Introduction

This book is about the place of social anthropology in Britain’s intellectual culture. Barbara Pym captured the mood of this culture in her novel *Less Than Angels* (1955). Pym’s plot turns on an attempt by a group of social anthropologists to lobby a rich American for fieldwork funding. But *Less Than Angels* is also about love, class and urban change, literature, youth and suburbia. On buses, in country houses and in restaurants, the book’s characters describe themselves and their society using terms of anthropological art such as ‘social structure’ and ‘joking relationships’.¹ Like *Less Than Angels*, this book also follows the money (often to rich Americans), and it shows, too, how society and social change were reimagined in an anthropological idiom in mid-century Britain.

The year Pym’s novel was published, 1955, saw social anthropology at the apex of its intellectual prestige, both as an academic discipline and, as the literary critic Raymond Williams explained, as a source for thinking of culture as a ‘whole way of life’.² Over the course of seven chapters this book sets out the various forces that propelled anthropologists into such a position of influence and the field’s subsequent decline in the policy sphere. In brief, government funding in the 1940s allowed anthropologists to study development projects in the British Empire, and their work then began to be read by a wide range of scholars creating new ways to imagine ‘the social’ in Britain.¹ Soon, however, things began to change. Only a few years after Pym’s book was published, the rise of development economics and the growth of anticolonial politics
challenged the anthropologists’ intellectual authority in the British Empire and its former colonies. The 1960s was a time of transition in the history of the discipline: in the United Kingdom (UK), academics continued to emulate anthropologists’ holistic social analyses; in Britain’s former colonies, social anthropology was often criticised as conservative, irrelevant or imperialist. This is therefore a story of rise and a fall, from one point of view, and rise and diffusion, from another.

Setting the history of anthropology in its wider cultural, political and intellectual contexts is a more familiar move across the Atlantic, where Franz Boas, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict have long figured in histories of racism, science and cultural relativism. By contrast, when most historians think about British anthropology, they tend to imagine a rather dry and dull discipline that was more obviously compromised by the colonial context of its research. While it is always dangerous to generalise, historians tend to think of American anthropologists in the first half of the twentieth century as studying the formation of ‘personality’ in cross-cultural contexts, whereas British anthropologists tended to analyse ‘social structures’. When comparing these national traditions, the British are often found wanting. For instance, according to one of the discipline’s preeminent historians, it was their production of intensive field studies after the 1920s that led to the ‘decline of anthropology’s popular relevance’ in Britain; another summed up decades of research on the history of social anthropology by lamenting: ‘How could so many intelligent anthropologists have been so long infected by such a sterile and/or derivative viewpoint?’

But these arguments present us with a quandary. For if social anthropology was really so ‘sterile’ and ‘derivative’, why was it so influential? From Aldous Huxley’s speculative fiction, to the community studies of Elizabeth Bott and Michael Young, to the social histories of Keith Thomas and E. P. Thompson, British writers and academics found value and inspiration in works of social anthropology. This reception history has yet to be told, perhaps because so many of social anthropology’s historians have been so negative about its theories and methods. By contrast, we now have a good sense of the impact of literary criticism (especially the writings of F. R. Leavis) in mid-century Britain: a discipline that was influentially described by Wolf Lepenies as Britain’s ‘concealed sociology’. Since Lepenies made this argument, sociologists have been busy ‘unconcealing’ their past, either by ignoring social anthropologists or by patronising them as ‘gentlemanly social scientists’.
The history of twentieth-century anthropology has thus been squeezed between histories of sociology and histories of literary criticism; it has been left largely to disciplinary historians, often themselves anthropologists, to unearth. So while we possess a number of what Stefan Collini calls ‘discipline’ histories, which seek to bore a “vertical” hole in the past in order to unearth ‘the concerns of the current practitioners’, what we lack is an ‘intellectual’ history of social anthropology that would ‘excavate a “lateral” site, to explore the presuppositions, ramifications, and resonances of ideas, which may often involve pursuing them into neighbouring fields.’

This book offers one such ‘lateral’ history by tracking the formation of anthropology across the boundaries that have sprung up around anthropology, economics and sociology. By excavating this broader intellectual history, I tell a different tale to the one heard by generations of undergraduates. Traditionally, the story goes, British anthropology underwent a methodological ‘revolution’ when the Polish-born ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski did his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands and wrote about these experiences in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). The lasting importance of *Argonauts*, it is often explained, resides in the fact that Malinowski asked his readers to adopt the ‘native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world.’ To do this, anthropologists were told to live for an extended period of time amongst the community they wanted to study. Then, what may seem to the outsider to be mystifying behaviours would condense into a kind of order, as patterns and regularities emerged. In Malinowski’s day this approach to patient, intense participant observation went along with a kind of sociological ‘functionalism’: the idea that each society functioned as a social whole. To give another famous example of this kind of approach, Edward Evans-Pritchard argued that a belief in magic and witchcraft was not ‘irrational’ but functioned as a way to make sense of the world and of society, in his important book *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (1937). This turn to fieldwork in British anthropology has been the source of methodological inspiration and debate ever since.

This well-worn historical sketch emphasises individual anthropologists and their genius. The turn to fieldwork and functionalism is the result of the power and persuasion of ideas alone. It leaves underexplained how theories changed, which methods were discarded and why the turn to fieldwork became so influential. Rather than presume
that Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard had some power to compel their readers to adopt a ‘methodological revolution’ through their prose, this book shows how anthropologists transformed their discipline in dialogue with one another and with colonial administrators, their research assistants, the subjects of their ethnographies and philanthropic funders. To reconstruct this more richly contextual account of anthropology’s history, we need to look beyond anthropologists’ published ethnographies and dig into their archives. This allows us to understand these men and women in much the same way that they wrote about their own subjects – as ‘others’ situated in cultures formed by institutions, exchanges, feuds and rituals – and to centre the specific places where anthropological knowledge was constructed, from the South Pacific to Bermondsey, from the classrooms of the London School of Economics (LSE) to the printed pages of journals and ethnographic monographs.15

The archives left by social anthropologists are exceptionally rich and have been surprisingly underexplored by historians. Of necessity, I have had to be selective about exactly which topics to focus on. I have chosen to dwell on questions of particular contemporary salience: expertise, ideas about ‘race’, economics, kinship and community. I have also had to be selective about where I start my tale. It would be possible to begin a book on the history of social anthropology back during the Enlightenment or even in the Renaissance.16 Thematically, it would be possible to frame many of the discipline’s concerns in the wake of the great intellectual debates of the Victorian era: about Christianity, the Bible and evolution.17 I have not followed either of these paths. Nor have I written a history of social anthropology solely as a professional organisation.18 Rather, I pose a set of connected questions: How did anthropology come to be so marked by the ‘social’ in twentieth-century Britain (rather than by anatomy or museology or archaeology), and why did anthropologists’ theories and methods come to have such a great deal of influence on neighbouring disciplines at mid-century? Both of these questions respond to Collini’s demand for ‘lateral’ intellectual history, and I hope that answering them will appeal to readers in anthropology departments, historians studying modern Britain and all those interested in the question of how social research influences discourses of social change.19

In sum, my aim is to show that social anthropology had a far wider intellectual reach in Britain than has hitherto been appreciated. I have tried to achieve this aim by constructing two narrative arcs. The first narrative begins with the professionalising culture of early
twentieth-century anthropology in Britain and the British Empire. The opening chapters argue that colonial politics, Rockefeller Foundation funding and sheer good fortune led to the concentration of an intense anthropological research seminar at the LSE during the 1930s. I explain how the discipline’s focus on fieldwork and the intricacies of social life rather than on anatomy and museology was reproduced at the LSE not merely via the force of Malinowski’s ideas, but because he secured funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and patronage via alliances with prominent colonial grandees. I describe how these ties between anthropologists and their patrons can explain social anthropology’s rise in the 1930s and also how the vicissitudes of patronage made anthropology vulnerable to criticism in the 1950s and 1960s, when the discipline’s financial backers shifted their interests towards economics. This narrative encompasses the rise and fall of social anthropology as a prop to colonial development.

The book’s second narrative focuses on the dispersion of anthropological ideas and methods in mid-century Britain. By the 1950s social anthropology was increasingly perceived as a valuable body of theory that could explain ‘the social’ in a non-Marxist, non-economically determinist fashion: as a ‘whole way of life’, as Raymond Williams put it. The post-war decades stand, then, as an inflection point in the discipline’s history and also in the narrative arc of this book. Whereas in the post-war British Empire, economics was muscling social anthropology out of the field by the mid-1950s, it was anthropologists’ functionalist desire to connect together kinship, economics, law and religion – to reconstruct the ‘native’s point of view’ – that made their ideas so appealing to writers, academics and social scientists studying Britain’s present and its past. Telling these twin narratives – of social anthropology’s rise and fall as a prop to colonial development and rise and afterlife in Britain’s intellectual culture – bridges the colonial and metropolitan histories of social anthropology.20

This immediately raises a question about the ‘Britishness’ of British social anthropology. After all, Malinowski was born in Poland, and the other pioneering anthropologist of his generation, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, spent much of his career outside the UK (in South Africa, then Australia and then the USA). Furthermore, several of the key figures discussed in this book – Meyer Fortes and Max Gluckman most prominently – owed a great deal to the teaching, mentorship and theories of the South African anthropologist Winnifred Hoernlé.21 Nevertheless, the professionalisation of this generation of Hoernlé’s students
flowed ultimately in one direction: from South Africa to Britain, and then on into university posts from there. It was Malinowski’s seminar that formed what sociologists of science would call the ‘obligatory passage point’ in their disciplinary formation.22 This is why this book is framed in an overwhelmingly national and imperial context, introducing some South African and Australian institutions but placing French, American and German ideas at the margins.23 Choosing to centre different locations within these transnational histories, most importantly South Africa and Australia, would have meant writing a very different book.24 A global history of social anthropology still waits to be written.

I justify using an imperial rather than a global or comparative lens because it was in the British Empire that British social anthropology came of age, and it was in British universities that what Alfred Gell called its ‘seminar culture’ reproduced itself.25 To be sure, the history of British anthropology cannot be explained in a hermetically sealed national container. Thus, even though this book is about British anthropology and is aimed at an audience of scholars mostly in British studies, a national frame is insufficient, as so much of social anthropology’s history was transnational, imperial and international. To give only one example taken from chapter 2, British imperial policy began to be associated with the League of Nations and with ‘indirect rule’ in the 1920s, which in turn influenced the discipline’s fortunes and explains its contemporary appeal. Only by interlacing anthropology’s colonial and metropolitan histories together can we explain how overlapping networks of patronage and funding concentrated and narrowed a wider ‘community of inquiry’ into a well-financed and productive disciplinary project with a common set of protocols and research questions by the 1940s.26

The result (from the outside looking in) was a narrow intellectual outlook, remarked upon by the American anthropologist George Peter Murdock in 1951. ‘British social anthropology’, he wrote, was a paradigm marked by an interest in kinship and the practice of intensive fieldwork, whose members tended to ignore theoretical influences from outside their own in-group.27 Scholars writing in the critical spirit of post-1960s disciplinary history have tended to agree with that assessment, taking issue with the British anthropologists’ penchant for positivism and their proximity to colonial politics.28 While these arguments clearly have some purchase, they have led historians to underestimate or simply ignore how influential social anthropologists’ ideas and methods were in the 1950s and 1960s. One writer who did appreciate how important social anthropology had been to Britain’s intellectual culture
was thirty-year-old Perry Anderson. Looking back over the recent past in 1968, Anderson suggested that British social anthropology, unlike British sociology, had been a truly innovative and pathbreaking field. Anthropology had achieved this status, he argued, because it had been ‘useful to colonial administration and dangerous to no domestic prejudice’, concluding that ‘these were the twin conditions of existence of British anthropology, as it developed’.29 Anderson argued influentially that it was only outside the empiricist and positivist culture of metropolitan Britain that such a flourishing research program could have survived in an otherwise barren wasteland of anti-intellectualism.

Since Anderson made this argument, we now know a great deal more about the extent of anthropology’s entanglements with colonial rule. At its most ambitious, this history has been set in a genealogy running from John and J. S. Mill in the British Raj, via interwar social anthropology, to the Cold War and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-sponsored social science.30 There is a risk, however, in writing about the history of social anthropology in this fashion. As Talal Asad explained in the often-cited introduction to Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter (1973), ‘it is a mistake to view social anthropology in the colonial era as primarily an aid to colonial administration, or as the simple reflection of colonial ideology . . . bourgeois consciousness has always contained within itself profound contradictions and ambiguities.’31 Archie Mafeje made a similar point four years later. The fact that anthropology was a colonial science was not particularly interesting; how could it not have been? The important thing was to link social anthropology to a particular ideology of colonial control, to a bourgeois, liberal sensibility that aimed at ‘reformism’, both in Europe and in the European empires.32 This diminishment of anthropology’s ideological power and its subaltern status with respect to the state has been summed up by one commentator: ‘Anthropology needed empires far more than empires needed anthropologists.’33

This book carries this conversation about anthropology and empire forward by centring what Asad called the discipline’s ‘contradictions and ambiguities’, explaining how the changing contours of imperial power, especially in Africa, warped and guided anthropology’s institutionalisation, first by competition between policies of indirect rule and settler colonialism, then by colonial development and finally by decolonisation. The second way this book contributes to histories of anthropology and empire is to bring metropolitan histories together with imperial histories, in ways that Mafeje urged. For if we now know more
about anthropology’s entanglements with empire, we know far less about its metropolitan contexts. This book argues that anthropological knowledge and the colonial fieldwork encounters from which it was constructed came to have their greatest impact in informing intellectual debate about Britain, influencing new studies of community and culture. Adopting Collini’s ‘lateral view’ results in some surprising conclusions about the wide-ranging and long-lasting influences of anthropological ideas in twentieth-century Britain. As we wind from metropole to colony and back again, we will come to the surprising conclusion that Perry Anderson’s thesis needs to be turned on its head: the discipline was mostly useless to colonial administrators; instead, its lasting legacy lay in shaping debates about social change in Britain.

What follows is, to this extent, a story of spectacular and surprising success. Between the 1920s and the 1960s a number of British anthropologists leveraged their academic credentials and political alliances to transform their discipline away from the study of bones and biology towards an analysis of ‘the social’, which in turn spilled over into neighbouring disciplines. Telling this story as part of a narrative that encompasses anthropology’s rise and fall in the policy sphere and its rise and dispersion across the social sciences offers a new appreciation of the discipline’s place at the heart of the intellectual, political and cultural history of modern Britain and its empire.