

Brian Street (1943-2017): A Personal Reflection

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Abstract

Brian Street was a scholar and teacher whose contributions to social anthropology, and influence on the discipline, span a range of interlocking themes. This chapter explores several of these: the relationships between anthropology and literature; the ethnographic study of literacies; anthropology and education; and anthropology as it can be practised and understood by non-specialists and ‘ordinary people’. Running through all these, in turn, are Street’s personal commitments to the practical applications of scholarship in informed development policy, education, and the furtherance of global citizenship; to the understanding of how power and inequality are perpetuated; and to the democratisation of knowledge.

Biographical note

Brian Vincent Street was born in Manchester on 24th October 1943, and died in Hove on 21st June 2017. Following a first degree in English Literature taken at the then Buckland University Hall (taught by dons from nearby Oxford University) he progressed to postgraduate study in social anthropology at Oxford, a DPhil, and fieldwork in Iran. His tutor at Oxford was Godfrey Lienhardt (1921-1993) who in turn had been strongly influenced by the literary critic F.R. Leavis in Cambridge (Singer 2017). It was in this period also that I first came to know Brian, and with other postgraduate students shared in a blend of friendship and academic converse that continued through the years following. From 1974 to 1996 Brian was a Lecturer, then Senior Lecturer, in social anthropology at the University of Sussex, then moving to take up a Chair as Professor (subsequently Professor Emeritus) of Language in Education at Kings College, London. Brian’s influence on anthropology and related areas extended over many fields. In what follows, I shall concentrate on those aspects of his work with which I am myself most familiar. This is therefore a selective and personal reflection; other contributors to this collection will offer specialised assessments of Brian’s intellectual legacy.

Anthropology and Literature: a conversation in time

Brian’s earliest work, on anthropological themes in (predominantly English) literature, brought together for critical examination deep connections across the two domains. Many of these links have, in the years since he wrote, become embedded in the mainstream of social anthropology, as I shall argue below. The conversation between anthropology and literature was a cornerstone of Brian’s formative work – which came to fruition in his first book *The Savage in Literature* (Street 1975), based on his doctoral research – and a springboard for his subsequent lifetime of scholarship in literacy and education. Prefiguring by a few years Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), *The Savage in Literature* reaches back beyond the nineteenth century, into the history of European representations of non-Western peoples and the organizing concepts of culture, evolution, race, typology, hierarchy and scientificity; all in the senses then understood. As Brian himself puts it in an updated account:

The early traveler accounts of the peoples of the world were inserted into the same supposedly scientific framework as were physical and natural phenomena: the same discursive strategies, the same intellectual devices and strategies for handling diversity in nature were used for human beings. Travelers, for instance on James Cook’s voyages, took with them scientists who could describe all the flora and fauna that they encountered in those exotic parts of the world and reproduce them with the help of artists trained in scientific observation; and they likewise inserted the peoples they encountered into such ‘scientific’ frameworks. (Street 2021a [2018])

With this intellectual background, and writing of an era well before literary giants such as TS Eliot or DH Lawrence would draw inspiration from such early works of anthropology as Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, Brian traces in

painstaking detail the thematic and personal connections among English writers of fiction and anthropology of the nineteenth century. As with many of the English metropolitan intellectuals of the later years of Victoria's reign, circles were small and personal networks were active across landscapes which would later become fenced-off knowledge silos. Stereotypes were shared and mutually reinforced across the domains. Thus:

The inferiority of the native, common in the earlier image, is reinforced by the popularity of evolutionary theory (following Darwin's work in the mid-nineteenth century) and the notion of the survival of the fittest. The use of race as a means of classifying mankind and the notion of the scale of value, with European man at the top and primitive man at the bottom, are parts of the old image that lived on, strengthened further by post-Darwinian anthropology. (Street 1975, 9)

In turn, these organizing constructs fed through into the intellectual world-views of Victorian England. What *The Savage in Literature* uniquely adds to the story is a tight forensic analysis, rooted in rigorous textual criticism, of the depth at which these same constructs informed the fictional writing of the time, ranging from authors with the most serious literary intent, like Joseph Conrad, through the tales of adventure and imperial derring-do such as Kipling's, and boys' stories such as those of John Buchan, Edgar Rice Burroughs in the US, G.A. Henty and Rider Haggard, to the 'penny dreadfuls' of the 1840s and later, which from the 1870s often had an ethnographic theme:

The ethnographic novel, estranged in time and space from the claustrophobic Victorian drawing room, became popular. For the first time, information on other cultures, expressed in vivid, exciting tales, was available to the mass public of England. Such romances, with their large circulation and appeal to a recently literate general public, are appropriately termed 'popular fiction'. ... There is a unity in the scientific thought of the period, based on common interest in evolutionary and racial theory and the nature of 'armchair anthropology', and there is a unity in the political interests of the time, in the concern with overseas territory and the eventual emergence of an empire. (Street 2021a [2018])

As noted above, Brian's work in this period prefigures debates on the poetics and politics of representation that have come to the fore in anthropology since the 1980s. In the above-quoted publication, he brings the analysis up to the present moment, arguing that the conversation between anthropology and literature continues to be both a fertile and a challenging one. Along the way, he notes the appearance of the now-classic collection *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus eds. 1986) as a landmark moment in this conversation, marking a theoretical 'turn' which propelled mainstream anthropology in new directions, but which is also rooted in the thematic connections of the past:

A number of authors in this edited volume [*Writing Culture*] analyze classic examples of cultural description, from Goethe and Catlin to Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, and Le Roy Ladurie, showing the persistence of allegorical patterns and rhetorical tropes. Anthropology is here presented as located in the postmodern world system rather than the old imperial world within which the discipline emerged; and authors in this volume challenge all writers in the humanities and social sciences to rethink the poetics and politics of cultural invention. Here the relationship between the academic discipline and fiction is highlighted, its history is noted ..., and practitioners are called on to recognize the complexity and overlap to be found as they engage in 'writing culture.' (Street 2021a [2018]).

There are yet more ways in which I believe Brian's early scholarship in literature and anthropology feeds forward into some of our present-day disciplinary concerns. As he showed, there was an entanglement of issues within which anthropology, popular literature and indeed imperial governance were enmeshed, in their differing ways, during the Victorian period in England. Prominent among these was that of diversity: how to comprehend, describe, and in an imperial frame, how to rule, 'other' peoples. Mainstream social anthropology, of course, soon moved definitively away from the cruder versions of evolutionary race theories of the nineteenth century. But while vocabularies have changed and colonialism and imperial expansionism have long ceased to be respectable as overt political doctrines, 'othering' has remained a theoretical concern for anthropology; and governments and public policy continue to be exercised over how to engage with – and sometimes how to confront politically – the 'others' of our own age frequently perceived by decision-makers as incomprehensible, or implacable. Within anthropology too, contemporary voices – including Brian's own – have been calling for a more explicit theoretical recognition of the discipline's entanglements with popular imaginations, fictions and public discourses, *y compris* popular representations of the exoticised 'other' and the mediating role of 'public intellectuals' in constructing and deconstructing such perceptions (Callan 2013, Callan 2017, Callan and Street 2010, Eriksen 2006). This newer vision of anthropology as a pursuit enmeshed in many layers of the 'lay' and public imaginations, is in my view thematically connected with, and directly indebted to, *The Savage in Literature* and the debates it has stimulated.

Literacies: an ethnographic approach

When I went to Iran in the 1970s to undertake anthropological field research, I did not go to study 'literacy' but I found myself living in a mountain village where a great deal of literacy activity was going on. (Street 1984, cited in Heath, Shirley and Brian Street 2008, pp 55-57; and Callan et al (eds) 2013 pp 58-63)

In 1970, after completing his doctorate, Brian went to Iran to conduct fieldwork in a mountain village outside Mashhad. His initial interest was caught by the contradictions between prevailing academic and bureaucratic notions of literacy, and the actual reading and writing practices that were embedded in everyday life. This drew his ethnographic attention to the complex relationships between the 'literacies' inscribed in the then-new government education system, Quranic schools, and everyday trading practices (Street, Alice 2017, unpubl). These initial observations gave direction to much of his subsequent work on varieties of literacy displayed in real environments. In an unusually (for the time) self-revealing account, he later recorded his own intellectual journey from prior knowledge based on text, to the ethnographic unravelling of practice. In his own words again:

Maybe part of my interest derived from having done my first degree in English literature. I had moved into anthropology because of dissatisfaction with looking only at 'texts'... I arrived in Iran as my field site already excited by the ways that writing and anthropology could be brought together... I was drawn then to the conceptual and rhetorical issues involved in representing the variety and complexity of literacy activities at a time when my encounter with people outside of the village suggested the dominant representation was of 'illiterate' backward villagers. Looking more closely at village life ... I saw not only a lot of literacy going on but several quite different 'practices' associated with literacy ... Versions of literacy by outside agencies (eg State education, UNESCO and national literacy campaigns) did not capture these complex variations in literacy happening in one small locale where the people were generally characterised as 'illiterate'. (Street 1984, op cit)

Brian's work during the 1970s and later addressed and challenged a prevailing binary opposition between 'orality' and 'literacy', with the latter seen as a necessary precondition for 'development' and 'modernity'. To this view, Brian opposed what he termed an 'ideological' model, which sees literacy as "social practice, always variable and 'taken hold of' by individuals, groups and societies in ways that are consistent with deeply entrenched social and cultural patterns and values" (Kell 2021 [2018]). This shift brings with it a recognition of multiple 'literacies', and a challenge for fieldworkers to pay theoretical attention to reading and writing practices in all their diverse contexts. A good example of the force of this recognition, as well as its immediate implications for models of education and development, is a comparative study of literacy and numeracy in Ethiopia conducted by Brian in conjunction with adult education specialists (Gebre et al 2009). In this study, adult educators were given some ethnographic training and sent into public spaces to observe signs, languages and scripts being used in streets and market places. Brian himself had observed that many Isuzu lorries on the airport road to Addis Abbaba carried the word 'Isuzu' in both English and Arabic scripts (Street, pers comm) and this had sensitised him to 'the experience of being literate in Ethiopia' (Gebre et al 2009, pp 15-16). Generalising this and similar observations, Gebre et al conclude:

An ethnographic approach to literacy ... does not start by assuming that people are not literate. Rather, it seeks to discover what literacy activities there are in any society and how different people relate to these activities... Are they using literacy in some ways? There are many different modes of communication, but people may not use all of them; which mode a person uses is a choice, whether conscious or unconscious. Our researches have shown that there are local literacy and numeracy practices... that have been overlooked. When adult and non-formal educators try to persuade people to become 'literate', the question arises: Which literacy? ... If we walk around the town of Bahir Dar, what can we learn about literacy practices? Are local people taking for granted that signs will be written in a number of different languages and scripts? ... Which script is used for which kind of sign? Local people are making choices all the time but visitors need help with understanding what they mean. (Gebre et al 2009, pp 15-16)

Since the 1970s, literacy studies have expanded and diversified beyond measure, in large degree inspired by Brian's ideological model and the multiple, situated, literacies which it brings to attention. From roughly the 1980s onwards, what became known as New Literacy Studies (NLS) took shape, together with the associated concepts of 'literacy events' and 'literacy practices'. Kell argues that:

Together this set of concepts formed an elegant and parsimonious theoretical framework for the study of literacy, with high explanatory power, which was valid in explorations of literacy across different time periods, social and cultural groups, different languages and in multilingual contexts. (Kell 2021 [2018])

Brian's work through the 1980s and 90s continued to lie at the heart of these developments, and influenced scholars across a broad swathe of the social disciplines. According to Kell again:

First- and second-generation literacy studies were characterised largely by three main approaches toward understanding multiplicity and variation in literacy practices. ... First, literacy practices could be seen to be associated with different social and cultural groups. Second, different literacy practices could be associated with different contexts of use or domains of practice, and this is where the idea of sectors, such as religion, health, development, bureaucracy, and education, comes in ... Third, literacy practices can be associated with contestation in the intellectual and social spaces of groups or societies, as a result of [differing histories and interests]. (Kell 2021 [2018])

Among the dimensions of literacy brought to the fore by the New Literacy Studies approach was a political one: that literacies are deeply connected to structures of power and inequality. The ideological – and indeed political – correlates of literacies continued to be a strong theme of Brian's scholarship during and after the 1980s. A good illustration here is that of academic literacies: a conceptual frame within which a body of scholarship has emerged around academic reading and writing in higher education. Over time, Brian and a group of associates, based mainly at Kings College London, have documented the intersections of academic literacies with modes of knowledge construction – in effect epistemologies – in different disciplines (see e.g., Lea and Street 1998). To cite Kell once more, multiple literacies can be seen as:

... repeated configurations of literacy practices within particular domains of practice and in stratified economies of signs and symbols. Some literacies therefore become more dominant and institutionalised than others, with schooled and academic literacies carrying tremendous potential for social stratification and reproduction of inequalities. (Kell 2021 [2018])

Anthropology 'in' and 'of' education; anthropology beyond the academy

As seen above, academic literacies, and the forms of normative discipline in the use of language that are applied to students as a condition of educational 'success', constituted a major thread of Brian's work and that of his associates through the 1990s. An extensive body of research and analysis has also taken wing internationally within the frame of New Literacy Studies (Kell 2021 [2018]). Most recently, the concept of 'superdiversity' has come to the fore, in a drive to capture the unpredictable consequences for literacies of global forces such as mass migration, transnational linguistic environments and digital communication (Street 2021a [2018]). Running alongside this thread, and interweaving with it, are two broader themes which Brian himself frequently termed 'anthropology "in" and anthropology "of" education' (see e.g., Street 2013). While the configuration may be slightly different in the US (see e.g., Bloome et al 2021 [2018]), these labels as now understood within the UK relate, respectively, to the inclusion of anthropological content in educational curricula, and to the deployment of anthropological methods – such as classroom ethnography – in the study of educational policies and practices. The terms were originally coined in the US by Green and Bloome (1997); most recently, Bloome and colleagues have expanded the phrase to become 'Anthropology *of* education, anthropology *in* education and anthropology *for* education' (Bloome et al. 2021 [2018]; emphasis mine). The addition of 'for', here signals a role for anthropology in 'the enactment of educational change' (Bloome et al. op. cit). A vigorous transatlantic conversation has grown around these formulations. Again, Brian has been a key figure in this conversation; in part through his institutional links with the University of Pennsylvania (where he was a Visiting Professor for many years and ran regular summer schools), and also through his close association with the Council on Anthropology and Education within the American Anthropological Association and with individual colleagues in the US such as Shirley Brice Heath and Teresa McCarty whose work intersected with his own (Street, pers. comm). The historical and political contexts of the work differ somewhat between the USA and UK – for example, constructions of 'race' and of educational disadvantage are very different in the two environments – but nevertheless, collaboration has thrived across the Atlantic, both institutionally and personally.

The distinction between anthropology 'in' and 'of' education remains a heuristically valuable one. Experience in the UK suggests, however, that the interconnections *across* these constructs are also significant. The point is well illustrated by the history of the anthropology A-level qualification in the UK (a standard university entrance credential) over the first decade and a half of the present century. This has been extensively documented elsewhere (see e.g., Callan and Street 2010, Callan 2013, Street 2013, and especially articles in 'The Anthropology A-level': *Teaching Anthropology* Special Issue 2016, vol 6); and does not need to be recounted here. However, it is worth recalling that the anthropology A-level, as part of a broader project to develop anthropology *in* education,

had a long pre-history, in which Brian played a key role together with the then Education Committee of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

During the 1980s, there was some convergence of values (albeit contested) between anthropology and the general climate of educational policy in the UK. This allowed some educators, teachers and anthropologists to cooperate in strategies to draw on anthropological perspectives in teaching and curriculum development. This in turn, in line with Brian's longstanding commitment to multiple literacies and contextualised approaches to educational practice, encouraged a shift from 'deficit' models of teaching in multicultural environments towards a more nuanced awareness of what goes on in the classroom and how diversity can be harnessed for educational enrichment:

... [government reports on education were ... perceived as focusing on 'problems' and 'deficits' among ethnic minority children, whether with language or with learning. Anthropologists on the RAI Education Committee believed that the discipline offered a more sophisticated approach to such issues, eschewing 'deficit' in favour of 'diversity', and recognising that language varieties could be strengths rather than 'problems'. (Callan and Street 2010)

As noted, this was not a view universally held by anthropologists, and the initiatives were largely lost through the 1990s until they were reinvigorated a decade later. Shifts in the broader political climate in Britain also made it harder to build bridges of this kind in the later period. But reaching back to the agenda-setting work of Brian and others in the 1980s, there arose later a natural convergence between anthropology 'in' and 'of' education. This was a moment when, it seemed, anthropological perspectives within the design and delivery of school curricula (anthropology *in* education) could both draw on, and feed into, anthropologically informed approaches to educational systems themselves (anthropology *of* education).

The convergence became even more marked from 2003 onwards when the RAI's Education Committee was re-established under Brian's chairmanship and established a broadly-based educational outreach programme, which included (but was not limited to) the creation and launch of the anthropology A-Level. On the one front, this was clearly an exercise in anthropology *in* education. On the other, the process of constructing the programme and negotiating its adoption forced reflexive ethnographic thought, within the mixed Committee of academic anthropologists, teachers, educational administrators and others – and to some extent within the disciplinary community at large – about how anthropology could learn to 'speak for itself' to multiple audiences in education and the wider spheres of national policy and regulation (for a discussion see e.g., Callan 2013; Callan 2021 [2018]). This parallel exercise in what we can certainly think of as anthropology *of* education, has in turn been closely linked to a commitment to expand the reach and relevance of anthropological ideas to wider publics beyond academia. Brian's leadership, both intellectual and organisational, was and remains critical to making and sustaining this connection. His own contributions to both theorising, and operationalising, anthropology 'in', 'of' and 'for' education, signal his longstanding commitment to a role for anthropology beyond the narrow domain of university based teaching and research. The work is ongoing, across the transatlantic axis and also on a more global scale, as evidenced by the recent creation within the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) of a Scientific Commission on Anthropology and Education chaired by the current Director of the RAI. Callan and Street, writing of the post-2003 period (but before the decision to discontinue the A-level) made the idealistic case thus:

In the present climate, the arguments for what anthropology might contribute to education are rather different from those of that earlier period [the 1980s]. In an era when global understanding and recognition of diverse ways of seeing the world are of critical social, political and economic importance, anthropology can play a central role in broadening the range and scope of education ... Themes that anthropology brings to bear within education include understandings of the relationship between local and global processes, unity and diversity in human life, personhood, ethnic identity, colonialism and racism, stereotyping, exoticism, [and] representation of 'otherness'. (Callan and Street 2010).

Mass Observation, the 'Right to Write' and the democratisation of knowledge

The Mass Observation project in the UK was initiated in the 1930s, inspired by Tom Harrisson (an anthropologist), Charles Madge, and Humphrey Jennings. The early phase (1937 to the early 1950s) was followed by a fallow period, after which the project was revived in the early 1980s. It continues to flourish within the University of Sussex Special Collections with new material being collected, archived, made available for research, and published on a continuing basis. The founding idea was:

... to provide a source of everyday experience from 'ordinary people' whose diaries, recorded observations, and responses to questions about their lives drew on everyday participant observation. This can be seen as a classic example of the ethnographic perspective that had mostly been applied overseas but had now come home. (Street 2021b [2018]).

During his time at Sussex, Brian became closely involved with the Mass Observation project and archive, together with David Pocock, then Professor of Social Anthropology who spearheaded the project's revival in the 1980s, and Dorothy Sheridan, who later became its director. Brian himself was deeply committed to the aims of the project, serving as a Trustee for a number of years until 2010. In a retrospective essay on Mass Observation (Street 2021b [2018]; see also Sheridan 2005; Sheridan et al 2000) Brian discusses the twentieth-century historical connections between anthropology and Mass Observation; and highlights the associated debates and tensions within anthropology itself. Foremost among these were concerns regarding the 'scientific' status of anthropology, claims to professional authority, and entitlement to 'do ethnography'. The concept of an 'anthropology of ourselves', blurring the then-conventional distance between observer and observed, aroused anxieties in a number of quarters, as did the notion that 'ordinary people' – 'amateurs' - could be entrusted to write material that would be of ethnographic interest. Among mainstream anthropologists of Mass Observation's early period, there was both support and criticism of its methods and claims. Thus, according to Brian's own analysis:

Some of the leading anthropologists of the day in the United Kingdom, Bronislaw Malinowski and Raymond Firth, took serious note of Mass Observation's claims to be 'an anthropology of ourselves'. They delivered some powerful criticisms that have remained in the memory of the discipline and still colour its relationship to the project. The concerns of the discipline at that time with professionalisation of the study of society, with the elaboration of case study methods, with the genre of ethnography, and with the relationship of objective to subjective modes of inquiry, were all germane to the development of Mass Observation. (Street 2021b [2018]).

The ambivalences in the relationship ran deep throughout Mass Observation's early life. Thus:

Such an approach [that of Mass Observation] can be seen as 'democratic' in the sense that 'ordinary' people have access to methods and perspectives normally the preserve of specialists in the discipline of anthropology (or sociology); or, alternatively, as more akin to popular journalism, lacking the theoretical and methodological rigour of the academic disciplines. (Street 2021b *ibid*)

In the wake of the revival of Mass Observation in the early 1980s, Brian argues that the turn towards a 'more reflexive and interpretative frame' within anthropology (cf. Clifford and Marcus 1986, as noted above) made possible new connections between the discipline itself and Mass Observation (Street 2021b *ibid*). Under David Pocock's leadership and influence, the concept of 'personal anthropologies' (Pocock 1975) gained traction within mainstream anthropology, and offered a link with a Mass Observation that was also exploring ways to recognise and legitimate the construction of meanings by 'ordinary people'.

In reflecting on Brian's longstanding engagement with Mass Observation, what most stands out is his insistence on the entitlements of 'ordinary people' to write and to be read; and the matching obligation of scholarly disciplines to find interpretative frames within which diverse voices can be 'heard' and given effect. This thrust towards the democratisation of knowledge production is of course entirely consistent with themes elsewhere throughout Brian's work and teaching: such as his deconstruction of polarised concepts of 'literacy', his key contributions in the area of New Literacy Studies, and his many-layered engagement with anthropology in, of and for education.

In conclusion: Brian and the ethics, diplomacy and pragmatics of anthropology

Implicit through much of the foregoing is a set of concerns running throughout Brian's work, and having to do with ethics and practicality as well as with scholarship. Thus the shift from a 'deficit' model of literacy requiring 'remedial' measures to one which recognises the diversity and contextuality of language use, has clear implications for student support, whether at school, university or adult-education level. It also offers a moral counter to the tendency to 'write off' students and communities whose use of language fails to accord with norms taken for granted and assumed to be universal by a dominant educational culture. Brian's work with the Mass Observation project in Britain also brings this democratising theme to the fore, in related ways. His educational outreach work – notably in the UK as Chair of the RAI's Education Committee and prime mover in the construction of a comprehensive pre-university education programme in anthropology – drew on his

capacities for tactful leadership, coordination of effort, consensus-building, and effective negotiation with powerful and sceptical decision-makers at national level. Elsewhere (Callan 2013) I have noted the consequent challenge to anthropology reflexively to incorporate this positioning within its own theoretical apparatus; and have referred to the composite whole as the ‘diplomacy of anthropology’. Brian himself (pers. comm.) endorsed this construction in the course of many discussions.

Without ever (to my knowledge) laying formal claim to do so, Brian pursued an anthropology that had – and has – a strong public purpose and impact. His work in the areas I have outlined was living testimony to the contribution of a critical anthropology to issues of literacy, education and knowledge production in a globalised world. Outside academic and professional domains he was actively engaged in parallel work for the public good; for example as long-serving President of the British Association for Literacy in Development (BALID) which works globally in association with other NGOs to promote literacy as a human right. Throughout adult life he had a gift for friendship, which in his world was coterminous with teaching, learning and public engagement. His legacy will be that of a seminal scholar and teacher in the many fields he touched and shaped; and also as a leading actor in that strand of anthropology that stresses its necessary presence in the wider contemporary world.

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