# INTRODUCTION

## A BRIEF LIFE

> My created heart says so with every beat:
> Stay on the border …
>
> —*Conquests*, V, 'The Lonely Man'

Franz Baermann Steiner occupies a unique place in modern social and cultural anthropology. The fact that his singularity was recognized by only a handful of influential contemporaries is attributable to his early death, which occurred – cruelly – just when he had embarked upon his most mature and innovative writings. Working at the confluence of many of the significant theories and methodologies of the twentieth century, in the early post-war years – and especially in the all-too-brief period he enjoyed as a Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford from 1950–52 – he had begun to select from among these various currents. At the time of his death, he was developing an unprecedented synthesis in mid-century anthropological thought. Broadly speaking, Steiner's thinking stakes out a territory between the Jewish *Haskalah* or Enlightenment, German post-Enlightenment philosophy, modern linguistic thought, Marxism, Central European ethnology, German sociology, British social anthropology and early structuralism. He deploys these resources with a scholarly passion for truth – which for Steiner is never far removed from its Biblical source – allied to an overriding concern for the right to self-determination for non-Western peoples, among whom he includes his own Jewish people. In their equal concern for geopolitics and detailed local ethnography, his writings foreshadow trends in anthropology that were to become apparent only as the twentieth century turned into the twenty-first. In their deep aversion to the imposition of Western values on non-Western peoples, his writings relentlessly expose biases brought by Western reporters to their texts. His work may, indeed, be read as entirely critical, which is how Evans-Pritchard presented Steiner's lectures on taboo on their posthumous publication, but Steiner's early deconstruction

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of Western presuppositions cleared the ground for a fundamental defence of the scholarly, political and religious values he held dear.

Recognition of his scholarly significance has grown in the now more than twenty years since we edited a two-volume collection of Steiner's work in English (Steiner 1999a, 1999b). Most tellingly, we have seen the twenty-first century publication in three volumes of his poetry, sociological writings and aphorisms (Steiner 2000, 2008, 2009), amounting to 1,800 pages in total – a substantial oeuvre for someone who published so little in his lifetime. A conference was devoted to Steiner's work in 2000 immediately after the publication of our original volumes (Adler, Fardon and Tully 2003), and there has been wider interest in his close circle, for instance in the confluence of literature and anthropology in the London writings of Steiner, H.G. Adler and Elias Canetti (J. Adler and Dane 2014). Given the publication of these and other works, including full-length biographies of all three of these friends (Hanuschek 2005; Van Loyen 2011; Filkins 2019), the opportunity to revise our account for publication as a book was particularly welcome, not least since our studies had always felt like a book, and not simply on account of their length. Hence, we have rewritten some parts of our original Introductions, corrected others and added new materials. Our intention remains to set the development of Steiner's ideas in a biographical context, recognizing Steiner's affinity with various intellectual schools and pointing towards a synthesis of the ideas that he was beginning to wrest from his massive and extraordinarily wide-ranging scholarship in those two and a half years that he was a lecturer in the Institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford. To appreciate the numerous tensions this synthesis sought to contain, the reader needs to know something about the complexity of Franz Baermann Steiner: poet, aphorist, thinker, ethnologist, anthropological and philosophical theorist, Zionist, political activist, lecturer, friend and mentor. We summarize this briefly here to help orient the reader for our fuller account, some parts of which lead down byways less familiar to historians of anthropology.

Born in Prague in the final years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the young Steiner fully partook in the intellectual ferment that characterized the early part of the twentieth century, just as he was to witness at first hand some of its greatest political cataclysms. His father's life was shattered by the First World War. His own existence was undermined by the Second World War. Political and intellectual engagement were two of the opposite if ultimately complementary

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facets of his life's work. In the 1930s, he went through an early Marxist phase and subsequently studied at the Hebrew University in Palestine. His early Marxism was thereby tempered with political Zionism, and both these theories were to leave their trace on his anthropology. After completing his degree in linguistics at Prague, he went on to train in the Central European tradition of cultural anthropology at the University of Vienna, where he had the opportunity to study with some of the major exponents of the 'culture circles' school that then dominated German-speaking ethnology and was to exercise considerable influence in the United States. At this stage in his career, he specialized in Arctic ethnology. Then, in the mid- to late-1930s, he came to England, largely to study with Malinowski at the London School of Economics. However, he gravitated towards Oxford, where he became a student first of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and, later, of E.E. Evans-Pritchard. Initially, he continued to concentrate on material culture but reached a turning point in his work around the year 1942. This was perhaps his period of deepest isolation.

It was at this time that he started fully to internalize the persecution that his people were experiencing at Nazi hands, and a sense of this suffering appears to have transmuted his thinking. Yet great as the changes clearly were that took place around this time, it is hard to pin them down precisely. His scholarly focus, according to the prevailing mood in England, switched from the Arctic towards Africa, and from ethnology to the study of social institutions. And it was to the institution of slavery, a subject selected as a penance for his people's suffering, that Steiner now devoted the best years of his life. Many of his deepest thoughts can be traced to this study. He also brought to this area a profound interest in religion, values and epistemology. The project was phenomenally wide in conception and involved Steiner in the comparative study of practically every known society – from Europe to North America, Africa, India and the Far East. Although only a fraction of this learning materialized in his writing, it provided a sociological grounding for all his other work. A project on this scale was doomed from the start; doomed also in its attempt to combine continental comparative method with British particularism. For even in its more specialized British garb, the habitual mode of his thought remained continental in its syncretism. This was to prove one of the many rewarding tensions in Steiner's writing, the division between universal comparative aspirations and particular, local realities.

From Evans-Pritchard himself to Mary Douglas, colleagues valued Steiner for his learning, which in Godfrey Lienhardt's phrase made

Steiner 'an intellectual's intellectual'. But there was also a less serious side to him. He was an avid sportsman – a great hiker and a skilful boxer (H.G. Adler [1953] 2006: 6). Thanks to his voracious reading – Professor Sir Ernst Gombrich always imagined Steiner as a veritable 'bookworm', practically eating his way through the stock at the British Museum (PC) – Steiner developed into a polymath. And his implicit but ever-present sense of universality informs the bewildering variety of projects he eventually worked on. From slavery, he was led to comparative economics, taboo and the theory of truth. In the early post-war years at Oxford, working beside Meyer Fortes, Godfrey Lienhardt, Mary Douglas, Paul and Laura Bohannan, Louis Dumont and M.N. Srinivas, Steiner emerged as a central intellect in that small group of Oxford anthropologists that Stefan Collini has called 'the power-base from which the science of social structure could be developed as the defining core of the discipline of social anthropology' (1996: 5). However, in a metonym for his fate, a celebrated picture of the members of the Institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford taken in 1949 (Stocking [1995] 1996: 428) does not include Steiner. The handwritten caption – itself omitted by Stocking – describes him as 'missing'. Because of his early death, this has until recently been his fate in the historiography of modern British anthropology. He went 'missing' and gained scarcely a mention in such standard texts as Kuper's *Anthropology and Anthropologists* (1973) and Stocking's *After Tylor* ([1995] 1996). Yet had he lived longer, had he undertaken his projected field trip to Tanganyika and had he remained an academic, Steiner would presumably have remained at the centre of the anthropological stage and would have retired, if still at Oxford, only in 1976, aged sixty-seven, six years after Evans-Pritchard. There would be no need to write him back into the picture. He would have written himself into our consciousness by his own endeavours. Like his closest friends at Oxford, including Godfrey Lienhardt, Mary Douglas and Iris Murdoch, he would inevitably have achieved visible recognition, at the very least from the anthropological community but possibly – as was his undoubted ambition – among the wider reading public. Even so, there is enough in his extant writings to suggest that his impact on modern anthropology and anthropologists had already been substantial and that had he lived longer he would have influenced anthropological debates in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His life and work anticipate several of these later interests, which have informed an emergent European anthropology with intellectual roots that include but are wider than

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modern British social anthropology: the switching perspectives of the discipline between insider- and outsider-hood, the blurring of genres in scholarly production, the urge towards transdisciplinary investigative styles and philosophical grounding, and the more explicit acceptance that an author's positionality has to be seen as something that both enables and slants their scholarly insights.

To some degree, Steiner's outsider status was endemic to other practitioners of the discipline. Like Malinowski, Firth, Schapera and the other 'foreigners' who Leach has observed were 'mainly responsible for the high prestige that was attributed to "British" anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s' (1984: 11), Steiner 'assimilated himself into the lifestyle and conventions of Oxbridge academics' but remained 'highly ambivalent' towards his 'adopted milieu'. Yet Steiner was perhaps even more detached from the 'British' school than some of these others. While fully occupied at Oxford, Steiner was also busy on at least three other, quite separate fronts. He was at work on his poetry, which by itself would have sufficed for a life's work. He was active politically as a Zionist. And he was engaged in wide-ranging discussions with another exile writer, the anthropological outsider and his own close friend, the future Nobel laureate Elias Canetti. In consequence of this complex arc, Steiner's writing is marked by some very disparate cultural traces. In Marxism and Zionism, it is touched by some of the twentieth century's most virulent ideologies; yet, like Canetti and Wittgenstein, he was also shaped by the anti-ideological streak in the century's thought, exemplified by Karl Kraus and his cultural critique. This brings to Steiner's other work, his aphorisms and the brief essays he wrote in German – as distinct from the anthropology, which he drafted and wrote exclusively in English from as early as 1938 – a wholly different character, closer to the ambit of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School than to Radcliffe-Brown or Evans-Pritchard. Though he may have been acquainted with Adorno's writing, there is no evidence, however, that he knew Benjamin's work; he appears to have reached his convergences with them by starting from similar premises and facing a similar situation. Despite the best efforts of Adorno and others, this major, but fragmentary and aphoristic, part of Steiner's output was not published in the original German until 2009. Our English language selection (Steiner 1999b) was able only to hint at this substratum of concise thought that also informed Steiner's English writings and accounts, in large measure, for their complexity.

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To grasp Steiner in the round, it must be remembered that at the same time as he was working and writing in English, using scholarly method, logic and argument, which are conventions inimical to the aphoristic mode, Steiner was privately writing a religiously grounded cultural critique in German. This led him into very different territory from that known to his Oxford colleagues. An area bordered by books like *Masse und Macht* (1960; *Crowds and Power* 1962), on which Canetti was working at that time, and Adorno and Horkheimer's contemporaneous *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944; *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 1972). Yet whereas these latter have long since in differing degrees established themselves in the arena of modern critical debate and from there entered the wider scholarly sphere, Steiner's contribution, though known to both Canetti and Adorno, had to await a belated discovery. Only when one juxtaposes Steiner's two styles of production, the English scholarship with the Central European aphorisms, does the full picture of his thought begin to emerge.[1]

## Note

1. Our referencing follows the original catalogue system based on H.G. Adler's archive of Steiner's papers, which are here referred to by box numbers, and Steiner's own reference system of folder numbers and colours. The papers have now been catalogued according to the standard system in use at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv (=DLA), Schiller Nationalmuseum, Marbach am Neckar. For details of the current system, and a reconciliation of the two systems, see the note introducing our References.

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