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Author(s): Jonathan Spencer

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POST-COLONIALISM AND THE
POLITICAL IMAGINATION*

JONATHAN SPENCER

University of Edinburgh

This article considers the rise and fall of political anthropology in the context of the global shift from colonial to post-colonial rule. Classical political anthropology peaked in the 1960s and has remained obstinately out of fashion ever since, not least because of the narrow, acultural view of politics associated with it. Neither recent anthropological interest in power, nor more broad theoretical attention to the issue of post-colonialism, seem to have helped bring the phenomenon of post-colonial politics into clearer theoretical light. Taking its cue from Malinowski's late interest in questions of transculturation, the article argues for the gains of a radically empirical approach to post-colonial politics, an approach which would acknowledge the diversity of post-colonial experience and the unpredictable contours of what different people take politics to be. The article uses recent anthropological examples from South Asia, concentrating on issues of democracy and representation, to illustrate what such an approach might look like.

Drawing the line

Imagine yourself high in the air over Africa. It is 1938 and you are 'a passenger flying over the inland route of the Imperial Airways', a route which our intellectual navigator assures us, can provide 'almost literally a bird's eye view of the cultural situation'. As you cross the Upper Nile the circular villages and unclothed natives give 'a surface effect of Old Africa'. But 'as the 'plane crosses the border between Nilotic and Bantu peoples, it becomes obvious that it is a transformed Africa over which we are moving. Among the Baganda the houses are new, square, built on the European pattern; even from above, the dress and equipment of the natives spell Manchester and Birmingham.' Then, moving on, 'In Nairobi we enter a world where natives and things African seem to play but the role of mutes and properties respectively ... The white inhabitants go about their European business and live in a world almost untouched, on its surface, by Africa.' And then, shifting the visual metaphor into full imperial gear, 'we can conclude that changing Africa is not a single subject-matter, but one composed of three phases. It would be almost possible to take a piece of chalk, and on the face of the continent to map out spatially the areas of each type: predominantly European, genuinely African, and those covered by the processes of change' (Malinowski 1938: vii-x).

I have been quoting from Malinowski's 1938 introduction to *Methods of study of culture contact in Africa*. It is an essay full of surprises and required reading for

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anyone still attached to the two-dimensional reading of Malinowski as colonial villain.[1] I want to start, though, not with Malinowski's politics, but with the piece of chalk and the line on the map separating 'genuinely African', 'predominantly European' and 'the processes of change', or as Malinowski put it in the same essay, 'old Africa, imported Europe, and the New Composite Culture' (1938: viii).

   One part of my argument concerns the way in which the political structure of colonial rule shaped the social imagination of both colonizer and colonized, leaving behind a vocabulary of social types and political possibilities which continues to haunt us thirty, forty or fifty years later. I want to deal with this later by asking what anthropologists can learn from new empirical studies of post-colonial politics in South Asia, but first I want to look at some of the reasons why anthropologists have recently paid less attention than they might to post-colonial politics. In this case, I want to follow the implications of that clear line between genuine Africa and the processes of change. This strikes me as an exemplary case of a way of talking about social and cultural differences, which is steeped in the history and politics of late colonial rule, but which has continued to loiter like an unwanted intellectual guest years after the political circumstances which gave rise to it in the first place have disappeared.

   In the late 1960s Bernard Cohn suggested, 'In a very real way the subject matter of anthropology has been the study of the colonized' (1987: 225). Cohn's assertion tells us something about power and something about history. I want to concentrate on the historical implication: the facts of colonization – and the facts of decolonization – do not in themselves serve to constitute a homogeneous theoretical object, 'post-colonial culture' or 'post-colonial society'. All they do is to serve as a mnemonic, a salutary jolt to remind the complacent ethnographer that these places have histories, and in particular that their political institutions are the product of both a moment of colonial implantation and a subsequent post-colonial history. In his late writings on change in Africa, Malinowski employed a rather contemporary-sounding term to describe such moments of colonial implantation: 'transculturation'. In particular, he argued that apparently 'Western' institutional forms – mines, plantations, factories – transplanted into African circumstances must be interpreted in their own terms as quite new phenomena: 'Even a material object, a tool or an instrument like money, changes in the very process of culture contact' (Malinowski 1938: xxii). He also, somewhat unexpectedly, railed against futile ethnographic attempts to reconstruct a world of pure tradition in the face of change. And yet, for all his dismissal of 'an untouched native culture' as 'only a figment', there remains that line drawn in imaginary chalk, those clear areas of 'old Africa' which are so self-evidently different from the new. And, once he progressed from observation to analysis, so his three zones of the genuine, the imported and the composite, become three analytic phases to be charted in three columns: elements of the indigenous culture, elements of the impinging culture, and the process of contact and change. In other words, what at one moment is dismissed as 'a figment' – an 'untouched native culture' – re-appears a few sentences later as an unproblematic analytic category in the study of contact and change. As an anthropologist, and as a fully paid-up member of the colonial order, Malinowski continued to believe in a zone of tradition, enclaved in space

or removed in time, which could continue to serve as an anthropological (and legal and administrative) point of departure. But as, in Leach's (1957: 120) phrase, an 'obsessional empiricist', he also insisted on the study of the here and now, and this meant a study of the *transformation* of both local and non-local institutions in the colonial setting. This, I will argue, is the genuinely radical direction for ethnographic inquiry into other people's politics.

The institutions I am concerned with are those of the post-colonial state. Anthropologists, I suggest, have a problem with politics. According to its own most distinguished recent chronicler, the subdiscipline of political anthropology has been both 'late and comparatively short-lived', peaking in the mid 1960s before it gradually dissolved back into a wider anthropology, itself recently absorbed by its own rediscovery of the ubiquity of power (Vincent 1996: 428; cf. Vincent 1990). But 'power' as it is currently understood in anthropological circles, is not necessarily the same thing as 'politics', in the sense of parties, elections and states. On the one hand, everything worthy of ethnographic atten- tion is by definition a product of 'power' – from pronouns to common-sense, by way of nicknames and clothing styles, and of course the very practice of anthropology itself (however trivial this may seem in the eyes of the outside world [cf. Sahlins 1993]). On the other hand, obviously 'political' topics – nationalism, for example – are often discussed by anthropologists with little or no reference to the institutional context of modern politics.[2] And, if like me, you have the misfortune to have spent your ethnographically formative years among people whose lives were simply dominated by the political, prepare for disappointment as few topics now inspire such disciplinary *ennui* as 'local-level politics'.

It was not always so. If we want to explain anthropology's problems with politics then I think we need to look at the intellectual assumptions which have shaped and constrained our apprehension of the political. One of these is the dichotomy between tradition and modernity – genuine Africa and the processes of change – which is still to be found not far below the surface of the most advanced post-structural analyses. To this we might add the unspoken assump- tion that modern political institutions are either pre-eminently rational and transparent, or anthropologically irrelevant and intellectually unchallenging.[3] Then there is the ontological status of the 'political' in mid-century anthropol- ogy. In British anthropology at least, the political was often opposed to the cultural or the symbolic, and served as a source of social facts at their most thing-like; political structures and political processes were the hard currency of anthropological comparison. Although the kind of anthropology which treated the political as the bedrock of comparative certainty is now thoroughly out of fashion, recent approaches which claim Foucault and Gramsci as their inspira- tion have again invested power with a similar foundational status, a kind of acultural hardness which can serve as the beginning and end of ethnographic analysis. Against these various sources of confusion I want to advance an appar- ently old-fashioned argument for the subversive potential of obsessional empiricism and ethnographic holism, and for the virtues of attending to what is there and what people say about it.

I am especially interested in what is there in those parts of the world which were, until recently, European colonies. The political imagination of my title

refers to the *different* ways in which people have identified, created or reacted to an area of life and a set of practices they themselves refer to as 'the political' – sometimes including parties, usually including politicians, almost always including the post-colonial state. What was left behind after the flags were lowered and the new leaders sworn in was not just a lingering nostalgia for the Royal family, or a passionate commitment to nineteenth-century British team sports, or an often hopeless dependence on the fluctuations of world capitalism – although all of these are unmistakable features of the post-colonial landscape. What was also left behind was a set of institutions – police and courts and legal codes, schools and clinics, a civil service – usually accompanied by a basic political vocabulary founded on a number of linked ideas: these include the legitimacy of the postcolonial nation-state as an ideal framework for political life, a legitimacy usually justified by some appeal to the virtues of representative democracy, thus involving the sovereignty of some collective entity known as 'the people', whose political will is properly expressed by its chosen representatives. In a nutshell, I am interested in the cultural implications of democracy, implications which seem to me to extend in some ways to all post-colonial states (because of the shared rhetoric of popular sovereignty and representation), whatever their practical claim to being 'democratic'. I shall concentrate on South Asia, because that is what I know best, even as I recognize that a similar argument based in, say, African, or more contentiously, Latin American material might reach radically different conclusions.[4]

Anthropology and the political imagination

First, though, I need to spend a little more time on what anthropologists have construed as political. I shall confine my comments to what we may take to be the heyday of political anthropology, from the publication of *African political systems* in 1940 to some indeterminate point in the late 1960s or early 1970s – the publication of Bailey's *Stratagems and spoils* (1969), perhaps, or Abner Cohen's attempted rescue-act in *Two-dimensional man* (1974). The first point is the absolute separation between the political and the cultural. For Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 'A comparative study of political systems has to be on an abstract plane where social processes are stripped of their cultural idiom and are reduced to functional terms' (1940: 3). For the Leach of *Political systems of highland Burma*, social structure and social relations (however defined), and a heuristic based on assumptions of individual pursuit of interest and power, provide the framework for any coherent analysis (1964: 1-17); culture, in contrast, was (in Schneider's not inaccurate characterization) 'ornaments, different hat styles, things like that' (1995: 131; cf. Leach 1964: 16). While there were real differences within what was called political anthropology in the 1960s – between those who would emphasize process over structure, or between the various emerging forms of methodological individualism (transactionalism, games theory) and those who retained a concern with social morphology (the now arcane typologies of groups, quasi-groups, non-groups, action sets) – the idea that the political could be, and should be, abstracted from the cultural remained almost entirely unchallenged: 'We attempt to discover some of the general principles in political manoeuvre which transcend cultures and which

provide questions which could be the tools of research in a variety of cultures'
(Bailey 1969: xiii).[5]

The second point is the stress on observation rather than interpretation, be-
haviour rather than values. Again this was clearly expressed in *African political
systems*, in the celebrated attack on political philosophers' concern with 'ought'
rather than 'is' and their indifference to science and 'observed behaviour'
(Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940: 4). Interestingly, this exactly matches the
rhetoric of American political science in its post-war, value-free, crew-cut
prime:

> *[S]cience* and *scientific*, then, are words that relate to only one kind of knowledge, i.e. to
> knowledge of what is observable, and not to any other kinds of knowledge that may exist...
> Science concerns what has been, is, or will be, regardless of the 'oughts' of the situation
> (Almond quoted in Taylor 1985*a*: 58-9).[6]

In this respect, political anthropology differed little from legal anthropology or
economic anthropology. In all three subdisciplines, anthropologists were at-
tracted by the prestige of formal models deriving from their larger (and better
funded) cognate disciplines. But while the anthropology of law and economic
anthropology were bitterly split in the 1960s by arguments about the applicabil-
ity of ideas and models drawn from Western jurisprudence and neo-classical
economics, there is little trace in the political anthropology of the time of
internal resistance to positivist political science.[7] In the late 1960s political phi-
losophers, particularly Alasdair MacIntyre (1971) and Charles Taylor (1985*a*;
1985*b*), mounted an eloquent attack on the claims of this kind of political
science. Between them, they exposed the incoherence of the putative separation
of political facts from political values, of political behaviour from its interpreta-
tion, emphasizing instead the embeddedness of all observers (however
'scientific' and detached their pretensions) in particular political traditions, and
arguing that different traditions or cultures will have different senses of what
might be construed as political. It follows that the study of politics, which
became the refuge for a kind of hard, acultural comparativism in anthropology,
should really be the source of constant reflexive critique (Taylor 1985*c*). There
are many things you may see from the god-like perspective of your Imperial
Airways flight, but politics is unlikely to be one of them, because to see it and
to comment on it is, *ipso facto*, to be a part of it. But this critique, despite its
obvious attractions for anthropologists, has been barely noticed, still less devel-
oped within the anthropological study of politics.

In Britain instead, this kind of political anthropology developed in unhealthy
schismogenesis with the first stirrings of structuralism and symbolic anthropol-
ogy in the 1950s and 1960s. Where others spoke of cosmologies and modes of
thought, ritual and symbol, unconscious structures and implicit meanings, po-
litical anthropology became determinedly unexotic, anti-cultural and dull. By
about 1970 all the richness and complexity of actually existing politics had been
reduced by anthropologists to the micro-study of instrumental behaviour, as the
discipline divided between what Abner Cohen called the 'action theorists' and
the 'thought structuralists' (1974: 40-5). Political anthropology, so conceived,
was the subdiscipline that died of boredom. (James Carrier has coined the
expression 'auto-narcosis' for this common academic malaise.) But sub-disciplines
do not develop in isolation and I am concerned not just with what was missing

from political anthropology, but more with what parts of life were or were not thought appropriate for anthropological analysis in general, with the ways in which anthropologists drew imaginary chalk marks around some areas of life and quietly ignored others. Structuralists got myth, ritual and the last old villager who might just remember how things used to be. Political anthropologists got factions, networks, action sets and much apparently meaningless politicking.[8]

In retrospect, it is hard for an outsider to grasp the point of all this formalization, the typologies and models and definitions. It is even harder to place this in its context, which was of course the great wave of decolonization without which there would have been no elections around which to mobilize factions and action-sets. Sometimes political anthropology seemed to inhabit an altogether different universe. That stalwart of the undergraduate syllabus, *Political leadership among Swat Pathans*, barely acknowledges the existence of the new state of Pakistan, in which Barth's fieldwork was conducted (Barth 1959: 8-9). We now know, through a startling piece of historical anthropology, that only a few years earlier the same area had been swept by a radical non-violent Islamic nationalist movement, unmentioned by Barth, the *Khudai khidmatgar*, a movement which both acknowledged and transformed the world of agonistic feuding relations found in Barth's analysis (Banerjee 1994). Bengal in the 1950s and 1960s was, as well as the empirical source of Nicholas's (1968) work on factions, the site of a remarkable transformation as the Communist Party established itself as the dominant force in rural politics; and, as another excellent recent study makes clear, the political work involved in such a transformation had as much to do with rural theatre and poetry-readings and the literary tastes of a generation of educated village leaders (Ruud 1995).

Anthropologists did, of course, respond to this extraordinary change in political circumstances. Few, though, did so in a way which really took note of the cultural implications of nationalism, decolonization and 'transcultural' mass politics. The most notable of those who did was probably Clifford Geertz in his writings of the 1960s on comparative politics (collected in Geertz 1973: 193-341). On the one hand, Geertz was unusual in acknowledging the cultural implications of decolonization: the new states, he wrote, were going through a period of 'disorientation', 'groping for usable political concepts', searching 'for a new symbolic framework in terms of which to formulate, think about and react to political problems' (Geertz 1973: 221). Or, in a later essay, he refers to the transition from colonial to post-colonial as a 'sort of social changing of the mind' or 'conceptual dislocation' affecting 'the most familiar frames of moral and intellectual perception' (1973: 319). There is, of course, more than a touch in this of what I think of as the Chicago fallacy – the idea that there are few problems in the world which cannot be resolved by re-organizing your reading-list, coupled with the confidence that this problem is at the heart of the human condition everywhere. Nevertheless there is still much in Geertz's formulations that repays reflection.

In the best known of these essays in comparative politics, 'The integrative revolution', Geertz analyses the politics of the post-colonial world in terms of two opposing forces: the pull of 'primordial attachments' versus the virtue of 'civil sentiments' – on the one side the imperatives of blood and belonging, ethnicity, language and race, and on the other the sanitized attractions of a

modern state. But in the essay itself it is the 'primordial' which attracts most of Geertz's analytic and empirical attention. That 'civil society' and 'civil sentiments' may also be rather problematic categories is briefly acknowledged at the end of the essay, and then rather quickly brushed aside (1973: 309). What happens in fact is that the primordial emerges as the marked category, as that which requires documentation and analysis, while the civil is essentially defined as the absence of the primordial: as societies become properly modern, 'to an increasing degree national unity is maintained not by calls to blood and land but by a vague, intermittent, and routine allegiance to a civil state' (1973: 260). And who wants to come back from two years in the tropics with meticulous documentation of something already known to be 'vague, intermittent and routine'; the prospect is about as appealing as an ethnography of the weather forecast.

In so far as anthropologists in the past few years *have* turned their attention back to the politics of the post-colonial world, they have continued to work within this framework, concentrating above all on the peculiarities of what is presented as the primordial. That defamiliarizing jolt to the otherwise slumbering ethnographer is now administered by the 'calls to blood and land', by nationalism in its bloodier and most exotic mode. Yet anthropological studies of nationalism have often concentrated more on the rituals and symbols of the nation, and their inevitably invented traditions, and less on the broader political framework of the post-colonial nation-state, which is the necessary context for their very existence. Or, to put it another way, we have continued to draw that chalk line across the ethnographic map, and it is no surprise to learn that we remain as entranced as ever by the enclave containing the 'genuine African' or the 'genuine Indian', even if 'genuineness' is now usually construed by the people themselves in highly self-conscious and occasionally bloodthirsty ways.

Geertz's framework derives, of course, from his colleague on the Committee for the Study of New Nations at Chicago, Edward Shils. The Committee's work presents an interesting alternative to what passed as political anthropology in Britain at the time. In Benedict Anderson's words, 'a typically grandiose Kennedy-era operation' (1995: 19), the Committee's comparativism was explicitly Weberian in its intellectual orientation, it was equally conscious of both the sociological and cultural contradictions of decolonization, and above all – and unusually for its time – it privileged the qualitative and holistic approach of the anthropologist in its methods (Shils 1963).[9] But – and it proved to be a very large but – it was trapped in the contradictions inherent in its own brand of modernization theory, treating 'tradition' as inherently plural, and the modern as, by definition, singular – 'generic modernity' in Fallers's terms (Fallers 1963: 160). Thus it was, for example, that the civil became the empirically unproblematic counterpart to the primordial in Geertz's essay, and that Shils denied any attachment to 'Western liberal parochialism' in the middle of a passage extolling the 'universal validity' of crucial liberal values (Shils 1963: 25).

We have come a long way in order to return to Malinowski's 'bird's eye view of the cultural situation'. The Chicago experiment is important because it acknowledged the cultural dimension of political change in the post-colonial world. But instead of staying with Malinowskian moments of 'transculturation' – with what happened to electoral politics as they developed, withered or mutated in India or Sri Lanka or Pakistan – it fenced itself in with the liberal

certainties of the Parsonian-Weberian version of modernization theory. British political anthropology had the merit of greatly expanding the empirical definition of where we might find the 'political', but only at the expense of a massively impoverished definition of 'politics' itself. Neither strand of inquiry survived the radical upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is not the place to review the theoretical enthusiasms of post-1960s anthropology – structural Marxism and symbolic anthropology, feminist anthropology and post-modernism. Between them they have contributed a much more sophisticated approach to culture and cultural difference, and a heightened awareness of the quotidian workings of power. They have not, as yet, done much to re-invigorate the study of post-colonial politics. As an anthropological topic it has died from an early excess of certainty, and my task in the rest of this lecture is to attempt to revive it. I shall do this by looking at two possible sources of uncertainty in our apprehension of the political: 'horizontal' uncertainty as politics seeps through areas of life where, theoretically, it has no proper place; and 'vertical' uncertainty induced by the cultural elasticity of the notion of 'representation' which is central to the modern political project.

Identifying the political

This argument is the development of a long, slow process of reflection which was triggered by events I witnessed more than a decade ago. In the second half of 1982 I was living in a sprawling rural settlement in central Sri Lanka, alternating between anxiety and boredom in a mood familiar to most fieldworkers. Then, suddenly, an election broke out in the village, neighbours ceased to smile at each other in their usual neighbourly way, and my fieldnotes started to expand exponentially as political rivals sought me out in order to get their verbal retaliation in first. By the end of the election, one side – the losers – were cowering fearfully in their houses, awaiting attack from the other side – the winners. But in this village at this time the winners contented themselves with visiting the pleasures of non-violent humiliation on their opponents – dancing in the street, parading around the village, chanting insults and drinking. The usual political stuff, in other words.

But somehow it still seemed rather more than this. As an undergraduate in Edinburgh I remember the professor of politics starting his first-year lectures with the helpful observation that, in strictly statistical terms, any direct political engagement in Britain could be classified as a deviant activity. Not so in this village in Sri Lanka, where all (or nearly all) were involved and implicated, where everyone seemed to share a fascination with politics, both local and national, and where a surprisingly high proportion of the village population were publicly identified as belonging to one of the two major national parties; where in fact the political permeated the texture of everyday life, even while the state itself often seemed quite remote and foreign. The domain of the 'political', in this place at this particular moment had expanded and seeped into surprising areas of life: a case of spirit possession, a dispute about stray buffaloes and a marital break-up were all explained to me as the routine product of what people called 'politics' (*desapalanaya*). At the same time, in a village 100 or so miles to the north, the bitter divisions of party political affiliation shifted into a different register as a local god, through the medium of a woman in possession, appealed

for the two political parties to come back together in a collective village ritual (Brow 1990; 1996).

I could expand this ethnographic case at much greater length, and have done so elsewhere (Spencer 1990). In particular, I tried to show the way in which nationalist attachments had roots in particular social and historical circumstances, and also the way in which the appropriation of the post-colonial state as a resource in local politics introduces a new element of danger in the fabric of local argument. But my point here is this. Mass politics, which were introduced in Sri Lanka with universal suffrage in 1931 and enthusiastically embraced by the population in subsequent elections, presented people such as these villagers with a new possibility: the creation of an apparently bounded and structured social arena in which to work through all manner of purely local tensions and differences, while nevertheless seeking more of the good things and social standing that follow from access to the state – something between a tournament of value like the kula, and a rite of reversal like carnival. But the bounds and the structure were not at all stable: after a few more years, these village political divisions mutated again, as young opponents of the ruling party attacked what they saw as agents of a corrupt government, while the state responded with a wave of counter-terror in which thousands died or disappeared (Chandraprema 1991; Moore 1993; Spencer n.d.).

What happened in Sri Lanka was by no means unprecedented. There are obvious similarities to the Indonesian massacres of 1965 (vividly evoked by Geertz [1995: 5-11]) and to what became known as *la violencia* in Guatemala (Warren 1993). In Sri Lanka, the institutional structure of post-colonial politics – elections, parties, political argument in newspapers – became, obviously, the site for certain kinds of instrumental action, the 'politics' of one kind of classic political anthropology. But it also became a site for much else – intense moral evaluation, the articulation of collective images of nation and community, and sometimes plain old public entertainment.[10] If we want to make sense of situations like this, it is self-evidently insufficient to analyse them only in terms of strategies or group morphology, of interest groups or youth 'frustration'. We have to open ourselves to the empirical unpredictability of it all – tracking the 'political' from mass rallies to village arguments, in some cases into houses and families and through the particularity of everyday practice.

They cannot represent themselves

That is, as it were, the ethnographic problem. Situations like these also pose problems of historical interpretation. Elsewhere I have tried to analyse Sri Lankan politics in terms of one set of political institutions – those of representative electoral democracy, with their own history and implications – being re-interpreted in an idiom derived from a different political tradition, that of Buddhist kingship (Spencer 1990). Such re-interpretation is never entirely predictable nor is it ever complete, as other examples demonstrate.[11] Whereas indigenous ideas about kingship have continued to animate the political imagination in Sri Lanka, but without any kings to do the animating since the early nineteenth century, in Nepal kings have clung on despite constant pressure from the outside. But, as Richard Burghart made clear in a fascinating series of articles on the Nepali polity (1996: 191-318), a combination of external and

internal pressures forced the kings to come to terms with the idea of the nation-state as a coherent, bounded entity whose sovereignty could in some sense be represented as an expression of the will of some other entity called 'the people'. Of course, even the idea of Nepal as an exemplary Hindu kingdom has its roots in the era of high colonialism. Nevertheless, according to the official ideal of kingship, the king in some sense incorporated the people themselves as part of the body politic. Internal divisions, of the sort which are perfectly normal in party politics, were quite literally unthinkable. Nepali political culture was, in Burghart's terms, 'lordly': 'the public domain was personally represented by the sovereign whose will was executed by his state agents for the common good of an indivisible body politic' (1996: 302-3). Political parties were the expression of private interests and therefore had no place in the public sphere as conceived in the radically different idiom of the official Nepali political imagination. It followed that 'private' criticism posed no special threat to the powers-that-be, until the moment when it became publicly visible.

But the fact that divisions were unthinkable does not mean that they did not exist. In the course of a referendum on the constitution in 1980, the powers-that-be were in fact forced to organize themselves into something looking awfully like a political party, in order to advance the view that parties were unnecessary and undesirable elements in the body politic. The result was something between Flannery O'Connor's fictional 'Holy Church of Christ without Christ' and the SDP of early 1980s Britain: a party pledged to take the politics out of politics. When Burghart carried out fieldwork in 1984-5 there was a rising tide of dissent within the polity, looking for some medium in which to express itself. This in turn involved imagining a space for legitimate criticism. Burghart analyses the way in which a teacher's strike was organized as an expression of dismay *within* the body of the state, rather than a protest directed *at* the state from some external public space: like a limb or an organ signifying through its pain a malaise affecting the whole body. The results were complex and involuted, each gesture on either side requiring repeated interpretation in order to tease out the intention behind the forms of lordly deference. How much irony was there lurking in that marginally too lavish expression of praise and deference? Why did the official newspaper announce that nothing had happened on one particular day, unless it was conceding that 'something' – a protest, a strike – was widely expected to happen, and in so conceding was it granting that 'something' the right to exist?

The Nepali case, as well as demonstrating the unexpected results of a historical moment in which the language of representative democracy coexists on a more or less equal footing with the language of divine monarchy, also highlights a recurring predicament in the practice of representative democracy: how do we construe the very idea of 'representation' itself? The idea of representation was crucial to the colonial political project in South Asia well before it became attached to the specific idea of representative democracy. In the mid-nineteenth century, according to Cohn's well-known essay on the representation of authority in colonial India (1983), official thinking was torn between two ideas about the nature of colonial rule and the sources of colonial authority. On the one hand, India could be seen as a relic of 'feudal' society: if so, the colonial project required the identification of a native aristocracy to play the role of feudal

intermediary between the Queen and her Indian subjects. Alternatively, India could be viewed in a more 'modernist' way in which the whole society could be subdivided into differing communities, each with a collective interest which should be brought to the attention of government by an appropriate representative

Cohn's opposition between 'feudal' and 'representational' modes of colonial government, evokes Tom Paine's distinction in *The rights of man* between the 'hereditary' and the 'representative' principle; but this distinction has never been as stark as Cohn sometimes seems to imply (Paine 1989). One way to link community, representation and interests is to posit a social world which is divided into 'natural' communities, each of which has its natural representatives – castes, tribes, races, religious communities, with their chiefs, landlords, princes, aristocrats (cf. Freitag 1989). What is at stake in Cohn's two types of colonial authority is not the issue of representation, but the link between the representative and those who are represented. Broadly speaking, colonial modernizers were more inclined to allow some element of choice in people's relation to their representatives. Colonial traditionalists, on the other hand, were more likely to imagine the people sunk in the mire of unreflective traditional thought to such an extent that at any one time there could only ever be one natural representative: think of those Rhodesian officials in the 1960s who, according to Lan (1985: 186), became convinced that all that was needed to win the hearts and minds of an ever-more obviously disaffected peasantry was possession of the right genealogies from which to appoint the right chiefs.

The issue of representation is not only a colonial problem. The rhetoric of political representation – the idea that the government is made up of men and women who can confidently claim to represent the interests and desires of the people – is ubiquitous in the post-colonial world, and by no means confined to those pockets of it, like India and Sri Lanka, where electoral politics have more or less survived intact. The problems and contradictions in the idea of 'representation' are as manifest in European history as they are in the history of the ex-colonies. Raymond Williams (1983) notes the earliest usage of 'represent' in the fourteenth century in which the word carries the sense of 'making present', as in paintings or plays, and its swift accrual of the slightly different meaning of 'standing for' or 'symbolizing'. As 'represent', 'representative' and 'representation' take on their modern political sense, this tension between 'making present' the views of an absent person or persons, and 'standing for' or 'symbolizing' the persons themselves, remains (Williams 1983: 266-9). A king may represent the kingdom, just as the crown may represent the king, but my local Labour Party delegate to the party conference claims to represent the interests of the party's members in a somewhat different way.

This tension at the heart of the political vocabulary of the modern state is there, for example, when Marx writes of the French peasantry: 'They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented' (1973: 239). Although this sentence is probably most familiar now as the epigraph to Said's *Orientalism*, Marx was *not* writing about the peasantry's ability to write books about themselves. It takes a less political and more scholastic age to assume this was their problem. He was puzzling, as so many good leftists have puzzled since, about the peasantry's political support for a representative, Louis Napoleon, whose intentions and interests seemed so much at odds with their own.[12] What is

interesting for my purposes, though, is the semantic or cultural 'emptiness' of the idea of political representation. We all know there is a link between representative and represented, but we cannot necessarily specify what form that link may take. It may be a link of common substance: fathers and kings may like to think of themselves as embodying those they are said to represent. Or it may be a contractual link, in which the representative is only temporarily mandated to put forward the views of those she represents, while those represented retain the right of recall at the first sign of their views being misrepresented. Historically, the left has tried to treat all this as a matter of institutional arrangements, to be resolved by structures of committees and meetings and delegates, but also it is inevitably a problem of symbolism, in which issues of trust, community and agency are worked through at a rhetorical level (cf. Cruces & Diaz de Rada in press). This is one point at which culture re-enters the political stage, and it is thus a point at which other people's politics can look the same, because they seem to share the same language of 'states', 'governments' and the representation of the people. Nevertheless they may be extraordinarily different, because there is huge scope for different ways in which to construe the idea of the 'people' as well as the idea of 'representation' which supposedly binds them to the government.

Nowhere better demonstrates this conjuring trick of a politics at once apparently familiar, yet in practice startlingly different, than the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The dominant political personality of the post-Independence period was M.G. Ramachandram, or MGR as he was usually known (Dickey 1993a; 1993b). After playing the hero in hundreds of popular Tamil films, he became chief minister of the state in 1977, and retained power until his death in 1987. When he died, his grief-stricken followers rioted in some places and committed suicide in others. It is estimated that between 2 and 3 million people attended his funeral (Dickey 1993a: 351 n.6). MGR seems to have inhabited an extraordinary cultural space midway between the fantasies of the movie industry and the fantasies of the political arena. Both his caste identity, and even his linguistic or ethnic origins, were surprisingly hazy for a region and a political order in which these are usually thought to matter a great deal. His successor, Jayalalitha, who was electorally defeated in 1996 after a surreal and embattled spell as Chief Minister, played his lover in so many films that no one is sure quite where her screen relationship with MGR ended and her political relationship started. Many fans believed MGR could never die. In films he played the heroic champion of the poor, singing: 'If you follow me the poor will never suffer'. His political stature was summed up by the informant who told Dickey 'MGR is a god; MGR is a king; MGR is my leader' (Dickey 1993a: 351). Dickey presents a convincing account of the ways in which MGR used the institutional structure of his fan clubs as a political base, as well as of the ways in which his political persona grew out of deep Tamil preoccupations with heroes, kings, and the proper relation between leaders and followers.

What we have, in short, is a kind of politics in which the force of the idea of 'representation' has connected it to other areas of popular culture, other kinds of representation – movies and their heroes and villains. Of course, this 'vertical' uncertainty (inherent in the idea of political representation) links to 'horizontal' uncertainty (in the areas of life which are implicated in what people

take to be politics). In this case, fan clubs become key political organizations, young men their most devoted activists, and fights between groups of rival fans a recurring feature of political argument. Of course, political science has a special subset of dustbin categories for politics like this – 'personalistic', 'parochial', 'primordial'. But, needless to say, these sound more like terms of admonishment than possible sources of enlightenment.

Conclusion: imagination and uncertainty

I have suggested repeatedly that the anthropological study of actually existing politics has been hindered by an excess of certainty. Classic political anthropology set out with an impoverished sense of the political, rendered yet weaker by the infusion of bad ideas from post-war political science. The neo-Weberians of 1960s Chicago successfully recognized the cultural complexity of the emerging post-colonial world, but greatly exaggerated the transparency of 'modern' values and institutions. My examples have been intended to demonstrate that the politics of the post-colonial world deserve better than this. Three converging trends in recent anthropology may, between them, begin to rectify this: what we may think of as the 'politics-and-poetics-of-everything' strand in post-*Writing culture* anthropology; the extraordinarily fertile interdisciplinary area known as 'post-colonial theory'; and the emerging anthropology of the institutional structures of modernity. None can be dealt with adequately here, but let me sketch in some of the obvious strengths and weaknesses of each.[13]

The recent enthusiasm for 'power' as an analytic concern, especially in American anthropology, is usually traced to the impact of the later work of Foucault, and to a lesser extent to the work of Gramsci and Raymond Williams. I have already alluded to Sahlins's uproarious lampoon of what he calls 'power functionalism' in post-*Writing culture* American anthropology: 'hegemonizing is homogenizing: the dissolution of specific cultural forms into generic instrumental effects' (1993: 15). Rather than conferring significance on whatever cultural form is under discussion, Sahlins argues, vulgar imitations of Foucault serve 'to trivialize such terms as "domination", "resistance", "colonization", even "violence" and "power"' (1993: 17). In this literature, 'power' is at once a new source of premature analytic certainty, easily as impressive and encompassing as those earlier certainties from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s which I criticized earlier, and a term of such theoretical looseness as to admit everything – and nothing. And if everything is 'political', what word can we use to mark out that special area of life which people themselves refer to as 'politics' (cf. Turner 1994: 42-3)? The problem is real enough because, for whatever reason, mass politics – parties, elections, the state – has been more often than not absent from this literature.

It is not hard to see why these topics may prove uncongenial to the spirit of sentimental radicalism which has swept the American academic scene in the last decade or so, but there is no particular intellectual reason why post-structural approaches to power should not connect to, and illuminate, the empirical tracking of the political I have advocated. Rather than single out examples of the 'trivializing' use of the domination-hegemony nexus, of which there are many, I would prefer to point to writers who are working to connect post-structural approaches to power with issues of mass politics: most obviously Scott (1990),

but also, in their recent work, Gupta (1995) and Ferguson (1990) and, in an altogether more spectacular key, Mbembe (1992; Mbembe & Roitman 1995).

Post-colonial theory is more obviously problematic, not least because of the extraordinary quantity of argument and analysis to have appeared under that broad rubric in recent years. This work ranges from detailed critical analysis of colonial texts and colonial societies on the one hand, to the most sweeping meta-theoretical claims for a radical break from the accumulated intellectual baggage of the Western past on the other.[14] Most anthropologists are familiar by now with the force of Said's seminal critique of Orientalism (1978), even if few will have managed to keep pace with the dizzying theoretical excurses of Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1993). Clearly Gellner's (1994) unfortunate warning that this was a topic 'too important' to be left to 'lit crit' has received the response it probably deserved. Nevertheless, an outsider is entitled to feel a little bemused by the general direction of post-colonial theory, in which claims for political and theoretical importance sometimes mask the limited empirical terrain that is being traversed: on the whole there have been rather more rereadings of Fanon than analyses of the tragedy of recent Algerian politics, and much more on Conrad than on post-colonial Zaire. Again, this is not to say that these readings of colonial discourse cannot illuminate issues in the post-colonial present; it is merely to note that the textual products of the era of high colonialism often seem more attractive as objects of academic attention.

I suspect this empirical skewing connects to the paradoxical moral certainty of the colonial as an object of study, a moral certainty as comforting in its way as Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's hermetic world of 'scientific' political structures must have been in the opening months of the second world war. The high moral and political tone of post-colonial debate is, though, aligned with theoretical positions which pride themselves on their ability to embrace the uncertain and indeterminate. Take, for example, Spivak's argument for the relevance of deconstruction:

> This impossible 'no' to a structure which one critiques, yet inhabits intimately, is the deconstructive philosophical position, and the everyday here and now of 'postcoloniality' is a case of it. Further, the political claims that are most urgent in decolonized space are tacitly recognized as coded within the legacy of imperialism: nationhood, constitutionality, citizenship, democracy, socialism, even culturalism. Within the historical frame of exploration, colonization, and decolonization, what is being *effectively* reclaimed is a series of regulative political concepts, the supposedly authoritative narrative of whose production was written elsewhere, in the social formations of Western Europe. They are thus being reclaimed, indeed claimed, as concept metaphors for which no *historically* adequate referent may be advanced from postcolonial space (1993: 281).

There seem to be at least two ways to read this. The case for deconstruction seems to be that concepts such as 'democracy' and 'socialism' originated 'elsewhere', and for all their contemporary urgency in the post-colonial world, they have no 'historically adequate referent' there. This would imply, in an argument bizarrely similar to the complacencies of modernization theory, that such terms have a more or less unproblematic referent in the history of the West. In a different reading, these words have no 'historically adequate referent' *anywhere*, not least because they belong to a language of political aspiration, to many different manifestations of the political imagination, rather more than they are tied to any specific historical 'referent'. If this is the case, the 'West' itself is a

chimera and 'Western politics' are as likely to depart from our theoretical and empirical expectation as any other kind of politics. In the end, the interpretation of post-colonial politics may be no different in kind from the interpretation of all politics. This argument strikes me as much more promising, not least because it raises important empirical questions about the political structures of modernity.

It is time, surely, to bring down the whole house of cards. I have argued for an anthropology of actually existing politics that would endeavour to gaze wide-eyed at whatever happened to be designated political in our own and other people's lives. This is easier said than done, for again and again we seem constrained by prior, narrow ideas of what we might call political. In fact, the most persistent apprehension of the political – the very idea of a politics of pure calculative instrumentality – has its own, recent and relatively shallow, history and as such is better treated as an object for anthropological interpretation than as a source of anthropological insight (Hirschman 1977; cf. MacIntyre 1985: 85-7). Latour (1993) has recently called for a symmetrical anthropology which would apply the anthropological virtues of ethnographic holism to the impossible dichotomies of the modern, not least those dichotomies which fence off the practice of politics from other areas of life. Latour's project is grandiose, and not a little obscure, but its promise is delightful: to expose the fictional separations which have guaranteed the integrity of modern self-descriptions. The task I have been outlining is related – the empirical dissolution of the certainties of some kinds of modern social inquiry in the unexpectedness of actually existing politics. No more flights will be made by Imperial Airways; ethnographers will have instead to travel on foot, relying on the natives for directions. The potential of Malinowski's obsessional empiricism is as radical (and impossible) as ever.

NOTES

[1] On which see James (1973) and Stocking (1991; 1995).

[2] To take two examples close to my own interest, neither Kapferer's (1988) study of Australian and Sri Lankan nationalism, nor van der Veer's (1994) otherwise far superior study of Hindu and Muslim nationalism in India, waste much time on the relationship between democratic institutions and nationalist movements, preferring to concentrate on more anthropologically-correct topics like ritual and pilgrimage. Handler's (1988) excellent study of Québecois nationalism is equally silent on the changing political context, concentrating on the intellectual

lineaments of this nationalism but leaving the reader puzzled as to the source of its rapidly fluctuating political fortunes.

3 For example, the paucity of references to the word 'democracy' in the indexes to Vincent's huge *Anthropology and politics* (1990) and Gledhill's recent survey of political anthropology (1994).

4 For an illuminating example of the different path taken by recent anthropological studies of the political in West Africa compare the apocalyptic syntheses offered by Mbembe (1992) and Bayart (1993), with the empirical response of Rowlands (1995; cf. Rowlands & Warnier 1988).

5 For a sympathetic and comprehensive review of this period see Vincent (1990: 308-87); Victor Turner's work characteristically evades my generalizations, and it is notable that the introduction to his co-edited *Political anthropology* (Swartz, Turner & Tuden 1966) is much broader, both in its sense of what might count as political, and in its suggestions for places where anthropologists might turn for help.

6 Ironically this position, of course, has a long history in political philosophy itself, going back at least as far as Machiavelli (1988 [1513]: ch. xv), before being reiterated by writers as diverse as Hobbes, Spinoza, Vico and Rousseau (Hirschman 1977: 12-14). In their joint introduction to the volumes that emerged from the 1963 ASA conference, Gluckman and Eggan survey the contributors' relations with neighbouring disciplines and approvingly note the extensive use of arguments from political science (and equally approvingly note the relative paucity of reference to cultural and psychological anthropology [Gluckman & Eggan 1965: xx-xxi]). The most frequently quoted political scientist was David Easton, author of a then influential critique of political anthropology. His reduction of values and morals to 'the emotional response of an individual to a state of real or presumed facts' (in Taylor 1985a [1967]: 60) might explain the marked lack of enthusiasm in Durkheimian Oxford for this style of anthropology.

7 Something equivalent to a 'substantivist' position in political anthropology can be discerned in the central claim, shared by virtually all writers, that the study of 'politics' is not confined to the study of the state, and kinship, religion, etc., can all have political functions. But no one, so far as I can see, took the further step of arguing that the formal models of political science are therefore misleading in non-Western political contexts.

8 Compare, for example, the comments by Mayer and Nicholas on the absence of political ideology and political values in their analyses of Indian politics (Mayer 1966: 103-4; Nicholas 1968: 245). In fairness, though, it should be pointed out that the 'morphological' concerns of this generation of ethnographers did force onto the analytic agenda certain issues which might otherwise have remained hidden (e.g., the political role of caste), while also attempting to grapple with issues of scale and linkage which remain unresolved in the anthropological study of politics (e.g., Bailey 1963; Fox 1969).

9 For recent memoirs of this brief experiment see Geertz (1995: 111-14) and the more caustic comments of Schneider (1995: 189-90) and Anderson (1995).

10 In the words of one Indian commentator: 'Too much has come to be expected out of politics in India ... [I]ncreasingly, politics has been taken to be so versatile a tool of communication that other levels of social action have inadvertently been dispensed with. In India ... there is a poverty of popular culture ...' (Banerjee 1990: 64).

11 For example, see, among other studies in Southeast Asia, Anderson (1972), Sarkisyanz (1965) and Tambiah (1976).

12 It is especially ironic that the puzzle Marx discusses hinges on the problem of a social class apparently sharing common objective interests, yet unable to exercise collective agency, while the thrust of most post-colonial, post-Said criticism has been the dogmatic substitution of contingency and fluidity for any allusion to collective identity or collective interests (cf. Washbrook & O'Hanlon 1992).

13 Space permits no more than the sketchiest of sketches; readers who feel especially cheated by the brevity of this discussion may be reassured (or not) to know that this is precisely the area of the author's current work in progress.

14 Illuminating arguments can be found in, *inter alia*: Ahmad 1992; 1995; Appiah 1992; Dirks 1992; Dirlik 1994; Prakash 1990; 1992; 1995; Said 1989; Washbrook & O'Hanlon 1992. Thomas (1994: 33-65) has provided a sympathetic but nuanced anthropological critique of some post-colonial theory.

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Le post-colonialisme et l'imagination politique

Résumé

Cet article considère l'ascension et le déclin de l'anthropologie politique dans le contexte du remplacement global des régimes coloniaux par des régimes post-coloniaux. L'anthropologie politique classique a culminé dans les années 60 et elle est restée résolument demodée depuis. Ni l'intérêt récent prêté à la notion de pouvoir en anthropologie, ni l'attention théorique plus générale qu'a reçue le post-colonialisme ne semblent avoir apporté une clarification théorique du phénomène de la politique post-coloniale. S'inspirant de l'intérêt tardif de Malinowski aux questions de transculturation, l'article défend l'avantage d'une approche radicalement empirique à la politique post-coloniale, une approche qui puisse reconnaître la diversité de l'expérience post-coloniale et les contours imprévisibles des compréhensions de la politique par différents acteurs. L'article utilise des exemples anthropologiques récents de l'Asie du Sud et se concentre sur les questions de démocratie et de représentation pour illustrer tentativement une telle approche.

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, Adam Ferguson Building, George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LL, U.K.