Don’t Kill Your Ancestors! Jack Goody, Ernest Gellner and the Vortex of Decolonisation

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Abstract: *With debates about decolonising curricula and research practices in socio-cultural anthropology continuing vigorously, this paper argues for caution. The decolonisation movement is the culmination of appeals for rupture that devalue the contributions of those who worked within earlier paradigms. In Britain, the loose paradigm known as structural functionalism, which claimed the mantle of science on the basis of comparative methods, has long been discredited. Sometimes the critique is specific and personal (individual anthropologists are faulted for imperialist bias or the unfair appropriation of local knowledge). Sometimes the critique is oblique: the oeuvre of distinguished predecessors can be set to one side because, according to the standards of the 2020s, they failed to address the injustices of the colonial era that formed them. This paper explores and rejects both types of critique with respect to Jack Goody and Ernest Gellner, major figures in the Cambridge department of social anthropology in the last century who began their careers in the colonial era. It is argued with reference to their biographies, substantive contributions, and epistemologies that both upheld conventions of a cumulative science to which the discipline might one day return. Both Goody and Gellner wanted to push social anthropology beyond the ethnographic documentation of cultural diversity in the direction of a comparative historical social science. This agenda for the discipline has been thwarted by the dominance of culturalist approaches that pay little heed to history and depend on weighty but transient theoretical frames, all against the backdrop of decolonial handwringing.*

Keywords: *Cambridge; comparison; decolonisation; Ernest Gellner; Jack Goody; positivism; structural functionalism*

> *'… it is an impoverished field that sees itself as having to discard its predecessors at each generation instead of building critically on their achievements …' (Goody 1995: 144–45)*

Introduction

Debates about the relationship between social anthropology and colonialism have reached a new peak in recent years with the intensification of calls to decolonise the discipline itself. They have received impetus from the impact of postcolonial studies in other fields, though scrutiny of the relationship between anthropology and colonialism dates back to the 1960s (Gough 1968). The editor of a seminal collection devoted to the British school of social anthropology did not confirm the blanket accusation 'handmaiden of imperialism' (Asad 1973). Even when their funding and access depended on colonial authorities, few anthropologists shared the values of the powerholders and worked to serve their interests; some became actively engaged on behalf of the peoples they studied (see Foks 2023). This has not prevented historians of the discipline from detecting deep historical layers of imperialism in the questions pursued and tacit assumptions (Kuklick 1991).

In recent years, special issues and forums have presented a variety of viewpoints (*Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 2018; *American Ethnologist* 2023). There is widespread agreement nowadays that foreign anthropologists have no privileged right of access to their chosen field and should be held to account by the people with whom they work (Smith 1999). The thrust of 'anti/de/postcolonial critique' has been to shift the vortex away from attacks on particular 'canonical' authors towards a more general and fundamental unsettling of hierarchies of knowledge and calls for 'epistemic justice' (Mogstad and Tse 2018). In a provocative contribution, the president of the American Anthropological Association invited his colleagues to imagine how different the history of their discipline would have been in a world free of colonial domination (Gupta and Stoolman 2022). This has drawn sharp criticism from scholars who view such exercises as a slur on the integrity of predecessors (Lewis 2025).

While the debates have been most heated in the United States, this paper focuses on the British school of social anthropology that traces its roots and institutional consolidation to Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown in the inter-war decades of the last century (Kuper 2015). The recognition enjoyed by this school reflects a successful paradigm shift, a veritable 'slaying of the ancestors' (Gellner 1995). In essence, evolutionism ('conjectural history' in the style of James Frazer) was discarded in favour of fieldwork-based sociological accounts of how societies functioned in the present. The deeper ambition, beyond the ethnography,

was to deploy comparative methods in the pursuit of a more structural 'natural science of society' (Radcliffe-Brown 1957).

Malinowski died in 1942 and Radcliffe-Brown in 1955. The British empire in which they practised their craft crumbled shortly afterwards. It took a little longer before the loose paradigm of structural functionalism experienced the same fate as the evolutionism of Frazer. By the 1980s, the demise of the 'scientistic' paradigms was acknowledged throughout the Anglophone world. The volume which epitomised the shift was titled *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Contributors reflected the postmodern and postcolonial trends that were gathering strength in both the humanities and the social sciences. Differences between social anthropology in Britain (and its Commonwealth) and cultural anthropology in North America dwindled into insignificance. The new hallmark of the discipline was cultural critique (Marcus and Fischer 1986). The object of enquiry had of necessity been shifting, with the gradual disappearance of remote, non-literate, 'tribal' societies of the kind studied by Malinowski. Instead, anthropologists began to research 'peasants' in rural Europe and elsewhere; some chose to investigate diverse groups within their own societies, others transnational networks or NGOs. Multi-sited fieldwork has long become normal and the variety knows no limits. Journal papers in recent decades engage in erudite fashion with the theories and concepts currently in vogue across the humanities and social sciences, many of which prove ephemeral. Some academic anthropologists prefer to see themselves as writers or philosophers. Students' exposure to anthropological predecessors is confined to critical appraisals in courses on the history of anthropology. These courses are now strongly impacted by the ongoing campaigns to decolonise the discipline, which I view as a radicalisation of the critique that began in the 1960s.

In Britain, the rupture with the structural functionalist synthesis that emerged in the closing years of empire can be equated with the Malinowskian 'revolution' of the 1920s (Jarvie 1964). Few of those who teach and do research in social anthropology in the 2020s have any direct experience of the paradigm that was displaced in the 1980s. In this paper I focus on two pivotal scholars of the British school who held the William Wyse chair in social anthropology at Cambridge University between 1973 and 1993.[1] When Jack Goody (1919–2015) and Ernest

[1] Disclosure: Jack Goody was the supervisor of my doctoral research in the 1970s and Ernest Gellner my head of department when I was a junior lecturer in the 1980s. I was on friendly terms with them both. There was little if any hierarchy in our routine interaction. Both were extraordinarily hospitable and generous to me and my young family. Some strands of this paper derive from these personal relationships in the last century, and also from

Gellner (1925–1995) began their careers, European colonial empires had not yet disintegrated. Both men started out in different disciplines and had their undergraduate studies interrupted by military service during the Second World War. Both were witnesses to the demise of colonial regimes in their most important field research, which they undertook in non-literate communities remote from central power. I argue that both Goody and Gellner adhered to the positivist premises of the paradigm known as structural functionalism. At the same time, both sought to transcend that paradigm by restoring a historical dimension. Their positioning became explicit in their later publications, when the mainstream shifted in a quite different direction.

Both Goody and Gellner were prolific writers. I shall concentrate on selected late contributions, including articles in the 1992 inaugural issue of the journal of the European Association of Social Anthropologists. EASA was intended by its founders to counter the growing dominance of postmodern approaches in North America (Kuper 2024). Goody and Gellner were supportive of the proposed orientation. Despite significant differences between them, in their concern to address larger questions of historical and evolutionary change they had more in common with each other than with their professorial predecessors (Meyer Fortes and Edmund Leach) and successors (Marilyn Strathern and Caroline Humphrey). In Cambridge as elsewhere, this was a moment of transition. By the 1980s, specialists in 'tribal' societies were already a minority in the department. The future of the discipline was wide open and a comparative historical social science was one of the possibilities. Some four decades later, in the heated climate of decolonisation, my impression is that Goody and Gellner have become unfashionable on both sides of the Atlantic and even within Cambridge. I argue that both should remain in our curricula, as ancestors whose voices still deserve to be heard. The discipline did not evolve as they would have wished and their main concerns and methods are no longer widely shared; but rather than dismiss Goody and Gellner with the banner of decolonisation, I suggest that their agendas could inspire renewal.

Jack Goody (1919–2015)

> *'Of all the things that I have worked on in my academic life, the one that I am most proud of is the account of* Bagre *ceremonies among the LoDagaa of northern Ghana, especially the transcription and translation of the recitation that I have called The Myth of the Bagre.' (Goody 2003: 81)*

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my general participation in Cambridge academic life and informal contacts with many other local scholars.

Born in London and raised in St Albans, Hertfordshire, for his first degree Jack Goody studied English literature at St John’s College, Cambridge. His course was interrupted by six years in the British army. After taking a graduate diploma in social anthropology, he was briefly affiliated to the University of Oxford. Apart from this, he spent his entire academic career in Cambridge. His field research took place in Northern Ghana (then the Gold Coast) between 1950 and 1952 among the people he called the LoDagaa. He was William Wyse professor of social anthropology between 1973 and 1984 (for further biographical materials, see Goody 1995: chapter 8; Hann and Vermeulen 2024).

Goody’s fieldwork among acephalous, non-literate communities in Ghana earned him his doctorate and was the basis of his most celebrated monograph (Goody 1962 is a much-revised version of the dissertation approved in 1954). With his second wife Esther Newcomb Goody, he carried out intermittent field research among other groups in northern Ghana throughout the 1960s. Goody’s doctoral funding came from the Colonial Research Council and he was formally a government employee. German anthropologist Carola Lentz, who worked with the same communities from the late 1980s, has criticised her predecessor’s nomenclature for them and his failure to attend to their history, including emergent ethnic identifications (Lentz 2024). As Lentz herself acknowledges, some of these gaps may be explained by Goody’s particular research interests, which differed from hers.[2] But it is reasonable to maintain that at least some of them derived from the synchronic framework, the pursuit of social structure, and assumptions of order and equilibrium central to the paradigm of structural functionalism.[3]

The means by which Goody gained access to the secret recitations of the *Bagre* would not be countenanced by the ethics committees of the 2020s. Although invited to take part in these rituals, he was not a regular participant and did not have permission to record and commit the narratives to paper (see Goody 2003). In collaboration with indigenous informants over many years, Goody

2 Lentz’s efforts to engage in a dialogue with her predecessor were rebuffed (personal communication). It is nonetheless likely that Goody would have applauded her work as an example of what he meant by cumulative knowledge, not only with regard to the local setting as it has changed through time but also with regard to theoretical approaches.

3 This designation is widely used but hard to pin down. It is little used by most of the anthropologists to whom it is conventionally applied, including Jack Goody and Ernest Gellner. I use it to denote the paradigm in which the synchronic functionalist approach of Bronislaw Malinowski, based on intensive field research using local languages, is modified by more analytical, sociological concerns with social structure. The key figure in the emergence of this synthesis in the late colonial era was A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. For further discussion by a Cambridge ‘insider’ trained in this conflation, see Abrahams (2018).

went on to transcribe and publish English and French translations of performances now widely recognised as outstanding examples of oral literature on the African continent. Concentrating on what the actors themselves said, Goody's work went against the grain of the dominant academic schools of the era (he was more sympathetic to James Frazer than to Malinowskian functionalism or Lévi-Straussian structuralism). The upshot was a better understanding of how such ritualised narratives are composed and how they change, with far-reaching implications for theorising the impact of literacy on human memory and cognition (Goody 1977). This contribution to the advancement of anthropological science is viewed by modern descendants of the LoDagaa not as colonial appropriation but as a valuable contribution to their own heritage. Nothing that Goody did or wrote justifies tarring him with the brush of colonial agent. He joined the party of Kwame Nkrumah when still in the field and was enthusiastic about independence. He helped to train young Ghanaians in their new educational institutions. Generations later, he is remembered affectionately and respected by cultural activists and by ordinary descendants of the people he studied. He never lost his ability to communicate fluently in the vernacular (Lobnibe 2018).

Although much of Goody's early work was devoted to quintessentially anthropological topics in the field of kinship, he published some of his most important papers in the *British Journal of Sociology*. He followed Radcliffe-Brown in defining anthropology as comparative sociology. Years later, when other anthropologists in the British Academy fissioned to renew an old alliance with geographers, Goody opted to remain with the sociologists. His commitment to the unity of these disciplines led him to call in the 1960s for a 'decolonization of the social sciences', first in a short article in *New Society*, and later in more scholarly form (Goody 1966, 1969).[4] Inside Cambridge University, he questioned social anthropology's longstanding faculty affiliation with archaeology and biological anthropology and pushed for integration into new programmes connecting sociology, politics, and social psychology.[5]

4 I thank Han Vermeulen for drawing my attention to these publications.

5 This rapprochement was all the more attractive in view of the fact that the inaugural professor of sociology in Cambridge was a contemporary of Goody, John Barnes, who had worked as an anthropologist in southern Africa. However, relations cooled following the appointment of Anthony Giddens as Barnes' successor and Gellner as successor to Goody. Closer administrative and intellectual integration was attempted in the new century and progress has been made. However, in the 2020s the department of social anthropology still functions with a high degree of autonomy from sociology and the other social sciences.

Ernest Gellner (1925–1995)

> *'Atonement for the sins of domination is best displayed by laying bare one's soul, and the soul had better be a complex and tormented one, externalizing itself in correspondingly tortured prose. The impoverished masses of the Third World may find consolation in the thought that their erstwhile oppressors are now suffering the agonies of obscurity of style.' (Gellner 1995: 5)*

Born in Paris and raised in Prague, Ernest Gellner arrived in England as a refugee in 1939. He attended grammar school in St Albans (a less prestigious institution than the one attended by Goody a few years earlier). His undergraduate studies in Oxford were interrupted by military service in the 1st Czechoslovak Armoured Brigade. After graduation, Gellner taught philosophy in Edinburgh and then at the London School of Economics, where he was formally affiliated to the Department of Sociology. He was by nature combative, as critical of most of his social science colleagues at the LSE as he had been earlier of the philosophers who taught him at Oxford. At some point during the 1950s, following several climbing expeditions to the Atlas Mountains, he converted to social anthropology, completing a doctorate in that discipline in 1961. Gellner succeeded Goody as William Wyse professor in Cambridge in 1984. Retiring definitively from Cambridge in 1993, he continued to work for the Central European University in Prague until his death in 1995 (see Hall 2011 for the definitive biography).

Gellner's field research in Morocco began almost accidentally in the course of his climbing expeditions. He had no formal education in social anthropology but expressed his informal debts to LSE colleagues (Raymond Firth and Paul Stirling), as well as to Edward Evans-Pritchard in Oxford. Though he did not learn Arabic, he became fluent in Berber, the language spoken in the mountain villages he investigated. His particular concern was with the role of religious specialists ('saints') as a structural element in the mediation of social conflict between the 'lay tribes'. The dissertation (later published as Gellner 1969) broke new ground. Functionality in the ethnographic present was connected to long-term history in a way that was unusual in the structural functionalist paradigm. Gellner never undertook further fieldwork, but proceeded instead to elaborate a cyclical model of Islamic government, inspired primarily by the writings of Ibn Khaldun (Gellner 1981). While the ethnography was respected as an elegant product of the British school, Gellner's speculative application of segmentation theory and his general model generated much controversy and have few defenders today.[6]

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6 Munson (1993) offers a sharp critique based on ethnographic details. After summarising

During the years of Gellner's field research, French colonial rule in Morocco (and other parts of the Maghreb) was crumbling. Close-up observation of the birth of the independent state influenced Gellner's later work on nationalism (Franzinetti 2022: 223). Gellner retained strong attachments to the country. He was well aware that independence did not satisfy the aspirations of all citizens of the new state: Berber cultural activists are familiar with Gellner's work and continue to find it valuable for its documentation of their heritage.[7] His influential model of the nation-state was predicated on the 'congruence' of polity and culture (Gellner 1983). In later life, realising that most states remained intractably plural, he offered a mischievous solution to the problems faced by the minorities. Countering the slogan of decolonisation (already very much in the air thanks to the work of Edward Said and other postcolonial theorists to whom he was unsympathetic), Gellner proposed to 'Colonise simply everybody – i.e. deprive their political units of sovereignty – whilst allowing them absolute cultural freedom of expression …. It is obvious that this is our only hope' (Gellner 1998: 144).[8] By the time he wrote these lines (as the epigraph above suggests), Gellner was sharply critical of the most influential theoretical currents in anthropology and of the self-indulgent obscurity he detected in much ethnographic writing.

Social anthropology as comparative global history

> *'If the opening to history is to result in broader perspectives and conceptual innovations, the most obvious way to go is comparative analysis.' (Árnason 2025: 16)*

So far I have introduced my protagonists and argued that, though they began their careers in the colonial era, both had deep respect for the societies they studied and adopted progressive stances towards independence movements. In this section I look more closely at their substantive contributions to social anthropology. While remaining rooted in structural functionalism, Goody and Gellner practised a global social science that moved social anthropology closer to materialist

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the debates, John Hall concludes that the Gellnerian model 'essentializes modern Islam' (2011: 305). Some critics are equally dismissive for the past.

7 Author's conversation with a Berber tour guide at Mount Toubkal, Morocco, August 2005.

8 This stance may have been prompted by the violence that broke out in the early 1990s in the Western Balkans. Needless to say, proponents of the decolonisation of anthropology would read such statements as a misunderstanding of anti/de/post-colonial critique. Some social anthropologists, including Goody, might argue that to use the concept of culture in this way risks reification.

historical sociology. Fieldwork was retained as the rite of passage for the novice and chief distinguishing feature of social anthropology, but the mature scholar was expected to pursue questions of interdisciplinary significance involving the use of comparative methods.

When invited to contribute an article to the first issue of *Social Anthropology*, the journal of the new professional association EASA, Goody chose to tackle the concept of culture (Goody 1992). He questioned whether making culture a focus of study distinct from social structure was even possible. The separation of the two was attributed to a ‘carve-up’ instigated by the sociologist Talcott Parsons, with deleterious consequences for anthropology in the United States (see also Kuper 1999). From Goody’s British perspective, ‘… the cultural is the social viewed from another perspective, not a distinct analytic entity’ (1993: 30). The former student of English literature rejected the Geertzian invitation to read culture as text. Symbols and ritual performances always have material dimensions. They must be integrated into the study of human interaction; to isolate them from social action is to introduce an idealist bias. Goody proceeds to discuss the material differentiation characteristic of oral cultures, which increases greatly with literacy. Written records allow historians to distinguish popular culture from elite forms, and to document how cultural unity can be consolidated from the top down (e.g. the examination systems of imperial China). But Goody warns against using culture to designate any putatively homogenous group, whether as small as a village or as large as a nation-state (1992: 19). The proliferation of internal ‘sub-cultures’ and group-specific affinities across external cultural boundaries together vitiate any general theory of culture and cultural change. The way forward is to develop theory at an intermediate level by identifying specific boundaries of domain and social class. Goody attempted precisely this in his magisterial study of the culture of flowers, completed contemporaneously with his *Social Anthropology* paper (Goody 1993).

A few years later, now well into his seventies, Goody turned for the first time to the history of anthropology (Goody 1995). In reviewing the work of the British school in Africa, he was highly critical of the work of Henrika Kuklick (1991; Goody 1995: Appendix 2). The American historian had linked the agenda of British anthropological research to ‘folk’ political ideas in the homeland, but Goody objected to this and to other generalisations by Kuklick. He emphasised instead the diversity of the anthropologists who worked in Britain’s African colonies, both in terms of personality and politics. Many of them were not British at all, and none fitted the ‘handmaiden of imperialism’ stereotype. Moreover, their very real accomplishments were often funded with grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, certainly not awarded to promote British imperial interests.

In the same volume (1995: chapter 9), Goody provides retrospective insight into his epistemological principles, previously left implicit. He begins by recalling a paper by Clifford Geertz on 'religion as a cultural system' (Geertz 1966). Goody had served as discussant for this paper when it was first presented at a 1963 conference in which key figures from the United States were invited to exchange views with their colleagues in the Association of Social Anthropologists of Britain and the Commonwealth. He remained as critical of the Geertzian approach in the 1990s as he had been 30 years before. A focus on symbols and the webs of meaning shared by members of a culture was, in Goody's opinion, a poor alternative to the rigorous testing of hypotheses within the 'tight' paradigms developed by the structural functionalists. When the same topics were pursued in a wide range of contexts, some of the results might strike Geertz as repetitive, perhaps even boring. But Goody stressed the dividends of coordinated efforts by an intellectual community that was still very small at this time. The 'cultural studies' alternative proposed by Geertz would generate an abundance of case studies, but this would contribute nothing to comparative agendas and generate only 'solipsistic withdrawal into culture-specific studies and personalized accounts' (Goody 1995: 157). Moreover, the Geertzian approach risked serious misrepresentation if the investigator found herself captivated by just a few articulate interlocutors (perhaps only one) and failed to appreciate the complexity of explicit and implicit meanings in the wider population. The key to success was therefore 'comparative or cumulative work' (1995: 152) on the basis of empirical data to test hypotheses, backed up by 'only as much theory as necessary' (1995: 156). The reliability of the analysis was assured by long-term immersion in a community in the Malinowskian tradition and a high-level of linguistic competence.

Having worked with African materials, primarily concerning property, kinship, and literacy, in the first half of his career, by the 1990s Goody had shifted to world history (exemplified by the above-mentioned study of flowers). When still focused on Ghana, he had drawn meticulous comparisons and contrasts between neighbouring LoDagaa communities. But even before his appointment to the William Wyse chair in 1973, his units of comparison had become much larger. In a first step, sub-Saharan African societies practising hoe agriculture were compared and contrasted with Eurasian societies that used the plough. One demonstration of this contrast was a co-authored study of bridewealth and dowry (Goody and Tambiah 1973). The fact that bridewealth could also be found in some Eurasian societies did not invalidate the structural implications of Goody's model, which linked the 'vertical' transmission of property to endow the next generation (including daughters) with more advanced technology and eventually with changes in the kinship system and increased productivity. He supported

his analysis with reference to the statistical patterns thrown up globally by the Human Relations Area Files (Goody 1976). With this work, complementing his research into the transformations wrought by literacy, Goody stepped far outside the comfort zone of structural functionalism.

In a second step, Goody wrote several books (some rather polemical) attacking Eurocentric scholarship in the social sciences and history. Africa fades from view in the final phase of his work, in which the temporal frame antedates the European colonial empires by millennia. Comparisons remain important but the principal units are now Europe and China. The argument is that 'modernity' cannot be specified in terms of transformations originating in recent centuries at the western end of the Eurasian landmass. Rather, modernity is a 'moving target' that emerges unevenly across the landmass, oscillating between east and west due to 'alternating leadership' ever since the urban revolution of the Bronze Age (Goody 2010). The case is persuasive. Goody's argument owes more to voracious reading in economic and cultural history than to ethnographic monographs. But his late work can nonetheless be read as consistent with the paradigm of the structural functionalists and his call in the mid-1960s to decolonise the social sciences.

Whereas Goody started out in English literature, Ernest Gellner was trained and employed for years as a philosopher. He was certainly interested in the epistemological foundations of the British school of which he became an informal member while working at the LSE in the 1950s. The empiricist Gellner was impressed by Bronislaw Malinowski's displacement of the evolutionist intellectualism of James Frazer with functionalist analysis based on long-term fieldwork. On the surface, Malinowski was deferential, even obsequious, towards his predecessor. In reality, however, 'As the paradigmatic anthropologist, Frazer was killed and replaced in the inter-war period' (Gellner 1995: 103). Like Jack Goody, Gellner found much to admire in Frazer. Unlike his Cambridge predecessor, who emphasised symmetries and connections across Eurasia, Gellner believed in a 'European miracle'. It was Britain's industrial revolution, together with scientific progress in the West generally, that brought humanity to its modern condition. In other respects, however, especially concerning the significance of literacy, Gellner's schema of world history built on the work of Goody (Gellner 1988).

Given his background, it is unsurprising that Gellner paid close attention to the philosophy of the social sciences. Whereas Goody offered a retrospective defence of positivist rigor at the level of methodology, Gellner was more interested in epistemology, in positivism as a 'conceptual package' for the social sciences (1985: 67). Neither required newcomers to anthropology to undergo intensive training in social science methodology or philosophy. Gellner's stance was consistent with his attack on ordinary language philosophy (Gellner 1959),

which targeted the ‘relativism’ of the later Wittgenstein. That first book earned Gellner the reputation of *enfant terrible* among British philosophers; he was in effect expelled from that community. In later work, he contrasted the classical positivism of Auguste Comte, based on critical empirical analysis, with the historicist philosophy of Hegel, which did not permit validation by rational criteria. Gellner concluded that ‘in the end, the positivists are right. For Hegelian reasons’ (1985: 67). By this he meant that the direction in which world history was moving was determined by the power of science and technology, which rested in turn on the culture-transcending truths of the empiricist-positivist package. Gellner argued that researchers of human society, including social anthropologists, should follow the same principles. As with Jack Goody, fieldwork was the key method for grasping the native point of view. This *understanding* was indispensable, but anthropologists also had to *explain* phenomena and pursue larger questions beyond the ken of the locals. Gellner shared Goody’s view that the discipline needed to move beyond exquisite ethnographic case studies; he also shared Goody’s reluctance to demarcate a realm called culture that was not amenable to analytic investigation by empiricist-positivist methods.

The paper titled ‘Positivists versus Hegelians’ was first drafted in 1980 for a conference devoted to the philosophy of Karl Popper, hailed by Gellner as ‘the most sophisticated formulation of the empiricist/positivist tradition’ (1985: 67). Soon after Popper’s death, Gellner delivered a vitriolic personal attack on his mentor and the aridity of a philosophy which paid no attention to the insights of social science and history (published posthumously as Gellner 1996). Notwithstanding this final instance of Gellner’s gadfly contrarianism and several significant ‘wobbles’ (Hall 2011) in his last years, his basic commitment to science and the conceptual package of positivism (latterly in opposition to that of postmodernism) did not waver.

In the 1980s, the term decolonisation was not yet current. But Marxist influences lingered, and postmodern trends were gathering speed. Having previously attacked Marxism, Gellner now polemicised vigorously against the latter, which he saw as destructive of the social anthropology he had embraced in the 1950s and a threat to its future as a comparative science. Postmodern emphasis on textual representation was leading to new forms of idealism and ‘self-indulgent subjectivism’ (1992a: 6). The cultural relativism of Clifford Geertz had opened the gates to a truly dangerous flood in the following generation, when readers learned more about the hyper-reflexive author than about the people studied and their social organisation.

In his plenary lecture to the first conference of EASA in 1990, Gellner laid out these worries with his usual clarity. One of the reasons for inviting him on

this occasion was presumably the fact that the holder of the prestigious chair in Cambridge had pan-European interests, partly deriving from his biography, and evident in his many publications on nationalism and on communism as an ideocracy. Gellner opened by playfully presenting the history of Europe in terms of two momentous divisions. The north-south divide occasioned by the Reformation led the former to consolidate its cognitive superiority in the course of the Enlightenment. Following the failure of the French revolution, Marxism was interpreted by Gellner as a second valiant attempt to rule on the basis of reason. The end of the east-west division (this lecture was delivered in September 1990) offered a unique opportunity for the anthropologists of the continent to unite. Gellner reprised his argument that Bronislaw Malinowski had synthesised the collectivist *Geist* of romantic Hegelianism with the individualist empiricism of positivist 'Machismo' (his coded reference for the positivism of Ernst Mach).

On the subject of decolonisation, the polemical temperature could hardly have been higher. Gellner identified a link between 'the expiation of European colonial guilt' (1992a: 5) and relativist ethnographic reporting:

> '… we are not entitled to deny blatant facts, even if it were the case that this is a precondition of saving Bongo-Bongo from despair or humiliation. But in fact, it is not anything of the kind. On the contrary, inventing an absurd philosophy in the interests of pleasing the natives of Bongo-Bongo is, in reality, an insulting, offensive act of condescension. We do not lie or commit self-deception on behalf of those whom we respect.' (Gellner 1992a: 6)

The insidious long-term enemies were the relativists, who (according to Gellner) were in denial of scientific truths. One wonders what the Amazonianist Philippe Descola made of these remarks when listening to them in the audience at Coimbra (Descola was a member of the first EASA executive committee). Did Gellner really mean to dismiss the Parisian scholar's attempts to grasp Amerindian life-worlds as 'an absurd philosophy'? With his language of 'blatant facts', Gellner's philosophical positivism comes across in this address as crude and aggressively ethnocentric.

But this would be a misunderstanding. Gellner's 'ontologisation of science' (Buchowski 2003: 45), exclusively located in the West, is undoubtedly overstated. But it does not imply a belittling of all the remote societies and cultures with which anthropologists have traditionally concerned themselves and continue to investigate in the present. Gellner's critique of relativism does not pertain to ethics; for him, scientific knowledge has universal validity but morality can be specific to a culture (1992b: 54; cf. Lukes 2008: 16). It is the 'affectation of

cognitive equality' that he rejects. For Gellner, cognition refers to the differentials of power inherent in inter-cultural encounters, in fact a central concern of the decolonisation agenda.

In place of idealist definitions of culture, both Gellner and Goody sought to develop new methods and heuristics for comparison, very different from those of the structural functionalists but holding on to a generalising scientific purpose. As noted above, Goody's doctoral research was constructed on a detailed comparison of two neighbouring communities in north-west Ghana. In later moves, he contrasted sub-Saharan Africa with Eurasia, before going on to trace East West comparisons within Eurasia. Ernest Gellner's doctoral research and later theorisation of Muslim society hinged on the structural comparison between the *ulema* of the towns and the tribesmen who lived in the countryside and periodically invaded those towns. His influential work on nationalism was also founded on comparisons, sometimes highly abstract (such as the ideal conditions of *Industria* in contrast to *Agraria* (Gellner 1983), but sometimes spatially more specific (such as the 'time zones' he identified in Europe (Gellner 1997)). The principal difference between Gellner and his predecessor is that, whereas Goody saw East and West as equivalent actors over millennia of Eurasian history, Gellner insisted on a unique European breakthrough to modernity. Despite this important difference, both have more in common with the sweeping comparisons of historical sociology (and, within this field, of civilisational analysis; see 574 2003) than with the fine-grained, ethnographic studies that dominate the Anglophone anthropological journals of the 2020s.

Conclusions

Contemporary debates concerning the decolonisation of the social sciences, including the particular issues facing anthropology, date back more than half a century and continue to generate more heat than light.[9] The word 'decolonisation' was used in a specific sense by Jack Goody in the mid-1960s. Goody and Ernest Gellner began their careers as observers of decolonisation processes in Africa. Both denied that anthropological studies were determined by colonialism (except in the trivial sense that all empirical work is constrained by the prevailing political conditions). Both identified with the British school, albeit in somewhat different ways. The unity of the structural functionalists only became apparent after the European colonial

[9] Recently there have been qualifications and even some pushback. Shah (2024) has shown that anti-colonial platforms can be 'hijacked' for distinctly non-progressive causes. See also Sanchez (2023), to whom I am indebted for the title of this article.

empires had disintegrated, when the number of professional anthropologists grew and it was impossible to sustain the same 'tight' paradigm. Goody and Gellner were products of the short-lived golden age of *social* anthropology. Both were critical of the emphasis on culture which came to dominate Anglophone anthropology from the early 1960s. Clifford Geertz was their principal foil.

Jack Goody defended a positivist structural functionalism, arguing that the testing of hypotheses through long-term fieldwork followed by comparative analysis was methodologically superior to the pursuit of nebulous symbolic meaning. The cultural approach could yield rich case studies but if the anthropologist merely followed her nous and failed to engage with more than a few informants, the results would not be conducive to scientific comparison. Ernest Gellner's reasons for rejecting Geertz and, later, more extreme forms of 'self-indulgent subjectivism' derived from his earlier training in and rejection of ordinary language philosophy. For Gellner, expiation and 'atonement' for the sins of colonialism were intrinsic to an idealist package that denied the superiority of modern civilisation, which he thought originated exclusively in Europe. He considered the idealism of the cultural relativists to be a preposterous affectation. Gellner's anti-relativism applied to scientific knowledge, but it did not extend to values and morality. His methodological and epistemological stance (not his Eurocentrism) resembled that of Goody.

Both Goody and Gellner embraced the Malinowskian standard in viewing the collection of data in the field as central to their discipline.[10] Both embraced Radcliffe-Brown's aspiration to promote a science of society, with the important difference that they wanted to open up this science to history. Rather than philosophise about the distinctive challenges facing the empirical social scientist, they thought that fresh ethnographic (and archival) research should feed in to broader comparisons. For these ancestors, social anthropology was a cumulative body of knowledge that should in turn contribute to advancing a larger intellectual field of historical social science.[11]

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10 After their initial field research (in Goody's case protracted and 'multi-sited', though not in the sense in which this term is used today), neither Ernest Gellner nor Jack Goody worked in other countries as ethnographers. Both encouraged their students to prioritise the objective realities they documented in their fieldnotes, as opposed to textual representations, personal reflections, and philosophical speculation.

11 The individual scholar does not have to contribute at both levels simultaneously. In practice, solutions are shaped by the life course: while the novice anthropologist pursues an agenda within social anthropology on the basis of field research, senior practitioners need to make connections with historians and historical sociologists (and perhaps further afield in archaeology and a range of biological sciences).

If Jack Goody and Ernest Gellner were alive today, they would perhaps agree that understanding the subjectivities, class, and educational background of an author, the power relations that shaped their fieldwork at multiple levels, and the rhetorical devices used in the texts, are all legitimate concerns. They might also respect the greater salience of moral judgement in contemporary research bearing on colonialism and economic justice (though they might bristle over 'epistemic justice'). If pushed, they might acknowledge that debates on all these topics have sensitised and advanced our knowledge practices in the last half century. But I think, after making these concessions, Goody and Gellner would insist that it is about time we rediscovered the discipline's original tasks of describing and explaining social organisation out there in the world. This is why they should not be cancelled: to keep open the possibility of renewing those comparative agendas.

I conclude in the voice of a nostalgic participant observer in the Cambridge department throughout the 1980s, when the differences between the British school in social anthropology and American cultural anthropology had already been thoroughly attenuated. Younger colleagues (senior to me but a generation below Goody and Gellner) who followed the international trends were prone to fault their head of department for not keeping up to date. If Jack Goody was a materialist, why did he not engage with the welter of neo-Marxist work emerging from France and elsewhere? Why did he eschew theory altogether in most of his publications? As for Ernest Gellner, was his compass likewise stuck in the 1950s, the heyday of structural functionalism, when he converted to social anthropology from philosophy? My reactionary feeling today is: better to be rooted in the 1950s and attempt to move forward on that basis towards a comparative historical social science than to be stuck in the 1980s and confine anthropology to heavily theorised reflexive ethnographies accompanied by decolonial handwringing.[12]

[12] In addition to Goody and Gellner, during this period Alan Macfarlane and Keith Hart were developing their own 'philosophies of history' in the same department of social anthropology. These differed greatly from each other as well as from the spatial and temporal frames of Goody and Gellner. There were also differences of personality. Only Macfarlane, trained as a historian, had extensive experience of archival research. The upshot was that no collaboration took place, no new school was formed, and Cambridge social anthropology evolved in entirely different directions.

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