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Historical anthropology: the unwaged debate

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Historical anthropology

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What is social anthropology? Like a historian, I respond to a request for a timeless definition by offering a historical account instead. The phrase 'social anthropology' came into use at the end of the last century, when the first university departments of the subject were founded in the USA...

Why should a group of historians (myself included) demonstrate such an interest in anthropology? Why now? Essentially because of the turn which the discipline of history has taken in the last few years. Since fieldwork began, anthropologists have been interested in the everyday: that is essentially what they have always studied. They have always worked at the microsocial level. They have long been concerned with alien mentalities or 'modes of thought'. They were the ones who first widened the concept of culture, using the term to refer not simply to the arts but to the attitudes and values expressed and embodied in artifacts, rituals and the practice of daily life, and more recently emphasizing what they call the cultural 'construction' of reality, the construction of gender, authority, and so on. Their assumption of

cultural relativism, rather than the superiority of the western or the modern, has also helped historians in the task of understanding the past in its own terms.

Historical anthropology is not an intellectual field in the sense of a specialization in the history of a certain domain of behavior, economic history, for example, or art history; it is a particular approach to the past, which has been developed in collaboration between anthropologists who discovered history and historians who discovered anthropology.

Thirty years ago, few anthropologists were interested in history. The concern of the majority was to study so-called 'primitive' or 'tribal' societies as they were, c. 1960, before they disappeared. Their aim was to turn their field-notes into a full description of all aspects of life in a remote culture. It might take ten or twenty years to turn these field-notes into a book, but it would be written in the present tense, the so-called 'ethnographic present'.

These remote societies in Africa, South Asia, Polynesia and elsewhere were of course changing rapidly in the 1960s as they were

incorporated more and more fully into the system of late capitalism. Awareness of change in the present encouraged more and more anthropologists to turn to the past, to learn what these societies had been like a hundred or even two hundred years ago. There is now a substantial shelf of books on the history of the third world in the nineteenth century or even before whose authors are anthropologists. To cite only the best known examples: Clifford Geertz has written about Bali, Marshall Sahlins about Hawaii and Fiji, Bernard Cohn about India, and Jan Vansina about Central Africa, while Eric Wolf produced a general study of the changing relations over the centuries between Europe and what he called, ironically, 'the people without history', in other words those people whom westerners, including anthropologists, used to think had no history.

Some historians of some of these regions were relatively quick to take an interest in the work of the anthropologists, especially when anthropologists behaved like historians and took their evidence from the archives. The use of oral tradition by Jan Vansina for example, was less easy for historians to accept (although an oral history movement was developing at about the time that Vansina published his book). A collaborative approach by historians and anthropologists to what was called 'ethnohistory' was established in the USA and elsewhere by the 1960s. In practice if not in theory, ethnohistory meant the study of the cultures or societies which used to be called primitive or tribal (although people are uncomfortable with these names, no substitute seems to have become accepted). Literacy was a late arrival in these societies, hence the need to study the past by collecting oral testimonies. The societies were generally small in scale, so that it was possible to study them as wholes rather than writing monographs on economic or political activities.

On the other hand, it is more surprising that some western historians of the west should have been so strongly attracted by an ethnographic or anthropological approach from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, among them Keith

Thomas, Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Davis, Jacques Le Goff, Aron Gurevich, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. Why, for example, should a historian of Tudor or Stuart England study and quote a monograph dealing with witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande of Central Africa? Why have so many historians, whatever their region of specialization, quoted an article by an anthropologist describing and interpreting cockfights in Bali as witnessed in the 1950s?

It is this apparently paradoxical situation, which should not be taken for granted simply because it has lasted for a generation, on which I should like to comment now, leaving the assessment of the ethnohistory of Africa, Asia, the Americas and Australia to specialists in these fields and concentrating on the history of Europe. I shall try to explain what has attracted some historians to anthropology, what they have appropriated, and what problems this appropriation raises.

Let us go back some thirty years and examine the interests and problems of historians in Britain and elsewhere before the encounter took place. (This is an eyewitness account, as I remember it). Some of us were dissatisfied with the modes or styles of historical writing dominant at that time. So far as subject-matter was concerned, the main choices were between a traditional narrative of high politics and an economic history which was becoming increasingly macroeconomic and quantitative (Cliometrics in the USA, *histoire sérielle* in France). So far as types of analysis were concerned, the choice was, to speak in shorthand, between Ranke and Marx, in other words between a focus on the reasons great men had for acting as they did and a focus on modes of production and class struggle. For what the French *Annales* school offered, in its second generation, the age of Braudel and Labrousse, was a less dogmatic, more open form of Marxism (the determinism being less that of the economy and more that of the environment). That was how Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein were able to go into partnership in the 1970s in their study of world systems.

In the early sixties, some British historians, myself included, were attracted but not completely satisfied by the Marxism and the *Annales* of the time. We were looking for some sort of third way, wanting to write some kind of social or cultural history rather than one which was essentially political or economic. Some people, notably Edward Thompson and Raphael Samuel, were speaking of history 'from below'. Others, notably Richard Cobb, were studying 'faces in the crowd'. Still others, like W.G. Hoskins and his school, were interested in the history of small communities. I give English examples for convenience, but roughly similar points could be made about the USA, or France, or Italy at this time. Börje Hansen in Sweden and Julio Caro Baroja in Spain had similar interests, but they were rather more isolated at the time.

These were among the conditions for the emergence of an interest in anthropology among historians. There was a need or a demand for an anthropological approach, or at least for something rather like it. An approach not a field, impossible to define (or at least to define to everyone's satisfaction), but distinctive in its combination of characteristics, five in particular.

1. An approach to a culture or society via its everyday life, its practice (cf. *Alltagsgeschichte*). Anthropologists observe the everyday, historians try to reconstruct it through documents. More precisely, historical anthropology involves an interest in the principles underlying everyday life in a particular place and time, the 'rules', or norms (revealed especially in disputes, hence the interest in judicial archives).

2. Studies at the microlevel. Anthropologists study whole cultures, but generally work in face-to-face communities where they know everyone. In the 1970s the term 'micro-history' came into use to describe the work of historians who also focused on small communities, of which the most famous is surely Montaillou, the community in southwest France studied by Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie in a book published in 1975.

3. Interest in what Malinowski called 'the

native's point of view'. Historians used to try to reconstruct the views of contemporaries, but elites. Now, like anthropologists many historians are committed to studying everyone, and to presenting the past as seen 'from below' as well as from above. Associated with this shift is an interest in the history of 'modes of thought' or 'mentalities', the everyday life of the mind, unexamined assumptions rather than conscious theories.

4. A concern with the symbolic, especially with symbolism at the level of everyday life. Public rituals (easily observable by anthropologists and important in societies without writing) have been studied with enthusiasm by historians of medieval and early modern Europe. Historians used to dismiss what they called 'mere' symbol or ritual. Now, on the contrary, many of them assert that symbols and rituals matter, that they have power. Thus Natalie Davis has analyzed lynching in sixteenth-century France as a form of purification, while Caroline Bynum has examined the body and its food as symbols, as communication.

5. Finally, I would include among the defining characteristics of historical anthropology a use of some concepts which were coined by anthropologists.

Thus Aron Gurevich used Mauss and Malinowski on gift exchange. Keith Thomas made use of Evans-Pritchard on witchcraft and magic. Le Roy Ladurie, characteristically wide-ranging and eclectic, drew on Bourdieu, Gellner, Leach, Lévi-Strauss, Pitt-Rivers, Sahlins and Wylie.

Among the problems raised by this interdisciplinary poaching or borrowing I should like to note three in particular.

1. Is historical anthropology static? Jean-Christophe Agnew accused it of this sin in a paper entitled 'scenes from a marriage'. If the accusation is just, it might be explained partly in terms of an intellectual tradition, functionalism, and partly by the anthropologist's position of temporary observer. However, it would be more exact to say that change has been presented by anthropologists as coming from without (from culture contact or 'ac-

culturation'), rather than from within.

2. Does historical anthropology depend on a model of community consensus? Perhaps it once did, but it need not, witness the rise of Marxist and feminist anthropology and history with their challenges to the idea of community consensus. Though Marxists and feminists have their own conceptions of community which it might be useful to problematize, asking about differences of interest or viewpoint within the female sex or the working class.

3. Everyday history or microhistory have been challenged as trivial and also for ignoring politics. On occasion, at least, the arrow has hit the target. All the same, some historical anthropologists - notably Marshall Sahlins - are concerned with the relation between small communities and large societies, between structures and events, and between politics and culture.

In conclusion, I should like to make four points about the continuing value of this approach.

1. In the first place, it encourages or even forces us to rethink some central issues in historical writing such as the relation between events and structures, so long studied in isolation from each other.

2. In the second place, it helps in the undoing of a certain style of western history, once dominant, which centered on the west, and within the west on elites, and within the elites on great men. It is an antidote to what Vico called the conceit of nations, and also to the more recent conceits of classes or genders.

3. In the third place, it helps us to overcome the problems of cultural distance, of understanding cultural difference or 'otherness', whether it is spatial or temporal. Some anthropologists, notably the followers of Evans-Pritchard, see their task as cultural translation. Historians and historical anthropologists might also usefully regard themselves as translators, as interpreters or as mediators between the past and the present.

4. Finally, historical anthropology is of value to us because it defamiliarizes our own history. Anthropologists have not only made

the remote more familiar, they have encouraged us to see the familiar as strange, as problematic. I wonder who is going to write a historical ethnography of parliament or the diplomatic service, or an anthropology of British or of Dutch culture. Must we wait for an African or an Indian visitor to take an interest in our changing customs, or can we do the work ourselves?