

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FOUR LETTERS TO RADCLIFFE-BROWN FROM DURKHEIM AND MAUSS

(transcribed with an introduction by W. S. F. Pickering
and translated with commentaries by Peter Rivière)

Introduction

WHEN the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies was founded in October 1991, its members were told that there were a few letters written by Durkheim and Marcel Mauss in the archives of the University of Oxford's Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology. They are in fact to be found in a collection of material given to the Institute by Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955). Whilst none of the letters is of earth-shaking importance to Durkheimian studies, it seemed worthwhile bringing them to the attention of academics interested in Durkheim and the *Année Sociologique* school, especially anthropologists concerned with the history of their discipline. Amongst other things, these short letters offer some insights into the way Durkheim and Mauss viewed British anthropology.

Editors' Note: This is the first in what we hope will be a series of occasional articles drawing on the archives of Oxford's Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology and Pitt Rivers Museum. We expect that for the time being at least only these archives will be mined, but we should be interested in the longer term in publishing related material from other archives, especially (though not exclusively) where there is a connection with Oxford anthropology. Anyone interested in consulting the archives of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology should write to the Tylor Librarian, ISCA, 51 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 6PE.

Letters by Durkheim and his colleagues are now being published with increasing frequency. A mass of letters written by Durkheim to Mauss, enough to form a largish book, is due to be published in Paris soon. Such publications point to a growing interest in Durkheim and his school amongst scholars in the social sciences, an interest sparked off in part by Steven Lukes's well-known study (1973). The British Centre for Durkheimian Studies is another manifestation of that interest.

One reason why the Centre is located in Oxford and under the auspices of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology is that from the days of Radcliffe-Brown, who was the first Professor of Social Anthropology there from 1937 to 1946, he and his successors in the chair have been influenced by, or at least have acknowledged the importance of, Durkheim. Radcliffe-Brown was converted early in his academic life to Durkheim's sociological method; though while he lectured on him he published nothing about him. Radcliffe-Brown's *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1952) clearly bears the stamp of Durkheimian ideas. In 1913 Radcliffe-Brown had sent Durkheim a copy of his article 'Three Tribes of Western Australia' and received back from Durkheim that November a letter in which Durkheim admitted that in the light of Radcliffe-Brown's ethnographic evidence he must rethink his conclusions about matrimonial rules (see Peristiany 1960).

The small cache of letters published here reminds us that for Durkheim anthropology and sociology were not widely differentiated disciplines. Indeed, their closeness, even mutuality, is demonstrated in the twelve volumes of the *Année Sociologique*, edited by Durkheim, where reviews and articles by anthropologists and sociologists jostle side by side. The point is substantiated in Durkheim's letter here, where in writing to the anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown, he could say that the latter's lectures were 'new proof of the understanding that exists between us on the general conception of our science'. There is a similar reference to this 'science' in Durkheim's first letter to Radcliffe-Brown. And Mauss, of course, was just as much at home in anthropology as he was in sociology, indeed some would probably argue that he was in fact more of an anthropologist (of the armchair style) than a sociologist. As is well known, his knowledge of ethnographic material was enormous, and he was one of the founders of the Institut d'Ethnologie in Paris in 1925.

Durkheim might well have been saddened by the development of the social sciences in Britain and elsewhere in which anthropology and sociology took separate paths (inevitably perhaps, as both disciplines expanded and became increasingly professionalized). In Britain in recent decades sociology has become more allied with social administration and social policy than with social anthropology. And after Durkheim's death, anthropology was never again to be taught alongside sociology in France. Those departments in Britain and the United States in which anthropology and sociology are taught as complementary subjects maintain the spirit of Durkheim and of the *Année Sociologique* he founded.

1. *Durkheim to Radcliffe-Brown, 12 January 1914*

Transcript

12 Janvier 1914
4, Avenue d'Orléans, XIVe

Cher Monsieur,

Vous m'aviez fait espérer votre visite pour les fêtes du premier Janvier. Elles sont maintenant passées et il me faut, sans doute, renoncer à faire votre connaissance. Je le regrette vivement et je souhaite que vous puissiez, une autre fois, donner suite à ce project.

C'est parceque je comptais vous voir que je ne vous ai pas remercié plus tôt des votre précédente lettre et de l'obligeance avec laquelle vous voulez bien vous mettre à ma disposition. J'ai lu avec beaucoup d'intéret votre programme de cours à Birmingham. Il m'a apporte une nouvelle preuve de l'entente qui régne entre nous sur la conception générale de notre science.

Croyez, je vous prie, cher Monsieur, à mes bien dévoués sentiments.

E. Durkheim

Translation

You had led me to expect a visit from you over the New Year's holidays. They are now passed and doubtless I must forgo making your acquaintance. I deeply regret this and wish that you may be able, on another occasion, to carry out your plan.

It is because I was counting on seeing you that I did not thank you sooner for your earlier letter and for the courteousness with which you are very willing to put yourself at my disposal. I read with great interest the programme of your course at Birmingham. It has brought me new proof of the understanding that exists between us on the general conception of our science.

Commentary

This is a handwritten postcard. The first paragraph is self-explanatory. Radcliffe-Brown had proposed to visit Durkheim over the New Year and had failed to turn up. They were never to meet, for Radcliffe-Brown went to Australia later that year and did not return to Europe until after Durkheim's death.

The second paragraph needs a little elucidation. Radcliffe-Brown had returned from Australia in 1913 and was living in Handsworth, Birmingham, presumably with his wife and close to his family who had moved there in 1890 on the death of his father. In 1913 and early in 1914 he gave a course of lectures, similar in content to those delivered at Cambridge in 1910, at the University of Birmingham under the title 'Social Anthropology' (see Firth 1956). This course was an introduction to Durkheimian sociology (see Stocking 1984a), and it is not surprising that Durkheim should react to the outline of the course by referring to 'notre science'.

2. *Mauss to Radcliffe-Brown, 2 January 1935*

Transcript

Marcel Mauss
95 Boulevard Jourdan
Tél. Gobelins 40-54
Paris, Le 2 Janvier 1935

Mon Cher Radcliffe Brown,

Veillez trouver ci-inclus ma réponse à Miss Rosenfels. Ces études sont en effet importantes et de toute urgence, et d'un intérêt capital pour l'Administration. L'enregistrement de ces faits est évidemment un devoir pour nous, qui permettra de mieux asseoir la politique présente et l'histoire future. C'est d'autre part un sujet ou peuvent s'exercer non seulement les indigènes dressés par nous, mais aussi ceux de nos jeunes ethnographes qui ne sont pas tout à fait capables d'un travail sociologique approfondi. Ne le leur dites pas, mais c'est bien ce que je pense. La science comporte d'ailleurs des degrés et c'est plutôt les générations qui nous suivront qui seront juges que nous.

Je sais le despotisme de Malinowski. La faiblesse de la Rockefeller vis à vis lui est probablement la cause de son succès. La faiblesse, due à l'âge et à l'élégance des autres Anglais, ceux de Londres aussi bien que ceux de Cambridge et d'Oxford lui laissent le champ libre en Angleterre; mais soyez-en bien sûr, même les jeunes qu'il protège savent le juger. Ce sont des royautés qui ne durent pas. Son gros ouvrage sur la Magie et d'Agriculture sera sûrement une très bonne exposition de faits. C'est là qu'il excelle. Et les subventions de la Rockefeller à toute une armée de nègres qu'il a eu à sa disposition lui permettront certainement d'en avoir fait quelque chose de très complet. Seulement à côté de cela il y aura une théorie très pauvre de la nature magique de cette chose essentielle. Enfin il

va faire un grand livre sur sa théorie fonctionnelle de la Société et de l'organisation familiale. Ici sa faiblesse théorique et son manque total d'érudition se feront encore mieux sentir.

J'ai de bien mauvaises nouvelles du brave Hodson que j'ai vu au Congrès déjà fort souffrant. Péri est très malade. Ne pourriez-vous pas vous informer à leur sujet? Je crois qu'Evans Pritchard a quelque chance de côté d'Oxford. La demi-chaire de Seligmann n'est pas occupée sauf par Firth en combinaison avec une partie de la chaire de Joyce. Comme nous disons ici, à bon entendeur salut. Je voudrais moi aussi vous voir revenir dans les vieux pays.

Je vous enverrai ainsi qu'à un certain nombre de gens de Chicago une série de mes récents travaux extraits en particulier *Nouvelles Annales Sociologiques*.

Best regards and wishes
Votre dévoué

Mauss

Translation

Please find enclosed my reply to Miss Rosenfels. These studies are indeed important and of great urgency, and of capital interest for administration. The recording of these facts is clearly our duty, which will allow better the establishment of the present policy and the future story. On the other hand, it is a subject that not only the natives trained by us, but also those of our young ethnographers who are not entirely capable of a sociologically profound work, may undertake. Don't tell them, but that is indeed what I think. Besides, science admits of degrees and it is the generations that follow us who will be judges, rather than us.

I know of Malinowski's despotism. Rockefeller's weakness with regard to him is probably the cause of his success. The weakness, due to the age and the elegance of the other English, those in London as well as those of Cambridge and Oxford, leave the field in England free for him; but you may be sure, even the young whom he protects know how to judge him. There are dynasties that do not last. His big work on magic and agriculture will surely be a very good exposition of the facts. This is what he excels at. And the subventions from Rockefeller for a whole army of stooges which he has had at his disposal will certainly have allowed him to have done something definitive. Only, alongside it there will be a very poor theory of the magical nature of this essential thing. At last he is going to write a great book on his functionalist theory of society and family organization. Here his theoretical weakness and his total lack of learning will make itself still more obvious.

I have as well bad news of brave Hodson whom I saw at the Congress greatly suffering as before. Péri is very ill. Might you not make inquiries about them? I think Evans-Pritchard has some chance at Oxford. Seligmann's half-chair is not

filled, except by Firth in combination with a part of Joyce's chair. As we say here, go for it. I would also wish to see you return to the old country.

I will send you, as to some other people in Chicago, a range of my recent offprints in particular from the *Nouvelles Annales Sociologiques*.

Commentary

This is a typewritten letter with a handwritten valediction. The Miss Edith Rosenfels to whom Mauss refers in his opening sentence was a student of Radcliffe-Brown at Chicago and was later to marry the applied anthropologist, Philleo Nash. In 1935, Mrs Nash was secretary to a seminar on Race and Culture Contacts, and in this capacity she had written to a number of people, including Mauss, soliciting their co-operation. (Mrs Nash is still alive and living in Wisconsin. My correspondence with her, together with some other letters and a description of the seminar, has been deposited in the ISCA archive with Mauss's original letter.)

Mauss expresses the view that the collection of ethnographic facts is important but can be left to natives and ethnographers incapable of sociological analysis. It then becomes apparent at the beginning of the second paragraph that he has Malinowski in mind, and there are indications that he and Radcliffe-Brown had previously corresponded on the funding of anthropology by the Rockefeller Foundation and Malinowski's influence with it. The competition, indeed rivalry, between Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown for Rockefeller funds has been documented by Stocking (1984: 165-8). Mauss ends the second paragraph with an almost wicked hope that Malinowski will bring about his own downfall by exposing his total lack of learning in a book on his theory of functionalism.

In the penultimate paragraph, Mauss refers to Thomas Callan Hodson, who was at the time the first William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge. Mauss makes it sound as though Hodson was at death's door, but in fact he retired from the Chair in 1937 and lived until 1953. It is not easy to find biographical information on Hodson. No obituary of him appeared in *Man*, despite the fact he had at one time been Secretary of the Royal Anthropological Institute, as well as in turn a lecturer, reader and professor at Cambridge. It is not known from what illness he was suffering when Mauss met him in 1935, but he may have been dogged by ill health, having retired for this reason from the Indian Civil Service in 1901. Péri, referred to in the next sentence, may be W. J. Perry, the diffusionist anthropologist at University College London.

The question of who was to get the newly founded Chair in Social Anthropology at Oxford had become a matter of interest. Mauss is indicating to Radcliffe-Brown that he should go for it.

3. *Mauss to Radcliffe-Brown, undated [22 September 1936]*

Transcript

Mon Cher Brown,

Votre lettre m'est parvenue pendant de grandes souffrances et pendant une cure que j'ai faite à Contrexéville, dont je suis revenu il y a peu de temps. Il m'était en particulier difficile d'écrire, et j'avais besoin d'autres renseignements.

J'envoie, par le même courrier, à Balfour, Membre du Board qui doit décider de la question, le testimonium que vous me demandez, et je vous envoie une copie; pour de sûreté, j'envoie encore une autre copie à Seligman, pour qu'à l'occasion il puisse la faire circuler. J'espère qu'elle arrivera à temps.

Je suis heureux de pouvoir faire cela pour vous. J'espère que vous serez élu, et cela me fera grand plaisir de vous voir vous rapprocher de nous.

Je suis heureux des nouvelles que vous me donnez également ainsi que de celles de votre voyage en Chine. Vos faits m'intéresseront et intéresseront Granet certainement.

J'ai vu Ogburn qui m'a donné des nouvelles de votre santé et de votre succès à Chicago.

Excusez-moi de ne pas vous en écrire davantage. Votre affaire m'occasionne déjà un long courrier avec toutes sortes de gens.

Avec mes meilleures sentiments et [...] de [...]

Votre dévoué

Mauss

Translation

Your letter reached me during great suffering, and while I was taking a cure at Contrexéville, from which I returned a little time ago. It was in particular difficult for me to write, and I had need of other information.

I am sending, by the same post, to Balfour, a member of the Board which has to decide the question, the reference for which you asked me, and I am sending you a copy; for safety, I am sending moreover another copy to Seligman, in order that in case of need he may circulate it. I hope it arrives in time.

I am happy to be able to do this for you. I hope that you will be successful, and it will give me great pleasure to see us brought closer together.

I am happy about the news you give me, also that about your journey to China. Your information will interest me and certainly interest Granet.

I have seen Ogburn who had given me news of your health and your success at Chicago.

Excuse me for not writing more to you. Your concerns already cause me a long correspondence with all sorts of people

Commentary

This is a covering letter, typewritten except for the handwritten valediction, for a copy of the reference that Mauss wrote in support of Radcliffe-Brown's application for the Chair in Social Anthropology at Oxford, which he obtained. He also sent copies to Balfour, then Curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, and a member of the Electoral Board, and to Seligman who was by then retired. The journey to China referred to relates to Radcliffe-Brown's position as Visiting Professor at Yenching University in the autumn of 1935.

Marcel Granet, the sinologist, was a colleague of Mauss in Paris, and William F. Ogburn, a sociologist at Chicago.

Mauss refers to the fact that he has been unwell (Contrexéville is a thermal spa in the Vosges), and there is more than a hint that he found preparing the reference a burden. This may account for the fact that the testimonial is rather superficial and at no point goes at any depth into Radcliffe-Brown's achievements.

4. *Mauss's Reference for Radcliffe-Brown*

Transcript

COLLÈGE DE FRANCE

Paris, le 22 Septembre 1936

Monsieur le Professeur Arthur Radcliffe-Brown, de l'Université de Chicago, que je connais depuis très longtemps, et dont le Docteur Haddon et le Docteur Rivers m'ont fait faire la connaissance, est candidat à la chaire d'Anthropologie Sociale que l'Université d'Oxford va fonder.

Il me prie de le recommander à l'attention du Board chargé de la désignation du futur professeur.

Je pense—et je ne crois pas indiscret—ayant eu l'honneur d'être en 1898 à Oxford, sinon l'élève, du moins le disciple du regretté Sir E. B. Taylor [*sic*]—de dire à quel degré A. Radcliffe-Brown est capable de continuer la tradition dont mes deux amis, le Professeur Balfour et le Docteur Marrett [*sic*] ont été les continuateurs.

Le livre de Brown sur les *Andamans* est un des plus importants livres d'ethnographie et de sociologie descriptive que je connaisse. Il a élucidé, autant que les choses se peuvent, une série considérable de faits concernant des populations dont l'observation était urgente, et dont la position dans l'histoire de la civilisation est encore une des plus controversées.

Ses recherches et surtout ses directions de travaux en Afrique de Sud ont été également, comme son enseignement, couronnés de succès.

J'ai eu le plaisir de voir à l'École des Hautes-Études d'anciens élèves à moi devenus ses collaborateurs: Mrs Tucker, actuellement Professor Hoernlé à l'Université de Johannesburg, et le Professeur Schapiro.

L'ensemble de ses travaux sur la famille chez les Bantus Sud sont extrêmement importants.

Depuis, il a dirigé pendant longtemps les travaux d'Anthropologie Sociale, et d'anthropologie de l'Université de Sydney, et la publication d'*Océanie*.

Ses deux séries de recherches sur l'Australie, celles d'avant-guerre sur les tribus de l'Ouest, et celles d'après 1926 sur les tribus de Centre, de l'Est et du Nord, sont décisives.

Puis c'est le succès qu'il vient de remporter en Chine, au Shan-Si.

Comme scholar, comme professor, comme chercheur, comme travailleur sur le terrain, comme directeur de travaux et animateur des sciences, A. Radcliffe-Brown me semble être l'un des meilleurs vivants.

Je me fais un plaisir de l'attester,

Marcel Mauss

Professor au Collège de France,
Directeur d'Études à l'École des Htes Études,
Secrétaire Général et Professeur à l'Institut
d'Ethnologie de l'Université de Paris
Paris.

Translation

Professor Arthur Radcliffe-Brown, of the University of Chicago, whom I have known for a long time, and of whom Dr Haddon and Dr Rivers made me acquainted, is a candidate for the Chair in Social Anthropology which the University of Oxford is going to found.

He has asked me to recommend him to the attention of the Board responsible for the appointment of the future professor.

I think—and I believe not imprudently—having had the honour to be in 1898 in Oxford, if not the pupil, at least the disciple of the late-lamented Sir Edward Tylor—I can say to what extent A. Radcliffe-Brown is capable of continuing the

tradition of which my two friends, Professor Balfour and Dr Marett have been the continuators.

Brown's book on the *Andamans* is one of the most important works of ethnography and descriptive sociology that I know. He has elucidated, as far as things can be, a considerable range of facts concerning people of whom the observation was urgent and whose position in the history of civilization is still one of great controversy.

His researches, and above all his direction of work in South Africa, have also been, like his teaching, crowned with success.

I have had the pleasure to see some former students of mine at the *École des Hautes-Études* become his collaborators: Mrs. Tucker, now Professor Hoernlé at the University of Johannesburg, and Professor Schapiro.

The collection of his works on the family among the Southern Bantu is extremely important.

Later, he directed for a long time the work of social anthropology and anthropology at the University of Sydney, and the publication *Oceania*.

His two series of researches on Australia, those before the War on the tribes of the West, and those after 1926 on the tribes of the Centre, East and North, are definitive.

Then there is the success that he has just gained in China, at Shan-Si.

As a scholar, as a professor, as a researcher, as a fieldworker, as a director of research and as a stimulator of science, A. Radcliffe-Brown seems to me to be one of the best alive.

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