

CSAC Monographs 7

**Questions in Sociology and
Social Anthropology**

a collection of papers by

Derek H. Allcorn

Edited by David Goss



**Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing
The University of Kent at Canterbury**

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Since 1986, a lot of people have helped us to remember Derek. For this volume, we thank first Joyce Allcorn for permitting and encouraging us to edit his papers. We thank, secondly, David Goss, who studied with Derek, for taking on the task of going through the masses of Derek's papers, and making, with us, hard decisions about what to include, and how to edit it. We thank the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Kent at Canterbury for a grant to support the costs of preparation and printing. We thank Dr. Michael Fischer and the Centre for Anthropology and Computing for setting, printing and publishing.

We would also like to thank those who have spoken at, helped to arrange, and attended the annual workshops which we have organised in memory of Derek; and very warmly all who contributed to the Allcorn Box Memorial Fund, which we set up in his memory and that of Steven Box. This Fund currently provides help for sociology and anthropology graduate students in need. It is Joyce Allcorn's wish that any revenues from the sale of this book will be added to it.

Paul Stirling

Richard Scase

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Derek Allcorn
1927 - 1986

Derek Allcorn's totally unexpected death from illness on Nov. 29th 1986 stunned all of us who knew him. He was devoted to, and very much loved by, not only his close family and personal friends, but a much wider circle of colleagues and students, past and present. We missed him sorely; and still miss him.

Derek was born in Hastings, where he in due course attended Hastings Grammar School, which for part of the war was in St. Albans. At Cambridge, in 1945, he began by reading English, but switched to Anthropology, in which he took a First. After a year of research in social medicine with the Medical Research Council in London, he went as a graduate student to Anthropology at Manchester, with Max Gluckmann, Vic Turner, Emrys Peters, and a whole set of other distinguished mates; cloth cap supporters of Manchester United. There, still medically funded, he made a truly pioneering anthropological study of young men in Acton for an acclaimed doctorate, ratified in 1955; the year in which he married Joyce. He continued to work for the MRC, in London, with research colleagues, in three different projects. From 1958-60, he was at Aberdeen, with Raymond Illsley, working on Aberdeen fishermen, and on the occupational classification of the sick and the dead; work which has had permanent consequences for national censuses. From 1961-63, he was back with old friends in Manchester, to study, in a team of three, the town of Leigh.

In 1963, he went as Lecturer to the University of Hull, and in 1965, he was appointed Senior Lecturer – the second sociology job ever – at Kent; a founder member of the new department. His contribution was enormous. Not only did he work like a trojan on the planning of new arrangements and new courses, and especially in establishing graduate studies, but he helped to shape the thinking ('what shape is your thought, mate?') of all of us, – if in rather different degrees!

Derek found everything and everyone interesting. He had no airs, no arrogance, no self-righteousness. He was magnanimous and tolerant, if on occasion pigheaded. His friends were from all walks of life, and he kept up with them with almost obstinate loyalty.

He had a passionate love of reading, an astonishing range of scholarship, a vast research experience, a fierce scorn for dogma, fashion, cliché, pomposity, and loose verbiage, a unique, brilliant and often sustained sense of fantasy and humour. For all this praise, we can claim objective evidence; he owned most of the books he wrote or lectured about, and the copies in his study were copiously interleaved with his hand written notes. He was perhaps at his best in informal discussions, preferably with a pint to hand, or in hand. More formally, he gave many seminar papers, and of course innumerable lectures, all it seems written out in full. All such occasions were memorable, but the taller, intellectually, the audience, the less of his firepower went over their heads. He was a remarkable thinker, and a effective teacher for all of us. He – and everyone else – enjoyed his jokes, and he knew his Marx well. But he was intellectually incorruptible, and he cared passionately, if with at times infuriating sophistication, about truth, 'whatever that is'.

He left mountains of disorderly paper, mostly handwritten. Tragically, he published very little, not even his thesis. His influence lives impalpably in his friends and students, and in their friends and students. And what he did leave was extremely difficult to arrange in publishable form. Here at least are some examples of his style of thinking. He was not short of self doubt; he largely predated much of the current self criticism and loss of nerve in sociology and social anthropology; but his commitment to meticulous care with data, with words (concepts), and with clarity about questions and their consequences (theory), implies that the comparative study of human societies is possible, cumulative, and of breathtaking interest. And he certainly practised it – well.