Malinowski: second positivism, second romanticism

In a recent number of Man, Andrzej Paluch (1981: 276-85) argued the interesting historical thesis that the young Malinowski was formed by the so-called ‘second positivism’ of Avenarius and Mach, mediated through the Polish philosophers, Straszewski and Pawlicki. I would argue not that Paluch is wrong about the influences of the ‘second positivism,’ but that he tells a very incomplete story about the intellectual shape of the young Malinowski—a story I believe Paluch himself admits makes far less sense than it ought. Malinowski was as much (more, if we focus on The Argonauts of the Western Pacific, a product of the ‘second romanticism,’ as he was of any ‘second positivism.’ Moreover, it is only by assuming this perspective that Argonauts becomes intelligible, that Malinowski’s arguments with colonial administrators make sense, that his choice of subject-matter shows a certain plan, and that his own good-will confessions of a radical intellectual transformation leading to the empiricist/positivist Malinowski we know so well have credibility at all. I am talking about Paluch’s numerous references to places where ‘Malinowski diverges from the positivist programme,’ where he ‘represents a standpoint opposed to’ positivism (1981: 280), where his ‘positivist spectacles’ were ‘not very strong’ (1981: 279) and even where Paluch declares that Malinowski ‘was not an adherent of . . . radical empiricism’ (1981: 279). I am talking about what to Paluch seems the exception, but the more we read both Paluch and the early Malinowski must seem the rule—Malinowski’s part in the ‘second romanticism,’ perhaps better known in its native German, ‘neuromantik’ (Bauman 1973: 26; Ermarth 1978: 79-90). Without denying his positivist nurture, I want to show how Malinowski was a complex and substantial mixture of romantic and positivist, and that, at least in his Argonauts, he ought to be seen as having been dominated by a romantic agenda of fieldwork and scholarship.

The most regrettable part of Paluch’s reading of the early Malinowski is its repetition of what has become conventional wisdom. For Jarvie (1964) and Leach (1964; 1966) Malinowski was always a consistent and perennial positivist empiricist/inductivist. To be sure, in Argonauts Malinowski advocated and practise what seems impossibly complete fact-gathering and even an incipient behaviourism (1922a: 17-22). But both Argonauts and The Diary of the same period reveal that Malinowski did not believe in ‘objectively existing facts: theory creates facts’. Data had to be subordinated to the ‘final synthesis’ (Firth 1981: 108; Leach 1966: 565; Malinowski 1922a: 517). Fact-mongering (1922a: 517) was an object of Malinowski’s disdain. In Argonauts, facts are gathered and behaviour closely observed in the service of the empathetic ‘understanding’ of native life—something he would later indeed call ‘dangerous guesswork’ (1944: 23). In the remarkable concluding pages, Malinowski brings these points to a resoundingly romantic and unpositivistic conclusion:

I have tried to pave my account with fact and details . . . But at the same time, my conviction, as expressed over and over again, is that what matters really is not the detail, not the fact, but the scientific use we make of it. Thus, the details and technicalities . . . acquire their meaning in so far only as they express some central attitude of mind of the natives . . .

What interests me really in the study of the native is his outlook on things, his Weltanschauung, the breath of life and reality which he breathes and by which he lives . . . a definite vision of the world, a definite zest of life (1922a: 517).

To his credit, Leach at least records that this youthful Malinowski put theory before facts, even if he (Leach) does not seem to be able to capitalise on this observation (1966: 565). Instead of linking Malinowski’s view directly with contemporary continental romantic thinking, Leach can only make sense of Malinowski’s methodological zest for ‘life’ by reference to his bitter feuds with the London cultural diffusionists, Elliot Smith and Perry.

The London diffusionists were indeed the butt of Malinowski’s jibes against ‘curiosity-hunting’—a short-hand reference to the museum anthropology nurtured by Elliot Smith and Perry. At the bottom of Malinowski’s aversion to London diffusionism was, it...
seems, a distaste for the dry and lifeless, which emerged in his defence of the 'new' functional method. I want to recommend taking this aspect of Malinowski’s arguments against diffusionism as seriously as we have taken his critique of their speculative historical constructions. For what it may be worth, Malinowski maintained life-long, frequently amicable, intellectual relations with the German-speaking cultural diffusionists such as Boas, Frobenius, Graebner, Schmidt and of course Lowie. Was it merely an accident that these scholars often self-consciously acknowledged their debt to German romanticism, and that they, along with the British, were also real protagonists and pioneers of empirical fieldwork? (Heine-Geldern 1964: 410; Stocking 1974: Introduction, Part I). When we speak about Malinowski’s opposition to diffusionism, it might perhaps be best to distinguish the British from the Germans and Austrians, and to observe that most of Malinowski’s explicit critical ire was aimed at the British.

If, then, Paluch is correct to locate positivism early in Malinowski’s career, perhaps romanticism is also located equally early there as well. In the early 1920’s this sometimes meant that Malinowski would run the two streams together for his own polemical purposes. In Argonauts, Malinowski manipulates the notion of ‘life’ in the way one might expect this half-positivist, half-romantic to do, informing it with varying proportions of vitalist and biological meaning (1922b: 22). In the year that Argonauts appeared (1922), the essay ‘Ethnology and the Study of Society’ treated the notion of life in a familiar way (‘zest for life’) (1922b: 210); at the same time it spoke of ‘every item of culture’ having a ‘positive, biological significance’ (1922b: 214).

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Malinowski's anti-utilitarian and anti-pragmatic position are in order.

Argonauts aimed to show that Trobriand economic life operated by principles other than those of instrumental or utilitarian rationality. What surprises one here is not only Malinowski's exclusion of pragmatic values from certain ceremonial exchanges, but his determination to exclude utilitarian values from straightforward economic exchanges. The Trobriander 'works' 'toward aims which are certainly not directed towards the satisfaction of present wants, or to the direct achievement of utilitarian purposes' (1922:60). Yet while noting (correctly) that Malinowski judges the kula 'pragmatically useless' Leach claims (incorrectly) that Malinowski defaults in explaining why the ceremony persists. To Leach, Malinowski was simply stumped by the kula: he had believed (sic) that 'all behaviour must have a practical end' (Leach 1964: 133). Thus, of course, clearly ignores Malinowski's triumphal euphoria in discovering that the kula served no pragmatic end—a conclusion for which Malinowski prepares the reader by no fewer than three chapters of discussion (ch. 2, 3, 6). Utility is not sovereign in the kula nor in many other performances of Trobriand life—not, at least, in the eyes of the early Malinowski:

I hope that whatever the meaning of the Kula might be for Ethnology . . . the meaning of the Kula will be instrumental to dispel . . . the crude, rationalistic conceptions of primitive mankind . . . Indeed, the Kula shows us that the whole conception of primitive value . . . has to be revised in the light of our institution (1922a: 516).

Malinowski's participation in these neuromantik and academic cultural trends adds greater depth to an appreciation of his work in the 1920's. Thus more than personal idiosyncracy or temperament accounts for the style of the Malinowski who burst onto the intellectual scene of 1920's London. His personal reputation there, manufactured or not (Malinowski 1967: 282 sqq.), seems more understandable if one appreciates his participation in the culture of the 'second romanticism'. This also accounts in part for Malinowski the man—the soul within The Diary, lovesick hypochondriac, libidinous aesthete, authentic specimen of brooding, fin de siècle Spenglerian, 'socio-Slavic' (Mayo 1918) gloom. This is the man recently described by Firth as 'romantic' in his deeply felt 'nostalgia for belief' (1981: 109); the man behind the author of flamboyantly titled works such as Sex and repression . . . (1927) or The sexual lives of savages . . . (1929), and who kept the company of Havelock Ellis and Bertrand Russell, in short

that, when in field-work we pass from one culture to another, we come to feel that some new 'tribal genius' or 'national spirit' is taking sway of us. I have myself confessed that 'what interests me really in the study of the native is the breath of life and reality which he breathes and by which he lives. Every human culture gives its members a definite vision of the world, a definite zest for life. In the roamings over human history, and over the earth, it is the possibility of seeing life and the world from the various angles, peculiar to each culture, that has always charmed me most, and inspired me with real desire to penetrate other cultures to understand other types of life (Argonauts 1922 pp: 517) (1937: xxi–xxii).

But then Malinowski draws back from the romantic methodological implications of this kind of statement and relegated what was in the Argonauts an aspect of scientific procedure to the
level of the artistic and personal. In the passage immediately following the above, Malinowski says,

This I would now like to correct in the sense that—to quote again from the same context—'the love of the final synthesis . . . and still more the love of the variety and independence of the various cultures' constitutes the personal and artistic inspiration of the field-worker. His scientific task lies elsewhere (1937: xxii).

Sometime in the early 1920s, Malinowski shifted methodological ground, a shift which we have never really appreciated because we never fully understood the place from which Malinowski began to move toward the positivist/pragmatist position of his maturity.

At this juncture I believe I have made a defensible case for the substantial contribution of neuroantik thought to Malinowski's methodology, at least in his first great work. However, my overall aim has been to redress an interpretive balance, produced by the blanket empiricist/positivist readings of Malinowski by Leach, Jarvie and others. To a lesser extent, I have sought to balance Paluch's essentially correct, but unemphatic, interpretation of the mixed methodological views of the early Malinowski as a product of forces in concert with those arrayed against the 'second positivism'. I think I have shown what those forces were, and how Malinowski was moved by them. But the question finally arises whether Malinowski's synthesis of the 'second romanticism' with Paluch's 'second positivism' was modelled on the work of another scholar? I think Malinowski may have had such a model—whether or not he was aware of his identity—and that this was Wilhelm Dilthey.

To cite Dilthey's thought here partially reconstitutes the personal and artistic inspiration of Argonauts add up to anything?

That I clearly think it does first from Stocking's claim that Malinowski deserves major credit for anthropology's reputation as an 'empathetic' study of mankind (Malinowski 1926: 768; Stocking 1968: 193). To be sure The Diary may reveal a man more 'observer' than 'participant' (Wax 1972: 12). Perhaps once more we have fallen for Malinowski's myth rather than seen through to his reality. Yet, I think that the more one examines comparative details of the methodological and theoretical ambitions of Dilthey and Malinowski, the more plausible becomes their relationship.

To begin, both Dilthey and Malinowski cherished great ambitions for their anthropological work: Dilthey aimed to build a 'new Humanism' on the epistemological foundations of the human sciences he articulated; Malinowski, too, thought his work could facilitate a 'modern Humanism', both 'strictly scientific' and placed at the service of 'life' (1967: 267; Symons-Symonolewicz 1959: 28).

In particular reference to the protean notion of 'life', both Dilthey (Ermarth 1978: 82, 875 sqq.) and Malinowski maintained a certain reserve, which put them at a distance from the unqualified romantising irrationalism of the Mandarin Lebensphilosophie described by Ringer. Both insisted upon the proper rights of science by synthesising the agenda of the 'second romanticism' with the duties of intellectual rigour and empirical study imposed by scientific work. Even though Dilthey raised 'life' above thought, he did so more in the style of Jamesian pragmatism than Bergsonian vitalism (Ermarth 1978: 110, 112, 176). Dilthey and James promoted scientific activity; Dilthey, in particular, thought 'life' was straightforwardly empirical (Ermarth 1978: 108 sqq.) and thus ought to be studied biologically (Ermarth 1978: 178). Like Malinowski, who waxed poetic and metaphysical about the ' zest for life', Dilthey believed that ethical values needed to be measured against the standard of their utility for 'life' (Ermarth 1978: 85). Like the fieldwork anthropologist of Argonauts, Dilthey believed 'life' was objective (Ermarth 1978: 188) and therefore that it ought to be studied descriptively and critically (Ermarth 1978: 174, 177) man ought to be studied in concrete, lived situations (Ermarth 1978: 82 sqq., 87) and not as an object of contemplative or a priori philosophising.

It is well known that Malinowski assigned
psychology a central place in his anthropology. This can be traced to the earliest periods of Malinowski's English language publication record (Firth 1981: 108; Malinowski 1923a: 1923b). It may not be as generally known that Dilthey held psychology in the same regard, and that, like Malinowski, he believed it had to be connected with society, culture and history (Ermarth 1978: 122, 172). In a way similar both to Wundt of the Völkerpsychologie (Ermarth 1978: 172) and Malinowski throughout, psychology served as a Grundwissenschaft for anthropology (Ermarth 1978: 141; Firth 181: 108).

Dilthey also accommodated drives and instincts (Ermarth 1978: 113). It has been customary to attribute this element of Malinowski's thought solely to McDougall (Parsons 1964: 67; Symmons-Symonolewicz 1959: 40). Indeed, the case seems even stronger when we consider that McDougall owed much to William James — particularly McDougall's later pragmatism and interest in physiological psychology (Bruner 1961: xi). But the case does not seem as neatly closed when we also consider that Dilthey not only knew James personally, but also had high regard for James's pragmatism (Ermarth 1978: 110, 176). Ermarth even considers Dilthey a kind of pragmatist himself in that he consistently opposed 'intellectualism'.

With a biologically attuned psychology as its basic science, the anthropology of Dilthey was cast in a methodologically individualist mould; Malinowski's anthropology was the same. Dilthey was as explicit as was Malinowski in rejecting the view that society formed a super-organic whole (Ermarth 1978: 123; Malinowski 1913: 284); societies cohere because the individual mental lives of its members cohere (Ermarth 1978: 171). Here Dilthey seems directly opposed to the tradition of Hegelian social and political thought; Malinowski specifically articulates similar views against Durkheim, who, as Lukes has shown, may well have developed his holistic sociology in response to his study of German academic life (Lukes 1972: 88–90).

Taken together, the picture Dilthey constructs of the study of man seems in remarkable ways similar to that of Malinowski in Argonauts. The student of traditional cultures seeks to penetrate the worldviews of native folk through an empirical exercise of empathetic understanding (Verstehen) and lived experience (Erlebnis) of their world. In this way anthropologists could make known the precious and unique visions of the world (Weltanschauungen) unknown until that time. This was edifying anthropology, not the 'reforming' science of Tylor nor the 'practical anthropology' of Malinowski gone British.

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Perhaps the principal merit of Blok, and of the Latin and in the Romance languages—is of fundamental importance for the Mediterranean. Numerous metaphors of pastoral origin found in this metaphor of the 'horns'—as with other basis of an economic structure) generally tends to be neglected. Berti: 'Bech: Becco, capro, caprone, irco. The dictionary of the last century—the Vocabolario Bolognese italiano (1869-74) edited by Coronedi. We find it clearly defined in a good dialectal expression of the concept of the betrayed husband. It also lends itself to a discussion of a methodological argument and to extend his methodological discoveries of considerable importance. If this challenge were to be taken up, empirical and methodological arguments and to extend his methodological discoveries of considerable importance could result, especially in terms of a comparison with the conclusions of the Indo-Europeanists. For this reason, the invitation which Blok extends to anthropologists to interest themselves in history seems particularly important. If this challenge were to be taken up, empirical and methodological discoveries of considerable importance could result, especially in terms of a comparison with the conclusions of the Indo-Europeanists.

Leaving aside for the moment the Indo-European problem and its intrinsic contradictions I would like to discuss some of Blok's methodological arguments and to extend his linguistic horizon. I begin with the premise that the pastoralist nature of much of the Mediterranean area is undeniable, not only on the synchronic level, but also on the diachronic level, due to the clearly pastoral character of the prehistoric cultures of the Apennines, the Pyrenees...