

# Manchester as a birth place of modern agency research: The Manchester School explained from the perspective of Evans-Pritchard's' book *The Nuer*<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

At least two definitional modalities may be discerned in the approach to agency. The relationship between agency and structure may be conceived as one of neutral but necessary complementarity: structure can only exist to the extent to which its is brought to life in concrete acts by concrete actors. However, according to another, much more attractive definition of agency, agency is not so much the coming to life of social structure through actors' concrete social behaviour, but the freedom that actors take, in their interaction, to manoeuvre between the stipulations set by structure, and then agency becomes not so much the enactment, but the denial, the compensation, the improvisation *beyond* structure. In the present paper, emphasis will be on the second approach.

My contribution to the study of agency, with the present argument, will mainly be in the field of the history of ideas, more specifically the development of social science theory and method in the twentieth century, with special emphasis on Africanist anthropological

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the substantially revised translation of a chapter from Wim van Binsbergen: *Van Vorstenhof tot mediaproduct: Een culturele antropologie van Afrika, vooral Zambia*, (1995/2006). An English oral paraphrase was presented in 2003 as: Wim van Binsbergen, 'Manchester as a birthplace of agency', paper read at the international conference on 'Agency in Africa: An old theme, a new issue', Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) (chair of intercultural philosophy) and Theme Group on Agency in Africa, African Studies Centre (ASC) (convenors Rijk van Dijk, Wouter van Beek and Wim van Binsbergen, 16 June 2003). I express my indebtedness to the ASC and the EUR Trust Fund for financially contributing to this intellectual event; to the Victoria University, Manchester, United Kingdom, and the Institute for African Studies, University of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia, for major institutional contributions to my anthropological work; to Richard Werbner and to the memory of Jaap van Velsen, and to many other members of the Manchester School, who, over the decades, have illuminated and inspired me, welcomed me in their midst and shared their network's resources and gossip with me; to my research participants and adoptive kinsmen among the Zambian Nkoya people and in various South Central African settings, without whose hospitality and inspiration I would never have been able to appreciate the analytical challenges posed by the societies in that region; and to André Köbben, Douwe Jongmans, Wim Wertheim, Bonno Thoden van Velzen, and Jeremy Boissevain, my main teachers of anthropology at the University of Amsterdam in the 1960s, who laid the foundation that both prepared me for, and made me acceptable to, Manchester. Since part of the present arguments relies on insider knowledge gathered in personal association with the Manchester School, I have occasionally indicated the nature of that association. For my heavily annotated photographic essay on the Manchester school, see: [http://www.shikanda.net/ethnicity/illustrations\\_manch/manchest.htm](http://www.shikanda.net/ethnicity/illustrations_manch/manchest.htm)

research. Until the second half of the nineteenth century CE, North Atlantic intellectual tradition had derived from the converging influences of the Judaeo-Christian and the Graeco-Roman tradition a largely individual-centred image of man. Here religion, ethics and morality, aesthetics, as well as dominant models of social, political and legal action and accountability, mainly emphasised individual agency before others and before God. ‘The social’ was a category that had to be specifically invented and installed in the intellectual toolbox of the West. The emergence and subsequent professionalisation of the social sciences had the effect of eclipsing earlier ‘models of man’ (cf. Simon 1957) based on individual agency – e.g. those derived from dominant forms of *belles lettres*, historiography, and Christian theology. Instead, a *sociologistic* paradigm was favoured in which agency was systematically underplayed and overarching, blindly dictating social structure was welcomed as the new paradigm. Classic structural-functionalism in the social sciences, including anthropology, during the 1930s-40s marks the triumph (albeit short-lived) of this paradigm.

This paper presents in detail how that paradigm was effectively challenged by the Manchester School: the work of Max Gluckman and his associates, whose main inspiration lay in the apparently loosely structured rural societies of South Central Africa in late colonial times (mid-20th century), with their subsequent urban developments. Although agency scarcely appears, as an explicit concept, in the Manchester conceptual toolkit, my argument will demonstrate how the school of social research in fact amounted to the modern re-vindication of agency research. Therefore, a detailed examination of the theoretical and methodological position of Manchester will bring out many crucial points of agency research, that will remain relevant even decades after the effective demise of Manchester as a coherent intellectual movement.

## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF SOUTH CENTRAL AFRICA

Within a given culture area, social research often displays a tendency to cluster, thematically and methodologically, into a more or less distinct school. In that case, specific approaches and theoretical perspectives are developed which may often also be applicable to other parts of the world, but which in those other parts determine the general signature of regional studies much less than in the region where they were originally conceived. Richard Fardon (1990) has called this tendency *localising strategies*. The edited collection which he published under that title clearly brings out the specific local character of anthropological research in ten different regions of the earth.

A number of factors interplay in this connection. On the ground, between the societies and cultures within one particular region (for instance Indonesia, or the Fertile Crescent between Egypt and Western Iran, or South Central Africa) we may expect a certain convergence in structures and themes. Such societies and cultures resemble one another, and social research in their particular region brings these resemblances to light. Moreover, researchers have the tendency to send their students, half a generation or one whole

generation of scientists later, to the very same cultural region where they themselves once made a name for themselves. This leads to an intellectual convergence which further reinforces the empirical similarities in the research data. When on top of all that the region becomes the home of a central research institution which in the course of years maintains a fairly close link with such a regionally-orientated group of researchers; when within such a cluster a marked leader arises of international stature; and when there happens to be adequate funding for personnel appointments, research and publications; then we can say that the principal conditions for school formation have been met.

This effect is particularly clear in the study of South Central Africa. In this region, a large group of anthropologists became known under the name of ‘Manchester School’, around the figure of Max Gluckman – once described as the ‘focal point of our network’.<sup>2</sup> The majority of these researchers held an appointment at the Rhodes-Livingstone institute in colonial Zambia, which shortly after its founding by Godfrey Wilson came under the leadership of Gluckman (cf. Brown 1973). With the Rhodes-Livingstone institute as their base, these researchers carried out fieldwork in Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Congo- Kinshasa, and Mozambique. Nearly all of them read anthropology at the Victoria University in that city, or held academic appointments there. As a group they can boast several great achievements. With creative pioneering work they put the societies of South Central Africa on the map ethnographically, in both their rural and their urban aspects, in the late colonial and early postcolonial era. In the course of these ethnographic activities they developed a methodological and theoretical perspective which, at the time, was downright revolutionary; this perspective allowed them to *concentrate, not on structure but on agency*; thus they could do much better justice to the exceptionally flexible and unstructured (in Clyde Mitchell’s terms, ‘inchoate’) forms of social organisation which they encountered in the region. In this way they were amongst the first to take their distance from excessively schematic, abstract, mechanical and totalising structural-functional models, such as had been developed in the course of the 1930s-40s, within British ‘social anthropology’ — which was the international standard at the time. Even though the Manchester school disintegrated in the 1970s, present-day anthropology and sociology of development would have been unthinkable without Manchester – even though many other inspirations have made significant contributions to these fields, such as neo-Marxism, structuralism, configuration sociology, and postmodernism.

The methodological and theoretical edifice of the Manchester school was designed, in the first place, to be able to grasp the centrality of the participants’ *agency* within the little institutionalised, and constantly changing social relations they found to be typical of South Central Africa. This may be one of the reasons why that edifice in itself is not very formalised either. Existing attempts to characterise Manchester<sup>3</sup> do indicate themes and variations, but

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<sup>2</sup> With these words the edited collection *Social Networks in Urban Situations* (Mitchell 1969) was dedicated to Gluckman.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Kuper 1975; Van Teeffelen 1978 ; Van Donge 1985; Werbner 1985; Kapferer 1987; Thoden van Velzen 1965; Geschiere & Raatgever 1985; Van Binsbergen 1985; Schumacher 1994, 2001. In addition, a long series of introductory and synthesising texts, mainly by the hand of Gluckman and Mitchell,

these attempts concentrate on individual intellectual products, their specific authors, and the specific ethnographic situations to which these refer. Such an approach may be well in line with what I will describe, in the course of the present argument, as *the emphasis on narrative historicity within the Manchester school*, but of course, any study in the history of ideas should seek both to reflect the ideas under discussion and to transcend them in the light of complementary other approaches. In the present study I will systematically evoke a number of characteristics of the Manchester school. Here I will use a thought experiment, on the basis of the idea that the essential characteristics of a particular phenomenon are most clearly brought out in contrast with other similar phenomena. Therefore I find it useful to look at ‘Manchester’ from the perspective of what is, without a doubt, the most classic, and the most influential product of British social anthropology: the book *The Nuer* (pronounced: *Noo-áir*) by E.E. Evans-Pritchard. This book entails the description of the ecology and the social organisation of a group of Nilotic-speaking pastoralists in Southern Sudan, based on fieldwork conducted in the 1930s. If the Nuer ethnographic material had been collected from a ‘Manchester’ perspective, if in other words *The Nuer* had been written by Max Gluckman, Clyde Mitchell, Elizabeth Colson, Victor Turner, Jaap van Velsen, or any of the other big shots of ‘Manchester’, what would have been the outcome? What principal characteristics of ‘Manchester’ would we apply for such a thought experiment?

Even several decades after the demise of ‘Manchester’ these questions retain a certain topicality. In the first place because the rural societies and the people’s kinship relations of Zambia and elsewhere in South Central Africa have largely retained many of the basic characteristics sketched in the ethnographic portraits produced by the Manchester authors – despite the massive rate of social change since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the heyday of ‘Manchester’. In the second place, because ‘Manchester’ continues to function broadly as a centre of inspiration among anthropologists, not least in the Netherlands, where the research work of Africanists like Köbben, Thoden van Velzen, and Schoffeleers has owed much to ‘Manchester’. My own link with ‘Manchester’ is even stronger: although I only met Gluckman a few times when he was already at the end of his life, there is no anthropological approach with which I have interacted so intensively as with the Manchester school, both at the University of Zambia (where for years I was affiliated as a member of the successor of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, the *Institute of African Studies*), and in Manchester, which I frequented between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s, and where in the academic year 1979-1980 I held an appointment as Simon Professor – a post previously held by several prominent members of the Manchester school. Intensive and prolonged personal contact with senior colleagues such as Jaap van Velsen and Richard Werbner had a decisive influence on my work in the 1970s, and the ‘Manchester’ inspiration on my anthropological work has remained paramount – even though, like most of my Manchester friends in the course of the last three or four decades, I have often ventured into terrains where even ‘Manchester’ feared to tread, from ethno-history (but cf. Barnes 1951, Cunnison 1951) to religious anthropology (to which we will come back below), myth analysis, long-range comparison, and the adoption

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many of which will be considered in the course of my present argument. It is remarkable that Gluckman features scarcely, and the Manchester School not at all, in Harris’ (1969) authoritative history of anthropology.

of an African role as diviner-priest – which was in many respects the deathblow to my Manchester ties (cf. van Binsbergen 1991, 2003a).

## SOME ASPECTS OF BRITISH ‘SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY’ IN THE 1930S

One major lesson was taught to anyone who, like myself,<sup>4</sup> read anthropology at a Dutch university in the 1960s: anthropology was a very young branch of science, in which virtually nothing of lasting value had been achieved before 1920, nay, before 1930. The British School, with big names such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Meyer Fortes and Daryll Forde, dominated anthropology and certainly the study of Africa; at the time, the works of these authors were only a few decades old, but already they had acquired such classic status and such a reputation of brilliance as to eclipse the many, many works of anthropology that had preceded them, both in their own country and in North America, France, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, etc. We students were indoctrinated to consider these older works anathema and ridiculous, and to leave them unread; they acquired somehow the same taste as would now be associated with pornography from the first decades of photography and motion pictures: curious, embarrassing, strictly speaking forbidden, and in fact absolutely obsolete and no longer interesting. The British School’s structural-functionalism had caused such a landslide that whole generations had been namelessly covered underneath it: swept away was Tylor’s evolutionism; swept away was likewise the analysis of religious and mythic patterns by the classicists-anthropologists James Frazer and Jane Harrison however extensive their knowledge of Antiquity may have been; so was the work of a folklorist like Andrew Lang;<sup>5</sup> so was diffusionism, which counted among its exponents not only Germans and Austrians such as Wilhelm Schmidt and F. Graebner,<sup>6</sup> but also a *diffusionist* Manchester School *avant la lettre*, with G. Elliot. Smith and J. Perry as leading figures.<sup>7</sup> The same devastating fate awaited – even more undeservedly, as I finally allow myself to think today – the kindred approach (termed ‘cultural morphology’) by the great German Africanist Leo Frobenius.<sup>8</sup> Even the highly solid, purely ethnographic work by people like Junod (1962/1913) and Stayt (1931) was not exempted from the censorship with which the professionalisation of European anthropology sought to define its identity, simply by declaring inimical or ridiculous all previous approaches that did not fit into the straightjacket of that new anthropology’s own theoretical perspective. Yet from our present-day perspective the saving grace of Junod and

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<sup>4</sup> I had as one of my professors André Köbben, whose role in Dutch anthropology in the years 1955-1975 was somewhat comparable with that of Gluckman’s in Britain.

<sup>5</sup> Tylor 1948; Frazer 1955, 1918, 1968; Harrison 1977, 1980, 1948; Lang 1893, 1898, 1970.

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt 1908, 1926, 1933; Schmidt & Koppers 1937; Graebner 1911.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Dawson 1929; Perry 1918, 1923, 1926, 1935; Smith 1916, 1919, 1929; Jackson 1917.

<sup>8</sup> Of Frobenius’ unbelievably voluminous oeuvre we may cite: Frobenius 1898, 1904, 1904b, 1911, 1912-13, 1923, 1931, 1954, 1973.

Stayt consists in not only their considerable cultural and linguistic competence, but also in the fact that they remained close to the ground and did not burden themselves with the, inevitably ephemeral, theoretical pretensions of structural-functionalism.

Meanwhile, the British School with its classic products did not fall from the sky, but had been prepared by two major figures, each with his own characteristic theoretical orientation: Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.

Bronislaw Malinowski was born in Poland. His work can be characterised as ‘psychological functionalism’, in which the influence of the German founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) is unmistakable. Malinowski’s empirical basis is a very thorough descriptive knowledge of western Melanesia, specifically of the Trobriand islands, where this Polish researcher had been interned during World War I. There he became the founder of modern anthropology’s principal method: participant observation. Malinowski explains a society’s institutions by reference to the *function* they have for the individual; they satisfy certain individual needs. Many of these needs have to do with individual survival (food, shelter), and are more specifically satisfied – especially in non-western societies at the time – by means of direct, personal and productive contact between a human individual and her or his natural environment. This is why Malinowski lays great emphasis on ‘man’s selective interest in nature’,<sup>9</sup> in other words on ecology.<sup>10</sup> Malinowski’s own ethnographic work offers classic examples on this point (Malinowski 1925, 1935). He instilled this approach in his students, a number of whom did field research in Africa in the 1930s, including Phyllis Kaberry who was to work in Cameroon (Kaberry 1952, cf. 1957), and Audrey Richards who, while initially orientated mainly towards food and food production (in a rather narrow and literal application of her teacher’s emphasis on ecology), soon broadened out her scope which allowed her to write the first modern professional ethnography of a Zambian society (Richards 1939).<sup>11</sup>

With an empirical basis in the societies of the Andaman Islands (Indian Ocean) and of the Australian Aborigines, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown’s main theoretical inspiration derived from the circles of French sociology and anthropology, around pioneering figures such as Durkheim, Mauss and Lévy-Brühl.<sup>12</sup> Radcliffe-Brown was the main propagandist of these French writers’ works in British anthropology. This brings him to a ‘sociologistic functionalism’, which seeks the explanation of social institutions primarily in the functions they satisfy, not for the individual as Malinowski had it, but for the group as a whole. For Radcliffe-Brown, society is a system of social relations. It is the anthropologist’s task to map out this system and to explain it in its internal consistency, by reference to the functions

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<sup>9</sup> Malinowski 1954.

<sup>10</sup> Taken here in the original sense of ‘the system of exchanges between an organism and its natural environment’; it is only in recent decades, in a context of North Atlantic excessive waste-making, that ‘ecology’ has taken the additional meaning of ‘environmental preservation’. But inevitably, out of well-realised personal interest an element of care and preservation has usually been an aspect of man’s relationship with nature.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Richards 1932, 1939, 1940, 1969, 1970, 1982

<sup>12</sup> Durkheim 1912; Durkheim & Mauss 1901; Mauss 1960; Lévy-Brühl 1910, 1927 (the latter book’s English translation with an admiring introduction by Evans-Pritchard).

which the parts have in the context of the whole ensemble (Radcliffe-Brown 1968). Along these lines this founder of structural-functionalism in anthropology dreams of a *Natural science of society* (Radcliffe-Brown 1937/1957). That branch of science was hoped to investigate ‘the social’ as a separate, irreducible category of reality (Durkheim’s influence on this point is eminently clear), and to establish its laws, with such precision and relative certainty hitherto reserved for the natural sciences. Needless to say that the systematic, predictable, wholly institutionalised features attributed to ‘the social’ in Radcliffe-Brown’s perspective (as in the latter’s main theoretical inspiration, Durkheim) made him primarily responsible for the eclipse, for anthropology’s oblivion, – at least temporarily – of the individual actor and his agency, in favour of blindly dictating social structure.

Although both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown published on Africa, they could not be called Africanists proper. It was a group of their younger colleagues and students who were to carry out the first modern fieldwork in Africa in the 1930s (cf. Kuper 1975).

The most important members of this group were E.E. Evans-Pritchard (with research among the Azande, Shilluk, Nuer, and Anuak),<sup>13</sup> Meyer Fortes (the ethnographer of the West African Tallensi),<sup>14</sup> and Daryll Forde, specialist on the Yakö likewise in West Africa.<sup>15</sup> At the time, Max Gluckman (1911-1975) was a young anthropologist who had just completed his fieldwork among the South African Zulu, which had gained him an Oxford PhD. A good impression of the first ten years of modern, that is structural-functional, participant-observation based, Africanist anthropology can be gleaned from the book *African Political Systems* (London 1940), edited by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, with contributions by the two editors, and further by Gluckman, Schapera, Richards, Oberg, Nadel, and Wagner.

The central problems and aims of British anthropology in the 1930s-40s may be characterised as follows.

The first aim was simply to continue mapping out humankind ethnographically. The juvenile discipline of anthropology, now affirming itself as a separate field, was only too well aware of the limitations of the older available material that had often been produced, not by professional ‘ethnologists’, but by colonial civil servants, missionaries, and travellers. Moreover, for many parts of the world even such pre-scientific ethnographic reports were simply lacking. In this period plans began to be made for one of the most ambitious projects in Africanist anthropology: the production, under the editorship of Daryll Forde, of the *Ethnographic Atlas of Africa*, which would conveniently summarise all the old and new ethnographic material in a systematic, though concise, description of all known cultural areas of the African continent.

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<sup>13</sup> Evans-Pritchard 1934., 1937, 1940, 1945, 1948, 1949, 1951a, 1951b, , 1956, 1962, 1965, 1967a, 1967b, 1969, 1974; Evans-Pritchard et al. 1934; Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1969/1940.; Beidelman 1974.

<sup>14</sup> Fortes, M., 1936, 1945, 1949a, 1949b, 1953a, 1953b, 1957, 1959, 1961, 1962, 1969a, 1969b, 1970, 1987; Fortes & Dieterlen 1965; Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1969/1940

<sup>15</sup> Forde, C.D., 1934, 1950–, 1953, 1956, 1970; Forde & Kaberry 1969; Forde & Radcliffe-Brown 1950.

In order to discharge this ethnographic task as well as possible, one designed a method for scientific ethnography, whose basis was *prolonged fieldwork*. The assumption<sup>16</sup> was that through a combination of many months, even several years, of goal-orientated participation and observation within the local community under study the fieldworker would arrive at the insight into connections within the local social organisation, which would have eluded him or her in case of a less prolonged stay, of a more distant approach to the local population, and of the use of less structured methods for the collection and administration of ethnographic data.

In order to create a foundation for such a structured method of data collection, it was necessary to design a series of interconnected *technical terms*, which would serve to process, systematise, report, and compare ethnographic data. This is the period when theories on kinship (around such core concepts as lineage, descent, segmentation), marriage, political systems, and (at a higher level of abstraction) ‘institutions’, ‘structure’, ‘system’, begin to play a leading role in the collection, ordering and interpretation of ethnographic data.

Moreover, these core concepts become more and more elaborated and integrated with one another, with the result that gradually, as a backdrop to more concrete ethnographic studies, we begin to discern the beginning of a *social anthropological theory* of societies in general. Of course, it was the lack of such an explicit and sophisticated theory that marked the earlier paradigms in anthropology, and that made them weak and indefensible in the face of the emergence of structural functionalism. In the theoretical endeavours of this period the emphasis lay on total, whole societies, which were conceived as more or less isolated, integrated and internally structured wholes: peoples, tribes, kingdoms. Only much later was the idea of such unity to be systematically doubted: in modern (post 1960s) anthropology, which has few illusions left as to the proclaimed unity of ethnic, cultural, economic and political unit; modern anthropology stresses the fragmentation of the units of social organisation, their lack of coherence, and the permeability of their boundaries vis-à-vis one another; and it problematises the wider frameworks of which these social units as part at the regional, national and global level.

But to return to classic anthropology of the 1930s: in the description of social units social anthropologists then mainly relied on the idea of an underlying ‘value system’ which allegedly was shared by all participants, i.e. by all members of the society under study. To designate such a value system, American anthropology of this period had adopted the concept of *culture* originally launched, with this specific meaning, by the pioneer British anthropologist Tylor (1832 – 1917); however, British anthropologists continued to prefer the concept of ‘custom’, which was not only considerably more vague than ‘culture’, but also had unmistakable connotations of othering, of primitiveness: culture might still be a characteristic of the middle to upper classes to which most anthropological academicians themselves belonged, but ‘custom’ was predominantly something *others* had: those whom we study but who are essentially different from us. But designated by whatever term, custom or conflict, the social unity that that term was meant to evoke was primarily conceived as an matter of *ideas*. Culture, internalised in the minds of people and expressed in their language, their

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<sup>16</sup> Which has severe limitations and epistemological flaws, cf. my book *Intercultural encounters* (2003), especially chapters 0 and 15.



explicit and conscious rules of behaviour, etc., was supposed to constitute a (more or less uniform and immutable) script whose concrete actualisation, performance, enactments would then reside in the actual interaction of people in economic, political and religious contexts.

So in a rather short period anthropology had moved considerably from the individual's needs as stressed by Malinowski: a double layer of the total social order, and the web of specific social relations, had been imposed, and had made individual agency, from central point of departure, into a problematic residual category.

For the study of agency this theoretical position had far-reaching, potentially negative implications. One accepted definition of agency is precisely in terms of such concrete actualisations, through which the members of a society, whilst interacting, give concrete substance and shape to their social institutions. *From the structural-functionalist perspective dominating British social anthropology in its classic years (1930s-1960s), agency therefore was dictated by and subservient to, social structure.*

In addition to the stress on normative integration as was supposed to dominate individual social behaviour, there was, in British social anthropology of the classic period, an increasing awareness of the interrelationship and the interdependence of patterns of social relations within a society's various institutional sectors; this gave rise to the notion that what held a society together was not only *normative* of *ideational* integration but also such integration as resulted from the coordination of *social relations* in various societal institutional sectors.

The fieldwork that was undertaken in this period between the World Wars still has a highly exploratory nature also in this respect that it leads to hints, or proposals, for anthropological theory, to hypotheses, which as yet are not yet systematically and methodically put to the strict empirical test.

Finally there is *the link with the colonial administration*. The relations between anthropology and colonialism constitute a topic that was in the forefront of critical attention in the 1960s and early 1970s;<sup>17</sup> today we witness a new cycle of reflection on this, stemming from our fear lest the production of anthropological knowledge (which is more and more funded from development funds, at least in the Netherlands) will become subservient to neo-colonial relationships around bilateral and multilateral intercontinental aid, to such Structural Adjustment Programmes as the World Bank imposes, and will be simply reduced to just one of the cultural forms of global dominance or hegemony in the context of globalisation processes that are engendered by capitalist maximalisation strategies, and that are sustained, in the South, by (the desire for) mass consumption and by the electronic media.

Characteristically, colonial anthropology described the local, non-western societies as more or less closed and self-contained political units of which the local representatives of the colonial power did not make part – the latter remain out of scope even though these local societies were – already at the time – unmistakably incorporated in a world-wide economic and political colonial order. In fact, of course, colonial civil servants, military men and European entrepreneurs served the linkage between the local socio-political units and that global order, and such incorporation must inevitably have had massive and decisive effects

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Leclerc 1972 Copans 1974, 1975; Buijtenhuijs 1972a, 1972b.

upon the distribution of power in the local socio-political units as early as the 1930s – even if these local political units often managed to retain the semblance of traditional intactness for decades or longer. Thus political anthropological studies from this period present us with a double fiction:

- The suggestion that the local society is closed into itself, also politically (whereas in fact, of course, that society's being forcefully incorporated in the colonial state was one of its principal features)
- The claim that that local society is 'traditional' and essentially unaltered, and that the political processes taking place in the 'ethnographic present' (the 1930s-40s) are still almost identical to what they were prior to the establishment of colonial rule (whereas in fact, of course, colonial incorporation had effectively disempowered pre-existing local and regional power structures, thus inevitably destroying the precolonial fabric of social life)..

It would be anachronistic to attribute these obvious and major shortcomings to anthropologists' bad faith. Rather, two other factors are involved here. There was, in the first place, the absence of a theory of complex societies which would have made it possible to grasp, within one analytical framework, both

1. 'traditional' (i.e. neo-traditional, and traditionalising) local politics,
2. the colonial state, and
3. global imperialist and capitalist relationships.

In the absence of such a theory (whose construction was to be one of the important achievements of modern anthropology since the 1960s), one can hardly blame anthropologists for not seeing through the fiction of the persistence of tradition; of course, such a fiction was the very cornerstone of their own professional identity. In the second place, among many anthropologists of the classic period there was the demonstrable intention to adduce, to the scientific, national and governmental forums of their time and age, such facts and analyses as would – admittedly – not put an end to the penetration of colonial powers in non-western local communities (the anthropologists' own presence in those community was usually predicated on such colonial state penetration!), but as would at least reduce the unnecessary misunderstanding and arrogance attending that penetration. The implied aim of many anthropologists was to demonstrate that African societies have their own order, logic and beauty (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937; Gluckman 1955), and that their members (who often had become very close and dear to the anthropologist during the latter's fieldwork) were in principle the equals of Europeans. Very few intellectuals at the time were capable of a more radical position beyond the ethical revisionist vindication just described. The time was not yet ripe for anthropologists to adopt a more militant position and to engage in head-on confrontation with the status-quo of colonial governments and colonial entrepreneurs; let alone that they were ready to investigate the inbuilt hegemonic tendencies of their own

discipline, and to seriously engage in a self-critical analysis of the intercontinental politics of knowledge.

### THE NUER AS A BOOK

Many of the above themes of British social anthropologists in the classic period are exemplified in Evans-Pritchard's book *The Nuer: A description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people* (Evans-Pritchard 1940), on which we shall concentrate in the next few sections on this argument. *The Nuer* appeared in the same year as the monumental collective work *African Political Systems*, that was edited by Evans-Pritchard along with Meyer Fortes. At that point in time Evans-Pritchard already had made a big name for himself with *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande* (Evans-Pritchard 1937).

*The Nuer* is the first scientific study of the Nuer people and their social, political and economic life, on which a number of other authors had already produced unsystematic accounts. In *The Nuer*, there is much emphasis on the method by which the data were collected, which has made the introductory chapter one of the most frequently quoted passages in the literature on anthropological fieldwork. There is a clear concern with the development of an anthropological conceptual toolbox. Concepts are used with great care and with precise definition. Perhaps the clarity, the logical consistence and the classical balance of the brilliantly structured argument are among the book's greatest, and most lasting, values. In this way *The Nuer* is, as the author himself claims (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 261), clearly an attempt to arrive at a synthesis of anthropological theory of political organisation. The central problem of the book is the following: *to what extent is it possible to discuss the political institutions of an African people as if these constituted a distinct order of phenomena, with as little as possible reference to this people's patterns of kinship and domestic organisation at the lowest, i.e. the most immediate, level of face-to-face contacts between members of one and the same local community* (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 261, cf. pp. 190-1). The book is, in other words, an experiment in the theory of political systems, as much as it is a (highly systematised, and aggregate) ethnography of a particular people. Finally, also *The Nuer* arose from a colonial context: it was written at the instigation of the colonial government of the Sudan.

Without a doubt *The Nuer* is the most widely read and the most influential professional anthropological text on Africa. This has been due to a number of reasons, including the classical beauty of its language and composition, and its high level of abstraction, but primarily to the fact that the book is the first fully-fledged elaboration of the British programme of structural-functional anthropology in the field of social organisation. *The Nuer* has remained the – mildly and politely criticised – point of reference for younger generations of anthropologists, who on the basis of new fieldwork and new, less formalist theoretical reflection have continued to ponder over the segmentary structural principles – usually implicit and largely imperceptible – of the Nilotic societies and other so-called 'a-cephalous'

groups (i.e. those lacking formal leadership).<sup>18</sup> The book is prescribed reading in almost any introductory curriculum in the field of Africanist anthropology, even though the society that it describes hardly exists any more in that form (if only because of the devastating effects of decades of civil war in Southern Sudan during the postcolonial era), and even though the more recent Nilotic anthropology has become more and more sceptical as to the possibility that Evans-Pritchard's abstractions may ever (notably in the ethnographic present of the 1930s), have been closer to reality than they are today.

The structure of *The Nuer* is immediately evident from the table of contents. The first two chapters deal with '*Interest in cattle*' and '*Oecology*': the material basis of local social life. Here the author apparently concurs with the Malinowski line, even though he does not explicitly make the link with that author. The ecological activities that determine the material survival of local society are in the hands of the members of small local communities. These may comprise a varying number of people depending on the time of the year. The local communities are composed of houses, clusters of houses (forming the homestead), and finally clusters of homesteads, forming the hamlet. But even at maximal numerical strength these local communities are not capable of entirely looking after themselves, are not fully autarkic. In other words, the ecology demands a form of organisation that transcends the local communities:

[ 'the tendency to migrate (such as existed in the past), the seasonal transhumance of cattle as is being practiced today, and moreover the desire to replenish the herds that have been decimated by Dinka raids – all of this contributes to the political importance of the unites above the village level; for both economic and military reasons it is difficult for villages to retreat into autarkic isolation' ] (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 93).<sup>19</sup>

The details of this relation between ecology and the wider social structure are masterfully described in the famous third chapter '*Time and Space*'. In the next three chapters entitled '*The political system*', '*The lineage system*' and '*The age-set system*', the author sketches on a broad canvas the wider political structure that makes the linkages between the local groups possible. Here Evans-Pritchard is wholly within the line of Radcliffe-Brown, and the book's introduction stresses the extent of Evans-Pritchard's indebtedness to him. In *The Nuer* Evans-Pritchard deliberately refrains from describing in any detail the internal structure of the local groups; that is a task he has reserved for his later book *Kinship and marriage among the Nuer* (Evans-Pritchard 1951), and for a whole series of other, shorter publications (cf. Beidelman 1974) which however never attained the fame and classic beauty of *The Nuer*.

It is outside our present scope to indicate in detail the specific forms which the wider political system takes among the Nuer, and to specify which significance Evans-Pritchard attributes in this connection to the tribe, the lineage, the clan, and the age sets. However, I must say a few words about the role of the feud or blood revenge. Evans-Pritchard defines the feud as

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, Sigrist 1967 ; Middleton & Tait 1958; Johnson 1980, 1982; James 1988 ; Simonse 1990 ; and extensive references there; Hutchinson 1985, 1992, 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Evans-Pritchard 1940: 93. [The brackets indicate that the quotation is merely a paraphrase.]

[‘a protracted mutual enmity between local communities within the same tribe’.<sup>20</sup>]

Conflicts are the order of the day, and usually they imply physical violence. In the case of violent conflict within the local community people take, through a particular choice of weapons, precautions so as to prevent a fatal outcome. However, between different local communities manslaughter does occur. There exists a

[‘moral obligation to settle conflicts by arbitration’]

in a bid to bring about reconciliation instead of allowing a feud to arise or to continue. On the other hand, one of the pillars of the lineage organisation is the obligation to revenge the murder of a patrilineal kinsman (technically known in kinship anthropology as an ‘agnate’). The institution of the leopard-skin headman makes it possible to accommodate these two contradictory tendencies, and to bring about reconciliation instead of feud. These headmen (and traditionally Nuer society did not know any other type), have no factual material or military power, no great authority, but what they do have is a special ritual link with the earth, on the basis of which they can curse people. After manslaughter the perpetrator takes refuge with the leopard-skin headman, and as long as he remains in the latter’s sanctuary he cannot be killed. The victim’s kinsmen lie in ambush in case the perpetrator ventures outside of his sanctuary. Meanwhile the headman ritually cleanses the killer,<sup>21</sup> and sets in motion the reconciliation process : he admonishes the victim’s kin to show forgiveness, and opens negotiations as to the number of cattle that the killer’s kinsmen will have to pay in compensation. As soon as this is settled, which usually takes a few weeks, the perpetrator is free to return home; and although some general resentment is likely to linger one, no counter-killing will ensue.

Evans-Pritchard stresses that, the greater the social distance between the local groups involved, the lesser the chance that the conflict may be solved in this manner: the relationships between very distant groups is characterised by feud, whereas groups living near in each other’s vicinity share many local ecological interests, and that gives them a reason to strive towards the rapid ending of a major conflict.

It is time to proceed to the discussion of the Manchester School and of its founder and leader Max Gluckman, which will enable us to discuss that branch of anthropology in detail from the perspective of *The Nuer*.

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<sup>20</sup> Evans-Pritchard 1940: 150. [The brackets indicate that the quotation is merely a paraphrase.]

<sup>21</sup> In a manner only too familiar from Ancient Greek myths, where such cleansing is of the order of the day; heroes like Heracles and Peleus submitted to it; the latter even reputedly killed Neleus because of refusal to cleanse him – which proved Neleus’ point, albeit posthumously.

## THE MANCHESTER SCHOOL

Gluckman soon acquired considerable esteem in professional circles on the basis of his PhD thesis on the Zulu (which remained unpublished, as so many Anglo-Saxon doctoral dissertations), and his articles based upon the Zulu material.<sup>22</sup> In 1940 he found a job as researcher with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), that had been founded in 1938. Gluckman started to do fieldwork in Barotseland, now Zambia's Western Province. Here he studied the economic and political structure; as an individual researcher (i.e. regardless of what he contributed to the work of others through his theoretical stimulus and his institutional coordination) he became especially known for his work on the Barotse legal system (*The judicial process among the Barotse*, Gluckman 1968, first published in 1957; and: *The ideas in Barotse Jurisprudence*, Gluckman 1965). Very soon he became the director of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute. He managed to lay the foundation for that institute's subsequent development into a world-famous centre of anthropological research, by means of his appointments policy, his own synthetic publications, his great influence upon the institute's journal (*Human Problems in British Central Africa/ Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, which after Zambia's independence (1964) was renamed *African Social Research*), and his uniquely inspiring influence on his co-workers. By the end of the 1940s Gluckman accepted a teaching position in Oxford, soon to be followed by an appointment in Manchester. He remained in close contact with his former co-workers in Africa, and sent his PhD students there for fieldwork. Because his students and former co-workers (J. Clyde Mitchell, E. Colson, R. Apthorpe, J. van Velsen and others) subsequently filled the directorship of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, a close link continued to exist between the institute and University of Manchester. Around Gluckman, a network grew of enthusiastic anthropologists of international stature. Through seminars, conferences, collective and individual publications which always leaned heavily on the work of other members of the same group, a clearly recognisable approach came to articulate itself within British anthropology from about 1950 onward: the Manchester School. Even though the emphasis continued to be on South Central Africa, gradually also specialists on other parts of the world were drawn within the circle of this approach: for instance, India-specialist F.G. Bailey,<sup>23</sup> the Europeanist Ronald Frankenberg with research in Wales,<sup>24</sup> and Emrys Peters, Gluckman's successor in Manchester, as a specialist on the Mediterranean region.<sup>25</sup> Other Manchester researchers in the Near East were Avner Cohen<sup>26</sup> and Emmanuel Marx (cf. Marx 1967). An important figure was also Peter Worsley. He wrote an important M.A. thesis

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<sup>22</sup> Especially Gluckman 1969 (originally published in 1940) and his articles that appeared in the journal *Bantu Studies/ African Studies* 1940-42; these were later collected so as to form *Analysis of a social situation in modern Zululand* (Gluckman 1958).

<sup>23</sup> Bailey 1957, 1969.

<sup>24</sup> Frankenberg 1957, 1978.

<sup>25</sup> Peters 1951, 1967, 1976, .

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Cohen 1965; incidentally, this researcher mainly worked on West Africa.

(which won him the prestigious Curl Prize in anthropology – a few years after Köbben had the same honour), on the limitations of the structural-functional model as it had been applied by Fortes to the Tallensi; next Worsley took a PhD in Australia on the topic of cargo cults; and finally, as professor of sociology in Manchester he became a major theoretician of the sociology of development.<sup>27</sup> Worsley was not the only Manchester figure in whose career we saw the progress from Africa to Australia / Melanesia. A similar development could be seen in the careers of ‘Manchester’ Africanists such as Marwick, Kapferer, Barnes and Garbett, who all made the transition to the South-East,<sup>28</sup> no doubt because of the overproduction of African material, the decolonisation of Africa, and the opening up of South East Asia and of Melanesia for anthropological research from Australia.

The term ‘Manchester School’ suggests a fixed body of theoretical and methodological tenets by which each member would be recognised and that would have dominated the work of all members from the ‘founding’ of that school. That, of course, is fairly unrealistic. It is true that the group had a fairly strong sense of identity, until it fell apart, from the late -1960s onwards, because of internal tensions, because of the geographical dispersal of the group – for its members came to occupy professorial chairs all over the world – and finally also because of Gluckman’s untimely death in Jerusalem in 1975, even before reaching pensionable age. Important factors in the emergence of this distinct corporate identity were the following:

- the forging a distinctive idiom of anthropological concepts,
- the practice of frequently quoting from one another’s work often whilst ignoring theoretical developments in anthropology outside the ‘Manchester’ group,
- and the marked animosity which existed vis-à-vis the ‘Manchester’ group among certain other branches of British anthropology.<sup>29</sup>

The same few themes were adduced, time and time again, by the concentration on groups in Central and Southern Africa speaking languages of the Bantu subgroup of the Niger-Congo linguistic family. Yet despite all this convergence there was also a fair deal of diversity among the Manchester crowd, and there was particularly a marked historical development throughout the lifespan of ‘Manchester’. An ironic consequence of the latter was that Gluckman’s own ethnographic work, especially his legal anthropological studies (cf. van Binsbergen 1977), ended up to be situated somewhere outside the specific “Manchester” approach.

The Manchester School is the result of the exchanges between Gluckman and his younger colleagues over a large number of years. While there is not even one publication (as

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<sup>27</sup> Worsley 1957, 1956, 1961, 1956, 1970, 1967, 1984

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Marwick 1964, 1965; Kapferer 1969, 1972, 1973, , 1976, 1987, 1988a, 1988b, 1996, 1997, 2003; Barnes 1951, 1964 ; Garbett 1966, 1969.

<sup>29</sup> Especially Cambridge and London; this animosity emanates clearly from Kuper’s – a Cambridge man, and a Radcliffe-Brown adept highly partial chapter on ‘Manchester’ in his book on the British School of anthropology (Kuper 1975).

far as I am aware) that lists of the major points of the Manchester School exhaustively and systematically and shows their interconnections, it is especially from the following four kinds of sources that we may gauge the more theoretical aspects of convergence of the ‘Manchester’ approach:

1. Gluckman’s own original work
2. the various individual monographs produced by other members of the Manchester School
3. the introductions, commentaries and synthetic review articles which especially the leading members of the school wrote on the work of the school as a whole, and on that of the individual members
4. and finally the edited works which brought together a number of members of the school for a collective endeavour around a characteristic common theme.

Let me discuss these four categories one by one.

In the first place there is Gluckman’s own collections of essays and theoretical studies *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Gluckman 1955; the first extensive formulation of some of Gluckman’s most seminal ideas); *Order and Rebellion in tribal Africa* (Gluckman 1962); *Politics, law and ritual in tribal society* (Gluckman 1965).

In the second place I must mention the books of the individual other members of the group, and among those especially the introductory and concluding chapters. Let me only make a small selection: Clyde Mitchell, *The Yao village* (Mitchell 1956); John Barnes, *Politics in a changing society* (Barnes 1964); Elizabeth Colson, *Marriage and the family among the Plateau Tonga*, and *The Plateau Tonga* (Colson 1958, 1960)<sup>30</sup>; Max Marwick, *Sorcery in its social setting* (Marwick 1964); Ian Cunnison, *The Luapula peoples* (Cunnison 1967). Victor Turner, *Schism and continuity in an African society*, *The drums of affliction*, and *The forest of symbols* (Turner 1957, 1968, 1967); Jaap van Velsen, (this was a Dutchman who already in the beginning of his anthropology studies in the United Kingdom had taken out British citizenship out of protest against Dutch colonial policy in Indonesia immediately after World War II)<sup>31</sup> *The politics of kinship* (Van Velsen 1964); Bill Watson, *Tribal cohesion in a money economy* (Watson 1958). A full list, of books alone, would be thrice as long.

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<sup>30</sup> Also see her Gwembe studies, which were a form of ‘rescue anthropology’ (the term is more common for urgent archaeology) undertaken when the construction of the Kariba dam was to eradicate Gwembe society, drowning its territorial base forever under the water of Lake Kariba: Colson 1960; Colson & Scudder 1988; Colson 1964, 1971.

<sup>31</sup> Jaap van Velsen’s mother continued to live in The Hague, the Netherlands – for many decades the haunt of Dutchmen with a background in the Dutch East Indies. His regular family visits offered him the opportunity of keeping up visiting relationships with selected Dutch anthropologists, especially with André Köbben (who had spent a year in Oxford prior to his succession to Fahrenfort’s chair of anthropology in the University of Amsterdam, 1955). A direct result of one such visit was my being groomed for a teaching post at the University of Zambia, whilst completing my studies under Köbben; this launched me into the Manchester environment in mid-1971.



Next there are the prefaces, introductions, and separate articles by the members of the group. Especially instructive are the introductions which the more senior members of the group (Gluckman and Mitchell) would write for the books of the younger members, e.g. Mitchell (1971) to *Politics of kinship*.

Finally there are the collective works, which have exerted an enormous converging effect on the Manchester School as a whole, through their choice of themes and through the critical and stimulating influence of their respective editor or editors. The most important of these collections were: *Seven tribes of British Central Africa*, edited by Colson & Gluckman (1950) as a systematic, ethnographic overview of the societies of Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe), Nyasaland (present-day Malawi), and Tanganyika (which forms, with Zanzibar, present-day Tanzania). Moreover, two collections under the sole editorship of Gluckman: *Closed systems and open minds: The limits of naivety in social anthropology* (Gluckman 1964; dealing with the question as to how competent an anthropology must be in adjacent fields of scholarship such as oriental studies, or legal studies); and from 1972 *The allocation of responsibility*, on the questions of culpability, sorcery, divination and kindred topics mainly in African societies (Gluckman 1972). Methodological question were central in Bill Epstein's collection *The craft of social anthropology* (Epstein 1967), while the great potential of the network paradigm for the study of urban relationships in Africa was investigated in the collection *Social networks in urban situation* edited by Clyde Mitchell (1969).

Even though all these publications did not exactly amount to the development of a neatly demarcated 'Manchester' 'orthodoxy', yet there are a number of common characteristics that return in the work of most or all of the individual members of the school.

Before we set out to discuss these common themes in detail it is useful to point out that not all of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute's research took effectively place under the 'Manchester' umbrella. There was a considerable amount of agricultural and nutritional research, as well as work on material culture and local history, that was hardly open to a revolutionary perspective on social relations. Among the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute anthropologists there were some who in seniority were at a par or outranked Gluckman, and they would have been his inspiring colleagues rather than his students: Colson, Holleman (1952, 1969), Cunnison. If the work of these authors can be said to have "Manchester" traits, then mainly indirectly so: because these apparently 'Manchester' traits highlighted characteristic aspects of the societies of South Central Africa – aspects which (as a further indication of the scientific and intersubjective nature of anthropology as an empirical discipline) could not fail to come up in the work of these experienced non-'Manchester' anthropologists.

The theoretical and methodological answers which 'Manchester' had to offer were not just new at the time, they were downright revolutionary, and today they have lost little of their topicality, as far as the study of small-scale sets of social relationships is concerned.

"Manchester"'s central theme has been set out in an accessible way in Gluckman's *Custom and conflict*. That popular book's content may be summarised as follows. *The social order is precarious and internally conflicting. Therefore we are not allowed (contrary to the assumptions of classic structural-functionalism) to take social integration and social*

*continuity for granted. The anthropologist's task goes almost in the opposite direction: to demonstrate how, not despite all internal contradictions (contradictions within, and between, values, norms, roles, aspirations, power relations) but precisely by virtue of these, yet a minimum of order is being achieved within society.* Needless to point out that his perspective amounted to a re-instatement of individual agency, freed once more from under the smothering imposition of social structure and the web of social relationships.

The Manchester School is an attempt to devise a coherent body of systematic approaches to this central theme. In regard of this central and perennial problem the Manchester School has offered specific theoretical and methodological answers that are eminently applicable to, and that offer eminent insight into, the small-scale social relations on which anthropologists have largely concentrated until recently..

### THE NUER AND THE MANCHESTER SCHOOL

In some respects the Manchester School may be considered a continuation of the inspiration of Evans-Pritchard's work. This was due, in part, to the historical connection via Gluckman's years in Oxford (Evans-Pritchard mentions him in the preface to *The Nuer* as an important sparring partner while the book was being drafted), and to the great influence which Evans-Pritchard exerted on British anthropology in general. A shorter text by Evans-Pritchard (*Some aspects of kinship and marriage among the Nuer* (Evans-Pritchard 1945), a pre-study for the later book with almost the same title *Kinship and marriage among the Nuer* (Oxford University Press; Evans-Pritchard 1951) was published in the series of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute. Gluckman had indicated that another version of Evans-Pritchard's same argument had formed the main inspiration of Gluckman's own approach to Lozi kinship (Gluckman 1950: 166, n. 1; Evans Pritchard 1938, 1945).

It is remarkable that the Manchester School acknowledges a very close link, not so much with Evans-Pritchard's Nuer studies, but with another *magnum opus* by Evans-Pritchard (1937): *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*, where the dynamics of social control, interpersonal relationships and ritual, against the background of a moral order, are treated in a much more concrete, much less abstract and aggregate way than in *The Nuer*. Under the editorship of Max Gluckman the Manchester School dedicated a Festschrift to Evans-Pritchard, *The Allocation of Responsibility* (Gluckman 1972), which chapter after chapter deals with the main themes of the Azande book, applying them to a different ethnographic context than the Azande. Such a honour has never been accorded to *The Nuer*, in the 'Manchester' context.

To the (relatively limited) extent to which 'Manchester' has occupied itself with the study of religion, also there the inspiration from the Azande material has been much greater than that of the Nuer material – even though Evans-Pritchard devoted to Nuer religion a major monograph (Evans-Pritchard 1956). But in fact 'Manchester's' attention did not go out so much to religion but to other institutional complexes in society: to law, traditional leadership, kinship, politics. In his insistence on the theme 'religion', on which he did path

breaking work, Victor Turner<sup>32</sup> has always shown himself to be the odd man out within ‘Manchester’. He remained faithful to ‘Manchester’ for instance by coining the phrase ‘ritual process’ by analogy to the ‘social process that (as we shall see below) was so central to ‘Manchester’. Moreover, already during the disintegrating phase of ‘Manchester’ he was to edit a major book on *Colonialism in Africa* (Turner 1971), to which many Manchester authors contributed. Yet Turner’s elaborations in the field of symbolism, divination, *communitas*, *counter-structure*, meant that he gained world fame precisely to the extent to which he distanced himself more and more from ‘Manchester’, both conceptually and geographically (as a professor of anthropology in Chicago, USA). Also the extensive work that has been done in the field of Southern African territorial cults,<sup>33</sup> even though closely associated with ‘Manchester’ in terms of personnel, yet in terms of theory and concepts is hardly mainstream ‘Manchester’. This work stresses the circulation of people and objects in the context of these cults, which results in local social relationships being overlaid with a wider, regional cultic framework – vast regions being caught in a more or less coherent net of cultic relations. Another characteristic of these territorial-cult studies is that, with all their attention for history, their main aim is to capture the structure of these cults and see this structure being enacted and change over time – while for Manchester, as we shall see, the idea of a structure being treated as more or less independently from and prior to its history was to be increasingly anathema, – on the contrary, if structure was to be anything it was the specific historicity of its dialectical and precarious unfolding.

However, if *The Nuer* is an impressive experiment in the theorising about political systems, then that is a line which has received a very fertile continuation in ‘Manchester’. Power, group relationships, conflict, conflict regulation, and structural tensions constitute a central field of problems for the ‘Manchester’ group, to such an extent that sometimes their works give one the impression as if anthropology, and the human society that forms its object of study, are concerned with nothing else but these themes. In formulating theoretical insights in this political field, ‘Manchester’ will time and again reach back to the standard example of *The Nuer*.<sup>34</sup>

On one point the Manchester School has explicitly engaged in polemics with Evans-Pritchard’s analysis of the political system of the Nuer: notably, as far as the interpretation of the feud is concerned. Dissatisfied with *The Nuer*’s analysis on this point, Gluckman (1955 ch. 1) argued that we have only genuinely understood the dynamics of the reconciliation process through Elizabeth Colson’s study on ‘Social control of revenge in Plateau Tonga society’.<sup>35</sup> According to both Rhodes-Livingstone authors the key to an understanding of the feud and its reconciliation would lie, not in the overlapping ecological interests of the

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<sup>32</sup> Turner 1952, 1955, 1957, 1961, 1962, 1966, 1967, 1968a, 1968b, 1969, 1971; Turner & Turner 1978.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Werbner 1977, 1989; Fry 1975; Garbett 1966, 1969; Schoffeleers 1978; Van Binsbergen 1981; Lan 1985; as a background also van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985.

<sup>34</sup> E.g. Gluckman 1965a, 1965b, *passim*; Bailey 1969: 31, 34, 35, 56; Marx 1972: 281f.

<sup>35</sup> Colson, ‘Social control van vengeance in Plateau Tonga society’, in: Colson 1960: 102-121; cf. Gluckman’s chapter ‘The peace in the feud’, in Gluckman 1955.

conflicting groups, but in *social* relations, notably in conflicting loyalties of persons who had ties of more or less equal strength with both parties, notably through affinal (= marital) relations. As a result of clan exogamy the entire local community, both among the Nuer and among the Zambian Tonga, is shot through with a network of affinal relations. Any outburst of conflict, especially when this involves manslaughter, brings a number of individuals in a situation where they are being co-opted into two conflicting camps at the same time, by virtue of their affinal relations on the one hand, and of their consanguineal relationships on the other hand. Clearly it is in the interest of these person to resolve their role conflict by trying to terminate the conflict: by setting in motion the institutional possibility of reconciliation (compensatory payments), and by applying their influence to both parties in order to quench the conflict.

This may appear to be criticism of minor detail, which may not invalidate the essence of Evans-Pritchard's approach and which appears to tally very well with the concrete ethnographic data which Evans-Pritchard himself presents. However, the implications of this criticism from the 'Manchester' side have much more far-reaching implications. The criticism suggests a totally different positioning vis-à-vis *The Nuer's* fundamental problem, i.e., the relation between the political order and other aspects of society, notably the conditions under which the political order may articulate itself as a distinct, separate domain within the social order.<sup>36</sup> Evans-Pritchard attempts to isolate the political order within the totality of a society's institutional patterns, and in doing so seeks an explanation *outside* the social order as such, notably in the ecology – in humankind's productive and extractive interaction with the non-human world. But if it is true that central institutions in the political system, notably the feud and its reconciliation, are directly dependent upon affinal relations (if, in other words, these political institutions manifest themselves in the sphere of kinship relations within the local community), then it would hardly seem meaningful any more to insist on the separation of institutional domains, and to claim for the political order an institutional domain of its own. Hence the Manchester adage that 'politics is everywhere'. And when we study small-scale communities without formal leadership and without effective central authority, this means that we have to look for the basis of the political process in the dynamics of power and transaction at the lowest level of social organisation, stressing agency over structure – and not in splendid, grand, abstract schemes involving major groups that comprise hundred or thousands of individuals.

Meanwhile, however, I have proceeded beyond the Manchester School's concrete pronouncements on *The Nuer*. I have begun to formulate, on the basis of the Manchester School's general points of departure, a possible criticism of *The Nuer*, which the Manchester

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<sup>36</sup> This is a theme on which I have often had occasion to reflect in the course of years: from my analysis of the Lumpa rising (where I had occasion to doubt whether the political could really be defined as a separate domain within the historic cosmology of Iron Age South Central Africa in the last few centuries before colonial rule – assuming that we are allowed to use such an aggregate generalisation); to the study of late 19<sup>th</sup> century kingship in Western Zambia where the political domain of the king and the royal capital and court could be argued to constitute itself by the radical denial of the cosmology and value informing the village domain of commoners; to the postcolonial African states, where the resilience of traditional leadership of kings and chiefs offers another invitation for theorising on this point (van Binsbergen 1981, 2003c, 2003b).

School itself has never concretely articulated, – at least not in writing, and not to my knowledge.

## HOW THE MANCHESTER SCHOOL WOULD HAVE ANALYSED NUER SOCIETY

Now we come to the thought experiment which I announced in the beginning of this paper. Above I indicated the principal explicit confrontations between the Manchester School and *The Nuer*. However, in view of the general principles underlying the ‘Manchester’ approach, on a number of points a much more fundamental criticism of *The Nuer* is possible, even though it has never been spelled out.

The absence of such criticism has at least two reasons:

- in the first place, the lack of an explicit formulation of the ensemble of basic principles which together could serve to demarcate the Manchester School, and secondly
- the sentimental bond between the Manchester School and Evans-Pritchard, which made it difficult for really fundamental criticism to be expressed.

What I will now do is to enumerate the Manchester School’s main points somewhat systematically, and to extend that enumeration into a critique of *The Nuer*. What follows is not in the first place my own critique of *The Nuer*, but rather what I believe the Manchester School could have formulated in the way of criticism, given its own orientation. In the process I will take the opportunity of somewhat distancing myself from ‘Manchester’, despite all my admiration over the years. Our main aim is to let the contrastive effect bring out more precisely what ‘Manchester’ has represented as a theoretical and methodological position centring on agency.

### *ecology*

When we look for answers to ‘Manchester’'s central question it is, in the first place, most remarkable that the Manchester School has consistently overlooked the ecological aspect. Some measure of attention was still paid to this topic in Gluckman’s first Barotse fieldwork, as written up in his *Economy of the Central Barotse Plain* (Gluckman 1967, originally published in 1941). However, in his later ethnographic work, in his theoretical arguments, and in the work of the other members of the Manchester School, the ecological basis of society is simply taken for granted or ignored, without being in itself the object of painstaking analysis. This is certainly one of the great shortcomings of the Manchester School, and it stands in sharp contrast, not only with the ecological orientation of the earliest professional anthropology of Zambia (that of Audrey Richards, 1939), but also with Evans-Pritchard’s

effective approach to ecology precisely in *The Nuer*. So, ironically, I will have to start out with criticising the Manchester School from *The Nuer*, instead of the other way around!<sup>37</sup>

‘custom’ and kinship

One answer that the Manchester School initially proffered for the question as to the nature and factors of the social order, was the concept of *custom*, a term which (as we have seen) more or less covers the same grounds as the concept of *culture* in American and continental European anthropology of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Especially in Gluckman’s early work (at least up to and including *Custom and Conflict*, 1955) a large, rather autonomous role in society is attributed to *custom*. Custom is

- the ensemble of norms and values
- that is endorsed by all members of society
- that is supported by the legal system
- but also by informal social control
- and by ritual
- and that gives direction to interaction processes.

This initial position scarcely differs from that of classic British social anthropology. It is only among the later members of the Manchester School that the ideological component of the social structure is more explicitly considered in the context of, and partly in dependence from, the non-ideological aspects of society. Mainly the work of Victor Turner (especially *Schism and continuity*; Turner 1957) and Jaap van Velsen (*Politics of kinship*; Van Velsen 1971, originally published 1964, on the basis of a PhD thesis defended in 1957) emphasised the dependent nature of a particular group’s *custom*. For these authors norms and values are no longer the fixed, immutable stage directions on the basis of which the social game is being played. On the contrary, in regard of the norms and values such as are involved in specific concrete situations within a specific group’s social process, these authors even tend to a position where they consider them as the flexible, dependent, and contingent result of processes of political manipulation within that group; once more we see Manchester authors put individual actors’ agency over impersonal, generalised structure. Because kinship is the main idiom in terms of which the members of South Central African societies consciously reflect on their own societies, this changing interpretation of *custom* in the Manchester

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<sup>37</sup> In my own, ‘Manchester’ inspired work on South Central Africa, the ecological element was initially quite strong, e.g. van Binsbergen 1979, 1981: ch. 3 and 4, where the link between religion, shrines and ecology is theorised. This was a result, partly of ecological emphasis in the work of senior colleagues outside the Manchester School proper, with whom I worked closely together at the time (Terence Ranger, Matthew Schoffeleers); and partly because of the strong ecological emphasis in my first fieldwork, which had not been in South Central Africa but in rural North Africa, rather outside the Manchester area (but cf. Peters 1951, 1960, 1967, 1976; and Evans-Pritchard 1949). In my subsequent work on South Central Africa, more central exposure to the Manchester heritage must have been among the factors that persuaded me to drop the ecological emphasis.

School has especially consequences for the interpretation of kinship. No longer are kinship relations, kinship terms, kinship roles, conceived as the fixed elements which cogently prescribe a particular behaviour and a particular group structure; instead, these elements of kinship begin to be counted among the various possibilities, drawn from *various* sectors of social life (hence not exclusively from kinship) that individuals have to make claims on other individuals. In other words, kinship comes to be seen by these ‘Manchester’ anthropologists, no longer as defining a society’s total moral order, with direct and fixed, hence predictable, stipulations for concrete individual behaviour. Instead, kinship furnishes only one of the several possible principles of recruitment of interaction partners within a micro-political process at the village level. This social process mainly revolves on the elderly members’ struggle over power, over honourable traditional titles (headmanship, chiefship), and over the followers necessary to attain and safeguard these goals. Kinship-based claims (of support, loyalty, material, financial and immaterial prestations etc.) may be honoured if this tallies with the personal interests of those involved – but equally frequently, such kinship claims are being ignored by those on whom they are being made. In every concrete social situation, whatever is to happen factually depends, not on specific kinship norms immutably and inescapably stipulating a particular outcome, but on the underlying micro-political *social process*, whose details are always unique, which therefore has its own unique (micro-) *historicity*, and which entirely revolves on actors playing out their agency. It is particularly in conflicts, and in the ritual elaboration of conflicts, that this micro-political process takes shape, and may be clearly identified and studied. It is in conflicts that the conscious ideological screen of a society is lifted, and underlying tensions become manifest, and open to empirical enquiry; hence Manchester ethnographies revolve on the presentation of extended cases (Van Velsen 1967) in which individual protagonists are shown in protracted conflicts, whose details and backgrounds are spelled out *ad nauseam*.

This is a fundamentally different approach to kinship from that of *The Nuer*. Evans-Pritchard remains silent on, particularly, the concrete dynamics of power relations within local communities that are apparently defined and exhaustively structured by kinship. His book’s argument ignores specific concrete situations and the actors involved in them. In *The Nuer* we meet no individual, concrete persons under their own names and with their own faces and pronouncements. In *The Nuer* Evans-Pritchard presents an abstract description of a kinship-cum-political system, without empirically demonstrating that that is how Nuer society works, and without theoretically explaining, strictly speaking, why it should be able to work in that way.

This criticism of *The Nuer* from the Manchester School perspective applies at least as much to many other classic ethnographies. Yet we have to ask ourselves if there are no limits to the extent to which the normative and value system can be manipulated by the local actors in concrete micro-political situations. *Are there no structural limits to agency?* If everything social is (micro-)political, does that mean *that everything social can be manipulated without limitation?* Is there yet no small core of fundamental points of departure in a society – principles that have been so much internalised and that are so fundamental that it is impossible to manipulate them – even in the (admittedly little structured) South Central African societies studied by Turner and Van Velsen, and perhaps also among the Nuer?

Part of the answer lies in the legal sphere. In the face of more rigid assumptions which students of positive law in North Atlantic society have been inclined to project onto Africa, legal anthropology has demonstrated that neither the legal sphere works with immutable prescriptive norms and values. Also in the judicial process, norms and values appears as flexible and manipulable – but their application and manipulation is publicly put to the test of specialists and of public opinion, and a society's manipulation are thus publicly reinforced even if occasionally transgressed. In the societies of South Central Africa, one typically shuns from bringing kinsmen to court, and as a result many kinship claims go without the judicial test. Yet also in these societies, like in so many others in Africa, the judicial process is often resorted to, being at the core of social continuity and conflict settlement. We cannot discuss the judicial aspect at greater length here. Yet it is clear that the ironical position of Gluckman as both the leader and the odd man out within 'Manchester', has to do with a more intimate appreciation, on his part, of the pivotal role of the judicial within the societies of South Central Africa (cf. van Binsbergen 1977 and references cited there). Inevitably, another such relatively stable and enduring, limitative factor in the manipulation-ridden social process is language itself: the participants may not all subscribe to the same values and the same conceptualisation of the world around them, but often they would share a common language (or at least a lingua franca), and that language's phonology, syntax and semantics would certainly impose severe limitations on the otherwise unbounded extent to which individual actors could try to manipulate the situation at hand, and each other. However, it has been characteristic of Manchester that it hardly ever explicitly considered the role of language in social relations.

#### *Society's articulation into constituent groups as the basis of social organisation*

From a political perspective the first step towards understanding the social order, both for Evans-Pritchard and for the Manchester School, consists in exploring which are the relevant groups or categories into which society is divided or articulated: local groups, kin groups, political parties etc.

In every society the participants have explicit ideas as to the division of their own society in its various constituent groups. When asked to do so, they will inform the anthropologists of these ideas, they will declare which group they belong to themselves, etc. The political analysis in *The Nuer* consists in the first place of the description of these group-wise articulations (tribe, clan, lineage, age set), and of the attempt to show how Nuer social life takes its shape within these various groups in their interrelationships.

However, such an explicit, conscious structure is never the whole story. Much of social life occurs informally, in the margin of formal groups, or even outside them. Formal interviews in which members of a society describe its formal, ideal structure, need to be complemented with participant observation over an extended period of time and in a large number of different social situations (also, and especially: in informal and conflictive situations). It is only in this way that the researcher may identify the informal, implicit underlying structural principles of the local social process – including those principles that



may never be consciously perceived by the actors themselves: principles, not of fixed and immutable imposition by the social structure, but principles of negotiation and deliberation, in other words, invitations to the exercise of agency, inserted (through a process of negotiation that often involves open conflict) into the social process through the personal and (micro-) historical effects of the actors' volitional acts, in combination with contingent accidental factors. The social process is whatever results, over time, from the accumulating effects of actors' individual decisions and contingencies. And even the adequate description of such an, inevitably highly complex and highly unpredictable, social process is not enough for a convincing description and analysis of a local society. For the dynamics of a society are determined, not only by its internal processes but also by economic, political, cultural and religious factors at the regional, national and international, even intercontinental level – factors which may totally elude the local actors, and which we may often study much more effectively from a vantage point outside the local society.<sup>38</sup> For such a wider data collection, the method of participant observation is often not the most suitable (kings, high-ranking civil servants, and industrial tycoons seldom tolerate anthropologists in their midst), and instead the researcher has to rely on documentary sources, governmental archives, statistics, legal texts, newspaper clippings, interviews with key actors at the national and intercontinental level, etc.

What is absolutely decisive for *The Nuer* is the model of the unilineal segmentary lineage. This was the main analytical instrument which anthropology had developed in the 1930s-40s for the analysis of African political systems and kinship systems and that was invoked to explain any other aspect (social, economic, religious etc.) of African societies at the time. Evans-Pritchard was the first to give a concrete formulation to this model, and in this respect he has had great influence on Fortes. Although Gluckman avoided to criticise Evans-Pritchard directly on this point, already in 1950, in his introduction to the first mimeographed product of the first Northern Rhodesian fieldwork of the first students of what was soon to become the Manchester School (Gluckman 1950; Barnes & Mitchell 1950)<sup>39</sup>, Gluckman argued that the classic model of the unilineal segmentary lineage was not applicable, at least not in South Central Africa. He did not yet go to the extent of claiming that such a model might not even be applicable to the societies for which it has been formulated in the first instance: the Nuer and the Tallensi. That step would be made by another member of the Manchester School, under the direct influence of Gluckman: by Peter Worsley in his radical, essentially Marxist, critique of Fortes (Worsley 1956). He argued that

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, throughout the colonial period in Northern Rhodesia (1900-1964), the alliance between the colonial state and the encapsulated Barotse kingdom was characterised by mutual admiration and close personal contact. The backing by state violence, and lavish subsidies, allowed the Barotse kingdom to tighten its grip on the outlying social and political groups in Western Northern Rhodesia, rather beyond the level of control the Barotse had enjoyed over these outlying societies immediately before the imposition of colonial rule. The effects of this national-level arrangement are manifest at the local village level in these outlying societies, but if one wishes to understand these effects, research must be done not only in these villages, but also at the Barotse court in colonial times, and among servants of the colonial state both in Barotseland, in the colony's capital, and in the metropolitan country.

<sup>39</sup> In fact, this early post-graduate work under Gluckman's close supervision marks the beginning of the Manchester School.

Fortes' description of Tallensi society in terms of a segmentary lineage model was unacceptable as an objective anthropological analysis. He suggested that, instead, it was merely a model such as exists in the heads of the participants, a participants' ideology therefore which, in Worley's opinion, had been far too much emphasised by Fortes. Worsley claimed that the participants (and Fortes) were projecting that ideology onto a social system whose real dynamics had to be situated elsewhere: not in the segmentary relationships between large groups, but at the lowest local level: in the political and economic micro-processes that were taking place at the Tallensi homesteads, where (or so Worsley claims, on the basis of a secondary analysis of Fortes' writings) they informed the division of labour, the relations between generations, the quest for individual autonomy, etc. Worsley admits that it is legitimate for the anthropologist to describe such an ideology, but as a next step he should take his distance from the participants' viewpoints, and attempt to explain even their ideology in social scientific terms – and such an attempt, Worsley argues, is likely to open the anthropologist's eye for social mechanisms and processes which he as a scientist can describe objectively, in analytical terms ('etically'). regardless of whether the participants themselves are aware of these processes, have explicitly named them, and have consciously realised their decisive effect on the social process. Years later the same was argued by Emrys Peters in the latter's reinterpretation of the political system of the Libyan Bedouins, which had hitherto been described, also by himself, in terms of unilineal segmentation (Peters 1967, cf. Peters 1951, 1960, 1976). Thus the segmentary lineage model, which had been so essential to Evans-Pritchard's attempts to present the political order as a distinct, separate system of supra-local relationships, turns out to be generally unacceptable from the position of the Manchester School, and owes its present unpopularity in part to the success of 'Manchester'.

Of course the Manchester School does not deny the importance of society's articulation into groups. However, given that school's emphasis on the extent to which any formal model of social organisation would be manipulated and would be dependent, in its application and execution, upon the specific shape the local political process would take at any specific moment, group formation is seen far less as automatic, as predictable from a formal chart. Hence that school attaches little value to grand schemes such as unilineal segmentation. In Jaap van Velsen's book *Politics of kinship*, one of the most characteristic products of the Manchester School, the following fundamental insight is being developed. *Depending upon the nature of a specific problem that confronts a local group, and upon the specific phase in which a certain micro-political conflict finds itself, different and continuous shifting groups of loyal kinsmen will form themselves around a particular individual; each of these groups will have its own, ever shifting, claims vis-à-vis that individual, and its own self-interests. In other words, the articulation of society into groups is a function of the social process, and not the other way around.* Ultimately, therefore, social organisation is claimed to depend on agency. If we could manage to probe beyond the official local societal ideology, and gather concrete data about actual interaction, about the mobilisation of people as mutual partners in such actual interaction, about the power relations and the shifts over time involved in such mobilisation, and about the concrete social groups to which such interaction partners are

locally reckoned to belong, then we would inevitably come to the conclusion that such groups tend to be ephemeral and tend to have shifting composition and shifting boundaries.

Under the heading of *transactionalism*, and in an explicit bid to reject the structural-functionalist paradigm, similar ideas have been advanced by such anthropologists as F. Bailey, Jeremy Boissevain, and Frederick Barth.<sup>40</sup> Of these ‘Three Bs’ who haunted anthropology in Britain and adjacent countries in the 1960s, Bailey has Manchester School roots, the other two have not; and none has an Africanist background.

We are lacking the precise ethnographic data that would allow us to determine whether this kind of insight into society’s articulation into groups may also apply to Nuer society at the time of Evans-Pritchard’s research, but there is certainly a distinct possibility that it does. In that case the articulation of Nuer society into tribes, clans and lineages would form an abstract, general scheme in terms of which the participants may have been able to describe and explain the principal traits of their own social organisation to their own satisfaction. But in doing so they would not be answerable to the canon of empirical modern science, their view of view of their own indigenous (i.e. *emic*) model, would remain an ideology (not meant to be tested, but also unable to stand the objective empirical test). The actual formation of groups (in the form of effective political factions) in concrete conflicts would be relatively ephemeral, situational and shifting (even more so than would already be implied in the very notion of segmentation ). That formation and these shifts would be dependent upon factors in the micro-sphere of actual political and economic behaviour at the local level, in other words, on agency. The articulation in explicit named groups would have to be constantly reworked, by the participants, to keep pace with the constant shifting in political relations. In the more recent literature on the Nuer as cited above there are indications that such, indeed, is the case.

### *The articulation of society into groups, and conflict*

No matter how society’s articulation into groups has been brought about, the resulting group distinctions will always overlap. For any individual belongs, at the same time, to a number of groups or categories, the members of each of these will exert their own claims on that individual, and these claims will often be contradictory and in conflict with one another.

In the early 1970s, King Kahare of the Mashasha branch of the Nkoya people, in Western Zambia, was a king in his royal capital, surrounded by courtiers, priests of the royal cult, musicians, sitting in judgment over his subjects, allocating selected pieces of land to prospective villagers, and occasionally receiving from the latter money, liquor, game meat, game trophies and other luxury goods as tribute; as an ex-officio member of the Kaoma Rural Council he was hardly distinguishable from other councillors, and he is supposed to evaluate and implement agricultural development projects even if these infringe on the specific rights of his own subjects (who are a minority in Kaoma district), and on his own royal territory; he was a mere kinsmen in the villages of his mother and grandparents, with obligations rather than regal prerogatives; in his second wife’s village he was merely a junior affine who has still most of the bride wealth to pay; as a member of the national House of Chiefs he was a mere figurehead without any power; but his most cherished identity was that of ex-sergeant of the former colonial army, who whilst already in

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Bailey 1969; Boissevain 1968; Barth, F., 1953, 1959, 1966, 1969, cf. 1989, 2001, 2002.

office as king spent half a year full-time to personally survey, in the least inhabited corner of his game-rich territory, the Zambezi-Kafue watershed with all the accomplishments needed for officially gazetted demarcations.

The family claims on a modern, emancipated husband and father to cook family meals and wash the dishes are potentially in conflict to the claims exerted on the same individual by his workplace, which may expect him to work overtime or to take his work home in the evening; and demands on the part of his co-religionists to join them in their choir rehearsals shortly after dinner time.

Individuals have to cope with role conflicts, which means that these individuals are, in fact, the nodal points between the various groups into which society is articulated. Every social situation, every member of society is subjected to profound tensions, and (because the various groups that come together in one individual, together constitute society) it is these tensions that are the basis of the social order. In the concrete social process of interactions and transactions, especially at the local level of face-to-face relations, these inbuilt tensions and cleavages come to the surface. The necessity to contain and resolve these tensions gives rise to a pattern of relationships and dependence, that is directly based on conflict. Conflict is not a regrettable epiphenomenon of the social order – not a *tache de beauté* that could be easily wiped out, but conflict is the principal basis of integration of society (Gluckman 1955; Coser 1956). Not normative integration, not culture or custom, not social organisation, but *conflict* is what makes societies tick. This point (essentially of Marxian inspiration but with a much longer history in Western thought, going back – via Hegel, Kant, Hobbes, Grotius, Cicero, among others – to Heraclites.), and its fundamental difference with the societal conception of Evans-Pritchard in *The Nuer*, can be aptly illustrated by reference to a particular form of conflict: the rival analyses of the feud as summarised above.

### *the social process and the ethnographic method*

If the essence of the social order must primarily be sought in conflicts at the micro-level, then this requires a new method of anthropological fieldwork and writing-up. Whatever happens concretely in a society: interactions, quarrels, reconciliation, collaboration, between very specific individual members, will no longer merely serve as *apt illustration*, just to elucidate an ulterior abstract order of which these concrete cases are merely arbitrary examples. On the contrary, the social order is nothing but the ensemble of all such concrete interactions. It is in concrete cases that the fundamental contradictions and the inbuilt conflicts of the social texture come to the fore – the abstract structural principles only exist in and through the agency that is acted out in these concrete cases. One of the most important accomplishments of the Manchester School is therefore the revaluation and vindication of individual concrete cases in the context of anthropological analysis. A large amount of biographical detail, and a very elaborate presentation of the social relations between a particular case's protagonists and the many other persons in their immediate and more distant social environment, offers a convincing (albeit often unreadable!) account of the development of the social process and of its main principles.

Manchester ethnography emphasises the story, full of details and backgrounds, of what precisely has been the sequence of specific events around the key figures or protagonists in the ‘social dramas’ that it considers to be constitutive of the social order. This implies an anecdotal or narrative position. Here the *historicity* of the social process, whose specifics cannot be predicted from any immutable structural principles) is adduced as an important explanatory principle, in addition to the more permanent social structure that inspired the social drama and that sets limits upon it. The social drama is essentially a negotiation process between the protagonists’ agency, in which they make choices, selectively and situationally, on the basis of the contradictory structuring principles at hand. Often these structuring principles have a certain textual basis in the consciousness of the participants: they may consist of local concepts, legal rules, proverbs, which may be exclusively oral, but in modern times often also have a written textual basis. As far as the temporal dimension of the social process is concerned, it displays a unique accumulation and concatenation of all the separate minute effects of individual actions; it may yet yield structural elements because actors in the exercise of their agency are constantly testing out and utilising – in a manner that often is eminently open to empirical research through participant observation and interviews – the range of variation and the institutionally defined alternatives of their social behaviour.

Moreover, as a late development in the Manchester School, network analysis<sup>41</sup> offers formal, often mathematical methods that allow the researcher to map out this social process very precisely, especially in so far as concerns the distribution of, and the competition over, power. When compared with the sophistication that has now come within reach through network analysis, we can only admit that the ethnographic data presented in *The Nuer*, however elegantly and sublimely as far as the author’s style is concerned, yet are far too sketchy, too abstract and too aggregate. Evans-Pritchard simply had not yet hit on the proper ethnographic method suitable to describe the dynamics of the social and political process in all its shifting, unpredictable capriciousness, that we can only understand on the basis of the micro-history of power processes. Nor did he feel he needed another ethnographic method, because his approach to ethnography was – as so much of British intellectual life at the time – essentially Platonic:<sup>42</sup> behind the bewildering chaos of concrete social events Evans-Pritchard projected the redeeming abstract permanence of a fixed institutional structure, in other words, of a Platonic Idea. ‘Manchester’, on the other hand, was primarily orientated towards individual’s agency as exhibited in concrete social events. It was convinced that there, far more than in some abstracted formal social structure, resided the key to the social order.

On the other hand there the ‘Manchester’ approach implies the risk that the anthropologist gets stuck in the all too meticulous, all too concrete description of a small number of informants, producing a family novel in scientific jargon, without generalisable conclusions, but also without the literary beauty characteristic of the best family novels.

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<sup>41</sup> Mitchell 1967, 1969; Boissevain & Mitchell 1973.

<sup>42</sup> In the philosophical sense (cf. Whitehead, Bradley); no doubt Evans-Pritchard’s approach to ethnography was also Platonic in the erotic sense, but that is immaterial in the present context.

## THE CHALLENGE OF URBAN SOCIETY AND OF THE COLONIAL SITUATION

In every respect, *The Nuer* is the product of an anthropologist for whom the colonial situation is inescapable, and for whom it is perfectly unproblematic to work, as an anthropologist, for the British colonial government in North-eastern Africa. The book is a contribution to the anthropology of the Africa of the villages. It describes the 1930's situation as if the colonial state and intercontinental economic relationships are irrelevant and do not really exist as far as the Nuer are concerned. A few decades later, and orientated towards a part of Africa that had been much more thoroughly touched by (proto-)globalisation in the form of colonial rule, modern industry, and urbanisation, the 'Manchester' approach differed very markedly from Evans-Pritchard's position. It showed a further phase in the development that Africanist anthropology was to undergo in order to meet the challenge of Africa's rapid decolonisation from the late 1950s onwards and the globalisation proper of the final decades of the 20th century. That challenge lay, on the one hand, in the need to develop and renew the discipline's theoretical and methodological, mainstream, positions; on the other hand it consisted in the need for a new political positioning, notably the shedding of anthropology's hitherto colonial and North Atlantic ethnocentric connotations.

Characteristic of 'Manchester' were a high level of political awareness and severe criticism of the colonial situation. Gluckman's formidable and demanding personality was a powerful cohesive force, and so was the collective interest the Manchester School members were supposed to show, at Gluckman's explicit demand, in the ups and downs of the soccer club *Manchester United* within the British national competition – could one imagine a better symbol of school formation? Quite a few Manchester School researchers were convinced adherents of a militant Marxism, and as such card-carrying members of the British communist party. One can well imagine that anthropologists of such signature inspired considerable distrust among European settlers and civil servants in colonial Africa shortly after World War II. At that time the clamouring for independence was already on the increase. India, Pakistan and Indonesia, which had gained independence by the end of the 1940s, formed inspiring examples for the African independence movements, especially after the 1955 Bandung conference in Indonesia. In economic respect the colonial situation meant that the majority of the inhabitants of the African colonies, i.e. the Africans themselves, had hardly any say over the conditions under which they could sell their labour power at mines, large-scale farms, factories, and as domestic servants; and as a result, these conditions were appalling. As is well-known, Marxism sprung from an analysis of labour relations in Western Europe in the nineteenth century. Marxism had attempted to develop a theoretical perspective on imperialism and it was much better equipped than mainstream anthropology at the time to problematise and analyse the underlying political economy of the colonial situation and the urban labour relations which the colonial situation had engendered.<sup>43</sup> What is more, the international labour movement inspired models of collective bargaining which contributed

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<sup>43</sup> Marx 1906-1909; Lenin 1917.

towards the improvement of colonial labour relations (Epstein 1958) and towards the termination of the colonial situation in general.

Historically, South Central Africa had known no cities before the establishment of colonial rule and of the capitalist mode of production. However, from that moment on the towns increased very rapidly both in number and in size. Their external characteristics, organisational structure, and culture, differed markedly from the village societies which had formed the stereotypical subject matter of classic anthropology. From the very beginning urban research had constituted one of the main points of Rhodes-Livingstone-research, and for a long time urban research in Africa was to be inspired by *The economics of detribalisation*, the book which Godfrey Wilson and his wife Monica Wilson-Hunter wrote on the mining town of Broken Hill (now Kabwe) (Wilson & Wilson 1968, originally published in 1942). After his first explorations in the field under the direct supervision of Gluckman, in Lamba villages under the smoke of the mining towns of the Northern Rhodesia Rhodesian Copperbelt (a few hundred km north of Lusaka and Broken Hill), , and after his first major, rural fieldwork among the Yao in Nyasaland, Clyde Mitchell (1955, 1956, 1960, 1965, 1969, 1970, 1974) fully applied himself to the study of ethnic processes on the Copperbelt ~~in the mining towns of the Northern Rhodesia Rhodesian Copperbelt~~. In a complementary movement Bill Epstein chose as the topic of his first major research the development of a working-class consciousness among the African workers in the same industrial situation of the Copperbelt; in his later work was to concentrate on the study of identity and kinship in town (Epstein 1958, 1967, 1978, 1981). The most striking aspect of these studies is that they describe an African social context whose unmistakable European participants (who occupied leading and supervisory functions in industry) were no longer censored out by the anthropologist – even though the latter himself was still entirely invisible in his writings. The great example is this kind of urban work was Gluckman's (1958) *Analysis of a social situation in modern Zululand* (originally published in 1940-1942 on the basis of fieldwork in the late 1930s). Social scientists at the time were eagerly looking for a model of complex analysis that could accommodate,

- on the one hand, major cultural differences,
- and the lack of communication that existed between the various segments of the colonial situation (such as Africans, settlers, colonial civil servants, missionaries, Indian traders),
- but also, on the other hand, the interdependence between these segments,
- not only for industrial tasks
- but also in so far as they shared a common system of status and class,
- and in so far they all relied on the same precarious, yet more or less workable, social order of colonial society.

This theoretical and analytical puzzle posed itself not only in South Central Africa (especially in the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt, and major towns such as Salisbury – now Harare –, Bulawayo, Lusaka and Livingstone), but also in South Africa, and prior to their independence, in India and Indonesia. In the latter region we encounter the same research

questions of pluralism and complexity in the work of Furnivall 1948 and of the great Dutch Third World sociologist Wertheim (1949, 1956, 1964, 1970) on the colonial society in the former Dutch East India. In Africa, the social and cultural relationships *within* the category of African urbanites posed analytical questions to which the studies of social organisation in village situations suggested no answers: how do urban workers, both at their workplace and outside work, interact with one another, in the typical situation that they have largely left their kinsmen behind in their village of origin, so that they had to make shift, as far as colleagues, neighbours, fellow-drinkers and fellow-church members were concerned, with strangers who often had a different culture, ethnic identity and language from their own. Manchester's great contribution to the understanding of the African urban environment has been the following:

- stressing *ethnicity*, not as the expression of an allegedly inescapable cultural baggage which the labour migrant had inevitably brought from the village and could not get rid of, – but as a creative system of categorisation for the social articulation and mobilisation of urban contacts
- and *individual networks*, which (as a further context for the exercise of agency) came to replace enduring corporate groups as the principal structuring element of social life in towns.

Pioneering critical anthropology, the 'Manchester' attitude was highly programmatic. As a matter of course these researchers took the side of Africans, in the conflicts of interests that constituted the colonial and urban situation. The colonial government and the capitalist entrepreneurs each employed various contradictory myths which, in only slightly acerbated form, were to determine the discourse of the South African apartheid state for years to come – both demographically and in terms of ethnic, industrial and political organisation and ideology there was very considerable continuity between South Central Africa, and Southern Africa, in late colonial times. According to these myths, the African worker would be no more than a displaced villager, without any rightful claim to the city; that putative villager's only frame of reference was supposed to be informed exclusively by the culture, the world-view and the politico-judicial relationships of his rural home. And at the same time the colonial/industrial myth turned the African urban worker into a mere bachelor, so that all his family obligations could be denied and his wages and level of lodging could be kept to a bare minimum, just enough for his own personal needs, and never for a family of dependents. For the 'Manchester' researchers it was a matter of intellectual responsibility to stress, in the face of such fictions, the extent to which the African townsman was yet in the first place an ordinary townsman, a worker,<sup>44</sup> whose modern urban identity should not be allowed to be swept under the carpet merely for the sake of governmental and entrepreneurial interests. In this way the 'Manchester' approach of urban-rural relations (Gluckman 1960, 1971;

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<sup>44</sup> I.e. a proletarian: a person formally selling his or her labour power as a commodity in a cash market, defined by modern industry, other bureaucratic organisations, and the private domestic arrangements of others successfully engaged in these formal sectors and hence capable of employing domestic labour in their own turn.



Apthorpe 1958) acquired, through over-compensation, a certain degree of forgivable one-sidedness, stressing (e.g. Mitchell 1956) the urban identity of African workers whilst paying far less attention (with notable exceptions, e.g. van Velsen 1961) to their continued commitment to their respective villages. A more subtle analysis which acknowledged more centrally a village-orientated identity and village-derived forms of group formation had to be postponed till much later (e.g., van Binsbergen 1981: chs. 6 and 7).

Despite notable achievements in selected fields of urban inquiry (networks, ethnicity, urban and class identity), and despite a few individual papers which suddenly contained unexpected and isolated glimpses of brilliant and comprehensive insight (e.g. Epstein 1967; Gluckman 1971), it seems fair to say that 'Manchester' has been far less successful in its approach to the towns and the colonial realities of South Central Africa, than in its approach to rural communities and their types of social organisation. It would take another few decades before Marxist political inspiration yielded a systematic anthropological approach of the colonial situation, in the work of French neo-Marxists such as Rey (1971, 1973) and Meillassoux (1975), who have also had a considerable impact in the Netherlands (&1985). In that type of work, the theory of the *articulation of modes of production* offered a bridging concept between the village and the town; between the role of village elders and other traditional authorities, on the one hand, and capitalist entrepreneurs, on the other hand; and between the African countryside and international systems of production and distribution. In even more recent decades this political-economy analysis had been enriched, and its materialist and economic one-sidedness has been largely compensated, by looking at South Central African towns from the perspective of cultural globalisation, as battle grounds in which the global cultural and religious influences and consumption models are confronted, sometimes successfully, by time-honoured elements of African cultural tradition whose domain was hitherto largely confined to the villages.

Against the background of such later studies, the frequently used 'Manchester' concept of 'the colonial-industrial situation' largely remained an under-analysed black box. Yet even on these points 'Manchester's' pioneering work dramatically enriched the analytical scope of anthropology, in a way that was to leave *The Nuer* far behind, and that helped prepare anthropology for the modern world of cultural globalisation.

## CONCLUSION

With this perspective on processes of change in the context of the colonial state and of modern industry we seem to have drifted far away from *The Nuer* as a classic book in the anthropology of the Africa of the villages. Gradually we have gained a systematic and reasonably profound insight in one of the main innovations in anthropology since *The Nuer* was published. In the 1980s, under the influence of postmodernism, the kind of institution-centred, generalised, aggregate ethnographic description *à la The Nuer* came under heavy attack. For an author like Clifford (1988) that book, despite its scientific form, belongs to the domain of *belles lettres* rather than to that of science, because its suggestions of totality,

integration and system are exclusively based on the anthropological author's imagination without – or so Clifford argued – being systematically anchored in the empirical data at hand.

Long before Clifford, and in analytical ways that are free from many of the one-sided and gratuitous, undisciplined, personalising and navel-gazing affectations often associated with a postmodern stance in anthropology, Manchester had already begun to formulate a way out of the unmistakable dilemma phrased by Clifford. Manchester did so, brilliantly, with the development of an analytical method that put agency, (micro-)historicity, the political nature and the fragmentation of the small-scale social process at the centre of the anthropological endeavour. Herein lies the lasting relevance of this approach, and the continued freshness and relevance of its products – an astonishing and rarely inspiring abundance of collective works and monographs.

The preceding argument is hoped to have enhanced our insight in the societies that formed the original research sites of the Manchester School and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, i.e. Zambia and surrounding countries. In the specific context of the present collection in which this argument appears, the detailed examination of the Manchester School has enabled us to consider the structural-functionalist paradigm, against which 'Manchester's' agency-orientated research was directed. In the process, we have seen the methodological and theoretical perspectives which 'Manchester' has brought to the study of agency – enough to justify our title which stresses how 'Manchester' has been one of the cradles of agency-orientated research in the last few decades.

Over fifty years after the inception of Manchester, many of its ideas in the field of social analysis and ethnography still appear to be essentially sound, and convincing. However, in the meantime anthropology has undergone a number of major shifts (cf. van Binsbergen 2003: chapter 4 for an overview of these developments). One of these has consisted in the move away from concrete local ethnography, and instead the desire to make pronouncements, as an anthropologist, about broad social, economic and political processes encompassing – far above the local level that is open to direct participant observation – entire nations, continents, even the world and humankind as a whole. I have enthusiastically participated in this recent development, with numerous articles and a number of edited books, and I cannot afford to reject it here. Modern anthropology, e.g. in the work of the comprehensive Programme 'Globalisation and the construction of communal identities' which Peter Geschiere and I initiated in the early 1990s with funding from the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO; cf. Meyer & Geschiere 1998; van Binsbergen & van Dijk 2003; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 2005)

- tends to be multi-sited,
- tends to abhor narrow horizons of time and space,
- is less prepared to invest lavishly in learning the specificities of one local cultural and linguistic idiom because interviews may also be conducted in a *lingua franca* or with the aid of an interpreter, and because modern research participants themselves often boast multiple cultural and linguistic identities

- may often be seen to jump for one or two vignettes (that typically may suggest far more specific ethnographic competence than is in fact at hand), not to pronouncements concerning a local social structure or process and its cultural specificities, but to *global* generalisations and to statements concerning the (modern) human condition as a whole.

On all these counts, Manchester and its theoretically grounded ethnographic method could serve to make us aware of the limitations of such a globalising and post-modern ethnographic approach. It would for instance drive home the very meagre grounds of empirical knowledge and hermeneutical understanding on which such apparently state-of-the-art ethnography is often based. Yet with all its shortcomings in the face of classic and Manchester anthropology, such recent ethnography also brings out the very considerable extent to which Manchester is dated and obsolescent.

The Manchester approach was predicated on a type of social situation that was utterly familiar to the ethnographic fieldworker in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century:

- local-level,
- typically rural,
- protagonists who would demonstrate and exert their own, considerable agency in a power play with, primarily, other such protagonists at the same local level,
- in a way that could be argued to reveal the local society's its structural characteristics.

This implies more or less a model of socio-political autarky at the local level: the stakes about which in the lives of the protagonists are in competition, are supposed to eminently matter in their lives, and their control over these stakes appears to be such that the outcome of their in-group competition is highly relevant. In other words, the Manchester approach was based on *the supposition that local rural actors in late colonial and early post-colonial South Central Africa could, with their agency* (about which Manchester furnished such lavish data), *significantly determine the course of their own lives.*

Expressed in this way, we begin to wonder whether Manchester may simply have traded the structuralist-functionalist fiction, for just another fiction: *that of the relevance of the local level, and of local actors competence in the face of the state and of the world system.* At this point we begin to see Manchester's blind spot for ecological relations in a new light. For how can we be so sure that the protagonists in Manchester social dramas *were fighting over genuine stakes worthy of their efforts*, if the very conditions determining their livelihood (food, shelter, access to land) had to remain out of scope in the Manchester ethnographic research? We have seen how their fascination for the political in social life did inspire the Manchester researchers to take admirable positions in the politics of knowledge in late colonial societies in Africa, but at the same time most of these researchers lacked the analytical imagination to investigate the political domain beyond the micro-politics of kinship, traditional leadership, and ritual involving an all-Black, all-African cast – usually (with precious few exceptions, especially in the work of Gluckman himself!) without any

analytical thought as to the place of colonial civil servants, missionaries and entrepreneurs within the local political process at the village level. This leads to the uneasy thought that perhaps, when all is considered, the stakes in the ‘politics of kinship’ which Manchester allowed us to study in great detail, were not the real stakes determining – at the level of political economy – the material shapes of the lives of the people involved. Given the fundamental powerlessness and deprivation of African villagers, such as was brought about by both colonial rule and the increasing encroachment of world capitalism upon the lives of Africans and their local communities, we may seriously wonder whether the social process as studied by Manchester, which Manchester itself usually conceived as a political process, was not merely about *tokens of powerlessness* (such as traditional titles as headmen and chiefs, or positions and statuses in the ritual sphere) – keeping local African people busy in a playground of their own traditionalist making, whilst the real power influencing their lives lay in governmental departments and industrial offices hundreds or thousands of kilometres away, and totally beyond their reach...

Modern, state-of-the art anthropology, despite with all its tendency to jump to conclusions on too flimsy empirical grounds, despite its lack of real linguistic and cultural local competence, its second-hand dabbling in the latest postmodern phraseologies borrowed second-hand from Foucault or Deleuze, and despite its fascination for meta-empirical all-too-comprehensive statements about statehood, global conditions, humankind as a whole etc., – despite all these shortcomings yet has at least once saving grace: *it ventures out into what is properly speaking not the anthropologist’s empirical domain, in a bid to address these ulterior forms and conditions of dependence and hegemony, which largely remained out of the Manchester scope even though, half a century ago, they were just as decisive and as unmistakable as they are today.* Manchester, while seeking to speak about *the locally political*, was (despite notable exceptions) largely inhibited from speaking about *the globally political*, which mattered a good deal more. And the attention, in present-day anthropology, for cultural globalisation, electronic media, the predicaments, identity strategies and consumption aspirations of individuals, has made us realise that Manchester’s attention for the social process in small-scale local communities reflected the information and communication technology of half a century ago in the very periphery of the then world system. Under today’s conditions, we can see very well how the social composed

1. partly out of the agency-centred micro-political process at the local level (and here, I think, Manchester is unbeatable as a method and a theory, and applies to today’s Africa, and to North Atlantic small-scale interaction settings, just as much as it did half a century ago)
2. but also out of the technological (especially media-based) underpinning of the illusion of the state, and of collectively consumed images which, even though commercially produced and manipulated, still manage to create a font of shared reference points and experiences which extends way beyond the local community, and very often also beyond the national state, to encompass the entire modern world of media consumption. In this ultimately post-modern situation, speaking of agency (of villagers, urbanites, citizens, consumers, migrants) almost appears to be a naive,

modernist denial of the extent to which the magic of commercially produced, electronically mediated, and state- and industry-manipulated semblances of reality – the worlds of simulacra (Baudrillard) – has come to replace reality as it once lived in the Africa of the villages. In that postmodern connection of utter, manipulated, and ignorant powerlessness,<sup>45</sup> what could agency be except the expression of a nostalgic hope on the part of anthropologists, and alienated intellectuals like them?

The second point conjures up, not only in the North today but also and increasingly in present-day African towns and even at the village level in Africa today, an entire Brave New World (Aldous Huxley) of post-agency, which the Manchester crowd did not and could not anticipate, even though they themselves would be glued – at Gluckman’s explicit command – to the television screen during the soccer matches of Manchester United.

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. the brilliant Ferguson 1999, where the present-day devastation of Copperbelt African life offers a shocking contrast with the Manchester descriptions of three or four decades earlier.

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**to be added: a map showing the various research locations of the Manchester School as discussed in the text .**