WHAT IS POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY?

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During the last ten years the world has seen such a rapid change, it has been difficult just to keep track of events. The end of the Cold War confrontation, unification of the divided Germany and self-rule for many new republics: news to celebrate that humanity may be going in the right direction but horrific violence and human miseries persist to haunt our conscience. Through advanced communication networks we are able to view the terror and human treachery that decorate our television screens: the ethnic in-fighting across the former Soviet republics, racist killings by neo-Nazis in Germany, the Kurdish struggle within Iraq, tribal war within Somalia, religious violence in India, ethnic cleansing within the former Yugoslavia, and ethnic violence in Sri Lanka; the list seems endless. The human endeavour to establish some form of political stability and coherence continues but how are we to understand the divergent political reality that does not show any real sign of resolving? In such a turbulent global political climate what can 'political anthropology' offer? Of course, 'political anthropology' in its infancy had a rather different task. Anthropologists believed in a triumphalist view of history, that Westernisation shall bring harmony. How wrong their thoughts were. John Gledhill (1993) castigates 'political anthropology' as the child of colonialism whereby the imperialist regime employed anthropologists to furnish details of how their 'subjects' behaved. By understanding the socio-political structure of the indigenous population, the colonialists anticipated a successful implementing of their policy of indirect rule. This initial link with imperialism has developed a negative aspect although with time 'political anthropology' has moved on.

The founding stone of political anthropology is widely agreed as *African Political Systems* (1958), edited by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard. It provides a useful entry point into the divergent political forms in Africa where typological approach can highlight the dialectical relationship between the cultural and political systems, and two distinct forms of government; the centralised and that which lacks centralised government, or what Evans-Pritchard has called the 'stateless societies.' But understandably, they have avoided the primary task of defining 'political anthropology.' Swartz *et al.* (1966) states three major characteristics that should help us to understand what is 'politics.' Firstly, a 'political process' has to be a public rather than a private affair. A 'process' that has ramifications for the whole society, community, neighbourhood, or a social group, is considered a public activity. In addition, 'political process' pertains to fulfil certain goals. If we add the two characteristics of 'political process' we can now say politics has to do with public goals. A final characteristic of 'politics' is the use of 'focussing' of power does not dictate the existence of a permanent hierarchy of power, but "it will always involve the existence of differential behaviour concerning public goals." According to Giddens (1985), 'power' is 'transformative capacity,' the ability to change events. In this essay, I shall review the 'transformation' of political anthropology from its earlier colonial days to its present development. In particular I shall rely heavily on John Gledhill's book as a main guide. However, in an attempt to understand some of the current global violence, which in my view is primarily political, I shall examine Carol Smith's study of Guatemala and Anthony Smith's work on Nationalism. The space cannot possibly accommodate the entire history of political anthropology—a rather short but abundant history—so generalisations about certain periods are inevitable.

Rather than delving into the development of political anthropology it may prove more fruitful to begin with a look at different 'methods and tendencies' as noted by Balandier (1970). In doing so we will be able to obtain a 'periodisation' of the discipline through their use of a particular tool. Political anthropology, in the beginning, did not adopt a different approach from those of anthropology in general but as it came to face its particular problems, its method had to be more specific to address the problems. The problems of the formative process of state societies, the nature of the primitive state, the forms of political power in societies with minimal government, etc. In an attempt to answer some of these questions the following approaches are described by Balandier: the genetic approach, the functionalist approach and the dynamist approach. I shall briefly describe each in turn.

The genetic approach was the earliest method in the history of the discipline and the most ambitious. It concentrated on the problems of origin and long-term 'evolution': the magical and/or religious origin of kingship, the process of the formation of the primitive state, the transition from societies based on kinship of political societies, etc. The functionalist approach, pioneered by Radcliff-Brown, was concerned with identification of the political institutions of 'primitive' societies on the basis of function. This leads to an examination of 'political organisation' as an aspect of the 'total organisation of society.' But it has been under criticism on the grounds that this type of approach makes it possible to define political relations, and the organisations and systems on which they are based, but it has contributed little to the elucidation of the nature of the political phenomenon. The typological approach is an extension of the functional approach that attempts to determine types of systems, to classify the forms of political organisation. It focuses on whether there exists a primitive state or not, an approach exemplified in *African Political Systems*. The main objection to

this type of approach is its static nature. As Leach (1964) put it so forcefully, 'we can no longer be satisfied with attempts to establish a typology of fixed systems.'

The terminal approach is an attempt to construct basic categories within political anthropology. It is a difficult task and, in the first place, it requires a precise delimitation of the political field that is far from complete. Within the structuralist approach the political is seen in terms of formal relations that express the real power relations between individuals and groups. When applied to the study of political systems the structuralist approach causes difficulties that are notable, especially those considered by Leach (1964) in his study of Kachin political society. He argues that the structures developed by the anthropologist are models that exist only as 'logical constructions, and as 'static systems' it is unable to reflect the social reality in the case of Kachin political organisation which contains contradictions, manifests variations and modifications of structure. The dynamist approach attempts to seize the dynamic of the structures as well as the system of relations that form it. By taking into account the incompatibilities, the contradictions, the tensions and the movement inherent in any society, political anthropology is able to discern such factors within the political domain most effectively as they are most apparent in the political sphere and that history most clearly leaves its mark. Leach has made a direct contribution to this approach by questioning the dominant influence of Durkheim that made possible a conception that overemphasised structural equilibriums, cultural uniformities and forms of solidarity. He condemned the 'academic prejudices' and ethnocentrism of anthropologists who eliminated certain data in order to deal only with societies that were stable, free from internal contradictions and isolated within their frontiers.

The regrettable wrong footing of political anthropology during its last fifty years' path can be contributed to two factors, its 'eurocentric premises' and 'absence of a relativizing perspective.' John Gledhill clearly stated 'how not to use the West as a point of departure' in political anthropology. So what may we take as the baseline? Giddens (1985) argues that the 'class divided' societies of the pre-modern era remained segmental and pre-modern states were never really territorial. Therefore, the Weberian definition of the 'state' quoted by Mann (1986) that 'the state is differentiated set of institutions and personnel embodying centrality, in the sense that political relations radiate outward to cover a territorially demarcated area, over which it claims a monopoly of binding and permanent rule-making, backed up by physical violence' can only be applied to the modern European state form. It seems that the emergence of the West, as clearly illustrated by Hall (1985), is a historical discontinuity rather than a triumphalist march of humanity in union. Clastres (1977) has shown through South American Indians how the notion of 'power' and its 'domination' does not exist within these particular 'primitive' societies. His model shows how power is regulated by the 'society' blocking the egotism of individuals. Man also agrees that 'chiefdom' is the normal end of social evolution and that states emerge only in 'unusual circumstances.' Having established that the European model of statehood can no longer act as a global political model it seems we are able to accept other forms of political organisation in a more constructive manner. But Gledhill acknowledges the Western influence on a global scale through 'diplomacy' of 'meddling' in other countries' internal affairs or through force or by its economic domination. In one way or another, the Western form of 'democracy' has been largely accepted as the model to emulate. But in the event, 'other' societies have been under great violence. Giddens provides a rather useful explanation. He argues that 'a combination of warfare between rival states and internal pacification' has given an 'important impetus towards capitalist development,' and the final transition to the modern nation state can be seen through the emergence of industrialism and the urbanisation process. During such 'internal pacification,' Giddens borrows Focault's idea of 'sequestration': the 'penetration' of the state into the daily lives of its people. Thus Asad (1992) writes that 'repressive regimes' can be defined as states which share the pretensions of all 'modern states' to intervene effectively in the social control infrastructures necessary to effect the kind of 'penetration' of social life achieved by the modern states of the North.

The 'state terror' of Guatemala is useful in substantiating the 'internal pacification' argument. As Carol Smith (1990) demonstrates, the economic control has replaced military coercion: an advance in state 'penetration' through more subtle means. Since 1954 the political control of Guatemala has been in the hand of the military which overthrew the popularly elected government at that time with assistance from the United States. By the mid-1960s it was reckoned that the military was the strongest, most fully institutionalised and most nationalistic military force in Central America. The Guatemalan society has undergone a militarisation process since 1954 now being penetrated into all levels of society. This apparatus has also been able to control opposition movements by the systematic use of threat, torture and assassination. So by the late 1950s, 'state terror' became normal politics. (Though not in the same momentum, this is not dissimilar to Sri Lankan politics.) Carol Smith's focus on the Indian highlands of western Guatemala illustrates how the military regime, on the pretext of national 'security and development,' has terrorised this region and has established total control. During the late 1970s an insurgent movement developed in the western highlands, particularly among the (primarily) Indian population. The movement was so powerful and strong, a drastic reaction on the part of Guatemala's military state was unpreventable. The mounting of a major counter-insurgency campaign in the western highlands allowed the Guatemalan military regime to move its domination beyond the cities, eastern highlands, and plantation areas to penetrate the Indian highlands of Guatemala which had previously been considered politically marginal. The rural terror that lasted from 1980 through to 1983 involved village massacres, selective torture and assassination of rural leaders, burning of houses and crops and displacement of nearly half the rural population of the highlands. After such a mass human destruction or genocide, the state introduced a new phase of militarisation. The military's presence was institutionalised and increased its recruits from the rural male

population to serve a two-year stint. Those who had completed their two years were released to their local areas as military commissioners and paid to assist in further recruitment and local intelligence gathering. Apart from coercion through physical violence, the state established their control by economic means, that is by herding those Indian peasants into several dozen 'model villages' along the major strategic roads the state built in the area. The key motive behind the 'transformation' of the highlands is this: before the insurgency of the 1980s, the military regime did nothing or probably negligible little to challenge the economic and political power of the agrarian-industrial-financial oligarchy. In fact, the oligarchy's interest became those of the military in the 1960s and 1970s, as members of increasingly corrupt military. High command became businessmen in their own right. (Similar allegations have been directed against Sri Lankan military officers too.) But after such a costly counter-insurgency campaign the interest of the military and the oligarchy began to diverge on issues of taxation, the international image of Guatemala, and the development of the Indian highlands. The details are too complex to describe but the current transformation of the Indian highland can be seen as a belated form of forced proletarianisation. For a weak state to transform itself into a fully fledged Western form of civil society, the Guatemalan society has experienced a militarisation that tries to implement the relevant social infrastructures to enable itself to create a new political order that must incorporate the Indian highlands into its new economic base.

Furthermore, we should not overlook Anthony Smith's (1979) statement that: 'Of all the visions and faiths that compete for men's loyalties in the modern world, the most widespread and persistent is the national ideal.' Event the army of Guatemala is driven by a nationalist sentiment. They view the oligarchy as betraying the national interest. The members of Guatemala's High Command having risen from the lower (non-white) middle sectors may have caused the conflict with the old capitalist elites and this resentment has led to different paths of economic and social development being experienced in Guatemala. Anthony Smith shows the historical development of nationalism in different forms, from 'enlighteners and romanticists', 'radicals and traditionalists', 'imperialists and secessionists', 'populists and anti-colonialists', and to the 'unity of nationalism' in the contemporary form. Of course, the present wave of ethnic cleansing across the world cannot be simply cast as divergent forms of 'nationalism'. Political anthropology must relate the 'local' to the 'global', as Gledhill writes. In addition, we should not forget the historical dimension, as Joan Vincent (1990) argues that the 'main contention itself is a historical process'. The contemporary political anthropology has its place in analysing the micro-mechanisms of political processes, how power is transformed and structured in everyday life and how it is related to a 'macro-understanding' on a world scale. As we now know 'in the true beginnings there was neither power nor history', as Mann states, and it seems political anthropology has undertaken the task of continuing the historical discontinuity of power.

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