



Anthropology, Anti-Racism and Schools in the 1970s: An interview with Jonathan Benthall

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As Director of the RAI between 1974 and 2000, Jonathan Benthall shaped a new public profile for the Institute. As well as helping the RAI fund-raise its way out of a financial crisis, he launched the monthly RAI News, later renamed *Anthropology Today*, along with a range of educational initiatives including a conference at Cumberland Lodge, Windsor Great Park, which resulted in a Minority Rights Group report *Teaching about Prejudice* (Whitaker, 1983). Without a formal training in anthropology, Jonathan's CV combined commercial IT experience with an interest in contemporary art, working as secretary of London's ICA in the early 1970s.

From the start Jonathan used RAI News to champion anthropology in schools. The first issue, September 1974, published a speech that HRH Prince Charles gave at an RAI centenary dinner. Calling for 'a less obscure and specialised' version of the discipline, Charles advocated the inclusion of anthropology in the O and A level syllabus that would 'reach a future important group of people while they are still with reasonably open minds at school' (Windsor, 1974).

Momentum quickly developed. The second issue published a report on a workshop for 150 teachers of the social sciences, at which 'few conference members had any clear idea what anthropology was' (Hurman 1974). The resultant confusion led to the publication of successive editions of a 'Teachers Resource guide', a resource that later became the online 'Discovering Anthropology'.¹ The 1970s were marked by a slew of educational activities, publications and teaching resources, several developed in tandem with the new Association of Teachers of the Social Sciences (ATSS).

In this previously unpublished short interview with David Mills, Jonathan talks about how he channelled this enthusiasm, fostering links between the RAI, teachers and policy makers to develop teaching resources. He goes on to describe the challenge of reconciling anthropological relativism with anti-racism policies and the eventful existence of the first RAI Education Committee in the early 1980s.

Tell me about how you decided to prioritise reaching out to schools?

When I started at the RAI, one of the relatively promising things I thought of getting involved with was education. Prince Charles made really rather a good speech, calling for Anthropology to be more engaged. So one of the first things I did was to apply to the Leverhulme Trust, who wanted to be involved with Prince Charles, for funds to appoint an education officer for three years. We appointed Michael Sallnow, who was a very good and highly capable man. After his appointment to a lectureship in anthropology at LSE in 1977 and after building a shining reputation as a Latin Americanist and specialist on pilgrimages, he died tragically at the age of 40 in 1990.

Can you tell me about the RAI's Teachers Resource Guide published in 1974?

This started, as a totally voluntary thing, by Richard Thorn and Ann Hurman, who went on to be a university administrator. It was just a loose-leaf thing, coming out of that Association of Teachers of the Social Sciences conference in 1973.

And how did Michael take this initiative forward?

Michael Sallnow produced something more professional. His main production was a joint project, entitled 'Land and Peoples' published by Blackwells and the ILEA and the RAI. The idea was to do a set of comparative ethnographies for schools. Like many, Michael felt that social anthropology and the theoretical sciences were not a suitable subject for school pupils, but that if you could capture the imagination of 11–14 year-olds, it would be very good for them. The basic idea was that though they wouldn't necessarily go on to do anthropology, they wouldn't turn out to be racists. There was a matrix of themes cross-cutting with selected peoples, and each theme would be emphasised successively in a different unit or 'pack'.

Can you tell me about these teaching packs?

It was Michael's view that one shouldn't try to teach theory to school children. It was widely shared at the time. Edmund Leach wrote a paper called 'Keep Anthropology out of the classroom' (Leach 1973). I was more ambivalent on the subject, but decided that the many obstacles to getting anthropology accepted as an O and A level subject were too daunting. We got ILEA involved with Mike's project, and Blackwell's Education Publishers, who were very go-ahead. There were a lot of teachers from schools such as Crawley Comprehensive that were particularly progressive. And there were also 'Jackdaws' – teaching packs – which had lots of printed materials, eg like a facsimile of the Magna Carta, and colour slides. It was too expensive to produce these things with their fancy typography, but that was the idea that Blackwells had put forward.

Mike developed an extremely interesting and well-produced pack, called 'Peru, the Quechua', based on his fieldwork (RAI and ILEA 1976). And then there were two others – one on the !Kung, and the other on the Trobrianders. Yet in the middle of this Blackwells and ILEA both lost interest. Blackwells felt there was no market for this any more. The key date for this was the late 1976, at the end of the Callaghan govt. Callaghan's famous speech saying that we needed to go back to the 3 Rs. This meant that every teacher teaching experimental subjects all over the country ran for cover (and even more so when Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979).

Did these packs sell well?

No, I don't think so at all. We had a launch at Queen Anne Street. Everyone turned up who had been involved. It was a very successful occasion, and we all patted ourselves on the back, but I did notice that there wasn't a single person outside this circle of teachers who had been interested in and proud of this.

Tell me about ILEA and its politics?

All of a sudden ILEA changed their position completely, from wanting to support these kind of experimental resources to supporting anti-racism. They moved to a policy where it wanted to show black people ('black' at the time was taken by some campaigners to include Asians and some other minorities) as authority figures, so you mustn't show a picture of a black person unless they were wearing a suit and tie. Obviously showing pictures of the !Kung wandering around looking for grubs didn't fit into this pattern. These resources were for the kind of teaching that needed a trained teacher who knew what they were doing. ILEA stood by the project, but only three packs were ever produced. Blackwells pulled out and ILEA published the packs in collaboration with the RAI.

But surely these packs were designed to be used by any teacher?

Well, yes they should have been. But the dominant teaching ideology of ILEA at that time was that you should project an image of black people who could achieve in our society. It was felt that 11-14 year old age groups were not seen as the sort of people with whom one could use comparative ethnographies. So the whole scheme foundered, and we did a rethink.

Was this when the RAI created its first education committee?

Yes, a committee was formed in 1982, with John Corlett as chair. There were various articles published in RAI and AT about anti-racism and multicultural education, and we went into all the arguments for and against (see Corlett 1983, Parry 1984). And the education committee came up with a policy that anthropology really ought to make a very strong stand and get involved with anti-racist teaching. We called some meetings, and I remember Michael Banton coming up from Bristol to a meeting, and Geoffrey Ainsworth Harrison. We got everyone to

work on a text that the RAI could agree upon, namely that the RAI was opposed to discrimination, supported anti-racist teaching, and that anthropology had something to offer that other disciplines didn't.

Did the RAI Council support this new development?

There were a majority of people on the council in favour of this. And at that point Adrian Mayer, who was the president, became strongly opposed to it, and started rallying a movement in the council against this, with the support of the American anthropologist Burton Benedict who was President of the RAI's North American Committee. Benedict's view was 'Look, if you go this way the RAI will become like the AAA, much more political and not seriously scholarly any more, and you will be taken over and made use of by people who have got a political agenda'. And Adrian Mayer basically put his foot in and squashed the initiative, and he got very annoyed with me (understandably), because I wanted to push ahead with it, and knew that he had only another 6 months as President, and I improperly said this to the Education Committee.

So I had to decide whether to push ahead with what the Education committee wanted, given that the council was split, or to drop it. I thought that this was not an important enough issue to risk a fatal split in the RAI council, and a lot of very damaging disagreements. And so I dropped it, and let Adrian Mayer take the council the way he wanted. As a result our educationalists dropped away from the RAI. Not that there were many, but there were a few very committed people, and they lost interest, and went on to do other things. And so the education committee lapsed.

References

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ⁱ www.discoveranthropology.org.uk/