

Preface to Encounters with Social Theorists

I encountered my first social theorist (a term I use to describe to anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers and others who are not strictly 'historians') at school. In the sixth form I wrote about **Montesquieu**. Forty years later I revisited him and wrote a number of chapters which are a separate book in this series. I also later broadened out my interest to other members of the French and Scottish Enlightenment. There is a full-length treatment of one of them, **Adam Smith**, elsewhere.

I first encountered **Tocqueville** in my first term at Oxford University, excellently taught by Harry Pitt. Again I returned to Tocqueville nearly forty years later as described in a separate book in this series. Later, I particularly enjoyed the paper on political philosophy, the triumvirate of Aristotle, Hobbes and Rousseau, with a few nineteenth century additions such as Marx.

It was only in the first year of my D.Phil. that I discovered that there was the discipline I had always been searching for to complement my historical interests, namely anthropology. I started to attend the lectures of the great Oxford anthropologists of that generation, Evans-Pritchard, Godfrey Lienhardt, John Beattie and others. Evans-Pritchard's work on witchcraft in particular provided much of the framework for my D.Phil. and his work has continue to be an inspiration until the present.

I decided to train properly in anthropology and on my two-year M.Phil. at the London School of Economics I was taught by many of the post-Malinowskian generation there; Raymond Frith, Lucy Mair, Maurice Freedman as well as younger scholars such as Robin Fox, James Woodburn and Mary Douglas. I also encountered a number of gifted social theorists, Ronald Dore and Ernest Gellner in particular. I was also very impressed by some of the American sociologists, in particular David Riesman.

Ernest Gellner remained an inspiration and later a friend for the next thirty years until his death in 1995 and the first essays in this volume concern my encounter with his work, though they were written a good deal later. He asked the large and interesting questions and combined philosophy, anthropology and sociology in trying to answer them.

I had become interested in population studies as an undergraduate, but it was at the London School of Economics and Cambridge that I was able to pursue this theme and it formed the centre of my Ph.D. work in the Himalayas. Here the influence of David Glass, Chris Langford, David Eversley, Geoffrey Hawthorn and Keith Hopkins and others was essential. But the figure who towers over them all is **T.R. Malthus** whose thought provided the framework for three of my books. My encounter with Malthus is therefore deal with ain a full-length separate treatment.

When I want to do my Ph.D. in anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, it came to know another set of distinguished anthropologists, Abner Cohen,

Lionel and Pat Caplan and particularly my supervisor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf.¹ His ethnographic skills, curiosity, photographic and film-making interests all impressed me and he made it possible for me to work in the Himalayas.

When I went to Cambridge I met another set of anthropologists, some already retired but still active; Audrey Richards, Meyer Fortes, Edmund Leach, Jack Goody, S.J. Tambiah among them. Jack Goody has particularly influenced my work, both through his writing and by his inspired headship of the Department I joined.² I was introduced to the work of other anthropologists; Levi-Strauss, Marshall Sahlins, Clifford Geertz, Pierre Bourdieu, Maurice Godelier and others. The only one of this generation of anthropologists about whom I have written an extended published piece was **Louis Dumont**. Although this is a negative assessment, it indicates some of the general influences of these wide thinkers.

In the 1970's and 1980's I was particularly interested in legal theorists and legal history and read many of the classic by Vinogradoff, Kosminsky, Hart, Pound and others. In particular I was attracted by the work of **Sir Henry Maine**, who combined law, social theory and history. An even larger influence was **F.W.Maitland** about whom I have written a separate book in this series.

Alongside this I was reading and re-reading the classical works of great sociologists, Marx, Weber, Tonnies, Durkheim, Simmel and others. I owe an enormous debt to all of them, but again only wrote and published one longer piece on one of them, **Emile Durkheim**. Again this is somewhat negative, reflecting disappointment that he failed in his quest to answer the riddle of how modern societies can cohere.

There are, of course, numerous influences from one's own contemporaries and I was fortunate to become friends and teach alongside many interesting social thinkers during my career. It is only, however, through accidents such as an early tragic death that one is forced to formally consider their influence, so the only example of this trend is the obituary of **Alfred Gell**.

As time passed, I came to appreciate that some of the most exciting ideas relating to the problems I was considering were put forward by people who were on the edges of academic life and I came to relish the work of people such as Hippolyte Taine, Arthur Koestler, Lewis Mumford and **Norman Jacobs**. I include one published sample of this influence, an essay on Jacobs. It is also a reminder of the many interesting historians of technology and the history and philosophy of science whom I came to read especially under the influence of Gerry Martin.

The scholarship alluded to above is all European or American. Yet as my questions grew wider I wanted to look at my own world through the eyes of people growing up in other worlds. I have been fortunate to meet and discuss with many distinguished scholars from India, Japan, China and elsewhere. They are represented here by two published essays, on the Nepali anthropologist **Dor Bahadur Bista** and the Indian sociologist **André Beteille**.

¹ Haimendorf's influence is described on www.alanmacfarlane.com under 'Life'

² Goody's influence is described as above.

A book on the Japanese social thinker **Fukuzawa Yukichi** is also included separately as part of this series.

My bookshelves and notebooks remind me of how many important figures in my intellectual network are not explicitly mentioned here, though they are present in the notes and bibliographies of my books. Where are Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, Karl Jaspers, A.M.Hocart, Herbert Spencer, Montaigne and so many others? They are all important, as are many others, but here they can only be mentioned in passing.