

EPILOGUE: AND SO WHAT?

I ordered my servant to bring my horse from the stables. He did not understand me. I went out to the stables myself, saddled my horse and mounted it. Somewhere far away I heard a trumpet. I asked him what it meant. He knew nothing and had heard nothing. At the gate he halted me and asked: 'Where does the master ride to?' – 'I do not know,' I answered, 'but away from here, only away from here. All the time away from here, only thus can I reach my aims.' – 'So you know your aim?' he asked. – 'Yes,' I answered, 'I told you. Away from here – that is my aim.'

— Franz Kafka, *The Departure*

What is the ultimate point of social anthropology? One may, obviously, use the subject to collect academic distinctions and eventually get a job. On the other hand, in most cases there are faster and more rewarding methods, at least in a pecuniary sense, of acquiring a livelihood. Fortunately, there are also other reasons for becoming involved in the subject.

The single most important human insight to be gained from this way of comparing societies is perhaps the realisation that everything could have been different in our own society – that the way we live is only one among innumerable ways of life which humans have adopted. If we glance sideways and backwards, we will quickly discover that modern society, with its many possibilities and seducing offers, its dizzying complexity and its impressive technological advances, is a way of life which has not been tried out for long. Perhaps, psychologically speaking, we have just left the cave: in terms of the history of our species, we have but spent a moment in modern societies.

As well as offering wisdom and insights, anthropology has its problematic points too – at least if we try to make it a moral philosophy. Perhaps the most common professional neurosis among anthropologists consists in the tendency to turn cultural relativism into a moral doctrine: as long as one can justify some notion or other as 'cultural', one feels committed to defending it. The result, of course, is that one becomes unable to pass moral judgement on anything at all. It must therefore be said that it is possible to understand without liking; it is possible to understand the mass worship of private cars and the death penalty as expressions of certain variants of North American culture without approving of them; and it is certainly possible to understand the principles for the exchange of women among the Kachin, or

the principles of political organisation among the Nuer, without regarding them as 'superior' or 'inferior' to our own.

It is also perfectly feasible to admire New Guinean garden magic without being against the mass production of CD players and potato chips. It is not even certain that one is doing a favour to one's chosen people by trying to protect them from the impact of modernity.

A related professional neurosis can be termed 'sociologism'. This means that absolutely everything about human existence is interpreted in a sociological or anthropological frame of understanding. Art and literature, love and aesthetic experiences may thus be understood purely as social products. If one prefers Beethoven to pop, this is allegedly due to one's upbringing and the need to maintain symbolic fences vis-à-vis the lower classes, not to the fact that Beethoven's music may happen to possess artistic qualities. When the attitude of sociologism is profoundly embedded in one's personality, the whole world may appear as a set of 'phenomena', possibly classified into 'interesting' and 'uninteresting' ones. One ends by turning everything into 'empirical material', ultimately even one's own life.

Anthropology deals with 'the Others', but, in crucial ways, it also concerns ourselves. Anthropological studies may provide us with a mirror, a window, a contrast which makes it possible to reflect on our own existence in a new way. Descriptions of life in the Trobriand Islands remind us that our own society is not the only conceivable one. The Ndembu, the Inuit and the Dogon may tell us that our whole life could have been very different, and thanks to anthropological analyses of their societies they may even tell us *how* it might have been different. They force us to ask fundamental questions about ourselves and our own society. Sometimes they may even force us to act accordingly.

Anthropology also teaches us something about the complexity of culture and social life. Sometimes, as in the analysis of rituals, it may indeed seem that there is no easy question to the answers provided by anthropological research. Our job, faced with ideological simplifications, prejudice, ignorance and bigotry, must be to make the world more complex rather than simplifying it.

Anthropology may not provide the answer to the question of the meaning of life, but at least it can tell us that there are many ways in which to make a life meaningful. If it does not provide answers, anthropology may at least give us the feeling of being very close to the questions.