Social Creativity

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In this lecture I wish to explore the ways in which people create social order. When I was a graduate student at L. S. E. in the 1960s it was quite common to hear the phrase «social creativity»: it was a code-phrase which people used to show that they were sceptical about the power of society to generate itself; and that they wished to redress the balance between individual and collective thought. Raymond Firth wrote about «social organisation», how that was susceptible to innovative negotiation which might affect «social structure» after enough of it had gone on for long enough. Ernest Gellner, so far as I know, never used creativity in this sense, but wrote essays in which he questioned the effort devoted to systematise anthropological data: the attempt to show that, for instance, Nuer are perfectly coherent and free from contradiction in all they do and say, could obscure fruitful and even —I think I detect— functional ambiguity and uncertainty: contradiction might be contra-indicated in a system, but in real life it was quite useful in allowing people to get along. Lucy Mair certainly did use the code-phrase, and indeed wrote about people having «room for manoeuvre» in which they could make their own space, live with their options open.

They wrote and spoke before either Marxism or structuralism had much of a following in Britain: though even the brighter graduates were approaching the period of their strongest commitment to socialism, only two teachers —Gluckman and Frankenberg at Manchester— openly described themselves as Marxists. In Oxford Rodney Needham was organising the translation of *Elementary Structures of Kinship;* but the world still had to wait for Totemism, and the first volumes of Levi-Strauss' *Mythologiques.* The emphasis on creativity was therefore, I think, a sort of residual Malinowskianism —a resistance to the determinism of collective life which he saw in Durkheim, and which he satirised mercilessly —but I think inaccurately— in the opening pages of *Crime and Custom in Savage Society.* Durkheim had said that crime was a sort of social reinforcer: it reminded people what social rules were for, how useful they were, and led them to respect and obey: crime, in short, was important sociologically because it strengthened the control of collective representations over individual behaviour. Malinowski in contrast took

crime to indicate that rules had no binding force: savages committed crimes, and that indicated they could calculate whether or not to obey laws, customs, conventions; and it further disproved any anthropological theory which suggested that savages were slaves to custom, unthinkingly obedient, their minds and actions controlled by collective forces. For that was the view which Malinowski, characteristically *grosso modo* in matters of theory, attributed to Durkheim and «his followers».

The L. S. E. at that time, I mean to say, maintained a traditional scepticism towards the idea that social patterns —patterns of ideas, of actions, of institutions— control individuals, and the code phrase for this was «social creativity». But while they resisted systemism, they did not often explore the ways in which people created social things: perhaps Barth's version of exchange theory was the nearest any of them reached to describing the creative process; but that was vitiated by his emphasis on rational choice, on a (broadly defined) profit motive which he supposed underlay the choices people made, and which resulted in social change: change in institutions emerged from multitudinous choices which were profit-motivated. In any case, with that exception (which turned out to be an interesting but blind alley), they did not bother much about the ways people exercised their social creativity. It is that gap which I want to try to fill today.

So, what are the interesting questions about «social creativity»? They seem to me to be four:

1. What does it produce?

2. What are its kinds?

3. What are its raw materials and processes?

4. What are the products like?

What does it produce?

People use their sociability to create agreements about actions. So, our worlds achieve the appearance of stability and regularity because we agree that certain actions are acceptable in appropriate circumstances, and others are not. By convention we seem to have agreed that I shall now talk mostly without interruption for an hour or so. It is perfectly possible to imagine another world in which this would be ludicrous and absurd, a sort of social gibberish. And if this were a dining table —at which we agree conversation is proper— it would be rude and boorish of me, to attempt to talk without interruption for an hour. The language I use is English, and English itself is a roughly ordered set of conventional understandings about the relation between sounds and gestures and meanings. We could, if we thought it necessary, introduce local and temporary agreements: «in these lectures I shall use the term "power" in the following sense» and so on. You don't have to come to the lecture (there are 3.5 billion people in the world who for one reason or another haven't turned up, you'll notice); but when you do we all behave more or less according to convention: you expect, for instance, that I shall do my best to

achieve some sort of rational discourse, that I shall not tell lies, that I do not create fictions, and shall try also to impress you with my learning and wisdom. In short, you know what to expect, in broad and general terms.

The outcome of sociability is an agreement, a convention, a routine. What we create is —within agreed limits— a predictable event, from which certain choices have been excluded: I do not sing, and my lecture is in prose; I am fully dressed, sober and fairly clean. It could so easily be otherwise. So when we are creative we attempt to create order and predictability and to eliminate choice, or at any rate to confine choice within certain prescribed limits.

I have used the example of a lecture, but the scope of sociability covers all our activities, from eating to sleeping to exchanging material goods and to taking decisions about defence, or about the distribution of common resources: we try to do this in a conventional way, and when we agree that we have options we try to create conventional ways of deciding among them.

And you should note that creative activity is continuous: lectures would cease to happen if we did not, so to speak, renew the understanding which makes them, each time we meet for a lecture. I know that some theorists speculate that the institution of lectures is now so old that it has a life of its own, and accumulated inertia, which makes it very difficult to change or abandon the institution: lecturers and their audiences, in this view, are servants (even obtusely conventional, outmoded and unoriginal servants) of the institution. The force of this argument is all the greater because that is indeed what it can sometimes feel like. On the other hand, you will notice how close saying «the institution has a life of its own» is, to the sort of systems analysis which I have said I wish to avoid if I possibly can. We do know that what was done in the past can have consequences —and in some cases it can create an inertia and an apparent permanency: but perhaps we can incorporate that by taking history into account as one of the raw materials on which people exercise their sociability. In that case it would not be a quality of institutions that they have an enduring or permanent life ot their own, but a consequence of the part thought about the past has in our continuous social creativity.

The second question to ask is, what are the kinds of social creativity?

The most general is the personally negotiated continuous sociability with which we construct order in our daily lives, as parents, children, spouses, lecturers, students and so on. Every action and thought which involves other people is creative sociability, attempting to make a social world which is secure and stable to live in. It is continuous, pervasive, inescapable that we create as we go along: the words I utter re-affirm my commitment to a particular language which I recreate and modify as I speak. My spouse and children and I negotiate to create a family —one which is different, you may accept, from the family in which I am a child. This is a universal, popular and irrepressible activity: everyone is creating most of the time —a universal human propensity to make arrangements which we hope will be relatively stable and durable.

It was common enough in the 1970s and 80s to call this kind of activity «social reproduction»: this was the way in which the common organisation of society was re-created and maintained: the forces of production were complemented by the forces of social reproduction, and tended (as the *re* of reproduction indicates) to be conservative and even repressive. What I want to emphasize however, is that this popular creativity is wider in scope than the mother's knee implications of reproduction, and that it is by no means conformist or conservative. For popular sociability is different from, and may sometimes be subversive of, the creative activity which is directed to making rules for others: if my spouse and children and I negotiate «family», that is a relatively direct face-to-face populist activity. But some people attempt to negotiate «family» not in a particular but in a general and impersonal way: in many civil codes derived from Napoleonic legislation, for instance, the rules define what is the proper behaviour of family members in matters of inheritance and property; and in most social groups someone has made rules about who may become spouses (and negotiate «family») and who may not.

I do want to say that this legiferous activity belongs in the general category of creative sociability; but it is distinguished from the populist variety by the possession or pretension of power: in the Napoleonic case, by state power derived in most instances from conquest. This is formally concentrated; but power is a common enough element in most negotiation: we know of patrons in Portugal, described by José Cutileiro, whose creativity was directed to making quite arbitrary and whimsical rules of behaviour for labourers and peasants. It is also quite clear that, even within families, power influences and shapes the negotiation of even those insignificant organisations.

The distinction between negotiating one's own arrangements face-to-face, and devising rules for others —whether as a Portuguese patron or a mafioso or a state's man, is not, strictly speaking, a distinction between kinds of creativity: at present, at any rate, it seems sensible to assume that the basic activity —making social order— is the same in both cases; and it seems likely that people use power in all cases, when they can. What is different is the scope of the arrangements, the range of people whom you want to agree or acquiesce. All of us, all the time make order with people we know; relatively few of us try to make order with people we don't know; or to make it for all the people in one category or another of a population. So it may not be a crucial distinction. On the other hand, it is interesting because the populist, inevitable creativity quite often subverts the centralised creativity of state's men. For instance, it is not simply that you and I can reach an agreement to break the Prince's peace; but that several hundred —or thousand— or hundreds of thousands of bilateral agreements of an unorganised kind, can have diffuse but quite definitive subversive effects.

So those are the first two questions: I've suggested that imaginative sociability, social creativity is purposeful action aimed at routinising and ordering life to make shared existence predictable from one day to the next; and that it is in fact a universal, continuous activity: we cannot escape from it. It has two kinds: what I have called popular, populist sociability —the activities which are by others called social

reproduction— which is characteristically uncentred, undirected: it is a form of diffuse power. And the second kind attempts to make rules for others and implies centres of power.

The third question is what are the raw materials, and it is the most difficult and complex.

The chief raw material is experience both direct and indirect: on the one hand, people's own ideas about what has happened in the past when they did things; on the other, their ideas about what happened to other people. People everywhere think about the past, and what they plan for the future is related to that understanding.

So far as thought about the past is concerned, we have begun to understand its place rather better in the last thirty years or so, following Lison Tolosana's work in *Belmonte de los Caballeros*. We call it «thought about the past» rather than history, because knowledge and understanding which is produced by literate professionals, often working in the academy, should be kept separate from popular reflection on past events. Of course, historians have a culture, belong in some cases to schools of thought, and are to some extent creatures of their times and social relations. But they also have criteria for establishing truth, methods of settling arguments and a tendency to publish their results, all of which offer some prospect of progressively closer approximation to reality. Other kinds of thought about the past —popular, non-academic homedistilled— do not offer themselves for continual scrutiny, and hence do not offer that guarantee.

We understand something about the ways in which thought about the past in affected by notions of time: it is I think quite clear that people who think of time as essentially cyclical, live in a world in which they expect recurrence of events, people, processes. A case in point are the Kedang, studied by R. H. Barnes. The notion of cause and of the efficacy of human action is quite different from that of people like academic historians who work with a linear time. Another case which anthropologists have explored in some detail is that of genealogical or lineage time in which past events are located in a genealogy, much as photographs are pasted in an album: the past is a vault of examples of good behaviour —noble, brave, magnanimous, bloodthirsty, merciless —which can be brought out for exhibition and warning: lineage history, as explored by Paul Dresch for instance, is largely static; people claim «we are brave and merciless and have always been so». That implies an understanding of time which asserts lack of change, and places of human agents the burden of keeping it so.

We also now include myth as a kind of thought about the past. Anthropologists who study myths used to contrast (as English-speakers and others do in ordinary speech) myth and history: one is true, the other is just stories. But it is clear that while it is sensible to distinguish the two, they nevertheless belong to the same general category of «thought about the past». We know that the Uduk, for instance, when they considered current events took into account a mythical past in which they were like antelopes and dogs living in the bush. They had an action-influencing sense that they might revert as a result of cataclysm, to a condition in which

they did not even know the word for mother's brother. [James; Davis-Inaugural; Davis-Hastrup].

In summary: anthropologists know that it is possible to work with more than one notion of time: not all times are linear, and different times seem to affect knowledge of the past, thought about the past.

In addition to time, anthropologists have recognised since Lison Tolosana's work, that knowledge of the past is mediated by social relations. He emphasized the importance of relations between generations: in Belmonte in the 1950s the main age cohorts of the population were generally reactive to their predecessors. Those who had fought in the Civil War reacted against those who had, they thought, in some degree been responsible for it; their successors, in turn, were those who were eventually participants in the evolution of 1975-9 (although Lison took a fairly dim view of them at the time of his fieldwork). He was able to show that generations had been the principle on which Belmonteans organised their political affairs for some centuries; and that the reactive relationship of each age-cohort to its predecessor had profound effects on politics, and also on agriculture, family life and so on.

In Belmonte people's knowledge of the past was mediated by the relations of one generation to another, which were reactive or even antagonistic. The social relations of production of thought about the past are not only those of generations. Members of lineages in Libya whom I have studied, emphasized the solidarity of multi-generation groups against others similarly organised. And the relations of production of history proper are characterised by controlled and general fission in the pressure-chambers of academia together with a wide diffusion of theory, interpretation and criticism.

So when I say that experience is the chief raw material for social creativity, I mean to imply a series of processes, themselves complex and different from place to place and time to time, which shape and organise «the past» into characteristic products —those of the Academy for instance contrasting with the more popular products of Belmonte or of Yemeni or Libyan tribesmen, or the Kedang or Uduk.

Our creative imaginations do not only feed on the past; knowledge of other peoples and of how they organise their lives is widely available, and is not confined to members of European and other imperial states. Anthropologists have sometimes underemphasized contact among subject peoples, as if the only important contact was with colonial power. That is much less true now, and the picture drawn by Edmund Leach of the exchange of ideas and models of organisation among Highland Burmese has been generalised and expanded among others by Eric Wolf in his *Europe and the people without history*.

In our own case we have records of observation and comment on other people for as long as the English have been literate, and we can observe the social consequences. In some cases, knowledge of other peoples is used to construct a critique of ourselves. Sir Thomas Moore's *Utopia,* for instance, draws on the sixteenth century genre of traveller's tales in two ways: its form is a report of a voyage beyond

the Americas; its content, too, is partly based on reports of real life in exotic societies. Some part of our social imagination is fed by observation of customs and techniques of our contemporaries elsewhere, drawing on travel, tourism, and even anthropology. You may mock the solemn absurdities of earnest borrowers —those who wish to incorporate the wisdom of the East, or Meso-America or Africa— but they have their consequences for our own social order: whether they are constituted as «order», as «oriental» or not, people have found new ideas and new procedures. Members of the Theosophical movement and its associated organisations had real influence on British social life in the 1920s and '30s; western Buddhists are still significant; users of hallucinogens and other possible wonder-drugs have found inspiration in Meso-American ethnobotany; and the movement for natural childbirth drew on accounts of native African obstetrics. You may doubt whether any individual North European tourist to Spain gains much understanding of Spanish lives and cultures and languages. But there have been several hundred million of them in the last thirty years; some increase in understanding there has been, and the Spanish contribution to European integration undoubtedly includes popular awareness, from direct experience, that German, British, Dutch ways of life are not the only ones, nor even in every respect the most desirable.

And anthropologists have played their part. T. S. Eliot considered that Frazer's *Golden Bough* was one of the most influential books of this century, on a par with the work of Freud on the subconscious. Malinowsky's *Sexual Life of Savages,* for many years sold in brown wrappers in dirty book shops in London (as well as in Dillons) no doubt disappointed many but also inspired others, such as A. S. Neill who tried to organise a school on Trobriand principles. Direct borrowings are no doubt always slightly ludicrous; but we should take into account the general effect on imagination, of an increasing amount of information in more and more accessible packages, about the lives of others.

These examples are mostly European, but I think the argument that the sociable imagination feeds on information about others, as well as on the mediated past, is more generally applicable. We know of general borrowing of models of organisation in the Burma Highlands; we know of a general assimilation of Nuer and Dinka religious symbols; we can point to the rejection of state-like forms of organisation by Bebers of the Atlas and of the Rif. These are significant cases, and are emblematic, here, of general and widespread phenomena.

I have used the phrase «sociable imagination» and «social creativity», and have suggested that these work on information to produce social organisation. What can we say about how they work? I suppose the most obvious point is that they are faculties of individual human beings, and that social organisation is therefore the product of human imagination and inventiveness rather than an organic growth of some systemic kind, or a spontaneous products of society itself.

I also want to suggest that these faculties are aesthetic rather than mechanical or automatic or biological. I mean to say that social creativity is part and parcel of human creativity as a whole, and that the principles and procedures for studying it are those we use when trying to understand the production of music and pottery,

songs and dances, houses and cathedrals. In this sense we are all authors of our social worlds, engaged in continuous creative activity.

Most day-to-day actions of this kind are repetitive and reaffirmative: we seek on the whole to maintain things as they were, and to ensure stability and continuity. The point, after all, is live in order, without the strain of continuous negotiation. For this reason, the processes of the sociable imagination are clearer when we examine the life and work of social engineers and of utopians, who both in their different ways, attempt to change the world. As an example of social engineers you could consider Col. Qaddafi who took over the Libyan government by coup d'état in 1969 and then in the subsequent years instituted a revolution. In the period 1969 to 1973 he (and fellow members of the Revolutionary Command Council) first of all maintained the old apparatus of the Libyan kingdom; then they copied Egypt, setting up a one-party Arab Socialist State. For various reasons they found this unsatisfactory, and set about creating a new order in 1973.

The essence of this was the perception that representative governement is inherently unjust: the representatives always take power from the represented. In Qaddafi's brand of puritanical and individualist Islam, that can never be right because God has given each man (and possibly each woman as well) responsibility for his own salvation; loss of autonomy, required by a representative system, is damnable: autonomy and responsibility for your own salvation were gifts of God: it was sinful to give them away to politicians. You will know that in Europe and America people are also concerned with this problem, and they seek ways to ensure that the personal autonomy we are constrained to give up is not abused, except in the general good. Qaddafi is more radical: what is inherently unjust can never be made just, by checks and balances, separations of powers, constitutional amendments or Bills of Rights. So his answer was, to abolish representative government.

This is not the place to describe the circumstances of the proposal, nor the extent to which he succeeded. What I do want to note is that the structure of government which Qaddafi proposed to replace the state was in many respects similar to the relatively commonplace model of Bedouin stateless autonomy, to the idealised image which many Libyans including Qaddafi himself, had of how they were organised before the state —let us say, a century or a century and a half ago. Qaddafi's creative imagination, I want to suggest, worked by extending and stretching a model of the past, to achieve a patrial reconstruction of the Libyan polity. It was one which received assent from many Libyans much of the time [Davis, 1987].

It may entertain you to note that this was also what Lady Thatcher did in Britain in the period 1979-1990. She too was dissatisfied with the state, and wished not exactly to abolish it but at least to diminish it. Again, this is not the place to discuss the circumstances, nor the extent to which this piece of social engineering succeeded. But do note that her model society, with which she sought to reshape Britain, was again an idealised image from the past. However, it was not in origin an image of a Golden Age, as Qaddafi's had been, but a nightmare. Victorian economists knew perfectly well that people act in economic affairs from a variety of motives,

and are moved by altruism, friendship and religion as well as by profit. But Edgeworth decided to work out the consequences of a worst-case scenario: would the economy survive if people were motivated solely by self-interest? He thought it would; but the case remained a speculative nightmare. It was later generations who transformed Edgeworth's Bad Dream into a goal for British government policy. In short, Lady Thatcher's programme of social engineering (reducing the state, augmenting the market) suggests another case in which creative imagination worked by extending an existing model, stretching it to fit new circumstances.

We could go on. I think, for instance that the biggest and most ambitious social engineering projects of our lifetimes are the attempts to create a European Union, and the attempts to reconstruct the politics of eastern Europe. In each case you can observe social creativity at work, negotiation of agreements of a fundamental kind to establish a basis for new sorts of polity: I mean, the agreements will not only be about who gets what, but also about the procedures for deciding. These are informed by thought-about-the-past as much as Lady Thatcher and Colonel Qaddafi; but while those two engineers sought to return to some imagined past, the people involved in European reconstruction and in the creation of a European Union are at least in part inspired by a rejection of the past, and their decisions are designed to secure that previous states of affairs should never occur again. The creative imagination, in short, seems to work in this case by inversion, rejection of old models, rather than by extension of existing images of the past.

These are social engineering projects; but the processes involved —extension and inversion— are also present in the direct, popular day-to-day social creativity. In negotiating social order, people use models, idealised images, derived from experience directly or indirectly, and extend or invert them. Of course, for the most part, popular creativity is used to preserve and maintain social relations in a fairly conservative way: but that is not always the outcome, and in fact people usually plan what they intend as modification of their experience. I daresay that most of us have had the experience of being children in a family. I daresay that none of us intends to produce an exact replica of that experience for our own children.

The efforts we all make to stabilise our social worlds are creative acts, and I think that these imaginative actions are accessible to the kind of analysis you would use for a book or a poem: you look for consistencies and innovations between one work and another as, for instance, Baxandall does in his account of fifteenth century Italian painting; you try to give an account of how experience is worked on by the faculties of mind, to produce a new thing —as, for example, George Painter does in his life of Proust. The aim is to understand how creativity works, the mix of knowledge, experience, social relations, with intention and skill, to produce something new.

Of course you might say that Painter and Baxandall are concerned with works of art. Their procedures might do for the work of Qaddafi or Thatcher, but are hardly suited for the humdrum day-to-day conformism with which people try to maintain outmoded institutions such as lectures, say, or families. I think I disagree: our attempts to create social order are part and parcel of a general creative ability,

and we should recognise that they are so. But I do agree that there are bad poems and bad novels, as well as good ones, and you should allow that there may be aesthetic as well as political differences between Lady Thatcher's vision of a new Britain, and Colonel Qaddafi's, of a perfect Libya.

It is time to consider the fourth question: it was, «what are the results of social creativity like?» The first thing to say is that they are not stable systems: some people may strive to create them; but not all do, and those who do, do not succeed. That is generally the consequence of the diffuse power of other people. You may try to negotiate, for instance, a stable family, and reach the appropriate agreements with the people in your household. But elsewhere other people are also making new things —in the school playground or the classroom, in the marketplace or in a television studio: your arrangements have to be continually renegotiated in fact, because your household is not a system, is not isolated from the power of others which may have consequences for your ingenious inspired and loving creation. The same is true of friendships, and business partnerships; of the relations among colleagues and among members of a party: we all try to create systems, and to buttress and protect them as best we can. In fact, the notion that there is such a thing as a social system (or an economic or political system) is one of the major contributions of social scientists, to the optimistic wishful thinking of social engineers. The idea of a social system is a comforting story, a tale that is told to reassure us that our efforts to create stability and continuity are directed to a realizable end.

Just as the diffuse power of other creators undermines our own creations, so it subverts the efforts of rule-makers and legislators. In my opinion the clearest and most disruptive example of that has been the almost total failure of the international development programmes of the last forty years, in what must by now be every third world country. Legislators and bureaucrats devise programmes and incentives to increase agricultural and industrial production; they are carefully designed; they are adapted to take account of local circumstances and of the errors of previous programmes. Everything is done to ensure that this time the plan will work as it is intended. But in every case, when the plan devised in Washington or Paris or London or Stockholm is transferred into a set of rules and practices for villagers in Bangladesh or Guinea Bissau or Peru, it comes unstuck: villagers, local officials and others simply do not do what they are told. I do not mean, that no change occurs; nor that no benefit follows; but that the plan never works as intended. And that is true even when the planners are advised by the most highly qualified experts in economic systems —even when anthropologists are co-opted to the planning team to take account of «the social factor». The reason is, in general terms, that the creativity of Bangladeshi or other villagers is irrepressible, and is usually subversive. Some people contemplate these outcomes with despair; but you may also perhaps be reassured by the ability of allegedly simple and ignorant villagers and officials, local big men and bullies included, to subvert the state's men in the ODA and World Bank, with their abundant expert economists and other social scientists.

In short, what I want to suggest is that the social order we seek to create is in fact not a system, nor a structure, nor an organic fuctioning whole nor a necessary and inevitable evolutionary track, but a series of ramshackle contraptions which

serve to get us through from one day to the next: they are ingenious, clever, often pleasing to contemplate, but they are inherently unstable and need continual affirmative re-creation and maintenance. The analogy is with Heath Robinson rather than Palladio.

Anthropologists do perceive patterns: we know that family arrangements, for instance, were different in the Trobriands from what they were in Tikopia and in Nuerland. And we know that the pattern of Trobriand families was related to the patterns of kinship, political power and exchange activities. The temptation is to regard this real and significant coherence as in some sense a property of the wholly illusory «Trobriand system» which shaped and determined the lives of Trobrianders, just as the Tikopian system constrained Tikopians to be distinctively Tikopian. It is easier, a simpler way of saying things, to say «in the Trobriand social systems boys did not inherit from their fathers, and that was because...» and so on. But that simplicity misplaces the source of coherence when it locates it in the demands of a system: the coherence came from the repeated and constant effort of Trobrianders to make an acceptable world for living in. It was an achieved coherence.

Let me finally address the issue, why some social arrangements are more durable and more coherent than others. We do have an unmistakable sense that our worlds are more unstable and insecure than some other people's. Is that true? And if so, how can we explain it?

I think it is true, even though the total stability, immobility of Nuer or Trobriand arrangements is partly an illusion created by ethnographers: Evans Pritchard and Malinowski attempted to discover *systems*, were part of the re-assuring movement which sought to show that you could discern a system in relatively simple worlds, and could therefore infer that there is one also in more complex worlds. We know that the Trobiands were in political turmoil during Malinowski's fieldwork, for instance, and we can see in Evans-Pritchard's account of Nuer structure («relations defined in terms of social situation, and relations between those relations» signs of improvisation and innovation which suggest that Nuer, too, failed to create a perfectly stable system. Even so, I think it is the case that Nuer were more successful than Britons are, at eliminating instability. Why should that be?

Numbers of people is part of the answer: we are affected by the decisions and negotiations, by the diffuse creativity of 55 million people in Britain alone, leaving aside the 300 million other people in Europe, the 400 million in North America, and so on. Nuer were about 120,000, in significant contact with 60,000 Dinka, a few thousand Arabs, a few hundred British. The variety of economic, religious, moral and political activities is also crucially important: the people whose creativity undermines our arrangements do not have a single model of «family» or «lecture» or «parliament». And indeed, because we have travellers' tales and ethnographies, our sociable imaginations and sense of the possible, are wider, and more de-stabilising.

Thirdly, I think that the kind of history which is current in our world is inherently unsettling: we perceive the present as the culmination of a series of causes and effects in linear time; and we expect that our present is itself a cause of some

future state of affairs. In this sense, we know that our world is transitory. The probability is, that Nuer of the 1930s thought about the past in a snapshot, repetitive way: the past was a series of examples of right action, used to show that Nuer had always been loyal, aggressive, fearless and so on: it is an essentially static view of the past, and is not one which incites people to innovate.

I have tried in this lecture to elaborate the notion of social creativity: it was, for my teachers, a code-phrase to indicate a general position *vis-à-vis* the French sociology of Durkheim and some other members of his school. The general point, and it is I guess fairly widely accepted, is that such system, such patterned social action as exists is a creation of human agents who are trying to create a system. I have tried to add to that an examination of the ways in which that creativity works, how people's sociable imagination results in effective social organisation. On the one hand, you have to consider the ways knowledge is organised —the kinds of history, the range of travellers' tales and so on. On the other, you have to try to perceive the processes of creativity itself: I've suggested, less tentatively than I should, common processes of extension and inversion of experience. These should be analysed in the same way that we analyse other products of human creativity —novels, dances, songs and poems.