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The Problems of Translation Between Paradigms: The 1933 Debate Between Ralph Linton and Radcliffe-Brown

George W. Stocking Jr.

CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

(N.B.: The "documents" below consist of extracts from material collected for a history of the Chicago department of anthropology. The first is based on the papers of Sol Tax; the second on the reminiscences of Philleo Nash. We thank them both for permission to include the material in HAN.)

I. THE PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION BETWEEN PARADIGMS:
THE 1933 DEBATE BETWEEN RALPH LINTON AND RADCLIFFE-
BROWN.

When Radcliffe-Brown arrived in this country in the fall of 1931 to take up an appointment at the University of Chicago, he brought with him a well-defined anthropological viewpoint which contrasted sharply with the traditional historical orientation of Boasian ethnologists. Radcliffe-Brown was not inclined to minimize the differences--like the clans he studied, he defined his intellectual identity oppositionally. He was, however, an active propagator, and there were trends within the American discipline which gave his ideas a heightened saliency. Sol Tax, who as an undergraduate had studied with Ralph Linton, had a strong sense of both the contrast and the salience, and from the beginning sought to bring about some kind of communication between the paradigms. In the fall of 1933, he arranged a debate--although not without considerable difficulty defining the proposition to be argued.

Linton, who apparently was the challenger, proposed the topic "Resolved: that any given society owes its form to a series of historic accidents." At first Radcliffe-Brown said he could not debate this unless the word "entirely" were inserted--in which case he felt Linton "wouldn't have a show." Tax, however, disagreed, and suggested in a letter that the real issues were: 1) "the degree of specificity of the needs to be answered" at any given point in the life of a society; 2) the idea that there are "tensions" and "responses" which are the "makers of cultures"; and 3) the "famous functionalist notion" that what a society doesn't need it would discard. If both sides would agree to this analysis, a lot of time could be saved getting to the crux of the opposition.

Apparently they would not, and in an unpreserved document, Radcliffe-Brown set forth four propositions of his own, three of which Linton discussed in a letter to Tax. "That history records events but cannot explain them" was true only if Radcliffe-Brown meant by history a science of the general course of history; one could, however, draw conclusions as to the relative probability of events from the "partial sequences of cause and effect" which could be observed. "That psychological explanations of cultural or social phenomena are always invalid" was true if one meant exclusively psychological explanations; but this was also true of explanations which ignored psychological factors. "That we cannot explain cultural and social phenomena unless we demonstrate within the field of such phenomena relations of universal form" conveyed no meaning to Linton at all, and until that statement (on which the fourth unpreserved proposition depended) was clarified, a real debate would be impossible, because the two of them were simply speaking different languages. Linton felt that the same difficulty would forestall meaningful discussion of a passage from Boas which Radcliffe-Brown had proposed as an alternative: "The material of anthropology is such that it needs must be a historical science, one of the sciences the interest of which centers in the attempt to understand the individual phenomenon rather than in the establishment of general laws which, on account of the complexity of the material, will almost necessarily be vague and, we might almost say, so self-evident that they are of little help to a real understanding." Linton would convince those who understood the "general American meaning" of the terms he used; Radcliffe-Brown would convince those who knew "the meanings he has given."

After talking it over with Robert Redfield (the proposed chairman) and with Radcliffe-Brown, Tax encouraged Linton to go ahead, on the grounds that it would be helpful to students to "get as clear an idea of the 'two languages'" as Tax had got trying to arrange the debate. Radcliffe-Brown was willing to allow Linton to defend the Boas statement within Linton's own frame of reference. He disagreed with it so completely that he felt "it cannot be interpreted in any way so that he will agree to it." Although Linton still had misgivings--and years later still wondered which of the two protagonists Tax had been out "to get"--on October 24th he wired his acceptance.

The debate took place three days later, filling the large lecture room on the first floor of the Social Science Research Building. The rotund Linton was slightly under the influence of fluids he had taken to ward off a cold; the lofty Radcliffe-Brown, still sporting a monocle which midwesterners had seen only in comic strips, looked every inch the emigre from Edwardian Cambridge. Although it was expected that Radcliffe-Brown, with his dominating personality and sparkling rhetorical flair, would have all the better of it, informants recall that Linton held his own quite well. But while there are no detailed memories of the content of the debate, it seems clear that the hoped-for translation between conceptual idioms did not occur.

Through less public channels, however, there seems to have been some communication of ideas. Commuting weekends to Madison, Tax maintained regular contact with Linton throughout his graduate years, and recalls that Linton expressed considerable curiosity about the ideas he was hearing in Radcliffe-Brown's courses. In this context, they had long discussions of Linton's work in progress; and although the informality both of the channels of communication and of Linton's scholarly style make explicit documentation difficult, it seems evident that The Study of Man was at certain points indirectly influenced by Radcliffe-Brown's ideas. Although influences in the other direction seem somewhat less likely, Radcliffe-Brown's American experience did lead him to sharpen some of the terms of his oppositional stance. As Fred Eggan has noted, it was at Chicago that he dropped the idiom of culture-- which the Boasians also used--and began to speak more narrowly in terms of "social structure." (G.W.S.)

II. RADCLIFFE-BROWN'S RECEIPTS: THE NOMOTHETICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Recounting his experiences as a graduate student for the departmental historian, Philleo Nash recalls some rules of social life which Radcliffe-Brown offered to him outside the classroom:

1. For salad dressing: "Press the garlic into the salt with a fork; then dissolve the salt with vinegar; and then add the oil."

2. For brussel sprouts: boil them one by one in a large kettle of water, plunging them into cold water the instant they are done.