

INTRODUCTION

For the first seven hundred of its eight-hundred-year history, the important collective entity in Cambridge was the College. In the later nineteenth century, science laboratories grew rapidly and provided an alternative magnet for students and staff. They have increased in strength and now Cambridge is in effect in three parts – the old centre with its colleges and laboratories, mainly inhabited by arts and social sciences, a new set of buildings across the river where various other arts and social science departments and faculties have moved, and a ring of science laboratories and science parks round the edges of the city, especially near Madingley.

During the last hundred years, the balance of attraction has not only moved towards laboratory science, but also towards faculties, departments and centres outside the college. They now conduct much of the teaching, all of the examining and much of the research. Yet they have received little formal attention from analysts.

There have been many accounts of life in Cambridge colleges, from the serious to the satirical. As far as I know, no one has described in detail how the departments and faculties evolve and work. This is partly because many of these institutions have a pale and largely uninteresting bureaucratic existence, with little sense of communal identity or culture. I am told this is true of a number of the large arts and social science institutions, such as the faculties of History or Economics.

Some of the smaller departments, for example History and Philosophy of Science or Archaeology, do have

both a strong history and a corporate personality. Just as certain science laboratories, most famously the Old Cavendish, have developed customs and culture, so these small departments attract commitment and loyalty and give their members a sense of belonging to some kind of intellectual community – perhaps not as strong as a college, and always in tension with the colleges, yet an important arena for teaching and research.

Another reason for the absence of descriptions of departmental and faculty organizations is that they are each so different that, unlike a description of the colleges, a description of one is not a description of them all. Physically, socially, intellectually and organizationally they are hugely varied, as they are in terms of size and depth of history.

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My account of one relatively small department is based on being associated with it since I came to Cambridge in 1971 and then, more fully, became a Lecturer in 1975, Reader in 1981 and Professor in 1991. I have been Head of Department on half a dozen occasions and done all the different kinds of jobs in the department at all levels.

When I first came to know it in 1971, the Department was already quite old, for it had been in formal existence as part of a larger faculty for sixty-seven years. I know little bits of the earlier history and culture from talking to and interviewing a number of older colleagues who were either students at the Department or teacher there. This takes back my direct oral historical knowledge to the 1930s and gives me some kind of direct contact with about eighty years out of the one hundred or so years of its existence.

The exercise is a rather strange one since I am an anthropologist who is to a large extent a participant in what I

describe, a major actor in the drama as well as trying to be an observer. Usually anthropologists are observers first, with some participation added to this. Here it is the other way round. This makes it complex to disentangle one's observations, so this is just a set of preliminary notes on some of the themes that occur to me now.

I shall try to become an outsider for a moment and write about the Department as if I were an anthropologist writing about a distant place and group of strangers, rather than about a place where I have spent so much time and invested so much emotion, and with whose inhabitants I have long, complex and deep relationships. The difficulties are, I hope, compensated for by the fact that as an insider for nearly forty years I have come to know and experience things which no visiting anthropologist spending a few months, or even a year, as an observer could possibly see.

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In terms of departments in Cambridge, the Department of Social Anthropology is at the small end of the institutions. In the last twenty years it has had roughly ten permanent university teaching staff, about 100 undergraduate students and the same number of postgraduates consisting of those doing one-year taught master's courses and doctoral degrees. In terms of its longevity, if we date it from the time when it was part of an undivided faculty (it only became a separate department in the early 1970s), it is roughly in the middle of the range, having been formally set up in 1904. One hundred years is neither particularly long nor short. Compared to mathematics or classics, anthropology is a new subject. Compared to some other social sciences, it is old – sociology, social psychology and politics, for example, are half its age.

It may be worth wondering why, apart from its small size, the Department of Social Anthropology seems to have been more than the rather empty bureaucratic machine for organizing teaching and research which is all it really is set up to be.

One reason may be that a number of anthropologists are attracted to the discipline because of their interest in being members of a community and find that their fieldwork helps to give them this sense. It is characteristic of anthropologists to feel again the allure of *Gemeinschaft* in the worlds where they do their fieldwork and then to have a feeling of loneliness, coldness and individualism when they return to their life in western academia. They search for, but cannot find, true community, but both at the level of the staff and those who have been to and returned from fieldwork, the department can, along with colleges, become an important imagined community which gives them some shelter and sense of identity in an atomistic world.

Anthropologists often speak of their discipline as a calling, a 'vocation' rather than a profession or a job. It is something which absorbs the heart as well as the mind and spreads outside the working hours. No doubt this is true of mathematics, music and other true vocations, as Lévi-Strauss noted, but it does mean that a group of anthropologists feel that they are members of a 'tribe'. In fieldwork they have been through a rite of initiation, and in their tribal gatherings at important lectures or conferences there is a sense of being with other people who speak a special language and have a special calling.

One manifestation of this is that the separations between the public life of the institution and the semiprivate, are blurred. Not always and not everywhere, but famously in Oxford in the era of Evans-Pritchard, or Manchester with Max Gluckman, or Cambridge with Jack Goody, the social side – the drinks in the Lamb and Flag or King's Bar, the

parties and the joint expeditions were and are important. The sense of fellowship which lies behind trust, collaboration and creative work in the university and most notably found in the colleges, is also to be found in some departments. The sense of working with people whom one respects, shares goals with, and feels a sense of identity against outsiders with, is quite marked.