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Anthropological History or Historical Anthropology?

Today's topic is a fitting one for an *Altfellow-Treffen*. The agenda was set, in effect, some 20 years ago in an influential article by an eminent *Altfellow* that brought about a paradigm shift in anthropology. This article redefined the anthropological project and broke down the barriers between anthropology and history that previous scholars had tried so hard to build. The approach he pioneered had an impact on the thinking of scholars from many disciplines and did much to revive the original notion of anthropology as a multi-disciplinary study of humanity. I refer, of course, to Clifford Geertz's "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture"¹. This essay shifted the focus of attention from the explanation of social sameness to the interpretation of cultural difference and was, we can now see with the benefit of hindsight, part of a wider philosophical trend that gives primacy to difference over unity. I do not want to question the undoubted contribution this perspective has made but the success of the interpretive approach does raise the question of its future, a question that can be addressed by examining the particular type of anthropology and history it has given rise to.

A major methodological difference between anthropology and history is that the historian communicates with the dead by means of the archive whereas the anthropologist communicates with the living by means of fieldwork. A central, if implicit, dogma of anthropology is the idea — once voiced by Chairman Mao — that too much reading can make you stupid. We try to guard against this danger by getting some of our data, and theoretical inspiration, in an oral form from people outside the academy. This information often comes in the following thought-provoking form:

History as it is told today begins with a white man, a white woman, an apple and a snake. Imagine how different it would be if these people were blacks. They would have eaten the snake and thrown away the apple and history would have taken an altogether different course.

This information comes from Herb Wharton. I heard him say it last week at the *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* where Mr. Wharton was speak-

¹ See the first chapter of Geertz, C., (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books.

ing as part of the *Erlebnis Australien* program. This aboriginal view of the history of the world, a classic example of what a prominent Indian historians calls the "logic of subaltern consciousness", serves to remind us that there is always more than one way to tell a tale and — what is an aspect of the same thing — that unexamined assumptions can be found in the most unexpected places. This leads me to raise the question of the unexamined assumptions of an anthropology that gives prominence to cultural difference.

Interpretive anthropology is in the historical particularist tradition of American cultural anthropology. This is the dominant orthodoxy today and its prime concern is to understand the meaning of the symbolic actions of people in specific settings by uncovering the conceptual structures that inform action. Geertz uses the analogy of a medical doctor to describe the project of the interpretive anthropologist: just as the doctor writes down the symptoms and performs the diagnosis with the aid of a detailed case history, the anthropologist writes a "thick description" of the symbolic action to be interpreted and decodes it with reference to the specific cultural context of the action. Geertz's interpretation of a Balinese cock fight is the classic anthropological example of this method; *Altfellow* Darnton's interpretation of a great French cat massacre³ the classic example from history. History and anthropology in this tradition, then, bring the details into focus; they give a close-up of a small significant event rather than a long shot of the big picture.

British social anthropology was the dominant paradigm until World War II and was on the wane when Geertz and his Chicago colleagues hatched the plot to redefine anthropology in the sixties.⁴ Geertz correctly saw his work as complementing rather than contradicting the British tradition; his over-zealous epigones, on the other hand, saw in the British social anthropology tradition a form of scientism that had to be vigorously opposed. This position, needless to say, has given rise to its opposite. The opponents of interpretive anthropology characterise it as

² See Guha, R., (1983), *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press.

³ See Darnton, R., (1984), *The Great Cat Massacre and other Essays in French Cultural History*, New York, Basic Books.

⁴ "The 1960s at Chicago redefined anthropology by placing the systematic study of meaning, the vehicles of meaning, and the understanding of meaning at the very center of research and analysis: to make anthropology, or anyway cultural anthropology, a hermeneutical discipline." See Geertz, C., (1995), *After the Fact: Four Decades, Two Countries, One Anthropologist*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, p. 114.

a form of wishy-washy humanism and argue for a more hard-nosed scientific approach to anthropology. The recent turn to rhetoric and literary criticism taken by Geertz and his colleagues has served to harden the view that what is at stake in anthropology today is a form of the old battle between science and the humanities. To describe the paradigm shift brought about by the interpretive anthropologists in these terms is to miss the point. British social anthropology in its classic form was primarily concerned with the functioning of society, not the meaning of symbolic action; it sought to provide general explanations rather than specific interpretations; it used the comparative method to reveal sameness not difference; the analogy used was that of the physicist concerned to find objective general principles ("laws") rather than that of the doctor concerned with diagnosis and prognosis. In sum, the British social anthropologist was concerned with the general principles of *society* rather than the specificities of a *culture*. Culture was deemed to be beyond the scope of social anthropology because it raised questions of history. The textbook example used to illustrate this point was the difference in the symbolic behaviour of a Muslim and a Christian upon entering a place of worship: the former takes his shoes off and puts a hat on while the latter takes his hat off and leaves his shoes on. The social anthropologist notes that the function of the two actions is the same — respectful behaviour in a holy place — and poses this as a general sociological problem to be explained; the reason for the different symbolic actions raises historical questions beyond the scope of social anthropology.

The rise of cultural anthropology, then, redefined social anthropology by broadening its scope to include cultural history; but recent moves by some interpretivists to eliminate all reference to explanation, function, and society have re-narrowed the scope of anthropology.

British social anthropology is often seen as being anti-historical. This charge conflates two forms of history: the cultural history of the interpretivists, which was seen as being beyond the scope of anthropology, and the conjectural history of the 19th century evolutionary theorists to which British social anthropology was decidedly opposed. Evolutionary anthropology involved yet a third variation on the comparative method. Here the analogy of the biologist was used. Just as the Darwinian biologist compared and contrasted the "survivals" of diverse forms of flora and fauna from different geological eras and arrayed the classifications in a linear sequence to yield a natural history of life on earth, the evolutionary anthropologist contrasted the different forms of economy and society that coexisted in different places and ordered them temporally to yield a conjectural history of human "progress". For example it was

noted that the native inhabitants of Australia were hunters and gatherers who practised magic, that the inhabitants of India were rice farmers who were polytheists, and that England was a country of industrialists and scientists. This geographical distribution was given a temporal twist so that the aborigines and the Indians were seen as two phases in the evolution of English economy and thought.

From the perspective of aboriginal people like Herb Wharton this evolutionary tale is an apple-eating Englishmen's version of history. People like him do not deny the hierarchical structure of society but they do make the point that it is based on money and power rather than a capacity for scientific thought. Imperialists, they argue, are money-minded and this greed for money is veiled behind in an ideology that compares the incomparable — scientific thought with magic — and judges one, science, to be superior.

From the perspective of the late 20th century, the merits of a subaltern critique of 19th century evolutionary theory are easy to see. But the closer we get to the present the more difficult it becomes to see what a critique of cultural anthropology might look like. Some obvious questions are posed. For example: Is there any correlation between the decline of the British empire and the decline of British social anthropology? Is there any correlation between the rise of the American empire and rise of American cultural anthropology? If so, what does it mean? These questions are easy to pose but the answers are much harder to find. Understanding the implicit assumptions of American cultural anthropology is a first step towards an answer. This tradition of thought, we have seen, stresses difference over sameness. On this point Geertz⁵ has noted that the idea that "thought is spectacularly multiple as a product and wondrously singular as a process" is the most powerful animating paradox within the social science, driving it in all sorts of directions. This move in the focus of attention from *singular process* to *multiple-product* sets the research agenda for a particular kind of anthropology and history. This is because, as Geertz notes, "the nature of that paradox has more and more come to be regarded as having to do with puzzles of translation, with how meaning in one system of expression is expressed in another — cultural hermeneutics, not conceptive mechanics."

But is thought "wondrously singular as a process"? This is the assumption of cultural anthropology that needs questioning. Is sameness due to the psychological unity of mankind, as one tendency in

⁵ See Geertz, C., (1983), *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, New York, Basic Books, p. 151.

American cultural anthropology would have it, or is the sameness brought about by a history of money-mindedness in the imperial powers? Is the "Unity of Mankind" an invariable psychological fact or a variable historical fact of imperialism? The psychological assumption is a legitimate one but it has the effect of providing an answer to the question of sameness such that difference is left as the problem to be explained. The perspective of imperialism, on the other hand, poses the question of the nature of the sameness that money-mindedness brings about. World-Systems Theory does this by means of a global historical approach that posits the mechanical workings of unequal commodity exchange on a world-scale. "Conceptive mechanics" of this kind opposes, rather than complements, "cultural hermeneutics" and it has not proved to be very popular with anthropologists because of its passive victim approach to people in the "periphery". There is room for another approach that stresses the contingencies of world monetary history. On 15 August 1971, for example, the "market" decided that the USA had lost the Vietnam War — the most expensive in world history — and Nixon was obliged to suspend the convertibility of the dollar into gold. This ushered in a new era of casino capitalism, and the effects of it are being felt in the everyday life of people all over the world. This event poses the historical question of the declining value of the US dollar and the political power of the US state and the anthropological question of the way people throughout the world cope with it. The issues at stake are mind-bogglingly complex and way beyond the diagnostic scope of cultural anthropology. The Historian can ignore the money problems of the present by focusing on an issue in the past, but the anthropologist cannot because our work is done in the present with living people: the anthropologists and their subjects are part of the *same* world. But modern anthropology, as *Altfellow* Fabian has noted, is founded on a paradox: anthropologists conduct fieldwork with people in the present but assign them to another time as Others in the process of writing up. He calls this the "denial of coevality" and argues that it permeates modern cultural anthropology just as much as it does 19th century evolutionary anthropology. The affirmation of coevality requires that anthropology and history come together as historical anthropology rather than anthropological history. The latter, important though it is, provides a means for anthropologists to deny coevality because it is an anthropologically informed study of the past rather than a historically informed

⁶ See Fabian, J., (1983), *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York, Columbia University Press.

study of the present. It is highly significant, for example, that the most hotly debated anthropological topic today concerns Captain Cook.⁷ This is anthropological history and is the latest illustration of Fabian's thesis.

Geertz has done us a favour by broadening the scope of social anthropology to include the study of the history of cultural difference. The time has come for the subject to be broadened yet again to include the history of economic sameness brought about by British and US imperialism. Historical anthropology of this kind is needed if we are to affirm coevality. There is evidence that it is emerging in the writings of some anthropologists⁸, but ethnographic film may end up being the medium that ushers in the next paradigm shift in anthropology because film is able to handle the complexities and contradictions of coevality in a way that few other media can.⁹

⁷ See Sahlins, M., (1985), *Islands of History*, Chicago, Chicago University Press. Obeyesekere, G., (1992), *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, Princeton, Princeton University Press. Sahlins, M., (1995), *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example*, Chicago, Chicago University Press.

⁸ See, for example, Geertz's (1995) recent semi-autobiographical book, *After the Fact: Four Decades, Two Countries, One Anthropologist*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

⁹ The films of David and Judith MacDougall on the Australian aborigines, the trilogy of Bob Connelly and Robin Anderson on coffee growing in Papua New Guinea, and the films that anthropologist Terry Turner made on the Kayapo Indians for Granda Television are some of the films that come to mind.