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E E EVANS-PRITCHARD

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SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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PREFACE

These six lectures were given on the Third Programme of the B.B.C. in the winter of 1950. Except for a few minor verbal alterations they are printed as they were delivered. I thought it unwise to change, or add to, what was written to be spoken within the limits imposed by the medium of expression and for a particular purpose and audience.

Social anthropology is still little more than a name to most people, and I hoped that broadcast talks on the subject would make its scope and methods better known. I trust that their publication as a book will serve the same purpose. As there are few brief introductory guides to social anthropology I believe that this book may also be of use to students in anthropological departments in British and American universities. I have therefore added a short bibliography.

I have expressed many of the ideas in these lectures before, and sometimes in the same language. I am grateful for permission to use them again to the Delegates of the Clarendon Press and to the Editors of *Man*, *Blackfriars*, and *Africa*.¹

I thank Mr. K. O. L. Burridge for assistance in the preparation of the lectures and my colleagues at the Institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford and Mr. T. B. Radley of the B.B.C. for critical comments on them.

E. E. E-P.

¹ *Social Anthropology*, an Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 4 February 1948, the Clarendon Press, 1948; 'Social Anthropology: Past and Present', the Marett Lecture, delivered in Exeter College Hall, Oxford, on 3 June 1950, *Man*, 1950, No. 198; 'Social Anthropology', *Blackfriars*, 1946; 'Applied Anthropology', a lecture given to the Oxford University Anthropological Society on 29 November 1945, *Africa*, 1946.

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I

THE SCOPE OF THE SUBJECT

I shall endeavour in these lectures to give you a general account of what social anthropology is. I am aware that even among well-read laymen there is a good deal of haziness about the subject. The words seem to arouse vague associations of either apes and skulls or strange rites of savages and curious superstitions. I do not think that I shall have any difficulty in convincing you that these associations are misplaced.

My treatment of the subject must be guided by this awareness. I must assume that some of you are frankly ignorant of what social anthropology is, and that others believe it to be what it is not. Those who have some acquaintance with the subject will, I hope, forgive me if, therefore, I discuss it broadly and in what may appear to them an elementary way.

In this, my first, lecture I shall tell you what is the general scope of the subject. In my second and third lectures I shall trace its theoretical development. In my fourth lecture I shall discuss that part of its research we call fieldwork. In my fifth lecture I shall illustrate the development of both theory and fieldwork by giving you some examples of modern studies. In my final lecture I shall discuss the relation of social anthropology to practical affairs.

I shall throughout restrict my account as far as possible to social anthropology in England, chiefly in order to avoid difficulties in presentation, for were I to give also an account of the development of the subject in continental countries and in America I should be compelled so to

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compress the material that what would be gained in comprehensiveness would not compensate for what would be lost in clarity and continuity. This restriction matters less than it would perhaps do in many other fields of learning because social anthropology has to a large extent developed independently in England. I shall, however, mention foreign writers and tendencies where these have markedly affected the thought of English scholars.

Even within these limits it is not easy to give you a clear and simple account of the aims and methods of social anthropology, because there is often lack of agreement about them among social anthropologists themselves. There is, of course, substantial agreement about many matters, but about others there are divergent opinions, and these, as often happens in a small and new subject, tend to become entangled with personalities, for scholars are perhaps more, rather than less, prone than other people to identify themselves with their opinions.

Personal preferences, when it is necessary to express them, are harmless if openly acknowledged. Ambiguities are more dangerous. Social anthropology has a very limited technical vocabulary, so that it has to use everyday language and this, as we all know, is not very precise. Such words as 'society', 'culture', 'custom', 'religion', 'sanction', 'structure', 'function', 'political', and 'democratic' do not always convey the same meaning either to different people or in different contexts. It would be possible for anthropologists to introduce many new words or to give a restricted and technical meaning to words in common use, but apart from the difficulty of getting their colleagues to agree to these usages, were this done on a large scale anthropological writings would soon become a jargon intelligible only to professional scholars. If we have to choose between steering close to

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the obscurities of everyday speech and the obscurities of specialist jargon I would prefer to risk the lesser perils of everyday speech, for what social anthropology has to teach concerns everybody and not only those who study it professionally.

Social anthropology is a title used in England and to some extent in the United States, to designate a department of the larger subject of anthropology, the study of man from a number of aspects. It concerns itself with human cultures and societies. On the continent a different terminology prevails. There when people speak of anthropology, which to us is the entire study of man, they have in mind only what we in England call physical anthropology, that is to say, the biological study of man. What we call social anthropology would be referred to on the continent as either ethnology or sociology.

Even in England the expression 'social anthropology' has only very recently come into use. The subject has been taught, under the names of anthropology or ethnology, since 1884 at Oxford, since 1900 at Cambridge, and since 1908 in London, but the first university chair which bore the title of *social anthropology* was the honorary professorship held by Sir James Frazer at Liverpool in 1908. The subject has recently received wider recognition and social anthropology is now taught under that name in a number of universities in Great Britain and in the Dominions.

Being a branch of the wider subject of anthropology, it is generally taught in connection with its other branches: physical anthropology, ethnology, prehistoric archaeology, and sometimes general linguistics and human geography. As the last two subjects seldom figure in degree and diploma courses in anthropology in this country I say no more about them; and all I need say about physical anthropology, since it has a very limited overlap with social anthropology at the present time, is

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that it is a branch of human biology and comprises such interests as heredity, nutrition, sex differences, the comparative anatomy and physiology of races, and the theory of human evolution.

It is with ethnology that we have our closest ties. To understand why this is so it is necessary to know that while social anthropologists consider that their subject embraces all human cultures and societies, including our own, they have, for reasons I will mention later, for the most part given their attention to those of primitive peoples. Ethnologists are dealing with the same peoples, and there is consequently a considerable overlap between the two subjects.

It is important to appreciate, however, that though ethnology and social anthropology make their studies very largely among the same range of peoples they make them with very different purposes. Consequently, though in the past no clear distinction was made between ethnology and social anthropology, they are today regarded as separate disciplines. The task of ethnology is to classify peoples on the basis of their racial and cultural characteristics and then to explain their distribution at the present time, or in past times, by the movement and mixture of peoples and the diffusion of cultures.

The classification of peoples and cultures is an essential preliminary to the comparisons which social anthropologists make between primitive societies, because it is highly convenient, and even necessary, to start by comparing those of the same general cultural type—those which belong to what Bastian long ago called ‘geographical provinces’.¹ When, however, ethnologists attempt to reconstruct the history of primitive peoples, for whose past historical records are lacking, they are compelled to rely on inferences from circumstantial

¹ Adolf Bastian, *Controversen in der Ethnologie*, 1893.