

| R e p r i n t |



“Remote areas” Some theoretical considerations

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I hope that this title will be pleasantly misleading. I have gone behind the theme of this conference, to the idea of places, or peoples, or locations, that anthropologists have considered to be ‘fit’ for their study. For, if there is anything controversial about the idea of the social anthropologist working at home, or relatively near home, it is because some may fear that the very nature of the subject may therefore be transformed out of all recognition. There is clearly something in the idea that distance lends enhancement, if not enchantment, to the anthropological vision. Yet the work in Europe, for example, has clearly yielded results of great general interest. This paper therefore starts from a deliberately obscure and ill-defined term: ‘remote’. I choose it from the natural language, and show that in an anthropological sense it can be ‘unpacked’ in rather striking ways. This paper is related to my basic theoretical papers on the nature of social space (Ardener 1975, 1978). I shall refer to the new concept of ‘event-density’ or ‘event-richness’, which (since the space is analysable at all levels in essentially the same way) is the event-homologue of the phenomenon of ‘semantic-density’ described in the concluding parts of my recent paper on social anthropology and reality (Ardener 1982). ‘Semantic density’ is a statistical feature, at the point where definition and measurement intersect and collapse together. We have a number of difficult paths leading away from us, so let us start.¹

Publisher’s note: This is a reprint of Edwin Ardener, 1987, “‘Remote areas’: some theoretical considerations.” In *Anthropology at Home*, edited by Anthony Jackson, 38–54. ASA Monographs 25, London and New York: Tavistock Publications. We are grateful to the ASA for granting us the right to reprint it. We remind the reader that we retain the style of the original. The original pagination is indicated in the text in square brackets.

- 1 This is a paper of some degree of abstraction. It is not an account of the Western Isles, but it should not, despite the terminology, be other than obvious to Gaels. It takes a great deal of explanation, they will be aware, to state the facts to those outwith.

The problem of identity

It will be no surprise that interest in 'minorities', 'embedded groups', 'plural societies', and the like, has led us to problems of definition. The term 'ethnicity' was a useful step on the road, which produced its own difficulties. The resort to 'identity', as a term, was an attempt to restore the self-definitional element that seemed to be inherent in the idea of 'ethnicity', but which was shared by [39] entities other than ethnicities as normally conceived = many kinds of entities have identities. As far as 'minorities' are concerned, majorities are just as important for our comprehension of this problem. We know (at least since Ferguson in 1767) that the definition of entities by mutual (binary) opposition is part of the point.² There is always the danger, however, that we may run the risk of so relativizing the distinction that we forget the original problem. The excellent volume called *Belonging* (Cohen 1982) has a title from a fuzzy part of the English lexicon which leaves all options open.

Let me remind you of the statement, that 'among the many things that society *is* or *is like*, it *is* or *is like* identity' (Ardener and Ardener 1965). The social is, in virtue of its categorizing and classifying structures, a space that 'identifies'. It is a chief source of any concept that we severally have of identity. That there is a multiplicity of identities that coexist together from any single perspective is not strictly speaking a problem theoretically. It is one of the proofs — and one of the costs — of the apparent paradox of the continuity between the space and the individuals that constitute it. They are defined by the space and are nevertheless the defining consciousness of the space.

We hear now a great deal about 'reflexivity'. Before that word loses its concreteness, let us remember that (to state it oversimply) our heads are full of categories generated by the social, which we project back upon the social. Perhaps, in the 'normal course of events' (as we put it), the 'native actor' does not perceive this interaction, for the social space is not for him or her an 'object', except intermittently. For the non-native social anthropologist the act of interacting with an alien social space, even relatively successfully, forms the basis of that 'daily experience of *mis*understanding'³ (at not only the ethnographic level but the theoretical level) which is the undoubted source of our greater readiness to see the space as object (of study), and thus, like Durkheim, to see 'social facts as things'. To treat the social space as object is almost literally child's play, when it is located in unfamiliar scenes and is already, in any case, predefined as 'other' in relation to our own world. 'Reflexivity' has become a popular, as opposed to a specialist, term in social anthropology as those conditions have changed. The task has not changed, however, save in that the individual/social interaction must be more

2 Adam Ferguson wrote, in *An Essay in the History of Civil Society* (1767: 31): 'The titles of *fellow citizen* and *countryman* unopposed to those of *alien* and *foreigner*, to which they refer, would fall into disuse, and lose their meaning.' This had a great influence on Evans-Pritchard (see Pocock 1961: 78; Ardener 1971: lix). Despite this, an ESRC correspondent referred to it as a recent and untried theory.

3 Ardener 1971: xvii. Also: 'Even the most exemplary technical approach to language would not in fact have solved the basic problem of communication. The anthropological "experience" derives from the apprehension of a critical lack of fit of (at least) two entire world-views, one to the other.'

minutely scrutinized. The currency of the term arises from an increase in theoretical awareness. It will no doubt acquire soft-centred connotations and be abandoned as the situation which produced it becomes commonplace. Nevertheless, it should not be confused with ‘subjectivity’.

There was a time when the relativity of cultural categories was raised to a philosophical bogey as ‘relativism’. Anthropology was then discovering a mismatch between the categories of the observer and those generated by the purported object – other people. When the differences are more subtle, the gap is narrower between these two; the mismatch is virtually simultaneous. Since mismatch *is* our experience of relativity, then the reduction of ‘transmission time’ (between the observer and the purported object) and the [40] narrowing of the mismatch (between the categories of the observer and the other), demonstrates that the process that we first called relativization is *not* a form of anti-objectivity, but (as its application to ‘familiar’ experience more clearly shows) is on the contrary our only mode of objectivization. This is quite an important theoretical proof of what has for social anthropologists been intuitively sensed, and it will be illustrated in the treatment that follows.⁴

Remoteness: some phenomenology

After these essential preliminaries, I start here from another English term: ‘remote’. For the moment it has no theoretical taint (sadly we may change that situation). I wish, by using it, to recapture the feature that started the personal interest of many anthropologists in their traditional areas of study. Elsewhere, I have pointed out that, for Europe, ‘remote areas’ of the globe have had a different conceptual geography, and have been perceived to exist on a different time-scale from the ‘central’ areas (Ardener 1975, 1985). But we are not now opening up a familiar ‘centre/periphery’ discussion – if only for the reason that most such discussion depends on an acceptance of known centres with known peripheries. On the contrary, the age of discovery showed us that the ‘remote’ was actually compounded of ‘imaginary’ as well as ‘real’ places; yet they were all of equal conceptual reality or unreality before the differences were revealed. ‘Brazil’, ‘California’, ‘India’, ‘Africa’, ‘Libya’, ‘Ethiopia’ – all were to one extent or other imagined (names ransacked from various sources), yet all were located eventually

4 There is endless useless confusion between relativity and relativization on the one hand, and a chimera called (usually by non-anthropologists) ‘cultural relativism’ on the other. Like many contemporaries (cf. Gellner 1983; Edwards 1985) I am not a ‘*cultural relativist*’. The very act of the comparison of cultures implies the existence of appropriate canons of comparison. By those canons judgements can be made. The relativity of social worlds is a mere fact, beyond all judgements: they are constructed differently, not equally. It is, of course, inappropriate to charge a culture with inferiority because it has few hue terms, or does not separate arm from hand terminologically. Judgements may, however, be made about the ‘adequacy’ of a terminological system. It is sufficient evidence to support this assertion to point out that judgements of inadequacy are daily made, even *within* a culture. Thus doctors devised anatomical terms, and artists construct colour charts. It is not great step further to assert, if we want to: ‘cultures are extremely unequal in their cognitive power’ (Gellner 1968: 401). The sentence remains, of course, a sentence in our language.

in limited and specific places.⁵ Occasionally we are conscious of a loss. Almost the most imaginary of all: the Antipodes (once the outlet of the Celtic Other World, and a home of King Arthur), and Australia (Terra Australis), are now almost the most mundane of all.⁶ On the other hand, and conversely, pockets of imaginary places have remained still unrealized within the European centre. When the far Antarctic was made real, Brittany and the Gaels were still 'unrealized', still 'removed' from the canons of Western realities, or indeed *remote* (Latin *removeo*). In the West, we are 'space specialists': we easily realize our conceptual spaces as physical spaces – for that is, in many respects, the European theme. 'Remote' areas are, for us, conventionally physically removed, but this obscures the conceptual phenomena associated with 'remoteness', which are real enough for biological anthropologists (for example) to perceive commuter-ridden villages of Otmoor (5-10 miles from Oxford) as 'remote'.

Let me begin from a naïve point of view, with a little personal anthropology. The fact has frequently been noted that the discipline of social anthropology itself belongs to a part of the 'academic vocabulary' that is concerned with marginality, regarded from a Western perspective. In that sense, anywhere an anthropologist chooses to go is likely to show the quality I have just called 'remoteness'. There are, however, interesting nuances. I [41] went first to the Ibo of South-Eastern Nigeria. It had, however, been expected that I would go to the Plateau area of Central-Northern Nigeria. I had read all the available literature on the many peoples of that zone at the International African Institute in Waterloo Place, guided by the quizzical attentions of Miss Barbara Pym, the then unpublished novelist, who was then embarking on her own peculiar fieldwork.⁷ In the event, the Nigerian government vetoed the worker who was going to the Ibo, and I went there instead. I did not personally like the change, for various reasons, and strangely, the Ibo never came to seem 'remote' to me. The Plateau certainly *had* seemed so. It was not that the Ibo were lacking in conventionally exotic features. In fact, no people were more 'anthropological' or 'ethnographical' in other ways than the Ibo, but they never fitted the qualities I now examine in retrospect as 'remote'. Of course, once there, parts of Ibo country began themselves to acquire the purely topographical characteristics of 'remoteness' – places more than walking distance, then more than cycling distance, then places in the north and north-west of the area. Nevertheless, I now see that the Ibo were, in the particular sense I am trying to unpack, essentially definers of remoteness in *others*, although with normally

5 'Brazil' was a red dye-wood; later an imaginary Atlantic island was so named in maps; even after it was located in South America, a non-existent 'Brazil Rock' remained on British Admiralty charts until the second half of the nineteenth century. California was then taken from a story of 1510, published in Madrid; it was near the Indies and the terrestrial paradise. India: variously placed, particularly in Indonesia and the Antilles. Libya: once Africa. Africa: once Tunisia. Ethiopia: once any African land occupied by people with 'burnt faces'.

6 See Loomis (1956: 61-76) for the Arthurian Antipodes, and once more the terrestrial paradise.

7 Barbara Pym included known anthropologists and African linguists in several of her novels, in particular *Less than Angels* (1955), or as composite characters ('Everard Bone', and the like).

unperceived pockets of internal remoteness — in a way, rather like England itself. Indeed, taken as a whole, Southern Nigeria has that quality, compared with certain other African countries. For the moment, I am merely trying to pinpoint the quality; what I mean may become clearer if one opposes Nigeria to the Cameroons, which are, in contrast, commonly experienced as 'remote' — not only by me, but by almost everyone else who visits the country, and it retains this quality even when after ten or twenty years you are an 'expert' in the area. The more expert, the lonelier you seem to become. To know the Cameroons well is to feel that you are outliving your contemporaries. The Cameroons does not become less 'remote': you become more and more remote yourself. Perhaps this condition is, at a higher level of opposition, one that is characteristic of all anthropologists — as against (say) sociologists. I am feeling towards the statement that although there are always 'real' centres, and 'real' peripheries which move relative to each other, there is an added feature of a more puzzling kind.

There are certainly some topographical elements that are relevant. Mountains conventionally add to the 'remoteness' experience, but so very frequently do plains, forests, and rivers — so much so that the inhabitants of 'unremote' places sometimes say that they do not have 'real' mountains, plains, forests, or rivers — only something else, hills (say), woods, or streams. Contrariwise, some areas (like Brittany) call their hills 'mountains'. The Scots, resisting the 'remote' vocabulary, perhaps, call their mountains 'hills'. The actual geography is not the overriding feature — it is obviously necessary that 'remoteness' has a position in topographical space, but it is defined within a *topological* space whose features are expressed in a cultural vocabulary. The Bakweri of Cameroon cannot really be said to be objectively remote from the [42] coastal belt of that country. Their more elevated settlements overlook an area of superficial commercial modernization and the sea. Yet they live up the Cameroon Mountain, and the higher seems to be the remoter in this elastic semantic realm.

With the Cameroons we are getting close to the problem I want to discuss. For example, the feature I describe of 'remoteness' (this term you see now is a label for something which is only gradually casting its shadow in language during my exposition) persists when it has lost its geographical correlates — that is, when the 'remote' area has been reached, and when it should now be merely present. Thus people would visit the Cameroons, and (as it were) stagger in to see us as if they had surmounted vast odds; as if the Cameroons had a protective barrier. Yet, from the inside outwards, there was an almost exaggerated contrary sense of the *absence* of any barrier to the world — a peculiar sense of excessive vulnerability, of ease of entry. With every improvement of communication over the decades, the more speedily did people appear to pour in uninvited; and yet the more they seemed to be on the last stages of an expedition to some Everest that terminated in the middle of your floor. That is a law of 'remote' areas — the basic paradox, for that is how you know you are in one. The West still maintains ideals of such places. 'Shangri La' is an image used by French visitors to the former British Cameroons, and by United Nations visitors to both Cameroons. You know you are 'remote' by the intense quality of the gaze of visitors, by a certain steely determination, by a slightly frenetic air, as if their clocks and yours move at different rates. Perhaps this is why the native of such an area sometimes feels strangely invisible — the visitors seem to blunder past, even through him. I think that to formulate this point you have to have stayed for very long successive periods in various spaces, in order to

separate out this quality, which I take to be a real one and connected to the experience of time. It is, of course, a conceptual experience. The one-way invisible barrier is a singularity of in the social space, which I have mapped already in formal terms in the Munro lecture (Ardener 1975).

Yet, as I have mentioned, remoteness does not appear to protect the 'remote areas'. In the Cameroons we penetrated more and more parts which, on the ordinary level of the relativity of conventional geographical remoteness, were remote even in the Cameroons. There were areas so 'remote' anthropologically that there was nothing written on them. Yet, when reached, they seemed totally exposed to the outer world: they were continually in contact with it. Why were they not known equally to 'the world'? Remote areas turn out to be like gangster hide-outs — full of activity, and of half-recognized faces. As the years went by, we had the choice of the blankest part of the Cameroon map: the Fungom area of the Bamenda Plateau, and within that area the Chiefdom of Esu. A thatched house was built on a hill, round which the village-capital nestled. The paradox of living in that blank area summed up the experience of remoteness very well, some of [43] which I shall touch on soon. For the moment I will note that an uncompleted dirt road led to a log over a stream, and a path that wound up that hobbit-like hill. From its top any distant Land-Rover could be heard approaching for miles, its cloud of dust being visible for further miles, until its minuscule occupants alighted and began their ominous ascent, gathering children and helpers as they came.

To the strange arrivals the village was either a scene of 'traditional hospitality of a simple highland folk' or the location of incomprehensible reticences. The very act of having arrived was its own justification. Years later, the new arrivals were a unit of gendarmerie, for this was the remote area of all remote areas for the new Francophone government and, like all areas of this peculiar type, not only perceived to be Shangri La but also the home of purported smugglers and spies. How shall the inhabitants of a 'remote area' evaluate the arbitrary love-hate of its visitors? Are alternating periods of 'unspoiledness' and violence their inevitable fate? After the destructions of one generation of strangers how is it that they are asked to play the role of ideal society to the next, before being unthinkingly redeveloped or underdeveloped out of existence by the next? The history of remoteness in Cameroon merges historically into the universal history of political states; my discussion is to show its minimal reflection in 'states of mind'.

The cognoscenti will recognize by now that Western Scotland is an area in which canonical levels of 'remoteness' are to be found. Indeed some may suspect that this has been an elaborate way of introducing the really basic economic and political factors. Such important matters as the Highland Clearances, for example, cannot surely derive from mere conceptualizations? That would be a false opposition, although the improver of the Duchess of Sutherland's estates, the well-known James Loch, was fired with high levels of what looks suspiciously like conceptualization: late-eighteenth-century ideas of betterment, much more powerful than malice. And what conceptualizations fired the undoubted and more easily handled villains of the piece like the factor, Patrick Sellar?⁸ Those old ladies

8 The Highland Clearances were already under way at the time of Samuel Johnson's visit to the inner isles in 1776. The sagacious doctor greatly blamed the landlords for encouraging emigrations. In some sense they are still going on. The period for which the term is notorious, some time between 1790 and 1860, was marked as such precisely

carried out of their houses so that the thatch could be burned: beware of being a conceptualization in another person's mind!

The great contribution of Malcolm Chapman's book, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture* (1978), was to approach this point from its literary expression. A Gael once asked in a poem: 'Cò sgrìobh mi?' ('Who wrote me?'). When the anthropologist Chapman with the freshness of inexperience innocently replied, 'Oh, didn't you know?: it was Macpherson, Arnold, Renan, the Edinburgh intellectuals . . .', all hell broke loose. Professor Derick Thomson, in his incarnation as Ruairaidh MacThomais, had himself often asked the same question, but he did not like *that* answer.⁹ The reasons are understandable as we shall see,

because of its *ideological* nature. The Duchess of Sutherland's commissioner, James Loch, wrote: 'It was one of the vast changes which the progress of the times demand and will have, and I shall feel ever grateful that I have had so much to do with (these) measures' (cited in Richards 1982: 185). At ground level the Morayshire agricultural entrepreneur, Patrick Sellar, with his colleague, William Young, provided a practical sense of purpose to the implementation of the fashionable ideas after 1809. 'It was during these removals (in Strathnaver) 'that Patrick Sellar was alleged to have set fire to houses and barns, and caused the deaths of several people, including a nonagenarian woman called Chisholm. He was brought to trial and acquitted in 1816' (Richards 1982: 312).

Derick Thomson writes, in his well-known poem, 'Srath Nabhair':

'Agus sud a'bhliadhna cuideachd
a shlaod iad a' chailleach do'n sitig,
a shealltain cho còlach 's a bha iad air an Fhìrinn,
oir bha nìd aig eunlaith an adhair
(agus cròthan aig na caoraich)
ged nach robh àit aice-se anns an cuireadh i a ceann fòidhpe.'

In his own translation: 'And that too was the year/ they hauled the old woman out onto the dung heap,/ to demonstrate how knowledgeable they were in scripture,/ for the birds of the air had nests/ (and the sheep had folds)/ though she had no place in which to lay down her head' (Macaulay 1976: 153).

9 The line is from Iain Mac a' Ghobhain:

'Cò sgrìobh mi? Cò tha dèanamh bàrdachd
shanas-reice de mo chnàmhan?
Togaidh mi mo dhòrn gorm ruitha:
'Gàidheal calma le a chànan.'

'Who wrote me? Who is making a poetry/of advertisements from my bones?/I will raise my blue fist to them:/ "The stout Highlander with his language"' (Macaulay 1976: 179).

Derick Thomson writes:

'Cha do dh'aithnich mi 'm brèid Beurla,
an liomh Gallda bha dol air an fhiodh,
cha do leugh mi na facail air a' phràis,
cha do thuig mi gu robh mo chinneadh a' dol bàs.'

'I did not recognize the English braid,/ The Lowland varnish being applied to the wood,/ I did not read the words on the brass,/ I did not understand that my race was dying' (Macaulay 1976: 157).

The Glasgow and Edinburgh reviewers of Chapman's book were unnecessarily outraged, but see the careful consideration, in two long articles by James Shaw Grant, in the *Stornoway Gazette* (1978), and the appreciative review by Parman in *Man*.

for Chapman, in showing how the very definition of Celticity and Gaeldom was inescapably tainted at source, and how the imposition of it had led to a 'symbolic expropriation' of the [44] Gaelic identity, seemed to ignore the experienced reality of being a Gael. Nevertheless, for the first time, the paradox of Gaeldom was brought out from the comfortably drifting layers of binary oppositions: development/underdevelopment, traditional/modern, centre/periphery, that had covered it for years like the soft patter of autumn leaves.

A similar experience occurred for Maryon McDonald (1982) among the Bretons.¹⁰ In her case she showed brilliantly how the Breton militant language movement coexisted uneasily with the native speakers who were cast as ideal types by their kaftan-wearing admirers. This time it was the militants who filled the newspapers with their violent reactions. I am personally sure the work of Chapman and McDonald will stand as genuine advances. The Gaels and the Bretons have a proper point, however. They want to know, 'Who then are we, *really*?' They believe as if they were indeed privileged enough to require to know something that no one can ever know. It is, however, an important feature of the 'remote' social spaces — indeed, as I argue, it is of the peculiar structure of such spaces — that the question imposes itself; and so far it is true that we have given the appearance of tackling only one half of the problem. On one side 'remote areas' are indeed parts of an imaginary world. I have kept for some years an image to print as a dedication to this phase of our studies, and I gave it to Malcolm Chapman to use on his fly-leaf; it is from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*:

' "He's dreaming now," said Tweedledee: "and what do you think he's dreaming about? . . . Why, about *you*! And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?" "Where I am now, of course," said Alice.

"Not you!" Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. "You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!"

"If that there King was to wake," added Tweedledum, "You'd go out — bang! — just like a candle!" '

The expropriation of the image of another is a puzzling thing. I have mentioned the novelist Barbara Pym. Now that she is dead, a strange simulacrum of her is taking shape, which is analogous in its processes to that effect caused by visitors to a remote area. Experts on Barbara Pym now begin to appear who know more about her than she knew herself, or than any single friend knew, while those of us inserted into her novels become symbolized figures, merely narrative elements.¹¹ There never was, in any purely physical location, that Barbara Pym — it is all 'true' perhaps, but it never existed. The new Pym is a series of storage points in a fuzzy network of information, whose general distribution signals the existence of the ex-Pym, the late Pym, the Pym that passed away. And who has selected these points, and in what space are they located? Similarly, the Gaels, the Cameroonians, and others, have had the privileged experience of being made, as collectivities, part of a similar process. They have become, like Pym, at worst a 'text', at best 'art'. The [45]

10 The tendency for publicists to react ambiguously to those using the threatened language in a non-private way is comprehensible.

11 See Holt and Pym (1984), and its reviews.

'remote' social spaces thus merely exhibit, in an exaggerated form, a feature which affects all human beings to some extent. Yet we assert that we are still 'there', in some experienced way, behind the textualization — at least while we are still alive. The social space consists of human persons, so it is right that the Gaels and others should assert: 'However we are perceived or constructed in the worlds of others, nevertheless there are *real* Gaels.'

It is not necessary, therefore, with this readership, to say that the Western Islanders do not see themselves as resembling that artistic or textual remoteness. They are quite ordinary — as ordinary as anybody can be who has the regular experience of wild-eyed romantics tottering through his door. The social space is a material one. A lifetime of being treated as a princess turns you into an ordinary — princess; a lifetime as an untouchable makes you just an unexceptionable — untouchable. A lifetime of being in a remote area, turns you into an ordinary . . . ? What?

To answer the question we must consider some paradoxes.

1. *Remote areas are full of strangers.* I know people who hardly experience the idea of 'a stranger'. No suburbanite sees the unknown mass of neighbours as 'strangers'. The city-dweller does not inhabit a world of strangers. To make a city-dweller perceive a stranger he must be marked by such criteria that total rejection is likely to be his reaction. As a result incoming New Zealanders can *really* believe they are Londoners.¹² Try to get away with that, however, in the Hebrides. There, every social interaction has its marking preliminaries ('*Cò às a tha thu?*' 'Where are you from?', or the like). People in remote areas have a wide definition of 'strangers', so that, whatever the real numbers of the latter, there will always appear to be a lot of them. This conceptualization interacts, however, with the undoubted tendency for perceived strangers actually to congregate in remote areas. We must be careful in formulating this point. First of all, the stranger remains 'marked' longer, perhaps for ever, so that the residue of strangeness accumulates. We can see already the difficulty of talking of 'real' highlanders, when biographies are well remembered. But even this is not enough, for the kinds of strangers that congregate in remote areas are quite peculiar and all over Europe one can list them: painters, jewellery-makers, vegetarians, cultists, hunters, prospectors, bird-watchers, and *innovators* as we shall see. Some of these categories have been present at all times under different historical guises, including those of monks and invaders.¹³

2. *Remote areas are full of innovators.* Anyone in a remote area feels free to innovate. There is always a new pier being planned, and always some novelty marking or marring the scene. For the Western Islanders there is always the new Highlands and Islands Development Board scheme. The next boom is

12 It is not thought odd that the London regional television programme should have the Scots presenter interviewing local representatives with northern accents. The suddenness of city explosions, when they occur, suggests that there are some pockets of remoteness within these blank spaces!

13 Adomnan's *Life of St Columba* is a medieval classic of remote area studies.

always on the way: kelp, sheep, deer, sheep again, oil, [46] fishmeal. There is always a new quarry for new road materials. We are always seeing the end of some old order. Meanwhile, beyond the new pier is the old pier, and behind the old pier the even older pier. The Cameroons have had an endless sequence of innovations since 1884, or even since 1858: yet the innovations seem to have a short life.¹⁴ The paradox is that there is always change and intervention in remote areas, while in timeless Leeds stagnation seems to rule.

3. *Remote areas are full of ruins of the past.* The corollary of the above is that the remains of failed innovations, and of dead economic periods, scatter the landscape. There is another paradox here: that remote areas cry out for development, but they are the continuous victims of visions of development. The Cameroons has presented a steady sequence of innovation and ruin. The Highlands and Islands Development Board has been in existence long enough for its history already to be marked by the monuments of its own failed projects: Breasclete on the Isle of Lewis, Ardveenish on Barra, bidding fair to join the even earlier projects of Lord Leverhulme — before the HIBD period itself passes away as another golden age of innovation, into the past.¹⁵ Remote areas offer images of unbridled pessimism or utopian optimism, of change and decay, in their memorials. The Highlands are, as a whole, a great monument at one level to a Malthusian experiment on a disastrous scale that filled most of the nineteenth century. Within that total landscape with ruins (and few human figures) nest smaller landscapes with their own lesser ruins.
4. *Remote areas are full of rubbish.* This is a minor corollary of the last. Remote areas are the home of rubbish, because rubbish is not a category there. What appears remarkable is that people elsewhere expect to tidy up the formless universe. Such an aspiration belongs to the worlds that *define* remote areas. These defining worlds do not, of course, perceive their own refuse tips, their own black holes, full of rubbish. In the Hebrides German tourists feel free to criticize your rubbish.¹⁶
5. *Remote areas are in constant contact with the world.* We must interpret this carefully. Remote areas are obsessed with communications: the one road; the one ferry; the tarring of the road; the improvement of the boat; the airstrip on

14 The Baptist settlement of 1858 had an 'improving' philosophy; the German annexation of 1884 led to the establishment of plantations.

15 HIBD friends will not be offended; they read worse every day in the press. Ardveenish may yet take off. Lord Leverhulme's ambitions for Lewis and Harris were a benign form of paternalism.

16 Round a croft house in Lewis were the following items, according to the writer Derek Cooper (one of the most sensitive reporters of the Hebrides): '5 cwt van (*circa* 1950s); Ford tractor minus one wheel; fragment of pre-Great War reaper; upright piano; 37 blue plastic fishboxes; 7 green lemonade crates; 2 chimney pots; a sizable pyramid of sand; a pile of cement blocks; 7 lobster creels; assorted timber; 2 bales of barbed wire (rusted); broken garden seat; Hercules bicycle frame; piece of unidentified machinery (loom?); a sofa' (Cooper 1985: 192).

reclaimed ground or even on the sandy beach. The world always beckons – the Johnsonian road to England, or the coast, or wherever it is, is an attraction to the young, for it leads from your very door to everywhere. It is quite different in this respect from a city street. The road to Cathay does not flow from No. 7 Bloomsbury Mansions. The assiduity with which the television is watched in remote areas has a particular quality. A programme on the Mafia is squirrelled away as part of the endless phantasmagoria of life that begins at Oban or Kelvinside. Are we making the contradictory statement that, after all, *remote areas are not remote*? If it [47] seems like that, it is a result of our earlier perception that remote areas, from the inside, feel open and unprotected – the one-way barrier.

6. *Strangers and entrepreneurs or remote areas are full of pots.* 'Lianish' is on the very end of the road from the island centre, one of the longest continuous journeys: there are fifteen houses, two bed-and-breakfast ladies, an English potter/cowman/temporary postman, and one child under eleven. The postbus runs until 4 p.m. Only an incomer will work the 'unsociable' evening round. The Englishman takes seriously his 'social service' function, does the drunks' trip to town, and gets home late in the evening. The real postman will be watching the television. A typical incomer, many Gaels will think, without animus. Incomers suffer frequently from remote-area anxiety: the arrival of another incomer is a sign that the fastness has been penetrated – we may call it the Crusoe effect.
7. *The incomer as entrepreneur*, which we have been gradually approaching, is a cliché of the Hebrides (the phenomenon is widespread, however). On one island the best private bus is run by an in-married incomer – a woman. The place it stops for tea is at the 'croft' of a man from Bolton, Lancashire, who admirably carries on traditional crofting activities, such as weaving. Almost all of the hotels are run or managed by incomers. The Lewis Pakistanis may not all speak the fluent Gaelic that legend says, but the legend marks their assimilation to the averageness of strangeness that characterizes incomers. No amount of Gaelic would turn them into Gaels, but their existence is used to contrast with those incomers who have learnt no Gaelic at all. It is easy to document the entrepreneurs that are recent incomers. But when one looks at the 'island-born' entrepreneurs, there emerge the names of old tacksmen's families, of introduced mainland shepherds, and persons of odd biography – internal incomers, former incomers, products of incomer-island marriages.

One may easily concede that bed-and-breakfast ladies will be an exception, that they are from a random selection of hospitable families. Islands differ markedly and on the Long Island it is a matter of report that the Isle of Skye has taken to the hospitality trade to a remarkable extent. In the Outer Hebrides, the time, trouble, and expense of catering for guests can hardly be worth the £10 or £12 return that is characteristically charged. Once more, the bed-and-breakfast entrepreneur is likely to be upwardly mobile. A surprising number are not Gaelic-speaking. Indeed, the ubiquitous Scandinavian linguist is directed to lists issued by the *Gaellhols* enterprise. Gaels in the general trade are frequently families in which the husband is already the holder of another job.

8. *In remote areas the same set do everything.* Connected to the last point is the interesting observation (which is an actually voiced complaint) that the [48] same people take all the new jobs. Although this seems at first sight strange, the phenomenon is not restricted to the Hebrides. Development money tends to channel through the same entrepreneurs, however tiny their activities by world standards. A kind of micro-economic pluralism is endemic, as a pen-picture will illustrate.
9. *Under Milk Wood of a remote island.*¹⁷ Down to the ferry every evening go the teenagers, earnest with purpose; the grocer fills the cars with petrol (he is in charge of both food and fuel); the taxi-driver hires out the cars, to drive to his two rentable holiday homes; the dustman drives up with the travelling library; the retired English officer's daughter bakes the cakes, and ranges Sloanely to serve them to the airport passengers; the Commander bakes wholemeal bread (for incomers — Gaels prefer Mother's Pride sliced); the retired teacher grows vegetables to be sold in his sister's hostelry (she whose husband in Edinburgh writes for *Acarsaid*, the national journal, edited by the Revd Archie Hill alias Gillesbuig Mac an Dùin, professional Gael), while the sister's son discussing introducing 'speed boats between the islands' with Donald G., who bought an HIBD craft centre costing the EEC £200,000, for only £40,000, when two managers (incomers) each left to open their own shops; the latter, bearded, twice the size of an ordinary islander, spends much time on the plane to Glasgow and Corfu; seeing below Mr Mackenzie running his ferries, in turn with taking pay to skipper a subsidized ferry in competition with himself; the postman mows the lawns of his, the Caolas, guesthouse at Creagnaculist; Mrs McNeil inscribes her names on the list of Gaelhols for language learners; in the loch the Dean of Wyanunk Theological, Ohio, paints the wood of his restored castle with creosote; the Dutch wife of an Australian professor opens her guesthouse and craftshop; A. F., former serviceman and performer in *Man of Arran*, tells oft-told tales to an anthropologist; his charming daughter has 300 Christmas cards from Americans from whom she half-knowingly extracts the admiration due to the identity-constructing Gael . . .

So we come to the nub.

By now something in the paradox of remote areas can be seen to be systematic. It will be evident that I have used the terms 'remote' and 'remote area' as mere semantic grains upon which to grow a theoretical crystal. I wished to propose an 'empty formative' that would generate the interaction between the anthropologist and his field, the definer and the defined, the classifier and the classified, the imagined and the realized. The condition might have been given any code name, or a letter, or a number, and not illustrated by local colour. Nevertheless, the 'remoteness' paradoxes are well known (although not necessarily in all aspects everywhere the same), and so 'remoteness' may now finish its life in this paper as a

17 This is a carefully fictionalized picture, and several islands are combined. Tamara Kohn has pointed out that Hebrideans nevertheless are used to pulling apart composite pictures and painstakingly reassembling them. In any case, there are no prizes!

technical term. I will therefore provide a theoretical conclusion, inevitably somewhat condensed. [49]

Remote areas are event-rich, or event-dense

In the social space, not everything that happens is an event. Much of what passes has for the participants an automaton-like quality. Events are defined within the space by a certain quality which, to avoid a special terminology, we may for the moment call 'significance'. The nature of the event-matrix may be modelled synchronically (Ardener 1978), or diachronically (Ardener 1975). Essentially, specifying something in the space introduces a singularity into it, which 'twists off' the specified. The latter is bounded one way — from the perspective of the specifier.

The phenomena outlined above may be expressed in another form, by saying that the information content is high. That is: randomization, the ultimate condition of active systems, is continually resisted. These areas delicately teeter on the edge of perpetual innovation. This feature is both internal and external. Thus 'remoteness' is a specification, and a perception, from elsewhere, from an outside standpoint; but from inside the people have their own perceptions — if you like, a counterspecification of the dominant, or defining space, working in the opposite direction. Thus in the Cameroons the Bakweri were defined by general repute, in their multi-ethnic area, as apathetic (Ardener 1956; Ardener, Ardener, and Warmington 1960), while the silent villagers saw themselves as involved in a life-and-death struggle with zombies and their masters, which gave deep significance to the slightest act (Ardener 1970). All the materialities of dominance, economic and conceptual, were present in their traumatic history. These spiritual events are, however, of the utmost seriousness, as serious as the Diwygiad in Wales, or the Disruption in the Kirk which led to the sense of continuous spiritual battle that marks the characteristic religious life of the Presbyterian Hebrides. Their materialities do not lack some possible analogies with those that summoned up the zombies: expropriation, depopulation, landlordism, and definition as dwindling, dying, and out of time.

The double specification of remote areas, or double-markedness, produces that note of eccentricity and overdefinition of individuality, if you like an overdetermination — or to exaggerate slightly, a structure of strangers. In the large stable systems of dominant central areas, in contrast, there are equally large regularities, with more automatisms, in which only in periodic 'prophetic situations' do major singularities occur (Ardener 1975). They are event-poor. It is evident that the event quality is not a direct function of numbers or population for, in contrast, it is remote areas as we have defined them that are 'event-rich'.

Event-richness is like a small-scale, simmering, continuously generated set of singularities, which are not just the artefact of observer bias (as we have seen, observers commonly perceive only a puzzling blankness) — but due to some materiality, that I interpret to be related to the enhanced defining power of individuals. Event-richness is the result of the weakening of, or probably [50] the continuous threat to, the maintenance of a self-generating set of overriding social definitions (including those that control people's own physical world), thus rendering possible the 'disenchantment' of individuals, and that overdetermination

of individuality, to which I referred. The peculiar driving force of abortive innovation is precisely due to this, and the sense of vulnerability to intrusion experienced in such areas is genuine. The structural time is quite different, and in so far as a 'remote' area is (as it always is) part of a much wider definitional space (shall we say the dominant State) it will be perceived, itself, *in toto*, as a singularity in that space.

If that is so, then event-richness can occur within any social space. That is the meaning of our earlier paradox, that we can travel to internal remotenesses that have not yet been actualized, or which still form singularities in our otherwise more informationally random social space. It will be recalled that all individuals are potentially singularities in a social space through their (only intermittently exercised) power of self-definition. Since remote areas are singularities in the total or wider space, all singularities there are reinforced. As more and more internal remotenesses are defined out of our changing societies, it will be no surprise that social anthropologists, addicts of the event-rich, will be disappearing into them.

I am afraid that many will think this terminology unnecessarily arcane. They will not have far to seek in the literature for more conventional terms. For them I will, however, phrase it another way. The lesson of 'remote' areas is that this is a condition not related to periphery, but to the fact that certain peripheries are by definition not properly linked to the dominant zone. They are perceptions from the dominant zone, not part of its codified experience. Not all purely geographical peripheries are in this condition, and it is not restricted to peripheries.

Finally, I do not need to stress here that while human beings have theoretically unlimited classifying power, not all classifications have equal experiential density. The feature of a 'remote area' (in our technical sense of a singularity of a particular type) is that those so defined are intermittently conscious of the defining processes of others that might absorb them. That is why they are the very crucibles of the creation of identity, why they are of great theoretical interest, and why the social anthropologist 'at home' may be very far away indeed.

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