

by John Beattie

In his 'Reflections on the February Editorial' (*New Blackfriars*, April, 1967) Father Cornelius Ernst suggested that in the context of ecclesiological analysis the notion of institution should not be restricted to 'its narrower, governmental sense' of legitimated offices and procedures which, however initiated, are formally constituted, but might be more usefully employed in the wider sense of the term 'familiar to sociologists and social anthropologists'. If I have understood him correctly, his argument is that to confine the term to formally 'instituted' institutions, while denying it to ways of thought and action which although equally established as usages have not been established formally, is to lend countenance to dubious oppositions between the formal and explicit on the one hand, and the informal and implicit on the other. As an example of such an opposition he cites that between 'institutional Church' and 'persons'. He suggests that if such distinctions as this are taken as expressing fundamental dichotomies, they may entail 'damaging oversimplification'.

In the context of this interesting theme, a brief and inevitably cursory note by a social anthropologist on some of the ways in which the notions of institution and institutionalization have been used in his field may be of some small value.

First, it would be an illusion to suppose that either term has been consistently used by social scientists with any great precision. Most have tended to use 'institution' to denote, broadly, 'an established law, custom, usage, practice, organization or other element in the political or social life of a people' (the sixth meaning of the term listed in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*), or, even more generally, 'a well-established or familiar practice or object'. Among social anthropologists, only Malinowski has attempted to give the notion of institution a more exact meaning, approximating to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary's* further definition of it as 'an establishment, organization, or association instituted for the promotion of some object . . .', and it cannot be said that his usage, to which I return below, has been particularly influential.

Different writers have stressed different facets of the concept, in the broader of the two senses given above, but for most of them four interconnected aspects have been of special importance. These are, first, the ideal or conceptual content of institutions; second, the fact that they are often more or less informal, in the sense that they are not

explicitly structured; hence, third, their lack, very often, of any explicit teleological content; they are not necessarily seen by the people who have them as being there for a clearly specified purpose; and fourth, the fact that institutionalization in any particular context is a matter of degree; some usages are more institutionalized than others, and their degree of institutionalization may and often does change. Let us look a little more closely at these aspects and their implications.

First, it has not always been very clearly recognized that institutions, however defined, are not only ways of acting; they are also ways of thinking. Thus MacIver and Page, in their valuable introduction to sociology,<sup>1</sup> define institutions as ‘the *established forms or conditions of procedure* characteristic of group activity’ (their italics), a definition which evidently stresses action rather than thought. This emphasis is consistent with the sociological functionalism of the 1930s, which saw societies as, like organisms, systems of interacting parts (either people or institutions, depending on the level of abstraction), whose orderly functioning conducted to the proper operation and maintenance of the whole system. This over-simple model has been widely and justly criticized; though it is useful—even indispensable in modified form—as a research tool, it leaves out a great deal of the kind of information in which social anthropologists and at least some sociologists are chiefly interested. In the last resort the components of societies are people, and unlike the—presumably—mindless components of physical systems, people are conscious agents, and at least some of the time they act in accordance with the ideas, the mental representations, which they share with their fellows. A contributor to the recent *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* makes the point clearly. ‘We deal with institutions’, he writes, ‘where distinctive value-orientations and interests, centring upon large and important social concerns, . . . generate or are accompanied by distinctive modes of social interaction.’<sup>2</sup>

But most social anthropologists would go even further, and would assert that even where ‘distinctive value-orientations and interests’ do not generate or accompany ‘distinctive modes of social interaction’, they may still be institutionalized as enduring features of the cultures concerned, and so be of interest to them. The religious categories and beliefs of the African Nuer or Dogon are institutionalized elements in Nuer or Dogon culture, whether or not they issue in distinctive modes of social interaction. A too exclusive concern with systems of action for their own sake seems sometimes to have distracted attention from the study of shared beliefs and values (Durkheim’s *représentations collectives*) as such, an interest which is again central in social anthropology, as distinct from sociology.

<sup>1</sup>R. M. MacIver and C. H. Page, *Society: an Introductory Analysis*. London, 1950, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>L. Schneider, article ‘Institution’ in *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (eds. J. Gould and W. L. Kolb). London, 1964, p. 339.

The second character of institutions, as social anthropologists have used the concept, is their (often) informal quality. Unlike the major institutions of modern Western society, for example Church, government, or the universities, they are not usually consciously structured and sustained by reference to explicitly defined procedures and formally enacted rules (this is not to say that they have no structures, procedures or rules). Institutions in this sense have in fact to be looked for, and their essential features often have to be inferred rather than observed or elicited from official charters or articles of association. The point has been made (for example by W. H. Hamilton in the old *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*<sup>1</sup>) that although formal institutions had long been known and studied, the idea of studying informal ones or 'folkways' really only became respectable at about the turn of the century. As long as science was dominated by Newtonian concepts, the main scientific preoccupation was with the search for 'laws' and uniformities. It was hoped that ethnography might provide instances of or at least a testing ground for such putative 'laws', but the ethnographic data could hardly be of any very great interest or importance in their own right. The first beginnings of professional fieldwork changed all this, and it began to become recognized that the institutions of so-called 'savage' or 'primitive' societies, though no doubt often inchoate, imperfect and incomplete by Western standards, were not only of unsuspected interest and complexity, but also afforded an increasing body of material for the comparative study of such broad-based and presumably universal institutions as marriage, the family, political and legal organization, religion, magic, economic structures, and so on. With this recognition modern social anthropology was born.

Turning to my third theme, it follows from what has been said that the institutions of 'primitive' society, unlike the more formal institutions of 'modern' society (and of course there are 'informal' institutions in modern societies, too), are not to be wholly understood in terms of the explicit purposes and intentions of the persons who constitute and participate in them. Of course I am not saying that these persons do not have purposes and intentions, or that they do not attempt to realize them through their institutions, but often the ends which these institutions in fact achieve are not those which they consciously have in mind. None the less they may be of major social importance. Thus institutional analysis in social anthropology has generally involved the explicit distinction between what the American sociologist R. K. Merton has termed 'manifest' and 'latent' functions, manifest functions being 'those objective consequences for a specified unit (persons, sub-group, social or cultural system) which contribute to its adjustment or adaptation and were so intended; [latent func-

<sup>1</sup>W. H. Hamilton, article 'Institution' in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (eds. E. R. A. Seligman and A. Johnson), Vol. 7. New York, 1937, pp. 84-89.

tions] referring to unintended and unrecognized consequences of the same order'.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of this distinction is obvious, but as Merton goes on to remark it is both easy and crucially misleading to confuse motives and intentions with functions. Functional analyses carried out by social anthropologists during the past half-century or so afford numerous examples of its analytical value. Thus, to quote only two celebrated studies, among the Azande of the Sudan the system of institutionalized beliefs and practices relating to witchcraft, oracles and magic may serve at the same time to solve an intellectual puzzle, to provide a sense of security and a means of coping with misfortune, and to maintain a particular moral and social order (aims not consciously formulated by most Azande), without in fact accomplishing at all the ends confidently and explicitly anticipated by them.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the blood feud, carried out with at least some regard to rules for its conduct and termination, as well as achieving the manifest function of revenge, may also realize the latent function of sustaining and redefining group awareness in a segmentary lineage system, an awareness, however inexplicit, upon which the social order itself depends.<sup>3</sup> There is much more to the social and cultural institutions which social anthropologists study than the people who have them can tell you about them. Both their meanings for their practitioners and their consequences for other co-existent institutions and for the social order as a whole are of central concern to the investigator.

The fourth aspect of the anthropological notion of institution, the fact that institutionalization may be a matter of degree, has been implicit in the discussion so far. For when we speak of social relationships, or of shared concepts or categories, as 'institutionalized', we mean simply to say that they are familiar or well established in the culture being studied. And evidently in this sense some usages are more institutionalized than others. But unless they are institutionalized in some degree, even though they may be of interest to psychologists and 'personality-and-culture' anthropologists, social anthropologists are not directly concerned with them. But they may be concerned with them indirectly. Thus modes of behaviour or thought which by the standards of a particular culture are eccentric or deviant—incest is an obvious example in all societies, or heresy, where formal adherence to a particular set of beliefs is called for—may be of interest to social anthropologists, both as being themselves the objects of institutionalized attitudes, and also (and especially) where, as is often the case in the context of social change, they imply the breakdown of hitherto accepted institutions.

<sup>1</sup>R. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Revised edition, New York, 1957, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup>E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford, 1937.

<sup>3</sup>E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: a description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*. Oxford, 1940.

In this latter context particularly, the emphasis must be on process rather than, or at least as well as, on structure. As S. M. Eisenstadt has sensibly suggested, 'instead of speaking of institutions as given, constant, self-contained entities, it might be more profitable to talk about the process of institutionalization'.<sup>1</sup> And, we might add, the process (though not the term!) of de-institutionalization. In studying changing institutions, as the modern fieldworker almost invariably is, account must be taken of both structure and process, of both what is changing and how it is changing. The notions of institution and institutionalization, broadly conceived, have proved indispensable in both contexts.

I said that I would return to Malinowski, and I do so now to sustain my general theme. In the attempt to give the notion of institution real precision, Malinowski, in my view, succeeded in rendering it analytically useless. (He also succeeded, as always, in raising valid and interesting problems.) 'We can', he wrote, 'define an institution as: a group of people united for the pursuit of a simple or complex activity; always in possession of a material endowment and a technical outfit; organized on a definite legal or customary charter, linguistically formulated in myth, legend, rule and maxim; and trained or prepared for the carrying out of its task.'<sup>2</sup>

It must be remembered that Malinowski was reacting against the view, still widespread in the 1930s, that primitive cultures were a 'medley of words, implements, ideas, beliefs, customs, myths and legal principles', lacking any kind of systematic order or coherent structure. He wanted to show that primitive societies made sense, that in terms of their equipment and purposes they were as well organized as any other kind of society. But in fact no social anthropologist has found it useful, or even possible, to use Malinowski's model. His appealing picture of an institution as a courageous and united little band of people, trained and armed with material equipment and a set of rules, starting out to pursue an already formulated goal, tells us much about his respect, even admiration, for the 'primitive' societies which social anthropologists had then mostly studied, but it altogether over-formalizes the realities of life in such societies. What Malinowski is defining approximates more to what modern sociologists call an 'association', than to any kind of social or cultural institution, as this term is commonly used. It is the very imprecision and flexibility of the concept, and so the wide range of questions and assumptions which it involves (some of which have been briefly considered here), that have made it useful to social scientists generally, and to social anthropologists in particular.

<sup>1</sup>S. M. Eisenstadt, article 'Social Institutions: I, the Concept' in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (ed. D. L. Sills), Vol. 14. New York, 1968, p. 414.

<sup>2</sup>B. Malinowski, *The Dynamics of Culture Change* (ed. P. M. Kaberry). New Haven, 1945, p. 50. A later definition (cited in footnote, *loc. cit.*) differs mainly from the first in defining the end of the activity involved as 'contributing towards the work of the culture as a whole'.