Comment on dr. Buijtenhuijs's The Generation Gap in Anthropology

door J. Beattie

The gist of Dr. Buijtenhuijs's lively and stimulating criticism seems to be that since social anthropology both can be and has been used by administrators and development planners to 'manipulate' people, my Inaugural Address ought to have contained a discussion of the problems and dangers to which this state of affairs gives rise. And he suggests that part of the reason why it doesn't is that I belong to the older, 'fieldworker' generation of anthropologists, who, unlike the new, 'concerned' generation, 'were mostly unaware of the ethical and political implications of their research'.

Well, no doubt the findings of the social sciences can sometimes be misapplied, though I do not believe that in the case of social anthropology the danger is as great as Dr. Buijtenhuijs thinks it is. And it is also true (and has often been pointed out) that as human beings scientists cannot, or should not, remain indifferent to the possible misuse of their findings. But whether, in a talk primarily concerned with social anthropology's contribution to our knowledge of Africa, such themes as these should constitute 'the main problem' — I agree that they might have been mentioned — is a matter of opinion. It all depends on how real and serious such abuse has been in the past and is likely to be in the future. Let us look at the grounds on which Buijtenhuijs bases his opinion.

First, is the 'generation gap' as wide as he suggests? Was the 1920–1960 generation of fieldworkers quite as 'unconcerned' as he implies? I doubt it. Malinowski, the founding father of that generation, certainly was not, and at least some anthropologists who carried out fieldwork during that period — two examples are John Barnes and Kathleen Gough — have published on anthropology's ethical and political implications. But Buijtenhuijs is right in suggesting that most of the anthropologists of the time got on with their work without worrying too much
about its possible misuse. I think there were two reasons for this. The first was
that as anthropologists they saw themselves as fact-finders, and not as makers
or advisers on policy, roles for which they had no special qualifications. Indeed
they regarded it as specially important not to import their own value judgments
into their analyses. This did not mean that they were indifferent to injustice when
they came across it; often they were active in opposing it. And the second reason
was that in the territories in which most anthropologists worked there was during
those years little or no reason to suppose that the data they provided were, or
might be, misused. In so far as administrators paid any attention to anthro-
pology at all, it appeared that they were doing so for the benefit, not to the
disadvantage, of the people they were responsible for.
It has to be remembered that during the period between the two world wars, in
much (though not all) of dependent Africa colonialism was going through a
relatively benign phase. The violence and excesses of the early stages were for
the most part ended if not forgotten, and the serious struggle for independence
had not yet begun. Improbable though it may now seem, in most British territo-
ries at least, colonial administrators saw themselves — and were widely seen —
as being on the Africans' side.
As long ago as the 1920s, British government policy, even in the case of Kenya
(belied though it was there by later events), was that 'the interests of the African
natives must be paramount' (Devonshire White Paper, 1923). It is sometimes
forgotten that ultimate self-government for its African dependencies, and not only
for the 'settler'-dominated ones, had from the earliest days been the official aim.
So during much of the colonial period the interests of the European administra-
tions and those of the 'native' peoples were not generally seen, even by the latter,
as being opposed to each other. (Kenya, with its 'White Highlands' problem, was
a glaring exception, and one cannot help wondering whether Buijtenhuijs's special
familiarity with conditions there has a little coloured his view of the sometimes
very different situation elsewhere).
So Buijtenhuijs's question, 'was the 'fruitful exchange between anthropologists and
administrators' to which I referred in my Lecture for the benefit of the colonial
administrators or for the good of Africa?' poses altogether too sharp a disjunction.
As Buijtenhuijs knows, colonialism, however much and properly we may deplore
it today, was a complex phenomenon, and the policies of colonial bureaucrats
and administrators between the wars, though they sometimes had unhappy results,
were by no means always directed against African interests. More often, perhaps,
than Buijtenhuijs realizes, 'what was good for colonial administrators' (or more
exactly what as administrators they considered good) was 'good for Africa' too,
and was seen to be so by both parties.
cases in which the co-operation of anthropologists and administrators led to
advantages for the colonial rulers at the expense of the local people, but I cannot
think of any. Dr. Buijtenhuijs's example of Dr. Leakey's 'counter-insurgency'
enquiries in Kenya is not very much to the point. Though Leakey knew the Kikuyu
well, he was not a social anthropologist but a prehistorian. It is not naive to
suggest that if the Kikuyu had been professionally studied by a social anthropol-
gist, the clearer and fuller understanding thus gained might conceivably have led
at least some Europeans to a better awareness of, even sympathy with, that
people's grim situation.
It is not difficult to quote cases in which administrative use of anthropological
information has benefited members of African communities. To mention only one or two enquiries with which I was personally concerned in the 1950s, or of which I had direct knowledge, my own researches into land tenure in Bunyoro (Uganda) enabled the Native and Protectorate governments to limit by legislation the exploitative role played as 'landlords' by a traditional élite: anthropological studies of administration at the 'grass roots' level in several parts of Uganda facilitated the implementation of the then official policy of 'democratizing' local government institutions (a development much welcomed by ordinary people in Bunyoro at least): Philip Gulliver's enquiries (as Government Sociologist) into land use in the Tukuyu district of Tanganyika revealed the growing landlessness in the area and some of its causes, enabling at least some official action to be taken in alleviation. Other cases involving collaboration between anthropologists and administrators could be quoted. It would be foolish to make exaggerated claims for the benefits they brought to the African community. But I know of no evidence that they have done that community any injury.

So before we accept Buijtenhuijs's sweeping contention that African (or Dutch or British) peasants are being 'manipulated by their Governments with the help of anthropological knowledge' (my emphasis), and that this constitutes 'the main problem' which a student of the role of social anthropology in African should consider, I think we should be provided with some hard evidence of the kind of abuse he has in mind. Apart from his rather dubious reference to eakey and the Kikuyu, his article offers none.

There is a further and more basic point. I do not believe that the information provided by social anthropologists is quite so readily susceptible of misuse as Buijtenhuijs thinks it is. Social anthropology is not (as Radcliffe-Brown thought it was forty years ago) a 'natural science of society', such that 'general laws' about how human communities work might be discovered and perhaps applied. As Lucy Mair has remarked, 'anthropologists' books are not 'how to do it' manuals, providing formulae for the manipulation of society as the text-books of applied science do for the manipulation of matter' (Anthropology and social change, 1969, pp. 11-12). She goes on, 'the phrase 'social engineering', which some of us used with confidence a generation ago, is now out of favour'. It is a delusion to suppose, as Buijtenhuijs appears to do, that the anthropologist is in a position to provide the administrator or planner with a sort of blueprint for action, which will enable him to mould society as he wishes.

As I argued in my Lecture, the anthropologist has a contribution to make, but it is a much more limited one. What he can do, sometimes, is (I quote from Mair again) 'to show where and why resistance is likely to be shown to innovations the merits of which may seem to their sponsors to be self-evident'. The practical man, whether administrator or developer, can learn from anthropology what not to do, rather than what to do. In this respect as in others social anthropology has (as is now widely recognized) more in common with history, which is little if at all concerned with 'laws', than it has with 'science'. One does not usually talk of misusing history, or employing it to 'manipulate' people, though certainly history can be and has been misrepresented for political purposes. But important though this consideration is, historians are not usually expected to treat it as their 'main problem'.

Dr. Buijtenhuijs writes that he would have no objection to working as an anthropologist for Nyerere in Tanzania, but he would be 'rather unhappy' if his anthro-
political knowledge were used by people like Tombalbaye, Vorster or Ian Smith. But is he not being a little naive? What if there should be a change of government in Tanzania (or for that matter in South Africa or Rhodesia)? And how could he be sure that the information he acquired in Tanzania might not be useful to, and used by, Tombalbaye and company, unlikely though this possibility is?

No doubt governments and planners will go on 'manipulating' people, whether for what is conceived to be the people's 'own good', or perhaps for their own nefarious purposes. And they will do so whether anthropological knowledge is available to them or not. Dr. Buijtenhuijs has offered no evidence that the fate of the manipulated is likely to be any worse if the manipulators have acquired from anthropology some information about the culture of the people they are manipulating. Before the problem with which Dr. Buijtenhuijs is so concerned can be adequately dealt with, I think we shall need clearer evidence of its existence and importance than has so far been made available.