Locating the Political: A Political Anthropology for Today

We actually know a great deal about power, but have been timid in building upon what we know. (Wolf 1990:586)

Half a century ago, the subject matter and relevance of political anthropology still seemed relatively easy to define. Under Western colonial regimes, one of the most valuable kinds of knowledge which anthropologists could offer to produce was that relating to indigenous systems of law and government. Most colonial governments had opted for systems of indirect rule. Colonial authority was to be mediated through indigenous leaders and the rule of Western law was to legitimate itself through a degree of accommodation to local 'customs'.

In the last analysis, however, the laws and authority of the colonizers were pre-eminent. Anthropologists in the twentieth century found themselves in the same position as clerics in the Spanish-American Empire at the dawn of European global expansion. The authorities were interested in witchcraft accusations and blood feuds with a view to stamping out what was not acceptable to European 'civilization'. Yet there were some areas of indigenous practice, such as customary law on property rights, which colonial regimes sought to manipulate for their own ends, and might even codify as law recognized by the colonial state. This bureaucratic restructuring of indigenous 'traditions' and social organization was generally carried out within a framework of European preconceptions, giving anthropologists an opportunity to offer their services in the cause of making colonial administration work.

A particularly intractable problem for the colonial regimes was that of finding persons who could play the role of authority figures in areas where state-less or 'acephalous' societies predominated. Much of the classical writing of British political anthropology was devoted to showing that the chiefs the colonial authorities recognized in the 'segmentary' societies of Africa did not possess real authority over their people. The classic case is the Nuer, a pastoral people in the southern Sudan, studied by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1940, 1987). Evans-Pritchard argued that the Nuer political system was an 'ordered anarchy' based on the principle of 'segmentary opposition'. The population was organized into clans and lineages based on male lines of descent from founding ancestors. Local groups formed 'segments' of larger, more inclusive, kin-groups defined in terms of descent. Nuer social and political structure could thus be represented as a hierarchy of nested lineage segments of differing scale: the 'clan', the biggest group, segments into 'maximal lineages' founded by brothers, each maximal lineage segments in turn into different 'major' lineages, and the segmentation process continues through levels of 'minor' and 'minimal' lineages. Evans-Pritchard saw this structure of lineage segmentation as a consequence of the political principles that operated in Nuerland. Obligations to aid others in fighting were expressed in terms of kinship. Groups which were opposed at one level of segmentation, that of minor lineages, for example, would join together in a conflict which opposed the higher segmentary unit to which they all belonged to another unit of the same structural level, such as a major lineage. This principle of 'fission and fusion' also provided the Nuer with a principle of unity in conflicts with other 'tribes'.

Evans-Pritchard described Nuer politics as 'ordered anarchy', since even villages had no single recognized authority figures. There was an indigenous figure called the leopard-skin chief, but he was merely a ritual mediator in disputes, lacking any power to summon the parties to jurisdiction or impose settlements, let alone a wider political role. People seldom achieved redress without threatening force. Nuer society did not, therefore, possess the kind of leaders who could act as agents of 'indirect rule'. If the colonial authorities mistook ritual mediators for genuine political authority figures, such agents might provoke resentment when they tried to act, as representatives of an imposed alien power whose ideas of justice conflicted sharply with indigenous ideas (note 1)

The classical British texts on political anthropology of the 1940s and 1950s thus offered a
commentary on the tensions that colonial rule produced and on the reasons why it might be resented, but tended to take colonial domination itself for granted. Nevertheless, in a magisterial survey of anthropological perspectives on politics, Joan Vincent has argued that it is 'historically inaccurate to regard the discipline simply as a form of colonial ideology' (Vincent 1990:2). She bases her case on several different arguments.

Firstly, Vincent contends that early anthropological voices often offered trenchant critiques of the consequences of European domination. In the 1880s, before anthropology departments became established in American universities, fieldworkers of the Bureau of Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution were not merely documenting the sufferings of Native Americans and producing the first academic monographs on the 'resistance movements of the oppressed', but entering into political confrontations with the federal bureaucracy (ibid.: 52-5).

Secondly, in Britain, the first ethnographic surveys funded by the British Association in the 1890s were not conducted on 'exotic' societies but on English and Irish rural communities, and were motivated by concern about the potential social and political consequences of industrialization and mass urbanization. The Edwardian pioneers of fieldwork-based anthropology in the British colonies, notably W.H.R. Rivers, failed to convince the Colonial Office of the value of funding a professional anthropology which might improve the government of subject peoples (ibid.: 119-21). Between 1900 and 1920: the Royal Anthropological Institute approached the government formally on several occasions, but the official response towards anthropology remained one of suspicion, compounded by the class prejudices of Colonial Office. The first professional anthropologists generally came from non-establishment social backgrounds (ibid.: 117). It was private foundations associated with the global expansion of American capitalism that showed the greatest interest in funding anthropology. Rockefeller money not only supported the development of American anthropology within the USA's growing international sphere of interest, but much of the classic fieldwork of British anthropologists in the 1920s and 1930s (ibid.: 154).

Nevertheless, as Vincent herself shows, the critical strands of an anthropological approach to politics were not those that became hegemonic in the discipline in the period after 1940. This was the date when the British structural-functionalists established 'political anthropology' as a formalized sub-field. Their anti-historical functionalist theory created a breach between the American and British traditions which was not fully closed until the 1960s, when new approaches to political anthropology associated with the Manchester School, discussed in Chapter 6, became the mainstream on both sides of the Atlantic (ibid.: 283). Anthropologists working in colonial countries were seldom 'agents of colonialism' in a direct sense. Wendy James summed up their dilemma as that of 'reluctant imperialists' (James 1973). Yet most of the profession did display 'willingness to serve'. More significantly, the analyses of mainstream academic anthropology, in both Britain and the United States, proved incapable of confronting the fact that its object of study was a world structured by Western colonial expansion and capitalist imperialism in a systematic way. As I stress throughout this book, it remains necessary to strive for the decolonization of anthropology today. The problem is not simply the relationship between the development of anthropology and formal colonial rule, but the historical legacies of Western domination, the continuing global hegemony of the Northern powers, and contemporary manifestations of racial and neo-colonial domination in the social and political life of metropolitan countries.

Anthropologists whose own politics were generally rather conservative (Worsley 1992) could make a valuable contribution to showing how indigenous notions of authority and justice might conflict with Western notions during the era of formal colonial rule. Their approach was, however, clouded by the assumption that the West and its way of doing things represented the future for all humanity. Political anthropology became an analysis of the tensions of transition. For a while it remained that, as the old colonies became new and independent nations, supposedly embarking on their own roads to a 'modernity' which was seldom subject to any profound scholarly reflection.

The political experience of these 'new nations' was, however, soon to cause Western anthropologists considerable anguish, and the kinds of theoretical paradigms and research agendas that seemed appropriate in the 1940s and 1950s gave way through the 1960s and 1970s to more critical
perspectives. A new generation of Western-born anthropologists that had played no role in the colonial regimes felt free to denounce its predecessors. The professional advancement of anthropologists within the ex-colonial countries themselves turned on the heat. The main pressure for rethinking came, however, from a changing world.

In Africa, both the economic and political visions of the modernization theorists of the optimistic post-war era seemed illusory by the late 1960s. The negative consequences of failure to achieve sustained economic development were reinforced by civil wars and the appearance of some particularly vicious regimes in a continent where even the best of governments seemed distant from liberal democratic ideals. On the economic front, some parts of Asia presented a brighter picture to Western liberal eyes, but those countries that advanced economically were not conspicuous for their progressive stances on human rights. The Indian sub-continent remained economically weak, and combined destructive patterns of inter-state violence with intra-state political conflict. The Indonesians followed up violent internal political repression with brutal colonial expansion. Latin America, which had already experienced more than a century of violence and political instability since independence, not only failed to translate impressive per capita economic growth rates into greater social justice for its impoverished masses, but experienced a wave of military regimes.

The combination of a generally unsatisfactory outlook on 'development' and a dismal report on 'democratization' favoured the rise of radical paradigms. At first, explanations couched in economic terms tended to win out, since inequalities within the global economy were manifest impediments to the universalization of prosperity. A substantial number of repressive regimes around the world owed their survival, and in some cases their very existence, to the intervention of imperialist powers. The dependency paradigm, initially associated with Andre Gunder Frank and a series of Latin American writers (note 2), but subsequently diffused to other parts of the world, explained the politics of the periphery by arguing that the bourgeoisies of 'underdeveloped' countries were subservient to metropolitan interests, siphoning off their countries' wealth in alliance with foreign capital. Given that analysis, the national state of the peripheral country is charged with maintaining the kind of social order needed to perpetuate dependent development.

Yet dependency theory proved as popular with democracy's enemies as with its supposed friends. If a nation's miseries depend solely on the unequal distribution of economic power on a world scale, and Third World bourgeoisies are in hock to foreign interests, then the colonels can leave the barracks to take over government in the name of a defence of national and popular interests against the imperialist enemy and its local bourgeois clients. Strong government and state-directed economic development becomes the anti-imperialist alternative to the treacherous machinations of civilian politicians tied to private vested interests. If things go badly, this is because the North is determined to continue exploiting the South. Dependency theory thus not merely proved weak at explaining variety in political responses to underdevelopment in scientific terms: it was sometimes coopted by the torturers.

Dependency theory and its more 'academic' successor, the world-systems theory pioneered by Immanuel Wallerstein (1979), did, however, force 'international relations' onto the anthropological agenda. World-systems analysis stimulated lively debate about ways in which global processes were modified by local historical variables to produce variety in the way particular regions of the periphery developed (Smith 1984). Marxist theories of imperialism also enjoyed a revival in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly among indigenous anthropologists whose intellectual formation was based on reading Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. It now became commonplace to argue that the end of formal colonial rule did not spell the end of 'colonial' relationships between North and South, the old politico-administrative form of colonialism simply having been replaced by new, and more insidious, neocolonial relationships.

At the same time, however, an awakened anthropological interest in history provoked further exploration of the consequences of the colonial process itself and non-economic dimensions of Western domination. The 'new nations' of the period after the Second World War were formed by the colonial powers out of a frequently incongruous series of pre-colonial 'societies'. Pre-colonial states and 'statelets' were amalgamated together into colonial territorial units along with sundry stateless agricultural and pastoral-nomadic groups on principles that made less sense once colonial rule ended,
since it was the presence of the colonial power which had provided the territorial unit with political and social unity. Furthermore, the colonial powers had not been content simply to cast the mantle of their rule over peoples already living in the territories they colonized. Colonial capitalism also transplanted people from continent to continent, some as labourers and some to develop services that the locals were deemed incapable of providing. Thus, some of the new nations of Africa and the Pacific were left by their European colonizers with substantial Asian populations occupying advantageous social and economic positions, laying a basis for future conflict. Surveying Caribbean history, Sidney Mintz has observed that our current heightened awareness of mass migrations in an era of so-called 'globalization' is partly explicable by the fact that so much earlier population movement in the capitalist world economy involved non-white people moving within circuits that segregated them from the populations of North Atlantic countries, whereas today former colonial 'others' are an increasingly important presence in Northern countries themselves (Mintz 1998:124).

Eager to divest themselves of a colonial empire that no longer seemed economically beneficial after the Second World War, and unable to find politically feasible ways of resolving the contradictions they had created, the British must bear a heavy responsibility for the course of events in various parts of Africa and in the Indian sub-continent since independence. There is, however, a more general principle at issue here than the particular messes created by the extended process of decolonization, to which all the colonial powers made a contribution - including the United States. The contemporary configuration of the world into political units, nations, peoples and religious communities results from a global process of carving out empires and spheres of influence through direct military interventions and indirect political meddling in the 'internal' conflicts of states that achieved or conserved political independence from the great powers in the nineteenth century.

Developments in regions which retained political independence, such as the Russian Empire, the Ottoman world and China, were also reshaped by the carving up of the world into colonial territories and the global commercial expansion of the industrial powers of north-west Europe and the United States. The 'non-bourgeois' elites of Japan and Russia sought to promote economic modernization to underpin their geopolitical position in a world of rifles, heavy artillery and battleships. Western expansion did not produce cultural homogenization, much less a universal tendency towards bourgeois society and liberal democracy as envisaged by the optimistic social theorists of nineteenth-century Europe. It did, however, transform the nature of social and political life in ways which are as recognizable in the case of Islamic fundamentalist' Iran as they are in countries on the immediate frontiers of Western Europe.

Anthropology's distinctive contribution to the social sciences is often defined in terms of its favoured methodology, the direct study of human life 'on the ground' through ethnographic fieldwork. Anthropologists live for an extended period with the people they study, observing the details of their behaviour as it happens and conducting an extended dialogue with them about their beliefs and practices. The fieldwork method is not, however, peculiar to anthropology, and I would prefer to stress the importance of anthropology's theoretical contribution as a social science that attempts to examine social realities in a cross-cultural frame of reference. In striving to transcend a view of the world based solely on the premises of European culture and history, anthropologists are also encouraged to look beneath the world oftaken-for-granted assumptions in social life in general. This should help us pursue critical analyses of ideologies and power relations in all societies, including those of the West.

In my view, a political anthropology adequate to the world of the late twentieth century must seek to relate the local to the global, but in a more radical way than has been attempted in the past. A crucial question is anthropology's relationship to history (Wolf 1990). One problem is that the sub-field of political anthropology has failed to reflect adequately on what is peculiar to the political life and systems of Western societies in world- historical terms. Progress has been made in strengthening historical perspectives that explore how the present state of the world is the product of social processes of global scale, impacting differentially on regions with specific local social characteristics, through different agents of global change, such as particular types of capitalist enterprise or colonial regimes. Yet anthropology has continued to talk about local 'societies' and 'cultures' in a world where the politics of the former Yugoslavia are influenced by the politics of Serbs living in North America, and the politics of the Indian sub- continent or the Middle East erupt onto European streets.
Furthermore, what we often take as the 'core' of political life in 'democratic' regimes, going out and voting, seems to be an increasingly unpopular activity in the country which now claims to guarantee all our freedoms, the United States. The whole of the Western world seems to be experiencing a notable public disillusion with institutional political life and the role of professional politicians. The world to the east of Western Europe seems to manifest a greater enthusiasm for nationalism than democracy. How are we to understand such processes without asking more profound questions about what states, nations and democracy mean in Western terms and how these Western forms emerged historically?

Ethnographic research methods remain essential for investigating the dynamics of political processes at the local level, particularly where we are dealing with the way institutional politicians interact with popular social movements, or with informal aspects of power relations in which the way people understand the situations they face and the options open to them must be central to the analysis. Such studies enable anthropologists to challenge analyses and explanations offered by other disciplines in ways that are politically as well as intellectually significant. I explore ethnographic examples in considerable detail throughout this book to underscore these points. Yet taking their cues from the insights afforded by ethnography, anthropological perspectives on larger-scale phenomena may also differ from those of other disciplines. As we will see in Chapters 5 and 7, anthropological studies have shown that understanding the behaviour of apparently 'Westernized' post-colonial political elites demands an understanding of the distinct cultural frameworks which orientate their actions and make them meaningful. Even within Western Europe, differences in political cultures are significant enough to make cultural analysis of political life essential. Addressing these issues takes us beyond the local level and the immediate field situation towards formulating broader kinds of models and looking at historical processes seriously.

Anthropological writing about political life therefore has much to offer, but there is still a need for sustained rethinking if we are to maximize the potential of anthropology to illuminate this facet of human experience. In order to clear some of the ground, I will begin by examining some of the premises of 'political anthropology' as it was defined in the classical writings of the British school. I will show how its premises can be subjected to a double critique: as both a form of ethnocentrism and as an inadequately critical analysis of the historical specificity of the Western reality which served as its point of departure.

HOW NOT TO USE THE WEST AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE

Anthropology occupies an uncomfortable place in the social sciences and humanities. From the discipline's earliest days, anthropologists assumed that their work had a universal significance. Anthropology was to be the study of the whole of humankind, in all its cultural diversity. Yet in practice this pretension to universality was inhibited by the fact that anthropology crystallized as a discipline within an institutional framework in which sociology, law, economics, history and political philosophy were already established fields. In the eyes of practitioners of these other specialisms, anthropologists could challenge their claims to universality on two fronts: first, by arguing that they embodied eurocentric premises that limited their usefulness for analysing non-Western societies, and second, by arguing that conventional social science accounts of Western modernity itself were limited by the absence of a relativizing perspective. Anthropology had something
distinctive to say about all human societies, including the industrial societies of the West, because it alone possessed an adequate comparative perspective on human institutions and experience. A radical anthropological critique of conventional social science would assert that the latter was hopelessly entangled in ideological conceptions reflecting the world-views of the dominant groups in Western societies. Although no social scientist could entirely escape the cultural preconceptions of his or her native milieu, the anthropological project offered the best means of promoting open and critical minds because it forced the analyst to pay attention to cultural difference. On this view, understanding of 'the other' is the precondition for greater understanding of 'ourselves'.

This maximalist account of the anthropological project remains one that can be advocated in principle, but more modest claims for the discipline's role have tended to prevail in practice. Funding agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governments are told that the world needs anthropologists to add 'cultural' dimensions to research projects designed by specialists in other fields. Thus anthropologists help reinforce the conviction of others that they are exclusively specialists on non-European peoples, as illustrated, for example, by perceptions of anthropology's relevance in AIDS research. Anthropologists also sell themselves as researchers who do fieldwork and thereby come up with details of local situations other methodologies would fail to capture. Both these selling points of the discipline are valid, but they also invite continuing marginalization. It is a rare research proposal which contends that anthropology offers a root-and-branch alternative perspective on some fundamental contemporary human issue.

Professional anthropologists are not, of course, free to pursue their intellectual convictions in an unrestrained way. Part of our contemporary problem of self-definition arises from the way more powerful agencies and interest groups shape our horizons. Such constraints are not, however, entirely new, since the founding schools of anthropology had to react to the definitions of anthropology's role produced by the colonial order. Then, as now, anthropologists responded to the pressures placed upon them in diverse ways, and frequently conflicted amongst themselves in doing so. In order to understand what anthropologists of different generations have said (or not said) about politics it is necessary to explore the politics of anthropology itself, a theme which will be discussed in depth in Chapter 9. Since the development of anthropology is related to Western domination, it is clear that political anthropology is a sub-field in which the need for critical self-awareness of the way historical contexts have shaped research agendas and interpretations is particularly important.

Because anthropology was originally assigned the task of investigating societies defined by their 'otherness' and 'non-Western-ness', it has taken a long time for anthropology to get to grips with the West itself. Too much of what classical sociology had to say about Western societies was taken for granted as a valid baseline from which to work out what was different about the non-European world, including the way sociology defined a society in general terms and identified 'societies' with bounded territorial units. Hidden behind this apparently universal definition of what 'society' is were two specifically European preoccupations. Firstly, nineteenth-century European social theorists were preoccupied with problems of 'social order' arising from elite anxieties about the impact of mass proletarianization and urbanization - the fear of the 'dangerous classes' produced by industrial capitalist development (Wolf 1982: 7-9). Secondly, Europeans developed a very specific conception of the 'modern state', which also shaped their ideas about society and culture (Gledhill 1999: 11-14). When British structural-functionalist anthropologists asked the question: 'What is political organization in African societies?', they brought too much of this ethnocentric baggage with them.

In his Preface to African Political Systems, edited by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard and first published in 1940, Radcliffe-Brown concludes on the following note: 'The political organization of a society is that aspect of the total organization which is concerned with the control and regulation of the use of physical force' (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1987: xxiii). This definition (and the rest of the discussion 'which precedes it) derives its inspiration from Max Weber's definition of a 'political community' as: 'a community whose social action is aimed at subordinating to orderly domination by the participants a "territory" and the conduct of persons within it, through readiness to resort to physical force, including normally force of arms' (Weber 1978: 901).

Weber's original discussion was concerned with identifying the distinctive features of the modern
state, which he defined as a type of political community possessing a monopoly of the legitimate use of force in addition to the association with a 'territory' highlighted in the quotation. Radcliffe-Brown, however, had to extend his discussion to include 'stateless' segmentary societies. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard proceeded to explain that authors in the volume charged with studying such societies - as distinct from what they defined as 'primitive states' like the Zulu or the Bemba - were unable to base their analysis on a description of governmental organization but were 'forced to consider what, in the absence of explicit forms of government, could be held to constitute the political structure of a people' (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1987:6).

This looks suspiciously like a familiar anthropological procedure in dealing with the 'exotic': we begin by defining the phenomenon that does not fit into existing Western conceptual frameworks in negative terms as an absence of something we understand (or think we understand) and proceed from there. After asserting (ibid.: xiv) that 'in dealing with political systems ... we are dealing with law, on the one hand, and warfare, on the other', Radcliffe-Brown observes that:

In many African societies a person who is accused or suspected of witchcraft or some other offence may be compelled to take an oath or submit to an ordeal, the belief being that if he is guilty he will fall sick and die. Thus, the rudiments of what in more complex societies is the organized institution of criminal justice are to be found in these recognized procedures by which action is taken by or on behalf of the body of members of the community, either directly or by appeal to ritual or supernatural means, to inflict punishment on an offender or to exclude him from the community. In African societies the decision to apply a penal sanction may rest with the people in general, with the elders, as in a gerontocracy, with a limited number of judges or leaders, or with a single chief or king. (ibid.: xvii, emphasis added)

This line of analysis is utterly ethnocentric, despite Radcliffe-Brown's claim that his definition of political organization lays the basis for 'an objective study of human societies by the methods of natural science' (ibid.: xxiii). It begins from a model of how power and political organization are supposedly constituted in modern Western societies, and proceeds to classify other societies in accordance with their distance from this baseline. Thus 'recognized procedures' for sanctioning persons accused of witchcraft become 'rudiments' [of] organized institutions of criminal justice' in more complex societies.

Pierre Clastres has criticized traditional political anthropology for universalizing the Weber-derived identification of political power with coercion, subordination and violence. Radcliffe-Brown certainly sees the political as invariably centred on coercive power, even if coercion takes a 'moral' rather than physical form (ibid.: xvi). What, Clastres asks, do we do with Amerindian societies in which: 'If there is something completely alien to an Indian, it is the idea of giving an order or having to obey, except under very special circumstances such as prevail during a martial expedition' (Clastres 1977: 5-6)? Are these societies in which political power does not exist at all and which therefore lack any political organization, or is there something wrong with the assumption that all power is coercive, and that the forms of power found in modern Western state societies (and other civilizations) are universal?

One problem with looking for institutions in 'stateless' societies that perform the same sorts of functions as state institutions elsewhere is that it becomes difficult to separate out 'political' organization from other aspects of social organization, in just the same way as it is difficult to identify an autonomous 'economic domain' where production, consumption and exchange are organized by kinship or other types of social relations that have multiple functions. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard remark, for example, that in very small-scale societies 'political structure and kinship relations are completely fused' (1987: 7). Ted Lewellen (1992) has argued against the critique of the sub-field offered by the political scientist David Easton (1959) - that anthropology's failure (or refusal) to mark off the political as a distinct 'sub-system' of societal organization is a virtue rather than a vice. As Lewellen shows, there are grounds for refusing to separate the 'political' and the 'social' even in analysing 'modern' large-scale societies, but there are also dangers in taking theoretical short-cuts here. We need to think about how the political has come to be seen as something separate.

In his analysis of the rise of 'historical bureaucratic societies' (the imperial states of the prU-modem
period), the sociologist S.N. Eisenstadt argued that it was in such societies that a political domain first became 'disembedded' and achieved relative 'autonomy': rulers' goals began to conflict with those of traditional aristocratic groups enjoying hereditary status by virtue of their birth and specialized organs of political struggle, such as court cliques, emerged (Eisenstadt 1963). Yet it is also possible to argue that the perceived autonomy of the 'political' in Western societies is one of the key ideological dimensions of Western 'modernity' - not something we should take as an objective fact, but a way of representing power relations that obscures their social foundations and the way they work in practice. The problem with taking a model of Western systems as a baseline is that we are in danger of de-emphasizing fundamental differences between forms of social life. In this case the basic issue is whether the way 'stateless' societies organize themselves actually checks the development of the forms of power associated with state societies. An investigation of how particular societies resolve universal problems may prove less interesting than a study of how and why they come to have different problems to resolve.

The point of Clastres's critique of traditional political anthropology is precisely that it obscures one of the major lessons to be learned from the study of the so-called 'primitive societies': that it is possible for societies to exist and flourish without any division between oppressors and oppressed, coercers and coerced. 'Stateless societies' are not societies that have yet to 'develop' politically but societies that have resisted the emergence of the form of political power which generates the state (and social inequalities). Clastres sees the birth of the state as the first crucial 'rupture' (coupure) in human history, one that is far more important in world historical terms than the transition to agriculture.

Fortes and Evans-Pritchard might have responded that Clastres's analysis smacks of the intervention of political-philosophical interests into the 'scientific' field. Clastres clearly wishes to make a critique of 'civilization' as an alienating form of existence by reconstructing the 'savage' as a negation of all forms of inequality and oppression. He is offering a 'political' version of Marshall Sahlins's analysis of hunter-gatherers as the 'original affluent society', in which the rest of human history moves downhill all the way (Sahlins 1974). Does the world of 'stateless societies' really know no coercion, oppression or inequality, between, say, men and women? The answer, I will argue in the next chapter, is negative. Yet this is not really what Clastres's argument is about. What is being challenged here is the ethnocentrism of universalizing a particular model of social and political power, ultimately derived from a model of the modern Western state. This procedure leaves us with little option but to rank societies on an evolutionary scale in terms of the amount of this sort of power present within them, which leaves the 'primitive' world close to zero on the scale. It obscures qualitative differences in the nature and deployment of power in different types of societies, including those of the Western industrialized nations themselves.

It also obscures another important issue for understanding the variety in 'traditional' African political systems: how far did the historical coexistence of 'states' and 'stateless' peoples in a single region reflect the way groups of indigenous people sought to resist the kinds of inequalities associated with political centralization? Traditional models presented 'stateless' societies as having a deficit in terms of institutions possessed by more 'complex' societies, due to technological, ecological or demographic conditions. There is another possibility: that state and 'stateless' societies formed interrelated and interdependent parts of a single, dynamic social process on a regional scale. State-builders sought to extend their dominion, whilst 'tribal' groups sought to preserve their autonomy and resisted the development of centralized power within their communities - being transformed, as we shall see in Chapter 2, from the 'pristine' organizations that existed in a world without states in the process.

To sum up the argument thus far: the problem with traditional political anthropology was that it started with the political organization of 'modern' societies as its baseline and set up typologies of 'other cultures' according to the categories thus defined. This reduced 'stateless' societies to a negative category, but it also produced a categorization of societies that did have states as 'primitive' versions of Western-derived archetypes. This would be particularly undesirable if the 'modern' state of Western civilization used to generate universal concepts of 'the political' turned out to represent another major break in history.

A number of comparative sociological studies of the 1980s, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3,
argued that the Western relationship between 'state' and 'civil society' represents a radical discontinuity in world history, which plays as important a role in the constitution of the modern global social order as the birth of capitalism. There are really two issues to examine here. The first is concerned with understanding the differences between agrarian civilization in Europe and other parts of the world, and the reasons for Europe's dramatic global expansion. That can lay the ground for investigation of the second issue: the impact of Western forms of social and political organization on the rest of the world.

At first sight, contemporary global political organization appears extremely diverse, much more diverse, in fact, than economic organization. Yet there are general tendencies. One example would be conflicts between national governments and elites and regional separatist and 'ethnic' movements. It could, and should, be argued that each case of conflict of this kind needs to be contextualized, to be placed in its particular historical and cultural setting. The apparent similarity between phenomena may evaporate as we begin to understand that the conflicts not only have different historical causes, but also have different meanings to the groups that organize them. Nevertheless, the way 'ethnicity', for example, becomes politicized in the contemporary world may reflect a subtle universalization of some of the features of the politics of Northern societies to the South, despite the differences which continue to exist between forms of political organization and political cultures.

The importance of this issue becomes obvious if we reflect on the way Northern politicians and media tend to explain modern political and social conflicts in terms of an absence of 'modernity'. 'Ethnic' identifications are often presented as primordial and atavistic, aspects of a 'traditional' social order surviving under the veneer of modernity and reasserting themselves because a given region has not succeeded in achieving the kind of modernity the North has attained. 'Tribalism' is often the term used to mark the 'primitive' characteristics of this form of conflict. The objections to such an explanatory framework are manifold. Firstly, the leadership of 'ethnic' and 'regionalist' movements are generally thoroughly 'modern' politicians vying for power with another elite faction commanding the central state machine, and the symbols which rally popular support to the cause are generally invented or reinvented rather than primordial (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Secondly, both the means and the ends of the conflict centre on 'modern' conceptions of political and economic organization, the achievement of states within states, or political units which possess partial or total autonomy from the existing centre and recognition by other political units as sovereign bodies. The implication of rejecting a view of certain kinds of conflict as indices of imperfect transitions to 'modernity' is that there is a deeper sense in which Western colonial expansion and more recent tendencies towards 'cultural globalization' shape the diverse forms of modern political and social conflict and are, indeed, what underlies the proliferation of 'difference' that seems so integral to modern political processes.

As a prelude to further discussion of this point, we should review what social theorists now argue is peculiar to the modern Western state.

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE MODERN STATE

A number of comparative historical sociologists have emphasized the way in which the 'modern state' differs from its predecessors in terms of its 'pUnUtination' of everyday social life (Giddens 1985, Hall 1985, Mann 1986). The governmental apparatus of the kind of state which began to develop in north-west Europe from the sixteenth century onwards affected the day-to-day lives of those it claimed to rule to a far greater degree than even the most centralized non-Western states. Thus Giddens argues that the 'class-divided' societies of the pre-modern era remained essentially segmentai. As a Chinese proverb puts it: 'the country is great and the emperor is far away'. Imperial China had an elaborate administrative system, but in Giddens's view this type of pre-modern bureaucracy gave the central government far less power over society than that enjoyed by the national states of early modern Europe. Furthermore, Giddens suggests, pre-modern states were not really territorial. Imperial governments always claimed to be masters of all they surveyed, but lacked the administrative, communicative and military infrastructures necessary to make that claim a reality. 'Traditional' states had/ronfiers rather than borders. The administrative reach of the political centre was relatively low and its control was patchy on the periphery of its domains. The Weberian definition of the state as an institution that possesses a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a territorial domain is
therefore appropriate only to the modern European state.

Giddens traces the break away from traditional state forms to the emergence of 'Absolutist' states in Europe. Post-medieval European states were based on centralization of administration and the formation of standing armies, accompanied by a transition from feudal to private property relations. Monarchs consolidated their own power at the expense of feudal aristocracies, which had previously been able to exercise some of the powers of government themselves at the local level, including the ability to tax. Giddens argues that this political transformation created a climate peculiarly favourable to the separation of the 'economic' and 'political' and 'private' and 'public' domains. The apparent 'autonomy' of the political domain and the separation of 'public' and 'private' are central to Western ideas, but products of history, not universals. As I suggested earlier, they constitute ideological representations that need thinking about more critically when it comes to attempting an anthropological analysis of how power relations actually work in the European context.

Giddens argues that a combination of constant warfare between rival states and internal pacification linked to centralization of power produced a kind of 'selective pressure' towards the development of states that had efficient centralized tax systems. This also promoted the development of money economy and credit systems that gave an important impetus towards capitalist development, bolstered by the state's guaranteeing the absolute rights of private property. On this model, the development of a 'capitalist world economy' centred on Europe which is seen as the motor of Western global expansion by Wallerstein (1974) is only one facet of a European world system developing on the basis of transformations of political and military power. Capitalism, in the sense of merchant capitalism, flows across borders and is 'transnational', but the consolidation of Wallerstein's capitalist world economy is universally accompanied by military force and the state system develops according to its own logic (note 3).

This is initially the product of military competition between different states which in turn strengthens tendencies towards administrative reorganization and greater fiscal efficiency within states. Giddens suggests, however, that the final transition to the modern nation-state depended on the way the internal social pacification process became linked to what he calls 'the consolidation of internal administrative resources'. The military arm of the state, a professionalized army, was now mainly pointed outward, towards other nation-states, whilst internal control was increasingly based on other kinds of 'surveillance' techniques and institutions - a point on which Giddens derives his inspiration from Michel Foucault, whose wider theoretical contribution is discussed in Chapter 6.

In Giddens's view, this development was the result of the emergence of industrialism and a new type of urbanism and relationship between town and country associated with industrialism in the 'core' areas of the European world-system. He argues that the changing nature of internal control in European states was based on processes Foucault (1979) calls 'sequestration'. Foucault is referring to the creation of carceral organizations - prisons, asylums and workhouses. A new social category of 'dÜviants' is removed from society and disciplined through training of the body and surveillance - a transformation of modes of exercising power from the public torture and destruction of the body that had characterized earlier forms of punishment. Giddens, however, regards Foucault's emphasis on prisons and asylums as excessively narrow, emphasizing a more general shift in the sanctioning capacities of the state from the manifest use of violence to the pervasive use of administrative power.

Firstly, police forces replace the use of troops in everyday social regulation, in conjunction with an elaboration of sanctioning mechanisms of codified law and imprisonment. There is a general extension of surveillance mechanisms into everyday life. Secondly, everyday life is now based on industrialism, so the workplace itself becomes a site of surveillance. Violent sanctions on the part of employers and workers do not disappear overnight, but, in the industrializing nation-states of the core, capitalist employers were not allowed any direct legal access to the means of violence for use against their workers. 'Dull economic compulsion' became their main power resource. In the long run workers had no practical alternative but to accept the disciplines of capitalist wage labour and became habituated to its rules, which came to seem 'normal' and 'natural'. At first, however, they seemed to be quite the opposite, so that capitalism was born in a world of vagrancy laws and workhouses, institutions in which the 'disciplines' of capitalist wage labour were imposed on a recalcitrant
dispossessed rural population.

Giddens therefore identifies certain links between industrialism and industrial urbanization on the one hand, and the forms of internal pacification which become characteristic of the nation-state on the other. Of course, the methods used to discipline the vast mass of human beings whose dispossession was the basis for industrialism were a kind of (class and state) violence. The classification of the uprooted poor as 'vagrants and criminals' and their incarceration in workhouses was hardly humane, and physical coercion played an important role in getting people into these institutions in the first place. Nevertheless, in the longer term, the new mass societies associated with industrialization were forged on the basis of new technologies of social control that differed in important ways from preceding forms of state power. These new technologies were far more pervasive in people's lives than their predecessors and thus the nation-state overcame the segmentalism of older state forms.

Giddens then proceeds to explain the form of nationalism found in Western industrial societies as a concomitant of the nation-state and industrialism. Once the state achieved an administrative and territorial unity, nationalism, based on a symbolic sense of shared history, culture and language, became a way of lending the administratively integrated unit a conceptual unity. Much of this symbolic unity was fabricated out of 'invented traditions', and Western nationalism for Giddens therefore has a political character. It is also an ideology which lends itself to oppositional movements, particularly where uneven development creates social dislocation in regions within the 'national unit' and claims to administrative sovereignty or autonomy are pressed by disadvantaged groups. Nevertheless, even these oppositional movements are now channelled through the administrative and political apparatus of the modern nation-state regime, through struggles for amendment of national constitutions and legal recognition of the rights of particular national or ethnic groups. As Wilson and Donnan argue in criticizing what they see as an unhealthy tendency for political anthropology to focus on a 'new' politics of identity, privileging the self and its representation, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race, much of this new politics 'would be nowhere without the state as its principal contextual opponent' (Wilson and Donnan 1998: 2). This suggests something about the deeper changes brought about by a 'modern' type of state organization.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS OF HISTORICAL DISCONTINUITY

Talal Asad has argued that the contemporary production of social, cultural and political difference on a global scale ultimately rests on the universal 'formation of modern states on European patterns throughout the world' (Asad 1992: 334). Given the variety of contemporary political regimes, it may seem implausible to talk about a diffusion of the modern state form throughout the world, but Asad is pointing to something deeper than forms of government.

He suggests that the crucial transformation in European society came with the notion that there existed a separate legal and constitutional order that the ruler had a duty to maintain, a notion which emerged in north-western Europe in the period from the late thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. This is the historical moment when the word 'state' first comes into general usage. It becomes possible to see the state rather than the person of the ruler as the sole source of law and legitimate force within its territory. With that change emerged the 'citizen' who owes allegiance to the state, of which both he and the politically dominant class were members, together with the distinction between the 'public' sphere and the 'private' sphere, also emphasized by Giddens, which corresponds to the distinction between state and 'civil society'(note 4). What is distinctive about this new type of political organization is that all groups in society become compelled to pursue their interests 'within the domain organized by the state', through political struggles focused on legal categories. Working-class politics, for example, becomes struggle about labour laws, whilst struggles in colonial contexts often revolve around getting colonial administrations to recognize 'custom' as a legal category.

Within a modern political system, Asad argues, all social issues become politicized in this way. Indigenous groups demand the legal recognition of their special status, whilst gender and sexual politics become possible once the law makes it possible for sub-groups of free and equal citizens to acquire certain distinctive rights. Such struggles cannot always be pursued successfully, but it is important that people now attempt to secure rights in this way even in profoundly authoritarian
circumstances. Repressive regimes increasingly find themselves forced to justify practices which violate human rights as universally understood. Asad in fact suggests that 'repressive regimes' are states which share the pretensions of all 'modern states' to intervene profoundly in the social practices of everyday life but have not succeeded in developing the power infrastructures needed to effect the kind of 'pUNtration' of social life achieved in the North. They are essentially weak states, resorting to physical coercion because they cannot secure their ends through the more subtle and manipulative practices of power associated with Northern 'surveillance' societies.

The modern state does not necessarily function in a way that guarantees 'the greatest happiness to the greatest number'. The deep regulation of social (and personal) life through law can be deeply disadvantageous to particular groups even in a democratic society. In the context of the world colonized by the West, however, what Asad stresses is how the spread of modern forms of power underpins the homogenization of certain understandings of 'modernization' and 'progress', despite the continuing cultural and social differentiation of the global social order:

The West has become a vast moral project, an intimidating claim to write and speak for the world, and an unending politicization of power. Becoming Western has meant becoming transformed according to these things, albeit in a variety of historical circumstances and with varying degrees of thoroughness. For conscripts of Western civilization this transformation implies that some desires have been forcibly eliminated - even violently - and others put in their place. The modern state, invented in Europe, is the universal condition of that transformation - and of its higher truth. (Asad 1992: 345)

Asad's argument remains salient even if the model of state 'modernization' and its relationship to nation-building offered by Giddens turns out to be an inadequate or incomplete account of Western European development, and may be even less applicable to the development of national states outside Western Europe. Considering the processes that led Catalans living on the borders between France and Spain to identify with one country or the other, Peter Sahlin's (1998) argued that national identity is not always imposed on 'peripheral' or borderland regions from the top down and the centre outward, as envisaged by a model of the state as creator of national culture and consciousness. Looking at the provincial backwater of Chachapoyas in Peru, David Nugent (1997) demonstrated that, under Latin American social conditions, people who live in 'peripheral' regions could embrace ideologies of 'modernity' independently of the national state. Indeed, the Chachapoyanos demanded that the state intervene in their lives to fulfill its obligation to deliver modern systems of government and 'economic progress', in order to displace aristocratic oligarchies whose arbitrary and rapacious rule remained founded on colonial models of racial hierarchy. 'Western modernity' is thus not always a process of enforced conscription, although the Chachapoyanos were to come to appreciate the more negative implications of social and economic 'modernization' and state power, and to rebel against them, at a later stage in their history. There may also be 'alternative modernities' that are not purely Western in their configuration even though they are forged in response to Western expansion, as Aihwa Ong has argued for the case of China (Ong 1996). Nevertheless, Ong (1999) also argues that contemporary East Asian states deploy 'modern' forms of disciplinary power in a way that enables them to play by the rules of liberal market society and embrace a global culture of consumerism whilst appearing to 'say no to the West'. This reinforces Asad's analysis of the deeper transformative impact of Western forms of power.

POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY RECONSTITUTED

From an anthropological perspective, it can, however, also be argued that the Western tradition of political analysis places excessive emphasis on the state and on formal political institutions of government. That understanding power relations in society involves more than an understanding of the formal institutions of the state is a point some theorists outside the anthropological tradition, notably Antonio Gramsci, argued long ago. It is also necessary to recognize that power remains incompletely centralized even in Western societies. The anthropological study of local-level politics, the main theme of Chapter 6, can play as important a role in helping us to understand the North as it does in the case of the societies of the South. As Marc AbUls has argued, given the crisis of legitimacy now afflicting the political life of the North, it seems more necessary than ever to move
beyond a focus on the state to an analysis of how power is acquired and transmitted in society as a whole. We need to appreciate the 'multilayered complexity of political reality'. This includes political action in everyday life and the symbols and rituals associated with these everyday political actions, the concretization of 'political culture' at the point where power is affirmed and contested in social practice (Abeles 1992:17).

Here Abeles is again suggesting that the 'autonomy' of the political in modern societies is an illusion. Power actually rests on the everyday social practices that are the concrete form taken by relations between the governing and the governed. These relations are not simply expressed in forms of social action we could explicitly label 'political'. I will take up this issue in Chapter 4, in considering the problems of analysing 'resistance' to colonial exploitation and oppression and look at it again in Chapters 6 and 8. It is central to the life of modern 'metropolitan' societies, not only for the reasons Abülbs gives, but because these societies now contain large numbers of people who do not feel incorporated into the political life of the nation in which they reside, the migrants and refugees drawn into the centre by economic and political forces but then subjected to practices of social discrimination and exclusion. We might already suspect that these systematic practices of discrimination are not simply reflections of the nature of modern capitalism, but another side of the coin to modern 'political' nationalism as Giddens defines it. Discrimination in the metropolis may encourage migrants to re-identify with their countries of origin, strengthening what Basch et al. (1994) have termed the 'deterritorialized nation state' (see also Glick Schiller 1999). Yet other scenarios of a more 'post-national' kind are possible, as illustrated by Mixtec Indians moving in transnational space between Oaxaca State, in the south of Mexico, to agribusiness farms and urban slums in the borderlands of northern Mexico and California (Kearney 1996).

Action that contests existing power relations may take many forms, including, for example, the parodying of the institutions and symbols of the regime which has characterized certain colonized groups' responses to situations of domination and struggles for autonomy and recognition (Keesing 1992). Much of it is in constant danger of slipping from view simply because of its everyday and inchoate quality. Anthropology has an important role to play in bringing these dimensions of modern political life back into view - and recognizing them brings a political, ethical and moral dimension to doing anthropology.

This suggests, however, that emphasis on the historical discontinuity constituted by the rise of Western state forms can potentially have negative as well as positive consequences. It is important not to replace the Weberian ideal-type model with another theoretical straitjacket on the understanding of difference. Anthropological perspectives can enrich the account of Western political life provided by sociology and political science. Yet it remains important to recognize that contemporary political processes everywhere reflect the impact of Western global expansion in both its direct, colonial, forms and in other, more indirect ways.

Even struggles for cultural autonomy and against Western domination take place under conditions that have been shaped by that domination. The West has not merely played a crucial role in drawing up the political map of the modern world, but it has also transformed the ways in which social conflicts are politicized and in which states and groups seeking power pursue their objectives on a global scale. Though particular situations always reflect the interaction of the local and the global, local social and cultural histories now und expression in action in ways that are part of a common experience of modernity, as I stress in Chapter 7. Only concrete, contextualized analysis of particular situations will enable us to understand what is happening and why it is happening (in Europe and the United States as well as other parts of the world). But little that is happening anywhere can be understood without reference to the historical discontinuities produced by the rise of the modern state and modern forms of power.

Endnotes
Note 1: Evans-Pritchard's classic work on the Nuer has been subject to many critical re-evaluations: see, for example, Beidelman (1971), Gough (1971) and the modern study of Hutchinson (1996), discussed in Chapter 2. For overviews of this tradition of Africanist work, see Middleton and Tait (eds) (1958). Mair's contribution is particularly interesting because she began her career at the London School of Economics teaching colonial administration, going on to pioneer the anthropological study of the politics of the 'new nations' of Africa. She vociferously defended the British structural-functionalist school against the charge that it had turned the discipline into a servant of colonialism (Vincent 1990:257).

Note 2: For critical surveys of this and other 'radical' perspectives on development and under-development, see Goodman and Redclift (1981), Kay (1989), Escobar (1995), Kearney (1996) and Gardner and Lewis (1996). The alternative development strategy advocated by the dependency theorists could be seen as simply another variant of the developmentalist ideologies that became globally hegemonic after the Second World War, in contrast to the kinds of 'grassroots' models advocated as 'alternative development'.

Note 3: Wallerstein contends that capitalism can only develop where a number of politically independent states organize the 'world-system' division of labour between manufacturing centres and the peripheries which supply them with raw materials. Following Weber (1951), he argues that politically decentralized 'world economies' avoid the overheads of imperial bureaucratic superstructures, permitting reinvestment of profits to sustain continuous growth of production and trade. Wallerstein does, however, argue that the way European societies were structured politically before the sixteenth century is relevant to understanding why their 'world system' escaped subjection to the control of a single, imperial, political centre. This emphasis on the novelty of 'the modern world system' has, however, been contested by Jonathan Friedman (1994), Friedman not only argues that there are fundamental similarities between contemporary economic globalization and cycles of decentralization in the wealth accumulation processes of earlier civilizations (which he also sees as 'capitalist' in a broad sense, derived from Weber rather than Marx), but that the developments that Giddens associates with Western modernity, such as the public-private distinction, individualism and 'control of the subject' through new forms of institutional power, are related to such cycles and have appeared several times before in history, for example, the Hellenistic, Roman and Chinese worlds. Like Aihwa Ong (1999:241), Friedman takes Giddens to task for treating nation-state formation processes as autonomous phenomena relative to the economic dynamics of global systems, in an approach that is generally 'atomistic' and contingent when it should be holistic and systemic (Friedman 1994:224).

Note 4: The notion of 'civil society' plays a crucial role in European theories of politics and is central to the way European thought constructed a negative 'Orientalist' discourse emphasizing the West's superiority to rival civilizations (Said 1978, Turner 1994: 34). Seventeenth-century models of 'bourgeois individualism' defended the political freedom of the propertied individual against the monarchical state, arguing that freedom depended on the existence of a 'civil society' standing between the autonomous individual and the state. The institutions of civil society - churches, guilds, voluntary associations, families and communities - protected the interests of individuals and enabled them to assert their interests against those of the state. Models of 'Oriental despotism' defined non-Western political regimes as ones in which the institutions of civil society do not exist, and a similar argument is often advanced today to explain the absence of democratic governance in countries that allegedly have 'weak civil societies'.