Crime, Custom and Culture

Remarks on the Functionalist Theory of Bronislaw Malinowski

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Precious few figures in contemporary social science have been able to transcend their own disciplinary provinces and make an impact on social theory and research as a whole. The tendencies to specialization, to what has pithily been termed the secularization process (Lipset 1961: 41–51), has led to a deepening insularity of scholarly pursuits. One of the few anthropologists who escaped this fate of expertise and reached into every aspect of the social sciences without compromising the integrity of his own area was the late Bronislaw Malinowski. The achievement of Malinowski can perhaps be best appreciated in the light of subsequent changes in anthropology itself, which at this point is bureaucratically departmentalized into five parts: ethnology, linguistics, physical anthropology, archaeology, and social anthropology (Fairservis 1958). At the jurisdictional level alone, the fracturing of the field has created a new set of inner conflicts and hostilities that would make the appearance of a new Tylor, Boas or Malinowski quite improbable. And whether this secularization process has produced a more formidable body of work, even in the much vaunted middle-range problems, is clearly subject to doubt (cf. Redfield 1953: 728–38). A new overview of Malinowski’s work is thus proper, not only or even primarily on historical grounds (for after all, a posthumous festschrift often has a ghostly quality of sealing the lid on the intellectually departed), but more vitally as a method for placing current tensions and tendencies in their proper intellectual settings.

Perhaps the main reason Malinowski succeeded so well in gaining a widespread hearing stems less from his pragmatic and empiricist mistrust of grand theories, than from an almost inadvertent creation of an operational set of anthropological “first principles”. Paradoxical as this may appear, it is clear that while Malinowski emphasized the role of the anthropologist as an ob-

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2 Should this be construed too literally, I hasten to add that this is not the case with the recent commemorative volume on Malinowski (Firth 1957).
jective reporter, he nonetheless did his reportage with a deep, direct and passionate confrontation with man as a cultural configuration having private and public parts, individual and social needs. The qualities of manliness, and this could signify unreason as well as reason, cowardice no less than heroism, custom in addition to law, such qualities were present in some degree in all men – whether they be Trobriand fishermen or Polish noblemen. The character and worth of men is defined and not destroyed by the roles, functions and positions performed in the act of social creation. To take this simple “humanistic” standpoint on the essential unity of man as a social and psychological animal required Malinowski to reject hoary ethnocentric doctrines emanating from European citadels of learning earlier in the century. It meant a break with the polarization of primitives and moderns, prelogical and logical, profane and sacred. It meant further a rejection of a simplistic pre-determinism which viewed the behaviour of primitive peoples as some sort of proving grounds for a general theory of future developments within advanced cultures. That Malinowski was equal to the task is an ineluctable fact that no amount of criticism of his supposed or actual theoretical limits can overcome1.

Turning to our main purpose: how does Crime and Custom illustrate the principle aspects of Malinowski’s strategy and theory? Further, how have these strategies and theories become the common currency of modern anthropology and sociology? In order to provide meaningful answers to these related questions, Malinowski’s work will be considered under five headings: (i) the meaning of culture; (ii) functionalism as the theory and method of culture; (iii) the nature of human institutions; (iv) the nature of social and cultural change; (v) the scope and method of anthropology. We will then be in a position to see how Crime and Custom fits into Malinowski’s total contribution.

(i) The meaning of culture: Central to all of Malinowski’s work is a multivariate analysis of culture. If the earlier stages in anthropological theory defined culture idealistically, in terms of consciousness (Tylor 1891: 1–6), and further developments produced a reaction to this so that culture was defined much more decisively in terms of material artifacts (Boas 1927: 4–5; Oakley 1950: 1–3), Malinowski faithfully sought to avoid a reductionist choice as to the “ultimate” component in culture. Thus culture is seen as comprised of “inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits and values.” Malinowski further adds that “social organization cannot be really understood except as a part of culture; and all special lines of inquiry referring to human activities, human groupings and human ideas and beliefs can meet and become cross fertilized in the comparative study of cultures.” (1931: 621).

Such a view avoids several inherited metaphysical issues Malinowski held

1 In an unfortunate essay, Malinowski has been reproached for not developing a universal account of social systems (Parsons 1957: 53–70). However, since Malinowski made no pretenses at being the grand theorist of the social sciences, this charge is rather inept. Further, this essay makes the important factual error of claiming that Malinowski was unaware of the writings of Max Weber. This is clearly not the case (cf. Malinowski 1925: 926–30; 1944: 20; 1948: 25f).