

# Anthropology and Educational Theory

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The word "anthropology" has acquired in England a meaning different from that which it has in Germany and in some other parts of the European Continent. Long ago it denoted a philosophical doctrine concerned with the nature of man and with his relations to himself and to the Deity. This ontological significance has entirely vanished and has been replaced by a more scientific, factual, and empirical concept. This does not mean that the British have lost interest in metaphysical speculation or that their erstwhile passion for religious controversy has altogether evaporated. They still hold quite definite views regarding man and his nature,<sup>\*</sup> views which might be described as post-Christian, or perhaps as modified-Christian, and which are, in fact, much like those held by the majority everywhere in the West. The traditional doctrines of man as a "fallen angel" and of "original sin" still appear wraith-like on the scene but few seriously accept these myths. They have been replaced, at least in conscious thinking, by ideas derived in the last instance from the doctrine of evolution. Most people in Britain think of man as creature firmly rooted in animality, but striving to move upwards—not a fallen angel but something more than an animal striving to become an angel.

There is associated with this view another, derived from the rational optimism of the eighteenth century, namely that man is perfectible, endlessly perfectible, provided always that he tries

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\* The last book bearing this title was written by a physiologist.

sufficiently hard to become better. The older theology thought of man as most characteristically a creature of reason, and the application of this notion was that reason could be and should be applied always to control the passions. In this matter nearly every Englishman nowadays is filled with doubt. He has heard, often in rather vague and muddled terms, about the development of psychoanalysis, and realises therefore that there are in his mind dark unconscious forces which surge and strive and which may lead him to behave in a harsh, unreasonable, brutal way. In this sense, therefore, the idea of original sin re-enters upon the scene, but our Briton would reject the thought that he is bound to be entirely controlled by the unconscious. He still feels that, in the end, reason can and must be supreme. Then there is the doctrine of 'grace'. This, too, has suffered a remarkable transmutation. Few believe to-day that the grace of God is likely to descend as a result of prayer or mental strife; yet there is a feeling that on the whole such grace and the power of love are more likely to operate if there is a conscious faith in a universal power which is on the whole beneficent and which is capable of shaping human destiny.

Far-reaching ideas or hypotheses such as the above are very seldom described as being "anthropological". That word now means exclusively the orderly study of the ways in which human beings living in communities behave: how they get their food, how they eat and drink, how they clothe themselves, how they build houses, how courtship is carried on, how children are brought up, what ideas are current regarding the gods, what are the totems and taboos. Since this sort of study concerns itself largely with simple or primitive communities, the distinction between "ethnology" and "anthropology" has become vague. On the whole, the former word describes the natural-history or fact-

collecting phase of the science, the latter is thought of as a more theoretical and synthetic business in which use is made of hypothesis and theory.

*The scientific approach to anthropology.*

The difference between the matter-of-fact and empirical approach of the English and the more metaphysical, idealist attitude of the Germans, tempts one to speculate on national character, and to point out once again the evident fact that the English accept as an axiom the idea that the purpose of life is not knowledge but action, while the Germans tend to think that refinement and fulfilment are the outcome of a deepening of personal experience and of spiritual life. The truth, however, is probably less fanciful. In comparing the two patterns one should not overlook the fact that the British have been exposed for two hundred years to a number of challenges which the Germans did not meet, in part because of their belated nationalism and in part also because they travelled less far afield. Take, for example, British experience in Canada in the 1760's. The more far-seeing of our generals and statesmen could see, as a small cloud on the horizon, the probability of trouble with the American colonists. They therefore wished to strengthen their position and to improve their relations with the French-speaking colonists of Quebec. This they did by offering them a degree of colonial autonomy, especially in religious and educational affairs, which went far beyond that which the French Government at that time was willing to grant. As a result, when the time of war and trial came, the French in Quebec proved more loyal to the British connection than the Puritan farmers of New England.

An arrangement almost identical with the above was made seventy years later with the French colonists in Mauritius, and

here again it worked well. On the other hand, when an attempt was made in 1805 to impose the English pattern of religion, education, and culture<sup>1</sup> on the Dutch in South Africa the result was tension, strife, and the emigration of the Dutch farmers—the final harvest of this terrible mistake is even now being reaped.

When comparing successes and failures, an important lesson could easily be drawn. It is evident that every human community cherishes a number of values, customs and practices which it is prepared to defend to the death. In his dealings with foreign communities, a statesman must pay very careful attention to these values, these regulative norms. He cannot easily tell what they are merely by reflecting upon his own way of life. There is a need for a naive, unprejudiced study of facts. The British, of course, did not send out only administrators and soldiers. Their missionaries and traders, too, gathered experiences of all kinds. For example, when the missionaries arrived in Tierra del Fuego in the 1830's they found a population living at a very low level of material well-being—underfed, afflicted by many diseases, running about naked. This last fact shocked their Victorian minds, and it was decided to help the unfortunate Indians by collecting old clothes in London and distributing them free. It was argued that this would not only keep them warm but would teach them the value of modesty. The result was far other. The clothes had been infected with measles and smallpox. Both diseases ran riot, and most of the population died—an entirely unlooked for sequence of events. The missionaries had hoped to

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1. The word culture is used here to indicate the totality of ways of life and behaviour, and refers to food, sex, family, religion, etc., as well as to art of all kinds. It is not here used to denote what it often does, namely, the leisure time activities of the upper classes.

raise and ennoble the savages by converting them to Christianity. Instead, they killed them unwittingly because one possible aspect of cultural interaction had been overlooked.

Then, too, there is another sad story of the same kind. Some fifty years ago missionaries in the South Pacific were shocked by orgies that took place regularly. The islanders drank far too much fermented coconut juice, and in their drunkenness behaved in a way completely unacceptable to evangelists. Moral persuasion, backed by the prestige of white Europeans, was applied and the orgies ceased. Thereupon the women started aborting, the birth rate fell, and all kinds of ulcers and diseases appeared. Why? The coconut juice, it seems, had been the only source of vitamins such as E and F available to the islanders. Cutting them off from their supply brought not moral elevation, but disaster. Once again important facts had been left out of account. With greater knowledge misfortune could have been avoided. It is not necessary to multiply examples of this kind, to demonstrate that interaction between persons of one culture and persons of another may bring about entirely unexpected results. If the more unhappy of these are to be avoided there must be careful study and a measure of control over the interaction. Let it be noted that, for the sake of brevity and simplicity, the examples given had to do with the material nexus of life—with microbes and vitamins. But it would be as easy to give countless instances of equally devastating results of interaction on the mental, social and moral planes.

Experiences like these have for a long time led British thinkers to pay careful attention to the science of ethnology and anthropology. Travellers tales were put together by writers like Herbert Spencer or Frazer into accounts which began to display a certain measure of scientific organization. Others like Patrick Geddes,

Flinders Petrie and Bronislaw Malinowski put forward general theories dealing with the processes of the adaptation of a culture to the imperious demands of the geographical and material environment and began to speculate on the genesis and course of cultural change. In a word, what had been merely an haphazard collection of anecdotes, stories, facts, began to be rationalized into a system of knowledge; that is, into a science. All this work continues, and more vigorously than ever both in the United States and in the United Kingdom, and it would be wrong to omit mention of the debt which we owe to Germany, to French, and to other Continental scholars in this field.

*Anthropology in the service of education.*

What is the bearing of all this on education? Let us consider the situation in the University of London Institute of Education. This University has become in less than forty years the metropolitan centre of studies of the whole British Commonwealth. To it flock students from all parts of the world to pursue enquiries and researches at an advanced level. Among our own thousand students of education some three or four hundred come from overseas, and they represent among them some fifty or sixty different nationalities. English students continually meet others not only with pink, but also with yellow, brown, or black skins. They argue with Confucians, Buddhists, Hindus, pagans, Christians, and Muslims. They learn that there are all sorts of ways of managing courtship and marriage, of dealing with children, of food taboos, and of habits of study. They realise even before they can express the idea in words that education must of necessity adapt itself to different kinds of family life and political organization. What is learned at this face-to-face level is reinforced at the administrative and governmental levels. The British

have been responsible for initiating and running some sixty or seventy different systems of education in all parts of the world. Evidently as is to be expected, they usually began by transplanting the institutions with which they were familiar in their own country. So in India can be found English Public Schools and in South Africa Scottish High Schools. But, before long they learnt that if such transplantations were to survive they must adapt themselves to the different climate; that somehow the school or the university must change so as to fit with the different desires, expectations, skills, and attitudes of the local population.

(a) Twenty or thirty years ago, students of education in the West began to realize that their problems could often be illuminated by a study of other culture areas. Take, for example, the question of the adolescent period, a question which has been made urgent through the rapid spreading and growth of secondary education among classes of the people who, at an earlier period of history, would have had access only to elementary schooling. Now, is this period of adolescence really and necessarily one of "Sturm und Drang"? Is there something in the nature of man that causes it to be so, quite independently of the social environment? Do human beings always go through that strange and unsettled phase, just as they always seem then to develop skin eruptions? Or could the mental upset be avoided by modifying the social nourishment, just like the skin disturbances can often be controlled by the right diet? Margaret Mead, a brilliant student of the most famous American anthropologist, Franz Boas, set herself to enquire into all this by studying the period of adolescence among the natives of a number of South Sea Islands. It is well known that a perfectly clear and unambiguous conclusion emerged from Mead's research. The problems of adolescence are

basically social problems and their intensity can be diminished by controlling and altering the environment. There is nothing in the fundamental "nature of man" which necessarily causes them to arise.

(b) Strong stimulus to theory was also given through the promotion of education among backward and colonial peoples. For at least twenty years Great Britain has systematically devoted much effort to establishing schools and other educational institutions in all her colonial territories.

A vast amount of experience has been gathered and this work is now being supported by Unesco, under its programme of "Fundamental Education".

In this field anthropological data are of the deepest significance. A couple of illustrations will make this clear. In a North Australian nomadic tribe the stone axe was the most precious possession. It not only served to cut down brush wood and to kill animals, but it was the symbol of masculinity and of the primacy of the male. Travellers coming across this tribe, moved by humane motives and no doubt desirous of setting the natives to work clearing the bush and planting fruit trees, obtained a supply of cheap steel choppers from Birmingham. They distributed these freely, even among the women and children. The result was catastrophic. Far from getting down to work, the tribe almost broke up. The centres of authority had been dissipated. Respect for the elders had gone. No one obeyed the former leaders, and social cohesion was sapped. All this need cause no surprise. One is reminded of the difficulties which arise in industrial communities when, through a change in the technology, young semi-skilled girls find themselves earning more money than their fathers. Let us ponder, too, on what would happen in our own money-centred society if well meaning strangers came along

freely giving lots of money to children and women—think of the disturbance caused to our own mores when American soldiers did just this, in a small way.

A last instance may be mentioned. A recent United Nations mission was struck by the plight of the natives in the north of Venezuela, and recommended the establishment of a fishing industry. Much money was spent on boats, nets, and piers but there was no useful result. Fish among these people is a taboo food. Evidently, therefore, if one really wished to improve the diet of these natives one would have to begin by somehow removing or altering the taboos. Unless success is first achieved in this field, investment in the fishing industry is a waste of money. The lessons are clear. The ways of life of a people are all of them organically connected: the axe with the position of men and the obedience of children; the food habits with the religion. All change involves total change. Economic change cannot be brought about only by economic means. Often educational change may be the pre-requisite to change elsewhere.

### *The theory of Education.*

It is evident from the above that the influence of anthropology upon the theory of education may be so great as potentially to constitute a revolution in thought. Six main points of impact can already be discerned:—

1. Anthropologists have developed a technical vocabulary which makes possible the discussion of problems in terms more precise than is usual. Among these new words and expressions the most important is probably "*culture pattern*". This is taken to indicate the totality of traits displayed in the life of a people, these traits being seen as parts of one single whole. The meaning of each trait can be understood only by reference to the whole,

intricate and interwoven as it may be, and the significance of the whole is seen as something more than the simple total obtained by adding the separate traits—just as an organism is more than the sum total of its parts.

The culture-pattern idea makes it possible to present general description and interpretations of specific societies, and it stresses the inter-relatedness of the various parts. The role of the school in a society can then be more exactly discussed and problems propounded. For instance: what is the function of the educational instrument in a given culture? What are the basic characteristics of that culture? How does education serve to reinforce these basic characteristics? Appreciation of the full range and meaning of the concept serves to direct attention to features that might otherwise be overlooked. There is no room here to develop this point: Reference to publications like the University of London's *Year Book of Education*, 1954; to Margaret Mead's *Societies, traditions and technology* (Unesco, 1953); to the International Sociological Association's *Social Implications of Technical Advance* will show how fruitful the new outlook is for education. At a more popular and speculative level, books like Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* or Gorer's *The Americans* are sure to yield entertainment as well as instruction. It is a matter of regret that so little of this new material has been translated into French or German—the consequence is that educational theory on the Continent is tending to lag behind, and that we miss the contribution which our colleagues could make.

2. The application of the culture-pattern concept to the study of educational and social situations involves the abandonment of the cause-effect category, even in its more sophisticated form of "multiple causation". It is possible to describe a particular

society at a particular moment. A general pattern emerges. Later observation reveals changes in this pattern, but it is never possible to link together in a unique way a specific feature observed at a particular moment with a specific feature observed at a later time. It is thus futile to speak of A being the 'cause' of B, for everything is somehow related to everything else in the whole complex scene. Isolation of a single causal factor is not possible. When a physicist studies the performance of an electric lamp he can say "the closing of this switch *causes* the lamp to light"—and this is a useful and meaningful proposition. Social scientists are very seldom in this happy position. This is, no doubt, the deep reason why prediction is so difficult in this field of study.

It should be stressed that this abandonment of the mechanical cause-effect category in serious social thinking also involves the abandonment of the attempt to provide for our thinking a hierarchic structure. The Marxist theory, for example, is characterized by the attempt to single out from all the features observable in a particular societal pattern those which have to do with the production, distribution, or exchange of material goods. It is then asserted that just these features are primary and that by concentrating attention on these all the others may be explained in causal terms.

This notion is mistaken. Certainly the production of material goods is connected with every other feature of the pattern, for example with the religious ideas and with the forms of artistic expression. But it is no way primary. It is just as important to trace the effect of social customs, taboos, and religious beliefs on the forms of production, as the other way round.

3. From the point of view taken up in this paper, education is a process of cultural transmission from one generation to the

next, or, more appropriately, it is seen as the recreation of culture in the minds and behaviour of succeeding generations.

Two points emerge immediately. Of all human institutions which transmit culture the family is the most important, and it discharges its functions most powerfully when reinforced by instruction given in school. Thus, when studying any educational process, one is bound to consider carefully the structure and the functions of the family. From this point of view, it immediately becomes clear why much attention is given in England to moral and social training, which on the Continent tends to be left to the care of the family. The reasons for such differences should be sought first in the structure of the family as well as of society in general rather than in the sayings or preachings of philosophers. Verbalizations of practice are not always ineffective or useless—they too have important functions. But they are nearly always derivative, exercising their influence only when supported at other levels.

In addition, it is clear that if an educational system is studied in a way that pays attention only to the formal institutions called schools or universities, a very one-sided picture of what is happening emerges. The study of an educational system must necessarily include a consideration of all informal educational agencies such as apprenticeship schemes, adult educational institutions, trade unions, libraries, museums, and so forth.

4. It is important when evaluating and attempting to understand a particular society to clarify the subject by paying attention not only to the institutions, but also to the various social skills possessed by the population. More important still, there must be taken into account what might be called the social climate:—that is the prevalence and acceptance of certain traditions, and the general approval accorded to certain modes of

conduct. A trivial example will show what is meant. If one compares the British police with those of any Continental country one observes straight away that they are much milder as persons, that they do not carry arms, and that they view their task as one of helping the public. This particular institution works as well as it does because it is supported by others such as courts of law, independent of the police itself, and irremovable judges. In addition, the British people have in the course of centuries learnt a number of social skills, such as the right way to approach and to speak to a policeman in a manner which evokes a gentle and helpful response. Lastly, there exists in England a general climate of opinion which favours mild language and gentle behaviour, and which discourages roughness and aggressiveness.

If these views are sound, important conclusions emerge. The most important task of teachers and educators is, evidently, the teaching of social skills and the maintenance of a social climate which will be favourable to progress, security, and happiness. Such aims are more important than the handing-on of book knowledge—the latter is, indeed, little more than a vehicle for achieving the more fundamental aims of promoting political well-being and social harmony. It may well be thought, for example, that the prosperity and stability both of England and of Germany depend more upon spreading new social attitudes among the population than upon teaching them intellectual or manual skills. For only new attitudes will make possible the incorporation of scientific technology into the culture pattern and without such incorporation, the potential benefits will not be realized. Seen from this angle, pedagogical devices like the Project Method or Activity Methods acquire added importance. They are above all means by which constructive attitudes can be pro-

moted and fruitful social skills acquired.

5. Most modern political units are conglomerations of nationalities, races, religions, language-groups—think of the U. S. A.; the U. S. S. R.; the British Commonwealth; the French Union; the embryonic Western Europe. Now, anthropological studies reveal the conditions that must be satisfied if such plural societies are to persist and to function well. It is being realised that cultural diversity, within a political unit, far from being a menace to the operation of an industrial and technological system, may when properly integrated, enormously enhance the possibility of cultural progress. The various communities, instead of clashing, can stimulate one another to fresh vigour.

Social harmony, however, does not come into being spontaneously. It has to be deliberately created and, in this twentieth century the instrument that will have to be used to transform discord into concord is the school. Through deliberate planning by wise educators and devoted teachers, children will have to be taught how to manage their own ambivalence and how to handle social tensions constructively. Evidently, this is a new aim of education. To suggest that it has become the duty of teachers throughout Europe to create the conditions that will allow the emergence of a United Federation is to challenge them to fresh creative effort—but it is abundantly clear that this is merely stating a condition of survival. Happily we have now at hand a substantial body of well-verified knowledge which can act as a directing compass, showing us where to apply effect. And in this area we have much to learn from the U. S. A. where human beings of the most diverse racial and cultural origins have learnt to work together, building up in a few generations the most advanced and prosperous society in history.

6. Anthropological studies are concerned with the process of

cultural change. It has been demonstrated that over-rapid change lays excessive stress on individuals who, faced by shifting codes of conduct and conflicting moral norms, may become distressed and distraught, uncertain and unhappy. A beginning has been made in finding ways by which education can serve as an influence which can stabilize and integrate the personality—serving to harmonize men standing with one foot in a tribal and pagan society and with the other in the age of motor cars and aeroplanes.

Experiences gained here are particularly relevant to us in Western Europe for we also are undergoing a process of very rapid cultural change, and we too, are all, men of two cultures. Part of our being is rooted in the old prescientific age, and the other in the age of thermo-nuclear weapons and jet engines. It would be wise to take account of this when considering the whole problem of educational reform.

*The basis of educational theory.*

To explore fully the implications of the anthropological point of view for educational theory would require volumes. In this paper, no more has been done than to gather half a dozen examples of the way in which thought may be influenced by new insights derived from experience and study. I have, however, implicitly raised a problem of quite basic importance, namely: what should the theory of education be like? Should it be something like, say, a sociological or psychological theory? Or should it not rather resemble a philosophical system?

No one should under-rate the importance of philosophical discussion—yet it might be urged that the word “theory” should refer (as it does in the natural sciences) to a body of precepts which make it possible to foresee and predict the likely con-

sequences of one's actions ; a body of propositions, moreover, each one of which is, at least in principle, verifiable by and in anybody's experience.

We should distinguish here between a study of norms and aims, which is a branch of philosophy or of ethics on the one hand, and on the other hand, a system of factual statements dealing with the means to be employed in order that aims may be most surely realised. The first branch of study is essentially philosophical, or even metaphysical, the second is scientific. It is evident that the first is of vast importance, enabling one to clarify one's mind, to become clear as to what is being aimed at, to consider how far various aims may be antagonistic to one another and the degree to which they may be short-sighted or selfish, concerned only with one aspect of the whole. It evidently serves to keep us moving in the right direction, but there still remains the question of how most surely to reach one's goal.

The "science of education" might perhaps be compared to that of navigation. The captain of a ship, knowing his destination, needs to take account of the winds and the currents, of the size and strength of his ship, of the skill of his crew. He will take observations of the stars, and in the end will bring his ship safely into port. A captain who completely ignored the whole of that body of precept called "navigation" would be unlikely to reach his destination. It is not for the science of navigation to tell captains where they should go, but to help them on their journeys when they know their goal. Yet, a reflection should be added : it would be stupid to set oneself goals which the means at one's disposal did not allow one to attain ; and timid to be afraid of moving towards a port when the science available showed that it could be reached, given courage and energy.

We do not lack in educational philosophers more than prepared to tell us where we should go, how to derive spiritual benefit from the spectacle of storm and sunshine, what amusements will be best to while away the monotonous hours of the journey. But we have been and still are sadly short of persons modest enough to collect slowly and patiently the experience needed to provide the basic facts out of which a science may grow, and persistent enough in their efforts to attempt to organise these facts into meaningful systems.

The difference between the modern world and previous epochs in man's history is that in the fields of mechanical and scientific invention men have been found who were willing to construct the methods by which one generation may stand on the shoulders of its fathers in order to see further. Can we now find among our own ranks devoted students who will, with skill, passion, and patience, devote the best they have in them to building up a science of education which will enable us more surely to move fowards the aims set before our eyes by the genius and insight of the great men who have been our teachers?