

Nancy Munn (1931-2020) and British anthropology, part 1: her no classical sources criticism of Marilyn Strathern's *Partial Connections*

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Abstract. I evaluate Professor Nancy Munn's criticism in her 1994 review of Dame Professor Marilyn Strathern's 1991 book *Partial Connections* that Strathern does not refer to "classic sources." For one end (getting included in collections of important articles on a topic), I suppose that the material would be better presented with reference to classic sources. More specifically, it would be better for Strathern to refer to the rationale presented by E. Evans-Pritchard for focusing on primitive societies: that it is best to start with simple and move towards more complex. Strathern implies a rejection of this rationale, but it seems her work would benefit from being recast in a more traditional academic format.

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Software used (freeware): Google docs, [google.com](https://www.google.com), Google scholar, <https://paint.js.org/>

*"When reliable folk work poorly
There is some problem surely"*

Nancy Munn (1931-2020) was an American anthropologist who did fieldwork in Australia, studying the Walbiri people, and studying the Gawa of Melanesia. Munn was based at the University of Chicago for many years (1976-1997). Within British anthropology, I believe she (rightly) has a reputation as a person whose writing is difficult to understand. Munn has various interactions with British anthropology: an article on witchcraft, an article on the anthropology of time, and a review of Dame Professor Marilyn Strathern's 1991 book *Partial Connections*, which I shall focus on here, specifically her criticism that Strathern pays insufficient attention to "classic sources" that address her themes. After making the much-repeated complaint about Strathern's elliptical writing style, Munn tells us:

Also disturbing is the exclusion of historical references to what one might take to be classic theoretical contributions to some of the ideas Strathern presents... (Munn 1994: 1013)

No detail is provided here, apart from perhaps Munn's earlier reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss. But I agree with Munn's criticism. More carefully, for an important end, I suppose it would be better for Strathern to present herself as in dialogue with classic theoretical contributions. It is not difficult for me to make this argument, by the way: it is merely a matter of drawing upon my 2022 unpublished paper "British structural-functionalist anthropology, feminism, and partial connection."

In Britain, social anthropology in the first half of the 20th century was often defined as the study of primitive societies, but the term "primitive" was not intended to refer to societies which resembled the earliest human societies in customs or beliefs, or even in other respects. It was intended to refer to societies which are small in scale and technologically simple, regardless of what resemblances there are to the earliest societies. An obvious reason for focusing on such societies was that they will soon disappear or be subject to radical transformations with contact with Western civilizations. But this was not the only reason given. In 1951, the distinguished Oxford anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard wrote:

...anthropologists were interested in them because it was held that they displayed institutions in their simplest forms, and that it is sound method to proceed from examination of the more simple to examination of the more complex, in which what has been learnt from a study of the more simple would be an aid. (1951: 8)

Anthropology since the 1920s has been associated with doing fieldwork for a lengthy period (at least one year) which involves participating in the way of life of the people studied. The focus on primitive societies promised an exhaustive depiction of a single society, before moving to more complex societies. (It also promised a way of avoiding a criticism often directed at qualitative research: although it provides more detail, it only deals with a small sample, which is inadequate to generalize from. But if the society itself is small, it can hopefully be exhaustively described and there is not this generalization problem: "You are trying to tell us about the Bororo but you have only spent time with some Bororo. What about the rest?")

In *Partial Connections*, Marilyn Strathern denies that a focus on small scale technologically simple societies can actually deliver what was promised. The amount of material the social scientist finds worth recording does not appear to reduce when there is a switch to a small scale:

The more closely you look, the more detailed things are bound to become. Increase in one dimension (focus) increases the other (detail of data). For example, comparative questions that appear interesting at a distance, on closer inspection may well fragment into a host of subsidiary (and probably more interesting) questions... (1991: xiii)

She either thinks that there is no reduction whatsoever, a metaphysical thesis, or for practical purposes it is as if there is no reduction: the social scientist does not run out of things to record. (By the way, one can imagine a possible world in which the reason Evans-Pritchard presents for focusing on primitive societies is the main reason and Strathern's attack on it produces a revolution.)

Marilyn Strathern is probably the most influential living anthropologist but her writings do not feature in various books which aim to collect important texts on topics she addresses. For example, a reader on kinship and a reader on feminist anthropology do not include her work (Lewin 2004; Parkin and Stone 2006). If she wrote in a more traditional academic format - for example, "This is the rationale Evans-Pritchard presents for studying primitive societies" and "This is my objection"; and "These are some case studies supporting it" (e.g. the volumes and volumes written by Malinowski) - I suppose they would include her. Is this an overly optimistic supposition? "She would merely enter the next stage of preventing her from joining a mainstream club"? One can be presented with "goodchild work" and more or less told, "Why don't you write like this?" but it does not help or the gains are meagre.

References

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