

RECENSIONI

Frederico DELGADO ROSA, Han VERMEULEN (eds) | *Ethnographers before Malinowski. Pioneers of anthropological fieldwork 1870–1922*, New York-Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2022, pp. XVIII + 522.

This volume is a recent product of HOAN (History of Anthropology Network), which in its turn is one of the most efficient among the networks of EASA (European Association of Social Anthropologists). In a way, the book had been announced by a panel with the same name held at the 16th EASA Conference, Lisbon, on July 21, 2020: P001 “Ethnographers before Malinowski”, with Christine Laurière and Frederico Delgado Rosa as convenors, plus Han F. Vermeulen as discussant. “The panel’s idea is to challenge the unfounded prejudice that ethnographies before Malinowski were mostly travelogues, expeditionary surveys, or defective and fragmentary ethnographic descriptions by unqualified amateurs”. Excerpted from the “Long abstract” of the workshop, the message from these words may be rediscovered in the editors’ argumentation in support of their enterprise. Let us quote from the end of the “Introduction” to the present volume: “Therefore, it is time to render more visible the pre-Malinowskian side of the coin, by opening the ethnographic archive and bringing earlier ethnographies from the margins to the center of anthropology’s history” (p. 31).

Before any comment about the content of the book a preliminary question arises. It regards the two temporal points of reference chosen for determining the historical interval: why 1870 and 1922? Without sophisticated arguments, Rosa and Vermeulen explain:

For chronological coherence, (...) our intent is to explore ethnographic texts produced from ca. 1870 on, i.e, *after Tylor*, in creative ways that bring them nearer to the twentieth century up to the year when *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and *The Andaman Islanders* were published (“Introduction”, p. 30 – all italics in original).



This fragment contains the answer to the twofold question above. Supposedly, 1870 has been chosen for being in immediate proximity to 1871, the year when Edward B. Tylor published his *Primitive Culture* – the work where the concept of culture received for the first time a proper *anthropological* definition. As to the second year in question, it is clear that the two editorial landmarks just mentioned – one by Malinowski and the other by Radcliffe-Brown – appeared, both of them, in 1922, a reason for which Vermeulen and Rosa call this year “The *Annus Mirabilis* of British Social Anthropology” (“Conclusion”, pp. 451-453).

The book is captivating from beginning to end. The content consists in a series of case studies destined to illustrate the editors’ strategy.

The attention paid by editors to female ethnographers is praiseworthy. The book included special chapters about outstanding women such as Katie Langloh Parker, Alice C. Fletcher and Maria Czaplicka (presented by Barbara Chambers Dawson, Joanna Cohan Scherer and Grażina Kubica, respectively). Promptly, the figures of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead (“the Bacon of anthropology”, as Stephen Toulmin called the latter) – who represented this science at its highest degree of prestige – come unavoidably to our mind.

A problematic subject matter is the rehabilitation of “armchair anthropology”. Strictly speaking, it is improper to label Marcel Mauss as an armchair anthropologist, as Eriksen (p. xvii), and Rosa and Vermeulen (p. 19) do. His activity cannot even be characterized as “philosophical anthropology”, a domain in which genuine philosophers like Max Scheler or Ernst Cassirer (among his contemporaries) excelled (to leave aside Immanuel Kant with his *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*). Mauss’ *The Gift* is rightly a classic work, but its author was rather a *hermeneutic* ethnographical mind than a scientific practitioner of anthropology. In fact, the so-called “armchair anthropology” was an initial phase in the development of this discipline. Once fieldwork became a defining feature of the canon of anthropological research, the “armchair method” remained a manner for cultivating certain forms of anthropological rhetoric, namely: philosophical, theological, or (literary-) artistic anthropology (and, naturally, the history of domain). As to the rigorously scientific paradigm, field research still counts today as a valid, essential and indispensable component of it. To quote Charles Seligman: “Field research in anthropology is what the blood of martyrs is to the Church” (cf. George Stocking, Jr., *After Tylor*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995, p. 115).

The title of the present book evokes automatically another volume (*Before Boas*, by Han F. Vermeulen, Lincoln & London, University of Nebraska Press,

2015). Both volumes are impressive, each in its own way. Perhaps the main difference consists in the role assigned to the two central figures: in Vermeulen's book Boas appeared as a very distant reference point, a guiding beacon from afar; by contrast, in the book here discussed, Malinowski's shadow is present at every step. The deepest challenge induced by the ethnographical contributions here revealed is that they incorporate some procedures – fieldwork, intensive research, participant observation – usually considered as Malinowskian priorities. Thus, correlatively with the existence of such writings in the interval 1870–1922, the editors' purpose seems to be the re-evaluation of Malinowski's position in the history of anthropology. So, after revisiting the so-called “revolution in anthropology” (Ian Charles Jarvie, Routledge, 1964), the editors conclude (right at the end):

Within such a complex “pre-Malinowskian” world, we suggest surpassing preconceived ideas on the irrelevance of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ethnographers and focus on their texts, which bring out the plurality in anthropological writing. Before reproducing the hasty judgment that such ethnographic accounts were mostly miscellaneous, dry compilations of odds and ends, we should get back to reading them with an open mind (“Conclusion”, p. 464).

More radical in putting the question (“What, then, is left of the so-called Malinowskian revolution?”) and categorical in formulating his answer had been Thomas Hylland Eriksen at the beginning of the volume:

For one thing, Malinowski was a far better writer than his predecessors. [...] His field methodology was also clearly formulated, systematically and succinctly laid out. His emphasis on participant observation also marked a departure from Westermarck and Rivers, although it remains an open question to what extent later ethnographers actually participated in everyday life” (“Foreword”, p. xvi).

With simple words, Eriksen revealed some *distinctive* merits of Bronislaw Malinowski. However, other significant achievements should be added. Let us skip over his sensational *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967), as well as over his influential teaching experience. In exchange, let us underline that if the main methodological aspects of his activity are acknowledged, his virtues as a theoretician are generally overlooked. Indeed, it is not only for the sake of practical efficiency that he devised his methods, but equally for the sake of their theoretical relevance. As it was asserted (irrefutably): “Clearly, Malinowski's great contribution was as an exemplar of ethnographic method. Yet his method carried a theoretical and even a moral charge” (Adam Kuper, *Anthropology and Anthropologists*, 1996, p. 34). While Radcliffe-Brown considered social anthropology as a branch of comparative sociology dealing with

primitive societies, Malinowski wrote a study on “culture” as anthropological concept (*A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*, 1944), i.e. he practiced anthropology *qua*... anthropology!

To conclude, similarly to a sociopolitical revolution which does not appear as a bolt from the blue but is anticipated in one way or another, the ethnographies before Malinowski (lacking the prompt integration into their *Zeitgeist*!) preceded the certified revolution in anthropology linked with this outstanding scientist. In short, this volume constitutes an actual editorial event. It fills important gaps into an overall picture, but it does not erode the protagonist’s figure; on the contrary, his creative dimensions are pointed out all the better.

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