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INTRODUCTION
MALINOWSKI'S READING, WRITING, 1904–1914

Robert Thornton with Peter Skalník

This volume makes available for the first time to an English-speaking audience Bronisław Malinowski's earliest, formative writings. With this volume, most of Bronisław Malinowski's previously unpublished or otherwise inaccessible writings have now been published or reissued.[1] Several recent publications have brought to light manuscripts from the beginning and the end of his career (Malinowski 1988; Malinowski and de la Fuente 1982), and other efforts have given us much more insight into the richness and detail of his ethnographic theory and practice. There has been increasing interest in Malinowski in Poland, the country of his birth and education, and Polish scholars have contributed important new studies on Malinowski's intellectual roots in Europe (Ellen et al. 1988; A. Flis 1983, 1984; A. Flis and Paluch 1984; M. Flis and Paluch 1985; Kempny 1979; Kubica and Mucha 1985; Paluch 1981a; Średniawa 1981; Strenski 1981), and we now possess a better understanding of the historical and social context in which he came of age as an anthropologist, a scholar, and a 'good European' (Clifford 1986; Geertz 1967; 1988; Gellner 1987; Stocking 1986; Strathern 1987; Thornton 1985).

ON MALINOWSKI'S WRITINGS FROM 1904 TO 1914

In the light of this, readers of this volume are entitled to ask what value is there now in publishing Malinowski's very earliest work, most of it written before he went 'into the field'. Conventionally – by a convention that Malinowski himself invented, and that commentators have adhered to since – Malinowski's genius lies in his ethnographic work in the field, and in his authorial effort to relate this to the major currents of thought in the period during which he wrote his major works, that is, the period from 1920 to

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1942 when he died suddenly and prematurely (Firth et al. 1957). Of what use, then, is this excursion into his writing before he was 'initiated' as an anthropologist by this *rite de passage* which has become, after him, the *sine qua non* of twentieth-century anthropology?

Several answers to this question emerge from these texts. First, the questions that defined Malinowski fieldwork emerge clearly during the period of his most intense theoretical investigations before leaving Europe. These essays are more pieces in several complex puzzles about the European confrontation with the 'Savage', about self-knowledge and the constructions of selves and others, about the adequacy of European philosophy and social science, and many other issues that extend far beyond the field of anthropology alone (Rapport 1990:7). In reading them we must keep in mind Malinowski's dictum, repeated throughout his published work, that for the social sciences, theory creates facts, not facts theories. They expose the route by which Malinowski came to the 'theories' which defined the 'facts' he collected, for these facts, in turn, have defined part of the subject matter for anthropology since then, just as the methods have helped to shape the practice of anthropology and the body of knowledge that it has created. R. G. Collingwood said that 'a body of knowledge consists not of "propositions", "statements" or "judgments" . . . but of these together with the questions they are meant to answer' (Collingwood 1939, in Stocking 1968:5). These early texts then give us the questions that the ethnographic corpus on the Trobriand Islanders, among his other works, was meant to answer.

Secondly, the essays collected here have a clear and consistent relationship to one another: they map a trajectory of Malinowski's thinking. This train of thought goes from Nietzsche's philosophy, through Mach's empirio-criticism and psychophysics and Frazer's provocative errors and culminates in Malinowski's project for modern anthropology.

Finally, these essays are challenging and valuable in their own right. They address issues which continue to be crucial to the human sciences: relativism, epistemology, the nature of religion, economy, gender, and labour. Although Malinowski's lengthy review of Frazer's *Totemism and Exogamy* may appear today to be ancient history concerning problems long since 'solved', we may read it now as an example of his critical methodology. The

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later essays, while often relying on Frazer for thematic definition, move quickly to become penetrating conceptual explorations of the meanings of terms like 'magic', 'totemism', 'economy', and 'belief', and result in significant 're-valuations' (as Nietzsche urged) of these terms for a new anthropological practice.

Malinowski's correspondence from the period immediately after going to the London School of Economics shows that he wanted to make translations of these works as soon as possible. The eventual decision not to translate then, must be seen as deliberate. There are several likely reasons for this. His criticism of Frazer was written before Frazer had befriended him and his wife. Malinowski may have thought that publication of the sweeping criticisms of Frazer's theories would jeopardize his career. Malinowski probably also realized that his unusual central European scholarship was a valuable intellectual asset not easily available to English-speakers, especially if it could be used to foster the image of the prophet with a mysterious source of new ideas with which to revolutionalize a discipline. Indeed, his research on heroic legend and myth, and his reading of Nietzsche, may well have pushed him in this direction of 'self-fashioning' and myth-making. Finally, it is also possible that once he went to Australia, there was simply no time to do the translation, and by the time he returned it was too late since the writing deriving from the fieldwork certainly claimed higher priority. All these factors are likely to have contributed to the decision not to translate. The result, however, has been to foster speculation about his intellectual roots.

NIETZSCHE, MACH AND FRAZER, AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP IN MALINOWSKI'S WORK

Nietzsche's relevance to Malinowski had been unknown until the 1904 manuscript was discovered by Skalník among Malinowski's papers at Yale University. The essay introduces an entirely new dimension to Malinowski's thought. Andrzej Flis, who provides the most thorough treatment of Malinowski's philosophical background until now, was obviously unaware of this aspect. '[W]hat a deep gulf separated Mach's programme from the "metaphysical" explanation applied in *Coral Gardens* or *A Scientific Theory of Culture*!' (Flis 1988:125). We can see here, however, that Malinowski's essay on Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* is

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approximately three-quarters the length of his dissertation, and is almost as densely and as passionately argued. It is unlikely that Malinowski read only this one work by Nietzsche during his many philosophy courses. In any case it is clear that Nietzsche's influence is the 'missing link' between Mach's positivism or philosophical pragmatism and *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926a), *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (1926b), *Coral Gardens* (1935, especially volume 2, 'The language of magic and gardening'), and *Freedom and Civilization* (1944b). Except for brief references in his diary and in his most obscure publications (Malinowski 1937:133–68; 1962) which seem to draw on this early essay (while not acknowledging influence), Malinowski did not mention Nietzsche.

The writings collected in this volume, then, reveal that Malinowski's most important ideas were embedded in a rich European intellectual tradition which he absorbed and partially transformed. Probably because he consciously sought to proclaim himself a prophet of a new anthropology, Malinowski did not adequately acknowledge these roots in his own English-language writings. While Malinowski acknowledged the influence of the anthropologists Frazer, Westermarck, and Seligman, and the German economist Bücher, the nature and direction of this influence is never clear from the few brief footnotes that Malinowski included. These essays offer some surprising insights into the way he used the source materials we already know about. For example, while he praised Frazer in English (1925; 1944), in his work published in Polish he made it clear that Frazer was important mainly because of the clarity of his errors and as an undigested archive of ethnological information, most of it also methodologically flawed. What Malinowski learned from Frazer was *how not to do anthropology*, but this is only clear in his Polish writing, written long before he realized that he would require Frazer's patronage.

Many will be surprised to learn of the much more important influence of Friedrich Nietzsche and Ernst Mach. Again, while something is known about Mach's influence on Malinowski, we have not had the source material which would allow us to explore the nature of this influence. Nietzsche, too, is mentioned by Malinowski in his diary, but the depth and importance of his influence has not yet been explored.[2] Finally, these documents reveal the extent of Malinowski's acquaintance with the socio-

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logical, historical, anthropological and philosophical literature available in the first decade of this century. These texts represent one careful reader's response to texts of his time, a response which has been among the most intellectually productive of this century.

Malinowski's early essays, then, deal primarily with three influential thinkers: Nietzsche, Mach, and Frazer. Nietzsche's essay *The Birth of Tragedy* and Malinowski's response to it suggest that this, and not Frazer, may well have been the critical 'turning point' in Malinowski's decision to direct his career into the science of society. Nietzsche raised for Malinowski as the problem of how science (*Wissenschaft*) is possible. Mach raised the question of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) and error (*Irrtum*) as the problem of the techniques and process for doing science. Together, these insights clarified the fundamental problems and conventions of European science for Malinowski so that when he did encounter Frazer he was intellectually prepared to leap beyond the limitations of Frazer's theories by means of an extremely powerful set of intellectual methods. Frazer's simplistic notion of a straightforward evolution from 'magic' to 'religion' to 'science', his lack of rigour, his genial credibility in the face of ethnographic reports by amateurs of all kinds and his tolerance for multiple and contradictory conclusions in his own writing were all attacked and rejected, but the substantive questions that Frazer asked still remained. Nietzsche and Mach, on the other hand, contributed few substantive problems and would not have been sufficient without the data that Frazer provided.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Malinowski's anthropology grows out of his application of a unique synthesis of the thought of Mach and Nietzsche to Frazer's ethnological projects. Frazer's ill-conceived problems are not solved, but rather 'dissolved' along with the contemporary intellectual ground which made them seem like valid problems. Malinowski ruptures the boundaries of Frazer's specific discourse to ask 'Does Totemism exist at all?' 'Is "magic" not in fact a practice or technique rather than an intellectual category?' 'Can we retrieve the "origins" of a belief or of a part of culture – and what, after all, do we mean by "belief", "a part of culture", or "origins"?' The concrete result of this transcendence is a series of detailed ethnographic studies, methodological treatises and philosophical statements that rejected an ethnological discourse and founded a

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truly anthropological discourse around concepts of myth as charter, the function of cultural wholes, reciprocity in social relations, the nature of value, the fiction of kinship, the pragmatics of language use, and many other powerful new ideas and problems.

Malinowski's inquiry into Nietzsche's 'abhorrence of the "beyond" [*jenseits*]' is more than a pragmatist's critique of metaphysics. The use that Nietzsche made of the concepts of myth and function gave new direction to Malinowski, and Nietzsche's role in Malinowski's formulation of his version of functionalism remains relevant since the theoretical adequacy of 'functionalism' still remains at issue (cf. Gellner 1986; 1987). Malinowski began to apply aspects of Nietzsche's insights and methods drawn especially from *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and the *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) right from the beginning, and the themes of myth, morality, sexuality, punishment, the nature of power and order in the midst of apparent chaos, the nature and power of knowledge, and the relationship between words and things are traceable from his first publications in English to his last. And Malinowski's wilful effort to impose his own stamp on anthropology while declaring that its erstwhile 'gods' were if not dead then at least in their twilight suggests a Zarathustra in the London School of Economics more than an Argonaut or even a Zeno from Cracow (cf. Gellner 1987).

Apart from Frazer, the other major animus in the essays included here is Ernst Mach (1838–1916). Ernst Mach is known today as the leading exponent of positivism and monism in late nineteenth-century Europe, as well as for his many scientific achievements in the physics of heat, fluid-dynamic systems and mechanics, and in psycho-physics (the name given then to the study of the physiology of perception). His gesture towards a *general relativistic theory of knowledge* inspired significant advances in the fields of physics, biology, history, philosophy of science, psychology and anthropology.[3] Indeed, Mach himself made significant forays into all of these fields, giving his name to 'Mach bands' in the field of perceptual psychology among other contributions in diverse fields.[4]

Malinowski did not adopt the radical monism of Mach himself, nor agree fully with Mach's claim to find in positivism the route to certain knowledge (though not necessarily to truth).[5] Nevertheless, Mach's view that the world and our human experience of

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it is the only possible grounds for truth certainly saved Malinowski from the consuming and destructive nihilism of Nietzsche. Mach believed that it was the human experience of the world, not the world as such (*an sich*) nor the transcendent Idea, that provided both the possibility of knowledge and the grounds for its evaluation. Mach's world was a fully human one because there was no other. Its mastery was achieved locally, not cosmically, and the standards for its measure – and thus for the measure of truth – were the daily activities of people in their own characteristic environments, 'forms of life', and in terms of their own histories. For Mach as for Malinowski, this pragmatic and human perspective on the world provided the scope of science simply because 'there is no cognitive alternative to science . . . no cosmic perspective to provide a greater scope' (Cohen 1970:132). Mach believed, then, that because all knowledge is achieved and evaluated through sensation all measurement is, therefore, relative to other measurements and not absolute. Thus, for example, the Mach number, a ratio of the velocity of a body to the variable density of the medium in which it travels is used today instead of a more direct measurement of speed (such as km/h) for supersonic aircraft. By contrast, Nietzsche's relativism (more correctly termed 'perspectivism') states that knowledge is obtained and evaluated relative to the power or will of persons with specific attitudes or interests. Thus it is Mach's relativism rather than Nietzsche's 'perspectivism' that provides a foundation for Malinowski's exquisitely nuanced ethnography of local contexts and his balanced or 'weak' relativism.[6]

In fact, Mach's relativism can be said to have failed in his own major field, physics, since most people now agree, as Mach himself never could, that atoms and their parts really exist in nature and are not merely the convenient and provisional fictions of the human mind. The failure (or success) of relativism is not yet so clear in social science. Today the nature of a sociological and cultural 'reality' – whether social concepts and practices are fictions coerced by power, imposed by history, implicit in human nature, immanent in Nature or, by contrast, really Real – is still a matter of intense debate. Mach's precepts – as these are interpreted and applied by Malinowski – contribute to a debate that is still fresh and urgent.

Finally, James Frazer's influence on anthropology has been declared a dead letter many times before, not the least by

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Malinowski[7] and by Frazer's most recent biographer (Ackerman 1987). Nevertheless, the issues that Frazer raised are still very much with us (Thornton 1988), and Malinowski's critique of Frazer's methods and results yields some surprising and far-reaching results. Nietzsche and Mach emerge in these documents as the sparks that ignited Malinowski's intellectual fire, but Frazer is his fuel and ore, and out of the critical intensity which Malinowski focusses on his ethnology emerge much light as well as the complex alloy of methods, data and ideas that is modern anthropology. Malinowski continued to rework the intellectual product of his 'Polish period' in the forges of Australia, Mailu, The Trobriands, Africa, Mexico and Europe to produce masterpieces of anthropology. Since these works are read with profit today, we can only benefit from understanding the intellectual matrix out of which they were crystallized.

Mach, Nietzsche and Frazer ranged broadly and boldly over the intellectual disciplines of philosophy, science, and the humanities, but, except for Frazer, their influence on anthropology has scarcely been known, let alone acknowledged. The empty places in Malinowski's intellectual gallery are also surprising. Nowhere is Karl Marx even so much as mentioned, although the socialist writers Friedrich Engels and August Bebel receive notice. Max Weber was perhaps too near a contemporary, and too little published to have attracted Malinowski's attention during this time, but Weber, Georg Simmel, and other German social theorists, with the obvious exception of Nietzsche, are not mentioned. Malinowski was clearly fully aware of the work of Durkheim and his students Hubert, Mauss and van Gennep, among others. Nevertheless, except to direct some attacks on the uncritical gullibility of Durkheim that led him to found elaborate theories on the limited and sometimes doubtful Central Australian ethnography of Spencer and Gillen, Malinowski does not develop further any of their ideas. These early essays and notes, of course, do not show that Malinowski was not aware of Marx, Weber, and Simmel, but only that he did not write about them at length. On the other hand, the threads that lead from Mach, Nietzsche and Frazer are clearly discernible throughout the writing collected here, and beyond, into the broad weave of twentieth-century anthropology through Malinowski's contribution to it.

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MALINOWSKI'S PERSONAL AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

A full biography of Malinowski is yet to be written. Fifty years after his death, Malinowski remains a *deus ex machina* of anthropology for the simple reason that his roots are unknown. Bibliographies of works on Malinowski today contain over 100 titles and interest in him has grown rapidly. Fortunately, new facts are also emerging which are starting to modify some of the commonly held stereotypes of Malinowski (M. Flis and Paluch 1985; Kubica-Klyszcz 1982; Martinek 1981; Paluch 1981a; Skalník 1982; Stocking 1983; Thornton 1985; Young 1984).

Malinowski grew up and became a scholar in the intellectual environment of Cracow in the Polish-speaking Austrian province of Galicia. He used the Polish language until his departure for Australia and New Guinea in June 1914. His intimate fieldwork diary (Malinowski 1967), as is well-known, was also written in Polish and refers often to his Polish background. The cultural values and conceptual apparatus that he acquired during the first thirty years of his life – the greater part – could not fail to exercise a powerful influence over the remaining twenty-eight years of Malinowski, the man and the anthropologist.

Bronisław Kasper[8] Malinowski was born in Cracow on 7 April 1884, the only child of Lucjan Feliks Jan Malinowski and Józefa, née Łącka. The Malinowski family belonged to the Polish gentry, *zemianstwo*, and had its own coat of arms, but the family had long since lost any wealth or land that might once have belonged to it. In later life, when established as an anthropologist, Malinowski would remind people of his 'nobility' with a mixture of vanity and humour (see H. Kuper 1978:5). Malinowski's father and mother, married in Warsaw in 1883, were both established, well-educated and urbanized. Malinowski's mother, Józefa (1848–1918), was probably financially better endowed than her husband since her father, Leopold Łącki, had been counsellor to the General Attorney of the Kingdom of Poland and later State Counsellor and member of the Senate. Malinowski's father was an eminent philologist and folklorist who was involved in the establishment of the Cracow school of Slavonic folklore studies. Like so many Poles of his time, the senior Malinowski was caught between Germany and Russia, attending universities of both of these occupying powers. His PhD was obtained from the University of Leipzig in 1872, where his son was to proceed in order to

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study *Völkerpsychologie* under Wilhelm Wundt and *Volkswirtschaft* with Karl Bücher, in 1908–10.

Malinowski's father joined the Cracow academia after 1867 when Galicia became autonomous within Austria. The Jagiellonian University, founded 1364, had then gained the right to teach in Polish only. Lucjan Malinowski became professor of Slavonic philology in 1877, seven years before Bronisław's birth. He studied the comparative philology of the Slavic languages and concentrated on the dialects and ethnography of Silesia. Lucjan Malinowski died of a heart attack in 1898 when his son was only fourteen years old (Borowska 1971:3–4).

Bronisław Malinowski, affectionately called Bronio or Bronek by his family and friends, was considered to be a sickly child and suffered from visual and respiratory problems. In 1901, an operation on his eyes caused his studies to be interrupted (Flis 1985:249). Both parents helped Bronio with his school work while he was not able to attend, and when his father died in 1898, the burden fell on his mother. Bronio was by that time a student of the Jan Sobieski III Imperial and Royal Gymnasium, the best grammar school in Galicia, but he only attended classes during the year 1899–1900. Among his teachers was Jan Bystroń a former pupil of Lucjan Malinowski, who was known as an outstanding ethnographer and dialectologist. During the other eight years, he was tutored by his mother and others. As a grammar school student Malinowski completed eight years of Latin and six years of Greek in addition to the modern languages, German, French, English and Italian.

When Bronio's vision and general state of health deteriorated, a friend of Bronio's late father, Dr Dobrski, offered some financial assistance which enabled mother and son to go to Biskra in Algeria, where Bronio's vision and health improved. He returned to Cracow for his final school exams, and passed them with great success in 1902 (Borowska 1971:5; Dubowski 1984). On 6th October, 1902, Malinowski entered the Jagiellonian University with a special stipend he received as the son of a university professor. He matriculated in the Faculty of Philosophy. In 1905, he received the Potocki Foundation stipend for Polish noblemen worth 315 Austrian crowns per year and in 1906 he also received 600 Austrian crowns from the Barczewski Foundation (Kubica-Klyszcz 1985:264). He studied for only four years before reaching

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