

Hans Medick

Historical Anthropology and its Misunderstandings

I write here, not as someone in a state of conceptual innocence, but as a historian who in recent years has intensively engaged himself in discussions with social and cultural anthropologists and as the founder of a German language journal with the title *Historische Anthropologie* two years ago. The main title of this journal as well as its subtitle *Kultur – Gesellschaft – Alltag* (culture — society — everyday life) have led to some misunderstandings. Of these I would like to mention the most telling and challenging one, since it seems relevant for current discussions between historians and anthropologists: the assumption that "historical anthropology" really amounts to nothing more than a new and fashionable term to "dress up" the conventional subjects and research practices of historians who, so far, have been concerned with cultural or social history or with a field which in this country has been called *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life). Indeed one of our co-fellows at the Kolleg this year, Carola Lipp, has recently issued a warning in this very direction: she maintains that "historical anthropology" in its German variant is in danger of amounting to nothing more than the "-emperor's new clothes", a false pretence. In this case, it means to mask rather conventional research subjects and practices of social and especially cultural historians as new and fashionable and in this way to extend the dominating reach of historians over other disciplines and areas of research in the humanities.

I am in full agreement that there have been such uses and misunderstandings of the term *Historische Anthropologie*, both in my journal and elsewhere. They should be avoided in theory and editorial practice. The three points I am making pursue this critical aim.

1. Historical anthropology is not to be seen as a unified disciplinary subject, whether old or new. It is rather an open field of research extending between the disciplines of history and anthropology. It aims at the cross-breeding of these disciplines within the broader field of cultural studies of *Kulturwissenschaften*, at the purposeful creation of what Clifford Geertz has called "blurred genres".

2. Historical anthropology should be more than just anthropologizing history, i.e. a kind of history concerned with down-to-earth subjects like family and kinship, ritual, the history of everyday life and

mentalities. It is rather defined by the epistemological challenge it derives from taking up insights from cultural and social anthropology. These insights amount to a radical revision of our understanding of culture and of certain universal claims engraved in our guiding notions and concepts. Historical anthropology takes the "anthropological turn", *die anthropologische Wende*, which Wolf Lepenies pointed out as a decisive moment of recent developments in the human sciences, and complements it by what I would like to call a "historical turn". If the anthropological turn in the human sciences amounts to a questioning of the universalizing and Eurocentric assumptions of the categories and master concepts of the human sciences, last but not least engraved in totalizing notions of culture and universalizing notions of man that originate in the Enlightenment tradition, the historical turn could be seen as a consequent continuation of this anthropological turn. It calls into question the overarching and unilinear concepts of tradition and historical identity that are contained in historical master narratives of industrialisation and the origin of national states. Instead of evoking unilinear cultural traditions, it tries to see the multivocalities, overlappings, indeed mixtures of cultures. It considers — so to speak — the impurity of any culture as a constituting feature of all historical processes, by no means only in the so-called multicultural societies of the present age. And it seems that only through taking up the challenge of this "historical turn" in cultural and social anthropology can history become more anthropologically reflected, both in theory and in its subject matters.

3. One last point I would like to stress as a future goal of historical anthropology in and outside Europe would be what one could call a strategy of "offering" our own histories. This might be achieved by taking the views of outsiders to our own cultures, whether they were and are participating, suffering, travelling or just doing research as scholars, much more seriously than we so far have done. This "defamiliarization by cross-cultural juxtapositions", as George Marcus and Michael Fischer have called it, could be a fruitful approach for historians, anthropologists and others inside and outside of Europe.