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Anthropologists and Historians: Reflections on the History of a Relationship

Today, historians and social anthropologists belong not only to different academic disciplines but also — as a scholar whose work contradicts his own generalisation has remarked — to distinct subcultures, with their own languages, values and mentalities or styles of thought, reinforced by their respective processes of training or 'socialisation' (Cohn, 1987). However, this was not always the case.

In the eighteenth century, before the modern academic division of labour had developed, 'philosophical historians', as they sometimes called themselves, wrote with equal confidence about 'civilized' and 'savage' peoples and on history and theory. William Robertson, for example, wrote not only about the emperor Charles V but also about the manners and customs of the American Indians ('manners' was a keyword of the time). Edward Gibbon interpolated chapters on the manners of pastoral nations, such as the Huns, into his famous account of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Adam Smith devoted considerable attention to history, documented or 'conjectural', in his *Wealth of Nations*. Adam Ferguson and Johann Gottlob Steeb compared and contrasted the manners of 'polished' and 'barbarous' peoples. When the term 'Anthropology' was used at all, it was used in a Kantian sense to refer to the study of the nature of humankind (Lepenies, 1970; Meek, 1975).

To turn to the middle or late nineteenth century is to discover a very different situation. The philosophical historians were no longer visible. Their place had been taken by the disciples of Leopold von Ranke, self-consciously professional historians who were considerably more rigorous in their source criticism than their predecessors but paid the price of asking less ambitious questions, concerned in the main with political events, the sort of questions to which the documents preserved in official archives could provide definite answers. Other kinds of problem were relegated to other disciplines.

There were more and more such disciplines, for in the later nineteenth

century, the division of intellectual labour (in the study of mankind as in the study of nature) was becoming institutionalised in the form of new disciplines and academic departments. Among the most important of these new disciplines were sociology, psychology, and anthropology. For example, departments of anthropology were founded at Clark University in 1888 and in Columbia in 1899. In Britain, Edward Tylor was given the title of Professor of Anthropology in 1896, and Sir James Frazer that of Professor of Social Anthropology in 1907.¹ The new subject was soon subdivided into two branches, 'physical' and 'social'. It is with the second branch that this essay is concerned.

Workers in these new disciplines, and the more traditional subjects of history, law, and political economy, shared a concern with long-term trends, and in particular with what contemporaries called social 'evolution', a term they often understood in a Lamarckian rather than a Darwinian sense. The model of laws of 'evolution' linked the different disciplines (Burrow, 1966).

Economists described the shift from a 'natural economy' to a money economy. Lawyers, such as Sir Henry Maine, in his *Ancient Law* (1861) discussed the move from 'status' to 'contract'. Ethnologists such as Edward Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* (1871) or Lewis Henry Morgan in his *Ancient Society* (1872) presented social change as an evolution from 'savagery' (the 'wild', 'primitive' or 'natural' state of mankind) to 'civilization' (Kuper, 1988). Sociologists such as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer described the development from religion to science or from 'military' to 'industrial' societies. The geographer Friedrich Ratzel and the psychologist Wilhelm Wundt produced remarkably similar studies of the so-called 'people of nature' [*Naturvölker*], the first concentrating on their adaptation to the physical environment, the second on their collective mentalities.

The evolution of mentalities from 'primitive' to civilised was the major theme in the work of the French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. Despite his emphasis on the survival of the 'primitive' in the psyches of civilised men and women, Sigmund Freud also belonged to this evolutionary tradition, as is apparent from such essays as *Totem and Taboo* (1913), and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). The 'comparative method' — a slogan of the time — was historical in the sense that it involved placing every society (indeed, every custom or artifact) on the evolutionary ladder.

The theorists respected history, but they did not always extend this respect to historians. Comte, for example, referred with contempt to what he called the insignificant details so childishly collected by the irrational curiosity of the blind compilers of sterile anecdotes. Spencer declared that sociology stood to history 'much as a vast building stands related to

the heaps of stones and bricks around it'. At best, the historians were treated by sociologists as collectors of raw material. At worst, they were dismissed as totally irrelevant because they did not even provide the right kind of material for the master builders. To quote Spencer once more, "The biographies of monarchs (and our children learn little else) throw scarcely any light upon the science of society".

Only a few historians were exempted from the general condemnation. One of them was Fustel de Coulanges, whose study of *The Ancient City* (1864) was considered a classic by sociologists (such as Durkheim) and anthropologists (such as Radcliffe-Brown) as well as by his historical colleagues. Another was F. W. Maitland, the historian of English law, who coined the famous phrase that anthropology had the choice of being history or being nothing. Maitland's discussion of "The Sorts and Conditions of Men" in his *History of English Law* (1895) presented the social structure as a set of relations between individuals and between groups, regulated by rights and obligations, a view which has had considerable influence on British social anthropology.

An interest in history was characteristic of the majority of social theorists in the early twentieth century. A number of them had begun their career as historians, especially as historians of the ancient world. This was true of the French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache, for instance, the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, and the Scottish anthropologist James Frazer. Others tried to combine the study of the past and the present of a particular culture, as the anthropologist Franz Boas did in the case of the Kwakiutl Indians in the Vancouver area. Max Weber and Emile Durkheim were both extremely well-read in history. The great classical scholar Mommsen considered Weber as a potential successor. Durkheim studied history under Fustel de Coulanges at the Ecole Normale. He dedicated one of his books to Fustel. He wrote a monograph on the history of education in France. He made it the policy of his journal, the *Année Sociologique*, to review books on history, as long as they were concerned with something less 'superficial' than the history of events.

In the next generation, however, anthropologists, like other social theorists, turned away from the past. For example, psychologists as diverse as Jean Piaget, author of *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1923) and Wolfgang Köhler, author of *Gestalt Psychology* (1929), were turning towards experimental methods which could not be applied to the past. They abandoned the library for the laboratory.

In similar fashion, social anthropologists discovered the value of 'field-work' in other cultures as opposed to reading accounts of them by travellers, missionaries and historians. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, for example, lived in the Andaman Islands (in the Bay of Bengal) from 1906 to 1908 in

order to study the local social structure. Bronislaw Malinowski spent most of the years 1915-18 in the Trobriand Islands (near New Guinea). It was Malinowski who insisted most vigorously that fieldwork was the anthropological method *par excellence*. "The anthropologist", he declared, "must relinquish his comfortable position in the long chair on the veranda". Only by going out into the 'field' would he be able "to grasp the native's point of view". Fieldwork became a necessary stage in the training of every anthropologist.

Sociologists too abandoned the armchair in the study (rather than the long chair on the veranda) and began to take more and more of their data from contemporary society. For a dramatic example of the shift towards the present one might take the first sociology department in the United States, founded at the University of Chicago in 1892. Its first chairman, Albion Small, was an ex-historian. In the 1920s, however, under the leadership of Robert E. Park, the Chicago sociologists turned to the study of contemporary society, especially their own city, its slums, ghettos, immigrants, gangs, hobos, and so on. "The same patient methods of observation" wrote Park, "which anthropologists like Boas and Lowie have expended on the study of the life and manners of the American Indian might be even more fruitfully employed in the investigation of the customs, beliefs, social practice and general conceptions of life prevalent in Little Italy or the Lower North Side in Chicago".

This systematic concentration on the present was associated with a withdrawal of interest from the past. It was not an outright rejection. Radcliffe-Brown, for example, argued that social anthropology was concerned with change and must therefore "rely on history". However, he did not give change a high priority. He believed that the study of synchronic relationships should precede the study of diachronic ones.

Several different explanations might be given for this shift to the study of the present at the expense of the past. In the American case (more especially that of Chicago) the past was less visible in everyday life than it was in Europe. In America and Europe alike, the professionalisation of the disciplines of economics, anthropology, geography, psychology, and sociology required independence from the older, larger discipline of history. The rejection of historical method and the claim to be 'scientific' was necessary to the construction of the new disciplinary identities.

These social and psychological needs coincided with a new intellectual trend, the rise of 'functionalism'. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, explanations of customs or social institutions had generally been given in historical terms, using concepts like 'diffusion', 'imitation', or 'evolution'. Much of the history was speculative or 'conjectural'.

The alternative, inspired by physics and biology, was to explain these

customs and institutions by their social function in the present, by the contribution of each element to the maintenance of the whole structure. On the model of the physical universe, or the human body, society was perceived as a system in 'equilibrium' (a favourite term of the engineer-economist-sociologist Vilfredo Pareto). In anthropology, this functionalist position was adopted by Radcliffe-Brown and by Malinowski, who dismissed the past as 'dead and buried', irrelevant to the actual working of societies. It is hard to say whether it was the spread of fieldwork which led to the rise of functionalism or vice versa. Slipping into the idiom of the functionalists themselves, one might say that the new explanation and the new method of research 'fitted' each other. Unfortunately, they reinforced the tendency of social theorists to lose interest in the past.

There was of course a reaction against functionalism in anthropology in the 1960s, associated above all with the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Structuralism and functionalism differed in many ways, but they had shared one important characteristic, a concern with the synchronic rather than the diachronic, with structure as opposed to process. Lévi-Strauss himself is far from dismissing history, and he has written about the relation between history and anthropology on more than one occasion. All the same, the approach to anthropology which he encouraged reinforced the anthropologists' tendency to ignore history.

It is certainly not my intention to dismiss such formidable intellectual achievements as functionalist anthropology, the sociology of the Chicago school, structuralism, experimental psychology, or mathematical economics. These developments in the study of mankind may well have been necessary in their day. They were reactions against genuine weaknesses in earlier theories and methods. Fieldwork, for example, provided a more reliable factual basis for the study of contemporary tribal societies than the speculative evolutionary history which had preceded it.

What I do want to suggest, however, is that all these developments — like the history associated with Ranke — had their price. Neo-Rankean historians and functionalist anthropologists were more rigorous in their methods than their predecessors, but they were also narrower. They omitted, or rather deliberately excluded from their enterprise whatever they were not able to handle in a way compatible with the new professional standards. Sooner or later, however, there was bound to be what a psychoanalyst might call a 'return of the repressed'.

Ironically enough, social theorists were losing interest in the past at just the time that historians were beginning to produce something like an answer to Spencer's demand for a 'natural history of society'. At the end of the nineteenth century, some professional historians were becoming in-

creasingly unhappy with Neo-Rankean history. One of the most vocal of the critics was Karl Lamprecht, who denounced the German historical establishment for its emphasis on political history and great men, and called for a 'collective history' which would draw on other disciplines for its concepts.

These other disciplines included the social psychology of Wilhelm Wundt and the 'human geography' of Friedrich Ratzel, both colleagues of Lamprecht's at the University of Leipzig. "History", Lamprecht declared with characteristic boldness, "is primarily a socio-psychological science". He put this socio-psychological approach into practice in his multi-volume *Deutsche Geschichte* (1891-1909), a study which was favourably reviewed in Durkheim's *Année Sociologique* but was not so much criticised as mocked by more orthodox German historians, not only for its inaccuracies (which were in fact numerous) but for its so-called 'materialism' and 'reductionism'. The violence of the 'Lamprecht controversy', as it came to be called, suggests that his real sin was to have called Rankean or Neo-Rankean orthodoxy into question.

Lamprecht's attempt to break the monopoly of political history was a failure, but in the United States and France, in particular, the campaign for social history met with more favourable responses. In the 1890s, the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner launched an attack on traditional history which was similar to Lamprecht's. "All the spheres of man's activity must be considered", he wrote. "No one department of social life can be understood in isolation from the others". Like Lamprecht, Turner was impressed by Ratzel's historical geography. His essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", was a controversial but epoch-making interpretation of American institutions as a response to a particular geographical and social environment. Elsewhere he discussed the importance in American history of what he called 'sections', in other words regions, like New England or the Middle West, which had their own economic interests and their own resources. Turner's contemporary, James Harvey Robinson, was another eloquent preacher of what he called "the new history", a history which would be concerned with all human activities and draw on ideas from anthropology, economics, psychology and sociology.

In France, the 1920s were the years of a movement for a 'new kind of history', led by two professors at the University of Strasbourg, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. The journal they founded, *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, was relentless in its criticisms of traditional historians. Like Lamprecht, Turner and Robinson, Febvre and Bloch were opposed to the dominance of political history. Their ambition was to replace it with what they called a "wider and more human history", a his-

tory which would include all human activities and which would be less concerned with the narrative of events than with the analysis of 'structures', a term which has since become a favourite with French historians of the so-called 'Annales school'.

Febvre and Bloch both wanted historians to learn from neighbouring disciplines, although they differed in their preferences. Both men were interested in linguistics, both of them read the studies of 'primitive mentality' by the philosopher-anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. Febvre was particularly interested in geography and psychology. So far as psychological theory was concerned, he followed his friend Charles Blondel and rejected Freud. He studied the 'anthropogeography' of Ratzel, but rejected his determinism, preferring the 'possibilist' approach of the great French geographer Vidal de la Blache, which stressed what the environment enabled men to do rather than what it prevented them from doing. Bloch was closer to the sociology of Emile Durkheim and his school (notably Maurice Halbwachs, the author of a famous study on the social framework of memory). He shared Durkheim's interest in social cohesion and collective representations and his commitment to the comparative method.

Bloch was shot by the Germans in 1944, but Febvre survived the Second World War to take over the French historical establishment. Indeed, as president of the reconstructed Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, he was able both to encourage interdisciplinary co-operation and to give history a position of intellectual hegemony among the social sciences. Febvre's policies were continued by his successor Fernand Braudel. Braudel was well-read in economics and geography and a firm believer in a common market of the social sciences. Despite his long acquaintance with Lévi-Strauss (which began in the 1930s at the University of Sao Paulo) he showed rather less interest in social anthropology, but in the next generation the 'Annales School' found it the neighbour from which they had most to learn.

France and the United States are two countries in which social history has been taken seriously for a relatively long time and in which the relations between social history and social theory have been particularly close. However, it is possible to find social historians oriented by theory elsewhere in this period, in Japan, for example, or in Brazil.

The late Gilberto Freyre, for example, who studied in the United States with the anthropologist Franz Boas, might equally well be described as a sociologist or a social historian. He is best known for his trilogy on the social history of Brazil, *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933); *The Mansions and the Shanties* (1936); and *Order and Progress* (1955). Freyre's work is controversial, and he has often been criticised for his

tendency to identify the history of his own region, Pernambuco, with the history of the whole country, and for underestimating the degree of conflict in race relations in Brazil. On the other hand, Freyre's originality of approach puts him in the same class as Braudel (with whom he had many discussions when Braudel was teaching at the University of Sao Paulo in the 1930s). He was one of the first to discuss such topics as the history of language, the history of food, the history of the body, the history of childhood, and the history of housing as part of social history.

There was no period when historians and social theorists lost touch with one another completely, as a few examples will show. 1919 was the year in which the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga published his *Waning of the Middle Ages*, a study of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century culture which draws on the ideas of social anthropologists. In 1929, the new journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* included the political scientist André Siegfried and the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs on its editorial board, alongside the historians. In 1939, the economist Joseph Schumpeter published his historically-informed study of business cycles, and the sociologist Norbert Elias his book on *The Process of Civilisation*. In 1949, the anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard, a lifelong advocate of close relations between anthropology and history, published a history of the Sanusi of Cyrenaica.

From the late 1960s, however, the trickle of such books became a stream. On the historical side, landmarks include Keith Thomas's study of the decline of magic in seventeenth-century England, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's portrait of a medieval French village, and the essays of Jacques Le Goff, all of which refer to the concepts, theories, and case-studies of anthropologists. It was not necessarily the most historically-minded anthropologists to whom the historians turned. Some of them, like Thomas, were attracted by functional explanations, others, like Le Goff and Le Roy Ladurie, by the structural analysis of kinship systems and myths. There seems to be no relation between the interest shown by historians in the work of a particular anthropologist and that anthropologist's concern or lack of concern for history. Erving Goffman, whose work lacked a historical dimension, is cited by historians almost as often as Clifford Geertz.

From the 1960s onwards, an increasing number of social anthropologists, such as Anton Blok or Kirsten Hastrup, gave their local studies a historical dimension. On a grander scale, the anthropologist Eric Wolf has produced a comparative essay on peasant wars in the twentieth century and a study of the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world, especially the so-called 'peoples without history' since 1500. The term 'historical anthropology' has come into use to describe each discipline's discovery, or rediscovery, of the other.

There are obvious reasons for this convergence. Accelerating social change virtually forced itself on the attention of anthropologists (some of whom have returned to the areas of their original fieldwork to find them transformed by their incorporation into a world economic system). There has also been a massive shift of interest on the part of historians all over the world away from the narrative of the actions and policies of rulers and towards social history. As one critic of the trend puts it, "What was at the centre of the profession is now at the periphery".

Why? A sociological explanation may be in order. In order to orient themselves in a period of rapid social change, many people find it increasingly necessary to find their roots and to renew their links with the past, particularly the past of their own community—their family, their town or village, their occupation, their ethnic or religious group.

As a social historian with a strong interest in social theory, I can only welcome these developments, the 'theoretical turn' on the part of some social historians and the 'historical turn' of social anthropologists and others. Without the combination of history and theory we will never understand either the past or the present. All the same, it is only fair to add that we are not living in an intellectual golden age. As often happens in the history of intellectual endeavour, new problems have been generated by the attempts to solve old ones.

There have been moments in the last few years when historians and anthropologists, rather than converging, appear to have been rushing past one another, like two trains on parallel lines. For example, historians discovered functional explanations in the 1960s, at the very time that anthropologists were becoming dissatisfied with them. They were turning to 'microhistory', to studies of small communities in the past, when anthropologists were emphasising the limitations of such studies. Conversely, anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins discovered the importance of events at the very time when many historians had abandoned *histoire événementielle* for the study of underlying structures.

To complicate the situation still further, more kinds of theory are competing for attention than ever before. Social historians, for example, cannot afford to confine their attention to sociology and social anthropology. They need at the very least to consider the possibility that other forms of theory are relevant to their work. From geography, an old ally but also a discipline which has been changing rapidly in the last few years, historians may learn to consider central-place theory, or the theory of the diffusion of innovations, or the theory of 'social space'. Literary theory now impinges upon historians and social anthropologists alike, encouraging them to pay attention to the existence of literary conventions in their own texts, to rules which they have been following without realising they were

doing so. Feminist theory (itself interdisciplinary) is affecting history and anthropology alike.

The rise of a discourse shared between some historians and anthropologists coincides with a decline of shared discourse within each discipline. Indeed, even a sub-discipline such as social history is now in danger of fragmenting into two groups, one of them concerned with major trends, the other with case-studies on a small scale. In Germany in particular, the two groups are in conflict, with the so-called 'societal historians' [*Gesellschaftshistoriker*] on one side, and the practitioners of 'microhistory' on the other. We live in an age of increasingly blurred lines and open intellectual frontiers, an age which is at once exciting and confusing.

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Note

- 1 It may be worth adding that the terms 'ethnography' and 'ethnology' came into use in English in the early nineteenth century, while the now standard distinction between them goes back to the later nineteenth century.