

Comments On "The Renaissance Foundations Of Anthropology"

[originally published in *American Anthropologist*, 68:215-220, 1966]

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The interesting paper by John H. Rowe, "The Renaissance Foundations of Anthropology" (AA 67: 21-20, 1965) adds important details to our knowledge of the protohistory of anthropology, and is a valuable supplement to Margaret Hodgen's recent work, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1964). However, there are two main points of criticism I wish to make of Dr. Rowe's interpretation. The first concerns his identification of "the history of anthropology" with European history and scholarship. The second concerns Dr. Rowe's emphasis on cultural diversity as the core of anthropology, and the difference between this and a conception rooted in the history of ideas, with emphasis on theory rather than description. A related point concerns his view of Renaissance--Medieval relationships.

With respect to the first point, the conception of anthropology and social science in general as a distinctive European invention neglects the substantial bodies of social theory and cultural analysis to be found in Islamic and Oriental thought. Among social scientists who happen to be familiar with these materials, there is the further assumption that they did not influence European developments, hence can be safely ignored in writing the history of social science. While scholarship on the connective tissue is incredibly poor, there is growing evidence that there may be more relationships than believed. The Oriental roots of Christianity are gradually coming to be known; and the interpenetration of Greek and Oriental ideas in the Near East, plus the Aristotelian foundation of Islamic philosophy and the contributions it made to medieval European thought, are emerging as historians turn their attention to the problem.* The difficulty is that clear connections are difficult to establish; the principal lines of transmission were unpublished, and the ideas communicated were part of an anonymous stream of "folk" ideas and concepts, turns of phrase, and the like. There is little evidence that

Islamic thought made any strong impact on European scholarship.

To illustrate the impressive development of "anthropological" ideas outside of publicized European channels I may cite the remarkable contributions of Islamic scholars of the 14th century. On the cultural diversity of the Muslim empire, the work of the traveller Ibn Batuta (Gibb 1958) is well known, but Al Muguaddisi (Newton 1926; pp. 96-98) is probably more outstanding as a scientific geographer and ethnographer. Al Jabarti (Ayalon 1960), a social historian, provides us with a social anthropological analysis of Mamluk society which contains clear distinctions between the normative and action levels. Ibn Khaldun is probably the best known, due to one complete translation of his major work (Rosenthal 1958) and an excellent contemporary analytical presentation of his theories (Mahdi 1957). Khaldun is the only scholar with a modern view of culture to antedate the 19th century; - there are some intimations in Vico for the early 18th century (Bergin & Fisch 1960, pp. xxiii, iii; 47), but they do not approach the clarity and modernity of Khaldun.

Khaldun had a word for culture; he recognized and theorized about cultural differences; he distinguished culture from society and primitive culture from civilization; and had a clear theory of the roots of culture in human biological needs and engagement with the environment. While most of his theory is founded on Aristotelian principles of original nature, these play the same role in the subsequent exposition of his thought that, say, Marxist principles might play in contemporary welfare-state economic theory.

Of equal relevance are the circumstances out of which Khaldun's theory emerged. He lived most of his life as a kind of 14th century Harry Hopkins- an intellectual attached to rulers of various sections of the western Muslim empire. He had observed the disparity between Islamic orthodoxy and the social realities of the empire, and became deeply critical of the failure of Islamic history to portray this disparity, and to present reasons for the cultural differences existing between the many peoples of the

* For a recent, popular, and entertaining treatment, see Parkinson 1963.

empire. He developed a theory of what he called, in direct translation, "the science of culture" as the explanatory element in historical scholarship; that is, while history could render an account of events in chronological order, the science of culture was needed to explain the causal connections between these events and their true nature. This objective led him, as already noted, to an exposition of a theory of culture with both historical and functional orientations.

This Islamic efflorescence of cultural theory and descriptive ethnography precedes the anthropological concerns of the Renaissance by one to two centuries -although the marginal interest of Westerners in exotic peoples, customs and the nature of man and his works is unbroken from classical times through the Middle Ages. Penniman cites links between Europe and Islamic scholarship via Christian students at Cordoba, and this has been fairly well demonstrated (Penniman 1952, p. 38). However, on the evidence, it is clear these connections were not close enough to impart the full weight of Islamic scholarship. Even so, one must avoid ethnocentric views in writing about the history of anthropology lest these views obscure the recognition of other valid developments. Hodgen (eleven references - see her index) castigates the Renaissance and Enlightenment protoanthropologists for their excessive "Europocentrism" (although she herself does not inquire into Oriental and Middle Eastern developments).

Rowe's topical conception of the history of anthropology as concern for human or cultural differences leads him to assert the existence of a hiatus between Classical interests and those of the Renaissance. Now, it is true that Medieval travel and geography represent a comedown from the best classical items. However, Hodgen shows that in another "anthropological" sense, this hiatus is not so wide. Hodgen (and also Lovejoy 1935) demonstrate that the concepts of culture and of human difference and similarity, and of the logical devices used to make comparisons, can be traced back from 19th century scholarship, through the 18th century, the Enlightenment and the Renaissance, into Medieval writers, and so on into classical antiquity. There is simply no break (and little development) in such devices as the method of negative comparison ("the Scythians lack a priesthood"; *i.e.*, we Europeans, Romans, Greeks, *et. al.*, have priests); the method of identity ("the Hebrews were patrilineal, and so

are the Indians, hence the Indians are related to the Hebrews"); the hierarchies of being (*vide* the "superorganic" in the 20th century); the method of conjectural history (called "evolutionism" in the 19th century); the ideas of degeneration and the Golden Age; the categories of cultural description; and others.

Rowe's emphasis on a topical rather than an ideational conception of anthropology also results in an underrating of a number of writers: his treatment of the medieval travellers, like Rubruck, Carpini, and the Polos (he does not mention di Conti, one of the briefest but most interesting) is a case in point. He states that their "influence ... was not proportional to the value of the information they contained" (p. 7), but this is only one aspect of their role. These writers were a transmission belt between the Classical period and the Renaissance in that they analyzed and compared "cultures" in the terms used by the writers in both periods. These ideas, right down to the 19th century, were simply received techniques of analysis, "givens" in the stream of thought or attempts to understand human diversity. Where "anthropology" begins is really a matter of open choice: to pick the Renaissance is to ignore the long history of ideas and logics received and used by Renaissance scholars.

Or, consider Rowe's treatment of Pliny. He notes for Book VII only the absence of adequate cultural comparison and the recitation of tales of monsters. This is quite correct. However, the first three pages of Pliny's Book VII, (Rackham 1938, Vol. 2, pp. 507-513) contain the outline of a theory of man-in-general which is quite acceptable modern general anthropology: alone among the animals, man has "borrowed resources," *i.e.*, cultural apparatus to protect himself against the environment; has a prolonged infancy and education; walks erect; has articulate emotions and cognitive thought; and above all, preys on his own kind. Pliny also sees "manners and customs" as incredibly numerous - too numerous to count; *i.e.*, he is well aware of cultural diversity. True - he fails to analyze it, but he is aware of it, and deserves a place in the history of anthropological thought for having recognized it. Every idea as well as every wrong fact in Pliny descended through Medieval writings into the Enlightenment, with occasional echoes in the 19th century.

Rowe quite fairly informs us of his fundamental historical bias: his "Burkhardtian" interpretation of the Renaissance as a period of

genuine renewal, of new ideas and departures.* All well and good, but in fact the accumulation of materials on non-Western peoples as a result of the labors of traders and explorers probably is as responsible as any fresh intellectual approach. Nevertheless, something had to be done with all this material. How much was done? Rowe cites a number of outstanding scholars, but behind them - as Hodgen shows most convincingly - were hosts of writers who did precisely no more than the Medieval and the less skilled Classical writers had done (mainly, that is, to copy Pliny and not Herodotus). In many respects, Rowe's assertion of a new perspective on man in the Renaissance is correct, but he overdoes the case for Renaissance anthropology as the science of cultural diversity.

Rowe singles out Peter Martyr for special attention, as an example of the ethnographic skills of the Renaissance writers. Martyr played a role in the 15th and 16th centuries at the Mediterranean courts not unlike that of Ibn Khaldun in the Muslim principalities of the 14th: he was a scholar and political advisor working under the patronage of nobility and the Church. His principal work, *De Orbe Novo* (MacNutt 1912), is a compilation of the travel accounts and official reports of the Italian and Spanish explorers, beginning with Columbus. These colorful accounts provide the ethnographic data without comment, and repeat the exaggerations and old wives' tales along with the ethnography. Comparisons are made on the basis of the logical devices familiar to every writer on exotic "nations" since Pliny; there is no attempt to understand the native cultures in their own terms. Moreover [*sic*], as is typical of all writers of the period, there is no evaluation of the accuracy of the reports, nor any attempt to separate fact from fiction (in contrast to Herodotus, who generally weighed his sources, or even Ibn Batuta, who usually segregated "anecdotes" from hearsay). There is some stirring of conscience on the issue of relativism, but no real break with Europocentrism.

P. Martyr D' Anghera stands as a man with Medieval or even late Classical views of scholarship who simply had a great deal of fresh material with which to work. Something had to be done with these data, and something was; though in terms of the methodological rigor we associate with scientific ethnology, it was a modest effort indeed. At that, Martyr is better

than the vast majority of Renaissance and Enlightenment travel and custom anthologies: for the few Martyrs and Las Casas', there were a dozen Boemus' and Muensters, who simply echo late Classical and Medieval fantasies.

In the entire period of the Renaissance and early Enlightenment, there are, to my knowledge, only three pieces of writing which stand out with something of the conceptual perspective required for a true anthropological science. The first is Montaigne's single essay, "On Cannibals"; the other two are the writings of Louis Le Roy (Becker 1896) and Jean Bodin (Reynolds 1945). Each of these writers offered one or two insights which anticipate modern developments, although each "spoiled" his recommendation by traditionalistic views. Thus, Montaigne disavowed the technique of warmed-over presentations of Classical *fabuli* and hearsay, and pleaded for naturalistic description - but he decided in favor of the misleading method of negative comparison. Le Roy pointed out the difference between vertical transmission (social heritage) and horizontal (diffusion) - but then embarked on a reactionary defense of vertical transmission since diffusion was "bad," having broken up the original Biblical unity of man. Bodin pled for objective data collection, and rejected value judgments as guides to cultural analysis - but confused biology and behavior with culture and technology in his anthropogeographic characterizations, and made numerous compromises with Biblical orthodoxy.

In spite of these and other defects - or naivetes, as compared to the best of the Islamic scholars - these two writers do anticipate some of the methodological requirements of a scientific ethnology. That none of the Renaissance collectors of customs and travel accounts paid any attention whatsoever to them is to be regretted, but on the other hand is understandable in light of the gaps in scholarly communication and even more important, the need to justify Christian or Biblical dogma. In broad terms, the failure of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the 18th century to produce a social science comparable even to the Islamic must be laid at the door of Biblical authoritarianism. The Bible contained detailed descriptions of "primitive" tribes, and its received authority resulted in centuries of effort to perceive exotic peoples as somehow related to their Biblical ancestors. The dissenters were few, and their own lack of historical data often vitiated their efforts to understand cultures in other than the most naive terms.

* For a selection of pros and cons on this issue, see Dannenfeldt 1958.

It is not until the 19th century that European ethnology emerges as a field of study with the avowed effort of understanding non-European cultures in their own terms. The vast bulk of the literature previous to that century may add data, but does not provide any significant advance over Medieval modes of analysis and understanding. There are flashes of theoretical insights in Herodotus, in Pliny, in Islamic writings, and in Renaissance materials, but none of this is sufficient to establish the date of the beginning of anthropology as a science. Before the 19th century, one might as well begin the history of the discipline with Herodotus as with Martyr .

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Further Notes On The Renaissance And Anthropology: A Reply To Bennett

[originally published in *American Anthropologist*, 68:220-222, 1966]

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In his comments on my paper, "The Renaissance foundations of anthropology," Dr. John W. Bennett raises some interesting questions. Some of them derive from misinterpretations of what I said, but this fact makes them no less worthy of brief discussion.

The anthropological significance of an interest in differences among men would have been clearer if I had started out from a definition of anthropology. I define anthropology as follows: *Anthropology is the study of man and of human behavior in the perspective of physical and cultural differences.* To make this definition fully intelligible, a definition of culture should be added. *Culture is customary behavior.*

The definition of anthropology just given is the broadest one which still recognizes a distinction between anthropology and other disciplines concerned with man and aspects of his behavior. The mention of differences carries no implication that similarities are unimportant; the fact is that it is the existence of differences which makes similarities significant. If there were no differences among men, similarities would be meaningless.

A recognition that there are differences among men and that these differences are significant, is, I maintain, the distinctive feature of anthropology; without it we may have social philosophy, natural theology, speculation about origins, and all sorts of other intellectual currents which have influenced anthropology or become a part of it, but we do not have anthropology.

In arguing that the effective beginning of the anthropological perspective is to be sought in the Renaissance movement, I had no intention of implying that all ideas which have played a part in the history of anthropology had their origin there. On the one hand, the Renaissance program was a program of learning from the ancients, and all the ideas in ancient literature which could be fitted into the new perspective on man, "primitivism," environmental determinism, cultural categories, and many more, were eagerly adopted. On the other hand, there was also a massive survival of Mediaeval ideas which influenced later anthropological thought, the idea of the savage being a particularly important one.

Thought about human origins continued to be deeply affected by Christian dogma regarding the Deluge and the peopling of the world by the descendants of Noah. All this is an important part of the history of anthropology but falls outside of the scope of the particular paper I was writing.

Understanding of the significance of the Renaissance has been severely handicapped by the tendency of many historians to "periodize" the continuum of events in Europe in general and speak of a "Renaissance period." Dr. Bennett is mistaken in attributing this procedure to me. The Renaissance should be viewed, not as a period with certain general characteristics, but as an intellectual movement which affected different parts of Europe at different times and some people more than others. It was hostile to certain Mediaeval ideas but not to all, so that the break with what went before was naturally a very partial one.

On the other hand, the position that the Renaissance did not introduce a new outlook or affect the development of science in any major way is no longer tenable. Ample grounds for its rejection have been provided by Erwin Panofsky and George Sarton, both of whom are also well known for their contributions to Mediaeval studies. Panofsky's work is cited in my paper; of Sarton's writings on Renaissance science the interested reader should consult especially the essay "The quest for truth: scientific progress during the Renaissance," in *The Renaissance; six essays*, pp. 55-76 (Harper Torchbooks, the Academy Library, TB 1084, New York, 1962), and *The appreciation of ancient and Mediaeval science during the Renaissance (1450-1600)*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1955.

Dr. Bennett thinks that "the simple accumulation of travel materials on non-western peoples probably is as responsible as any fresh intellectual approach" for the development of anthropology. The point is that a "fresh intellectual approach" was required to produce an accumulation of travel materials on non-western peoples. Both in antiquity and in the Middle Ages Europeans had abundant contacts

with non-European peoples, but the volume of observations they reported was pitifully small and attracted little contemporary attention. What ethnographic information is there to show for the Mediaeval European contacts with Eskimos, Lapps, Turks, Caucasians, Berbers, and the peoples of the Niger, or for that matter, even the Arabs? Something of critical importance happened to European travel literature between Sir John Mandeville and Hans Staden.

Dr. Bennett emphasizes the anthropological interests of 14th century Islamic scholars. I am also aware of the quality of Islamic thought on anthropological problems and mentioned it in the paper under discussion (p. 6). Of course, if the Islamic anthropological tradition had influenced European thought at this time, this influence could provide an explanation for the awakening of European interest in foreign customs. I did some searching for such influence and could find no evidence for it. Dr. Bennett suggests that there was such influence but that it operated on some "folk" level which escaped documentation. This suggestion has no other basis than wishful thinking. It is not even plausible, since the 14th century is too late for the kind of transmission Dr. Bennett visualizes. The Renaissance

movement was beginning, and the founders of this movement were hostile to Islamic learning. By the time Ibn Khaldun wrote, Europe was not listening to Arabic voices.

The Renaissance tradition did not produce any very impressive anthropological reporting or comparison until about the middle of the 16th century, a period beyond the limits of the paper which started this discussion. Some of the 16th century developments are, however, dealt with in another paper of mine, "Ethnography and ethnology in the sixteenth century" (*Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers*, no.30, pp. 1-19, Berkeley, Spring, 1964). This paper was written after the one published in the *American Anthropologist* but appeared before it. The paper on the 16th century will be of interest to readers of this exchange, because it shows how the perspective of the 15th century was developed in the 16th into a substantial effort in ethnographic description and the beginnings of ethnological classification and comparison. The latter development was not the work of any of the writers cited by Dr. Bennett but of the Spanish scholar Jose de Acosta. The story is pertinent to the last three paragraphs of Dr. Bennett's comments.