

CONTEXTUAL IMPASSE AND THEORITICAL LEAD IN  
ANTHROPOLOGY : REVIEW OF SOME  
RECENT WRITINGS

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A. C. SINHA

*Department of Sociology, North Eastern Hill University  
Shillong 793014*

I

Anthropology conceives man in totality. Concerned with the bio-cultural profile of man, it has developed two distinct branches : physical and social (cultural). These two, inspite of the obvious over-laps, have developed into two highly specialized scientific traditions during the last five decades. This has eventually led to difficulties in communicating the scientific results across specializations. Even social anthropology does not appear to be a unified speciality. Lowie recognized national speciality such as British, American, Austro-German (Lowie, 1937), and a subdued French anthropology. However, by 1950's the non-physical part of anthropology got polarized into cultural (American and Austro-German) and social (British and French). Though there may be British and French cultural anthropologists such as Furer-Haimendorf, and American social anthropologists like Fred Eggan, by and large, the two trends represent two distinct approaches of cultural origin and structural analysis (Leach, 1982), predominantly in practice in the two countries, respectively. Because of the past colonial association, the impact of the British social anthropology has been considerable in the Third World countries. In a way the problems of the craft of anthropology are invariably identified with the issues of the British social anthropology. In this paper, we intend to review the theoretical issues of anthropological research, its contextual relevance and future prospects. These issues are proposed to be clinched by reviewing some significant recent publications, which represent a broad academic concern of the discipline.



The British anthropology, the functional and the social, was founded by Malinowski and Red Cliffe-Brown between the two world wars. Their first major publications *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and *The Andaman Islanders* respectively, were published in 1922. The modern British social anthropology was so to say discovered by these two master-craftmen. After the second world war their students, who represented the second generation, institutionalized the highly personalized craft into a viable academic discipline. Most of the significant names of this generation who chaired between 1945-1952, continued functional-structural theory. They all reached their retiring age between 1968-72. The third generation took over the reigns of the discipline as professionals in 1972, exactly 50 years after its foundation. During these five decades the world had witnessed a sea change. Now this third generation anthropologists are emersed with a number of theoretical and contextual problems. The British social anthropology did not remain the same as conceived by its founders. The academic tradition so assiduously built up, was being charged with in-sufficiency, inadequacy, incoherence and without future, in 1970's.

Across the English Channel Levi-Strauss was categorical that anthropology was the "daughter of violence". From the other side of the Atalantic, sceptic like Manners (1968) were suspicious of the real worth of the functional anthropology to the Third World Countries, even in 1950's. The non-confirmist Leach found 'the functionalist doctrine (to have) ceased to carry conviction' (Leach, 1961 : 1). Peter Worsley wrote in 1966 on 'the end of anthropology' because of its 'self-professed science of society whose subject matter was the variety of human and social types'. Needham (1970) found social anthropology without a 'unitary and continous part so far ideas are concerned' and 'a regorous and coherent body of theory proper' to it. Soon after, Edwin Ardener (1971) noted that "for practical purposes anthropological text books, which looked useful, no longer are: monographs which used to appear exhaustive, now seem selective; interpretations which once looked full of insights now seem mechanical and lifeless".



That was exactly the time when two significant efforts were made to take stock of the achievements of the British social anthropology. The first work was initiated by Isaac Schapera; the second by a relatively young group of radical anthropologists, who assembled in September 1972 at the University of Hull. While the former work provides an excellent review of the past developments and suggests some potential trends for the future, the latter critically examines its past 50 years with reference to the British colonies. Kuper (1973) acknowledges the impasse in the discipline and suggests three ways out of it in the form of continuation of studies of 'other cultures', in place of 'ethnic groups', the new conflict model of the plural societies proposed by M. G. Smith and Van der Berghe etc., and a neo-Marxist theoretical framework from sociology. (Kuper, 1973:236-'37). Asad (1973) finds that the basic reality which made pre-war social anthropology a feasible and effective enterprise was the power relationship between dominating (European) and dominated (non-European) cultures.

However, the discipline of anthropology has expanded phenomenally. Of the 2'000 papers presented in the Chicago World Congress (1974), 82 percent were contributed by the scholars identified with the industrialized world, and only 18 percent by the Third World scholars from Asia, Africa, Oceania and Latin America (Tax, 1979). Such an expanded academic discipline can no more be controlled and critically influenced by the advanced academic centres such as the L. S. E., or the University of Oxford, any more. Meanwhile something had distinctly changed in the colonial Third World. It experienced an ideological change. These subject countries of the other day no more necessarily look to the centres of academic excellence in the imperial powers. Their political independence since 1950's did accelerate the process of socio-economic change, planned development of national networks of communications, promotion of education and rural development. An anthropologist now enters a world in which the politically dominant values are those of 'development' and 'modernization', and he will be challenged to show what his work contributes to nation building (Kuper, op. cit., 3:234-5).



How should the anthropologist react to this contingency? Will anthropology survive as an academic discipline? Will it continue to contribute to the understanding of society and culture of the down-trodden communities scattered in the non-industrialized world? Will it turn from *status-quo* oriented functional anthropology to an instrument of social transformation, economic development and political modernization of the extensive peasantry of the Third World countries? These questions are pointers to the dynamism of the discipline. To be pragmatic to be concerned with the prospect, relevance and direction of the discipline. However, it is certain that anthropology has come to stay as an independent academic discipline. Innovations, novelty, experimentation, methodological regour and theoretical contributions will always be welcome and desirable. Instead of resignation to confusion, loss of direction and purposeless, anthropology has to look around itself; its past rich tradition and its present extensive vigour. And we find something positive to fall back. Its tradition of humanism and philanthropy and radicalism and revolutionism right from Morgan to neo-Marxism inspire a confidence.

## II

Here we discuss a couple of significant publications, the proceedings of the IXth World Anthropology Congress held at Chicago, (Hinshaw, 1979; Diamond, 1979). The first is a *festchrift* volume of more than two dozen papers contributed by Sol Tax's students and associates on his life long missions of action anthropology among the Red Indians and various aspects of Mexican Anthropology. For Sol Tax the most appropriate role of an anthropologist is that of the educator; though he could be facilitator, resource co-ordinator, but he must not assume a position of power. As a scientist, he could not choose either the state, represented by the government, or the tribes, whose very existence was at the stake. He was committed to rationalization and progress for which *empathy* is the keyword. Unlike most objective academic analysts, he was very much bothered with the questions like 'what will be the future of the Fox?' After years of experiments action anthropology was born with



“two co-ordinate goals, to neither of which (the anthropologist) will delegate an inferior position. He wants to help a group of people to solve a problem, and he wants to learn something in the process”. Thus the action anthropologists concern for contributing immediately to the betterment of the lives of his informants, or host community, becomes part of his overall research scheme. Finally, it is in responding to this concern that action anthropologist severs his traditional anthropological allegiances and brings the methods of anthropological fieldwork into line with 20th century realities”. (Blanchard, 1979 : 438).

“The actionists stress the equal responsibility to the people whom they wish to help and to the scientific community, of which they must remain members and to which they must contribute data.” (Ablon, 1979 : 446).

Keeping the above scheme in mind Tax organized the American Indian Chicago Conference on June 13-20, 1961, in which more than 500 Indians representing 90 tribes and a host of scholars and administrators participated. The conference provided unique social stimulation and educational enlightenment.

There are articles by Leonard Borman on ‘Mutual Aid Movement’, Hinshaw and Young’s on ‘College Administration’, and others with a bearing on action anthropology. Gearing provides the conceptual genesis of action anthropology. One of the illuminating papers was contributed by Steven Polgar, which charts out the related areas of applied, action, radical and committed anthropologies. Radical anthropology is a self-conscious movement, while committed anthropology proposes to work for diminishing the influence of nation-states and building a humanity wide community. Again while the applied anthropology works for the presumed benefit of the community in question, the radical brand seeks to ally itself entirely with the oppressed. Naturally the radical and committed brands of anthropology will be linked with Marxism. In case one takes radicalism seriously by moving into the sphere of action, what one does will usually not be considered anthropology.



## III

This leads us to review the second significant publication. Stanley Diamond (1979) edited the volume *Towards a Marxist Anthropology*. It is divided into five parts: 'structuralist constraints', 'primitive communism as theory and critique', 'African perspective', 'ideological relations', 'some academic and bourgeois illusions'. Also an Introduction and a theoretical exposition. Stephen Levin in his critique of everyday life makes an attempt to sketch how in primitive society labour, sexuality, speech and existence can be seen as integrated in the ritual of initiation, as collective celebration of identity formation and the individuation process at a critical point in the life cycle of the individual (p. 28). Bob Scholte examines the structuralist approach of Levi-Strauss in details and rejects it in favour of the one proposed by Jean P. Satre.

"Satre unites dialectically what Levi-Strauss severs analytically: the dynamic relation between human experience and scientific reality. As a situated activity, anthropological enquiry demands a constant and critical awareness of its own sociohistorical confines. As a motivated activity, anthropological praxis must seek to liberate us from the ethnocentric projections so often imbedded in these confines and visited upon others in the form of exploitative ideologies." (p. 60)

Various nuances of the structuralist constraint are examined by Godelier, Goodfriend, Besthoud and Rossilaud in the next part. In part three, Krader, Dunn, Leacock, Bromley, Weetfish and Torkanyszucs examine the aspects of primitive communism. Lawrence Krader notes the difference between Morgan and Marx. With this we proceed to the empirical part of the presentation.

It is not clear why a separate section on African perspectives (part four, with four articles) has been included in the anthology. At least three more such sections could have been possible on Oceania, Asia and Latin America. Mariotti and Magubane analyse the theoretical issues on the urban process in African.



Emanuel Terray finds a correlation between the expansion of long-distance trade and the emergence of the state in the Abon Kingdom of Ivory Coast. Ahmed reports on the Sudanese scenario of the religious and merchant elites leading to the class formation. Similarly, Nzimirp examines the character of feudalism in Niigeria.

Part Five provides one of the weakest links. Out of the four papers on 'primitive division of labour' 'aesthetic values', 'analysis of a Christian myth', and on 'British Social Anthropology' (by Talat Asad, referred above) the last one is the best piece. Part six incorporates three papers on 'the revolutionary potential of the Maxican peasants', 'social evolution and population pressure' and 'methods of cultivation'. These papers presented to the symposium on 'Problems and Possibilities of Marxist Ethnology' have been introduced by Diamond, the chairman of the symposium. He has identified four significant issues, which were spread all over the volume.

Firstly, Krader contended that Marx had never defined his works as contributing a doctrine of historical or dialectical materialism. In fact, he was a revolutionary historian, who had adopted a dialectical method of inquiry. Secondly, structuralism appeared as no more than the adoption of a synchronic perspective, the analytic freezing of time in order to focus on a society in cross-section. Various social analysts examine structures, but this does not necessarily convert all of them into structuralists. The specific character of structuralism (complementary non-dialectical binary opposition, isomorphic regularities throughout culture and nature, merely phenamenological and illusory character of all transactions) contribute the definition of structuralism and it has no bearings on the Marxist definition of the structure of capitalism. Thirdly, Godelier's presentation of the Pygmy religion evoked the issues of exploitation and ideology. The isolation of religious authority as the origin of political authority is a reification which converts authority into an abstraction. Forth issue on which there was no concensus, was Bromley's reperiodization of the Morgan-Engels' projection of historical evolutionary sequence.



## IV

With the political economy we propose to review the volume on *Political Anthropology*, (Seaton and Claessen, 1979) which was the product of the session on 'political Anthropology and the state: centre/periphery authority processes'. The volume is not a detailed and systematic outline of various theories of state and state formation. Though it claims neither to be comprehensive nor to provide a deep analysis of its objects, the volume has neatly been divided into four parts, besides a useful introduction by Claessen.

Part One takes stock of theoretical concern of the sub-discipline. Kurtz identifies four major approaches of structural processual, network analysis and that of political economy as complementary and overlapping in their empirical and analytical techniques. These approaches, suggesting different levels of abstraction, have mainly come from African studies.

Parts Two, Three and Four examine various dimensions of centres and peripheries, authority and power and political culture, respectively. Amsbury on 'patron-client structure in modern world organization', Mary Mathur on 'local level competition between tribes and non-tribes', and three other small papers are grouped under the rubric of centre and peripheries. The most significant contributions are combined under authority and power in part Three. Claessen finds publication of *African Political Systems* (Fortes and Evans Pritchard, 1940) as the beginning of political anthropology and then he proceeds to examine the structure of the centralized primitive states ruled by a sacred king (pp. 183-195). His conclusions are largely relevant for other systems as well.

Peter Skalnik presents the dynamics of early state system in the voltaic area of Africa and terms it 'historization' of anthropology and 'anthropolization' of history. The study of early states is, in fact, an exercise in answering the historical questions through anthropological methodology. Particularly useful at this stage are Marx's concept of the Asiatic mode of production (and further extended to African mode of production by Coquery Vidsovitich) and Engel's research on the formation of feudalism. As Asante, Dahomey, Yoruba, Benin, Kongo, Nupe, Hausa, Futani possessed "the combination of a patriarchal community economy with the



exclusive control of long-distance trade by one-group and the dominating bureaucracy only interferes indirectly in this community" they fit well into the model of the African mode of production.

Wachuki assumes law as cultural universal and objects to the categorization of all indigeneous African laws into customary laws. In fact, customary laws are only one branch of the indigenous African laws. He puts forth a threefold classification besides the customary law, of supernatural law and enacted positive law.

The last part on political culture presents rather the weakest link. Aronoff writes on the Israel Labour Party and Sertel on the methodological perspective of the Turkish peasant political cognition. Szalay and Vid Pecjak provide an interesting analysis of the U. S. and Slovenian socio-political frames through a dozen of statistical tables.

As it happens in large-scale conference, the volume appears to be unweilding in treatment of some of their presentations. At least half a dozen of them give the impression of casualness and insufficient coverage on their topics. The volume suffers from another angle: it would have been ideal to provide a chronological as well as thematic review of the travail of political anthropology.

## V

Henry Claessen organized a seminar on *the* formation of the state at Leiden in 1975 in which about two dozen scholars presented their papers. The volume is divided into three parts: *Thesis*, the theoretical and working hypothesis, *antithesis*, or 20 case studies arranged alphabetically from all over the world in time and space and *synthesis*, or a comparative conceptual analysis, at the end. In the 'Theories and Hypothesis of the Early state' Claessen and Skalnik concern themselves with the initial stage of the evolution of the pre-capitalist non-industrial state. The early state was supposed to be of three types: the *inchoate* (found when kinship, family, and community ties still dominate relations in the political field; where full-time specialists are rare; where taxation systems are only primitive and adhoc taxes are frequent; and where social differences are offset by reci-



procuity and close contacts between the ruler and the ruled); *the typical* (where kinship ties are counter-balanced by territorial ones; where competition and appointment to office counter-balance the principle of heredity of office; where non-kin officials and title holders begin to play a leading role in govt. administration; and where ties of re-distribution and reciprocity still dominate relations between the social states); and *the transitional* (where the administrative apparatus is dominated by appointed officials; where kinship influences are only marginal aspects of government; and where pre-requisites for the emergence of private property in the means of production, for a market economy and for the development of overly antagonistic classes exist. It incorporates the pre-requisites for the development of the mature state).

The following significant questions on the theory of state formation were raised : What can be said about the existence and role of social classes in the evolution of the state ? Is it possible to describe the characteristics of the Asiatic mode of production to all, or only some, of the early states ? What was the role of the conquest in the rise and further development of the early state ? What role did war and other types of external conflict play in the evolution of the early state ? What was the influence of population growth and or pressure on the development of the early state ? What kind of a correlation existed between the development of trade and markets and emergence of early state ? What were the methods of resolving internal conflicts in the early state ? And what kind of a correlation existed between the development of the early state and the rise of cities and urban life ?

Ronald Cohen in his 'reappraisal of state origins' finds the emergence of the state structures theorized by dint of population pressures, long distance trade, location, war fare, conquest, defence internal strife, or the benefits to be derived from more permanent forms of centralized control. However, none of these factors is sufficient or even consistently antecedent to state formation. Anatolii Khazanov similarly examines some aspects of theoretical problems of the study of the early state. Lawrence Krader summarizes his concept on the origin of the state among the nomads of central Asia. The part two on *Antithesis* presents 20 case studies,



two from America two from Oceania, eight from Africa, three from Europe and six from Asia. These presentations spread into 420 pages are unique scholarly contributions of their own types.

Part Three : *Synthesis*, covered by Claessen and Skalnik into four chapters, appears to be the main contribution of the volume. In his 'Structural Approach' to the early state, Claessen surveys the differences and similarities between the 20 cases, and presents their 515 structural characteristics in a schematic way. These features, though drawn from the empirical presentations, are full of insights for the future studies. It will be instructive to enumerate them for our readers : (1) The early states had a definite territory and the people permanently residing in them were considered as subjects or citizens. (2) It is an independent organization. (3) It has at a specific stage only one governmental centre. (4) Trade is commonly practised in early states. (5) Markets are generally found in the early states. (6) Long distance trade was found. (7) Trade and markets form a source of income for the ruling hierarchy. (8) Full-time specialists are generally found. (9) The most prevalent means of subsistence in the early states is agriculture. (10) The production of a surplus is characteristic of the economies of the early states.

In the early states (11) a sovereign and kin and an aristocracy are found. (12) Small holders appear to be commonly found in early states. (13) Tenants are generally found. (14) The social stratification of the early states always embraces at least two strata. (15) The direct participation in food production is limited to specific social categories. (15) With exception of the traders all social categories have the obligation to perform services for the state. (17) The obligation to pay taxes existed even in the case of the aristocracy. (18) Access to the basic means of production in early states is unequal. (19) Tribute is the main source of income of the sovereign and aristocracy. (20) The main source of income of small holders and tenants is primary production. (21) A mythical charter on which the relationship between the sovereign and his subjects is based is generally found in early states. (22) The basic characteristic of the sovereign is his sacral status. (23) The sove-



reign's exalted position is explained by his genealogical status. (24) The sovereign performs rites. (25) He is the formal law giver. (26) He is the supreme judge. (27) In early states one always finds informal influences on law giving. (28) The sovereign is considered as the supreme commander. (29) He generally has a body guard. (30) They present gifts to their people.

In early states (31) the sovereign enumerates his people for service rendered. (32) He generally pays offerings. (33) The payment of salaries and remunerations and the presentation of offerings and gifts are found to be general. (34) A royal court is found. (35) Tenure of office renders one eligible for classification with the aristocracy. (38) The aristocracy is internally stratified according to rank order of birth and function occupied. (39) The priesthood supports the ideological basis. (40) Commoners have the obligation to pay taxes, tributes, or comparable levies. (41) Commoners generally have obligations to perform military service. (42) Commoners have the obligation to perform menial services for the state, the aristocracy or functionaries. (43) There are no kinship relations between the sovereign and his family, and power constitutes a principle of political organization. (45) Usually a three-tier administrative apparatus is found. (46) General functionaries are found mostly on the regional, and slightly less frequently on the national and local levels. (47) Specialist functionaries are usually found at the top level of the administrative apparatus. (48) Generally the courtiers exercise an influence on political affairs. (49) The members of the sovereign's family exercise an influence on political decisions in all early states. (50) Priests exercise an influence on decision making. (51) The sovereign travels through his domain in order to extract allegiance and tribute.

Skalnik examines the early state as a process, and finds the necessity of a historical, processual way of looking at the agencies of the early state. Of the five functional spheres (administrative, economic, ideological, military and political) distinguished here for analytical purposes, it is hardly possible to speak of strictly 'economic' or 'political' functions of the early state—they all are inter-



wined. A set of seven general principles of early state functions has been identified : syncretism, redistributive exploitation, centralization, legitimacy, sacral sovereignty, self-oriented political strategy, and suppression and transformation of pre-state patterns. In the next presentation (chapter 27) the limit of the beginning and end of the early state was charted out by the editors. A set of mutually corresponding factors responsible for the formation of the early states have been identified as population growth and population pressure; war, the threat of war or conquest, raids; conquest; progress in production and the promotion of a surplus, tributes. affluence; ideology and legitimation; and the influence of already existing states as critical to phenomena of the early state.

The concluding chapter, 'Models and Reality', provides a brief generalization. The state functionaries are found to fulfil more than one task. These 'generalists' dominate the state apparatus and most of the state activities appear to be multipurpose. The underlying principle of the early state has been reciprocity, but this does not appear to be balanced. In fact, a form of redistributive exploitation prevails. The *seven characteristics* of the early state proposed to be examined (p. 21) and structurally generalized (pp. 586-9) have been answered at the end (pp 639-40). Except the characteristic of the presence of a number of people, which was found to be vogue, all other features were found to be positively correlated. At the end, on the basis of the degree of development of trade and markets, the mode of succession to important functions, the occurrence of the private ownership of land, the method of the remuneration of the functionaries, the degree of development of the judicial system, and the degree of development of the taxation system, the three variants of the early state have finally been conceptually and empirically established (640-1).

This 700 pages long exercise appears to be most extensive academic interprise undertaken on an international level and excellently executed on the problem of the state formation after a similar exercise undertaken in Paris a decade back (Eisenstadt and Rokkan, : 1973). The study presents a most constructive approach by combining structural functional approach with that



of the Marxist model of state formation. *The early state* may not provide answers to all the issues of the state formation. However, its theoretical exposition, methodological concern, efforts to cover most of the regions of the world through the case studies are singular academic achievements. The problem of the state formation continues to engage Claessen's concern, which is evident by his recent publication (Claessen, 1984) and the session on the Early State and After organized by him at XIth World Anthropological Congress in 1983. It is heartening to note that the theme is being pursued elsewhere as well (Sinha, 1981; Bhattacharjee, : 1984).

## VI

The above presentation adequately demonstrates that the anthropologists are serious about their profession. All their theoretical and methodological concerns are addressed to uncovering various facets of 'the other cultures' as insiders through the technique of participant observation. The issues raised by the concerned anthropologists during the last three decades appear to be answered through the volumes under our review. If anthropology continues to be relevant and dynamic, it has to re-orient itself from the *status-quo*-oriented exploitative colonial context to the cause of the oppressed humanity of the Third World. Our presentation indicates that there are already two significant trends operating in anthropological researches, which may be identified with Sol Tax's humanitarian action anthropology and committed, radical and Marxist approach sweeping all over the world. Political anthropology, which began as an apology to the colonial *status-quo* analysis, has come a long way and at least fifty percent of its current researches are concerned with political economy and other aspects of the Marxist praxis. In our present context, right from Talat Asad, Steaton's political anthropology, Diamond's Marxist anthropology, Claessen and Skalnik's early state formations suggest the vigour of the theoretical contributions being made by the radical anthropologists. Needless to add that these studies do indicate a sense of purpose, concern and direction in the anthropological studies.



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