

Jacques; Lyotard, Jean-François; Network Theory/ Social Network Analysis; Postmodernism; Poststructuralism; Social Constructionism; Social Studies of Science

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Website

Bruno Latour: <http://bruno-latour.fr/>

LEACH, EDMUND

Edmund Ronald Leach (1910–1989) was one of the most emphatic and colorful figures in modern social anthropology. He spent much of his time writing for and speaking to lay audiences and so became perhaps the most widely known British anthropologist of his generation. Writing on an improbably vast range of topics, between 1937 and 1988, Leach published nine books, four edited volumes, more than 50 scholarly articles, and hundreds of shorter pieces. Although he is remembered primarily as the Anglophone purveyor of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, his intellectual achievement does not align with any one theory. He founded no "school," constructed no theoretical systems, and was impatient with theoretical assertions. Leach's assaults on established theories provoked charges of

inconsistency from his colleagues, but his intellectual restlessness was far from the petulant belligerence of which he was often accused. Rather, it expressed a steady vision of social anthropology, which he maintained throughout his life. For Leach, unsettling old dogmas was not a matter of settling into new ones but of challenging intellectual habits. He saw anthropology's subject matter not as a set of theoretical edifices but as other worlds of human action and thought, there to be understood.

Early Life and Introduction to Anthropology

Leach was born on November 7, 1910, in Sidmouth, a town in Devon, into a large and densely intermarried family of Lancashire mill owners, to William Edmund Leach and his wife Mildred (née Brierley). At the time he was born, the family fortunes came from a sugar plantation and a sugar-refining factory in northern Argentina. Leach grew up in Rochdale; studied at Marlborough College, a public school, which he entered as the twenty-first Leach; and was later admitted to Clare College, Cambridge. Like most anthropologists of his generation, he had no initial training in the discipline, and at Cambridge, he read mathematics and engineering. On graduating with a first class BA in 1932, he joined a British trading firm, John Swire and Sons (later Butterfield and Swire), with operations in East Asia, and was posted to China. He spent more than 3 years living in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Chungking, Tsingtao, and Beijing, all the while traveling a great deal. In China, Leach was struck by an extraordinary fact: Here was a great, ancient, and wholly viable civilization in which everything was, as Leach liked to say, "back to front." Chinese religion, architecture, clothing, ritual, cuisine, and art offered solutions to universal human problems and seemed to invert comprehensively the ways things were thought of and done in the West. While traveling all over China, Leach wrote swathes of letters and detailed notes on the local customs, religion, and (especially) technology.

By 1936, he had grown weary of commerce. Instead of renewing his contract, he followed a spur of the moment call by an expatriate American psychiatrist, former Mormon missionary, and amateur anthropologist, Kilton Stewart (whom Leach had met in Beijing), to visit "Bottle the Bugger"—that is, the island of Botel Tobago (now Langu) off the coast of Taiwan. Having spent 8 weeks on the island, he

wrote voluminously about his observations, drew sketches, and took many photographs of the native Yami, the first “real primitives” he encountered close-up. On his return to England, Leach was introduced by a childhood friend, Rosemary Upcott, to her husband, the anthropologist Raymond Firth, and through him to Bronisław Malinowski, the leading grandee in British social anthropology at the time. Malinowski was a big, forceful, and tremendously charismatic man, who presided unchallenged from his chair at the London School of Economics over the entire discipline in Britain. Malinowski was a pioneer of extended fieldwork as anthropology’s central method and of “functionalism” as its theoretical stance, which was maintained in British anthropology well into the 1950s. When Leach went to the London School of Economics as a student of anthropology, he joined Malinowski’s legendary seminars, which he ran between 1924 and 1938. These salon-like meetings, which brought together a motley gathering of anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, missionaries, and colonial administrators from around the world, were the nursery for much of that generation of British anthropology. Participants included the anthropologists Isaac Schapera, Audrey Richards, S. F. Nadel, Meyer Fortes, M. N. Srinivas, and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, as well as Leach’s mentor and immediate teacher, Raymond Firth. Here, Leach met Noël Stevenson, a colonial administrator in Burma, through whom he came to do fieldwork in the Kachin Hills of northeastern Burma (following an abortive spell among the Rowanduz Kurds in Pakistan in 1938).

Contributions to Anthropology

During the 6 years (1939–1945) Leach spent in Burma, he conducted extensive fieldwork, served in the Burmese Rifles (reaching the rank of Major), raised a force of Kachin irregulars, got married (to Celia Buckmaster), and had his first child, Louisa. On the basis of his researches, he published his first professional monograph, *The Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954), which is now widely regarded as his most enduring book and a momentous contribution to political anthropology. His key breakaway assertion was that the notion of a bounded “tribe” with its own language and culture was useless for understanding the Burmese highlands. Instead, he argued,

the social landscape of the Kachin Hills comprised a shared system of social and political relations, in which clans segmented and allied themselves to one another via marriage and identity codes such as dialect and dress. This “system” was neither stable nor closed, as people constantly entered, left, and shifted their position within it. The changes were made possible by three ideal political models that actors had at their disposal: (1) the hierarchical *gumsa*, (2) the anarchic egalitarian *gumlao*, and (3) the Shan state system of the neighboring valleys. Ambitious persons seeking political and economic advantage employed these models strategically to justify their actions, and the accumulated weight of their decisions tilted politics this way or that, shifting the whole structure of local society over time.

This was trailblazing work, far ahead of its time. By dissolving the old ethnographic notion of tribe as an isolated totality, Leach dissented from the persistent habit in anthropology of treating village, tribal, national, or any other communities as islands unto themselves, rather than as constituents of broader relational schemes. This insight informed, for instance, his student Fredrik Barth’s celebrated thesis (1969) that ethnic groups were not cultural isolates but relational entities defined vis-à-vis one another. Leach’s stress on a broad regional approach also anticipated work done by anthropologists in the 1970s under the rubric of “political economy.” His emphasis on the flux inherent in social systems and on changes in societies over time was radical in the age of functionalism, in which anthropologists generally described societies as existing in a state of static, ahistorical equilibrium. His insistence that societies were made and unmade by human action and interaction also prefigured criticisms of social stasis leveled at functionalist-structural anthropology by “practice theorists” from the late 1970s.

Leach pursued the two concerns central to *Political Systems*—the relationship between social structure and individual agency (Malinowski’s legacy) and between ideology and the material conditions of life—through much of the rest of his career. One set of responses to these concerns appeared in *Pul Eliya, a Village in Ceylon* (1961), his next monograph based on fieldwork conducted in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1954. Here, he argued that kinship was “not a thing in itself,” a concrete organization for anthropologists to study, but an idiom for speaking about property relations, used to pursue

the pragmatic, material goals of political actors. *Pul Eliya* has been criticized for Leach's unquestioning adoption of the economically motivated, self-maximizing individual and for the reduction of culture to a residual consequence of paddy cultivation. The monograph, nevertheless, developed the theoretical coup that Leach launched in *Political Systems* and for which he is still mainly remembered today. One of the book's central assertions is that the local "subcastes" (*vaigas*) were not discrete groups bound by blood and descent; divisions between them were important not because they formed social enclosures but because they constituted the basis for conflictual or cooperative affinity. The implications of this, seemingly minor, ethnographic quibble were pivotal. As in *Political Systems*, here Leach was challenging the prevailing functionalist picture of societies as separate, self-sufficiently functioning organisms to be labeled and typologized by anthropologists, an exercise he derided as "butterfly collecting."

The year 1961, when *Pul Eliya* was published, was a watershed year in Leach's career. This was when he issued a collection of essays, *Rethinking Anthropology*, in which he departed drastically from his teachers' functionalism, urging anthropologists to abandon their taxonomies of cultural systems in favor of organizing the ideas that underlie patterns of action and thought in societies. This turn was accelerated by two felicitous encounters, one with the polymath-anthropologist Gregory Bateson and the other with the linguist Roman Jakobson, both of whom he met while working at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Palo Alto, California (1960/1961). Bateson and Jakobson were developing, in their own different ways, the means to understand systems of relations. Leach was particularly struck by the work of Jakobson, one of the most important linguists of the 20th century and a pioneer of structural linguistics. Jakobson's analysis of sound systems hinged on the pivotal proposition that meaningful sound units (phonemes) in a language did not exist in isolation but were necessarily defined relative to one another. The sounds /t/ and /d/, for instance, are separate phonemes in the English language because its speakers perceive the difference undetectable to speakers of Korean, in which they together constitute a single phoneme. So the smallest units of language could be identified only in contrast to others and were not freestanding but were fundamentally relational

entities. Jakobson went on to analyze syntax, morphology, and even poetry, music, and cinema just as he analyzed sounds, by identifying elements in a system through relational opposing pairs. His work was the primary inspiration for the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, considered the father of "structuralism" in anthropology.

Leach remembered that when he first encountered Jakobson's ideas, his reaction was as follows: "Ah! I have been there before!" By 1961, he had been grappling with relational systems for at least a decade, and Jakobson's method offered robust analytical tools. That year, he also published two essays—"Golden Bough or Gilded Twig?" and "Lévi-Strauss in the Garden of Eden: An Examination of Some Recent Developments in the Analysis of Myth"—which signaled his fascination with Lévi-Strauss and the shift of interest from kinship and politics to narrative, art, and myth. From then on, Leach wrote prolifically on art, ritual, architecture, mythology, communication, biblical narrative, humanism, masquerades, computing, time, and the meaning of hair, among other topics. For at least a decade, he brandished Lévi-Strauss's name in his attacks on functionalism, acquiring the reputation of an advocate. But he never took on Lévi-Strauss's structuralism in its entirety and in fact rejected much of it, especially as it later began to crystallize into a metatheory of cognitive universals. Leach described himself, in a characteristically defiant manner, as both a "functionalist" interested in how things "worked" and a "structuralist" who strove to understand the required cognitive machinery. But he never fully subscribed to either theory. Although Leach was driven by the desire to grasp general patterns, and even provocatively claimed that he was "bored by the facts," his loyalties remained with ethnographic detail, never to be trumped by theory.

Legacy

Leach's painstaking attention to and admiration for ethnography came out in his excitement about the work of his students, to whom he devoted tremendous amounts of energy and time. As in his own work, he insisted on independent thinking and welcomed challenges to his own assertions, in fact scolding students for failing to disagree with him. The resulting major achievement was a generation of leading anthropologists—including Ray Abrahams,

Fredrik Barth, Jean La Fontaine, Chris Fuller, Stephen Gudeman, Alfred Gell, Stephen Hugh-Jones, Caroline Humphrey, Adam Kuper, Jonathan Parry, Marilyn Strathern, and Nur Yalman, among many others—whose regional foci, subject matter, and theoretical attitudes have been as wide-ranging as his own.

Leach remained a maverick, intellectually as well as institutionally. Although he became a lecturer in social anthropology at the London School of Economics in 1946, moved to Cambridge in 1953, became Provost of King's College, Cambridge (1966–1979), was president of the Royal Anthropological Institute (1971–1975), was elected fellow of the British Academy (from 1972), and was knighted in 1975, Leach remains the most prominent British anthropologist never to become a professorial head of department. His persistent dissent from intellectual orthodoxies was strategic. What was surprising was that what first drew him to anthropology in China, and his continued fascination with the “exotic,” did not amount to unfocused reflections on the “Other” but to a real intellectual method. Leach constantly sought out contrasts between “us” and “them” to offer new insights into the lives of others, and in the process into ourselves. He saw theoretical statements as intellectually deadening if they became mental objects in their own right instead of aids to better understanding. Theory had to follow empirical observation, not the other way around, a message that remains as pertinent to anthropology now as in Leach's own day.

Anastasia Piliavsky

See also Barth, Fredrik; Bateson, Gregory; Evans-Pritchard, E. E.; Firth, Raymond; Fortes, Meyer; Jakobson, Roman O.; Lévi-Strauss, Claude; Malinowski, Bronisław; Richards, Audrey; Schapera, Isaac; Srinivas, M. N.; Strathern, Marilyn

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LEACOCK, ELEANOR

Eleanor Burke Leacock (1922–1987), known to friends and colleagues as “Happy,” had an extraordinarily active and productive career as a Marxist-feminist anthropologist. Leacock was admired for her politically committed scholarship, and she was always outspoken against injustices and exploitation. The daughter of the well-known literary critic Kenneth Burke, she was also remarkable for her ability to combine being a mother of four, a wife (she was married twice), chair of the anthropology department at City College, City University of New York for 9 years, and a political activist. Despite her multiple involvements, she was always available as a loyal friend, supportive colleague, and encouraging teacher who fought forcefully to assist minority students and to promote the careers of Third World and female colleagues.

Leacock died in Honolulu on April 2, 1987, of a stroke suffered a few weeks after returning to Samoa to complete the fieldwork that she had begun in 1985 on the problems of urban youth. This last field project, in keeping with her previous work, was undertaken to gather detailed ethnographic material with which to challenge analyses that she regarded as theoretically unsound and politically pernicious—in this case, Derek Freeman's claim that suicide and rape among contemporary Samoan youth reveal the “darker side” and “grim realities” of an unchanging Samoan culture earlier described by Margaret Mead.

As a leading U.S. Marxist-feminist anthropologist, Leacock carried out fieldwork in four major