

After society: anthropological trajectories out of Oxford

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Chapter II

Plodding towards prosopography: Oxford anthropology from 1976 on

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My aim is to introduce prosopography to the history of anthropology, by comparing the trajectories of two cohorts of taught anthropology postgraduates who started at the Institute in Oxford in the mid-1970s and the late 1980s. My objectives are to see what this comparison might tell us about students' initial hopes and their subsequent career paths. This should give us an at least reasonable idea of what effect, where relevant, the Thatcherite cuts of the 1980s did, and did not have on the fulfillment of their aspirations. As far as I am aware, this is the first attempt to apply prosopography, even a rudimentary version, to a department of anthropology.

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Senior British anthropologists have already produced departmental histories (e.g., for Oxford, Rivière 2007a; Benthall 2007). But these 'top-down approaches' tend to focus on administrative and bureaucratic concerns, on departmental development within their particular university context. At the same time, overviews of UK anthropology have been grand surveys which lose value as they shed detail (e.g. Akeroyd, Grillo & Tapper 1980, Kappers 1983, Mills 2003). The benefits of statistics are legion: easy generation of much information, ready for analysis. The resulting data appear precise, accurate and precategorized for productive comparison. To the quantitatively-inclined, numbers seem less open to idiosyncratic interpretation than what one ESRC reviewer of a grant proposal of mine classed 'yet more, woolly-minded, impressionistic ethnography'. Nevertheless, historians of UK anthropology are well

aware that 'statistics can be used to tell many a tale' (Mills 2003: 19). Qualitative researchers have no monopoly on 'woolly-mindedness'. If this is not quite Marx and Engel's proclamation of 'All that is solid melts into air', it is at least a reminder that the seemingly solid may well provide less secure purchase than at first appears.ⁱ

In contrast to the 'top-downers', I strive to provide the worm's point of view, as I was a student in 1976, and in 1988 spent time with the students and fellow post-docs, than with the staff. Unlike the statistically-minded, I focus on individuals (within cohorts) and their lived experiences. Instead of predetermining my ethnographic categories, I scrutinise the events and attitudes the people interviewed chose themselves to rank as important. Throughout I concentrate on the students: the one exception is my brief account of what I term the Institute 'Difficulties', as this historically important conflict remains untold, so far.

Methods: I contacted as people as possible who took the one-year graduate crash-course offered by the Institute in 1976, ('the Diploma'), and in 1988, (by then, a Master of Studies, or MSt). 1976 was during the time when the Institute was experiencing an Indian summer of activity before the years of decline, and the year I took the Diploma. The year of 1988 was close to the nadir of the Institute's fortunes, the last year for which it kept records of its MSt students, and the date of my return from extended post-doctoral fieldwork. I rely on multiple sources of information: interview scripts, my own memories, interviewees' comments on drafts, university documents. I regard the resulting text as not academic autobiography (e.g. Worsley 2008), collective biography, or intellectual genealogy, but as prosopographical in aim, as I strive to execute a comparative study of the career paths of two cohorts in contrastive periods.

Two limitations: first, in 2013 and 2017 I requested, from the Oxford University Archives, material on the University Committee which assessed the management of the Institute in 1977, and on students' planned complaints in 1979 about the supervisory practice of one don. Archival staff told me the complaints could not be found, and that Committee minutes remained confidential since some of those involved were still alive. When I responded that a key participant in those events would have now to be over 110, I was told to provide a copy of her death certificate,

and that if I filed a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to see Committee documents, I would be shown only heavily redacted versions.

In April 2019, I filed an FOI request to the Oxford University Compliance Team. Five months later, after a protracted series of email exchanges, phone calls, and apologies, I was emailed a 116-page e-sheaf of relevant documents. Fig. 1 gives an idea of how heavily redacted some pages are. – **INSERT FIG 1.1 HERE**– I then asked four former Institute students of that time and one then active member of its staff to assess my reading of the documents. All were polite but said they were then away on fieldwork or marginal to the Difficulties: ‘Sorry, Jeremy - these events were always a bit of a mystery to me’; ‘Crikey!’ (Anon A, B). Perhaps the most revealing responses were: from a then student, ‘All very interesting in retrospect but no doubt really painful for some’ (Anon A); from a former member of staff, ‘That’s a period we’d all like to forget.’

Sangren portrays university-based anthropologists as highly resistant to investigation of disciplinary knowledge practices: ‘etiquette’, he states, is a key mode of ‘systemic defence’ (Sangren 2007: 15).ⁱⁱ His argument has weight, e.g., the fact I have to use ‘Anon’ for the quotes above from former students. But I was still surprised that former staff and maybe at least one student were not very forthcoming when I asked about the Difficulties, ‘really painful’ though it might be; for, of course, there are manners of writing up painful episodes which are not painful in themselves. Yet, if anthropologists have been prepared to state how they have manipulated interlocutors to impart information they were reluctant to give (e.g Metcalf 1982; Gell 1993), surely it behoves us, as members of an academic anthropological community upholding contemporary versions of research ethics protocols, to expect and accept potentially awkward questions posed by analysers of our own disciplinary behaviour? If we are engaged in producing critical ethnography of people’s predicaments, what worth an account which avoids the unpleasant?

In 1984, Leach confessed in a piece on the history of British social anthropology that he could not be too open about his peers; they would have found his comments too offensive (Leach 1984). I have no wish to be gratuitously hurtful, but nor do I wish to avoid discussing a historically important process. Otherwise we self-cramp our understanding of the history of our own discipline. Thus, while relating events as fully

as possible, I avoid personal detail about any of the surviving, and make no comments about the social background of any member of the teaching staff. But it is already very well-known that the world-class academies of Oxford have long acted, and continue to act as vehicles of social mobility for both students and staff.

For similar reasons, I have given pseudonyms to all former students whom I discuss, or whose words I quote. The few exceptions are those whose relevant publications I quote. Finally, I wish to be non-sexist without committing grammatical infelicities, so use 'she' and 'her' as gender non-specific pronouns for the pseudonymized.

Structure: in the first pair of sub-sections, I give a flavour of the teaching environment, characterise the cohorts and place them in their starkly different historical contexts. Next, I analyse and compare the aims and achievements of students from both cohorts. I proceed to evaluate the grand surveys in the light of my analysis; and then edge towards a conclusion.

51 Banbury Rd, 1976

A dank mid-October Monday, 11am: like new pupils at the school gates, we await the recently-appointed Professor. At least one of us, transformed by the closing chapters of his *Belief, language and experience* is expecting a brilliant but eccentric man, with a slightly distracted air and wispy, long gray hair.

A man with deliquescent eyes, roundish face, dark blue pork-pie hat and mac to match, turns up. He wears a suit, has a military bearing, short combed hair, and clipped vowels. Rodney Needham introduces himself, and Oxford ways, to us.

Diploma graduates quickly teach us that life in the department is not calm. The nature and substance of these tensions are easy to caricature, more difficult to specify. Being exact here is tricky. Some, both staff and students, object to Needham's style. He is energetically promoting his vision of the Institute as a lively concourse of anthropological debate. Some take his energy as directiveness, and shy away. Uninterested in the analysis of power, he would later acknowledge he was not the most skilled at deploying it (MacClancy 2006). In departmental seminars he chaired,

his rapier-like ability to openly put down the arguments of some of his colleagues did not win him friends.

The leader of the alternative appears to be Edwin Ardener. A short man with a Guy Fawkes moustache, he is reputed to be brilliant but his conversation, which may tend to the obscure and to recondite reference, can be hard to follow. As one of our cohort, a student of Ardener's put it, 'I had the greatest difficult understanding any sentence he uttered, but somehow the effort was rewarded in un-measurable ways' (Taylor 2004: 21). Ardener's relations with Needham are so bad that the former holds his own seminars away from the Institute, in his own college. Attendance, it seems, is by invitation.

Some underline the intellectual differences between these two. Needham's research develops neo-Lévi-Straussian themes: analyses of kinship and empirically-oriented comparison about cognitive structure. Ardener has taken what would now be called a post-structuralist turn, and opened up new kinds of field sites in rural Western Europe. Politics here melds with anthropology, for Ardener's most active students see themselves as an intellectual vanguard, assessing critically whatever new approaches they hear of, and wish to be seen as associated with the left. By contrast, Needham's frequent self-enclosure within neo-structuralist confines is made to appear conservative, though he himself regards his projects as radical.

The division between Needham and Ardener can make for a tidy story, but it is easy to exaggerate their differences, for both may be regarded as critical inheritors of structuralism, e.g. their common, heightened concern with language and with classification. Both revered Mauss and the *Année Sociologique*. Both liked to scrutinize critically key cross-cultural concepts: 'belief', 'ethnicity', 'kinship', 'remote areas' (Benthall 2007: 158). Also, Ardener was ready to praise Needham's earlier work in print (Ardener 1971: 451, 454-5).

Yet Needham and Ardener are but two of a department staffed, it emerges, by a rainbow-like range of different, clear-cut personalities. The sharpness of their profile is matched by that of several veteran students and an array of Institute graduates, who would visit from time to time: colourful characters, some with famed surnames from the financial elite or the intellectual aristocracy. The most distinctive personality of all, however, is the librarian, June Anderson, whose office is directly opposite the

main door to the building. This allows her to command the entry and exit of all to the Institute. She redoubles her control by confining the most popular books to her room. Needy Diploma students are thus obliged to pay her obeisance. As she once replied to me, with her high-pitched voice and striking make-up, 'I've only two copies of Nadel's *Theory of social structure*, and you can't have either!' My point is that, to us fledglings, she seems of a piece with the place.

Diploma graduates also teach us that, to a significant degree, the department's great history is history; that it is trading on its fading glory, rather than living up to its legacy. Some members of the Institute staff would repeat the observation that its present circumstances were a consequence of the policy of Evans-Pritchard (E-P as he was called) of not selecting a dauphin from the former students he had appointed to his department. Instead he had created a court of competing aspirants or jostling pretenders to his post. Some argued that this competition had generated an unhealthy level of internal division, as well as premature departures for promotion elsewhere, and was a direct cause of the Institute's contemporary predicament. It could be counter-argued that E-P's supposed strategy was in fact highly productive, stimulating debate and advancing theoretical discussions, albeit at the cost of personal relations between some protagonists. A colleague, who had experience of both Oxbridge departments, said the domineering style of Jack Goody lent a very different ambience to Cambridge anthropology, and not a more likeable one. There are benefits to divisiveness.

This academic tale of intellectual ferment amidst dispute could take unattractive, even miserable turns. Two examples (I could include more): the in-house *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford (JASO)*, which was viewed by many as Ardenerian in style, included one paper by a student whose opening pages were a sustained, though indirect attack on Needham; a student of Needham's wrote a rejoinder but the JASO editors refused to carry it in the following issue: one of them said to me it was 'too personal'. The denouement came that summer, when several members of the Institute made a formal complaint about Needham's behavior. He immediately packed his books and left for his college, All Souls. He never returned.

This unsettled period of the Institute should not be as seen as exceptional within the history of Oxford. The collegiate structure of the university has long led to

a near-obsessional focus on teaching its undergraduates at the expense of its postgraduates, who are, after all, a very twentieth-century population within British academe. That historically grounded pedagogical bias plus Oxford's entrenched, institutional lack of governance meant that graduate departments could survive with remarkably little oversight of their management.

Even within that context, it is still important to underline how much of an outlier the Institute was within the university. There had been two bids to establish an undergraduate programme in anthropology, one in the late-nineteenth century, another by E-P in the '50s: both were unsuccessful. To an important extent, the Institute was financially viable thanks to the postgraduate training programmes it ran for colonial officers, which continued well into the 1960s. But the Institute staff only held university appointments: since they did not tutor undergraduates, they were not made tutorial fellows of traditional colleges; their salaries were thus considerably lower. This financial disadvantaging created some bitterness and increased the sense of distance from the rest of the university that some members of the Institute staff felt. This impression of relative isolation was compounded by the repeated physical moves the Institute had to make: from an underground section of the Bodleian to successively, Mansfield Road, the South Parks Road, Keble Road, and the Banbury Road. It was as though the university did not know what to do with its anthropologists, but shifted them around whenever it suited. ⁱⁱⁱ This qualified insulation of the Institute is also manifest by the then lack of contact between its staff and other anthropologists in the university. For instance, there was surprisingly little collaboration, of whatever kind, between the Institute anthropologists and Clyde Mitchell, fellow of Nuffield College, Kenneth Kirkwood, Rhodes Professor of Race Relations, and John Campbell, fellow of St Anthony's. One former member of staff recently told me he'd not even known Mitchell was in Oxford until several years after his arrival.

The view from the Proctors' Office

The redacted documents give an overlapping, but different picture of those times. Instead of students' perceptions, they provide some detail about several

manifestations of the underlying dispute, and informed opinions from academics outside the Institute about the goings-on there.

In March 1977 the Proctors, who oversee university management and ensure the statutes are upheld, commented on 'a general feeling of confusion' at the Institute, and the 'collective unhappiness' of its 'non-professorial members'. Needham's 'temperamental incompatibility' with the Institute Administrator was one focus for this abreaction, with Needham not seeing 'why the Administrator should get her way. . .by displays of emotion'. Those opposed to Needham had further worries. They were concerned he was trying to let lapse the lectureship of Peter Lienhardt, brother of Godfrey, to be replaced by one in Mediterranean Studies, with as its first incumbent John Campbell. They were also worried that Needham wished to control the future direction of Oxford anthropology by exercising his authority to select which students would be recommended for Social Science Research Council (SSRC) studentships. (At that time, the Institute enjoyed six to seven of these government-funded grants a year). Further, they opposed Needham's wish the Institute Assistant become a research assistant for the Professor, i.e. himself. On top of that, it seems he could also be domineering over new Institute appointees. When Ardener voiced concern about Needham's query over certain members' teaching hours, the proctorial comment was, 'This may be another area in which Professor Needham is going to cause us trouble'.^{iv}

Kenneth Kirkwood, then Chair of the Faculty Board of Anthropology and Geography, and several members of the Institute made repeated representations to the Proctors. For example, on 12 July several said they were

Outraged that a Professor could behave as they hold Professor Needham has and there be no way of redressing the injustice or preventing further harm. . .They feared that if all attempts to right matters were frustrated some of the students might carry out a threat to take some of the Professor's letters to the Press.

On 4 August matters came to a head, but not an end. The Senior Proctor wrote to Needham that a 'number of lecturers in the Institute' had made a formal

complaint 'against you concerning your conduct (there) over the past year'. The same day Needham, who had long complained about his lack of time for research, responded: 'I therefore readily accept, with immense relief, the consequences that according to the Statutes and decrees I am not responsible for the Institute.'

In the following months, the opposed continued to jostle for position. 1 December Needham complained about Ardener's 'officious' interventions in the 'delicate negotiations' of securing a college fellowship for a recently appointee. 10 January 1978 some members of the ad hoc committee overseeing the transition to a committee of management for the Institute were 'resistant' to the idea the Professor should be an ex officio member; the Proctors disagreed. Ten days later Kirkwood, who chaired the committee, reported Ardener was 'impatient' and wished the new body to endorse summarily the plans Ardener and his colleagues had already formulated. 24 January Kirkwood complained that the committee, which in his opinion was too weighted against Needham, had excluded him from a meeting by holding it before the agreed date. In a bid to overcome what the Senior Proctor termed the 'bickering' over the Institute, Kirkwood, who was from South Africa, tried to play the role of conciliatory intermediary:

There can be no doubt that the international status of social anthropology at Oxford at present owes a very great deal to Needham and that teaching and research at advanced level will be impoverished if his special contributions are not encouraged and provided for. Many outstanding students come to Oxford to work with him, . . .and many of the best. . .apply to transfer to him for his meticulous, exacting teaching at the highest level. . .Many of his astringent obiter dicta in his letters have been unnecessary, and offensive, but there have also been a great many nuggets and large grains of gold in the rich paydirt of his voluminous correspondence and memoranda. Yesterday's meeting of the Applications Committee provided many constructive examples and I fear that some at least of his strictures were well founded and indicated what might happen if his 'input' is not available (Kirkwood to Senior Proctor, 24 1 78, Proctors' Annuals, Vol. 9, orig. underlining).

Battle-lines were drawn but unstable. For example, though Godfrey Lienhardt was adamant reconciliation was not possible, in early December 1977 he did side with Needham in arguing against support for students whose research proposals 'were an unacceptable departure from Oxford social anthropology'. Two weeks later it was reported Needham had again highlighted 'the danger of a large proportion of SSRC awards going to students of whose subjects he did not approve'. In other words, the disputes within the Institute could be as much ideological, about the future shape of the discipline, as administrative, i.e. who controlled what or whom.

Institute life beyond the Difficulties

It is tempting to overstate the internal divisions of those days. After all, it makes for a more lively story. In fact many students observed the tumult with a distanced eye and the odd ironic comment. Most of them got on with their work, and the more long-sighted with the early development of their careers. Those students who did get involved in the division tended to be English. Some students, to their displeasure, found they were involuntarily given places within this dispute: at least one of Needham's students did not take well the suggestion that she was automatically an uncritical supporter both of the man and his ideas.

This dispute lent edge to student group-discussions about theory, which could act as indirect commentaries on Ardener and Needham. As many participants recognized at the time, these informal student-run seminars were especially important, as the lecture courses were relatively uncoordinated: occasionally brilliant, but usually patchy rather than systematic. Only two years before, Godfrey Lienhardt had openly repeated in print E-P's old boast that, come the beginning of each term, he did not know what lectures his staff were going to put on (Lienhardt 1974: 302). Weekly tutorials were our core learning opportunity. But even here little was taught directly. This appears to have been long-established: according to Lienhardt, E-P made the Institute a centre more for learning than teaching, for 'his pupils were not very conscious of being tutored' (Lienhardt 1974: 301. Also Shankland and Stirling 1999).

Students of previous Institute generations have corroborated this point to me. Needham followed suit: the essays he set us were oriented towards topics, not theories. We had to learn to assess modes of explanation for ourselves.

This indirect style of teaching was buttressed by alcohol: a major means of picking up anthropological knowledge and forms of argument was drinking with the staff in local pubs. In particular, Lienhardt was famed for what was termed his 'ongoing symposium' in a pub close to the Institute. Anyone was welcome to his table, which also served to connect students with one another. Indeed several students and members of staff regarded Lienhardt, who held a personal readership, as the centre of the Institute, to the extent there was one: for them, the Difficulties were a sideshow.

Whether in tutorials, student-run seminars, or pub backrooms, we were, in sum, being socialised into an Oxford-centred vision of the discipline where commentary on the past greats (Radcliffe-Brown's meanness, E-P's quirks) was leavened with gentle but sharp-eyed evaluation of anthropological points of view. It was like being invited to join an exclusive club: if you couldn't work out its rules of entry for yourself, you weren't fit for membership. A few members of staff exploited this privileged ambience by indulging in irresponsible behaviour, which at times went beyond benign neglect, and would not, today, be tolerated.

This gentlemanly culture of leaving students alone suited some incomers. One Oxford graduate on the Diploma, now a professor, judged the Institute 'a bit chaotic': 'Apart from the weekly tutorial, it all seemed pretty unstructured.' Another Oxford graduate in the same 1976 cohort regarded the mode of teaching at the Institute as of a piece with pedagogy at the university in general: lectures took 'second place to tutorials' and 'students were there to learn, under guidance, yes, but very much under their own steam and at least partly on their own initiative.' He found this approach 'liberating and life-enhancing' (Parkin n.d.)

Some felt very differently. Over the years several of my British and American friends, from different Diploma years, some now distinguished scholars, have spontaneously complained to me, with vehemence, about the lack of direction in the formal teaching they received. One freethinker on the 1976 cohort praised the emancipatory potential of the ethnographic challenge to mundane Western reality,

but criticized his tutor (Ardener) for the restrictive range of his tutorial topics: critical analysis of great theorists whom, it was hoped, the most gifted students, if carefully coached, might come to emulate (Taylor 2004: 21). One non-European student recalls her time at the Institute in a slightly different manner:

In (my country) we were used to an American-style lecture, and credit-based system. At first it was rather difficult to adjust to the tutorial system in which you meet mostly one particular scholar. It was hard, especially for a non-native speaker, to get information regarding the overall trends of the discipline. . . It was only after some years that I gradually got used to the independent research system.

In 1977 when a recent appointee to the Institute and her spouse listened to a Diploma student criticizing the haphazard teaching at the Institute, their reaction was laughter: 'It was the same in our day here!' In other words, for better or for worse, students were in effect being forced to teach one another more than being taught by the dons. And freshly appointed lecturers accepted that as the status quo. As one, in 1988, revealed to an administrator, 'I don't rock the boat.'

The cumulative effect, on me, of this particular style of teaching in a divided but very lively department was that 1976 was the most intellectually exciting year of my student times. A now very well-established curator, and member of my age-set, remembers similarly:

(The training at the Institute was) spectacular. My own philosophical interests were indulged; Faculty included towering, inspiring figures (some rather frightening), and the place was open to what was happening elsewhere in Europe and America. Since Oxford I have never found such methodological openness. . . No other university has given me the deep intellectual conversations we had at Oxford. Openness to other disciplines; the importance of literature, film and music. It was exhilarating.

51 Banbury Rd, 1988

Twelve years later the ambience at the Institute was very different. Peter Lienhardt had died in 1986, Ardener in 1987; Needham was still holed up in All Souls; Godfrey Lienhardt had long retired to the local pub. In the early '80s, the Government had offered New Blood Lectureships in new sub-fields of anthropology: e.g., visual, digital, and of Britain; the Institute had failed to gain any. The Hebdomadal Council of Oxford (the chief executive board of the university) had suddenly increased the number of years necessary to complete a doctorate, while the Government both jacked up the fees for overseas students and reduced the number of ESRC studentships by at least half, permanently. Between 1979 and 1981 the Diploma intake shrank from 17 to 8 and it remained worryingly close to single figures until 1987. 1988 the number of incomers was still only 14. The research student cohort had declined similarly. In telling contrast, numbers on the renamed Masters in Museum Ethnography were rising prodigiously; this was the first sign of the Pitt-Rivers' renaissance, which continues today.

Rivière gives the staff view of the Institute for the professorial interregnum of 1977 to 1990 (the year Needham retired, to be replaced a year later by John Davis), 'the Institute operated well, both administratively and socially' (Rivière 2007: 19, n.18). One 1988 student, not from Europe, concurred: 'The Institute was fantastic, I enjoyed the various classes and teachers. It was an amazing place for learning and meeting people from all over the world.'

Others, both staff and students, thought differently. Because there was no professor, no one, not even the Chair of the Management Committee (a three-year term of office, held in rotation), pushed the Institute in any particular direction, whether intellectual or pedagogical. Members of staff, then under no obligation to form into teams or research groupings, regarded themselves as individual researchers. Others saw this lack of leadership and coordination as stasis. In 1989 a recent appointee said to me she thought the Institute like an old tree: moribund at the core but with a few young shoots protruding from its outer bark. (I told her not to flatter me.) The then Institute Secretary was more pungent in her assessment: 'What this

place needs is not a breath of fresh air, but a gale.’ Students of the 1988 cohort could be as damning as this pair. In the words of one, not from Europe,

It became apparent to me early on that the Institute was dying, falling behind the curve. I learned nothing, for instance, of the superb and imaginative work being done in (the) ethnohistory and history (of her regional interest), of great importance for anthropology. I am grateful to have had the chance to meet and know Rodney Needham, a solitary figure who was trying to engage with wider concerns and other disciplines.

One American had come because her undergraduate college tutor, a product of the Institute,

Convinced me it would be worthwhile because Needham was still there but also cautioned it was a place greatly degraded. . .

(The Institute was) a tired old place full of wonderful history but now focused only on itself and little else. . . That most readings. . . tended to end by the early ‘70s was a constant reminder of how uncurious, unengaged and unambitious many of the tutors were. Coming out of the US educational system where professors take an interest in their students’ ideas and careers, . . . I was struck by how little the tutors were interested in the students or helping them to forge a path into academic anthropology. This was particularly felt by the international students who, the Institute made clear, were viewed as cash income and not an investment for the future.

Perhaps the most balanced comment came from an East Asian student who also had some experience of other leading UK departments of anthropology. At the end of each tutorial, she was

‘filled with feelings of relief and anxiety. . .

Yet, thinking back, weekly tutorials were the best methods I could ever expect. (My tutor’s) selection of literature was excellent. Towards the end of

my second year, however, I asked to add a few more “up-to-date” topics to my liking, such as gender and urban anthropology, because his repertoire tended to be more classical. . .

(The Institute) at that time was far from thriving, because it still had organisational problems and students were rather isolated, at least in my impression. I think the overall atmosphere at Cambridge or LSE was far better, at least on the surface. Nevertheless, I do believe I obtained a very fine training at the Institute and appreciate it. I loved being around there, got friends with the Institute’s Secretary and still maintain contact with a few good friends from that time.

Jobs

In a 1976 class Rivière told us, ‘Everyone gets a job, in the end’.

Several English students in our cohort, including myself, were already regarding anthropology as a viable and attractive career option. We were concerned but not put off by the fact that the drawbridge was being raised behind us. The number of ESRC studentships available was set to decline; there would be fewer openings in UK departments of anthropology. In 1983, while finishing our doctorates, we knew that Rivière, speaking at the ASA Decennial conference that year, had calculated there would be about 30 jobs in British anthropology over the next decade; we also learnt that his carefully derived predictions were so gloomy they depressed further discussion at the gathering (Rivière 1984: 13. Also Akeroyd, Grillo, & Tapper 1980). Yet, as far as I could judge, that coming shrinkage did not seem to discourage any of my academically-inclined British peers.

I have tried to track the career of everyone who joined the Diploma class in 1976, and almost succeeded. Of the 20 who enrolled that year, several had no intention of proceeding much further. One was keeping herself active and fulfilling an interest, while her spouse was spending a sabbatical year in Oxford; another was a psychiatrist with a passing interest in the subject; a third was an engineer taking a year’s break from the mathematical rigours of her profession; a fourth, an American,

came for two years, got her BLitt, then went home; a fifth was a rugby international, spending a year playing for the Varsity team. A sixth, dazzled by alternative systems of perception and taken by poetic approaches to the interpretation of cultures, such as Castañeda's, became a well-known environmental activist, of mystical disposition (Taylor 2004). Another I have failed to trace. Some were discouraged from proceeding further than a BLitt: a former publisher in his late 30s was told that she was too old to consider an academic career (she returned to the booktrade); another said to me she gave up her thesis because her supervisor (Ardener) was so slack in reading her drafts; a third turned her hand to a succession of occupations: IT, reliability engineering, defence, stock trading, before coming to stay in advertising: 'a ton of fun'.

The remaining eleven were more committed to academically furthering themselves. Four are American, and all now tenured academics, two of them full professors. One of the eleven is Asian, and now a full professor in her home country. Six Britons held ESRC studentships: one used hers to further her career in TV anthropology, which she did very successfully before moving into popular science programmes. Another fieldworked in Melanesia, got her doctorate, and then became an Anglican priest. The four others (which include me) became tenured academics, though one of them returned to her first discipline, human geography, immediately after the Diploma, because funding was available. In sum, out of a group of nine with dedicated academic interests, all managed to get jobs, eventually.

The key is 'eventually' or, as Rivière had said, 'In the end'. Some of us got jobs remarkably quickly; others took much, much longer. One American, who moved to Cambridge her second year in the UK, got a tenure-track position at Harvard a year *before* finishing her doctorate. Another American, within a year of finishing her doctorate, got a job at the same New England liberal arts college where her spouse was already employed (in a different department); in the 1990s, she fulfilled a long-held dream when she returned to UK academia; she is now a full professor in a leading department. A third American moved to Paris for the sake of supervisory expertise, and got a permanent job there. Of the three Britons who went on to become academic anthropologists, one took two years after her doctorate before she gained a post-doc fellowship in Japan, where she remained until her premature death, receiving the title of 'professor' in her last year. Another had a series of post-doc positions on the

Continent; it took her more than two decades after gaining her doctorate before she secured a permanent position at a major UK university. Myself: it took me two years after my doctorate before being granted a three-year ESRC post-doc fellowship, for work in a new fieldsite. At its end, it took me a further seven years and a series of temporary contracts, until I gained a permanent position; I was made professor within six years of being employed full-time. It seems this tendency for Institute graduates to wait, albeit industriously, for a job was recognized, indeed stereotyped, elsewhere. In the late 1980s, when I phoned a then non-prestigious department within London University about a one-year post, the professor who answered was polite at first, then commented caustically, 'Oh! You're not one of those absurd Oxford types who hang around for ever, are you?'

Several of us, as fresh post-docs, gave hourly-paid tutorials, to gain teaching experience and a little income. Oxford academics, not just in anthropology, argued to me at the time that the university's dependence on graduate tutors was both widespread and very longstanding: Oxford wouldn't have survived without it. My point here is that even if this academic economy of precarity was not a distinctively modern phenomenon, it was particularly acute in the years it affected my cohort.

Two students in the 1976 cohort came to study for the BLitt (now entitled MLitt), i.e. graduates of anthropology who had already chosen an academic career-path. The Canadian of the two gained a job shortly after gaining her doctorate; the Briton took a number of post-doc positions, both in the UK and abroad before securing a full-time museum position. Both are now full professors in Canada, and well-established scholars.

If we compare these four American and four British students, all the Americans bar one readily found relatively secure employment. Those three Americans all obtained full-time teaching positions on multi-year contracts, before finishing their doctorate or within a year of doing so. All of those jobs were in the USA. In contrast all four of the English had to spend years before gaining a permanent position. Each of these Britons chose to endure straitened circumstances, or a state close to that, for a sustained period in order to find the academic security they worked for. As I stated in the introduction to my first ethnography:

Much of the manuscript was written while I gave hourly paid classes in six different departments in three universities. On two occasions during this difficult period, when I thought I might sink, my parents threw me a financial lifeline. I am deeply grateful for their unsolicited generosity and well aware of my privilege (MacClancy 2000: xix).

All four of us were on the dole for extended periods, while writing up our doctorates and surviving our first post-doctoral years. Both the aspirant curator, who gained a post-doctoral position in America, and her peer, who went to the Continent, endured near-penury at times, the latter for one two-year period by surviving on money she had saved while on a one-year teaching contract. In our dedication to remain as anthropologists, it seems we were not alone. When the Institute advertised a Demonstratorship in 1988, one member of the interview panel stated to me their surprise, on looking through the CVs of the applicants: 'You wouldn't believe how many people out there are just managing to hang on in there. They just don't want to give up.'

None of my Diploma cohort cut an activist path, except for the environmentalist. Of the two who took the Pitt-Rivers Diploma in Ethnology that year one, who had failed the course the year previous and was now retaking it, became a cookery writer; the other fieldworked among the Yanomami, worked post-doc for Survival International and, after six years with them, left to establish her own indigenous rights organization. The Forest Peoples Foundation is now considerably larger than SI, and he the holder of an honorary doctorate.

Of the fourteen who joined the 1988 Masters course, I have been able to contact or have learnt of twelve. Three students were British women, the rest from beyond Europe. Three of the latter each did a two-year stint of Oxford anthropology and then either returned home and/or to their original profession (medicine, journalism). Of the other eight, two became and have remained full-time academics in their home countries, one as an anthropologist, the other as a professor of educational planning. One member of this cohort returned to the American museum she had previously worked in but, like other curators there, had to raise her own salary, while holding down an adjunct teaching position at a nearby university.

Another chose to raise her children rather than enter full-time academia; she is now a freelance researcher and co-founder of an NGO assisting the people of the area she studied for her doctorate. Yet another, a Jesuit, taught in a home university, then left academia and the Church; he is now married and a social activist in his own country. A further member of this cohort fieldworked in Africa, then worked as a consultant for the World Bank, and is today employed as an anthropologist, at the Asian Development Bank.

The three Britons in this group all held ESRC studentships and all became full-time academics. All three quickly got positions, either in the last year of their doctorates or immediately afterwards. To my knowledge, only one of this trio has ever been unemployed, and that for a brief period. Two are now professors at Russell group universities, the third a well-established scholar who has held visiting professorships in Continental universities. Of the professorial pair, one got a contract position in the UK two years *before* submitting her thesis, then obtained tenure in Australia; seven years later, she came home, for a job in the leading university of her natal city. The other, after submitting her thesis, gained a one-year post-doc, during which she turned her thesis into a book; she then applied for positions in sociology, and went on to obtain a series of posts of increasing seniority in ever more prestigious universities. The third of this trio had to spend half a year on the dole after her ESRC studentship ended, in order to complete her thesis. It took her six years between her viva and her first full-time post, and she felt she only got that by stepping sideways into tourism and planning:

I think if I'd stayed in Anthropology it would have been ten years more, as I managed to get some interviews in the late 1990s in anthropology departments, when I was informed that I was lucky to get an interview as all the other candidates were 10 years older than me.

In other words, two of this trio got full-time jobs by moving sideways, out of anthropology into allied disciplines; the third got tenure by moving to the country where she had done her fieldwork.

1976, 1988: criss-crossing the classes

What does comparison of these two cohorts, separated by a dozen years, suggest? A variety of things, which I shall try to connect.

First, there seems to be more career awareness among the English in the 1988 cohort. I and other English members of the 1976 group appear to have been among the last cohorts to have still believed in the near inevitability of us getting academic jobs, despite growing evidence to the contrary. All of us wanted jobs but were, on reflection, either naïve about how to be offered a post, or else arrogantly resistant to the new criteria for getting one. When in the late '80s I applied for a post at a Russell group university, I was offended at having to provide a statement of ideological persuasion. I wrote what I considered a clever but very tongue-in-cheek piece which, I hoped, both displayed my intelligence and my mockery of the need for such statements. Even though Needham told me he had written a particularly glowing reference, I was not shortlisted for interview. Another member of this cohort, when she belatedly failed to get her doctorate accepted by a publisher, was told by an older colleague to start publishing as much as possible. She spent the next two years doing exactly that, producing an extraordinary number of papers, albeit of variable quality, in a diverse range of journals, from the very well-known to the less prestigious.

I suspect this initial resistance to accommodating to the new criteria was among the last gasps of an old-style academic culture in the UK, which had particularly flourished in the '50s and '60s, especially in Oxbridge, sometimes now referred to as 'the golden age of British academia'. I refer to a class-grounded façade of cultural eminence, where many did not feel obliged to conceal their patent sense of privilege. And for the most talented or most pretentious, the style was to be one of effortless superiority, as though their claimed intellectual distinction were not the result of secret hours in the library, but the logical consequence of one's genes and upbringing: in a phrase, one's class-blessed birthright. My impression is that the student unrest of the mid- to late '60s, based on emulation of their American counterparts, modified and masked but did not fundamentally alter such mannerisms. These remarks apply directly to British social anthropology, whose class-biased membership was perceived

by both its own practitioners and colleagues in allied disciplines. I think it revealing that in 1977 the London events weekly *Time Out* could carry in its 'Lonely Hearts' columns, ads beginning 'Oxford graduate of social anthropology seeks. . .' Such classifieds were almost unimaginable in the late '80s: the discipline had lost so much of its extra-mural prestige by then. Structuralism was no longer trendy.

From the late '70s on, Thatcherism and its subsequent derivatives imposed series of new criteria on academic performance. Her politicians and disciples profoundly changed university culture, by introducing increasingly burdensome measures which progressively reduced the autonomy of academics. This cumulative process continues today. Freedoms achieved by tenured scholars a century previous were successively lost, as a much-praised tradition of productive freethinking slowly gave way to a constricting sense of academics as little more than highly monitored public servants labouring in the higher education industry. In this emerging context of intellectual and financial constraints, where a narrow-minded pragmatism was becoming the order of the day, doctoral students keen for a job could no longer presume their virtues spoke for themselves, but had to learn how to present themselves in a self-promoting manner in an ever-more competitive market. Little wonder, then, it took some of us in the '76 class so long to get permanent jobs, compared to our equals twelve years later.

In the intense socializing between staff and students, which still characterized Institute life into the 1980s, we were informally taught the value placed on resourcefulness. The example was held up to us of the penniless ex-Commando who had hitched a berth to Scandinavia, where he funded his fieldwork by herding for the Saami, and then went on to a glorious career (Cohen 2010). We also knew of the student who had returned precipitately from her fieldsite for psychological reasons; her supervisor did not support her later application for money to get back there. Not surprising then, that the one of our coevals who did come back for a few weeks because of a local love-affair gone wrong did not mention this home trip for years. This expectation of field-based resourcefulness dovetails with the independence of thought which our distanced Institute training was meant to inculcate. Whether intended or not, this expected style of self-help very likely enabled some to withstand the years before they got a permanent job. Stamina was esteemed.

The emphasis on self-education was pervasive, enduring, across the years covered here. We were repeatedly told E-P openly scoffed at the idea of classes in fieldwork; 'careers advice' was a concept never mentioned in our time. What our years at the Institute did provide, however, no matter the date we started, was the opportunity to make friends with fellow students, which would later turn, unwittingly or not, into the rudiments of our individual anthropological networks. A personal example: one day in 1988, while a post-doc fellow, I was in the Institute office when the phone rang. It was a friend, several years senior to me, now in a well-regarded department in the north of England. He said he was looking to appoint for a one-year teaching position, and immediately offered me the job. The size and reputation of the department is here crucial: the larger and more renowned it is, the greater the chance of building a broad and powerful network. And that web, of course, includes the staff: shortly after getting my doctorate, I dropped by the room of one member, who was putting down the phone as I entered: 'Ah Jeremy. I was just talking to an old student of mine. Like to teach in Minnesota for a year?'

Cross-cohort comparison also exposes the continuing importance of fieldwork as a qualification. My coeval compatriot who went to the Continent did not get even a short-term teaching contract at an English university until 1998, i.e. *twenty-two years* after starting out in anthropology. She strongly suspects she had had no luck until then because she had not done major fieldwork (for medical reasons during her doctorate), and that she only managed to get a job in 1998 because the year previous she had actually spent a few, sparse months doing funded fieldwork in India. The story is the same, but even more extreme, for one mature member of the 1988 cohort. She chose to write her thesis in the history of anthropology. After applying for 200 positions and not being interviewed once, she became a freelance writer and hourly-paid lecturer in pre-university anthropology. Four years later she started work as an anthropologist in a software company in her native Canada. But the company soon went bankrupt; her subsequent consultancy did not prosper. So she went back to her first profession: gambling. She dealt blackjack at a casino, and rose to manage the poker room. At the same time she taught courses in anthropology and business in two local universities. Within five years, she was teaching 'anywhere from 10-14 courses a year, which brought in enough to quit the casino.' In 2010, after nine years

as a sessional instructor, one university converted her post into a permanent tenure-track position: 'I will probably get tenure when I am ready to retire. I'm still trying to convert my thesis into a book and am in the process of writing a text on business anthropology.' For a budding anthropologist, the moral is clear: if you want a job, even eventually, do fieldwork first, though it be only for a token stretch.

Scrutiny of the 1976 cohort shows how anthropology was still attracting people interested in the subject but with no particular inclination to turn that interest into a lifelong academic commitment. These fellow travellers, to give them a term, are precisely the people who are not included in the career statistics compiled by analysts. To say they have 'drifted away from the subject' (Rivière 1984) is a statement overly oriented to the development of academia. Just as there are more varieties of anthropology than that taught to budding lecturers, so we should not dismiss those who wish to be informed by anthropology and perhaps spread the anthropological message in a more diffuse or popular manner, in non-university settings (MacClancy 2013). The medic in the 1976 cohort was open she only did the Diploma in order to inform her psychiatric practice. In reply to my question about any lasting effects of her year in anthropology, she stated:

A way of understanding human behaviour, especially perhaps of my colleagues in multidisciplinary teams, and the evolving and changing role and status of doctors in health-care. It was a good preparation for marriage and having children too!

The environmentalist of that cohort took the Diploma because it combined knowledge of other societies and varying ecologies with a critical attitude toward modern society and the role of science. As well as assisting various campaigning NGOs and Government advisory groups, he continues to work at bridging the gap between the scientific and the shamanic. A superficial comparison of the two cohorts suggests that these disseminatory or self-educatory functions of anthropological training have diminished, but not disappeared. In the 1976 group, ten out of twenty-one did not pursue anthropology beyond the BLitt; in 1988 that ratio had dropped to four out of fourteen, i.e. a decline from just under half to just over a quarter.

Comparison also shows that commitment to activism remains at a remarkably low level. The one member of the 1988 cohort who became a full-time development anthropologist was quite clear about her reasons:

What changed my mind about staying in academic anthropology is how navel gazing the discipline can be, the dithering jargon-ridden drivel that passes as contributions, and my desire to work with a wider range of topics and people.

Only two of the 1976 group clearly fit the activist category, the one above in environmentalism, the other (a Pitt-Rivers product) in indigenous rights. However, a few among this cohort who are now academics sometimes do undertake socially committed research, whose ultimate aim is pragmatic or policy-oriented. Indeed some Institute graduates may end up aiding each other's efforts: one member of the 1976 Diploma class co-founded a charity to assist the work of a coeval and close friend, who had returned to her field site in order to fight the good fight for those who had earlier accommodated her. The charity's efforts have been financially assisted by two other graduates of the Institute, also friends of the campaigner.^v It is yet another example of the network that active centres of a discipline may enable.

Further, comparison reveals the gender shift in the discipline. Only seven of the 26 entrants to the Institute in 1976 were women; one of those held an ESRC studentship. By 1988 the female fraction of the intake had risen to nine out of fourteen, with all three of the ESRC studentships held by women. To my knowledge, this gender shift continues through career trajectories: of the 1976 group two have gone on to become full-time academics; of their 1988 successors four are today tenured academics, one a part-time one, and one working as an anthropologist at an international development agency. Indeed the proportion may be even higher, as the only people whom I have failed to learn anything about are, bar one exception, all women (four of them), possibly because they have changed their surnames. This shift at the Institute mirrors national trends in the discipline.

Shuffling towards conclusion

I can hear the number-crunchers crowing in the back row: 'Pretty prose, poverty of insight. What generalizations can he make? His sample size is ridiculously small. And what correlations? His themes are too vague, the informants' comments too inexact. "Woolly-minded, impressionistic ethnography"? Absolutely!'

For fellow anthropologists, my response is obvious. Some contemporary prosopographers might rely on electronic analysis of large data sets, but even a fieldwork-grounded analysis of a limited number of people may yet be of high prosopographic value. For by giving people an opportunity to speak for themselves, we may learn what their priorities were: their aims, disappointments, and unexpected pleasures. Rather than deploying tick-box questionnaires, confined by their compilers' own pre-set categories, we fieldworkers wish to move towards the lived experiences of participants, and their claimed reasons for action. Further we hope, against hope, that their words will tell us something we really had not anticipated, and so suggest avenues of future work we had not even thought of travelling down. Of course, chances of that happening in this essay are low, as I am, after all, an integral member of the cohort I examine.

For some, the problem is not just that my sample size is so small, but that my ethnographic focus is peculiarly sharp: one postgraduate department in one university. 'What's the point?', a sceptic can legitimately ask. The point, as I see it, is that specific local histories may illuminate larger stories, giving reason to nuance otherwise black-and-white generalizations. If anthropology is the practice of taking people seriously (MacClancy 2002), then a limited study like mine, no matter how seemingly narrow, aims to return a rounded sense of humanity to the usually dehumanized products of quantitative analysis. Trying to collate and take account of people's variety of reasons may make any eventual attempt at understanding more complex and difficult to edge towards, but that methodological resistance, at the same time, promises to forestall premature, ignorant generalization. Better a richer, but more messy portrait than a sharp-edged delineation, which really only tells us about the quality of our lens.

On top of that, single-sited fieldwork educes local particularities which a discussion of national trends may not evince. Indeed, examination of other departmental trajectories may display just how very different some were: especially in those days, when professors with self-inflating personalities still strove to put their stamp on what they regarded as their fiefdoms. In this way we could edge towards a comparative prosopography of British anthropology.

Moreover, what happens at a once-great department, such as the Institute, may well have ramifications beyond and be taken as a litmus test for contemporaneous anthropology elsewhere. The released documents, despite their redaction, demonstrate that the Difficulties were partly a product of different visions about the direction of the discipline: over the years, at conferences and symposia outside the UK, I have been repeatedly quizzed by other anthropologists about the nature and outcomes of this Oxford dispute. As Kirkwood put it, with a little exaggeration, in a January 1978 missive to the Senior Proctor:

There can be no doubt about the reality of past ‘bickering’—your word—and I fear it is openly talked about throughout the world, with protagonists on both sides. Social anthropologists are eager to see Oxford giving Needham, who has a considerable international reputation, both as scholar and teacher, full scope for his talents, as well as due place for his colleagues.

Finally, I underline the need for us anthropologists to uphold the same values for all those whom we interview, including fellow practitioners. Within the discipline there are ever-increasing calls for a critical, engaged anthropology, which just might make a difference to the way we conduct our lives, wherever (e.g. MacClancy 2019). This kind of critical investigation may lead us into tricky terrain, uncovering the unpleasant in our urge to expose the unjustifiable. If we carry this point over to our own historiographical context, Sangren’s identification of a restrictive etiquette acting as a systemic defence is a key corrective. No anthropologist wants colleagues in neighbouring disciplines, such as the history of the social sciences, to accuse us of hypocrisy. It would be as though, having worked so hard to resolve accusations of neo-

colonialism, we were saddling ourselves with another unwanted ethical position, one very hard to explain away.

*

It would be nice to speak of the future. But what is the point of prognostication, when it is so easy to guesstimate badly, because of factors we cannot control or ones we do not even think worth considering?

Past practice reveals just how wrong one can be. In the early 1960s, Institute staff thought the discipline in danger because the training course for the colonial service was closed down. The opposite happened, as new universities were built and the SSRC set up a studentship scheme. Similarly, in the late 1970s many took the rise of Thatcherism to mean the decline of social sciences; in fact, the staffing cuts at the Institute 'were not severe and the 1980s were a period of stability rather than contraction' (Rivière 2007: 8-9, 15). The rise in fees turned out to have only a temporary effect on numbers of overseas students: they were back up to pre-1980s figures by the beginning of the 1990s. According to Rivière, the shift of anthropology from a gentleman's club to a discipline with a gender bias towards women was not foreseen.

We could speak of the ever-increasing threat to university finances, generated by a government obsessed with the bottom line, and a host of other dangers to the future of Oxford anthropology. One problem is that which dangers are real, which fantasized, we only learn with hindsight. Another way to put that: we can attempt to weight the known unknowns, but cannot assess, in any way, the unknown unknowns.^{vi}

Either way, and to my honest surprise, the Institute, to a truly remarkable extent, is managing to retain much of its attraction to potential recruits. Today it has at least three times the number of staff compared to the tally in E-P's hey-day. Current assessment of their research environment and collective list of publications now places them at the top, or second top position on global university rankings for the discipline.^{vii} E-P and his epigones may now all be gone but, as a recent Institute retiree argues, a distinctive 'Oxford anthropology' style remains: of open-ended analysis which shies from the formulaic and does not allow an obsession with theory to

overwhelm incisive ethnography (Dresch 2019). The ideal is a well-written account, penned without pretension, which opens our eyes anew to ways of thinking and acting in this world. And this is much valued. As a friend and colleague, at a now prestigious London department, spontaneously said to me in 2014, 'We get great research students. But if they get an offer from Oxford, they go. You cannot beat Oxford as a brand.'

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Fig. 1

10 | 1978, Statement by the Anthropology and Geography Board, Oxford University,
about the proposals of the ad hoc committee

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10 January 1978

ANTHROPOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY BOARD

Ad hoc committee on proposals concerning the Institute of Social Anthropology

ADA/AG



Endnotes

- i The famous line comes in Section 1, Paragraph 18, line 12 of *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848.
- ii For a critical foray into the 'unmentionables' of British departmental anthropology, see Mills and Berg (2010).
- iii The only other department within Oxford University whose status was at all close to the Institute was the Mathematical Institute, which was then also a postgraduate-only institution.
- iv The reference for this file in the central archives of Oxford University is: UR 6/ANT/1, file 4
- v www.chacolinks.org.uk
- vi My phrasing is inspired by the now-famous statements of Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld 12 February 2002, in a US Department of Defense news briefing.
- vii See, for example: <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2018/anthropology>;
<https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2018/feb/28/qs-world-university-rankings-2018-anthropology>;
<https://cwur.org/2017/subjects.php#Anthropology> (All accessed 7 x 2019)