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John Horsley Russell Davis

9 September 1938–15 January 2017

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1988

by

PAUL DRESCH

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Fellow of the Academy

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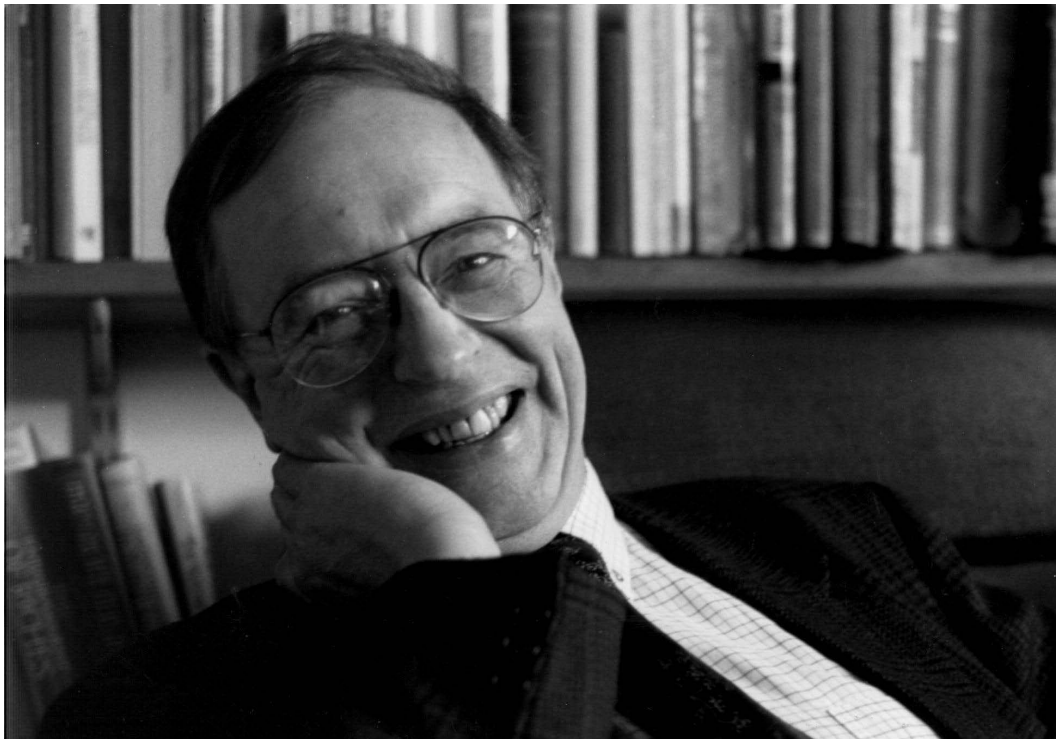

JOHN DAVIS

John Davis was a key figure in Mediterranean anthropology. He was also a pioneer in applying insights from the literature on exchange to the informal economies of complex societies, and in the use of computers in anthropological research. Educated at Oxford (1958–61) and at the London School of Economics (LSE) (1963 onwards), he spent his most productive years at the University of Kent, after which he returned to Oxford, first as the head of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology (1990–5), and latterly as Warden of All Souls (1995–2008). He died on 15 January 2017.

I

John was born on 9 September 1938, the son of William Russell Davis and Jean (née) Horsley.[1] His father left at an early stage, and John had no clear memory of him; his mother then lived in a *ménage* of independent ladies which lasted through the Second World War; and her second marriage, to a finance director, when John was thirteen, provided him with a readymade pair of older brothers, whom he liked. Though an odd (perhaps even unsettling) childhood, it was not materially deprived, and John was sent first to Dulwich College Preparatory School, then to Christ's Hospital, at neither of which he flourished. At Christ's Hospital he did acquire a love and knowledge of music, and a few inspiring teachers gave him a glimpse of scholarship as fun. Furthermore, he was packed off to Paris for a summer *cours de civilisation*, and in a queue to fill in forms he encountered an interesting English woman much older than he, with whom in due course he had an affair. Back at school, 'I found life even more insufferable than before.'

It somehow seems typical of John that the woman he met in a queue at the Sorbonne turned out to have been the third wife of Bertrand Russell—and, indeed, that John became great friends with her son (later an eminent historian), who was roughly his own age. The pattern of 'contacts' continued. At University College, Oxford, where he won a scholarship to read modern history, John fell in with 'what eventually became the *Private Eye* crowd'. He knew Peter Jay and Margaret Callaghan, and thus something of the worlds of politics and media. Before Oxford, having been more or less asked to leave Christ's Hospital, he spent a year in Italy, but when he began his own work there, years afterwards, the same pattern of interesting friendships emerged. Through an introduction from Paul Stirling, he was taken up by Manlio Rossi-Doria, a professor of economics at Naples who was also a senator in the Italian parliament and a considerable figure in Italian cultural circles.

[1] In addition to published work, we have drawn on a number of private sources and personal reminiscences, indicated as quotations but without a citation.

A second-class degree from Oxford, so John said later, put paid to his ambitions as a historian. More important in explaining his move to anthropology was probably an Oxford friend (Lady Russell's son, in fact) pressing on John the interest of what anthropologists wrote. Whatever the case, John became a graduate student in anthropology at LSE, where he encountered Raymond Firth, Maurice Freedman and Lucy Mair. It was Mair, whose sharp mind and writing style he much admired, who supervised the completion of his doctorate (awarded in 1969). Much earlier, he had a letter from Paul Stirling:

> It said in effect that he had no respect for people from Oxford since they thought themselves far too clever; he had no high expectations of anyone who had no training in anthropology; he didn't really want to employ anyone who had only a second-class degree—but he needed someone who could speak Italian to be his research assistant.

Stirling, whom he liked a great deal, was hugely important to John's career. But Ernest Gellner, whom he first heard lecture at the LSE, is spoken of by many who knew John well as no less than a 'father figure', as is Rossi-Doria. Several fellows of All Souls, where John arrived in his fifties, remember him having Gellner to dinner, when John was Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford and Gellner was the equivalent at Cambridge, and John treating Gellner with marked deference.

John himself later wrote of life as a succession of 'accidents'. Looking back, however, one has a strong impression of someone who, for whatever reasons, constructed a persona early in life (perhaps in his mid-teens) and lived by way of it thereafter. The persona was an established English one, alert to social context in the manner of certain novelists of the period (Ivy Compton-Burnett and Anthony Powell were two of John's own favourites), erudite in a way that was less common in England and with a cosmopolitan, European colouring. From the start, the authorial voice is that of an established figure. For example, here is John, at the age of thirty, on Mediterranean rhetorics of honour:

> They generally have as one of their components the control by men of women's sexuality, and the resulting combination of sex and self-importance makes a unique contribution to the human comedy in life and literature.[2]

Mixed with wide-ranging allusions to history and literature, the assured and measured tone gave his work a feeling of sophistication. Exchange theory, with its technicalities, might encourage dull exposition, but John picks out how 'rationality' in analysts' models filled the place of motive in the simpler kinds of moralising, and thus reproduced a foolish dilemma:

[2] J. Davis, 'Honour and politics in Pisticci', *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1969 (1969), p. 69.

> [M]y action was not truly noble because I had an eye to the audience; but if I simultaneously recognise my own duplicity, I am not as other men are—but if I can even think such a thing as that, then I am lost! The dreadful antiphony of regressive self-examination is familiar to us.[3]

An anthropologist need not adopt puzzles that grown-up persons knew in their own lives were unreal. He goes on to say:

> It is curious that an absolute division between morality and prestige on the one hand, and self-interest on the other, should have so perpetuated itself in social theory: that what a sensible man brushes away as an adolescent circularity when he is tempted to examine his inner life should be entrenched as the saving grace of a sociological tautology.

II

In 1966 John moved to Kent, like his fellow Italianist Nevill Colclough, following the appointment there in 1965 of Paul Stirling. (At that time academic life still had room to seize upon early talent; completing the doctorate could wait.) They were part of a group from LSE who formed the nucleus of a board of studies, later to become the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, and John was on the anthropology staff until 1990. Although Stirling established anthropology at Kent, he himself had been appointed as Professor of Sociology. John was Kent's first Professor of Social Anthropology, a personal chair accorded him in 1982, and he often said that he was 'made at Kent'. This was where his major work was done. Being among mainly sociologists at the beginning surely pushed him towards a broader social anthropology, particularly to examine the British informal economy, but Mediterranean anthropology was also in full bloom. J. G. Peristiany's conferences in Athens were a highlight, Kent became a central place and Mediterranean anthropology formed a kind of travelling house party. As Michael Gilsenan puts it:

> I don't think that I have ever quite recaptured the atmosphere and stimulation of those conversations, meetings and conferences in Kent, Rome, Zaragoza, Galicia, so many places. Ernest Gellner added enormously to the engagements and felt a real link with Kent, Sydel Silverman and Eric Wolf became friends. Provocation, argument, and lots of food and drink, those were the rules.[4]

The period, although one of UK university expansion, was one in which many anthropologists presented themselves as 'social scientists' in order to secure positions

[3] J. Davis, 'Forms and norms: the economy of social relations', *Man* (n.s.), 8 (1973), 162.
[4] M. Gilsenan, Memorial Address, All Souls College, Oxford, 24 June 2017, p. 10.

as well as to engage with new intellectual trends. In the early days at Kent, John both benefited from and contributed to the intellectual synergy between his work and that of colleagues in sociology, such as Ray Pahl, the political sociologist Krishan Kumar, Derek Allcorn (whose theoretical acumen and sense of humour he much admired) and Frank Parkin. It was for Parkin that, in 1974, John persuaded Gellner to hold the press deadline of the *European Journal of Sociology* to accommodate a *faux-Marxisant* analysis of Beatrix Potter, in which it was claimed there could be no such thing as 'an innocent reading'.[5] The Kent years were punctuated with sabbaticals at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara (1971), the Free University of Amsterdam (1977–8), the University of California, Berkeley (1980) and the University of Aix-en-Provence (1981). In Amsterdam John met Dymphna Hermans, whom he married while at Berkeley. Dymphna, herself a social anthropologist, later undertook fieldwork in Cambrils, a village on the Costa Dorada of Catalonia. They were different but complementary characters: he with controlled and conventional middle-class manners, she effervescent and outgoing. The couple were to have three children—Michael and Henry (born 1983) and Peter (1985).

Not a technical person in the normal sense, John could treat technical matters with great intensity. This was as evident when he took to bricklaying at his house at Kent as in his long enthusiasm for photography. More importantly, it was John—an otherwise more unlikely figure one could not imagine—who founded the Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing, and for a while placed Kent at the forefront of computing applications that are now standard. Although Marie Corbin and Paul Stirling, as early as 1969, had used a Social Science Research Council (SSRC) grant and the Didcot Atlas Computer Centre to reconstruct family and kinship data from census records, it was John who routinised computer use. In Berkeley he had been much impressed by the work of the Language Behavior Laboratory under Eugene Hammel and Brent Berlin. On returning home, John persuaded the SSRC to sponsor a workshop at Kent in December 1983 on 'Computing and anthropological research'. Over the following years he introduced applications that we now take for granted (bibliographic and other databases, text production and statistical packages) as well as specialist applications for handling kinship. A *Bulletin of Information on Computing in Anthropology*, initially edited by John, ran from 1984 until 1992. Characteristically, he christened the Kent anthropology server 'Lucy', not to memorialise the Ethiopian fossil hominid (as many thought), or the linguistically capable chimpanzee (as some thought), but to honour Lucy Mair.

As a teacher, John is remembered for 'Understanding other cultures' (a joint course with philosophy), a history–anthropology bridging course and—perhaps with

[5] R. and C. Parkin, 'Peter Rabbit and the *Grundriße*', *European Journal of Sociology*, 15 (1974), 181–3.

more ambivalence—for *L'Année sociologique*. This latter attempt to bring rigour to the study of Durkheim's inheritance was short-lived, not least because a condition of registration was fluency in reading French. More popular was his creation of 'Potlatch', a teaching game that sought to capture the dynamic properties of the eponymous Kwakiutl institution of competitive exchange. Entertaining and amusing both as guest and host, during the 1980s he would invite the Tuesday anthropology research seminar back to his spacious kitchen in St Thomas Hill (John was always a fine cook), where discussion would often continue over food and drink, even after John himself had withdrawn to bed. For Krishan Kumar, there was in all this a 'generosity of enthusiasm'.[6] John had a particular reputation for generosity towards the young although, sadly, he had few research students of his own who might have served as torch-bearers of his reputation. His writing had to speak for itself.

III

John's anthropological work in Italy began in 1963 with a six-month stint as Paul Stirling's research assistant, at a time when the Mediterranean drew wide interest. Such authors as Julio Caro Baroja had written well on Spain, but it was Julian Pitt-Rivers's *People of the Sierra* (London, 1954) that forced English-speaking anthropologists to pay attention. Stirling had worked in Turkey in the late 1940s, although he was slow to publish (his *Turkish Village*—London, 1965—would still have been in draft when John was his assistant). And John Campbell, who studied under Peristiany, was beginning to publish on Greece as John started work in Italy. (All of these people had been co-opted into British anthropology by E. E. Evans-Pritchard at Oxford.) Pitt-Rivers had edited *Mediterranean Countrymen* (Paris, 1963), and a series of important collections edited by Peristiany began in 1965 with *Honour and Shame* (London).

The first fruit of John's own efforts was a piece on the card game Passatella, published, it seems, with Maurice Freedman's help. This derived from a sustained commitment to a wine shop in Bolgiaquinta and two-and-half months of playing sociable cards. Confusingly for the newcomer, no doubt, the face values of the cards were not their scoring values; nor would it have been plain to start with what the game's attraction was. Despite elaborate shows of secrecy and deliberation, there was little room for calculation in the card play itself, since the deck was taken in and reshuffled after two inconclusive rounds of discards. The fun began when two 'masters' emerged by winning a hand. They then apportioned the drinks, a lengthy and complex

[6] Gilsenan, Memorial Address, p. 10.

process that *did* require strategy, 'around the cards went again, and (largely tacit) alliances were formed and reformed in the process of again allotting drinks, with people co-opted, betrayed or abandoned'. The article suggests an already fine grasp of Italian, a sharp eye for detail and a knack for sociability. Not everyone could have joined the wine shop regulars. A circle of players (all men, of course) were 'friends', some had been allies at the Passatella table for a quarter of a century, and the game exemplified, in a friendly way, the same concerns with patronage, rivalry and dishonesty as informed real life in a place where men were entangled with each other in the nature of things and resources were scarce. A loser was *fesso* (gullible, stupid), a winner was *furbo* (cunning) and admired as such.

The article exhibits several features that would characterise John's later work. The writing is exact and meticulous. Grand theories of anthropology are conspicuously not appealed to, and a novel (in this case Roger Vailland's *La loi*: Paris, 1957) may be a better source than 'social science' writing. The analysis is very much John's own and he sets it up with care: practical action usually has an overall end in view, but a formal game involves actions, 'each of which has its own moral value and excitement', while the fact that a game may have a goal 'does not help us to describe the game'.[7] John, meanwhile, must have exhibited a good deal of *furbezza* himself, not least to have taken notes to judge the detailed forms of reciprocity while presumably counting his own cards and chaffing his neighbours at the table.

By the time the piece saw print, John was engaged in fieldwork on his own behalf, in a town of about 15,000 people on the arch of the 'boot' of Italy. This was the subject of his PhD thesis (1969), of articles and of a monograph, *Land and Family in Pisticci* (London, 1973). In the same year as he gained his doctorate, John won the Royal Anthropological Institute's Curl Prize for an essay on 'Honour and politics in Pisticci'.[8] John begins by pointing out that the English term 'honour' does not denote the same thing everywhere. He is keen, as in the piece on card games, that we not mislead ourselves by asking what honour is 'for'. He expresses, also, a distrust of 'social structure' being invoked by anthropologists to recover a presumed coherence of belief where in fact there is none. But his own account stresses ranking and inequality, and he attaches the fact that the prestige of a person or a family is based on a moral unity, despite the many different criteria used to judge their actions, pertaining to control of resources. The theme would recur in his later work. For the moment, the relation of ideas to behaviour, as he chose to put it, was left hanging. On the one hand there were individual persons, on the other was something very like economics. This, of course, trespassed on broader questions.

[7] J. Davis, 'Passatella: an economic game', *British Journal of Sociology*, 15 (1964), 192.
[8] Davis, 'Honour and politics'.

In *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Chicago, 1958), Edward C. Banfield, an American political scientist who went on to be a presidential advisor, had blamed southern Italy's problems on a (non-economic, even anti-economic) 'family-centred ethos'. John, with a number of scathing remarks on Banfield's parochialism, insisted this was no kind of explanation. Family and community were inseparable, social control deserved attention and people's choices made sense when one realised how constrained was the range of practical options. Choice was one part of John's polemic. The other was economics. Unless someone has the power to block the process, says John didactically, 'Moral ideas always give way to economic opportunity.'[9]

The monograph *Land and Family* shows his usual virtues. Again, anthropologists appear if they are useful, not otherwise (there are five obvious names in the bibliography, most of them receiving just a nod). At the end of the book John rejects the idea that all Pisticcesi life might be seen as 'networks' and 'negotiation'. What he had in mind were such works as Fred Bailey's *Stratagems and Spoils* (Toronto, 1969). His own concern is

> to know why particular people are face-to-face at all; what is it that brings *them* together? Why do *those* two or three have need of each other? Why is it that discussions between families about marriage endowments are concluded more equably than discussions about the same endowments within families?[10]

His answer is 'social structure', but that in turn is a product of Italian history, and Italian thinkers, novelists, historians and sociologists are more prominent in John's bibliography than are anglophone anthropologists. (A slightly later piece in a Festschrift he organised for Lucy Mair shows remarkable confidence with language and dialect, albeit Nevill and Ripalta Colclough helped transcribe the tape recording from which John worked.[11]) His doubts about what he knows for sure and what he infers less surely are clearly marked, and his arguments are laid out in carefully constructed prose. This is not to say the writing makes concessions. Indeed, John was not above flaunting some gratuitous learning. The word 'parapherns' crops up with no explanation and little context, when even the more common Latinate parapherna might more easily have put one in mind of the Greek paraphernalia and thus of goods that go with the bride. Presumably, many readers turned to the dictionary.

Here was a place, Pisticci, where nearly everyone owned a piece of land, and most had interests in other pieces, but few people owned enough to get by; where underemployment was chronic and patronage was rife; and where neighbourhood, shared

[9] J. Davis, 'Morals and backwardness', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 12 (1970), 351.
[10] J. Davis, *Land and Family in Pisticci* (London, 1973), p. 162.
[11] J. Davis, 'How they hid the red flag in Pisticci in 1923, and how it was betrayed', in J. Davis (ed.), *Choice and Change: Essays in Honour of Lucy Mair* (London, 1974), pp. 44–68.

descent and intermarriage made life intensely sociable but no one could fully trust their friends. Why was it like this? John placed enormous weight not only on his own surveys but on local government archives, combing them as a historian would but anthropologists at that time rarely thought to do, and found as a baseline a cadastral survey of 1814:

> We cannot say, I think, that economic relations are basic and that kinship is a mere descriptive idiom emanating from them … What we can say is that certain features of the present-day kinship system … are new, not more than 150 years old. They appear also to be coeval with the distribution of land and the diversification of the local economy.[12]

As a perceptive reviewer of the book chose to phrase this, 'poverty is the South's way of being modern'.[13]

The book is of its time. Although migrant labour is mentioned at several points, almost as much space goes to labourers coming in from nearby Lecce to share-crop tobacco as to those Pisticcesi (we are not told how many there were) who worked elsewhere in Italy or in Germany or North America. 'Globalisation' was not yet a word to conjure with. Nor, conspicuously, is class discussed. John's position seems always to have been that unless there is explicit class consciousness locally, class is of no analytical use (the national salience of an Italian Communist Party did little to convince him). The one citation of Marx is thus from 'The Eighteenth Brumaire'—the line on peasants as a disorganised mass, like potatoes in a sack. Ranking by honour, says John, meant Pisticci was not like that: 'It is difficult, moreover, to imagine a continual class consciousness in a society in which rather more than half the population has some rights, however small, in the principal form of capital.'[14] *Land and Family* was not widely reviewed. It was, however, widely cited, and still is. An Italian translation came out in 1989 and the English version was reissued in 2004. The message to anthropologists remains what it was. Although one could, if one wished, make south Italian peasant society seem 'exotic', the beginning of wisdom about a place like Pisticci was to recognise that 'the Italian normal, the local idiosyncratic, the European commonplace are there combined'.[15]

[12] Davis, *Land and Family in Pisticci*, p. 160.
[13] J. W. Cole, 'On the origins and organization of South Italian poverty', *Reviews in Anthropology*, 2 (1975), 84.
[14] Davis, 'Honour and politics', p. 78.
[15] Davis, *Land and Family in Pisticci*, p. 1.

IV

At the time when *Land and Family* appeared, Jane and Peter Schneider were at work in Sicily, John and Marie Corbin were in Andalusia, Eric Wolf and John Cole were investigating an Alpine valley, and Wolf and Bill Schorger had for years run conferences on the Mediterranean, the last of which convened at Kent. American authors were bringing to bear fresh intellectual resources. Two of Peristiany's collective volumes on Mediterranean themes were in print,[16] and Braudel's great work was becoming available in English,[17] although one would guess with confidence that John had read the much earlier French original. His *People of the Mediterranean* (London, 1977) summed up where he thought anthropology stood. Perhaps surprisingly, given his own intellectual background, John, with few exceptions, left aside historians and others to concentrate on (mainly English-speaking) anthropologists. The book, which was widely cited, and in 1983 translated into Spanish, was described as 'a milestone that marks the coming of age of a Mediterranean social anthropology',[18] which was surely the author's aim. If he was a generation too late to be a pioneer, he was certainly intent on putting the older generation right, and he describes Mediterranean anthropology, not altogether fairly, as 'an almost complete museum of pre-modern research techniques'.[19]

Again, John could not resist an occasional obscure word (for example 'erogate'), but as ever his prose is in general a model of clarity. The controversies that arose were therefore not about ambiguity. Some readers doubted whether a discrete 'anthropology of the Mediterranean' was a wise idea, others whether John's view of the subject as the sum of existing ethnographies was viable. Certainly the book pulled together a vast amount of anthropology, and it was characterised, years later, by a colleague in the French system, as 'a solitary and promethean plea for a more resolutely comparative and historical approach'.[20]

Most studies to date had been highly localised, as anthropological studies often are, and setting one such study beside another had its limitations. By this time an Austrian colleague could report that half the population (perhaps she meant half the male population) of the village in Greece that she wrote about worked in or around

[16] J. G. Peristiany (ed.), *Honour and Shame: the Values of Mediterranean Society* (London, 1965); J. G. Peristiany (ed.), *Contributions to Mediterranean Sociology* (The Hague, 1968).
[17] F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (London, 1972).
[18] J. Boissevain, 'Towards a social anthropology of the Mediterranean', *Current Anthropology*, 20 (1979), 81.
[19] J. Davis, *People of the Mediterranean: an Essay in Comparative Anthropology* (London, 1977), p. 2.
[20] D. Albera, 'Anthropology of the Mediterranean: between crisis and renewal', *History and Anthropology*, 17 (2006), 126.

Stuttgart. Nor was timescale less problematic than geographical range. John himself had shown how, in Pisticci, patterns of marriage and land tenure were not very old. Behind such changes there seemed nonetheless to be a Mediterranean *longue durée*, and resemblances between the north and south shores of the sea were often striking; the record was full of 'institutions, customs and practices which result from the conversation and commerce of thousands of years'.[21] Without history in a more detailed sense, however, anthropology ends either with vague talk of 'culture areas' or with implausible appeals to common causes such as climate. It was not until 2000 that Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell (a medievalist and a classicist respectively) suggested a way around the impasse by stressing ecological variation on a local scale, 'connectivity' among localities and the production of difference through exchange.

People of the Mediterranean is combative. The shortcomings of existing works receive more emphasis than their strengths, and the tone is often acerbic, with a monograph on one Italian village tagged as 'the second worst book on Mediterranean anthropology' and the reader left to guess which book was the worst (presumably it was Banfield's).[22] A wife and husband team are singled out for 'the amount of ingenuity they have expended to make their data irrecoverable'.[23] Most memorably, Julian Pitt-Rivers's early classic on Andalusia is described as 'a tangle such as only a pioneer's licence could justify'.[24] Among Pitt-Rivers's papers, it seems, is a long and very angry response that he never published, but his letter on 'The value of the evidence', in *Man* (1978), was sharp enough.[25] John, for his part, might have phrased his initial comments differently. His reply to Pitt-Rivers, also in *Man*, retrieved certain points that mattered.[26] They disagreed over the propriety of publishing details of a kind that make people and field sites identifiable, where John's inclination was towards transparency. John also insisted that, while equality may be an aspiration, as it was in Andalusia, honour is hierarchical. His position was that which he had argued in his 1969 Curl Prize essay, and 'egalitarian institutions' are in his view a rarity; power goes with wealth, honour reflects this and anthropologists, he thinks, deceive themselves by analysing 'values' in isolation. His central point, which this echoes, concerns how to compare cases and thus what the bases of comparison might be. Somewhere, he feels, must be 'crude material differences in wealth' that would allow one to set cases in order.

[21] Davis, *People of the Mediterranean*, p. 13.
[22] Ibid., p. 73.
[23] Ibid., p. 81.
[24] Ibid., p. 93.
[25] J. Pitt-Rivers, 'The value of the evidence', *Man* (n.s.), 13 (1978), 319–22.
[26] J. Davis, 'The value of the evidence', *Man* (n.s.), 13 (1978), 471–3.

Years later, in an unpublished note, he gave vent to his view of Pitt-Rivers, though how their mutual dislike first developed remains obscure. Oxford anthropology in the 1950s, says John, had depicted other cultures as implausibly symmetrical, patterned and coherent. 'The most exquisite of the snowflakes was Julian Pitt-Rivers, an accomplished solipsist.' 'Every inch the Old Etonian gent', he had opposed John's views on honour, so John supposed, on the grounds that 'it was vulgar and middle class to consider the distribution of wealth; what a truly sensitive anthro[pologist] could perceive was the "essence"—egalitarianism'. John's own rejection of class as an explanatory principle, one might think, befits successful *novi homines* for whom class relations are merely something to clamber about among. Behind the squabble, however, lay more profound questions:

> It is clear that when Pitt-Rivers has a problem … he will cast around, invoking Voltaire, Haro, Lope de Vega, Odysseus, and a romantic novelist called La Picara Justina. The point is this: there are assumptions of continuity—historical and geographical—which are not spelled out, and which should be argued, if an impression of potpourri is to be avoided.[27]

John wanted causal explanation. The categories seemed to him fairly unproblematic. Pitt-Rivers was interested in categories and if some of these, such as hospitality, recur in one form or another everywhere, then Voltaire and Homer might indeed belong on the same reading list.

People of the Mediterranean rejects 'explications of the conceptual intricacies of ambiguous notions' as anthropology's true aim.[28] John himself, however, was intrigued by ambiguity, and a succession of pieces attempts to resolve the puzzle he had earlier set himself by opposing ideas and behaviour. Besides articles on 'Forms and norms' and on exchange theory, one thinks of his later claim that all rules have parasitic rules explaining them away: 'it is inconceivable to us that a society that "has" rationality should not also "have" sophistry'.[29] Later still, in a piece on irrationality, some of the colour professionally excluded from the Pisticci monograph was placed on display, as when a petty trader was recounted as being beaten up after a 'friend' let slip that the trader was having sex with an underage girl. The trader escaped through sophistry:

> You seem to be losing an argument for one proposition (it is right that merchants should have sexual access to the simple minor daughters of their social inferiors). If you are barefaced enough … you can try to shift the argument to another where you have a better chance (it is wrong to betray a friend). When you have won that argument,

[27] Davis, *People of the Mediterranean*, p. 253.
[28] Ibid., p. 93.
[29] J. Bousfield and J. Davis, 'What if sophistry is universal?', *Current Anthropology*, 30 (1989), 518.

> you can boldly claim that you have in fact won the other.[30]

This manoeuvre was no different, said John, from that of social scientists, who recuperate in their writing all manner of inconsistency and should instead give stupidity its due by creating 'ethnographies of doubt and argument'. John offered this to Gellner as 'a small bouquet of absurdities'. A contrast between the coarseness of the case and the subtlety of the presentation may have appealed to both men, but the rationality of 'economics' and the like as a unitary explanation of social life was certainly demoted.

V

Paul Stirling, who had drawn John to Kent, had worked in Turkey. Pierre Bourdieu's writing on Algeria had come to English speakers' notice through Peristiany's *Honour and Shame*. Evans-Pritchard and then Emrys Peters had long ago written on eastern Libya, and in the pre-war period French ethnographers had done excellent work in North Africa, which John had begun to explore in his Mediterranean volume. More recently Gellner and, less successfully, Clifford Geertz had published on Morocco. A professional Mediterraneanist, which is plainly how John saw himself, should ideally work on both shores, and as early as 1973, it seems, he set about learning Arabic.

In 1975 he began work in Libya, which went on, at intervals, until 1979. (At the end of his first stay John had his field notes stolen, amongst other possessions, from the back of a Land Rover in Rome; he searched unsuccessfully through Rome's rubbish heaps for days.) Libya was not an easy place to work, and one suspects good Italian contacts played a part in getting started. The literature was scanty, and no one with careerist ambitions of the simplest kind, and thus a need for fieldwork one could complete on schedule, would have aimed for Kufra in the deep south. Intermittently, a war was going on that involved Chad. Across tribal and linguistic divisions (Mgharaba and Zuwaya, Tubu and Arabic) that had nothing to do with national boundaries, fighters and supplies moved back and forth, not least through Kufra where, it might reasonably be assumed, there were many things best not noticed: 'Watch the wall my darlings'. These days one would be at hazard of killer drones.

The questions of transparency on which John had disagreed with Pitt-Rivers looked different in Libya, and John was careful not to compromise his sources. But the same knack for sociability that allowed the early paper on Italian card playing clearly worked in Ajdabiya and Kufra. John got on well with Zuwaya traders. And the local security official who, presumably, was meant to keep an eye on him, became a

[30] J. Davis, 'Irrationality in social life', in J. Hall and I. Jarvie (eds.), *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner* (Amsterdam, 1996), p. 449.

friend who in the end, we suspect, got him access to a hoard of legal documents that John duly photographed. *Libyan Politics* (London, 1987) mentions illness; it refers also to the many hours each day given over to field notes. The funny stories that inform most fieldwork are not in print, although one of them appears in a later reminiscence. Having clambered on top of a car to remove a faulty light fitting on the gateposts of a local school, the anthropologist duly checked with the locals that the current was switched off, inserted a pair of pliers to remove the broken part and was blown off the roof of the car by a whopping electric shock. Very cross, he withdrew to his tent, where the schoolmaster's brother came to arrange a reconciliation, if need be by sacrificing a sheep. John duly went to see the schoolmaster and forgave him, as one is meant to do. It was all rather silly, if mildly revealing, 'And in any case, what would you do with a dead sheep?'

The book 'is at once very "off-beat" and very good indeed'.[31] The scrupulous surveys John conducted of kinship and residence patterns in small Libyan towns were conventional, but the dominant theme was the nature of the Libyan state, and here he felt free to explore fresh ideas. There were 'cadres', certainly, but

> in Ajdabiya revolutionary friend and revolutionary foe were embedded in the same structures of descent and marriage and neighbourliness. And this was so for every cadre in Ajdabiya and Kufra and the other smaller oases, and it applied to the members of other tribes as well as the Zuwaya: the cadres of the revolution were members of their society, and an important part of that society was organized in lineage and tribe.[32]

There was no simple distinction between state and society, therefore, although the ruling circle monopolised decisions on major topics, and *hukuma 'arabiya*, 'Arab government', here really meaning 'people's government', was a common phrase to discuss a world where, ideally, there would be no institutions of top-down authority. Qaddafi's government had seemingly boundless oil wealth and no need to organise the population for productive ends; the population could draw on government stipends as of right, and did so. *Libyan Politics* explores this with the aim of extending readers' imagination of political life. The book was widely and favourably reviewed. A French translation came out in 1990. It provided, as one reviewer said, 'a welcome relief from the ethnocentric and politically motivated mystifications of most Western writing concerning modern Libya'.[33] It was also something of an escape from the narrow terms that had so far bound John's anthropology.

[31] D. Hart, review in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 21 (1988), 433.
[32] J. Davis, *Libyan Politics: Tribe and Revolution* (London, 1987), p. 93.
[33] R. Fernea, Review in *American Anthropologist*, 90 (1988), 1013.

VI

'Exchange' runs through John's work from first to last. This is not surprising given the early influence of Raymond Firth, but whereas Firth maintained that formal economics could serve in studies of non-monetary economies, John explored the limits in everyday life of economistic language. 'Gifts in the UK economy' drew attention to the volume of transactions, produced and acquired in the formal economy, that 'disappeared' into a sub-economy of gift where different rules applied;[34] 'Forms and norms' used the example of Tupperware parties to show how firms were able to harness these sub-economies to capitalist enterprise, but criticised analysts who would 'see the everyday inanities of love analysed with the aid of Paretan optima and indifference curves'.[35] Equally, he was sceptical of the stark distinction between gift and commodity that anthropologists such as Chris Gregory and James Carrier had made. In 'The particular theory of exchange', John develops a commentary on exchange theory of the Peter Blau variety, which is where he comes closest to a full-blown critique of economic formalism.[36] His later volume on *Exchange* (Minneapolis, 1992) sets out in fewer than 100 pages an approach to the anthropology of exchange, and his work on the informal economy of Western societies had an influence beyond anthropology, for example in Ray Pahl's *Divisions of Labour* (Oxford, 1984). It is surprising, however, how little John draws on his Italian and Libyan experience. With a second, and later, intellectual thread, which was history, the influence of fieldwork is more prominent.

One of the oddities of John's biography is that, despite his undergraduate background in history and his dislike of 'timeless' ethnography, he expressed no broad views, even in conversation, of historical method or of well-known historians. Analytically he had gone no further than to point out the shortcomings of Oxford anthropology's vague talk of history in the years around 1950. In the Mediterranean book, history figured largely as a set of straightforward 'causes'. The exception was Carmelo Lisón Tolosana's description of a Spanish village, where the younger generation rejected the older generation's view of the past to establish their own view of a possible future. This sets up John's own concluding section: 'Covertly, it might be said, Lisón Tolosana produces an account of how people make history and consume it. It is "living history" in the sense that it is incorporated in an analytical way into the account of a changing social structure.'[37] A review article in 1980 considered how

[34] J. Davis, 'Gifts and the UK economy', *Man* (n.s.), 7 (1972), 408–29.
[35] Davis, 'Forms and norms', 163.
[36] J. Davis, 'The particular theory of exchange', *European Journal of Sociology*, 16 (1973), 151–68.
[37] Davis, *People of the Mediterranean*, p. 248.

American authors whom John admired 'consumed' history in writing on Sicily, an Alpine valley and a town in the Piedmont.[38] John's Libyan work addressed how history was 'produced' by Zuwaya tribesmen, whose

> relations were for the most part those of patrilineal descent. The framework of analysis was not narrative nor progressive nor dialectical but genealogical. And consequently their history consisted of events and lives which carried moral and political precept: of incidents loaded with an interpretation.[39]

In 1983, a piece on 'History in the making' began to generalise Lisón Tolosana's insight,[40] and some years later John published a wide-ranging comparative chapter in a volume that, ironically enough, was informed by Oxford ideas, though of a later vintage than those that John had often condemned. 'The social relations of the production of history' became widely known.[41] Briefly, Lisón Tolosona's generational history and Zuwaya lineage or segmentary history were both contrasted with Qaddafi's newly national history, whose cumulative narrative was part of the modern package in which every nation-state has a history just as each has a flag and postage stamps.

Easily missed, but striking once noticed, are recurrent references in John's work on history and exchange alike to what he now dubbed 'state's men', those who drive informal transactions into the taxable economy and memory into national history. John's interest in such figures increased, perhaps for obvious reasons. In 1980, soon after he completed his Libyan fieldwork, the Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons had it thrust before them as an example of waste, although, by his own estimate, he had spent on top of his usual salary only £11,000 or £12,000. This was not the generally tolerant Britain in which John had begun his anthropology. The Jarratt report in 1985 urged universities to define their objectives, and funding of many sorts was disappearing; by 1993 John could mention in passing a resemblance between the views of Lady Thatcher and those of Colonel Qaddafi.[42] By the end of that decade, and throughout the next, British readers of *Libyan Politics* must often have shared John's appreciation that politicians who invoke the popular will as legitimising their schemes soon find themselves adrift and lonely:

> Hence the spectacle of rulers putting their ears closer and closer to the ground in the hope that they would eventually hear some whisper that they could recognize as the

[38] J. Davis, 'Anthropology and the consumption of history', *Theory and Society*, 9 (1980), 519–37.
[39] Davis, *Libyan Politics*, p. 206.
[40] J. Davis, 'History in the making', in H. Nixdorff and T. Hauschild (eds.), *Europäische Ethnologie* (Berlin, 1983), pp. 291–8.
[41] J. Davis, 'The social relations of the production of history', in E. Tonkin, M. MacDonald and M. Chapman (eds.), *History and Ethnicity* (London, 1989), pp. 104–20.
[42] J. Davis, 'Social creativity', *Anales de la fundación Joaquín Costa*, 10 (1993), 258–9.

> authentic voice of the people. They did not and, feeling themselves under threat, became increasingly autocratic and repressive.[43]

An easy thing to set about repressing in autocratic style, with higher aims in view, was academic autonomy. The criteria of success were therefore shifting.

In an unpublished note, written in later life, John says much about the virtues of Paul Stirling: 'And yet he never made it to the top: he was not FBA; he was not an officer of the ASA or RAI, not of any international academic organization, apart … from an Anglo-Turkish association of one kind or another.' This 'getting to the top' plainly interested John more than it had Stirling. John was thus delighted by his election to the British Academy in 1988, and one might have thought that, if the matter troubled him, he could have defined as 'the top' wherever it was that he was pursuing his own interests. In the newly hostile world of 'institutional reviews' he had suitable initiatives in hand. Apart from his involvement in computing, the book on exchange was all but finished, there was work subcontracted but overseen by John on his Libyan documents, a more general review was in progress on Mediterranean marriage and divorce, and a supervised project on Arab marriage in Britain. He had friends and valued colleagues in Kent, a home and a full social life. Yet in 1989 John applied to Oxford. The state of UK academic life may have played its part in this decision.

VII

The Professorship in Social Anthropology at Oxford is attached to All Souls College. When John was appointed, there was predictable discontent from Pitt-Rivers. Anthropologists teaching at Oxford were not upset, however, and when John arrived as professor, in 1990, he did so in a civilised way. His predecessor, Rodney Needham, had given an inaugural lecture marked not only by uncontrolled emotion about his own wartime military service but by unfortunate denunciations of colleagues. John, by contrast, got it right. 'Times and identities' found good in his new colleagues, explained what social anthropology could do, and suggested to the university some attractive ways to consider society, history and ethnography.[44] He gave the subject a certain presence.

John's sociability was much in evidence, as always, but the beginnings were slow. Invited to co-chair the weekly departmental seminar, he said hardly a word all term, as if gauging what he might be dealing with. Wisely, he leant heavily on Peter Rivière, 'an equable man', as John remarks. Occasionally, it must be said, John got things

[43] Davis, *Libyan Politics*, pp. 135–6*b*.

[44] J. Davis, *Times and Identities: an Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Oxford on 1 May 1991* (Oxford, 1991).

wrong. His social relations with women were sometimes clumsy; his competitive assessments of certain Oxford anthropologists as cleverer than others got back to the objects of his judgement more quickly than he realised and seemed odd to people less interested in precedence. Behind such faux pas, one gathers, was a deep unease. A friend of his speaks more generally of 'insidious whispers' of doubt, not always successfully overcome.[45]

As colleague and professor, John was a genial and supportive presence, with some admitted oddities. His computing interests, for example, took the form of an obsession with introducing specific servers and networks that left those who used PCs all but cut off from the world. In general, however, he worked to include people. At seminars convened by himself, not at those where he felt more vulnerably on display, he drew together anthropologists, historians and others, and set a tone of sophisticated curiosity. Administratively, however, the university was a constant frustration. Committees overlapped with committees, none with the power to decide much, and the central administration produced memoranda that were long, badly organised and poorly written. At least one of these John took the time to rewrite and send back with a note explaining what such a document should look like. Back came the counter-reply that whoever it was could not be blamed, and their mother was sick. John's patience at last ran out. Found by a colleague one day slumped in his office armchair, with the inevitable empty coffee mug and the ashtray with his pipe on the floor beside him, surrounded by piles of paperwork, John said in quiet despair, 'I think I have had enough of this. I shall look for another job.' But this was John; the job that presented itself was thus the Wardenship of All Souls.

John by now had some years' experience of the college, yet he claimed that his election (in 1995) came as a surprise to him. It certainly did to others. It was less of a surprise, it seems, to people within All Souls, where, as a colleague remembers, 'he won the right, the centre-left, and the "nice people" vote', to come out ahead in the first round. A key component of support came from younger fellows. Part of John's appeal among those older was, apparently, the contrast with his predecessor in anthropology: the subject has a certain attraction for those not within it (a touch of the exotic, perhaps; a hint of adventure in remote places), and here was an anthropologist who was urbane and friendly.

The job, of course, is an odd one, not least because it represents the public face of an esoteric institution that attracts much speculation. Wardens may attend formal occasions outside the university by virtue of their office. Locally they are drawn into such matters as the High Street in Oxford being choked by buses. Beyond this they are likely drawn into claims that private papers should be open to public scrutiny, which

[45] Gilsenan, Memorial Address, p. 4.

(whatever his position against Pitt-Rivers may have been some years before) John was not going to have happen with respect to the long-ago appointment of Isaiah Berlin. 'We don't let people see current and active files … Sir Isaiah's file doesn't just concern him but also concerns college business and other people's business.'[46] Even before he took up the post, John was accosted by a journalist, who reflected on a wasted afternoon by dubbing him 'the mysterious Professor John John'.[47] His anthropological colleagues hardly thought him so. Indeed, at least one of them found him puzzling for quite the contrary reason: 'The odd thing about John is, What you see is what you get.'

What one saw depended on where one stood, but there was a transparent innocence in some of John's concerns. For a brief time, for instance, his professorship at Oxford had coincided with the Cambridge professorship of Marilyn Strathern, and John would refer to her on occasion as 'Sister Cambridge' and himself thus as 'Brother Oxford'. In print John was respectful of Strathern's work. Yet in private he often related a story of his predecessor as Warden (Sir Patrick Neill, later Baron Neill of Bladon) being urged by Mary Douglas to support Strathern, presumably for the Oxford professorship. Neill had said that he could not understand what Strathern wrote. 'Well,' said Douglas, 'anthropology of course has its special views and methods that non-anthropologists might not grasp.' 'That is not the problem', said Neill, at least by John's account: 'It's her *prose* that I can't understand.'

If All Souls itself is less exotic than journalists hope, it does have peculiarities. The 'mallard song' is sung twice a year, and in every hundredth year a procession, with flaming torches, 'hunts' a mythically gigantic mallard. Such a year was 2001, and, under John's aegis, a verse was restored that refers to the creature's 'swapping tool of generation', though nobody knows why the genitals of male ducks should matter. That of course made the newspapers. It all seems a long way from Pisticci or the deserts of Libya, but John was entranced. An Oxford outfitters at one time had on its racks a surprising number of ties with duck motifs. Were these because of interest from a particular customer? 'Tubby chap, glasses, bright red braces?' 'Yes, sir. Do you know the gentleman?'

This commitment to College had a price. If the Warden is required to live in College, there is no requirement that he live there seven days a week or that his home be permanently open, but John's hospitality meant his evenings at high table were complemented by meals he cooked himself in the Warden's lodgings, and the line between College life and family life collapsed. Dymphna left to live in Wytham, and she and John divorced in 2006.

None of this meant an end to John's wider professional life. He was President of

[46] 'Closed files on open minds', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 9 May 1997.
[47] V. Grove, 'The warden who would not bare his soul', *The Times*, 24 June 1994, 15.

the Royal Anthropological Institute from 1997 to 2001, and his presidential address, in 1998, was very much in character, surveying, with a detachment that not all academics could feel, the position of British universities. Berlioz's encounter with the Académie des Beaux-Arts provides a case of the creative mind encountering mindless rules. Romanticism, however, is of little help to us, says John, and we are compromised before we start:

> Many academics participate in the bureaucracies that control their lives: we sit on the boards of the councils. We may be champions of academic freedom, but we are not all champions *à l'outrance*; we are drawn into complicity in the national councils in the hope that we will be able to defend our disciplines, in the fear that if we don't join someone else, less admirable and staunch than ourselves, will be invited to replace us.[48]

The everyday form of resistance can only be 'irony, tempered with as much compassion as we can muster'. While politicians may pursue a fantasy of 'business methods', collegiality has its own institutional history that spans seven centuries, a view more easily taken, perhaps, if one is part of an ancient college.

John's interests had by now moved on. At some point (we cannot pin down the date) he was heard to say that he had 'lost his faith' in anthropology, an odd thing to say in that anthropology is no more than a way of looking at the world and is notoriously content to appropriate other ways of doing so. Whatever the reasons, he threw himself into historical work. A piece he contributed to *All Souls under the Ancien Régime* (edited by S. J. D. Green and Peregrine Horden, 2007) thus did what a historian of Pisticci might have done. Never mind great books and intellectual currents, who *were* 'founder's kin' between 1600 and 1850? What were the kin links, what did these people own, who did they know and thus what *was* an Oxford college before the Victorian reforms? A reviewer referred to it as 'perhaps the most impressive and enlightening essay of the collection'.[49] John, though, adopted a self-aware pose of antiquarianism, and set about one of the College's parochial treasures, 'The Warden's Punishment Book'.

John retired in 2008. He is remembered as an efficient Warden, collegial but able to get things done. He is recalled as caring for the young, who can easily feel squashed by the 'big beasts', and he is remembered for his confident twitting of the old and the established when they needed twitting. At some point he had translated, rather beautifully, Carlo Cipolla's 'Fundamental laws of human stupidity' from *Allegro ma non troppo*. This, and Schopenhauer's 'Thirty-eight ways to win an argument', he sent as a 'welcome package' to those incoming heads of Oxford colleges whom he thought

[48] J. Davis, 'Administering creativity', *Anthropology Today*, 15/2 (1999), 7.

[49] M. Tworek, Review at H-education, H-net reviews in the humanities and social sciences, September 2010, http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30109 (accessed 1 May 2018).

showed signs of promise, though we have not ascertained when the practice started. Far less do we have a list of those who failed to receive a copy.

VIII

From his early days at LSE, John had moved steadily through a *cursus honorum*: the Curl Prize in 1969, the Malinowski Lecture in 1973, Honorary Secretary of the Association of Social Anthropologists and membership of the SSRC's committee on the subject through the early 1970s; in the 1980s membership of the Economic and Social Research Council's Research Resources and Methods Committee; chairmanship of the European Association of Social Anthropologists in the 1990s, and then President of the Royal Anthropological Institute. In short, all the things he felt Paul Stirling had failed to achieve but which Stirling may have thought irrelevant. Circumstances had changed, of course. John's career spanned a period when British anthropology had gone from a productively unsupervised state of opportunity, through a time of brutal cuts in funding, to a state of pettifogging regulation quite foreign to John's sensibilities. He himself emerged intact. From his days as a student, through his long career at Kent to his years in Oxford, he found himself in settings where a free exchange of thought and talk among well-informed friends was a practicable ideal.

A canting moralist—which John, decidedly, was not—would find the roots of later decay in earlier enjoyment. John had put on a great deal of weight, and by the time he retired he was not a healthy man. But he was as busy as ever, if not primarily with publication (*The Warden's Punishment Book*, co-edited with Scott Mandelbrote, came out in 2013), then with sociable encouragement of academics he thought well of. His ground-floor flat at Iffley, giving onto a garden, was lined with books and littered with papers, and his kitchen was as much a delight as ever. An evening of wine, *pasta all'amatriciana* and talk was a very civilised occasion. Anthropology had its place, but really that place was defined by literature, music and what used with more confidence to be called 'culture'; the greats of this or that academic subject might be acknowledged, although often deflated through some scurrilous story, but they were not to be venerated. It was rare on these occasions not to make a mental note to jot down afterwards some reference, anecdote or *bon mot*.

To what would have been the horror of some of his friends, had they known of it, John voted 'leave' in the Brexit referendum of 2016. He did so, as he explained the matter, from sheer dislike of the established powers telling him what to do. More than once in his Libya book he had mentioned with sympathy a man surnamed Bu Riziq who, with a small flock of animals, a pension and some grants from government

(apart from the goats, in fact, very much like an ageing British academic), spent much of the year in a desert camp miles from anywhere. He knew what was going on in the world—he had his short-wave radio—but needed space of his own. Why did he live where he did? 'The last time a policeman came here was in 1936; very few people know what happened to him.'[50] Bu Riziq had no ambitions against the state. John's natural habitat was not a tent in the desert; a well-furnished house with a library, food and good wine was more his mark. But in a comfortable way he found space to do what he wanted.

John's influence was felt subtly through his interactions with colleagues. His anthropology was deliberately 'middle-range' and eclectic, and as a stylist he was succinct and understated. His writing could be crystal clear, but occasionally allusive, and he rejoiced in pedantic eccentricities such as beginning summative sentences with 'So …'. His speech, meanwhile, was littered with the mockingly Italianate 'My dears', which, addressed to male interlocutors in particular, was thoroughly distinctive. In some ways reserved and modest to a point—his *Who's Who* entries and CVs were brief, almost casual—he treated friendship, which mattered to him greatly, as a public performance. He could move from intimacy in cultivating persons he deemed important to the social snub, and throughout his academic life was a master of the skilled put-down. But when relaxed, he was the consummate companion. Among friends he overcame his shyness and found the reassurance he needed to do his intellectual work.

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[50] Davis, *Libyan Politics*, p. 154.