

# TRIBAL EXEMPLARS

*Images of Political Authority  
in British Anthropology, 1885–1945*

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This essay examines six decades of British anthropology with the object of deciphering a particular feature of its successive messages: its contributions to and reflection of a sustained national debate about the structure of ideal political order. The period is bracketed by significant developments in the political history of Britain, as well as by benchmarks in the history of British anthropology. The age of modern, class-based politics began with the passage of the Third Reform Bill of 1884 and the Redistribution Act of 1885, which instituted virtual manhood suffrage (although measures implementing truly universal suffrage, including the enfranchisement of women, were very gradually introduced thereafter). An era of enthusiasm for imperialism began with Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882, which signalled the opening of her participation in the "Scramble for Africa"; this era came to an end in 1945, when the newly elected Labour government began the practice of development administration in the colonies in order to prepare them for independence in the near future. And during our period anthropology was professionalized, transformed from an amateur pursuit into an academic discipline. In 1884 E. B. Tylor became both reader in Anthropology at Oxford and first President of the newly created Section for Anthropology of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Section H). By 1946, anthropology had become a thoroughly academic occupation: unlike anthropological societies founded earlier, the Association of Social Anthropologists restricted its mem-

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bership to those who had earned Ph.D.'s in anthropology or could present evidence of equivalent qualifications.

### Conquest and Polity in Folk Political Theory

But though the events of our period made consideration of certain political questions especially urgent, the debate over these questions was framed by persistent British cultural assumptions about the range of possibilities of structuring the social order. These assumptions are conspicuous in popular culture and can be abstracted into a "folk political theory"; but they have also been prominent in the discourse of high culture, in the debates on the nature of the state conducted by political philosophers since the revolutionary period of the seventeenth century. Well before 1885, extrapolation from these assumptions had led to the elaboration of two, antithetical, ideal-typical models of political organization, each made up of a set of social elements in an interdependent complex. In extremist political argument of both the conservative and radical sort, it was granted that these two models exhausted the possibilities of constitutional choice, that the elements of each did not permit of independent assortment, although other moderate political theorists developed hybrid varieties of these schemes.

If it is assumed that the capacity for rule, and indeed for achievement of any sort, derives from inborn talents possessed by only a small fraction of the population, then the legitimate form of government is a centralized polity, dominated by an hereditary aristocracy. Social integration takes organicist shape: unequal individuals cooperate to advance collective ends, accepting as just the measure of status and material rewards that they are dealt in proportion to the power they exercise. Although this political philosophy exemplifies the tradition of Western conservative thought persuasively described by Karl Mannheim (1953; cf. Manuel 1956), the British variant of this social philosophy has a particular emphasis. The strong polity is created when a superior band of conquerors forces the consolidation of diverse peoples, none of which has previously been capable of developing culturally advanced forms of social organization. The alien conquerors retain a monopoly on the use of force within the state; this monopoly permits them to establish themselves as hereditary rulers, compel general obedience, and subordinate individual interests to the needs of the state. The character of such a state's international relations is consistent with its internal constitution: the state seeks to expand its territorial domain, and does so by military means. Evidently, the rhythm of life in such a state is punctuate: the stable order will be altered only under special circumstances by persons of peculiar genius.

If, on the contrary, it is assumed that talent is distributed fairly—if not

perfectly—uniformly throughout the human race, a legitimate political order must be an egalitarian, contractual union of atomistic individuals. The British folk-model of such a state is premised on the assumption that the use of force to achieve political ends is illegitimate. The polity must be based on voluntary alliances, a principle that extends to foreign affairs as well as domestic; the sovereignty of other nations must be respected, and peaceful relations effected with them, usually through the medium of economic exchange. The social stratification system of the polity may not be thoroughly egalitarian, but it must be meritocratic; individual social status must be based on personal achievement, rather than birth into an hereditary caste. Above all, political leaders can retain their offices only with the consent of the governed, for the function of the state is the satisfaction of popular desires and the protection of individual liberties. If this liberal state is considered the natural order of things, it is also assumed that social changes occur constantly but gradually, the products of small innovations made everywhere, everyday, by ordinary beings.

British political debate was not, of course, conducted in the abstract. It was shaped by the national experience, and in particular by reactions to significant historical events subject to diverse interpretations. From the period of constitutional revolution of the seventeenth century, the Norman Conquest of the Anglo-Saxon people was a major historical reference point of political argument. The results of the Conquest could be represented as justification for the conservative folk model of the state outlined above, as the events necessary to the foundation of the English nation, which was destined to extend its jurisdiction into the territories constituting Great Britain and beyond. Hence, the Conquest could be offered as but one illustration of the theory advanced by seventeenth-century defenders of the established order: submission to conquerors is in accordance with the providence of God, the salvation of a divided and confused people from anarchy (Franklin 1978). Thus, King James asserted that the Norman Conquest had disciplined the previously dissolute Anglo-Saxons (Hill 1958:52). This argument was to be echoed in the years to come. In 1762 David Hume wrote that until the Norman Conquest the Saxons had been “very little advanced beyond the rude state of nature” (Skinner 1965:155). And a number of nineteenth-century historians agreed with Carlyle that without the benefit of alien rule the English would have remained “a gluttonous race of Jutes and Angles, capable of no grand combinations; lumbering about in pot-bellied equanimity; not dreaming of heroic toil, and silence, and endurance, such as leads to the high places of this universe” (Burrow 1981:143). By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Norman Conquest represented a paradigm for British colonialism: it had welded a disparate population into a master race destined to bring the benefits of civilization to peoples as backward as the Saxons had been (Hill 1958:120).

Critics of established order ranging from liberal to radical could hardly deny that many governments were based on force. But as Locke argued in 1689, government rested on a voluntary compact between autonomous individuals; though natural societies might elect kings, they would permit them to reign only so long as they ruled properly, and many simple societies functioned without kings except during periods of military conflict. Portrayed in terms such as Locke's, the government established through the Norman Conquest was illegal, an abrogation of the natural democracy of the Saxons. Anglo-Saxon precedent was repeatedly invoked by supporters of causes ranging from radical to liberal, from the seventeenth-century Levellers and Diggers, through the followers of Thomas Paine at the turn of the eighteenth century, to the defenders of Lloyd George's redistributive "People's Budget" of 1909 (Briggs 1966:7-8). The constitutional ideal supposedly embodied in Anglo-Saxon society could be evoked without specific reference to the "Norman Yoke," however. It clearly informs the middle-class radicalism of the nineteenth-century free-traders Richard Cobden and John Bright, who envisioned a social order maintained by voluntary cooperation and economic exchange, with minimal government interference. And in the latter half of the nineteenth century, this sustained tradition of social thought was translated into the formulae of Herbert Spencer, who argued that while social evolution could be realized in "militant" or "industrial" form, the "industrial" order was the more natural, and thus preferable, form of society; Spencer's models corresponded to the conservative and liberal ideal types here outlined (Peel 1971:192-223).

Historically, there was one conspicuous attempt to reconcile conservative and radical models of the polity: the "Whig" historical tradition, which stresses the continuity of English history, arguing that the Conquest little altered the pattern of English life. Though originally a conservative argument made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by those who appealed to the "ancient constitution" in order to resist royal innovation, the "Whig" interpretation became an essentially liberal position. The Normans may have triumphed through force, but they could not reign without the consent of the governed, and therefore could not suspend Saxon liberties. Some "Whig" historians even suggested, as did one eighteenth-century writer, that William the Conqueror could not have ruled had he not "founded his Right upon the Election of the People" (Skinner 1965:174). Subsequent historical scholarship discredited such fictitious accounts, but many nineteenth-century historians agreed with E. A. Freeman that the Conquest was only a "temporary overthrow of our national being"—"in a few generations we led captive our conquerors" (Burrow 1981:102). "Whig" historians did not necessarily insist on Norman reaffirmations of the democratic Saxon constitution. Like Turner, they could argue that Anglo-Saxon society had been no less socially stratified than post-Conquest England (118). "Whigs" were, however, distinguished by their denial that force could effect disjunctive historical change.

## Evolutionary Anthropology and Political Development

Evolutionist anthropologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries described political development in the terms of liberal British thought, although, as we shall see, evolutionist schemes could subsequently be turned to different purposes. But because anthropology was by no means a professionalized academic discipline at the turn of the century, the evolutionist thought of this period virtually defies systematic summary. The loosely defined anthropological community tolerated a diversity of opinion, and, indeed, evolutionary ideas were to be rendered in their most schematic form by those determined to reject them. Nevertheless, one can abstract from the intricacies of anthropological discussion two interrelated postulates on which the evolutionist faith in universal human progress and the practicability of the “comparative method” of “armchair anthropology” were predicated. The first of these postulates, grounded in Enlightenment beliefs in human equality, was the “psychic unity” of mankind: Human beings everywhere possessed identical faculties of reasoning. The second was the “recapitulation hypothesis”: the development of each individual, and of every society, normally followed a single pattern. Individuals and societies were distinguished from one another by the *stage* of maturity they had attained, the *rate* at which they had evolved, and variations which could be explained primarily as functions of environmental factors. The “comparative method” followed from this model of development: no matter what their historical and geographical locations, peoples gauged in the same evolutionary “stage” were essentially identical, and whatever was known about any one of them could be used in analysis of the others (Bock 1978).

Evolutionist assumptions permitted the ranking of societies all over the world, as well as people within society, according to a single, meritocratic standard—the degree to which they had achieved high levels of rationality and morality in all forms of behavior, and with these the technical mastery of their environment. By this standard, it was possible to equate contemporary primitives, ancient European peoples, and the people living in less-developed sectors of modern societies—rural residents and the “dangerous classes.” All of these relationships were analogous: tribesmen to Europeans; children to adults; women to men; the poor to the elite. The last group was of course the vanguard of evolutionary advance. These relationships held because physical evolution and cultural evolution were interdependent. Racial characteristics were both dependent and independent variables, not only determinants of culture but themselves determined by all aspects of individuals’ and peoples’ environments—their willful behavior, their traditional practices, their material possessions, and their natural surroundings. As W. H. Flower remarked, “The physical characteristics of race, so strongly marked in many cases, are probably always associated with equally or more diverse character-

istics of temper and intellect" (1894). If physical development and mental development were correlated, these were also associated with social status. Many anthropologists agreed that the rulers of tribal societies resembled British gentlemen in manners and attitudes, while the lower orders in Britain displayed primitive physical capacities of strength and endurance their social superiors lacked (e.g., Beddoe 1891; Harley 1887; Hose 1894; Roth 1892; Venn 1888).

Belief in this social scheme was threatened at the turn of the century by new biological ideas—August Weismann's theory of the "germ plasm" and Gregor Mendel's rediscovered work on the laws of inheritance. This variant of social evolutionism was predicated on the neo-Lamarckian assumption that acquired characteristics were inherited. A number of figures prominent in the anthropological community at the end of the nineteenth century were quick to accept the new biology, although their judgments of its implications varied. It was possible to believe simultaneously that acquired characteristics were not inherited and that many apparent racial differences were produced by environmental rather than biological factors (Turner 1889). It was possible to argue that new findings on the mechanism of inheritance were entirely compatible with the observation that a people transplanted from one location to another could become physically adapted to their new environment, although the new biology suggested that the process of adaptation might require a greater period of time than had previously been thought. It was possible to argue, as Francis Galton did most notably, that the new biological knowledge would permit deliberate acceleration of human evolution (1885). And it was possible to argue that the new model of heredity did not in itself entail judgments of the relative superiority of some races over others, or eliminate the possibility that the dominance of some races over others was caused by environmental rather than biological factors (Campbell 1886). It should be stressed, however, that those who most readily embraced strict hereditarianism were those whose primary anthropological interest was the explanation of physical variations.

Evolutionist anthropologists concerned to maintain the integration of physical and social anthropology could not so readily abandon Lamarckism, however, for their theoretical synthesis seemed to require it. Few remained as unabashedly Lamarckian as William Ridgeway, who insisted on the importance of "the effects of the environment in changing racial types, and that, too, in no long time. The change in the type of the American of New England from that of his English ancestor and his approximation to the hatchet face and thin scraggy beard of the Red Indian have long been remarked" (1908:525). A. C. Haddon's defensive response to new biological theories was more cautious; he advanced a modified Lamarckism, arguing that while some physical characteristics, such as headform, were not modified by environmental influ-

ences, other characteristics, such as stature, were (1900). Haddon's revisionist approach was characteristic of a number of anthropologists. They agreed that some racial types were more stable than others, that some physical characteristics were more susceptible to environmental modification than others, that some climatic conditions had greater impact on physical characteristics than others (Beddoe 1889; Clouston 1894; Conder 1887; Flower 1884; Petrie 1906; Ridgeway 1910).

The new biology threatened the basis of the assumption of the "psychic unity" of all of the world's peoples, and with it the postulate that peoples everywhere were capable of "independent invention" of higher civilization. This is not to suggest that evolutionists were unwilling to explain cultural innovation as a consequence of contact between peoples. Indeed, in 1884, E. B. Tylor cautioned that, before the anthropologist fell "back on the extreme hypothesis of independent origins," he had to entertain the possibility that cultural similarities between peoples were products of "diffusion" (1884: 451). But evolutionist anthropologists agreed that different peoples who had attained the same level of social development also reasoned in identical fashion, so that cultural similarities need not be assumed to indicate diffusion (e.g., Brabrook 1898). And, as John Rhys argued, a people would only accept diffused cultural elements appropriate to their level of development, even when they had been forced to submit to alien rule; he "proceeded on the principle that each successive band of conquerors has its race, language and institutions essentially more or less modified by contact with the race, language and institutions of those whom it has conquered" (1900). Cultural advance could not be forced, but the "psychic unity" of mankind made the gradual development of all of the world's peoples inevitable. The view of social change embodied in evolutionary gradualism evidently represented a liberal, not radical, political outlook, and, indeed, was explicitly identified as such (Pitt-Rivers 1888).

Evolutionary anthropologists' explanations of the origin of the state were consistent with their liberal outlook, for the polity was the spontaneously generated product of peaceful, *natural* human drives. The rise of the state was based on the biological imperative of reproduction, for the state grew from progressive extensions of kinship ties. Anthropologists differed over the details of this process. Some argued that the most primitive society was a promiscuous horde, which by degrees accepted the discipline of monogamous family life; others countered that the nuclear family was the primordial form of social organization. But whether they believed that families derived from or merged into clans, anthropologists agreed that clans fused into tribes and tribes into nations (Gomme 1887; Lang 1905; Thomas 1906). The inevitability of state formation followed from the universal practice of exogamy, a practice variously explained as a consequence of the incest taboo instinctive to

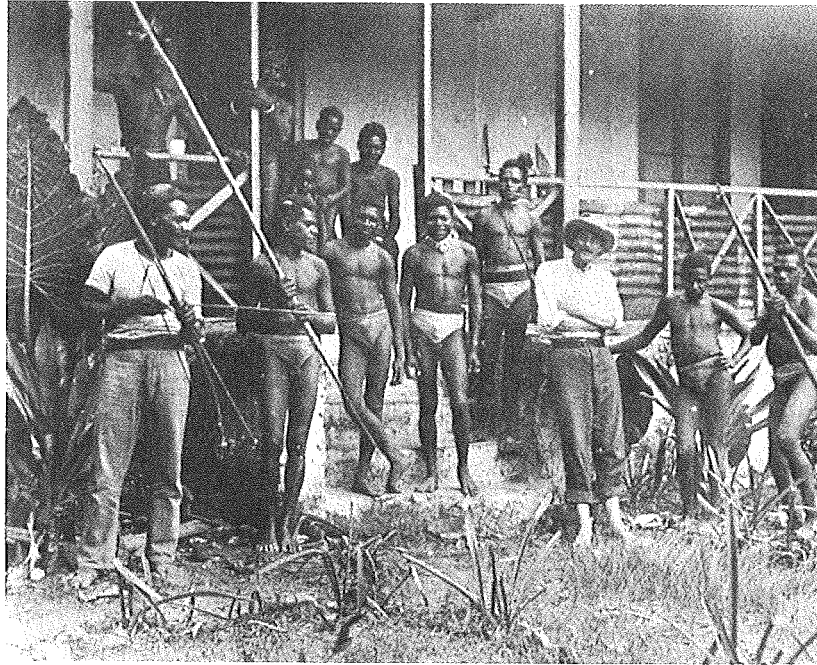
those reared together (Westermarck 1891:544), the rational decision to regulate reproduction for the biological good of the community (Howitt 1888), or the recognition that marital ties could be used to effect political alliances (Tylor 1888). Furthermore, primitive government was expected to serve popular needs, although it did not do so in a manner civilized man would regard as rational. The function of primitive government was control of natural resources; but it was the superior physical and moral condition of its archetypal leader, the “divine king”—rather than instrumental action—that supposedly ensured his people’s prosperity (Frazer 1900:I, 208–10). Anthropologists recognized that there were instances of state formation that deviated from this ideal pattern of its “independent invention” through the elaboration of voluntary alliances. Cultural patterns had been diffused; and the political consolidation of peoples had been effected through force: The strong triumphed over the weak—a process that might have some biological justification. But societies organized through peaceful cooperation would be more successful societies because they adhered to the most natural social form (Haddon 1889:387).

### **Diffusionism as the Migration of Conquering Races**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the climate of social opinion in British anthropology began to change. Emblematic of this change was the rise of the “diffusionist” school, whose most prominent members were G. Elliot Smith, W. J. Perry, W. H. R. Rivers, and A. M. Hocart, whose theoretical loyalties lay with the diffusionists more than with any other school. The conspicuously lunatic aspects of diffusionism, and the disrepute into which it fell in the 1930s, should not blind us to the school’s earlier importance. And if we are to understand the diffusionists’ role in British anthropology, we must appreciate the features of their scheme that gave it broad anthropological appeal during this period (after World War I the diffusionists were to emphasize different aspects of their model).

A new model of race underlay the new anthropological explanations of the development of modern civilization, including diffusionist explanations. This model did not derive from the new biology, however, but from the new paleontology—the excavation and analysis of ancient human remains. Elliot Smith figured prominently in the discovery of key pieces of evidence—the remains of approximately six thousand individuals who lived in Egypt from the predynastic period to the early Christian era, excavated during 1907 and 1908, as well as the fraudulent Piltdown remains, “discovered” in 1912 by Charles Dawson. Regardless of the provenance of these pieces of evidence, they were taken as proof that the races of mankind had remained unaltered for millennia (Anon. 1911). Anthropologists’ changed understanding of race might have





W. H. R. Rivers and Malekulan natives, 1914 (courtesy of the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge).

led them to eliminate racial factors from their explanations of cultural differences, as post-World War I anthropologists were to do. Instead, they revised their interpretation of the relationship between race and culture. They continued to believe that physical and behavioral traits were correlated, defining the perpetuation of culture from one generation to another as a biological process. The assumption that every race had a fixed cultural character, which would be sustained in the absence of unwonted constraints upon its behavior, entailed several propositions: geographical dispersal would not modify the behavior of members of a single race; cultural diversity within an area was *prima facie* evidence that its inhabitants were a racially diverse collection of migrant settlers; the global distribution of races reflected the inherent migratory propensities of members of different stocks, not the effects of the environment (Beddoe 1905; Cunningham 1902; Haddon 1920; Hall 1904; Parsons 1919; Pearson 1903; Seligman 1924).

For both those who accepted the new hereditarianism and those who rejected it, then, the crucial anthropological problem was the causes and consequences of migrations (Myres 1909). If the diverse races of mankind did not possess in equal measure the capacity to invent independently the elements

of civilization, evolutionary advance had to be the product of “the clash and contact of peoples” (Crooke 1912). For the social forms of modern civilization were, as Elliot Smith declared, “artificial and unnatural” (1915:167). This was not to say that modern civilization was not a great achievement, but that it was the product of historical accident and special genius—whether of gifted individuals or inherently superior races. Significantly, even Frazer enunciated an essentially diffusionist position in 1908:

The more we study the outward workings of society and the progress of civilisation, the more clearly shall we perceive how both are governed by the influence of thoughts which, springing up at first we know not how or whence in a few superior minds, gradually spread until they have leavened the whole inert lump of a community or of mankind. The origin of such mental variations, with all their far-reaching train of social consequences, is just as obscure as the origin of those physical variations on which, if biologists are right, depends the evolution of species, and with it the possibility of progress.

Smith and Perry’s diffusionism now seems undeniably bizarre: the origin of modern civilization was a culture-complex that had been developed in the unique conditions of ancient Egypt, and from there spread by migrants who were searching for precious substances. But we must recognize that certain features of their scheme were widely accepted. The initial reception of their work was positive (Anon. 1916), and even those like Haddon and Bronislaw Malinowski, who was later to ridicule diffusionism in all of its aspects, greeted early diffusionist work respectfully (Haddon 1918; Malinowski 1924). And the diffusionists’ early success must have been due in no small measure to their ability to sustain anthropology’s charter mission—the integration of social analysis with archeological and biological findings (Rivers 1922)—for the diffusionists brought to bear upon social analysis new evidence about man’s biological evolution, as we have seen, as well as archeological theories about the origin of civilization (Evans 1896).

During this period it was assumed that force was a necessary component of evolutionary advance, and that evolution occurred in unpredictable, disjunctive leaps rather than through the steady accretion of small advances. Conquest was essential to the creation of the state; when two peoples came into contact, the superior one would inevitably establish dominance over the inferior one, forcing the latter to adopt a more civilized mode of behavior. This pattern of cultural change obtained everywhere—in the ancient societies of Greece, Rome, and Egypt, in prehistoric Europe, and among contemporary primitives (Johnston 1913; Keith 1916; Migeod 1917; Naville 1907; Peake 1917; Rivers 1913; Seligman & Seligman 1930; Smith 1915; Werner 1911). Class divisions were legacies of military pacification and of interracial competition for niches in the social hierarchy, not the result of the ever-elaborating divi-

sion of labor that accompanied economic growth, as late nineteenth-century anthropologists would have had it (Keith 1915; Migeod 1919; Torday & Joyce 1906). Some anthropologists specifically invoked the Norman Conquest as an exemplar of the process by which societies were brought to a higher level of evolution (cf. Raglan 1956).

Significantly, perennial anthropological problems were reanalyzed to suit the new intellectual fashion. Such a problem is the origin of the social form called the "dual organization," which has been observed all over the world: a people conceptualizes all cultural and natural phenomena in dichotomous terms, which may be antithetical or complementary, and assigns them to one or another set of related phenomena; and the population is divided into two groups, each of which has a special relationship to one of these dichotomous inventories. Whereas the "dual organization" had been explained as the product of an internally generated split within an evolving group, in the early twentieth century anthropologists described it as a fundamental class division resulting from the conquest of one people by another (Gomme 1909; Perry 1923:326; Rivers 1914: II, 562-64).

### Functionalism and the Anglo-Saxon Model

The political orientation of British anthropology changed after World War I. The shift in anthropological opinion was marked by the rise of the functionalist school, led by Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. Prominent among their disciples were E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes. In technical terms, functionalism represented a dramatic departure from earlier styles of anthropological practice, but the political message embodied in functionalism was also conveyed by evolutionists and diffusionists after World War I, albeit to a lesser degree. The majority of anthropologists no longer presumed that conquering peoples were culturally superior to defeated ones, that race and culture were interdependent, that the state was the highest and best form of political organization, that the current character of Western civilization represented an evolutionary yardstick by which to measure the developmental level of all other cultures. Perhaps most important, they no longer assumed that those societies that were most technologically advanced and politically organized would also adhere to the highest moral standards. The virtue of Western civilization itself seemed questionable. In 1929 Elliot Smith chose to emphasize the negative rather than positive aspect of the diffusionist account of the world's history, writing that "when mankind acquired culture" it developed "with it social unrest, dangerous practices, and methods of cruelty" (Smith 1929: xviii). R. R. Marett could no longer equate material evolution and progress, wondering "whether it is possible to be both civilized

and good?" (1935:21). Postwar anthropologists granted their predecessors' premise: the strong state and an elaborated status hierarchy would not be developed in the absence of technological sophistication and material wealth. But they denied the merits of such achievements. Meyer Fortes, for example, stated that the social relationships of the Tallensi were harmonious because their society was distinguished by "the almost complete absence of economic differentiation, by occupation or by ownership of resources, and, in particular, the absence of both material or technological possibilities for capital accumulation or for technological advance" (1945). As Hocart said of ostensibly undeveloped peoples, "True it is that such societies cannot form big nations, maintain disciplined armies, lay networks of roads and railways, or suffer economic crises on a colossal scale; but they can exist, and quite successfully too, if success consists in surviving with happiness" (1936:128).

Evidently, postwar anthropology was a vehicle for liberal criticism of Western society. Paradoxically, by some measures it seemed conservative. It retained the model of social change implied in a positive interpretation of the Norman Conquest: change did not derive from the internal dynamics of a society but was necessarily stimulated by contact with some outside agents. Functionalists portrayed traditional cultures as perfectly integrated societies, inevitably static because all of their institutions were mutually reinforcing, their peoples united in consensual agreement. Certainly, their social organicism represented a rejection of the traditional liberal view of society as an aggregate of atomistic individuals—the view embodied in late nineteenth-century anthropology. But in the early twentieth century, British liberalism was reinterpreted by the proponents of the "New Liberalism," who argued for an increase in state power on the grounds that in modern society the average man was now powerless to protect himself against all manner of threats to his welfare. Unlike traditional conservatism, however, their collectivism did not entail subordination of individual interests to the needs of the state. As the New Liberal L. T. Hobhouse wrote in 1911, social harmony was the end of progressive evolution, effected in a voluntarist manner through the growth of altruism and the sense of social responsibility; in an integrated society, "an individual right . . . cannot conflict with the common good" (Collini 1979:126). Functionalist anthropologists projected the social condition that New Liberals saw as the end-state of evolution onto the simple societies they studied. Just as centuries of British radicals had invoked the mythology of Anglo-Saxon England, they were describing a lost golden age of mankind.

Certainly, there were anthropologists whose work contravened prevailing trends. The most important was C. G. Seligman, who in the 1930s continued to equate race with culture, and military success with cultural superiority. His "Hamitic Hypothesis" explained evolution in Africa in diffusionist terms:

[T]he history of Africa South of the Sahara is no more than the story of the permeation through the ages, in different degrees and at various times, of the Negro and Bushman aborigines by Hamitic blood and culture. The Hamites were, in fact, the great civilising force of black Africa.

(Seligman 1930:18)

In the late 1930s, Malinowski's student Margaret Read adopted a similar approach in her analysis of the Ngoni: Their superior moral qualities had been tested and shaped through their conquest of inferior peoples; they became the hereditary rulers of the state they formed through combat (1936). Significantly, though, Read became an academic, but not an anthropologist, and her views were unpopular in anthropological circles. By the time of World War II, the anthropological community had rejected the argument that the origin of the state lay in the conquest of one ethnic group by another—the conventional wisdom of the era of World War I (Nadel 1940:193). Indeed, for a time British anthropologists did not entertain speculations about the origin of the state, perhaps out of reluctance to conclude that force was necessary to political organization.

The anthropologists of the 1920s and 1930s turned for preference to the study of simple, "acephalous" or stateless societies, glorifying their way of life by virtue of the analytical model they adopted. A number of factors conspired to direct anthropologists' attention to such societies. They were the ideal subjects for a group then anxious to distinguish itself from its amateur predecessors, for trained expertise was necessary to discern the routinized patterns of behavior that sustained order in the absence of centralized government. Furthermore, owing to the dynamics of colonial pacification and rule, acephalous societies were likely to be relatively remote from colonial authority, and hence still-unexplored subjects for anthropological research; centralized polities were more common in thoroughly pacified areas, partly because consolidation of tribal authority was one of the typical responses to foreign invasion and partly because colonial rulers encouraged political centralization (Kuklick 1978). But anthropologists' selection of research problems also represented normative judgment, for it entailed recognition of sources of social stability and personal satisfaction ignored by previous generations of anthropologists. And anthropologists' judgments fitted a conventional form; acephalous societies were portrayed after the fashion of the folk model of Anglo-Saxon democracy.

Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's *African Political Systems*, published in 1940, summarized the approach of this era in anthropology. It is generally agreed that this book heralded and inspired a generation of anthropologists (Middleton & Tait 1958:1–3; cf. Mair 1975:8–9, 14–15), but it also constituted the culmination of a previous trend; for post-World War I anthropologists, not

merely those represented in this collection, typically portrayed the simplest societies as the realization of a cultural ideal. Only minimal differences of power and status existed in economically undeveloped societies, and social order was maintained through informal cooperation and consensus. In contrast, powerful states were socially stratified, and the hereditary aristocracies that ruled them maintained their authority through force. In such simple societies as that of the Andaman Islands described by Radcliffe-Brown, community leaders were selected on the basis of talent, not inherited status (1922:45). Persistent relationships between individuals and groups were conceptualized in inherently egalitarian terms, seen as resting on cooperation and reciprocal obligations. Variations in social structure such as the "dual organization" were assimilated to this model, and institutionalized practices were identified as the "realization of the mutual interdependence of the various parts of the society" (Firth 1936:57). Even those political structures resulting from invasion and subsequent domination of one group by another did not necessarily breach the norm of consensual government, for different peoples could be integrated as virtual equals in the same social system, and a government framework created by a conquering people as an instrument of subordination could become irrelevant in these terms (Evans-Pritchard 1940:125). Such a denial of the importance of force is wonderfully reminiscent of the "Whig" interpretation of the Norman Conquest.

Anthropologists could not deny the existence of centralized states or of aristocracies, but they emphasized those features of traditional centralized polities that made these societies essentially democratic. Even in a society pervaded by consciousness of class distinctions, dominated by an hereditary aristocracy, the exigencies of survival required the ruling class to grant some measure of authority to persons of talent and achievement, for the adaptive capacity of a people depended on its acceptance of meritocratic standards (Evans-Pritchard 1937:203, 343). These anthropologists postulated a relationship between a people and its environment that their predecessors did not grant axiomatically: if a culture had survived, this indicated that a people had satisfactorily adapted to its environment; that it had adapted to its environment indicated that a people necessarily accepted meritocratic standards to some degree. Even in centralized tribal societies, leadership was evaluated by performance standards, for the function of political leadership was instrumental, not merely symbolic. A ruler had effective contractual obligations to his subjects, and indigenous tribal constitutions incorporated checks on chiefly power. A chief who failed to meet his obligations would certainly cease to be an effective ruler and might well be deposed. Nevertheless, the ideal society was one without centralized political leadership, in which minimal distinctions of power and status obtained.

### The Nuer and the British Folk-Political Tradition

To appreciate the degree to which this normative political theory was manifested in anthropological analysis, we can examine the diverse findings of students of the Nuer; the task of the historian of anthropological ideas would be easier if other peoples had been studied over and over again, but unfortunately the range of materials available on the Nuer is unusual, if not unique, in the anthropological literature. The standard work on the Nuer is, of course, that done by Evans-Pritchard. To Evans-Pritchard, the sustained interest in the Nuer was a "tribute to the Nuer themselves. Twenty years ago they were not so highly regarded; but little by little we have learnt . . . that they are a people whose values are worth handing down to posterity" (1954:v-vi). We are not, then, doing Evans-Pritchard an injustice if we describe his landmark study, *The Nuer* (1940), as a brief for the Nuer way of life. But others who have studied this people have described them in different terms.

According to Evans-Pritchard, Nuer social organization embodies the form known as "segmentary society"; it is made up of equivalent, autonomous units, which are not joined in a centralized hierarchy but act together only in opposition to some common enemy. The largest stable unit, which Evans-Pritchard rather confusingly calls the "tribe," does not include all people who consider themselves Nuer and display the Nuer pastoral culture, but is the largest group of distinct communities that "affirm their obligation to combine in warfare against others and acknowledge the rights of their members to compensation for injury." The critical feature of Nuer political organization is its relative character. Loyalties are determined in the mode that is common to all Nuer culture: a political group "is a group only in relation to other groups"; the political system "is an equilibrium between opposed tendencies towards fission and fusion, between the tendency of all groups to segment, and the tendency of all groups to combine with segments of the same order" (1940: 5, 147-48). Social equilibrium is not sustained among the Nuer because of the absence of conflict, but each source of tension tends to be balanced with a countervailing power, so that paradoxically conflict becomes a force for social integration.

The Nuer make some status distinctions. Each tribe has a dominant clan, and has incorporated captured Dinka, people from the ethnic group traditionally preyed upon by the Nuer, who constitute at least half of the population. But the social distance between the classes is slim. Relations between the sexes are as egalitarian as anywhere; the dominant clan in each tribe may be the "owners of the land" as the descendants of the original settlers of the area, but they have "prestige rather than rank and influence rather than power"; the Dinka are incorporated as equals in Nuer society. The Nuer possess no



E. E. Evans-Pritchard with a group of Azande, ca. 1928 (courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford).



tradition of strong leadership of any sort: prophets arose among them after the Arab and European invasions, but they were religious figures with limited political authority; the men known as "leopard-skin chiefs" are only "ritual experts," persons from the commoner class who mediate but cannot arbitrarily resolve disputes. Furthermore, "the ordered anarchy in which they live accords well with their character, for it is impossible to live among the Nuer and conceive of rulers ruling over them" (1940:174, 181, 215, *passim*).

Evans-Pritchard's portrait of the Nuer is different from others' in several ways: it minimizes the importance of status distinctions in their society; it eliminates strong leaders from their political life, even as occasional figures; it minimizes those features of their society that reflect their history as a people who have expanded their territory by preying upon others. Certainly, there are common elements in all descriptions of Nuer culture: their democratic values, and the absence of a centralized, coordinated political system at all times in their history. But other anthropologists have argued that the Nuer have a tradition of strong leadership, particularly evident in times of crisis, although the power of such figures rests on their ability to articulate the popular will, not on the authority embodied in inherited status or routinized in an office. And they have seen the "leopard-skin chief," a constant character in Nuer society, as having more power than Evans-Pritchard was willing to grant (Howell 1954:28-34; Huffman 1931; Seligman 1934:23-34). Indeed, these patterns may be elicited from Evans-Pritchard's own material, although he did not emphasize them (Gough 1971). In some part, we may see Evans-Pritchard's interpretations as strategic, designed to counter the view of the colonial officials of the Sudan Political Service; like other members of his professional generation, he was determined to prevent colonial rulers from subverting traditional institutions to serve their own ends (Powdermaker 1966:43). And like British colonial officials everywhere, those in the Sudan were eager to find in indigenous political institutions an orderly system of leadership which they could employ; thus they were critical of Evans-Pritchard's analysis because it denied them such useful agents (Howell 1954:28-29). But another disputed component of Evans-Pritchard's analysis serves no such immediate tactical purpose: his critics have argued that he saw the same egalitarian relations between social classes everywhere in Nuerland; whereas in the parts of Nuerland recently acquired through predatory expansion, the social distance between aristocrats and commoners, and between commoners and captured Dinka, was greater than elsewhere (Gough 1971:89-90).

One can appreciate these anthropologists' differences in the context of the folk tradition of British political thought, in which societal variation is conceptualized in terms of a limited range of possibilities. Political and social stratification systems are interdependent, and a democratic society is neces-

sarily egalitarian and stable—because social control is maintained without force, disjunctive change is impossible. The ideal-typical alternative, the hierarchical political order effected through force, is fundamentally aristocratic rather than democratic. The pattern evidenced in recently acquired areas of Nuerland is consistent with this tradition, for it incorporates the elements that have been seen as essential features of aristocratic government: military pacification; exaggerated divisions between social classes; inherited, not achieved, characteristics as requisites for political leadership. Because Evans-Pritchard cast his description of Nuer society in the mold of the archetypal democratic polity, there was no place in his account for cultural materials that did not fit the mold.

The particular character of Evans-Pritchard's perspective is brought into bold relief when it is contrasted to the visions of anthropologists who work in other national traditions and bring different expectations to their analysis of the Nuer. Americans might find it particularly revealing that an American anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins, has described Nuer society as ideally structured to make it a "successful predatory organization in conflicts with other tribes"; unlike Evans-Pritchard, he has no difficulty reconciling the "militantly egalitarian" character of the Nuer with their insatiable appetite for territorial acquisition and subordination of other peoples—notably the Dinka (1961: 323, 335, 343). And a French anthropologist, Louis Dumont, has taken Evans-Pritchard to task, along with the others of his anthropological generation, for ignoring the social realities of "order, interdependence, subordination, and hierarchy," while projecting the virtues of liberal individualism onto the peoples they studied, seeing "everywhere individuals in the modern sense of the term, people imbued with the values of liberty and equality" (1975:338).

Evans-Pritchard's rendition of the relations between dominant Nuer and subordinate Dinka in the language of mutual consent and benefit might be interpreted as an implicit apology for British colonial power, cast in the conventional formula of "Whig" liberalism. Anthropologists, no more than other British liberals in this period, could not rationalize colonial rule as necessary to the improvement of subject peoples. But by denying that a conquered people could be compelled to follow an unwonted way of life through the use of force, they in effect denied the reality of colonial domination. If the consent of the governed was essential to the maintenance of authority, by definition colonized peoples had accepted only those British colonial directives they recognized as legitimate, practicing various forms of subterfuge in order to maintain cultural practices they cherished (cf. Mair 1952:1). But because Evans-Pritchard and his generation also idealized these stateless societies, their work may perhaps be better appreciated as a paean to the merits of egalitarian democracy than as an apology for colonialism.

### Anthropology and Society in Modern Britain

How can we explain the three phases of anthropological development described here? We must point to both national trends and changing opinion within the scientific community. In the late nineteenth century, the political opinions expressed through anthropology reflected the increasing importance of meritocratic standards in the determination of social status in Britain. Certainly, the advantages of inherited status were not altogether eliminated, but in the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s the liberal professions, the civil service, the universities, and the military were made more meritocratic (Perkin 1983; Reader 1966). The new scientific occupations, anthropology among them, seemed to exemplify the meritocratic ideal. As new professions, they represented relatively open avenues for upward mobility. And the very nature of scientific activity seemed to preclude undeserved reputation within the scientific community. Hence, the leading propagandists for public support of science conventionally argued that scientific progress could not be made in any aristocratic society, but must be accomplished by the "industrious classes," as did Lyon Playfair in the 1870s (Turner 1978). The scientific population as a whole, anthropologists among them, can be broadly characterized as proselytizing secularists of provincial dissenting origins (Cardwell 1957:6). Not surprisingly, then, anthropological writing represented a brief for the meritocratic values that had altered the fortunes of the middle classes, and especially the dissenters among them.

At the turn of the century, anthropological thought was affected by the shifting national mood—a product of a hardening of class lines and changes in Britain's world role. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Carlyle and Disraeli had described the widening gulf between rich and poor, but the gap was more pronounced by 1900. Upward mobility had become more difficult, as the consolidation of firms into companies created an economic climate too harsh for the self-made entrepreneur. Attendant on the reorganization of industry was the divorce of management from ownership and the growth of a rentier class. At the other end of the social scale was a growing underclass or "residuum," in large part composed of urban in-migrants from the impoverished countryside, whose numbers were increased by an intermittent stream of agricultural crises between 1873 and 1886. Political radicals and conservatives alike predicted the imminent outbreak of a "serious war of the classes." By the first decade of the twentieth century, the conflict between the classes had become intense: the self-conscious defense of privilege was exemplified in the behavior of the House of Lords, which provoked a constitutional crisis between 1909 and 1911 with its obstruction of the reform measures of the Liberal government. The belligerence of the working class was manifested in a

series of major strikes between 1910 and 1912. As class lines hardened and class antagonism grew, anthropologists began to think of race as a fixed attribute and of the lower races as inferior beings incapable of spontaneous cultural advance (cf. Lorimer 1978; Wohl 1968).

Imperialist enthusiasm translated upper-class attitudes toward the lower orders into international terms, and was a response to an increasing awareness of Britain's decline as a world power. In the international context, the population of Britain was one race, competing with other races for world domination. All parties to World War I sounded this theme, of course, but it was heard with increasing frequency from the time of the ill-managed South African War (1899–1902). Imperialism was now defended both because it was a means for improving the British race through conflict and because it would bring the benefits of civilization to inferior races, who would not advance unless forced to do so by a superior race. This argument represented a dramatic change from the earlier brief for imperialism, premised on the assumption that while Britain might gain economically from an expanded empire the peoples she conquered would necessarily be exploited (Semmel 1960).

It is not surprising that anthropological opinion again changed after World War I, for to many observers it seemed that the war marked the collapse of the old social order. Certainly, many prewar trends were sustained after the war. Relations between the classes remained uneasy. The postwar economic collapse brought trade union militancy, culminating in the General Strike of 1926; the growth of class consciousness also contributed to the first Labour Party victory in a General Election in 1924; the conditions of the Depression were to exacerbate class strife. Britain continued to lose ground as a world economic power, and her imperial authority was challenged in Ireland, India, and, to a lesser extent, in the other colonial territories; throughout the empire, varying concessions were made to nationalist demands. Finally, Hitler's triumph in Germany portended international conflict. Anthropologists were not alone in seeing these developments as evidence that the technical achievements of Western civilization had brought Western man neither moral improvement nor happiness (cf. Wersky 1978). Anthropologists in particular felt that Nazi excesses illustrated the destructive potential of race theories, doing public penance for what they saw as the misuse of their work (Smith et al. 1935).

The point of this exercise is that anthropologists' responses to national developments were not random. At the beginning and end of the period, their work could be construed as cultural criticism, while in the pre-World War I period it was a celebration of established order and national glory. But whether their politics were critical or celebratory, anthropologists' observations were refracted through cultural lenses. Thus the history of British anthropological thought demonstrates the extraordinary persistence of the folk tradition of

British political theory. This conclusion is in some sense ironic, for the demonstration of continuities in political argument impacted in British anthropology illustrates—as many typically ahistorical anthropological studies cannot—the value of the anthropological notion of culture.

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