



**MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE**  
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

# *Nie jestem Bronio* (I am not Bronio): Problems with the Economic Anthropology of Bronislaw Malinowski

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In one way or another in the course of his all too short life, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) wrote a great deal about economy.[i] Like everything else he drafted and published, the languages he used were Polish and English. Particularly in this field, however, a great deal of the work he cited was in German. I think it is reasonable to distinguish three phases in his career. The puzzle is how to fit them together. My argument is that, at least as far as economic anthropology is concerned, the outcomes were inconsistent if not muddled. That is the reason why, despite his great accomplishments as an ethnographer of the Trobriands a century ago, he does qualify to be included at the very highest level of the REALEURASIA pantheon (see earlier postings at this blog).

## A novice philosopher in Galicia



Collegium Maius Courtyard, Cracow

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Malinowski was the son of a Cracow university professor, his mother belonged to the minor aristocracy, and his upbringing was consequently privileged. He was, however, a sickly child and he was just 14 when his father died. The details of his early life have been superbly documented by his biographer Michael Young, who builds on a large body of scholarship in

Polish and English (Young 2004). Here I want to highlight Malinowski's doctoral dissertation, *On The Basis of the Economy of Thought*, submitted in 1906. The work was supervised by the philosopher and Catholic priest Stefan Pawlicki, to whom Malinowski remained close for many years. It was considered so brilliant that, after an application to Emperor Franz Joseph, Malinowski was awarded his degree with a special imperial distinction in a ceremony at the Collegium Maius of the university in November 1908.

What was this dissertation about? Malinowski himself, having established himself in London, was rather secretive about his early studies. Thanks to Robert Thornton and Peter Skalnik, however, we have an excellent edited collection of his early writings, including the dissertation (Thornton and Skalnik 1993: 89-115). *O Zasadzie Ekonomii Myślenia* was a critical appreciation of the fashionable empiricist philosophy of the era. Southern Poland had formed the Habsburg province of Galicia since the partitions of the late eighteenth century, and the intellectuals of Cracow naturally looked to Vienna. Malinowski paid particular attention to Ernst Mach, an extraordinary polymath who, in addition to his contributions to mechanics and physics, had been for decades the Empire's most influential philosopher of science (see also Young 2004: 82-88). Mach emphasized an inductive approach to knowledge via the senses. He was rebuked by both Lenin and Max Planck for his refusal to admit the reality of physical phenomena which the senses could not apprehend, such as atoms. Instead he argued for "economy" (*Ökonomie*) as the basis of scientific explanation: progress consisted in evolving ever more economic theories to account for the data observed. Malinowski was respectful of this position, which he demonstrated to be superior to the psychologising positivism of Richard Avenarius. But he goes on to question whether an approach based on mathematically sophisticated economising, epitomised by the principle of "least effort", can provide a sufficient justification for science and philosophy. Some additional element is needed, an element of human agency (as we might say nowadays), since even the most technical processes of science take place in a social context. But nothing like a Durkheimian notion of society is implied. On the contrary, Malinowski is much more attracted by Friedrich Nietzsche, and the metaphysical element that he cautiously invokes in his critique of Mach is the paradoxical anti-metaphysics of the German philosopher, whose influence in Cracow was considerable.

I note just two further points. First, Malinowski wrote his dissertation in Polish. This was possible because since 1867 the Poles had consolidated a privileged position in the *Vielvölkerstaat*. Cultural nationalism was a significant part of the background in Malinowski's formative decades. Second, the rootedness expressed in the language in which the dissertation was composed was countered by the universalist aspirations of the doctrines with which he engaged. Although the links between them are not well explored, we know that Ernst Mach developed his theories of economy in precisely the same years that another Vienna professor, Carl Menger, pioneered a marginalist approach to economic theory based on

essentially the same principles. Menger was one of a European triumvirate (the others were William Jevons in Cambridge and Léon Walras in Lausanne) who, in the early 1870s, displaced the old political economy (the discipline of Adam Smith, David Ricardo and Karl Marx) with a new version of economics that was mathematically more sophisticated. The new paradigm allowed its practitioners to abstract from macro-sociological questions of distribution in favour of formal models based on universalist postulates of profit and utility maximization, in environments of scarce resources in which the laws of supply and demand ensured optimal solutions. This was the first, rather indirect way in which young Bronio came into contact with a concept of economy.

## A postdoc interlude in Leipzig



Albertinum of the University of Leipzig about 1900.

After receiving his PhD Malinowski left at once to study in Germany. We do not know very much about the courses he followed at the University of Leipzig in 1908-10, where his father had studied before him. But he almost certainly attended many lectures by Karl Bücher, which would have opened up quite new perspectives on the nature of economy. Bücher was not impressed by the new trends in economic theory (though he had rather more respect for Menger than most of his colleagues in the German Historical School). He emphasized the diversity of human economic institutions, from pre-economic forms via the “closed household economy” to the complexity of the modern *Volkswirtschaft*. His evolutionist models look very strange to modern anthropologists and Malinowski was quick to reject them. He thus criticised Bücher in his first major publication, a contribution to a *Festschrift* for Edvard Westermarck, in which he examined the “economy” of Australian totemism with reference to data published by earlier ethnographers (Thornton and Skalnik 1993: 209-27). The rituals in question had been interpreted by Frazer in terms of an embryonic division of labour. Malinowski’s approach, ostensibly critical of Bücher, reflected the impact of the Leipzig economic historian, particularly his distinction between “pre-economic” labour and that was modern and disciplined and therefore as economic as that of modern Europeans.

## The mature Malinowski in the Anglosphere

The fundamental questions of Bücher, above all the question of why the principal of “least

effort” does not seem to apply in primitive labour, continued to preoccupy Malinowski throughout his career. In his Trobriand publications he provided a much fuller understanding than Bücher was ever able to achieve of why the “savages” spent more time toiling in their gardens than was warranted by considerations of subsistence and survival. The answers turned on the importance of magic, but also on social relations, pressures of emulation, and what Malinowski termed the “moral tradition” of the tribe. They were illustrated most fully in his last monograph (Malinowski 1935), although the first remains by far the best known (Malinowski 1922). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* must be assessed alongside the article published by Malinowski in *The Economic Journal* in the previous year (Malinowski 1921). In these works, he explicitly denies the value of a universal “economic man” by pointing out that Trobrianders very often behave in ways that contradict the short-term accumulation of resources. They are bound into communities which require complex patterns of gift-giving, in ceremonial exchanges with distant trade partners as well as within one’s own kin group. Only in the special case of *gimwali* did Trobrianders haggle to get the best possible deal from the other party in the manner of “economic man”. But *gimwali* was the exception, Malinowski paid little attention to this form of barter, emphasizing instead the myriad ways in which economic behaviour was determined by multiple forms of social embeddedness. He did not actually use the term embeddedness, which was coined later by Richard Thurnwald and later popularized by Karl Polanyi and the substantivist school in economic anthropology. Yet anyone who dips into Malinowski’s rich descriptions could be forgiven for concluding that he is a substantivist *avant la lettre*.

The problem is that Bronio failed to outline any convincing theoretical alternative to the straw man of *Homo Economicus*. On the contrary (as has often been pointed out over the years), he often portrays the scheming Trobriander individual in ways that any contemporary behavioural economist would have no difficulty in recognizing: the exotic tribesman maximises his utility, he merely does so in the context of a non-monetized economy that is very different from our own. We know that Malinowski digested Western economics literature when still based in Australia, between completing his Trobriand research and returning to England (Young 2004: 603). We know that later, during his years at the London School of Economics, he worked closely with Raymond Firth, who had studied neoclassical economics. Both were surely influenced by their LSE colleague Lionel Robbins, who throughout the 1930s promoted a definition of economics that was uncompromisingly universal: economics was the science of choice-making whereby rational actors allocated scarce resources between competing ends. Malinowski himself seems to endorse this approach to economy in an unpublished review prepared shortly before his death in the United States.[[iij](#)] Yet all this was a far cry from his own efforts as an ethnographer of the Trobriands. As for his last empirical foray in Mexico (Malinowski and de la Fuente 1982), while full of fascinating data for later ethnographers of

Oaxaca, it failed to implement either formal economic theory or substantive ethnographic contextualization as Malinowski himself had formulated the standards two decades earlier in *Argonauts*.

## Conclusions

I conclude that Malinowski was unable to reconcile the very diverse senses in which he encountered the notion of economy at different stages of his career. The rigor espoused by Robbins had strong echoes of his early enthusiasm for the *ekonomia* of Mach, but this had nothing in common with the analysis of historically specific forms of *Wirtschaft* as practised by Karl Bücher. Malinowski felt compelled to critique the latter although, as Gerd Spittler (2008) has shown, his unsuccessful attempt to construct a new ideal-type of “tribal economy” (Malinowski 1921) and his later Trobriand monographs remain broadly consistent with Bücher’s institutionalizing approach.

Fortunately for the future development of economic anthropology, and especially for projects such as *Realising Eurasia*, a Central European contemporary of Malinowski was able to draw on similar ingredients to produce a more satisfying cocktail. I am referring of course to Karl Polanyi, whose distinction between two fundamentally different meanings of the concept of the economic I discussed in a previous post at this blog (30th April 2015). Polanyi was greatly influenced by the Austrians Mach and Menger but (though not approving of Bücher) he was able to forge tools which allowed economic anthropologists to pursue comparative historical studies without falling into old cleavages such as economic/pre-economic.

## Postscript

The definition of economy is of more than antiquarian interest. The contradiction between an Aristotelian tradition concerned with the good management of resources in the interests of the flourishing of the community, and the tradition of the later Adam Smith, as refined in neoclassical economics, which privileges market forces, lies at the heart of contemporary political debate. It is no exaggeration to state that the future of our planet depends on the outcome. Meanwhile my hot days in Cracow in June 2015 prompted me to reflect on how the issues are playing out locally. In Malinowski’s time the main cultural threat to Polish identity in Galicia came from the German-speaking world. Today, after a century of vicissitudes, Poland is a member of the European Union, the economy of Cracow is highly dependent on the avalanche of tourists which arrives every summer, and the English language predominates. This language also dominates nowadays in the sources cited in social science dissertations at the Jagiellonian University. The first anthropology PhD in English was awarded some years ago, but I was told that most doctoral students still write in Polish. Their topics cover the same vast range that one finds in departments of socio-cultural anthropology globally, and the

standard is high. Senior colleagues worry, however, that it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract good students to undergraduate programmes. Academic salaries languish far behind the incomes to which one can aspire in other sectors. Of course salary is not everything, as Malinowski would have been the first to argue, but would he choose a career in anthropology today? The Jagiellonian University nowadays evaluates the performance of its academic staff according to norms already widely practiced in the English-speaking world. This is the insinuation of *ekonomia* into academic management, since scarce resources are allocated on the basis of pseudo-rational decisions based on supposedly objective calculations of merit. Malinowski's career would never have gotten off the ground in this system. His early fumbling analysis of the economy of totemism was published in a collective volume (Westermarck's *Festschrift*), a genre that scores very low in contemporary audit culture. Today, Malinowski would be advised by his Head of Department not to waste his time with chapters, or even a monograph, but to submit to a peer-reviewed journal, for which ten times as many points are awarded. Would Malinowski's landmark publication in *The Economic Journal* in 1921 have guaranteed his career? This was undoubtedly the top journal in economics at the time, but it would not have satisfied today's economists in the office of the Dean because it could hardly claim to be peer reviewed (most decisions were taken personally by the editor, a certain John Maynard Keynes).

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[i] This posting is based on the lecture I gave at the Institute of Sociology of the Jagiellonian University on 11th June 2015. I thank Marcin Lubaś, Director of the Institute, for his invitation. I am grateful to Marcin and other members of the Social Anthropology Unit within the Institute not only for their hospitality but for putting up with a foreigner's *lèse-majesté* towards their most illustrious ancestor.

[ii] I have not yet been able to access this review. The book in question was the first edition of *Economic Anthropology*, by Melville Herskovits (1940). Malinowski's review was discovered at Yale by Michael Young and is discussed in an unpublished manuscript of Scott Cook, who reports (Cook n.d.) that Malinowski here expresses particular enthusiasm for D. M. Goodfellow's neoclassical approach to "Bantu economics" in his 1939 work *Principles of Economic Sociology*. Cook's article offers a very positive reassessment of Malinowski's contributions to economic anthropology, primarily through a comparison of his Oaxaca work with the classical Trobriand studies. Although I reach different conclusions, I acknowledge the stimulus provided by Cook's appraisal, which I expect to be published soon.