11 Conclusions

This book has dealt with the 'content' of anthropological theory. Yet anthropological theory is not a vessel to be emptied of old ideas and filled with new ones, or stuffed with more virulent paradigms to strangle the weak ones. Anthropological theory undoubtedly has 'form' as well as content, and in this final chapter we shall focus initially on the question of what form this might be, then return to the issue of the relation between form and content, first with some reflections on the future of anthropological ideas and then with a concluding summary.

National traditions and the future of anthropological theory

It is commonplace to think of anthropology in terms of national traditions, and often useful to do so. I think it is especially useful when trying to envisage the roots of and relations between the Boasian and Malinowskian/Radcliffe-Brownian traditions, and also the relation between anthropology and sociology (which at least had the potential to become part of our discipline, or ours part of theirs). Each new development is partly the product of individual thinking, of course, but also very much the product of the circumstances in which these thinkers found themselves. Some of these circumstances were, in fact, single events or clusters of events occurring at around the same time. Among dates to remember, I would pick out 1748 (which marks the publication of Montesquieu's highly influential book, *The Spirit of the Laws*), 1871 (the date of publication of numerous important works, and that of the founding of the Anthropological Institute), 1896 (when Boas established anthropology at Columbia University), and 1922 (Rivers' death, the publication of important works by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, and the approximate date each of them began teaching in earnest their functional theories). Figure 11.1 illustrates this vision of the history of anthropology, together with the development of sociology and the false start of the mainly German philological tradition.

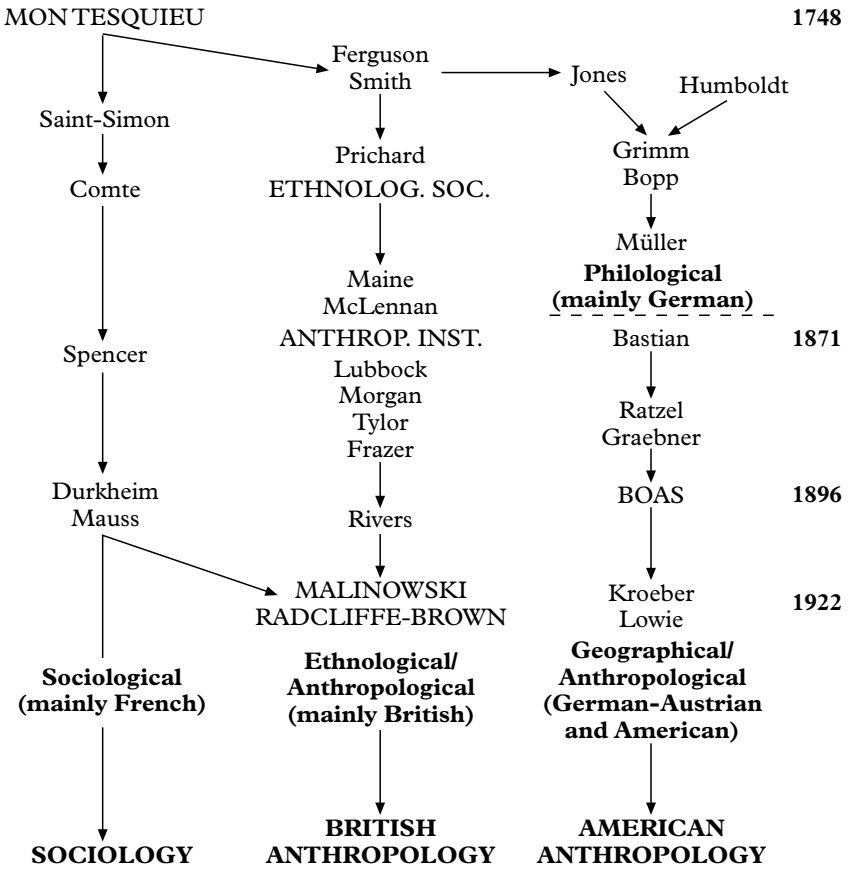

Figure 11.1 Three traditions

That said, it is not always easy to define traditions in anthropology along national lines. Fortes more than once remarked that modern social anthropology contains 'two distinct lines of descent':

> I see one as going back through Radcliffe-Brown, Lowie, and Rivers, to Morgan and Maine in particular, and the other as going back through Kroeber, Malinowski, and Frazer, to Tylor and to some extent Boas. I see the first line as the source of our structural concepts and theories, the second as the source of our speciality in the study of facts of custom, or culture. (Fortes 1969: 14)

This confounds the notion that American anthropology is the tradition concerned with culture, while British anthropology is the tradition concerned with society (Radcliffe-Brown, Rivers, Maine, Malinowski,

Frazer, and Tylor were British; and Lowie, Morgan, Kroeber, and Boas were American). Fortes went on to say that in the metaphorically 'double descent system' which makes up anthropology, each anthropologist belongs to both descent groups and takes from each according to the task at hand.

Integration of all theoretical approaches is one logical possibility. However, it is not likely that a single agreed paradigm will emerge, at least in the short term. What is likely is that there will be an integration of ideas on the part of individuals. This has been in practice for many years, beginning with people such as Edmund Leach (with his blend of structuralist and action-oriented ideas). Nowadays many anthropologists fall, at times, within the scope of more than one paradigm, and some blend two or more. Very broadly three contemporary approaches or emphases may be noted: interpretation, action, and structure. The relation between paradigms associated with such approaches has already been noted (in chapter 10), but others may be possibilities. For example, another set sometimes discussed is that of structure, event, and history (see Augé 1982 [1979]). In their different ways, regional comparison and Marxism may be said to have elements of both structure and history, whereas other approaches could potentially mix event with either of these two (see Holy and Stuchlik 1983).

Today there are a great number of theoretical perspectives for anthropologists to choose from, and these are each made up of many lines of influence. The possibilities for combining them are enormous. This is a positive and truly postmodern tendency. The danger is that the narrower postmodernist project might hold sway, with non-postmodernly correct positions being rejected simply because they make explicit their pre-postmodern origins. However, the acceptance of a diversity of approaches – with the utilization of theoretical ideas according to topic of concern – is at least as old as the early relativism of Franz Boas. Indeed, even before that, anthropologists were free to accept other influences and combine perspectives. For example, Morgan and Tylor happily incorporated diffusionist elements into their specific unilinear-evolutionist schemes.

Anthropologists also operate at different levels of theory: in grand theory, in middle range theory, and increasingly in specific theoretical debates. Anthropology as a whole (including biological as well as cultural anthropology) retains a long-standing concern with two quite different problems: the understanding of human nature and the study of cultural diversity. In the eighteenth-century Enlightenment the former was the main interest. With the development of anthropology proper, in the nineteenth century, cultural diversity became prominent in the hands of the polygenists. Later it came to be what unilinear evolutionism was

trying to explain. With Boas and the early relativists, diversity was extolled as a wonder of humanity, and it has seen some resurgence in recent years. Since the 1970s, relativism has come back and swamped both the old functionalist interests in social laws and the structuralist (including structural-Marxist) interests in cultural universals.

Further thoughts on histories of anthropology

Can there ever be a true history of a discipline? Or, the converse, is all history 'Whig history'? I think there are good grounds for favouring the latter, inherently relativistic, view, or at least for admitting that whenever anthropologists put pen to paper they will come out with a somewhat Whiggish version of events. 'Whig history' is a phrase coined by Sir Herbert Butterfield around 1931, when he said that historians have all too often seen history as a conflict between progressives and reactionaries, where the progressives (Whigs) eventually win and bring about changes effecting the present situation. Whig history is thus subjective and 'presentist', and that is why true historians do not like it (see, e.g., Stocking 1968 [1965]: 1-12). Good history, they say, is 'historicist', in a very precise sense of that word.

Yet much of the history of anthropology, especially that written by practising anthropologists, is presentist because that history is relevant to today's concerns. It is also, in the hands of several practitioners, *mythical* in the sense that Malinowski (1948 [1925]: 79, 120) used the word. By this I mean that history gives anthropologists a 'mythical charter' by which to view their own place in the discipline. I would not deny that my own history of the discipline is somewhat 'mythical', 'presentist', and 'Whiggish'. Such a heretical view is acceptable to me because in this book I do not claim to be presenting *the history* of anthropology, but only one possible history among many. More accurately, I am presenting snippets of history chosen and juxtaposed to show the complex connections among the different ideas which make up, not the history of anthropology, but anthropological theory.

There are other possible histories, and there can be more complex uses of history to illustrate ideas. The simple 'great man' view is found in many books, for example, in Adam Kuper's *Anthropology and Anthropologists* (1996 [1973]) or Jerry Moore's *Visions of Culture* (1997). In contrast, L. R. Hiatt chooses a unique method of historical portrayal in *Arguments about Aborigines* (Hiatt 1996). He focuses on aspects of Aboriginal society (gender relations, conception beliefs, political organization, land issues, etc.) and the ways in which each has been interpreted by successive generations of anthropologists.

In *A Century of Controversy* Elman Service (1985) focuses on the speci-

fics of anthropological debate, with issues like the status of kinship terminologies or the nature of culture coming to the forefront. Murray Leaf, in *Man, Mind, and Science* (1979), virtually sets aside anthropological debate in favour of a history of anthropology seen in terms of philosophical questions. Robert Layton's recent book, *An Introduction to Theory in Anthropology* (1997), lies in-between. Layton touches on both debates and philosophical questions (as well as questions of ethnographic interpretation), but largely ignores pre-functionalist anthropology and downplays national traditions. Jack Goody's *The Expansive Moment* (1995) and Henrika Kuklick's *The Savage Within* (1991) present social histories of British anthropology, but they differ profoundly in method and the interpretation of that history. James Urry, in *Before Social Anthropology* (1993), blends several approaches, as his is a collection of his own diverse essays on the history of British anthropology.

This list is certainly not exhaustive, but it gives some idea of the range of possibilities that have, to date, been realized. I hope also that it confirms my feeling that there is no such thing as *the* history of anthropology, any more than an ethnographer today could claim to be writing *the* ethnography of his or her 'people'.

Concluding summary

I do not accept that old anthropological theories die with their proponents. Rather, I hold that in general they are either incorporated into new theoretical trends, or they return in some later generation in a different guise. The foundations of our discipline were there in the Enlightenment, especially in the notion of the social contract (the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century basis of all social science), but the discipline itself emerged in the nineteenth century. The arguments of early theorists remain worthy of close scrutiny, partly because they illustrate so well the character of incipient and past anthropology. They are important equally because anthropologists of later times, and even today, define their own positions in relation to those of earlier writers – either in opposition to them or, not uncommonly, in the augmentation and transformation of their theoretical notions.

Evolutionism is often thought of as a nineteenth-century theory. But then, what about the preconceptions of the late twentieth century? Evolution is not entirely unrelated to the commonplace idea of progress or to the notion of social development. 'Progress', in fact, was a very nineteenth-century concept, and it is retained in our thinking today. The word 'development', with its present-day meaning of helping out people in poorer countries to be economically, at least, more like people in richer

countries, is only about forty or fifty years old. Yet in some respects, this concept represents a re-invention of Victorian evolutionary theory. It suggests similar ways of thinking about relations between technology, economics, and society to those pursued by nineteenth-century reformers and social theorists. What many nineteenth- and late twentieth-century anthropologists have in common is a desire to understand causal relationships within a framework of 'progress' or 'advancement'. Some late twentieth-century anthropologists have even taken up the search for human cultural origins, and this represents a promising development – given especially the much greater sophistication of relevant cognate disciplines, such as archaeology, linguistics, and human genetics.

Diffusionism in its pure and extreme forms is long dead, but ideas which grew from diffusionist schools, such as an interest in historical particularities and the notion of the culture area, have, if anything, increased in importance in the last few decades. Regional studies within various theoretical traditions are also increasing in prominence, as anthropological studies focus more on similarities and differences between closely related cultures. The increase in regional focus stems directly from the sheer number of ethnographic studies done by modern anthropologists.

Relativism has been a prominent feature of anthropological traditions, especially in North America, since Boas. In a sense, all anthropology is relativistic, as by its very nature the study of variety in human culture does, or at least should, lead to an appreciation of cultures in their own terms. This does not mean that all anthropologists are relativists in any pure sense. On the contrary, both 'pro' and 'anti' positions on relativism are prominent today, and the new relativism of reflexivity and discourse analysis stems not only from a renewal of interest in Boasian ideas, but equally from the influence of interdisciplinary postmodernist foci.

Functionalism, like diffusionism, is a word few anthropologists would be associated with today. However, functionalist methodology remains the basis of anthropological fieldwork. As Edmund Leach used to say, all anthropologists are functionalists when in the field, because they need to see how social institutions are related and how individuals interact with one another. When anthropologists return from the field to their respective universities, he claimed, they reformulate their ideas in frameworks which go beyond functionalism. In Leach's own case, this resulted in a mixture of structuralism and processualism. For others, it results in different mixes, but the functionalist basis of anthropology itself, like its relativist basis, is still there.

Structuralism achieved great notoriety, thanks especially to the work of Lévi-Strauss, which was influential well beyond the boundaries of

anthropology. Within anthropology, Marxist thought frequently had a strong structuralist element. Regional comparison as a theoretical paradigm took much from Lévi-Straussian structuralism and from the Dutch school which preceded it. To some extent too, interpretivist and postmodern perspectives build on structuralism and functionalism precisely by making explicit their rejection of the tenets of these earlier paradigms. They depend, at least in anthropology (perhaps less so in literary criticism, for example), on their own structural opposition to structuralism itself.

Processual and interactive approaches had their heyday in the immediate post-functionalist era, but they too have strengthened with each challenge to the conservatism of static approaches of all kinds. Probably they will never die, as all anthropologists now realize that they must take account of the nuances of social interaction and social change. Processual approaches offered a good antidote to overly formal ideas within functionalism and structuralism. They also enabled function-minded and structurally inclined anthropologists to look more closely at the nuances of social life through their studies of relations between different social or symbolic structures.

Early British interpretive approaches, such as the diverse ones of Evans-Pritchard, Needham, and Ardener at Oxford, built upon functionalism and structuralism while rejecting the analogies on which they are based. They sought structures which are intuitive, and encouraged scepticism of formal approaches and universalistic comparisons. Postmodernist, poststructuralist, feminist, and Marxist approaches all amplify this through their emphasis on the relation between the culture of the anthropologist and the culture of the informant, and more particularly on the relationship between anthropologist and informant as people, each with their own understanding of the other. An added dimension is that the anthropologist, knowing this, must reinterpret his or her own actions and consciousness of purpose in the very process of engagement with the 'other'.

Finally, it is worth reiterating the fact that anthropology is a discipline very conscious of its past. Anthropological theory has a complex history, but its structure can be seen through the influences of individuals, the interplay within and between national traditions, and the development of new foci of interest, new ideas from within and from beyond anthropology itself, and (every few decades) new grand perspectives. Yet there are many ways in which to envisage that history and these relationships. I have put them together in the way that I read them. Others may read, interpret, construct, or deconstruct them differently.