

Siegfried Frederick Nadel 1903-1956*

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THE death of Fred Nadel at Canberra, Australia, on January 14, 1956 was a terrible shock to his many friends, colleagues, and students in anthropology. He was Professor of Anthropology (and latterly of Sociology also) and, in addition, he was Dean of the Research School of Pacific Studies in the new Australian National University. Since the opening of the University in 1950 he had devoted himself to the development of this new academic body and had thrown himself with enthusiasm into its social as well as its institutional life. He was also still moving toward the summit of his powers as an anthropological theorist. His sudden death (of a coronary thrombosis) has therefore seemed all the greater loss.

Siegfried Frederick Nadel was born on April 24, 1903, in Vienna. He was the son of Dr. Maurice Nadel, a lawyer. Of Austrian nationality in his earlier years, he later became a naturalized British subject. In July 1926 he married Elisabeth Brown of Vienna, who continues to live in Canberra with their daughter.

Fred Nadel was educated first in Vienna. It may surprise even some of his friends to know that his early training and career were not in the field of the social sciences, but in music. From 1920 to 1923 he attended the Musik Akademie at Vienna, studying composition and conducting, and from 1921 to 1923 he also attended the Musikhistorisches Institut; at the same time he studied pianoforte under Professor Richard Robert. But even at that time it was clear that his interests were much wider than the purely musical. In 1923 he began the study of psychology at the Psychologisches Institut at the University of Vienna under Professor Karl Bühler, and the study of philosophy under Professor Moritz von Schlick. On November 11, 1925, he graduated as Dr. Phil. at the University, with a thesis titled "Zur Psychologie des Konsonanzerlebens." Characteristically, he did not play a merely passive role in his musical studies. In 1925 he served for a period as Assistant Conductor at the Dtsisseldorf Opera House. During the next year or so he worked as

an accompanist and conductor at the Vienna Conservatorium of Music, and in 1927 toured Czechoslovakia with his own opera company, the singers being pupils of the Vienna Conservatorium. The company produced Verdi's "Ernani" and Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi," with Fred Nadel as conductor. These facts are of interest to his anthropological colleagues in revealing some thing of the artistic element in his makeup, his gift for organization, and his capacity for making a success of what he set out to do. (At the end of the tour he had difficulty in refusing an offer to be conductor of a State Theatre.) Throughout his life, music continued to be his main means of relaxation and one important avenue of emotional expression for him.

About this time his interests had begun to move more in the direction comparative musicology. In 1930 he published a book on musical typology and in 1931 a biography of Busoni, but as early as 1926-27 he had produced a series of radio programs for Radio Vienna on African, Caucasian, Javanese, and American Negro music. In 1928 he attended the International Congress of Folk Music in Prague, and in 1930 he presented a treatise on marimba music to the Phonogrammarchivkommission of the Vienna Academy of Science. During the next two years he worked with von Hornbostel and Kurt Sachs on the musicology of primitive peoples at the Phonogrammarchiv in Berlin. At the same time, he began the study of African languages under Piedrich Westermann at the University of Berlin.

In a sense, the stage had thus been set for his appearance in anthropology in London. He had been in England in 1927 when he attended the summer school of music at Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire, and went to Cambridge at the invitation of Edward Dent (then Professor of Music at King's College) whom Nadel and his wife had met and come to know well in Vienna in their student days. But Nadel's English connections had been almost purely musical until 1932. However, in Berlin, at Westermann's

* I am greatly indebted to Mrs. Nadel for many of the details used in this notice, and to her and to Dr. I. D. Freeman for the bibliography attached. Though not quite complete, this is thought to contain all the items of significance to anthropology.

suggestion, he met Dr. Kittredge of the Rockefeller Foundation and was later awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship to enable him to have post-graduate training in order to undertake anthropological field research in Africa. In October 1932 he began his study at the London School of Economics under Malinowski and Seligman. He continued to be a member of Malinowski's seminar as opportunity allowed until 1937. With Fortes and Hofstra, he was one of the senior men whom Malinowski designated the "Mandarins." They were all holders of Rockefeller Fellowships, they were all preparing for African research, and they brought to the seminar an intellectual vitality, breadth of experience, and maturity of judgment which helped to give it its vivid character at that time. In the seminar discussions, as always, Nadel took a leading part, with the zest for constructive theoretical argument which was characteristic of him till the end of his days.

In 1933 he began his field work. Having been awarded a Field Research Fellowship by the International African Institute, he sailed for Nigeria with his wife and for two years carried out that field research among the Nupe which provided the foundation for many later publications. Returning in 1935 to the London School of Economics, he took his Ph.D in anthropology, his thesis title being "Political and Religious Structure of Nupe Society (Northern Nigeria)." In 1935 he also received an invitation to join a group of psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists assembled at the instance of F. C. Bartlett and others in discussions which ultimately resulted in the publication of *The Science of Society* (1939). He attended two meetings of the group, in July 1935 and December 1937, and maintained close contact with the Cambridge psychologists, especially Bartlett, from then on.

From October 1935 to November 1936 he continued his field research among Nupe. Back in England again, he attended and lectured to the Summer School on Colonial Administration at the University of Oxford. Appointed in 1938 as Government Anthropologist to the Government of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, he carried out field work from April of that year to May 1939 among the Nuba, a group of pagan tribes in the hills of southwest Kordofan. Military action against these people had ceased more than a decade before, but increasing contact with government and other Western forces had created pressing problems in education, agricultural development, and tribal federation.

It was Nadel's task to study the Nuba organization in such a way as to enable an evaluation of the effects of the change to be made. This task Nadel carried out with great energy, making a wide comparative survey which blended scientific accuracy with practical suggestion in a way which gave great satisfaction to the administration. After a period of leave in England, during which he completed his first book on the Nupe, *A Black Byzantium* (1942), he returned to the Sudan in November 1939 to complete his field studies.

But the war had begun. His book which set down the major results of his Nuba study was written in El Obeid (as the Governor-General pointed out in the preface) "during those fateful months in 1940-1941 when all the institutions we valued seemed in danger, and it must have needed no ordinary self-control on his part to concentrate on the work in hand when he was anxious to get away and take his share in combating the powers of evil."

Early in 1941 he enlisted in the Sudan Defence Force and later in that year transferred to the British Army, East African Command. After about a year's service on the Eritrean-Ethiopian border and in charge of a frontier post, he became Secretary of Native Affairs in the British Military Administration in Asmara, with the rank of Major. In 1945 he was transferred to the Home Establishment, given a gazetted commendation "for outstanding services" and in May 1945 transferred to Tripolitania with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. There he was Secretary of Native Affairs and also became Deputy Chief Secretary in the British Military Administration. In June 1946 he returned to England and was released from the army.

His rise in the academic field was rapid but only to be expected, once he had set his foot on the ladder. After little more than a year as a Lecturer at the London School of Economics, he took up an appointment as Reader in Anthropology and Head of the Department at King's College, Newcastle, University of Durham. There he remained until 1950, when he was appointed to the first Chair in Anthropology at the new Australian National University, a post which he held until his death.

His period of tenure of University posts had been too short for him to have reaped the full harvest of his growing reputation, but he had already received some professional recognition. In 1946 he was awarded the Wellcome Medal for his anthropological writings based on his wartime experiences, and in 1950 he was given

the Rivers Memorial Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute for his field research in Northern Nigeria and in the Sudan. He was also in demand as a good speaker who was one of the leading representatives of British social anthropology. In 1949 he lectured at Evanston at the Summer School of Northwestern University. In 1950, traveling on a Carnegie Grant, he visited and lectured at various universities in the United States while on his way out to Australia. In 1951 he paid a brief visit to New Guinea to examine the possibilities of field research there for members of his Department, and consulted with Government officials. In 1952 he took part in the Wenner-Gren Foundation International Symposium on Anthropology and, though he did not give a paper, he contributed freely in discussions on methodology, values, and the problems of applied anthropology in government. In 1953 he attended the 8th Pacific Science Congress at Manila and in 1954 visited India to assist in the establishment of a UNESCO Fundamental Education Training Scheme at Mysore. He was also a consultant at a conference in New Delhi on the teaching of the social sciences in Southeastern Asia, and carried out a lecture tour of some Indian universities under the auspices of UNESCO. In the early part of 1955, while he was on study leave in Europe, he gave a series of six lectures at the London School of Economics, these providing the foundation for his book on social structure. He also lectured at Cambridge, Oxford, and Manchester, and attended a Symposium on Customary Law in Africa in Amsterdam. Later in the year he contributed to a symposium on Culture and Personality at a conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatrists in Canberra. He also was President of Section F at the 31st Meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science at Melbourne, his presidential address being entitled, "Understanding Primitive Peoples."

Nadel's writings are widely known and greatly respected. Almost everything he published had some significant point of theory in it, some stimulus which takes the reader beyond the ethnography into thoughts of a more general kind. As an ethnographer, Nadel's work is sound. Each article, each book, has in it much of careful record. The value of this owes something to what Lord Lugard referred to as Nadel's exceptional talents as a linguist. He is said to have acquired and spoken with fluency the difficult tonal language of Nupe in less than six

months – little wonder, then, that by any standard "the Nupe seem to have regarded him as an unusual phenomenon," and conferred upon him a high title of tribal rank. At the same time, his interest and perceptiveness did not cause him to lose objectivity. He himself pointed to the fallacy of an anthropologist thinking he is regarded as "one of the tribe." In this respect he emphasized "the detached impartial scientific aim of an investigator from outside." He wrote on field techniques effectively and frankly. In one context he did not hesitate to say how, lacking a common quasi-scientific interest between interviewer and informant, the most successful approach is to stimulate the informant emotionally by leading questions, sometimes even by violent controversy – a practice which he himself described as a "bullying" technique. The teaching of research techniques was a matter on which he laid great stress, and he linked this with theoretical problems in the manner of Malinowski, though attaching more importance to comparative issues in planning.

Yet his real place in anthropology is not primarily through his ethnography, but through the comprehensiveness and profundity of his theory. Each of his books on Nupe and Nuba is concerned with general problems of political and economic organization and of religion in a way which will keep them long among the list of standard works from which students and their teachers can draw inspiration. His first published work with a general title, *The Foundations of Social Anthropology* (1951), though not inconsistent with his other work, is of a different order. He aimed, as he says, not at a textbook on social anthropology but at a prolegomenon to the study of a society. He intended to examine the logical premises that underlie our knowledge of all societies, primitive or otherwise, and what is necessary conceptually to undertake enquiry into their nature. This work brought together in striking fashion many of the results of Nadel's thinking from various fields. It was a bold enterprise and, for all its learning and clarity, in some respects it was only partly successful. Within the recognized field of social anthropology – on concepts of grouping and of institution, on the relation of anthropology to sociology and history, on definitions of function and of pattern, on methods of enquiry – he presents an authoritative statement. This statement is illumined and made much more valuable by the full use that Nadel makes of his reading in scientific method in general. In 1952, at the Wenner-Gren Foundation Symposium, he

gave his view that anthropologists need to go outside their own field and study more thoroughly and systematically both logic and philosophy. Nadel practiced his own dictum to such effect that he commanded respect when he addressed philosophers. But one difficulty about the book lies in its scope. As part of the enquiry Nadel deals with “psychological explanations,” examining both the concept of “mental energy” and what he describes as “action potentials.” In this section of the book an attempt is made to push the instrument of anthropological enquiry further into the refractory matter of human behavior – to make the question “why” more comprehensible and the answer more accessible. Nadel maintained – and many of us would agree – that the anthropologist must come to terms with psychology. But his analysis at this point is one which ordinary anthropologists may acquiesce in from respect for an elaborate and sustained intellectual construct rather than from conviction that it is the only solution.

Nadel’s thinking on anthropological problems was of a high order. It was rigorous yet intellectually bold. He was willing to adventure into discussion of “causal relations” and he had a gift of being able to select and arrange such relations in meaningful propositions. His reasoning was complex and, like Malinowski, he was wont to advance his analysis by steps at different levels of abstraction. His methodological interests are illustrated by the attention he paid to what is meant by the notions of “understanding” and “explanation” in anthropology. Drawing on the resources of sociology, psychology, and philosophy, he was moving more systematically and with more awareness than have most of his British colleagues toward a new synthesis of social disciplines. It is difficult to judge the validity of this attempt as yet, particularly because his early death left the design imperfect.

Nadel was a magnificent teacher and he left his mark on several generations of students. He demanded from them the same high standards as he set himself, and he paid them the compliment of assuming that they could follow abstract argument if it was illumined by pithy illustration. Though he was not always correct in this assumption, this was because of his level of argument, not his lack of clarity. Having no false modesty about the value of his own theoretical approach, he was a keen and helpful critic, providing, wherever necessary, his own framework of ideas in which others could set

their material. The result was that he stimulated colleagues and students alike.

In conclusion, something must be said of him as a person. Complex, subtle, and assured in his intellectual life, sensitive to his professional status and with decided opinions upon the best way to set up and organize academic institutions, he led a personal life which in some respects served as a foil to these characteristics. His judgments of people and events were usually uncomplicated and straightforward. His personal tastes were simple and without ostentation. He was happy with his family. He liked good food and good wine, but in moderation, and he preferred good company to either. Though always articulate, and sometimes impatient in professional matters if he encountered what he thought was stupidity or inefficiency, he bore without protest the privations and troubles of a field anthropologist. Later he also accepted cheerfully the inevitable difficulties that attended the settling in of himself and his family in Canberra with all the shortages of a University in the making. When on leave in England in 1955, he was to lecture before an anthropological group at the University of Cambridge. It was winter and the ground was icy. He slipped and injured his arm, cracking a bone. Uncomplainingly, though clearly in pain, he went on and delivered the lecture and only afterwards had his arm attended to by a doctor. When in Canberra he took an active part in the life of the community as well as of the University. He was for a time President of the Canberra Arts Council and took a leading share in organizing chamber music concerts. He also enjoyed his participation in the Canberra Repertory Society where, among other things, he took the part of Mephistopheles in a play reading of Goethe’s “Faust.”

His loss will be deeply felt not only by his colleagues and friends in anthropology, but by a much wider circle of social scientists.

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