

Imperialism and British anthropology again, with European intellectual cults

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. I address the problem that British social anthropologists ignored the wider colonial relations which the societies they studied were part of, by proposing a solution from reflecting on the structure of European intellectual cults.

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Days of the self-contained system—

O how I missed them!

The British social anthropology of the 1930s to the 1960s has often been criticized for being unable to deal with wider processes. It depicts the societies studied as neat self-contained systems – institutions within the society form a structure, with each functioning to maintain that structure (Boon 1983). But the various tribes studied are affected by the wider process of European colonialism. How can anthropologists ignore that? A solution has been proposed (see Werbner 2020: 39-40; Edward 2022), and I wish to add another solution below.

I can see a solution if we turn in a seemingly very different direction to that of the British empire: glamorous European intellectuals, like Lacan and Derrida, and their followers. Consider this dialogue.

Observer: These are cults. There is the continental European intellectual – he is obscure and has literary value, or is perceived to – it’s not to my tastes! – and the followers who find a system in his writings and promote it.

Observer of observer: Why do you attribute that structure? Why don’t you just say that there is an intellectual and his or her followers, without referring to him and being from continental Europe?

Observer: Well, there is a market for that, isn’t there? If I tried to do that, nobody would be interested, or the people attracted to this stuff wouldn’t be. Here in Britain and in various other countries, there is some attraction to partaking in the intuitive and the artistic, but there is a preconception that you have to go to Europe for that. Only the continental European is intuitive and artistic! And the leaders are usually male, aren’t they?

What we find here is that the structure attributed is more specific than the most general informative structure: a leader who devises the system and followers who promote it. And the explanation for that appeals to preconceptions (stereotypes) and wider market forces sustaining them.

So there is a solution for the British structural-functionalist anthropologist to dealing with how to incorporate wider “things” that are affecting the society under study, at least in some cases:

- The anthropologist identifies a more specific structure than they have to.
- To justify why, they refer to wider “things” – things beyond the society which is their focus.

At least they are going to be wider, if one uses the much-criticized approach of presenting a neat self-contained social system. In my example, what the anthropologist is studying is an intellectual cult or set of them and the wider things are material reinforcing stereotypes of where one can find the intuitive and artistic, such as various movies and novels and whatever promotes those. I should probably look up the appropriate language for talking about such things, but the solution is very general. At least in some cases, there is a prospect of identifying structures in line with this tradition of anthropology and also taking into account wider phenomena, such as market forces beyond the society or colonial projects, by the means described. By the way, I am not in a position to endorse the observer's views; they were just convenient for introducing the solution.

References

Boon, J.A. 1983. Functionalists write, too: Frazer/Malinowski and the semiotics of the monograph. *Semiotica* 46: 131-149.

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