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# Society, Matter, and Human Nature: Robert Gelston Armstrong and Marxist Anthropology at the University of Chicago, 1950

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Robert Gelston Armstrong

## CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

### **Society, Matter, and Human Nature: Robert Gelston Armstrong and Marxist Anthropology at the University of Chicago, 1950**

Robert Gelston Armstrong (1917-87) entered the doctoral program of the University of Chicago anthropology department in the fall of 1939, and at the same time joined the Communist Party. After completing his masters thesis on the basis of fieldwork in Oklahoma, he was drafted into the U.S. Army, in which he served for three years, first as a code clerk in Panama and the United States, and then in the invasion of Germany during the last months of the war. In the spring of 1946, he resumed graduate study, but after a year accepted an appointment at Atlanta University, where he taught during the academic year 1947-48. During the following academic year he taught at the University of Puerto Rico, where he also did fieldwork in the nearby town of Caguas as part of Julian Steward's team, although without producing a chapter for The People of Puerto Rico. Upon his return to Chicago in the fall of 1948, he spent several months writing a manuscript entitled "Society and Matter," which he regarded as essential methodological and epistemological preparation for a library dissertation on state formation in Africa.

Written during the early phases of the McCarthy era, "Society and Matter" is remarkable as an explicit attempt to ground anthropological research in general, and Armstrong's doctoral dissertation in particular, in a systematically Marxist point of view. It is at the same time intellectually idiosyncratic, wide-rangingly eclectic, informally conversational, and, in the end, unfinished, both stylistically and substantively. But regarded as an instance of a very small category (Marxist anthropological analysis in the United States during the early Cold War period), it is perhaps of some historical interest, as a stimulus to more historical systematic consideration of that category.

The first twenty-five pages of "Society and Matter" are a "Prologue," in which Armstrong, reverting to his military experience as a cryptanalyst, shows how the jumbled of letters of the first two lines of a coded message intercepted from a "from a well-known anthropologist" could be translated into English—as an analogical demonstration of the problem of finding "patterns" in anthropology. This is followed by a twenty-eight page "Preface" putting forward the "hypotheses" that that the "universe and everything in it consists of matter and is one material system, whose parts are organically interrelated"; that "motion is the manner of existence of matter"; and that "the basic manner of motion and therefore the basic category of the universe is contradiction." There are then three substantive chapters: "Direction, Trajectory and Networks of Trajectories"; "Material Things"; and "Criteria of Organization and Integration" before the manuscript breaks off at page 107. The table of contents, however, lists also two chapters as "proposed": one on "Patterns" (including the heading "Culture as a system of patterns conditioned by the human mind"); another on "Society" (as a "material thing" and a "biological thing," differing "profoundly from all the previous levels" and "synthesiz[ing] them all."

The completed portions reflect an unusually wide range of reading: philosophers, ranging from Heraclitus, Zeno, and Aristotle through Aquinas, Kant, and Hegel, down to Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, and Sidney Hook; political theorists, including Machiavelli, Gumpłowicz, Oppenheimer, and MacIver; psychologists, including Freud, the gestalt psychologists and a recent compilation of seven contemporary psychologies; natural scientists from Newton to Einstein to Norbert Weiner; and of course Marxists, from Marx and Engels through Plekhanov and Lenin to a recent Soviet Textbook of Marxist Philosophy edited by M. Shirokov—as well a number of anthropological writers including Redfield, Whorf, and, strikingly, the German ethnologist

Wilhelm Mühlmann. The style is conversational, with extended quotations from numerous interlocutors, some of them in Armstrong's own translations from the French, German, Italian and Russian originals. The most important of these was the Scottish polymath Lancelot Law Whyte, who had maintained in conversation with Armstrong that "the attempt to characterize a society as a material thing had been "rendered obsolete by the discovery of the equivalence of matter and energy" (cf. Whyte 1948:68-69). To the contrary, Armstrong hoped to demonstrate that "dialectical materialism" was not only a viable but a necessary standpoint for the understanding of a society. To this end, he inserted into his manuscript, as pages 32a-d, a supplementary statement on "Human Nature," which he listed in the table of contents as "An outline discussion of human nature as an analogic scenario of this whole thesis." Since the inserted material refers to two of the corollaries to Armstrong's first hypothesis, I have included these as preface to the text reproduced below:

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Corollary (Ib): Quite a number of the observable regularities among biological, social and cultural systems are due to the fact of their common materiality and must be explained in terms of the nature of the functioning of material systems as such.

Corollary (Ic): The description and explanation of phenomena on the biological, human-social and cultural levels requires that they be first isolated or distinguished conceptually from the purely material phenomena with which they are inseparably connected. To do this we must first identify and subtract by analysis that which is merely material in these phenomena.

[here, Armstrong noted the insertion of pages 32a, 32b, 32c and 32d, as follows:]

These corollaries were suggested by a consideration of the problem of a holistic-aesthetic approach to the problem of human nature and to the study of social forms and to the study of social forms and types generally. Despite the form which this thesis is taking, I fully agree with Redfield and others that the method of explicit statement of hypothesis and problem before undertaking an investigation has severe limitations. The emphasis on hypothesis made a great deal of sense a reaction to the old idea that one should approach field work without preconceptions of any kind and "allow the facts to speak for themselves." It was found that investigators as a matter of fact always do have preconceptions, and that it is much better to get them out in the open by specifying than to allow them to remain as submerged menaces to navigation. Then too, as Mühlmann says, "the facts speak for themselves if we know what questions to ask."

Nevertheless, I have never felt and do not feel now that the testing of previously stated hypotheses is an adequate field or research method. Most of the problems that one can state in advance of research soon look very naïve as the work proceeds. John Dewey has argued that a major reason why the frame of reference of scientific research methods cannot be prescribed in advance by an institution or by any other source is that adjustment of the frame of reference constitutes at least half of the on-going research problem itself. I have certainly found it so in all my own work. Explicitly stated problems and hypotheses should never impose limits on observation. They are correctly used as heuristic guides and as warnings of the investigator's biases. We must, for example, never allow any amount of subtle methodological and theoretical disquisition to argue us out of the obvious fact that people learn to understand and deal with each other all the time. It may be difficult to establish a concept of human nature rigorously enough to satisfy all the theorists. But

millions of people have a concept of it that is adequate for many, many purposes. The elaboration of an even more satisfactory concept, that will be adequate for some of the new problems the modern world faces, must take this datum of experience into account. Perhaps the major attraction which dialectical materialism as a body of thought has for me is that it alone among intellectual disciplines known to me allows one to deal both analytically and synthetically with the phenomena of nature in general and of society in particular.

I believe, therefore, very firmly in the importance of the "naïve," aesthetic eye for wholes among the phenomena we study. Nevertheless, it seems to me that when we deal in this way with problems such as the nature of the state or the nature of a human being, we run the danger, as expressed in Corollary Ib, that many of the more obvious characteristics of our phenomenon are not distinctive. Corollary Ic is intended as a partial statement of a method for dealing with this problem.

I submit herewith an outline for the conception and study of human nature that I prepared while attending Redfield's seminar on human nature. In a sense, this material is a digression; and much of the terminology will only be explained later on in this thesis. It should serve, however, to illustrate what I mean by Corollaries Ib and Ic; and it serves analogically as a "scenario" for this thesis generally: I mean to deal in similar fashion with the problems of kingdoms in Africa.

## HUMAN NATURE

- I. What do we mean by understanding the 'nature' of any class of phenomena: oysters, electromagnetic radiation, sulphur, etc.? My answer: understanding the contradictions that constitute it.
- II. What assumptions must we make on the basis of which to start our study?
  - A. A human being is a material object and has in common with other material objects the qualities of self-motion, motion-in-contradiction, and interpenetrative implication with the other material phenomena of the universe.
  - B. A human being is a living, organic object and therefore:
    1. is a vortex through which quite a variety of material things must pass (such as food, ideas, visual impressions, etc.), and through which some things must be kept from passing;
    2. has a communication-and-control system, distinguishable, if not separable, from the organic whole.
  - C. A human being (matter plus soma plus psyche) is a highly—if not perfectly integrated whole.
    1. Therefore, any given part "contains" the other parts and the whole process by implication. (The specific pattern of form and function of a particular part gives us information about the rest of the person).

2. Therefore, a human being can be studied as other systems are studied: by the construction of hypotheses to explain—or integrate—observed behavioral data, and then by searching to see if other new facts continue to fit the hypotheses.

a. introspection and projection are special cases of this: one observes that many qualities are in common between one's own behavior and that of other people. One assumes therefore that many other less obvious 'internal' processes are likewise in common. One's own introspective activity, therefore, becomes a source of hypotheses for testing generally. Likewise, one's first test of a new hypothesis from whatever source is usually an internal, introspective [one] ("Am I like that?" "Does this fit me?"). People often defend hypotheses which obviously do not correspond to their own actual behaviour and attitudes. They can be brought to realize this if too many sub-conscious emotional blocks not interfere.

### III. Human nature may be conceived thetically, antithetically, and synthetically.

A. the thetic conception of human nature should begin with the identification of the characteristics which distinguish man from the rest of the universe of phenomena.

1. He is a two-legged primate with the unique foot that permits him to march in step, play football and basketball, dance the classical ballet, high jump, skip rope, etc.
  - a. his erect posture has resulted and is resulting in specific alterations in every bone in the body, the musculature, functions of the internal organs such as the diaphragm, etc.
2. He has a unique hand, archaic in general pattern, exceedingly flexible in its particular form. The similar hands of the other primates are overspecialized for arboreal brachiation.
  - a. the human hand has immense flexibility for tool-using, knot-tying, piano-playing, etc.
  - b. it is a sexual instrument of great importance.
3. He has a unique ability to cry and to laugh and to produce a unique psychological capacity for identification and projection.
4. He has a unique pattern of sexual activity, being much less bound to rutting periods, etc. than other animals. Several positions of intercourse are uniquely human, including that of full-length face-to-face body contact. (No other animal can do it anatomically, although the other apes come close).
5. He has a unique vocal and oral apparatus, which permits speech, song-recitals and the Navaho Night Chant.
6. He has a unique brain, which permits and creates culture and co-ordinates all the rest.

- B. The antithetic conception of human nature begins with the study of the societies in which people (like many other biological organisms) live, as being the most human part of the environment—the generalized antithesis (see page 82 below). (Societies as natural phenomena can also be studied on their own level as theses, etc. Here we are asking a more specific question: What is the reaction of human societies towards the individuals in them?). I propose the following propositions for testing:
1. The adults who make up the leading parts of society at large find infants, children, and young people sexually attractive, they respond to them by direct sexual arousal and by visual –aesthetic-emotional identification. They are thereby willing and able to abide the obstreperous and difficult younger generation long enough to teach it what it must know. As people mature they exchange sexual attractiveness for greater mastery of social and cultural techniques.
  2. A major category of relationship of the individual to society is by the interplay and pattern-matching of verbal-mental images in conversation. Humans find the sinuous interplay of these patterns in itself stimulating and satisfying, entirely apart from the actual content of what is said. Given the contrast principle discussed on pages 100-101 below, the more intimate, specific and complex the fit, the more aesthetically satisfying.
- C. Human nature may be conceived of synthetically as an exceedingly complex integration of the general and the particular-human.
1. As a material thing, the human being must be studied in his essential self-motion. He cannot be reduced conceptually to an assemblage of molecules or to external social relationships.
    - a. The most mechanical of his “physical displacements in space” have a deep and intimate stamp of the human about them. This is even more true of the quality of his physical interactions with the things in his environment.
  2. As an organic vortex, he is once again human in the particulars of his vortex pattern.
  3. In addition to a material and biological aspect bearing a human stamp, he has a very large syndrome of uniquely human processes (see III above), which however, bear a physical and biological stamp.
    - a. As human food, health, heredity, habits, ideas, culture and society change, human nature must also be said to change. Insofar as man effects these changes, he “makes himself.” The more or less conscious way in which he goes about this is probably the most uniquely human feature of his self-motion.

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Lest it be assumed that “Society and Matter” is throughout presented in this propositional mode, it may help to give a brief excerpt of its more discursive substance, which draws on a variety of Armstrong’s intellectual and life experiences, including in several instances, his ethnographic research in Caguas. The most extensive and most interesting of the latter is a passage offered in

his discussion of Corollary IIIb: “The characteristic relation of opposites to each other is the dual, contradictory one of unity and conflict”:

I found it extremely difficult to arrive at a fruitful definition of the socio-cultural phenomenon called the town of Caguas, Puerto Rico, in an informal study I made in 1948. One could very easily see the entire town by climbing one of the nearby mountains. It had very well-marked edges; and I always found the thought rather startling that 25,000 people lived on or in that postage-stamp (as it looked from any distance). Its architecture and town plan was typically Spanish, and there was complete unanimity of informants and documentary sources that the name of this collection of houses and streets around a plaza was “Caguas.” Yet these facts got one exactly as far towards a definition that would be useful for the solution of problems in the social science as would be in the information that a featherless biped dressed in a uniform is called “soldier.” The town is the communications center for the east-central part of the island. This has been true throughout its history. Today it is the meeting place of five major highways and a narrow-gauge railway. I found that a large majority of the inhabitants of Caguas make their living outside of it (a list of all the jobs being held in the town accounted for only about a third of the working force). Even businesses whose physical plant was in the town had their decisive economic connections outside: many or most of their customers were outside; the decisive businesses were Eastern Sugar Associates (owned in Baltimore, Maryland) the branch of the Banco Popular of San Juan, the Chase National Bank, agencies for Westinghouse, General Electric, Ford, General Motors, Chrysler, Norge Refrigerator and various insular government offices and institutions. The mayor was also the agent for General Electric. There was a large group of cane-cutters who lived in the slums of the town and who worked in the fields nearby. There was a diamond cutting factory which imported its raw materials and exported its product. There was a very large group of persons who lived in the town but commuted to work in the San Juan area and other areas. So it would seem that the people who made their living mainly in the town itself were a relatively unimportant group that was mainly performing services for those whose main connections were outside. And yet Caguas was known all over the island as a town with strong local feeling and pride. In the 1948 election Caguas was the only town to produce a noteworthy revolt against the Popular Party, and although the Populares carried the town by a small margin, many many Cagüeños voted for it with a heavy heart and soul-searching.

What then does this socio-cultural phenomenon consist of? From one point of view it is a nexus or vortex of contradictory or “opposite” relationships each of which is characterized by the fact that at least one of its terms is in some physical sense located in the town of Caguas. The streets, houses, etc., are from this point of view little more than a fossil which gives testimony to the nature of a socio-cultural phenomenon whose weight lies elsewhere. The town’s internal definition might be seen to lie in the fact of the conflict between common residence and external interest of its citizens. And in point of fact, in this respect Caguas is not different from any other city, since no city that ever was could possibly survive apart from the multifarious contacts and relationships with the world outside it which are precisely its raison d’etre.

Now all this is very well. This conception of a city seems to me fruitful and good in that it suggests and leads to a host of particular new lines of investigation and gives us a live framework for ordering the facts which we collect. Nevertheless, I am still far from satisfied with the concepts of “opposites” and “contradiction” in this situation. In what sense is the diamond-cutting factory opposite to its source of supply or to its market? In the last citation from Shirokov we have a hint in that the phrase “new type of internal conflict” is use rather

incidentally as a synonym for "new contradiction." Now a business relationship mutually satisfactory to both parties and lasting for a long period is a conflict in the sense that it is part of the general struggle of the market, and in the sense that there is a certain jockeying for position around every transaction. But in another sense it rather hurts to hear relationships which I have defined as long-term and satisfactory called "conflicts." I see no reasons, however, to exempt "conflict," "contradiction," or "opposites" from the general "yes is no and no is yes" pattern of dialectical definition. Once again we see the Chinese-box character of reality. The exploration of this problem seems to me important, but so large a job as to lie beyond the scope of this paper" (Armstrong 1950: 52-54)

There was, in fact, a great deal that to Armstrong seemed important, but remained beyond the scope of his unfinished manuscript. However, while he did refer to it in his doctoral dissertation, in which the concepts of "contradiction" and "exploitation" played a central role, he never attempted to complete "Society and Matter," nor to address some of the unresolved issues (one might even say "contradictions") contained in it. He later spoke of having taken the time to write it as a justification of his right, in the face of criticism, to adhere to the doctrine of dialectical materialism; later on, of having spent "a lot of energy on the application of the theory of dialectical materialism to anthropology and in the end found I was talking only to myself" (in Stocking n.d.)

It may be assumed, however, that members of the Chicago faculty were aware of the project, since the surviving copy is contained in Armstrong's student file. And although the typescript bears no reader's markings, and is not referred to in his student record, it is clear that Robert Redfield knew of Armstrong's Marxist interests (although not of his Communist Party membership), since these were explicitly manifest in the doctoral dissertation that Armstrong completed in the fall of 1950. Redfield read it "from beginning to end" and in a general way approved it, although he was troubled by the idea of "exploitation," not so much because of its "background in Marxism," but because "the concept is not so clearly defined as it sounds" (in Stocking n.d.)

Despite that reservation, Redfield continued to think highly of Armstrong, and when Armstrong was looking for an academic job in the summer of 1953, after returning from two years of fieldwork among the Idoma of Nigeria, Redfield offered him a temporary position as his replacement during Redfield's leave of absence in Europe. The fall of 1953, however, was the apogee of McCarthyism in American academic life, and Armstrong's appointment was forestalled by the intervention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation several weeks before the opening of the fall quarter (an episode which, along with Armstrong's subsequent internal academic exile and later career as expatriate anthropologist in Nigeria, will be treated in detail in Stocking n.d.)

#### Sources

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## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Alice Conklin (University of Rochester) held a Guggenheim Fellowship during 2000-01 for a study of ethnographic liberalism in France, 1920-1945.

Jonathon Glassman (Northwestern University) held a Guggenheim Fellowship during 2000-01 for a study of racial thought in colonial Zanzibar.

Rob Hancock (Department of History, University of Victoria; rola@uvic.ca) is completing a Master's thesis entitled, "The Potential for a Canadian Anthropology: Diamond Jenness's Arctic Ethnography."

Dustin Wax (New School for Social Research) has begun work on a dissertation examining the "Fox Project" of Sol Tax in terms of the institutional and theoretical history of post-WWII anthropology and the relationship between Indians and anthropologists.

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