
There is a noticeable trend towards intrigue in recent writing on the history of British anthropological societies. Ter Ellington’s Myth of the Noble Savage, a search for the inventor of the term, is a glaring example of conspiracy as history writing, but Adrien Desmond and James Moore’s Sacred Curse, although much more nuanced, also focused on the power play behind nineteenth-century science. Marc Flandreau’s Anthropologists in the Stock Exchange resembles Ellington’s conspiracies, rather than Desmond and Moore’s careful scholarship.

At the heart of Flandreau’s approach is an interesting observation of the strong connection between the members of the Ethnological Society of London and the Anthropological Society of London and the financial industry. Considering Charles Darwin made his money through share-market trading, it is an area of nineteenth-century science that amazingly has had little focus. Flandreau identifies that many of the key figures in both societies were either bankers, stockbrokers, or involved in the sale of overseas loans, which in his words ‘tell the story of a science with the language of speculation’ (p. 76). From this observation, he moves his argument in two directions, first producing a new analysis of the dispute between the Ethnological Society and the Anthropological Society, and secondly, an analysis of how the investment industry sponsored and financed anthropology.

In developing a new understanding of the dispute between the Ethnological Society and the Anthropological Society, Flandreau has chosen to strongly distance himself from George Stocking, John Burrow, and more recently Desmond and Moore. The traditional narrative of the argument between the two societies was pioneered by Stocking and Burrow in the 1970s, but it reflected a version of events openly stated by James Hunt — who was one of the chief protagonists from the time. In this account the division was between the believers in monogenesis (meaning one original creation of human beings), who dominated the Ethnological Society, and the believers in polygenesis (meaning multiple creations), who dominated the Anthropological Society. However, the division was never that clear cut, with the President of the Ethnological Society, John Crawfurd, being Britain’s leading advocate of the polygenesis position.

Flandreau characterizes Stocking’s approach as ‘[choosing] to portray Hunt and his Cannibals as the villains and [pitting] them against the fair, the gentle, the Darwinian ethnologists of the X-Club’ (p. 35). Previous scholarship, in Flandreau’s opinion, has ‘mistakenly received at face value the Anthropologists’ own discourse that they were a minority of extremists’. (p. 37)

Instead of looking at ideological differences, Flandreau focuses on understanding the two societies as business models, appealing to different audiences, with the Ethnologies appealing to establishment figures, whilst the Anthropologies appealed to the new emerging middle class figures. In making his argument, Flandreau also changes the focus away from Hunt and onto Richard Burton, whereby he maintains we should look at the various claims both sides made, as they were more about attracting membership than anything else.

Most writers on this topic will agree with Flandreau’s assertion that the connections and conflicts between the two societies were more complex than any simple assertion that the Anthropological Society were racists, while the Ethnologicals could claim the liberal moral high ground. Yet in dismissing the analysis of ideas, Flandreau is equally selective of evidence. The argument between the Ethnological
Society and the Anthropological Society occurred in principle throughout the 1860s, when John Crawfurd was President of the Ethnological Society, yet Crawfurd’s influence is not addressed. Instead, Flandreau focuses on Huxley and Lubbock as the principle leaders of the Ethnological Society. As I have previously written, Crawfurd was a political radical who held strong emancipatory ideas and believed in universal suffrage in all the colonies and the United Kingdom. He also regularly wrote against colonial expansion as a columnist for the Examiner newspaper, a position he maintained as President of the Ethnological Association. Although finance might have been the mechanism for the eventual takeover of the Anthropological Society by the Ethnological Society, ideology was not absent in the positions of the leaders of the various societies.

Understanding the viability of foreign loans in remote places is the proposal that Flandreau offers to account for the origins of Anthropology. This argument draws on his analysis that bankers and people with connections to the finance industry were common in the ranks of the various societies. Flandreau’s argument, however, is not actually that new, but rather a rendition of already accepted assumptions. The earlier generation of orientalists, who contributed to early ethnology, were often employees of the East India Company. And they had learnt the languages of Asia as a means of forwarding the East India Company’s economic interests. Flandreau could have drawn on this long tradition, rather than present his insights as novel and new.

Anthropologists in the Stock Exchange uses an endnote referencing system and includes a well thought out index.

Flandreau goes a long way to revealing the complex interplay that existed in the creation of British anthropology. However, in writing the history of these societies, we need to consider both the passionate debates of ideas over the unity of humanity, and the moral consequences of these, as well as the material realities that Flandreau focuses on. Neither one should be ignored in favor of the other.

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