1 Introduction

Social anthropology is a discipline largely missing from the study of human origins. Until now, the discipline has sidelined itself. Yet its central concerns with notions like society, culture and cross-cultural comparison make it of the utmost relevance for understanding the origins of human social life, and relevant too as an aid for speculation on the kinds of society our ancestors inhabited. Like archaeologists, social anthropologists can dig backwards through layers of time, into the origins of language, symbolism, ritual, kinship and the ethics and politics of reciprocity.

When did human origins begin? That is a trick question. Of course, human origins began when humanity began, but in another sense human origins began when origins became an intellectual issue. There is no real history of engagement between social anthropology and early humanity, so one must be created here. Social anthropology's ancestral disciplines, like moral philosophy and jurisprudence, natural history and antiquarianism, travelogue and philology, all fed into post-medieval developments in building a picture of 'early man'. Yet, as I have implied, social anthropology proper has been absent. Since the days of Franz Boas at the dawn of the twentieth century, the study of human origins has been seen instead as the preserve of biological or physical anthropology. While not wishing to encroach too deeply into biological territory, in this book I want to carve out within social anthropology a new subdiscipline. I see this as a subdiscipline that touches on the biological and makes full use too of a century and a half of social anthropology – its accumulated experience and especially some of its more recent, and relevant, developments.

Scientific interest in human origins in fact has quite a long history. Seventeenth-century European thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke speculated on the 'natural' condition of 'man', and its relation to the earliest forms of human society. Eighteenth-century thinkers continued this tradition, and archaeological and linguistic concerns were added at that time. In the nineteenth century, the theory or theories of evolution, as well as important fossil finds like the first Neanderthal in 1857 and *Pithecanthropus* in 1891, provided much added impetus. Indeed, the later

supposed 'discovery' of 'Piltdown Man' in 1912 had the same effect. Piltdown, classified originally as *Eoanthropus dawsoni*, was exposed as a hoax only in 1953. Until then, although its importance was doubted by some (most notably Franz Weidenreich, from as early as 1923), its place in human evolution had to be counted. From *Australopithecus africanus* (unearthed in 1924 and described in 1925), discoveries through the twentieth century were eventually of great significance in understanding the place of Africa in human evolution, and later the spread of humankind from Africa throughout the world. That said, we must not read too much of what we know now into our understanding of the past: just as for several decades Piltdown was not known to have been a hoax, so too 'Dart's child' (*Australopithecus*) was not in the first decades after its discovery universally accepted as a human ancestor.

In each of these centuries, scholars of course debated the significance of what they found, and the debates too formed part of several emerging disciplines, including anthropology, archaeology, psychology, linguistics and philosophy. Yet we should not forget that both the fossils and the anthropological ideas in fact preceded, and in some cases long preceded, the academic disciplines as we know them today. This introductory chapter briefly traces the long history of relevant ideas, and then explores the potential for contributions from social and cultural anthropology. Its purpose is to highlight not only the trajectory of discovery and knowledge, but also the dependence of knowledge on theory, especially social theory in its widest sense. I am not aiming for a 'history of science' treatment of the topic, much less a history of some specific science, but rather a brief and, I hope, enlightening narrative of relations between some relevant ideas.

A short history of human origins

The seventeenth century

Archaeology, or more accurately its predecessor, antiquarian studies, emerged as an amateur pursuit in the seventeenth century. Even before that, in the early sixteenth century, Italian geologists had speculated on the idea of stone tools as antecedents of iron ones (Trigger 1989: 53). However, the great social thinkers like Grotius, Hobbes, Pufendorf and even Locke were *not* among those who had such notions. Social theory in the seventeenth century seemed almost completely oblivious to such insights and to the growing interest, throughout much of Europe, in early technology and in comparisons between Europeans of the past and the inhabitants of Africa or the Americas at the time. In retrospect,

it is as if Europe were emerging only very slowly from its medieval belief that the inhabitants of the other continents were degenerate remnants of Near East civilizations of the past (see Malina and Vašíček 1990: 12–15; Trigger 1989: 45–55).

It is true that Locke (e.g. 1988 [1690]: 339–40) speculated on Amerindian society as analogous to earlier Asian and European forms of social organization. Yet he failed to develop an evolutionary understanding of society in the abstract. He seems to suggest that 'man in the state of nature' possessed sheep and cattle, and that the earliest stages of society might be characterized by the exchange of wool for other goods (Locke 1988: 300). Hobbes's (1996 [1651]: 86–90) notion of the natural condition of the human species is well known: competition for resources, fear of one's neighbours, no domestication of plants, no true sociality and a state of war (or cold war) of all against all. Neither Hobbes nor Locke, nor any of their contemporaries, had any idea of biological evolution; and their notions of social evolution were not coupled with any appreciation of the universality of human advancement, of stages of development or of a relation between the social and the material. Neither of them, for example, seems to have developed anything approaching the modern notion of *hunter-gatherer society*, which had to wait until the following century to come into existence (see Barnard 2004). In short, although we may reasonably look to seventeenth-century philosophy as the basis for modern, post-medieval, European secular thought in many respects, nevertheless, the greatest names of the seventeenth century had virtually no understanding of prehistory, nor, apparently, much interest in the ethnographic discoveries then beginning to inform the European intellectual elite. I shall not dwell further on seventeenth-century political thought. The building blocks of at least social evolutionary theory were there, but they had yet to be put together.

On the biological side, there was one significant development relevant to human evolution. In 1698, London physician Edward Tyson dissected the body of a young chimpanzee, which had died soon after arrival in England from Angola. Tyson's (1699) famous treatise became widely known. Tyson's careful dissection showed unexpected similarities between what we now call the chimpanzee and the human, especially with regard to the brain, and he concluded that the specimen was neither human nor monkey but something in between: 'our *Pygmie* [chimpanzee] is no *Man*, nor yet the *Common Ape* [monkey]; but a sort of *Animal* between both; and tho' a *Biped*, yet of the *Quadrumanus-kind*' (Tyson 1699: 91). Although Tyson's treatise was well known, much less well known, and of course without support from the scientific establishment, was the idea that humans are descended from apes. The Italian

free-thinking philosopher Lucilio Vanini apparently suggested the idea in 1616, and was executed for the suggestion in 1619 (Thomas 1995: 19).

The eighteenth century

The eighteenth century was quite different from the seventeenth. In the early part of the century, the revolutionary thinker Giambattista Vico became perhaps the first 'major' figure to tackle social evolution in any serious way. This he did through the three, quite different, editions of his *Scienza nuova*, which were published in 1725, 1730 and 1744. His schemes were both social and material: 'Thus did the order of human things proceed: first there were forests, then isolated dwellings, whence villages, next cities, and finally academies' (Vico 1982 [1744]: 180). Vico conceived of world history as a sequence of recurring ages: *divine* (characterized by religion, as well as poetry and imagination), *heroic* (by noble heroes, perceived as divine) and *human* (by reason and by civil duty). Rejecting Hobbes's apparent atheism, he did, however, return to the medieval concern with divine providence as an evolutionary inducement. And while his works were important in Neapolitan thought, they were hardly read at all beyond Naples until long after his death. They became 'important' only in the twentieth century, and in terms of the eighteenth century are best understood as products of their time, however original, and not as carrying much influence.

The latter half of the eighteenth century saw developments in social theory, or 'moral philosophy' as it was called, and also in natural history. It also saw much better lines of communication among scientists and scholars across Europe. Yet it is important not to take for granted what we know today. For example, many intellectuals, including Vico, believed that 'giants' had once roamed the earth, but denied travellers' reports of 'pygmies' in Africa or Asia. And very importantly, eighteenth-century writers often used words like 'species', 'nature', 'savage' or even 'man' in senses quite different from our usage today.

Take the term 'Orang Outang', whose usage, especially in the works of Scottish judge Lord Monboddo (e.g. 1793), is revealing (and I use his eighteenth-century spelling to designate his concept, which was not at all the same as the modern notion of an orang-utan). 'Orang Outang' was in the eighteenth century widely employed to mean great apes generally: chimpanzees and orang-utans (gorillas were then unknown in Europe), while the word 'ape' usually meant what we refer to today as the baboon. Furthermore, the eighteenth-century image of such creatures was coloured by stories of their habits, which may or may not have been true descriptions: hut-building, tool use, fire-making and even 'a sense

of honour' in the case of Orang Outangs (e.g. Monboddo 1795: 27). Monboddo was famous among commentators on the *humanity* of Orang Outangs. He wrote twelve rambling volumes on a variety of subjects, and several of these touch on the issue. His arguments tested questions such as the relative importance of language and tool-making as defining characteristics of humanity, and they probed problems in what today would be called theories of mind. Arguably, Rousseau and Linnaeus also believed the Orang Outang to be 'a man', or at least, in Linnaean terms, of the genus *Homo* (see Barnard 2000: 18–22), although these far more famous writers never probed this issue quite as far as did Monboddo (Barnard 1995a, 1995b).

Feral children were perceived as both *pre*-linguistic and *a*-social. They occupied much attention in the semi-popular writings of the day, and also offered tests for any number of theories of the nature of the human species. Wild Peter of Hanover was the most celebrated (see, e.g. Monboddo 1795: 25–34). Peter was found in 1725, was brought to England, and lived to an old age on a pension provided by George I, George II and George III. He never did learn to say more than a few words, but was studied by intellectuals of the time in order to give them insight into natural, pre-linguistic thought. Memmie Le Blanc, the 'wild girl' of Champagne, was equally interesting, being both feral and 'savage'. She is believed to have been a Native North American, brought as a child-slave first to the West Indies and subsequently to France. In the 1760s, she dictated her memoirs, and parts were published in the fourth volume of Monboddo's *Antient metaphysics* (1795: 403–8).

The first presumed prehistoric ape-man to be found was *Homo diluvia testis* (literally 'Man, witness of the flood'), unearthed in Baden in 1726 (see, e.g., Haddon 1910: 70). Yet this creature turned out not to be a man at all, but a giant salamander. A hundred years later the specimen was to be renamed first *Salamandra scheuchzeri* and then *Andrias scheuchzeri* ('Image of man, of Scheuchzer'), after the discoverer. The story is of interest because it shows the state of understanding at the time. Fossils were, simply, not important in a world where living apes, feral children and 'savages' defined the boundary between our species and others, and gave the clues scholars needed as to whether humans are naturally social or naturally solitary. The *solitary* versus *social* debate on human nature dominated discussion in what would today be called political philosophy, from Hobbes (e.g. 1996 [1651]) to Rousseau (e.g. 1973 [1750–62]) and after. In a certain sense, then, the social anthropology of human origins actually preceded mainstream biological concerns with origins. Linnaeus, Buffon, Camper, Blumenbach, Cuvier and others in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries all lacked the comparative

evolutionary understanding we take for granted today, and the very idea of fossils of long-extinct animals was far more alien to eighteenth-century thought than was that of a feral child found alone, or in the company of wolves.

The nineteenth century

As naturalist on the voyage of HMS *Beagle*, Charles Darwin spent nearly five years from 1831 to 1836 sailing around the world recording what he encountered and collecting specimens. He published his theory of natural selection in his most famous work, *On the origin of species* (Darwin 1859), and twelve years later turned his attention to its implications for human evolution in *The descent of man* (Darwin 1871). In the latter, Darwin argued that human social life is rooted in that of the primates, and that from this basis humanity has evolved the cognitive skills that produced language, complex and co-operative forms of social organization and increasing moral awareness. He believed that some branches of the human species were superior to others, and that environmental adaptation and natural selection have produced 'racial' variation in these respects. This 'Darwinian' or 'evolutionist' view is often contrasted to the medieval and indeed eighteenth-century understanding of the 'Great Chain of Being' (see, e.g., Lovejoy 1936), which was hierarchical but static – lacking any mechanism or even any possibility for moving from a more primitive to a more advanced biological form.

Darwin's approach may also be contrasted to that of Jean-Baptise Lamarck. Like others of his time, Lamarck accepted the notion that acquired characteristics could be inherited. This 'Lamarckian' view is expressed most clearly in his 'second law of nature':

> All the acquisitions or losses wrought by nature on individuals, through the influence of the environment in which their race has long been placed, and hence through the influence of the predominant use or permanent disuse of any organ; all these are preserved by reproduction to the new individuals which arise, provided that the acquired modifications are common to both sexes, or at least to the individuals which produce the young. (Lamarck 1914 [1809]: 113)

Darwinian theory, though, might as easily be contrasted to Monboddo's. Far from being a 'forerunner of Darwin', as is often said, Monboddo embodies an otherwise never-fully realized eighteenth-century vision which is the antithesis of Darwin. If in probing the boundaries of 'man' Monboddo defined the 'Orang Outang' as part of the category, Darwin did the opposite: he defined 'man' as an 'ape' (figure 1.1). Linnaeus came close to seeing both sides of the problem that would haunt Darwin when

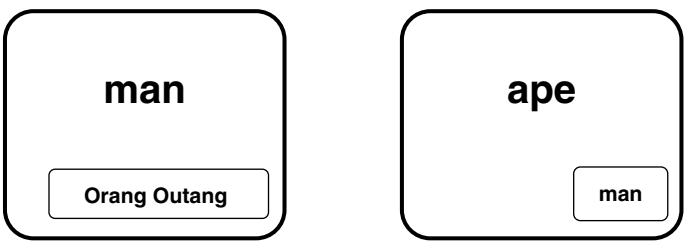

Figure 1.1 Images of the relation between 'man' and 'Orang Outang' (ape)

the former wrote, in a letter: 'But, if I had called man an ape, or vice versa, I should have fallen under the ban of all the ecclesiastics. It may be that as a naturalist I ought to have done so' (Linnaeus to J. G. Gmelin, 14 Feb. 1747; quoted in Slotkin 1965: 180).

The most famous find of human palaeontology was also the first to be generally recognized, and the most disputed. In 1856 workmen quarrying lime discovered a skeleton they presumed to be that of a cave bear in the Neander Valley near Düsseldorf. At first they discarded the bones, but the quarry manager saved them and showed them to a local teacher named Johann Carl Fuhlrott. Fortunately, Fuhlrott had read of the discovery, in 1847, of specimens of what is now known as the gorilla. Like the gorilla, the Neander skull had high brow ridges but was otherwise human-looking. Fuhlrott and anatomist Hermann Schaaffhausen announced the discovery of *Homo neanderthalensis* in 1847 (see, e.g. Trinkaus and Shipman 1994). The common name is either Neanderthal, or using modern German orthography, Neandertal (meaning 'Neander Valley'). Specimens had been discovered but not recognized, earlier in the century in Belgium and in Gibraltar, and by the end of the century hundreds of bones had been found, often in association with flint hand axes and points of the Mousterian tool industry. Some scholars doubted the authenticity of the finds, not least because the implied biological evolution did not seem to accord with biblical expectation. Neanderthal was variously said to have been an ape, a deformed member of *H. sapiens* or a recently deceased Cossack soldier from the Napoleonic Wars. In the twentieth century, the species name *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* came into common use, as its similarities to *H. sapiens sapiens* became clear. The tendency in recent years, however, is to return to the traditional designation *H. neanderthalensis* (and the Linnaean Latin is not altered by the German spelling change). The first draft of the Neanderthal genome was

completed only in 2009, and it suggests that the two species remained quite separate through a long history of coexistence.

Among other important fossil discoveries in Europe was 'Cro-Magnon Man', in 1868. Cro-Magnon is a rock shelter in the Dordogne Valley of France. The name no longer has any scientific significance, because 'Cro-Magnon' people are now known to have been fully modern *H. sapiens* – albeit *H. sapiens* who lived at the same time as Neanderthals. Yet in the nineteenth century, the find was deemed important, not least because the skeletons of five 'cave people' had been unearthed, buried in association with ivory pendants and carved antlers, as well as stone tools. It also seemed to show France as an early point of origin for humanity, and debates ensued on the relative significance of Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon for building a picture of human evolution (see Trinkaus and Shipman 1994: 110–11, 178–9).

It is worth noting that the debate was then still alive between monogenesis (a single origin for all humankind) and polygenesis (a multiple origin). In England, monogenic theory emerged as victorious with Darwin's *Descent of man* (published in 1871) and with the merger of the mainly polygenist Anthropological Society of London and the mainly monogenist Ethnological Society of London to form the Anthropological Institute (also in 1871). Darwin himself was not just a naturalist, but also a member of the Ethnological Society, and indeed one who had a personal objection to the perceived polygenist term 'anthropological'. However, polygenic theory was still strong on the Continent, where Darwinian thought had yet to penetrate as deeply as in England and Scotland. Evolutionism as we know it is dependent on acceptance of the monogenic thesis: one origin for humankind. British, and, to a lesser extent, American, French, German and Swiss, social anthropologists, through the last half of the nineteenth century, debated such things as: which came first, matrilineal descent or patrilineal? What was the earliest religion, animism or fetishism? Is early religion a reflection of early society, or does religious belief mould the social order?

Social anthropology or ethnology (as it was more usually known) was emerging as a discipline, but it was almost entirely composed of amateurs. Amateurs were not constrained by the boundaries of academic subjects in the way that professionals were. Some of the individuals who practised ethnology, most famously the banker Sir John Lubbock (later Lord Avebury), were also prominent in archaeology. Among other twists of fate, the foremost ethnologist of the late nineteenth century, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, met Henry Christie while travelling in Cuba in 1856, and Christie persuaded him to accompany him to Mexico. Christie, like Lubbock a banker, ethnologist and archaeologist, was

among the first to suggest that extinct ice-age mammals (whose bones were found alongside stone tools on cave floors) had lived at the same time as our prehistoric human ancestors. (He was also, incidentally, the banker who helped pay for excavations that led to the discovery of Cro-Magnon Man.) Ethnology, unlike archaeology, had not yet developed as a fieldwork subject, and the theorists rarely had experience of the peoples they wrote about. Ethnographic observation depended instead on travellers' reports, but perhaps for this reason the separation of theory and ethnography favoured the development of the speculative science of imagined social evolution (see also Barnard 2000: 27–46).

In 1879, an amateur archaeologist uncovered the magnificent Upper Palaeolithic paintings of Altamira Cave in northern Spain. Their significance was rejected by many, who assumed either that they were more recent than Palaeolithic or even that they were forgeries. Yet other discoveries followed, and the archaeological establishment retracted their objections in the early years of the twentieth century (see, e.g., Lewis-Williams 2002: 18–40). It was not until 1940 that the site of Lascaux, in the Dordogne, gave France a site of equal brilliance. Rock art, though, had already come into its own in the early twentieth century, and gained in prominence in the study of human origins with late twentieth-century concerns with the origin of symbolic culture among early *Homo sapiens*, especially in Africa.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, much interest rested on which was the origin of humankind before *H. sapiens*: Asia, Africa or indeed a now-submerged continent in between. Europe was not really in the running. Darwin favoured Africa, but he was in the minority. Ernst Haeckel famously championed Asia, and that theory held sway. In the absence of fossil evidence, Haeckel speculated on the hypothetical 'missing link', which he called *Pithecanthropus alalus*. He was also responsible for the notion that 'ontogeny replicates phylogeny', for popularizing the idea of human evolution as a line of progress from earlier forms to *H. sapiens*, and even for helping to shape the public image of Darwinism in Britain (Bowler 1989: 154–8). Haeckel's hypothetical creature became reality in 1891, with Eugène Dubois's find 'Java Man'.

Eugène Dubois was a Dutch medical doctor. When he seemed destined for a professorship in anatomy, Dubois realized that 'he loathed teaching and was becoming disenchanted with anatomy' (Trinkaus and Shipman 1994: 134). He set off for East Indies and arrived on Sumatra in late 1887. He published on evolutionary theory, and soon began examining fossils on Java. His break came when, in 1891, he discovered fossils of the species first, briefly, labelled *Anthropithecus erectus*, then *Pithecanthropus erectus*, which he believed stood in evolutionary terms between the apes

and *H. sapiens*. They are now known as *Homo erectus*. One fossilized femur and a skull (not necessarily from the same individual) remained virtually intact, and Dubois kept them under his bed for many years. He died in the Netherlands in 1940, and his grave is marked with a tombstone depicting the skull of *Pithecanthropus* and *both* femurs, crossed (Leakey and Slikkerveer 1993: 162).

The twentieth century

When the 'discovery' of Piltdown Man was announced in December 1912 (Smith Woodward 1913), England could lay claim to the missing link. Those who were soon to comment so favourably on Piltdown knew perfectly well that a human-like skull had been found in association with an ape-like jaw, but it took decades before anyone suggested, let alone proved, that they could not have been from the same animal. The early debate was not on forgery, but on the significance of the Piltdown bones for human prehistory. The earliest challenges, in a way, actually preceded the 'discovery': the eminent archaeologist Sir John Evans had in 1877 urged 'caution, caution, caution' in any dealings with the Eolithic or 'Dawn Stone Age': 'It is now no longer difficult to get evidence accepted as to the antiquity of man. The danger rather lies in the other direction, and we are liable to have evidence brought forward relating to discoveries bearing upon the subject which is hardly trustworthy' (quoted in Spencer 1990: 13).

The direct challenge to Piltdown was not from within British archaeology but from a foreign camp. Just over a decade later, Raymond Dart, an Australian anatomist working in South Africa, announced the discovery of *Australopithecus africanus* (Dart 1925). Perhaps he had a vested interest in finding the earliest human ancestor outside of Britain, but the British archaeological establishment had a vested interest in finding it in their own soil. They hailed Piltdown as overthrowing the ancestral claims of Neanderthal Man and Java Man, and they denounced the new foreign rival in similar terms. 'Dart's child', they said, was simply a juvenile ape and not a human ancestor at all (Keith *et al*. 1925). As Robert Ardrey (1963: 26) wrote: 'Piltdown Man combined perfectly the elements visualized by anthropology – by English anthropology in particular – as essential to threshold man. There was the ape jaw, and there was the bulging human cranium, source of all future evolutionary glory. The unknown perpetrator of the fraud had provided science with just what science wanted.' The British archaeological establishment was not about to abrogate the title 'noblest savage' to an African ape. We now know that Dart was right and the British were wrong. Even if we take the