrity, for the way they fit together as parts of a system or have meaning for the actors. (1987: 254-255)
- (ii) But perhaps he is a person whom postmodernism allows us to countenance. It is salutary to think of Frazer because it is salutary to think about what the modernists found so distasteful in him—taking things out of context. The postmodern mood is to make deliberate play with context. It is said to blur boundaries, destroy the dichotomising frame, juxtapose voices, so that the multiple product, the monograph jointly authored, becomes conceivable. (1987: 265)

But she combines the ripeness argument with other material, such as that the emphasis on context with the functionalist revolution was accompanied by a new way of writing an anthropology book. The addition of the writing style material and the use of the term “persuasive fiction” invites a charge of relativism, which Jarvie forcefully pursues. I say “addition,” but that is misleading. For responding to Jarvie’s charge, it is useful to identify the ripeness argument above as Strathern’s argument and then treat the talk of changes in writing style as something added: as elaboration, distracting elaboration even. But this is a simple model; one will later

hopefully replace it with a more complicated model in which that talk is actually essential to the argument.²

References

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- Kuhn, T. 1996 (3rd edition). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Searle, J.R. 1994. Literary Theory and Its Discontents. *New Literary History* 25 (3): 637-667.
- Strathern, M. (With comments, including by I.C. Jarvie) 1987. Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 28 (3): 251-281.
- Visweswaran, K. 1988. Defining Feminist Ethnography. *Inscriptions* 3/4: 27-44.

² One of Strathern's points, made early on, is wrong ideas are not enough to explain unreadability for anthropologists (1987: 251). Differences in writing style associated with the theories of Frazer and Malinowski are used to explain this and that is why characterizing references to such differences as mere "addition to" or "elaboration of" the ripeness argument is misleading – from her perspective, the argument is incomplete without them. But I think they are distractions when responding to Jarvie's charge of relativism.