2 Precursors of the anthropological tradition

Most anthropologists would agree that anthropology emerged as a distinct branch of scholarship around the middle of the nineteenth century, when public interest in human evolution took hold. Anthropology as an academic discipline began a bit later, with the first appointments of professional anthropologists in universities, museums, and government offices. However, there is no doubt that anthropological ideas came into being much earlier. *How much earlier* is a matter of disagreement, though not particularly much active debate. Rather, each anthropologist and each historian of the discipline has his or her own notion of the most relevant point at which to begin the story.

From a 'history of ideas' point of view, the writings of ancient Greek philosophers and travellers, medieval Arab historians, medieval and Renaissance European travellers, and later European philosophers, jurists, and scientists of various kinds, are all plausible precursors. My choice, though, would be with the concept of the 'social contract', and the perceptions of human nature, society, and cultural diversity which emerged from this concept. This is where I shall begin.

Another, essentially unrelated, beginning is the idea of the Great Chain of Being, which defined the place of the human species as between God and the animals. This idea was in some respects a forerunner of the theory of evolution, and later in this chapter we shall look at it in that context. Eighteenth-century debates on the origin of language and on the relation between humans and what we now call the higher primates are also relevant, as is the early nineteenth-century debate between the polygenists (who believed that each 'race' had a separate origin) and the monogenists (who emphasized humankind's common descent, whether from Adam or ape). Such ideas are important not only as 'facts' of history, but also because they form part of modern anthropology's perception of itself.

Natural law and the social contract

During the late Renaissance of Western culture and the Enlightenment which followed, there came to be a strong interest in the natural condition of humanity. This interest, however, was not always coupled with much knowledge of the variety of the world's cultures. Indeed, it was often tainted by a belief in creatures on the boundary between humanity and animality – monstrosities with eyes in their bellies or feet on their heads (see Mason 1990). In order for anthropology to come into being, it was necessary that travelogue fantasies of this kind be overcome. Ironically to modern eyes, what was needed was to set aside purported ethnographic 'fact' in favour of reason or theory.

The seventeenth century

The first writers whose vision went beyond the 'facts' were mainly jurists and philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their concerns were with abstract relations between individual and society, between societies and their rulers, and between peoples or nations. The times in which they wrote were often troubled, and their ideas on human nature reflected this. Politics, religion, and the philosophical discourse which later gave rise to anthropology, were intimately linked.

Let us start with Hugo Grotius. Grotius studied at Leiden and practised law in The Hague, before intense political conflicts in the United Provinces (The Netherlands) led to his imprisonment and subsequent escape to Paris. It was there he developed the ideas which gave rise to his monumental *De jure belli ac pacis* (1949 [1625]). Grotius believed that the nations of the world were part of a larger trans-national society which is subject to the Law of Nature. Although his predecessors had sought a theological basis for human society, Grotius found his basis for society in the sociable nature of the human species. He argued that the same natural laws which govern the behaviour of individuals in their respective societies should also govern relations between societies in peace and in war. His text remains a cornerstone of international law. Arguably, it also marks the dawn of truly anthropological speculation on the nature of human society.

Samuel Pufendorf (Puffendorf), working in Germany and Sweden, extended this concern. His works are surprisingly little known in modern anthropology, but intriguingly they long foreshadow debates of the 1980s and 1990s on human 'sociality'. 'Sociality' is a word of recent anthropological invention. Yet it much more literally translates Pufendorf's Latin *socialitas* than the more usual gloss of his anglophone interpreters, 'socia-

bility'. Indeed, Pufendorf also used the adjective *sociabilis*, 'sociable' (or as one modern editor renders it, 'capable of society'). He believed that society and human nature are in some sense indivisible, because humans are, by nature, sociable beings.

Nevertheless, Pufendorf did at times speculate on what human nature might be like without society and on what people did at the dawn of civilization. His conclusions on the latter are striking. His notion of 'there' is where people lived in scattered households, while 'here' is where they have united under the rule of a state: 'There is the reign of the passions, there there is war, fear, poverty, nastiness, solitude, barbarity, ignorance, savagery; here is the reign of reason, here there is peace, security, wealth, splendour, society, taste, knowledge, benevolence' (1991 [1673]: 118).

Meanwhile in a politically troubled England, Thomas Hobbes (e.g. 1973 [1651]) had been reflecting on similar issues. He stressed not a natural proclivity on the part of humans to form societies, but rather a natural tendency towards self-interest. He believed that this tendency needed to be controlled, and that rational human beings recognized that they must submit to authority in order to achieve peace and security. Thus, societies formed by consent and common agreement (the 'social contract'). In the unstable time in which he wrote, his ideas were anathema to powerful sections of society: the clergy, legal scholars, and rulers alike; each opposed one or more elements of his complex argument. Nevertheless, Hobbes' pessimistic view of human nature inspired other thinkers to examine for themselves the origins of society, either rationally or empirically. His vision is still debated in anthropological circles, especially among specialists in hunter-gatherer studies.

John Locke's (1988 [1690]) view of human nature was more optimistic. Writing at the time of the establishment of constitutional monarchy in England, he saw government as ideally limited in power: consent to the social contract did not imply total submission. He believed that the 'state of nature' had been one of peace and tranquillity, but that a social contract became necessary in order to settle disputes. While human sinfulness might lead to theft and possibly to excessive punishment for theft in a state of nature, the development of society encouraged both the preservation of property and the protection of the natural freedoms which people in the state of nature had enjoyed.

The eighteenth century

Locke's liberal views inspired many in the next century, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, though ironically Rousseau's essay *Of the Social Contract* fails to mention him at all. Rather, Rousseau begins with an attack on

Grotius' denial that human power is established for the benefit of the governed. Says Rousseau: 'On this showing [i.e. if we were to follow Grotius], the human species is divided into so many herds of cattle, each with its ruler, who keeps guard over them for the purpose of devouring them' (Rousseau 1973 [1762]: 183). For Rousseau, government and the social contract differed. Government originated from a desire by the rich to protect the property they had acquired. The social contract, in contrast, is based on democratic consent. It describes an idealized society in which people agree to form or retain a means of living together which is beneficial to all.

Social-contract theory assumed a logical division between a 'state of nature' and a 'state of society', and those who advocated it nearly always described it as originating with a people, living in a state of nature, and getting together and agreeing to form a society. The notion was ultimately hypothetical. The likes of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, just as much as opponents of their view (such as David Hume and Jeremy Bentham), perceived the 'state of nature' essentially as a rhetorical device or a legal fiction. The degree to which they believed that early humans really did devise an *actual* social contract is difficult to assess.

Most anthropologists today would accept the view that we cannot separate the 'natural' (in its etymological sense, relating to birth) from the 'cultural' (relating to cultivation), because both are inherent in the very idea of humanity. We inherit this view from these early modern writers who sought to humanize our understandings of law and legal systems.

Definitions of humanity in eighteenth-century Europe

A number of important anthropological questions were first posed in modern form during the European Enlightenment: what defines the human species in the abstract, what distinguishes humans from animals, and what is the natural condition of humankind. Three life forms occupied attention on these questions: 'Wild Boys' and 'Wild Girls' (feral children), 'Orang Outangs' (apes), and 'Savages' (indigenous inhabitants of other continents).

Feral children

Feral children seemed to proliferate in the eighteenth century: 'Wild Peter of Hanover', Marie-Angélique Le Blanc the 'Wild Girl of Champagne' (actually an escaped captive, Native North American), Victor the 'Wild Boy of Aveyron', and so on. These were people found alone in the woods and subsequently taught 'civilized' ways. Peter was brought to

England in the reign of George I and lived to an old age on a pension provided by successive Hanoverian kings. He never did learn to say more than a few words in any language. Le Blanc, on the other hand, eventually learned French and wrote her memoirs, which were published in 1768. Victor, a celebrated case, was probably a deaf-mute; and efforts to teach him to communicate were to have lasting effects on the education of the deaf in general (see Lane 1977).

Anthropological interest in feral children has long since dwindled (see Lévi-Strauss 1969a [1949]: 4–5). This is largely because modern anthropologists are less interested in the abstract, primal 'human nature' which such children supposedly exhibited, and much more concerned with the relations between human beings as members of their respective societies.

The Orang Outang

The Orang Outang is a more complicated matter. In Enlightenment Europe this word, from Malay for 'person of the forest', meant very roughly what the word 'ape' means today (while 'ape' referred to baboons). 'Orang Outang' was a generic term for a creature believed to be almost human, and I retain the eighteenth-century-style initial capital letters and spelling to represent this eighteenth-century concept. More precisely, the Orang Outang was the 'species' that Carolus Linnaeus (1956 [1758]) and his contemporaries classified as *Homo nocturnus* ('night man'), *Homo troglodytes* ('cave man'), or *Homo sylvestris* ('forest man'). Travellers reported these nearly human, almost blind, creatures to be living in caves in Ethiopia and the East Indies. Apparently, neither travellers nor scientists could distinguish accurately between the true orang-utans (the species now called *Pongo pygmaeus*) and the chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes* and *Pan paniscus*). Gorillas (the species *Gorilla gorilla*) were as yet unknown.

The importance of the Orang Outang is highlighted in the debate between two interesting characters, James Burnett (Lord Monboddo) and Henry Home (Lord Kames). Monboddo and Kames were judges of Scotland's Court of Session. Kames (1774) held a narrow definition of humanity. He argued that the differences between cultures were so great that population groups around the world could reasonably be regarded as separate species. He regarded Native Americans as biologically inferior to Europeans and incapable of ever attaining European culture.

Monboddo (1773–92; 1779–99) went to the other extreme. He maintained (incorrectly) that some of the aboriginal languages of North America were mutually intelligible with both Basque and Scots Gaelic. Not only did he regard Amerindians as fully human, he even thought they

spoke much the same language as some of his countrymen! Furthermore, Monboddo extended the definition of humanity to include those who could not speak at all, namely the Orang Outangs of Africa and Asia. He believed that these 'Orang Outangs' were of the same *species* as 'Ourselves' (a category in which he included Europeans, Africans, Asians, and Amerindians alike).

Monboddo's views on the relation between apes and humans are rather more cogent than is generally credited. From the evidence he had, it appeared that his 'Orang Outangs', particularly the chimpanzees of Central Africa, might well be human. Travellers' reports claimed that they lived in 'societies', built huts, made weapons, and even mated with those he called 'Ourselves'. The reports said that they were gregarious, and Monboddo accepted this. Today, we know that orangs in Southeast Asia are relatively solitary, but chimps in Africa are indeed gregarious, make tools, and can certainly be said to possess both culture and society (McGrew 1991).

The essence of Monboddo's theory, however, is language. Just as intellectuals of his day accepted the relatively mute Peter the Wild Boy as human, they should, Monboddo argued, accept the speechless Orang Outang as human too (Monboddo 1779–99 [1784], III: 336–7, 367). In his view, natural humanity came first, then the 'social contract' through which society was formed, then speech and language. Kames, in contrast, did not even accept that Native North Americans had spoken the presumed common language of Eurasia before the biblical Tower of Babel. Thus Kames and Monboddo represent the two most extreme views on the definition of humanity.

Notions of the 'Savage'

'Savage' was not necessarily a term of abuse at that time. It simply connoted living wild and free. The prototypical savage was the Native North American who (although possessing 'culture' in the modern sense of the word) was, in the average European mind, closer to the ideal of 'natural man' than was the Frenchman or Englishman.

The idea of the 'noble savage' is commonly associated with Enlightenment images of alien peoples. This phrase originates from a line in John Dryden's play *The Conquest of Granada*, Part I, first produced in 1692:

> . . . as free as nature first made man,
> Ere the base laws of servitude began,
> When wild in woods the noble savage ran.

Dryden's words became a catch-phrase for the school of thought which

argued that humanity's natural condition was superior to its cultured condition.

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the more typical view of human nature was that humans were but 'tamed brutes'. In the words of Hobbes (1973 [1651]: 65), savage life was 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short'. The relation between nature and society was a matter of much debate. Some conceived this in a Christian idiom. Nature was good, and society was a necessary evil, required in order to control inherited human sinfulness after the Fall of Adam and Eve. Others argued that society represented the true nature of human existence, since humans are pretty much found only in societies. As Pufendorf suggested, humankind's 'natural' existence is social and cultural, and nature and culture are impossible to separate.

Like Monboddo, Rousseau accepted Orang Outangs as essentially human, but unlike Monboddo he thought of them as solitary beings. This in turn was his view of the 'natural' human. He shared with Monboddo an idealization of savage life, but shared with Hobbes an emphasis on a solitary existence for 'natural man' (*l'homme naturel* or *l'homme sauvage*). Rousseau begins the main text of his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1973 [1755]: 49–51) with a distinction between two kinds of inequality. The first kind concerns 'natural inequality', differences between people in strength, intelligence, and so on. The second concerns 'artificial inequality', the disparities which emerge within society. It is artificial inequality that he tries to explain. Instead of being poor, nasty, or brutish, Rousseau's solitary 'natural man' was healthy, happy, and free. Human vices emerged only after people began to form societies and develop the artificial inequalities which society implies.

Rousseau's theory was that societies emerged when people began to settle and build huts. This led to the formation of families and associations between neighbours, and thus (simultaneously) to the development of language. Rousseau's 'nascent society' (*société naissante*) was a golden age, but for most of humankind it did not last. Jealousies emerged, and the invention of private property caused the accumulation of wealth and consequent disputes between people over that wealth. Civilization, or 'civil society' developed in such a way that inequalities increased. Yet there was no going back. For Rousseau, civil society could not abolish itself. It could only pass just laws and try to re-establish some of the natural equality which had disappeared. The re-establishment of natural equality was the prime purpose of government, a purpose which most European governments of his day were not fulfilling. Yet not all societies had advanced at the same rate. Savage societies, in his view, retained some of the attributes of the golden age, and Rousseau

praised certain savage societies in Africa and the Americas for this.

Coupled with earlier doctrines about 'natural law', Rousseau's idealization of simple, egalitarian forms of society helped to mould both the American and the French republics. This idealization also influenced a generation of philosophers in Britain, especially in Scotland. Adam Smith tried to tackle two of Rousseau's key problems: the origin of language (Smith 1970 [1761]), and the development of the importance of private property (1981 [1776]). Adam Ferguson (1966 [1767]) praised Amerindian societies for their lack of corruption and held great sympathy with the 'savages' of all other continents. Indeed, it seems that the 'polished' residents of Lowland Edinburgh thought of him, a Gaelic-speaking Highlander, as a sort of local 'noble savage'.

I believe that we inherit much more than we might at first think from the eighteenth-century imagery of the 'noble savage'. In anthropological theories which emphasize the differences between 'primitive' and 'non-primitive' societies (such as evolutionist ones), the noble savage has survived as the representation of 'nature' in the primitive. In anthropological theories which do not make this distinction (such as relativist ones), the noble savage is retained as a reflection of the common humanity at the root of all cultures.

Sociological and anthropological thought

Standing somewhat apart from the romantic concerns with feral children, Orang Outangs, and noble savages was the sociological tradition embodied by Montesquieu, Saint-Simon, and Comte. Paralleling this, successors to the Scottish Enlightenment argued vehemently over the biological relationships between the 'races'. Both of these developments were to leave their mark in nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropology.

The sociological tradition

The baron de Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1964 [1721]) chronicle the adventures of two fictional Persian travellers who make critical remarks on French society. That book foreshadows not only the genre of ethnography, but also reflexivity (see chapter 10). More importantly though, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (1989 [1748]) explores the forms of government, the temperament of peoples, and the influence of climate on society, with true ethnographic examples from around the world. Central to his argument is the idea of the 'general spirit' (*esprit général*), which is the fundamental essence of a given culture: 'Nature and climate almost

alone dominate savages; manners govern the Chinese; laws tyrannize Japan; in former times mores set the tone in Lacedaemonia; in Rome it was set by the maxims of government and the ancient mores' (1989 [1748]: 310). While Lévi-Strauss once argued that Rousseau was the founder of the social sciences, Radcliffe-Brown gave that honour to Montesquieu; and the styles of the later structuralist and structural-functionalist traditions do owe much to the respective rationalism of Rousseau and empiricism of Montesquieu.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century the comte de Saint-Simon and subsequently his pupil, Auguste Comte, put forward notions which combined Montesquieu's interest in a science of society with a desire to incorporate it within a framework embracing also physics, chemistry, and biology. Saint-Simon wrote little, and he wrote badly. However, in his writings and especially in Comte's famous lecture on social science (1869 [1839]: 166–208), we see the emergence of the discipline that Comte named *sociologie*. The proposed field of sociology comprised the ideas of Montesquieu, Saint-Simon, and other French writers, and also much of what we would later recognize as an evolutionist, anthropological thinking about society.

All the social sciences, sociology included, owe at least part of their origins to what in eighteenth-century English was known as Moral Philosophy. Modern biology grew from eighteenth-century interests in Natural History (as it was then called). Sociology in a sense originated from a deliberate naming of this new discipline by Comte, who clearly saw his sociology as similar in method to biology. Yet, while the linear development of sociology from pre-Comtean ideas, through Comte to his successors is clear, the development of anthropology or ethnology is not. Anthropological ideas preceded both the formation of the discipline and the name for it. As we saw in chapter 1, 'anthropology' and 'ethnology' as labels existed independently and with little association with what later came to be seen as mainstream social anthropology.

Polygenesis and monogenesis

It is often said that the early nineteenth century was an era of little interest to historians of anthropology. Those who might point to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment as the dawn of our science regard the early nineteenth century as a step backwards. Those who would begin in the late nineteenth century regard the earlier part of that century as an age before anthropology's basic principles came to be accepted. Certainly there is truth in both of these views. However, anthropology as we know it depends on the acceptance of the idea of monogenesis, and therefore the

controversy between the monogenists and their opponents marks the first stirring of anthropology as a discipline.

Monogenesis means 'one origin', and polygenesis means 'more than one origin'. Monogenists such as James Cowles Prichard, Thomas Hodgkin, and Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, believed that all humankind had a single origin, whereas their opponents, championed by Robert Knox and later by James Hunt, believed that humankind had many origins and that 'races' were akin to species.

Modern anthropology assumes all humankind to be fundamentally the same, biologically and psychologically. Such a view was inherent in Montesquieu's argument that it was climate, and not biology or mental ability, which made cultures different. In the early nineteenth century such monogenist or evolutionist thinking was regarded as politically liberal, and in some circles downright radical. Theories of cultural evolution, just as much as the later relativist theories of twentieth-century anti-racists (discussed in chapter 7), depend on the acceptance of the essential biological and intellectual similarity of all peoples. While nineteenth-century white European and American evolutionists did feel themselves superior to people of other 'races', they nevertheless believed that all societies had evolved through the same stages. Therefore, they reasoned, the study of 'lower' races could tell them something about the early phases of their own societies. However, polygenists of the early nineteenth century lacked this belief. Therefore, the polygenists did not invent, and could not have invented, anthropology as we understand it today.

Here is where we must part company with the history of ideas and turn instead to the politics of the emerging discipline. The monogenist camp was centred in two organizations: the Aborigines Protection Society or APS, founded 1837, and the Ethnological Society of London or ESL, founded 1843 (see Stocking 1971). The former was a human rights organization, and the latter grew from its scientific wing. Many of the leaders of both were Quakers. At that time, only members of the Church of England could attend English universities, so Quakers wishing to attend university were educated beyond its borders. Prichard (then a Quaker, though later an Anglican) and Hodgkin attended Edinburgh, and Buxton attended Trinity College Dublin. As it happened, Prichard and Hodgkin carried with them views picked up from the last remnant of the Scottish Enlightenment, Dugald Stewart – whose anthropological ideas stem ultimately from Montesquieu. They carried his small monogenist flame through the dark days of polygenist dominance. Prichard, Hodgkin, and Buxton were all medical doctors. They combined their vocation with the passionate furtherance of their beliefs in human dignity

through the APS, and the natural, resulting scientific understanding of humankind through the ESL. Hodgkin helped establish ethnology in France, though he achieved greater fame from his important work in pathology. Buxton became an eminent, reforming Member of Parliament, and one of his particular interests was the improvement of living conditions for the indigenous inhabitants of Britain's African colonies.

The early leader of the polygenists was Robert Knox, the anatomist who dissected the bodies of the victims of Edinburgh's infamous grave-robbers turned murderers, William Burke and William Hare. In *Races of Men: A Fragment* (Knox 1850) he argued, as had Kames, that different human 'races' are virtually different species, and that they had originated separately. Prichard, in various editions of his *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (see, e.g 1973 [1813]), put the monogenist case. His book went into five editions and long stood as an early evolutionist tract. Prichard did not necessarily believe that members of the 'races' they defined were equal in intellectual ability, but he did believe that 'lower' races were capable of betterment. While such a view would be rightly regarded as reactionary today, it was a veritable beacon of liberalism then, in anthropology's darkest age.

With hindsight it is ironic that those who held to polygenesis did take an interest in the differences between human groups. They did call themselves 'anthropologists', whereas most in the monogenist camp preferred the less species-centred term 'ethnologists'. Their battles helped to form the discipline, and it would be denial of this fundamental fact if we were to ignore the battle and remember only our victorious intellectual ancestors, the monogenists, in isolation. We should recall too that the discipline encompasses the study of both the human nature common to all 'races' and the cultural differences between peoples.

Concluding summary

It is impossible to define an exact moment when anthropology begins, but anthropological ideas emerged long before the establishment of the discipline. Crucial to the understanding of what was to come were notions of natural law and the social contract, as formulated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Though these ideas have long since been jettisoned by most social scientists, they mark a baseline for debate about the nature of society.

Eighteenth-century anthropological concerns included feral children, the 'Orang Outang', and notions of 'savage life'. Ethnography as we know it did not then exist. Montesquieu and Rousseau are both today claimed as founders of social science, and the sociological tradition descended

from the former has parallels with the anthropological one. One view of the founding of anthropology is that it stems from the debate between the polygenists and the monogenists of the early nineteenth century. All anthropology today inherits the monogenist premise that humankind is one species.

FURTHER READING

Slotkin's *Readings in Early Anthropology* (1965) presents an excellent selection of short pieces from original sources, while Adams' *Philosophical Roots of Anthropology* (1998) covers in more depth some of the issues touched on here. The classic work on natural law is Gierke's *Natural Law and the Theory of Society* (1934).

My essay '*Orang Outang* and the definition of *Man*' (Barnard 1995) gives further details of the debate between Kames and Monboddo. See also Berry's *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (1997) and Corbey and Theunissen's *Ape, Man, Apeman* (1995). A useful reference book on the period is Yolton's *Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment* (1991). See also Daiches, Jones, and Jones' *A Hotbed of Genius* (1986).

Levine's *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (1995) presents an excellent overview of sociology and general social theory. His approach is similar to the one given in this book for anthropology, though with a greater emphasis on national traditions. Stocking's essay 'What's in a name?' (1991) describes the founding of the Royal Anthropological Institute against a background of dispute between monogenists and polygenists. See also Stocking's introductory essay in the 1973 reprint of Prichard's *Researches into the Physical History of Man*.