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PROVOST: THE LORD ANNAN

4 November 1968

My dear Francis,

Many thanks indeed for your letter of 1 November and the copy of your reply to Dent. I am sorry you should have been troubled by this. I told him, of course, that as regards University College we were bound to have a rule that, as the sale of cannabis was illegal, any student who possessed or sold it was guilty of a serious breach of discipline.

I am very interested indeed to hear that the Wootton Committee may be suggesting some modifications in the existing law!

The phrase which, I think, made my eyebrows shoot up was when at one point in your lecture you said that all that was required to alter current practices in regard to numbers of social problems was for us to discuss matters thoroughly and change our opinions. This was very much the line that John Stuart Mill took 110 years ago in his Essay on Liberty and which was based on the social theory which he propounded in his book The System of Logic (1842). This theory holds that all changes in society really occur because people change their opinions, and they change their opinions most fruitfully when there has been a free discussion of the issues which results in Truth inevitably coming to the surface. Of course there is something in this, but no one to-day much believes in this rather simple positivist explanation of how society changes. They don't accept it if only for the reason that Marx said something pretty trenchant on this matter. Marx argued that it was not men's opinions which affected social relationships. It was social relationships which conditioned [redacted] (- or determined, Marx was never quite certain which) men's opinions.

At the end of the nineteenth century a new generation of sociologists, who were alive to some of the crudities in Marx, took up the argument - in particular Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Fundamentally they agreed with Marx in believing that the patterns of thought e.g. ideology or religion in a society are the product of social structure, social relationships (in primitive societies kinship structure), but they dissented strongly from Marx's contention that the whole thing boiled down to the class struggle.

I am entirely with you in thinking that unless we begin discussing the kind of topics you raised seriously and soon, we shall be unprepared for the situation which is going to arise owing to the population explosion. But at the same time I am afraid that however sensible the conclusions which may arise from such rational discussion, they will not be accepted as conclusions unless considerable changes have also taken place in our social structure and relationships.

I am ashamed to write all this because it is so primitive and clearly you know all this. The man to talk to, of course, is Edmund Leach. It is clearly terribly difficult to give a popular

lecture with any punch in it and which the audience actually believes at the end of it that they have heard something new, without simplifying. I think Edmund copped it over his Reith Lectures because he threw off the mantle of an anthropologist so vigorously that he appeared to the uninitaited simply to be uttering a lot of opinionated statements. If he had only wrapped it up more in jargon, he would have met with much less criticism - and would have had much less effect.

Well I am awfully glad you wrote because I was anyway going to thank you for coming here. It was lovely to see you and Odile again.

Yours ever,

Noël

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