

## **On a quick argument downplaying British anthropology's colonialist role**

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*Abstract.* I introduce and examine an argument presented by American anthropologist Herbert S. Lewis against thinking that British anthropology played a significant role in supporting colonialist projects: the British empire was large and centuries old, so it seems very unlikely that two dozen anthropologists late on made much difference.

What was the relationship of British social anthropology to colonialism? American anthropologist Herbert Lewis writes:

British colonialism is very old, but British anthropology is very young. As a profession, with training, standards, and guiding visions and perspectives, it was not established until the 1920s, with the first PhD degree in England granted in 1927—three decades later than in the United States. The British Empire had been lording it over the “natives” of their many possessions for centuries by this time. Could two dozen anthropologists have contributed much to such far-flung colonial rule at this late date? (Lewis 200?: 82)

Lewis poses this as a question. It is a powerful one: it seems to have the power to quickly shut up someone who asserts that British anthropology was the handmaiden of colonialism. Who would come up with such a thing?! Anyway, the question suggests an argument to look into. Here is my attempt to reconstruct it, as if it were made at that time.

- (1) If British colonialism is very old and the British empire is very large and British anthropology is very young and the number involved is small, 24 anthropologists, then British anthropology is not a significant contributor to British colonialism.

(2) British colonialism is very old and the British empire is very large and British anthropology is very young and the number involved is small, 24 anthropologists.

Therefore:

(3) British anthropology is not a significant contributor to colonialism.

There you go, not quite so powerful looking now! (Or at least I think so.)

It seems to me that the problems of maintaining a project can change over time. People who could have solved problems early on may not be able to solve mid-stage problems, people who can solve those may not be able to solve late-stage problems. That opens up the possibility that hardly anyone could solve certain late-stage problems and the solutions came from British anthropologists. They enabled the empire to last longer than it otherwise would. This is not a refutation of the argument, being a speculation, but premise (1) should not be taken as somehow obvious. (By the way, I often wonder whether British structural-functionalist anthropology would have lasted longer if it had better problem-solvers in response to the objections made to it. Some solutions are hard to see.)

## **Reference**

Lewis, H.S. 2017. *In Defense of Anthropology*. Oxford: Routledge.