BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

Robin Fox

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Elected to the NAS, 2013

A Biographical Memoir by Joyce Marcus

Robin Fox was a renaissance man, a broad thinker, a gifted writer, and a witty raconteur whose interests spanned many disciplines beyond anthropology. Fox loved learning new things and was fascinated by human behavior. He lamented the loss of holistic anthropology, "when everything was open to you and nothing was politically incorrect and you could go anywhere you pleased."[1]

Fox's enormous intellect and curiosity encompassed biological evolution, genetics, human behavior, cognition, and culture. He tackled many topics, some of which were traditional for a social anthropologist and some of which were quite unusual. Among the traditional topics were his studies of kinship, marriage, land use, and social organization. His nontraditional studies can be subsumed under what he called "biosocial anthropology"—those studies focused on brain evolution, language development, and the extent to which primate behavior sheds light on human behavior and activities such as hunting and male bonding. Many of these biosocial topics are tackled today by primatologists, biological anthropologists, ethologists, cognitive scientists, geneticists, and linguists.

Early Life and Education

Robin Fox was born on August 29, 1934, in the village of Haworth, West Yorkshire, in the United Kingdom. Fox's father, John, was a military man who left the army in 1932 after serving in India. John Fox then married Robin's mother (an Irish Protestant from South Yorkshire), and they settled in Haworth. Because of his parents' backgrounds, Robin said he became curious about all things Indian and Irish. He was also fascinated by the former residents of Haworth, the Brontë family. In 1820, the Brontë family had traveled to their new home on the edge of Haworth Moor, and it was there that the Brontë sisters (Charlotte, Emily, and Anne) wrote their books. Fox told me he was not only from Haworth situated atop the Pennine moors, but also a lifetime member of the Brontë Society, which was founded in 1893 to permanently curate all the items belonging to the Brontë family. Their literary masterpieces inspired Fox to make his own scientific writing approachable and entertaining. He said he "wanted people to keep on reading."

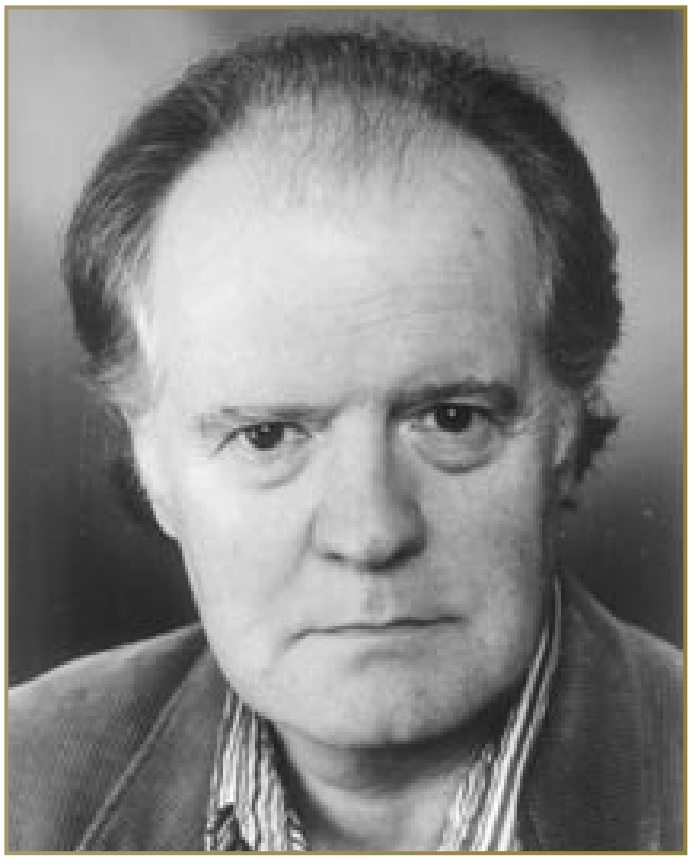

Figure 1 Robin Fox. *Photo courtesy of the Center for Human Evolutionary Studies at Rutgers University.*

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

For most of World War II, the elementary schools in England were closed or repurposed for the war effort, so Fox said he gained an informal education by visiting local libraries. In looking at the shelves in the library, he said he tried to calculate how long one would need to read every book there. He also said he learned by listening to the BBC.

Fox became interested in archaeology and history after having read James G. Frazer's[2] descriptions of exotic cultures and H. G. Wells's *Outline of History,*[3] but he did not envision those interests becoming his career. Instead, he decided on economics. He enrolled in the London School of Economics but by 1953 had become tired of this field. He scrolled through the course catalog and decided on sociology, a field that then included both social anthropology and social philosophy. What stuck out to him after taking those courses was the "principle of verification" and Karl Popper's "principle of refutation;"[4] he said that he liked being exposed to a range of philosophers and believed that the scientific method was the path to discovering the truth.

Quite naturally, World War II had an effect on Fox. He said a building near his home was bombed and that he was lucky to be alive. Repelled by war, he decided to pursue graduate studies in the United States. Fox ended up in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University, where he focused on social anthropology, one of the four divisions in the department created by Talcott Parsons. Among the professors who influenced Fox were Clyde Kluckhohn and Evon Vogt.

At that time, all those who selected the social anthropology division were required to do nine months of fieldwork. Vogt introduced Fox to Charles Lange, who was then working with the Cochiti of New Mexico.[5] Lange offered to facilitate fieldwork in the Southwest for Fox.

To prepare himself for his first fieldwork, Fox read everything he could about the Cochiti. He immersed himself in Franz Boas's texts, which were then housed in the Peabody Museum Library (now the Tozzer Library on 21 Divinity Avenue) at Harvard. At that time Fox had become particularly interested in texts and languages and all things linguistic, as a result of his interactions with Kluckhohn, Paul Friedrich, and Dell Hymes.

Upon his arrival in New Mexico, Fox was mesmerized by the Southwestern landscape and its people. He recalled that he was suddenly plunged into a new world; what he had learned in textbooks about kinship and social organization (for example, about matrilineal clans, moieties, and other kinship categories) had suddenly become real to him. He said with excitement: "I saw exogamy in action!"[6]

When visa problems arose, Fox had to return to England. He was lucky enough to secure a job at the University of Exeter immediately after he had finished all his doctoral work at Harvard except for writing his dissertation. He earned his Ph.D. in 1965 at the University of London.

His Early Books

Fox was offered the position of junior lecturer at the London School of Economics by his professor, Raymond Firth, who told him he would have to teach the class in advanced kinship. To prepare himself to teach such an advanced course, Fox set himself the task of diagramming various kinship systems, including the incredibly complex system of the indigenous Australians. Fox's lectures for this class were published in his best-selling 1967 book, *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective*.

It was a surprise to Fox that of all his books it was this first book that sold the most copies and was re-published in many languages. This book has been called "the best introduction to the study of kinship and marriage that has yet been published."[7] In his review, Rodney Needham went on to say: "no longer, thankfully, will students be compelled to rely on the more or less deplorable chapters on 'kinship' in the textbooks." Even though he was just a "junior lecturer," Fox was lauded by reviewers for his exceptional command of the topic and his unexpected inclusion in the book of a section on the way human social institutions evolved out of primate behavior.

After lamenting the fact that Fox had been hired away from England by Rutgers University, Needham added, "British universities cannot afford the loss of scholars possessing such talents as are evident in Fox's work—and he will certainly not be the last to take them abroad."[8] In fact, Fox was brought back to the United States to establish the Department of Anthropology at Rutgers in 1967.

Fox's two years at Harvard had convinced him that "a new idea in America was considered to be good simply because it was a new idea. In England it was quite the other way around. The old ideas were always the best; the new ideas really had to be proven."[9]

A good friend of Fox's was the president of Rutgers, Mason Gross. Upon his retirement, Gross became president of the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. Gross read Fox's book coauthored with Rutgers colleague Lionel Tiger, *The Imperial Animal*, and decided that he wanted the Guggenheim Foundation to pursue this kind of research. Tiger and Fox eventually came to work half-time as professors in the Department of Anthropology at Rutgers and half-time for the Guggenheim Foundation. Fox served as the director of the foundation for twelve years, from 1972 to 1984, during which time he funded scholars such as Napoleon Chagnon, Richard Dawkins, Edward O. Wilson, and other luminaries.

Fox himself decided to do research on cognition and brain development with Jacques Mehler, which led to their

Figure 2 Robin Fox enjoying one of his favorite pastimes, sailing. *Photo courtesy of the Center for Human Evolutionary Studies at Rutgers University.*

co-authored book *Neonate Cognition,* published in 1985. The Guggenheim Foundation also ended up funding Fox's own primate fieldwork, studying macaques in Bermuda.

In 1967, Fox's book *The Keresan Bridge: A Problem in Pueblo Ethnology* was published. In this work Fox presented a surprisingly different analysis of the social organization of Pueblo communities, an alternative to the widely accepted view that Southwestern pueblos could be divided into a western group, in which matrilineal organization survived, and an eastern group that was more acculturated. Fox presented data that the Keresan-speaking villages occupied a bridge between the western and eastern pueblos. Fox's work in Cochiti, an eastern pueblo, indicated that Cochiti was not an acculturated version of a western pueblo, but something different. He concluded that it would be more appropriate to divide the Keresan people into three groups—eastern, central, and western.

Fox's 1978 elegant and poetic book, *The Tory Islanders: A People of the Celtic Fringe,* was based on fieldwork he conducted over a five-year period between 1960 and 1965. He studied a parish of 350 Gaelic-speaking individuals living nine miles off the rugged north coast of Donegal in western Ireland. Fox describes this fieldwork as a case study in human survival and social creativity. In rich ethnographic detail, he presents the ecology, economy, and social organization of this parish, showing the many challenges of trying to survive on a shelf of inhospitable rock on which only 250 of the island's 785 acres of land are cultivable and the average plot of land is only two acres. The peat bogs that had once supplied abundant fuel were now largely exhausted. The Tory Islanders lived in one of two villages that were remnants of *clachans*, or hamlets of households of blood relatives who held land in common and redistributed that land among themselves. As Fox carefully documents, the notion of individual or permanent ownership of land was a foreign concept; what existed was a system of usufruct rights to farm the land once held by their ancestors. Fox says that Tory Islanders derived their identity from bilateral descent groups, each one originating in a remembered ancestor, and that four main lineages accounted for 80 percent of the island's population. In the 1960s, the Tory Islanders retained the nucleated hamlets and a regime of divided inheritance.

One of the unusual features was the number of married couples who resided separately, that is, each spouse continued to reside in his or her respective household of birth. Fox was told that obligations to kin outweighed obligations to spouses, and to hold on to their use rights to cultivable land, many spouses continued to reside in their natal homes after marrying. Ten out of fifty-one marriages followed this pattern in 1963, and the islanders reported that formerly at least half of the married couples resided separately.

From Fox's fieldwork, we learn that the central principle of Tory social organization was the sibling bond, which may have had its origin in the ancient clan systems of Eire. Revolving around this enduring sibling bond were other behaviors that Fox documented, such as holding land, the naming system, and the selection of mackerel and herring boat crews.

Fox's descriptions of the Tory Islanders served to correct the long-standing mistake of generalizing about all of Ireland (for example, one should not use Conrad Arensberg's and Solon Kimball's description of life in County Clare as characteristic of Ireland as a whole).[10] Indeed, Fox revealed that Ireland had no single or universal system of land use and inheritance. The Tory Islanders displayed idiosyncratic patterns in which there were separate residences for husbands and wives after marriage; this natal locality pattern was formerly thought to be uniquely associated with matrilineal societies with polyandry.

Fox's painstaking detail in this book serves as a model of ethnographic fieldwork.[11,12] His elegant prose brings the lives of Tory Islanders to life, so much so that it led the University of Ulster to award him an honorary degree. Fox himself considered his study of Tory Island to be his best work; he said, "once I got to Tory I found I had an ethnographic goldmine." He said he loved all things Irish and identified with the Tory Islanders—"they were a stubborn northern bunch with folkways all their own. We hit it off immediately. It was a singing culture, and I literally sang my way into it."[13]

Fox's Excursion into Biosocial Anthropology

Two of the many questions that intrigued Fox were: Which aspects of human behavior can be attributed to cultural processes and which to biological processes? In what

areas do humans have freedom and in what areas are they constrained by hardwiring? Some of his best-known books from his biosocial era include *The Search for Society: Quest for a Biosocial Science and Morality* (1989); *Biosocial Anthropology* (1975); *The Tribal Imagination*: *Civilization and the Savage Mind* (2011), and *The Imperial Animal* (1971), co-authored with Lionel Tiger.

Having just mentioned Lionel Tiger, I cannot help but recount what Robin Fox told me on the night he was inducted into the National Academy of Sciences. He said, "People always ask me if I really met my collaborator Lionel Tiger at the London Zoo. I tell them: Yes. Everybody thinks it is a joke, but it isn't. I met him at a very famous symposium of the Zoological Society, along with Tinbergen, Huxley, Edmund Leach, and Victor Turner in attendance."

The other striking feature during his inaugural dinner was that Fox said he was "fascinated" about each topic we discussed—from archaeology to hieroglyphs to neuroscience to genetics. His repeated use of the word "fascinated" was genuine and memorable.

As Fox advanced in his career in social anthropology, he wanted to explain the genesis of certain human behaviors; to do so he became more interested in the development of the human brain. He and Tiger wanted to understand what human behaviors could be linked to the behavior of primates. They sought to link data gleaned from the social sciences to the natural sciences to lay the groundwork for a more scientific social anthropology. Tiger's and Fox's landmark publication, *The Imperial Animal*, appeared in 1971. One reviewer said it provided "an extraordinarily well-written summary of contemporary biological and anthropological theory regarding man. But its intent does not stop there; it attempts to search for the possible substructure of human behavior, assuming that this behavior is decisively configured by preexperiential content."[14] Tiger and Fox saw certain human behaviors and institutions as inevitable because humans are wired or predisposed to learn certain things and to respond to stimuli in certain ways; simply stated, humans were conditioned by their evolutionary history.

Fox said that he had always been interested in kinship systems. He wanted to know how such systems evolved, and thus he decided to study primate social organization. He also began to wonder how many of the "cultural universals" were really "biological universals."

The Legacy of Robin Fox

The diversity of Fox's interests makes it difficult to fit them into a single category. All his work was filled with wit, eloquence, and insights about humankind. He showed exceptional breadth and depth, becoming a broad thinker on social organization, cognition, incest taboos, marriage rules, aggression, war, land use, inheritance, and social complexity.

To more fully understand the eclectic nature of Fox's publications and the shifts in his theoretical framework, one can do no better than read his autobiography, entitled *Participant Observer: A Memoir of a Transatlantic Life*. Another source of information is the superb interview of Fox conducted by Alex Walter and published in *Current Anthropology* in 1993.[15]

The best way to summarize the legacy of Robin Fox is to say that he advocated and funded new ideas. Fox worked effectively to reduce the gap between cultural and scientific approaches, showing that those approaches are compatible and can be unified to shed new light on human behavior. One of his many influential contributions was his argument that humans were originally adapted to living in small tribal groups, which is why in some ways we are poorly equipped to cope with life in today's crowded cities.

Robin Fox is survived by his wife, Lin, and his three daughters from his first marriage, Kate, Ellie, and Anne.

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