

Social Anthropology and Human Origins

The study of human origins is one of the most fascinating branches of anthropology. Yet it has rarely been considered by social or cultural anthropologists, who represent the largest subfield of the discipline. In this powerful study Alan Barnard aims to bridge this gap. Barnard argues that social anthropological theory has much to contribute to our understanding of human evolution, including changes in technology, subsistence and exchange, family and kinship, as well as to the study of language, art, ritual and belief. This book places social anthropology in the context of a widely conceived constellation of anthropological sciences. It incorporates recent findings in many fields, including primate studies, archaeology, linguistics and human genetics. In clear, accessible style Barnard addresses the fundamental questions surrounding the evolution of human society and the prehistory of culture, suggesting a new direction for social anthropology that will open up debate across the discipline as a whole.

ALAN BARNARD is Professor of the Anthropology of Southern Africa at the University of Edinburgh, where he has taught since 1978. He has undertaken a wide range of ethnographic fieldwork and archaeological research in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, is a participant in the British Academy Centenary Research Project 'From Lucy to language: the archaeology of the social brain' and serves as Honorary Consul of the Republic of Namibia in Scotland. His numerous publications include *History and theory in anthropology* (2000) and *Anthropology and the Bushman* (2007).

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For my mother and for Mother Africa

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Preface

As an undergraduate in an American four-field anthropology department, I came to regard the study of human origins as part of archaeology or physical anthropology. In my subsequent career in British social anthropology, little has changed. The people with trowels and callipers do human origins, and ‘we’ do ethnography.

However, the fact is that archaeology and biological anthropology (as the old physical anthropology has become) have little to say about the social or the cultural. Of course, I exempt the archaeological concern with specifically material culture, and I also exempt some rock art studies, with their concern with the richness of symbolic culture. I recognize too the odd archaeologist with an interest in music and human origins, or mathematics and human origins, and so on. These, though, are not the ‘bread and butter’ of their field. If you want an expert in ritual or symbolism, in kinship or reciprocity, or in political organization, or even in the utilization of resources and communication of environmental knowledge, why not turn to a social or cultural anthropologist? These are our areas of expertise.

My reintroduction in later life to ‘early man’ studies came through the fourth of the classic four fields of American anthropology: linguistics, where, as in Palaeolithic archaeology, there is much interest in some circles in early phases of human culture. I have long been interested in, and been writing on, theories of the origin of language and of the evolution of humankind from ape-like creatures. That interest, though, had been largely historical, that is, in terms of the history of anthropological thought – especially eighteenth-century anthropological thought. I had also long been writing on the evolution and transformation of kinship systems, but until recently not really with human origins as my focus. An invitation to the Cradle of Language Conference, held in Stellenbosch in 2006, encouraged me to develop some of my ideas in this area. A request to contribute to a book on early kinship further sharpened my theoretical understanding of the structural arrangements of human and proto-human interaction in the distant past. This in turn suggested to me that

social anthropological theory has as much to contribute as comparative ethnography to the study of human prehistory.

For any readers unfamiliar with the phrases ‘cultural anthropology’ and ‘social anthropology’, let me simply explain that in general they refer to the same thing. For historical reasons, in some countries one is used, while in other countries the other. It is meaningful to think in terms of both ‘society’ and ‘culture’ as the things that this discipline, or this branch of a larger anthropological science, can have something to say about. For now, let me say only that while both ‘society’ and ‘culture’ are contested abstractions, nevertheless, the social and the cultural are taken as broadly meaningful in the field of what is sometimes called ‘social and cultural anthropology’. In this book I will generally use the term ‘social anthropology’, which is the more common term in the United Kingdom, but this can be taken as comprising also what, especially in North America, is included under the heading ‘cultural anthropology’.

Social anthropology is a discipline that advances, like any other. Yet it is slower in this respect than, say, genetics, linguistics or archaeology. For that reason, among others, the material cited here from social anthropology is often older than that of other disciplines, genetics in particular. Social anthropology is built on firm foundation, and classic ethnography, and even classic theory, guide present-day concerns. The vast majority of citations to works in genetics are very recent; those to works in social anthropology, less so. Also, it is worth noting that a good deal of the material discussed here is in works written by others, in a vast number of disciplines. The study of human origins yields hundreds of publications each year. I have read thousands in the course of preparing this monograph, but have room to discuss and cite only a small percentage. Otherwise, there would have been little room for my own ideas. This, among other things, highlights the relevance of my main reason for writing: to help to establish a social anthropology of human origins.

One facet of my argument throughout the book is that the social and the cultural either have been neglected, or have been poorly treated, by colleagues in archaeology, biological anthropology and even linguistics. Indeed, one might throw in primatology, evolutionary psychology, human genetics, or whatever, as related disciplines in which the same problem may be found. The other facet of my argument is that we social anthropologists are, in fact, very much to blame for this. Few of us bother to learn the basics of these related disciplines, or to engage in the debates which surely are the essence of a wider field of ‘anthropology’ in its literal sense. But frankly, few of my friends in archaeology, linguistics or the biological branches of modern anthropology can hold their own with proper social anthropologists in theories of sociality, kinship, totemism,

symbolism or ethnicity. Social anthropologists have a wealth of knowledge of these things, with ethnography to back it up; and equally, we have a magnificent range of theoretical perspectives, from the nineteenth century right up to the present, which can provide insights.

In short, this book aims to fill a big gap in anthropological studies. In order to enable a better understanding of prehistory, a good dose of real social anthropology is needed. It is my hope both that some social anthropologists will develop a specialist interest in human origins, and that the discipline of social anthropology as a whole can contribute significantly to filling the great cultural and social gap in human origins studies.

I would like to thank Robin Dunbar for encouraging me to write this book, and my many colleagues in social anthropology in Edinburgh and elsewhere for sharing ideas on its theme. I am grateful to my wife Joy for harsh criticism of my more fanciful ideas. All figures and tables are my own, except, figure 3.2 which is in the public domain, and figure 4.1, which is courtesy of Robin Dunbar.

Social anthropology and human origins is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Doris Pinder Barnard (1924–2010), and to Africa, mother of us all.