

(discussi)

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History, Anthropology and the Study of Communities ¹

The belief that stable and tightly knit 'communities' have existed in the past and still survive in distant lands is an important one for highly mobile industrial societies. It is therefore no coincidence that it was in the turmoil of late nineteenth-century industrialization that the idea of 'community' as opposed to modern 'society' was developed extensively, particularly in the work on Tonnies.² It was felt that the quality of life was changing, values were being undermined, an older closeness represented by the idea of 'community' was being lost. This belief both influenced and seemed to find support in the work of anthropologists and historians working in the first half of the twentieth century. Westerners visiting remote areas of the world were able to discern those 'communities' which were already just a memory in their own society. Many would have agreed with the anthropologist Srinivas when he commented that 'nobody can fail to be impressed by the isolation and stability of these (Indian) village communities'.³ The work of social and economic historians also seemed to point to a community-based past, later destroyed by industrialization and urbanization.⁴ If villages in late nineteenth-century Oxfordshire were as Flora Thompson described them, how much more integrated, it might seem, would earlier periods be? ⁵The contrast, as Tonnies described it, was between life based on bonds of kinship, geographical bonds and the sentiment of belonging to a group (blood, place, mind), which was termed 'community', and the modern phenomenon where all these links had been broken in what he termed 'society'. Community, in this sense, could be defined as 'a territorial group of people with a common mode of living striving for common objectives'. ⁶ The belief in such 'communities' is one of the most powerful myths in industrial society, shaping not only policy and government, with the movement towards 'community centres', 'community welfare', 'community care', but also affecting thought and research. Expecting to find 'communities', the prophecy fulfilled itself and communities were found. An examination of the concept of community is therefore justified as an attempt to understand one of the controlling myths of our time.

The use of the concept of 'community' by a number of disciplines seemed to offer an analytic tool which made the observed facts more comprehensible. If it were true that the concept of 'community'

¹*The Social Science Research Council and King's College Research Centre, Cambridge, have provided support for the project which is briefly described below. I am most grateful to them, and to my colleagues Cherry Bryant, Sarah Harrison, Charles Jardine and Irish Macfarlane who have assisted in innumerable ways.

²F. Tonnies, **Community and Association** (1887; translated from the German in 1955 by C.P. Loomis).

³M.N. Srinivas (ed) **India's Villages** (New York, 1960), 23.

⁴See, for example, the work of W.G. Hoskins which contains occasional diatribes against contemporary society, for instance W.G. Hoskins, **Essays in Leicestershire History** (Liverpool, 1950), 66,101.

⁵F. Thompson **Lark Rise to Candleford** (Oxford, 1945). Another classic which helps to convey the impression of closed nineteenth-century communities is J.C. Atkinson, **Forty Years in a Moorland Parish** (1891).

⁶R. Frankenberg, **Communities in Britain** (1966), 201 quoting Durand.

reflected some reality in the observed, external world, then it might be possible to use it to help explain why human beings thought and acted in the way they did. If communities were systems of some kind, in which the various parts influenced each other, one could use the concept to help explain and predict. This belief in 'community' as a real feature in the observed data was of crucial importance, particularly in the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology. In the former, for example, it could be held to be nearly the most powerful of all the theoretical foundations; 'the concept of 'community' is to sociology what 'culture' is the anthropology',⁷ in other words, it is a basic organizing concept. Without it, a great deal of sociological work would be impossible. The belief was that there really are or were such things as 'communities' which lay outside the observer and merely had to be found. They were as concrete as American to Columbus. Thus, just as urbanities emotionally 'needed' communities, so social scientists intellectually required communities. If they did not exist, they would have to be invented.

The other major reason for employed the 'community study' approach was methodological. All disciplines have the problem of cutting out a clearing in the dense undergrowth of information about the world; the world is continuous but each discipline must set up some boundaries or be overwhelmed. Partly drawing on the belief that there really were communities, it seemed possible to demarcate an apparently meaningful area of interest. The real stress was on a technique for collecting data, rather than analysing it. Although the unit of observation and method of data collection might be artificial, the information might still be analysed meaningfully. The community study as 'method' emphasized the intensive study of a small number of cases, whether humans, animals or artifacts, often employing some form of participation in the activity of the community under observation. It is important to distinguish these two senses of the term 'community study', for the intensive study of, say, 1,000 individuals over a year does not necessarily imply that one believes them to be in any 'real' sense a community.⁸ This is one of the reasons why the 'community study method', in the second sense, is of interest to many disciplines which do not necessarily subscribe to a belief in the real existence of 'communities of sentiment'. For example, archaeology, demography, ethology, genetics, geography, population biology, are only a few of the disciplines which utilize the 'community study approach'. All of them influenced by developments in the technique of community studies, yet they do not necessarily subscribe to any one view about the internal links which bind the units they study.

However helpful both concept and method were at one stage in the history of social science, it would be argued by many that community studies are both impossible and undesirable. Most of the criticisms are well known, but it is worth stating them briefly before turning to the problem of historical community studies. The first problem is definitional. A recent summary of the contributions of various sociologists to 'community studies' has concluded that 'the concept of community has been the concern of sociologists for more than two hundred years, yet a satisfactory definition of it in sociological terms appears as remote as ever'.⁹ One survey of the very extensive literature using the concept 'community' considered ninety-four different definitions, yet was forced to conclude that 'all the definitions deal with people. Beyond this common basis, there is no agreement'.¹⁰ Even this minimum definition would appear to be

⁷ John W. Bennett, in a review in the *American Anthropologist* lxxii (1970) 627.

⁸ C. Bell and H. Newby, *Community Studies* (1971).

⁹ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁰ Hillery, quoted in Bell and Newby, *op.cit.*, 27.

inadequate since there are 'community studies' of animals other than man. Another minimum definition is that 'community implies having something in common'.¹¹ This appears to be the original dictionary meaning of the word. Yet, having something in common does not necessarily imply 'community' in any sociological sense of the word. Red-headed persons or suicidal maniacs do not collectively constitute a 'community' in any meaningful sense. Three recent discussions of definitional problems go into these issues in a depth which is not possible here. One of them stresses that it is the sentiment of belonging which seems to be essential to the notion or community.¹² The other two make a major theoretical distinction between the geographical and social aspects of life. 'Community' may be geographically based or it may not. Since sociologists are mainly interested in the social relationships and the feelings of belonging to some larger unit, it may be mistaken to demarcate the area of interest on the basis of physical space. In establishing this point, the distinction we have already made between data collection methods and analytic concepts is illustrated. Stacey argues that 'our concern as sociologists is with social relationships. A consideration of the social attributes of individuals living in a particular geographic area is therefore not sociology, although it may be an essential preliminary to sociological analysis'.¹³ It would thus seem that it is impossible to agree as to what a 'community' is. This is perhaps the most fundamental of all criticisms, but it is amplified and supported by a number of others.

It is argued that community studies are, in practice, non-comparable and non-cumulative. They tend to be like novels or works of art rather than like the objective products of a supposedly rigorous 'social science'. This may not worry historians a great deal, though they may agree that the fact that each study seems to throw little light on other areas is a defect. It is further argued that no amount of such micro-studies will help to piece together the whole society. The sum is greater than the parts and understanding the present or the past is not merely a matter of putting one small block on another. As the anthropologist Wolf pointed out some years ago, 'we cannot hope to construct a model of how the larger society operates by simply adding more community studies'.¹⁴ The same criticism could be argued against some local historians; the locality is **not** just a microcosm of the nation. Anthropologists have been engaged in intensive, professional, local studies much longer than historians and it is therefore wise to try to learn from them. Thus it is instructive to hear Freedman commenting on Radcliffe-Brown's influence on Chinese studies. The latter's belief was that 'from this patient induction from studies of small social areas would emerge a picture of the social system of China. Of all the biases to which the anthropological approach has been subject this seems to me to be the most grievous. It is the anthropological fallacy **par excellence**'.¹⁵ It may well be that the situation in which anthropology found itself in the 1950s and 1960s is the one in which social history will find itself in twenty or thirty years.

Another criticism is that the concepts and methods were developed for the study of groups which

¹¹11. Frankenberg, *op.cit.*, 238.

¹²12. D.B. Clark, 'The Concept of Community: a Re-examination', *Sociological Review*, xxi, 3 (August 1973), 397-416.

¹³13. M. Stacey, 'The Myth of Community Studies' *British Journal of Sociology*, xx, 2 (1969), 136. See also Bell and Newby, *op.cit.* 19.

¹⁴14. Eric R. Wolf, 'Aspects of group relations in a complex society: Mexico', *American Anthropologist*, lviii (December 1956), 1066.

¹⁵Quoted by Frankenberg in M. Banton (ed), *The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies* (1966), 124.

were geographically and socially isolated. Such isolation is seldom found today. Population growth and developments in communications of various kinds mean that boundaries can no longer be established and have to be constructed by the analyst. This merges into a further type of criticism, relating to the need to invent communities. It is argued that 'communities' tend to lie in the eye and methodology of the beholder. As Bell and Newby point out, the method of living in an area and studying it over a number of months or years through the observation of interpersonal relationships tends to create in the observer's mind, if nowhere else, a sense of an integrated 'community'. The method tends to bring the expected results. This is reinforced because of the strong belief in the objective existence of communities to which we have already alluded. The investigator will find community bonds and community sentiments because he expects to do so. On the contrary, with an image of the atomistic and individualistic nature of western urban society, a methodology was developed which seemed to lend support to this image. Mass observation techniques of census and questionnaire tend to overlook interpersonal bonds and the sentiments of 'belongingness'. If social anthropologists had only used the questionnaire and census in Tikopia or among the Nuer, while sociologists had lived in urban areas for a period of years and noted interactions, it seems likely that our whole picture of the two situations would have been reversed.¹⁶

Another criticism concerns the absence of any time dimension in community studies. The early professional community studies were mostly bi-products of a particular theoretical position in sociology and social anthropology, termed functionalist or structural-functionalist. It seemed clear to many that these timeless, highly integrated, 'equilibrium model' studies took too little account of change or of conflict. Anthropological and sociological researchers, in their attempts to escape from the ethnocentrism of the nineteenth century in Europe, tended to suffer from what has been called 'temporocentrism', which has been defined as 'the unexamined and largely unconscious acceptance of one's own lifetime as the centre of sociological significance, as the focus to which all other periods of historical time are related'.¹⁷ In the reaction against the evolutionary theory of the nineteenth century, descriptions of communities were made which seemed to show very well how such communities worked, but failed to show how they changed or how they had taken that form rather than a million other possible ones. The absence of any time dimension could be justified intellectually in a number of non-literate societies because there was apparently no information about the past. The important distinction between not knowing about the past and assuming that the past was unimportant was often, however, lost. Furthermore, the tools which were developed for the study of such e-historical societies were not adequate to deal with societies which do have extensive records of the past. The absence of written records also meant that it was extremely difficult to obtain any statistical information on a 'community'. Most of the descriptions were based on personal observation and informants' statements about what they believed should or did happen. A single individual living in a small 'community' for a year or so found it very difficult to gather enough accurate information to be able to generate any meaningful statistics. Most statements were bound to be impressionistic. The cumulative effect of all these different biases and shortcomings was that two skilled observers could study the same geographical 'community', a town in Mexico, at a fifteen-year interval. There were apparently no obvious dramatic economic, social, political or other changes, yet the two observers found entirely

¹⁶As happened, for example, with the studies by Wilmott and Young and others under the auspices of the Institute of Community Studies, London.

¹⁷Bierstadt, quoted in Bell and Newby, *op.cit.*, 63.

different 'communities' because of their differing interests.¹⁸ It will be interesting to see whether, when the time comes to re-study Wigston Magna made famous by Hoskins, a set of entirely different conclusions will be reached.

A partial solution to some of these objections is to use information from the surviving records of the past. This will not help us to solve the definitional problems. Although the presence of elaborate administrative divisions in many countries may make it easier to decide which small sample to choose and to know exactly how one 'community' fits in with others, there are still very grave problems. Nor does the problem of the absence of boundaries disappear with the use of historical material. It might once have been believed that before the industrial revolution people tended to live in more bounded, stable, isolated groups than they do now. It seemed reasonable to argue that the further back in time one went, the less the social contact and the geographical mobility. Recent studies by social historians, however, show that as far back as the thirteenth century at least, in England, there was a very great amount of mobility in most areas. In many areas people were caught up in a cash economy, ideas flowed swiftly around, there was a great deal of movement and political integration.¹⁹ The solution to this problem does not lie in finding further archetypal secluded communities. In so far as there is a solution, it would seem to be in the development of more sophisticated concepts for analysing the pattern of human interactions. Some of these were introduced in the 1950s and 1960s in sociology and social anthropology, but their implementation requires a quality and quantity of data which has proved to be beyond the reach of the disciplines which developed the theories. This data may well be available in material from the past. In order to show what is meant it is necessary to make a short digression in order to describe some of the more precise concepts which have tended to replace the ideas of 'group' and 'community'.

One of the attempts to provide a tool with which to study societies where 'community' was difficult to isolate emerged in the work of Turner. He took earlier analogies with drama one stage further with the concepts of the 'extended case study' and 'social drama'. The latter was defined as 'a limited area of transparency on the otherwise opaque surface of regular, uneventful social life. Through it we are enabled to observe the crucial principles of the social structure in their operation, and their relative dominance at successive points in time'.²⁰ This approach made it possible for social scientists to study minute processes over time, rather than taking a timeless cross-section at a higher level. It was combined with the 'case-study method', in which analysts were exhorted to gather material concerning 'a series of connected events to show how individuals in a particular structure handle the choices with which they are faced'.²¹ Although there were dangers of degeneration into a narrative or literary mode

¹⁸This is described in G.M. Foster, 'Interpersonal relations in peasant society', **Human Organization**, xix, 4 (winter 1960/61), 174-84 which includes comments by the protagonists, Redfield and Lewis.

¹⁹Medieval mobility is indicated by J.A. Raftis, **Tenure and Mobility. Studies in the Social History of the Medieval English Village** (Toronto, 1964) and by the other studies published by the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies. Two discussions of sixteenth-century mobility are E.E. Rich, 'The population of Elizabethan England', **Economic History Review**, 2nd series, 11 (1949), 247-65, and S.A. Peyton, 'The village population in the Tudor Lay Subsidy Rolls', **English Historical Review**, xx (1915), 234-50.

²⁰V.W. Turner, **Schism and Continuity in an African Society** (Manchester, 1957), 93.

²¹J. Van Velsen in A.L. Epstein (ed), **The Craft of Social Anthropology** (1967), 140.

of pure description, the concentration on a particular event, rather than on a particular group or larger unit, appeared to make a more subtle analysis of life in small 'communities' possible. In practice, the focus of the 'social drama' approach tended to be on crises of various kinds. It was apparent, however, that the method could be extended to cover a much wider range of 'events', including political processes both formal and informal. One of the most notable attempts to widen the concept was made in 1963 when Mayer pointed out that for the study of highly mobile and 'complex' societies it is necessary to move away from the earlier emphasis on enduring 'groups' towards the study of what he termed 'quasi-groups'. As part of his proposal he discussed the 'action-set' which 'is not a group...for the basis for membership is specific to each linkage, and there are no rights or obligations relating all those involved'.²² It is the 'set' of people who are mobilized in a certain situation. It is not all of a person's potential contacts, but those people who are called on in a particular faction struggle, crisis, or other event. If a number of such 'action-sets' overlap in membership, they begin to form into a more enduring unit which Mayer terms the '-quasi-group' since it lies half way between the entirely temporary action-set and the permanent 'group'.

The concepts of social drama, case study, quasi-group and action-set were designed to deal with the difficulty of analysing shifting, impermanent situations. They are tools which could be of considerable use to the historian. Much of his material comes in the form of 'cases' in various legal records where he often sees a particular action-set in motion. It is not often that he can study a group over time. Indeed it is quite possible that the absence of permanent, rigid groups is one of the major characteristics of many societies in the west during the last several hundred years. The manipulative, fragile nature of the situation will only begin to be grasped with these new tools. Here the historian is often in a more favoured position than the anthropologist. Collecting case material, or noting down action-sets requires arduous and meticulous work on the part of the investigator. Yet the historian's records are filled with enormous quantities of data which fall neatly into this format. For example, the vast central court records of England since the fifteenth century are filled with innumerable 'case-studies'; one year of Elizabethan Star Chamber Proceedings probably contains more detailed case material than has been gathered by all social anthropologists up to the present. Every baptism, marriage and burial where several names are given will give one a fragmentary action-set, just as each land transfer, will, or deed likewise does so. The quantity of the material is enormous. A combination of the anthropological techniques and the historical material could be extremely fruitful.

Nine years before Mayer presented his paper, Barnes had introduced the concept of 'network', which has been hailed as 'the first **major** advance in the language of sociology' since the concept of role.²³ Since the analytic concept was introduced there has been a rapid growth in the sociological literature on networks and a number of definitional and substantive battles have been fought. This is not the place to go over this complex ground, but it is important to sketch in one or two of the landmarks.²⁴ Barnes's

²²A. Mayer, 'The significance of quasi-groups' in Banton (ed), **op.cit.**, 109.

²³Frankenberg, **op.cit.**, 242.

²⁴The literature on network analysis has recently been surveyed by J. Clyde Mitchell, 'Social networks' in B.J. Siegel (ed), **Annual Review of Anthropology**, iii (Palo Alto, 1974), 279-99. Among the most important articles and books are J. Barnes, 'Class and committees in a Norwegian parish', **Human Relations**, vii, i (1954), the articles by Mitchell and Barnes in J.C. Mitchell (ed), **Social Networks in Urban Situations** (Manchester, 1969) and J. Boissevain, **Friends of**

original classic definition, when trying to analyse his Norwegian community, was as follows. He isolated three regions or fields in the social system, the third of which is 'made up of the ties of friendship and acquaintance'. He continues that 'each person has a number of friends, and these friends have their own friends; some of any one person's friends know each other, others do not. **I find it convenient to talk of a social field of this kind as a network.** The image I have is of a set of points, some of which are joined by lines. The points of the image are people, or sometimes groups, and the lines indicate which people interact which people interact with each other'.²⁵ Later investigators attempted to make further distinctions, principally between the 'general network' of all potential and actual links, and what is sometimes called the 'personal' or 'ego-centred' network in which the situation is looked at from the point of view of a specific individual. The latter use is termed a 'star' by Barnes. Further elaborations have been made not only to make it possible to distinguish the focus of the network, but also to distinguish degrees of distance from any selected individual in a given 'network'. A growing number of criteria have been suggested as to how interpersonal relations should be measured (interpersonal criteria) and how the overall shape of networks (morphological or structural criteria) should be compared.

The concept of network was developed in order to explain why people act, feel and think in certain ways in societies where the idea of permanent groups and bounded communities does not seem helpful. Most observers agree that the concept is a useful one in analysing the fluid situation we are likely to find in many European countries over the last several centuries. Yet no one has really found a way of utilizing the concept properly. One of the problems, and it is here that a historian can be of assistance, is that the data has been inadequate. Collecting information by traditional fieldwork techniques for such intensive investigation is extremely arduous. The point has been made by all those who have attempted to undertake a network analysis. For example, Mitchell has commented that 'the study of personal networks required meticulous and systematic detailed recording of data on social interaction for a fairly large group of people, a feat which few fieldworkers can accomplish successfully'.²⁶ Perhaps the most serious attempt to undertake a full network analysis is that by Boissevain. He admits that 'one of the major unresolved problems in the use of networks (is) size. Social anthropologists as of yet lack the methodological sophistication needed to tackle this problem'.²⁷ He goes on to recount that he 'began with two informants in 1968, on a pilot study basis, planning to branch out and test findings more systematically on a wider sample. Collecting this data proved to be very difficult and very time-consuming, as did its analysis. Hence, for better or for worse, I have data on only two first-order zones'.²⁸ For example, one informant had 1,750 in his 'personal network'. In order to see to what extent they interacted with each other one needed a matrix of 1,750 x 1,750. As Boissevain comments, this alone 'reached the memory limits of all but the largest computers'.²⁹ The concepts of network analysis could be extremely useful to historians and they are already being fruitfully applied to English

Friends (Oxford 1974).

²⁵Barnes, **op.cit.**, 43-4.

²⁶In Mitchell (ed), **op.cit.**, 10,11

²⁷Boissevain, **op.cit.**, 71

²⁸**Ibid** 97

²⁹**Ibid** 36.

parishes in the past.³⁰ In return, the data from historical records could well make it possible, for the first time, to do a full network analysis on more than one or two informants. The web of interconnections which can be obtained from the records of the past are terrifying in their quantity and complexity. Yet in order to blend the concepts and the data a good deal of thought needs to be given to methods of analysis. Until this is done, it will be true 'that no alternative to data collecting based upon participant observation has been devised that is suitable for testing proportions (sic) derived from network notions'.³¹ Here is a challenge in which several disciplines could combine; sociologists and social anthropologists have some indices and concepts, historians have large banks of data, and mathematicians are needed to help in the analysis.

We may now return to some of the other criticisms of 'community studies' in order to see how the use of material from the past could help to answer them. Two obvious areas lie in the criticisms concerning historical time depth and statistical meaningfulness. It is well known that the absence of information about the past, as well as a certain theoretical framework, limited early social anthropologists and prevented them from constructing a picture of communities through time.³² Later in the history of the discipline a number of studies were made in which economic and social change over the last hundred years were integrated into the account.³³ A similar interest in the past has been shown in the growing number of sociological studies of towns and villages in western Europe.³⁴ Yet a hundred years of intensive study is still a long time in anthropological and sociological work. Furthermore, there are very few attempts to make a detailed 'anthropological' study of communities existing some hundreds of years ago. In fact, it would generally be thought to be impossible. Yet some historians have undertaken intensive studies quite similar to those of anthropologists for communities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,³⁵ while others have managed to provide a detailed picture of some aspects of social and economic change over four or five centuries.³⁶

Six hundred years is not out of the question for a historian; but as yet there has been no true marriage of the two modes, sociological and historical. The very intensive study of daily interactions and everyday thought which are the hallmarks of social anthropology and of what we may call 'micro social history'

³⁰For example, in the work of Richard Smith of Cambridge, on medieval manors in Suffolk and Keith Wrightson on a seventeenth-century village in Essex.

³¹Mitchell, 'Social Networks', 295.

³²For a discussion of the problems and some suggested solutions, see David C. Pitt, **Using Historical Sources in Anthropology and Sociology** (New York, 1972).

³³For example, T. Kessinger, **Vilyatpur 1848-1968: Social and Economic Change in a North India Village** (Berkeley, 1974); E.R. Leach, **Pul Eliya, a Village in Ceylon** (Cambridge, 1961); G. Obeyesekere, **Land Tenure in Village Ceylon** (Cambridge, 1967).

³⁴Among the more notable are J. Davis, **Land and Family in Pisticci** (1973); P. Loizos, **The Greek Gift: Politics in a Cypriot Village** (1975); C. Lison-Tolosano, **Belmonte de los Caballeros: a sociological study of a Spanish Town** (Oxford, 1966); M.W. Williams, **A West Country Village, Ashworthy** (1963); John W. Cole and Eric R. Wolf, **The Hidden Frontier: Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley** (New York, 1974).

³⁵For example P. Boyar and S. Niessenbaum, **Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft** (Cambridge, Mass. 1974) and G. Bouchard, **Le Village immobile: Sennely-en-Sologne au XVIIIe siecle** (Paris, 1972).

³⁶Among the many histories of parishes over long periods are W.G. Hoskins, **The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village** (1965); M. Spufford, **A Cambridgeshire Community: Chippenham from Settlement to Enclosure** (Leicester, 1965), Department of English Local History Occasional Papers, 20; A.G. Ruston and D. Witney, **Hooton Pagnell: The Agricultural Evolution of a Yorkshire Village** (1934).

has never been achieved over very long periods. The explanation lies partly in the qualitative shortcomings of historical information, but also in the sheer quantity of material available. It is possible for a single observer to watch 1,000 persons interact over one year; this is the characteristic unit of observation for a social anthropologist. To study the same sized unit over 200 years would be impossible. It would be the equivalent of studying a town of 200,000 persons at one point in time, a project which would immediately strike any investigator as impractical. There are considerable technical problems to be overcome before the various social sciences interested in 'communities' in the present and past are able to collaborate effectively. If they were able to do so, however, it could clearly defuse many of the allegations of timelessness, and over-static equilibrium models. Unfortunately, the problem of the integration lies deeper than merely applying sociological theories to a new range of data. The ways in which facts are explained in social anthropology, the functionalist and now the structuralist interpretations, do not provide an adequate framework with which to study change. It will be necessary to work out some more adequate theories as to why relationships, thoughts and structures alter. This is an area where historians would seem well qualified to contribute since they have always dealt with change over time.

If the problems could be resolved, the historical data could certainly help to answer the charges of statistical meaninglessness. It is clearly very difficult for one observer working in a society single-handed to gather much meaningful statistical information. Although data from the past has many disadvantages, it does often provide a very large amount of information which is surprisingly good from a statistical point of view. This is true from the later thirteenth century onwards in several parts of Europe, and from the sixteenth century in other parts of the world.³⁷ Just as the demographer Louis Henry found that in order to obtain long runs of high-grade demographic statistics on fertility, nuptiality and mortality he needed to turn to historical archives,³⁸ so it may well be that in order to obtain really solid statistical information on a number of topics of interest to sociologists the best place to do so is in the historical records. This has already been shown to be the case with certain offences such as witchcraft,³⁹ bridal pregnancy,⁴⁰ and in the treatment of deviance.⁴¹ There are probably innumerable other topics, from agricultural economics and inheritance customs,⁴² to the study of social mobility,⁴³ literacy⁴⁴ and household structure⁴⁵ where

³⁷Preliminary descriptions of the records of a number of areas are contained in V.R. Lorwin and J.M. Price (eds.), **The Dimensions of the Past** (New Haven and London, 1972).

³⁸The method has now been described in many places, for example in E.A. Wrigley (ed), **An Introduction to English Historical Demography** (1966), Ch.4.

³⁹A.D.J. Macfarlane, **Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England** (1970) and, for a critique of anthropological studies, M.G. Marwick, 'Anthropologists' declining productivity in the sociology of witchcraft', **American Anthropologist**, LXXIV, 3 (June 1972), 378-85.

⁴⁰P.E.H. Hair, 'Bridal Pregnancy in rural England in earlier centuries', **Population Studies**, XX (1966), 233-43 and further examined in the same, XXIV, 1 (March 1970), 59-70.

⁴¹Kai T. Erikson, **Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance** (New York, 1966).

⁴²B.H. Slicher Van Bath, **The Agrarian History of Western Europe, A.D. 500-1850** (1963), summarizes many of the findings concerning agriculture. The 1974 **Past and Present** conference on inheritance customs attracted anthropologists and sociologists. Much of the best work on England so far has been on the medieval period, for example, G.C. Homans, **English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century** (New York, 1941), chs. 8,9; R.J. Faith, 'Peasant families and inheritance customs in Medieval England', **Agricultural History Review**, XIV, pt.2 (1966), 77-95; J.Z. Titow, 'Some differences between manors and the effects of the conditions of the peasant in the thirteenth century', **Agricultural History Review**, X (1962), 1-13.

historical material can be used to test and refine sociological concepts.

During the last ten years there have been a growing number of studies by historians which reveal the potential value of combining sociological questions and historical information. Here we are forced to confine ourselves merely to mentioning one or two of the more interesting of the 'community studies'. In England there has been a long tradition of amateur local history which has produced many fine works. This attained a new level of professional expertise in what is now known as the Leicester school, particularly under the influence of Hoskins.⁴⁶ Recently, Hoskins's work has been supplemented by important studies by Everitt and Spufford.⁴⁷ The main features of this tradition are a concentration on land and economic change in a specific area, though Spufford's work has shown that literacy, family relationships and religion can also be encompassed. The interest in intensive local studies has recently grown in North America. Again starting with land and economics, there has been a steady concern with crime, social control and family. Major works by Boyar and Niessenbaum, Demos and Greven and others have all appeared in the last ten years.⁴⁸ Until fairly recently, it appears that the emphasis in French social history was on a larger unit, the region. Hence the majestic works on Beauvais and Languedoc, which incidentally throw enormous light on demographic, economic and social change in particular villages, but do not initially focus on the small unit. Most of the 'village studies' that have appeared have been almost exclusively demographic.⁴⁹ They are very similar to Wrigley's intensive demographic study of Colyton in Devon.⁵⁰ Recently, however, there has been a growing interest in taking a smaller unit and studying all features of the discoverable past, and some notable studies of eighteenth-century villages are beginning to emerge.⁵¹ Work of a similar detailed kind is being undertaken in most European countries now⁵² there is a growing awareness that intensive historical

⁴³The work of Lawrence Stone, particularly in **The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641** (Oxford, 1965) and 'Social mobility in England 1500-1700', **Past and Present**, XXXIII (April 1966), 16-55, represents some of the more interesting work in a very large field.

⁴⁴Especially the statistical work under the direction of R. Schofield of the Cambridge Group for Population and Social Structure, a very preliminary description of which is in J.R. Goody (ed), **Literacy in Pre-Industrial Societies** (Cambridge, 1968), 311-25.

⁴⁵The most notable collection is that in P. Laslett (ed.), **Household and Family in Past Time**, (Cambridge, 1972). For a critique of some of the techniques, see Lutz K. Berkner, 'The stem family and the developmental cycle of the peasant household: an eighteenth-century Austrian example', **American History Review**, LXXII (1972), 398-418.

⁴⁶Hoskins, **Essays in Leicestershire History, op.cit; The Midland Peasant, op.cit; Provincial England; Essays in Social and Economic History** (1964); **Local History in England** (1959); **Fieldwork in Local History** (1967). These are only a selection of the books which have established Hoskins as one of the most influential English historians of the century.

⁴⁷Alan Everitt, **The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, 1640-1660** (Leicester, 1966); M. Spufford, **Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries** (Cambridge, 1974).

⁴⁸Boyar and Niessenbaum, **op.cit**; John Demos, **A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony** (New York, 1974); Philip J. Greven, **Four Generations: Population Land and Family in Colonial Andover** (Ithaca, 1970).

⁴⁹A recent survey of French regional and local history is Pierre Goubert, 'Local history' in F. Gilbert and S. Granbard (eds), **Historical Studies Today** (New York, 1972), 300-14.

⁵⁰E.A. Wrigley, 'Family limitation in pre-industrial England', **Economic History Review**, 2nd series, XIX, I (1966), 81-109.

⁵¹Bouchard, **op.cit**.

⁵²A good deal of this is reported in the **Peasant Studies Newsletter, Journal of Peasant Studies and Historical**

'community studies' may also be possible in parts of Asia.⁵³

It would seem that the impetus to undertake such work has largely come from the traditional disciplines of economic and demographic history. The studies have therefore tended to be somewhat biased towards these aspects of life. This also arises from the nature of local records, and it is a tendency of which one needs to be explicitly aware. The moral, ritual, intellectual and political aspects of life in small areas in the past have been largely unexplored. There are one or two notable exceptions, for example Phythian-Adams's study of ritual change in Coventry,⁵⁴ and Spufford's exploration of local religion, already mentioned. Another bias is towards small rural areas; the intensive study of towns and parts of cities is only really just starting.⁵⁵

It is a relief for the English historian to find that England is one of the best places in the world to study in this intensive way. There are a number of reasons for this. The tradition of local history has meant that a number of records have been printed, and that local archives are well preserved and well organized. The relative peacefulness of the English past, combined with certain features of administration, mean that medieval records up to the end of the thirteenth century are better in England than anywhere else in Europe.⁵⁶ The political and military crises which destroyed so much in other parts of Europe, tended to be avoided in England. Nor were the accidental losses so great.⁵⁷ The only other country in the world which may turn out to have as good or better records is Japan.⁵⁸ Of course, this is only a broad picture. Each country has its own special advantages. Italy has superb late-medieval listings of people and property; Sweden has detailed records of migration, property, moral behaviour and literacy, in abundance from the late seventeenth century; the French parish registers from the late seventeenth century are much better than the English ones. Experts on each country could point to a class that specially favours them. In terms of duration, survival, organization and multifariousness, however, it seems unlikely that any will surpass England.⁵⁹ It would, therefore, seem that England is not a totally eccentric place in which to undertake 'micro social history'.

Nor does the present time seem unpropitious. In fact, there are good reasons for believing that a number of almost simultaneous changes during the last few years have come together in such a way that it has become possible, for the first time, to undertake a new type of intensive local study. In other words, an approach which would have been out of the question in 1960 is now just feasible. We may isolate six major changes which have occurred and date these, for England, fairly precisely as follows. There has been an archival revolution which has meant the depositing and indexing of large quantities of

Methods Newsletter.

⁵³For a recent excellent example, see Kessinger, *op.cit.*

⁵⁴In P. Clark and P. Slack (eds.), *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700* (1972), 57-85.

⁵⁵An early work in the field in H.J. Dyos, *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell* (Leicester, 1966). A recent survey of work in America and Europe is Stephan Thernstrom, 'Reflections on the new urban history', in Gilbert and Granbard (eds.), *op.cit.*, 320-36. The *Urban Studies Newsletter* attempts to survey most of the literature in this field.

⁵⁶This point is made by Herlihy in his survey of medieval archives in Lorwin and Price (eds.), *op.cit.*, 19,20.

⁵⁷M. Bloch, *The Royal Touch* (1961; English edition 1973), 244, for example, points out that a fire in October 1737 destroyed almost all of the central administrative records of the French monarchy.

⁵⁸For Japanese records, see Lorwin and Price (eds.), *op.cit.*, 503-30.

⁵⁹This assertion is, of course, based on guesswork since the surveying of historical records throughout the world is still in its infancy. Some of the records for various areas are discussed in a preliminary way in Lorwin and Price (eds), *op.cit.*

hitherto inaccessible material. This gathered force in England during the 1950s and is still in progress. Much work still needs to be done, especially on central records, but the turning point was probably the 1960s. There has been a technical revolution in improving methods of data collection, the most important so far being xeroxing, microfilming and tape-recording. Again, the 1960s were the turning point, Third, a shift has occurred in the organization of academic research from individualistic to co-operative work; the setting up of the Cambridge Group for Population and Social Structure in the 1960s both symbolized and helped effect this change. Fourth, there is growing financial support for such collaborative work and for the most costly equipment needed for such research; again this is both symbolized by and effected by the increased involvement in such work by the Social Science Research Council during the later 1960s. All of these changes occurred during the 1960s and all of them meant that very large quantities of information on particular small areas in the past were both available and could be collected. Previously, the dispersion of the data and the stone-age tools used for collecting it, meant that little advance had been made. Many a life has been spent painfully transcribing supposedly 'all' the records for a particular area from the originals into notebooks - which now fill chests in public libraries and archive offices.⁶⁰ There was seldom time to analyse what was found and even a lifetime was not enough to do more than scratch the surface of the material.

By the end of the 1960s several new problems had become apparent. One of these was that traditional methods of analysis were far too slow to deal with the much greater quantities of information which could now be accumulated. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that it was hoped to make much more intensive use of the material, so that the labour input for the analysis of each piece of historical material was far greater. This is vividly illustrated by the case of parish registers. In the early part of the century they might be used to locate bad epidemics or to check the genealogy of a few selected individuals. In the post-war years they were being pressed by Hoskins to yield some information on overall population change, in other words some 'aggregative' analysis (that is, adding up totals of baptisms, marriages and burials) was being undertaken. This increased the time needed to analyse parish registers very considerably, but it was still something a historian could hope to undertake in two or three days for a specific parish. The introduction of the method of 'family reconstitution', whereby profiles of the demographic history of each family were built up by linking the vital events, was hailed as a breakthrough in historical research.⁶¹ It took approximately 100 times as long as merely adding up totals. It is reckoned that it would take approximately 1,500 man-hours to do a full 'family reconstitution' study of a parish of 1,000 persons over a period of 300 years.⁶² It is likely that as every other class of document is scrutinized it will become clear that intensive work could extract far more information from it than at present. There has thus been a double explosion in the amount of time it takes to undertake a really thorough study; there are far more sources available in full, and each of them needs to be studied with a new intensity. A partial solution for those who have access to it would appear to be the computer. It is, therefore, fortuitous that it was just at the time when the data appeared to be too large for analysis that there were a number of unconnected developments in computer manufacture. For example, the possibility of direct access to the material rather than sequential searching and new ways of putting historical material into a machine-readable form meant that instead of the computer having to be

⁶⁰A notable example are the transcripts made by the Rev. Andrew Clark which are partly deposited in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. His transcripts of archdeaconry records are at the Essex Record Office, Chelmsford.

⁶¹The technique is described by Wrigley in Wrigley (ed.), **op.cit.**ch.4.

⁶²Wrigley (ed.), **op.cit.**, 97

dismissed as a machine which was only useful at the final stage of working out statistics, it became possible to explore its use to a historian in actually preparing his indexes and breaking down his material.⁶³ Its power has been appreciated by a number of historians who have used it for a variety of problems, ranging from the analysis of a fifteenth-century Florentine census, through sixteenth-century English Star Chamber records, to nineteenth-century Indian land records.⁶⁴ It is also being used to help with the analysis of parish registers and nineteenth-century censuses and hence contribute to demographic and urban history.⁶⁵ It is likely, however, that when the period 1965-75 is viewed in retrospect it will be seen that only a tiny proportion of its real power is being harnessed and that there are ways, now undreamed of, in which it will develop and assist in the massive task facing historians.

In order to make some of these general remarks more concrete it is worth looking at the amount of information for particular places which has begun to emerge as a result of the changes outlined above. A small group of which I am a member is studying two English parishes in the past, Kirkby Lonsdale in Westmorland and Earls Colne in Essex. It was originally thought that this would be a task that could be performed in two or three years. One knew from Trevelyan and others about the 'short and simple annals of the poor', but, ten years on, the data still flow in unabated. If we take the parish of Earls Colne, with an average population of about 1,200, over the period 1400-1850 a rough guess as to the number of items of data would be as follows. In terms of the number of names appearing, ⁶⁶there are over 200,000 names. The names in the parish register constitute less than a sixth of these and hence the time taken for 'family reconstitution' based only on parish registers would need to be multiplied very considerably in order to link together these names. If one were interested in property as well as personal demographic characteristics, it would also be necessary to deal with about 20,000 descriptions of pieces of land or houses, mainly in manorial records. These also would need to be linked and indexed.⁶⁷ A class of document which survives for Kirkby Lonsdale and most other parts of England, but not for most of Essex, are the probate inventories taken at death. These list pieces of personal property such as furniture and livestock and would have added thousands more pieces of property. For Kirkby Lonsdale, for example, for inventories mention about 50,000 items over a 300-year period. A final category are the 'cases' in the numerous courts within which individuals from Earls Colne could appear, from the court leet at the local level, to Chancery and Star Chamber at the national. It would

⁶³Edward Shorter's **The Historian and the Computer** (New Jersey, 1971), one of the few books in the field, was written just before these new features became widely available, and can therefore be misleading. For a slightly more up-to-date account, see Roderick Floud, **An Introduction to Quantitative Methods for Historians** (1973), ch.9. I am grateful to Charles Jardine for his advice in this field.

⁶⁴For Italy, see D. Herlihy in E.A. Wrigley (ed.), **Identifying People in the Past** (1974), ch.2; for the Star Chamber, there is a very brief account of T.G. Barnes's work in L.P. Curtis (ed.), **The Historian's Workshop** (New York, 1970), 146-7. A computer was used in Kessinger, **op.cit.**, though there is no discussion of the methodology.

⁶⁵A preliminary description of attempts at computerized linkage are contained in E.A. Wrigley (ed.) **Identifying People**, chs. 4,5 and 6. The use in nineteenth-century urban studies is discussed in Thernstrom, **op.cit.** An earlier survey of some of the uses to which historians have put the computer is contained in Shorter, **op.cit.** ch.1 and in the June 1974 (vol.VII no.3) issue of the **Historical Methods Newsletter** which is devoted to 'History and the computer'.

⁶⁶This is obviously a very rough indication; we refer here to names and not individuals, in other words a person may be named a number of times and each of these is counted.

⁶⁷The details concerning the documents used will be given in **Reconstructing Historical Communities** (Cambridge U.P. 1977, forthcoming), but I would like to record my debt to the Essex Record Office and joint Cumberland and Westmorland Record Office for their help in locating and copying documents.

seem that about 6,000 such 'cases' are recoverable for the whole period for this one parish. ⁶⁸Just for one parish, therefore, one is dealing with an enormous and complex body of data.

Preliminary tests suggest that the information is not only extremely voluminous, but is also qualitatively very impressive. It is surprisingly comprehensive in that almost everyone who appears to have spent more than a few weeks living in Earls Colne appears in the local records.⁶⁹It is very accurate and precise if we compare source with source, and above all, it does seem to provide a rounded picture of individuals in the past. Although it would be impossible to prove, my experience as a social anthropologist working in the Nepal Himalayas suggests that the amount we can learn about seventeenth-century villagers compares well with that which a social anthropologist can gather about the average members of a place in which he lives and does fieldwork. It would seem contrary to common sense, but it is arguable that we can learn as much, if not more, about individuals living some 300 years ago than we could find out from written records about contemporary individuals in western societies. In the absence of census, criminal court, bank and other records, submerged for years by the need for secrecy, it is difficult to see how one could learn as much about the present as the past, except by full scale anthropological investigation.

With all its merits, both the approach and the data have a number of serious defects which need to be stressed. One problem is the archival one of record loss. Even the best documented area will have huge 'holes' in most sets of records, though one of the virtues of using many sources together is that it at least makes it possible to gain some idea of what has been lost. The social anthropologist carries his most vital data in his head, but the fragility of the past is constantly brought home by the disappearance of documents we know once existed. Another problem is the ambiguities lying in the data, one of the most serious of which is the extent to which they reflect any **real** actions or thoughts in the past. The problem is particularly acute in the case of legal records where many 'fictions' were employed and what is written down may bear little relation to what happened. This is a technical problem with which most historians are familiar so that there is no need to do more than mention it. The parallel problem in sociology is the extent to which informants' statements can be trusted to reflect anything beyond their wishes. At least, however, the contemporary investigator can check statements by observation, an option not open to the historian. Another way in which the student of past 'communities' is at a disadvantage is that many more uncertainties enter into his work at the stage of piecing together the items of information from the past. His material comes in a set of discrete records and before it can be used these need to be linked. An investigator studying a contemporary community will probably have little difficulty inducing whether two pieces of information relate to the same or different individuals, but it is more difficult to be sure about historical material. Names of the same individual are spelt in different ways; there are often two or more people of the same name living in the same area; the information is sometimes vague or mistaken. Consequently, very considerable thought has to be given to the philosophical problems concerning

⁶⁸A 'case' here taken to mean the set of documents relating to one specific issue or prosecution. It is quite possible that in the largely unexplored depths of the Public Record Office, many of whose classes of documents are as yet almost completely unused by historians, there are large numbers of further 'cases' which will inflate this total.

⁶⁹This was ascertained by comparing 200 individuals known to have been residing in the parish because they are mentioned in a contemporary diary with the normal village records. Only a very small proportion (less than 3 per cent) did not appear in local records and would therefore have been 'invisible'.

record linkage. Biases can easily be built in so that results are warped. For example, if one assumes that a blacksmith cannot also be a clergyman and therefore they must be different persons with the same name, the resulting analysis of occupational mobility will be affected. The problems are made more precise and pressing if the often unexamined rules upon which a human decides to link pieces of information are replaced by attempts to use a machine to do the linking.⁷⁰

A further defect in the data is that it is almost all at the level of behaviour. Almost all of it describes events and actions, rather than thoughts and feelings. We have a very large amount of information about how people interacted, but know far too little about what they thought, felt or even said they were doing. This means that it is possible to generate very large amounts of statistical information, but the reasons as to **why** people behaved in the observed patterns are left, on the whole, to our intuition. This is a curious reversal of the situation faced by investigators of contemporary societies who often have a very great amount of data concerning the normative level, but rather little information about how people do actually behave. Thus investigators are forced to infer the statistics level from the normative. Both types of inference have to be made explicit and it needs to be recognized that in historical work the theories put forward to account for the question of why people behave in certain ways are largely imported from outside the specific set of records.

It will be obvious that the material on small regions in the past represents only a tiny fraction of what was thought and done. There are huge areas which are of interest to us and were of importance to those who lived in the past which are completely omitted. Until we step back from a 'community' study' for a moment, we may forget that Civil Wars, Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, the collapse of the Established Church, and even major climatic and medical changes were occurring. Such major events often leave no obvious and direct trace in the types of record we have been considering. The topics which never occur in the local records of small communities are far more numerous than those which do, and encompass most of what is important to human beings. Using such records one gains only a very partial picture of some very delimited areas of the past. This is vividly brought home, for example, if we compare the account of village life we obtain from local records with the account which has by chance survived for Earls Colne in the form of a very long and detailed seventeenth-century diary kept by a vicar of the parish.⁷¹ The diary gives a picture of a world of religious turmoil, political involvement, daily disease and illness, which is almost totally absent in conventional local records.

Not only is there a bias towards certain topics, but there is a powerful pull towards certain categories in the population, Either because of their age, sex, occupation, wealth or mobility, certain types of people tend to be less well documented. The most conspicuous examples are women, children and servants, the poor and the mobile. Anthropologists often find that certain sections of the population they live with force themselves on their attention; they are easier to approach and easier to study. The same is true with historical data. Although it is no longer possible to believe that large proportions of the

⁷⁰For various discussion of the philosophical and technical problems of record linkage, see Wrigley (ed.), **Identifying People**.

⁷¹Alan Macfarlane (ed.) **The Diary of Ralph Josselin** (Oxford, 1976).

population of the past, at least from the sixteenth century in England, will remain totally invisible, it is true that even in the best-recorded periods it is the wealthy and the men who crowd the state.

Finally, to return and reinforce a point made earlier in the general criticism of the 'community study' approach, we need to be constantly aware that the geographical demarcation of an area of interest, which is common in historical studies of communities, is artificial. We know that people were geographically mobile in England from at least the thirteenth century, and, as a result, we often obtain only a partial description of any single life cycle. A second feature of this lack of boundedness is the fact that economically, socially, intellectually, and in every other way the units of observation were not isolated. Ideas, food, government, kinship relations, all overflowed the parish boundaries. Although we may make efforts to follow some of these chains outside the delimited area, we are bound to oversimplify and impoverish the past the moment we adopt the 'community study' approach. We are also lulled into a spurious sense of 'community' which we impose on the past.

All these defects in the data do not appear to invalidate the general approach. They do suggest, however, that the community study method here described is severely limited. It is one tool, among others, and not an end in itself. At present it offers hope of probing into areas which previous generations have thought were closed for ever. It provides large quantities of data of an unrivalled kind for literate societies stretching over long periods of time, where sociologists, demographers, economists, biologists and others may test out their hypotheses. Yet it tends to be essentially a technique and the choice of what is relevant and important and how this is to be explained must be brought in from outside.

Since the discipline which has had most experience in the study of small non-industrial human groups is social anthropology, it would seem to be worth looking to that discipline for some help in the analysis of the material.

Earlier we indicated some of the developments, mainly in the 1960s, which had made it possible for the first time to find and gather the data, and, with the computer, to analyse it. One strand, however, is still missing and this is perhaps the most important of all. The academic respectability of concentrating on such small units needed to be shown and some more sophisticated theoretical concepts were needed in order to analyse the enormous amount of material that was available. The growing influence of social anthropology and sociology has provided this justification and gone some way towards providing models more appropriate to this kind of analysis than those drawn from traditional history. The acceptance of social anthropology has been amazingly swift. In 1960 to 1963 when reading for a degree in history at Oxford, I never came across the worlds 'social anthropology' and finished the degree without ever having heard of the discipline. In 1963 Keith Thomas published an article which convincingly outlines the potential contribution history and anthropology could make to each other.⁷² Since that date there has been a growing discussion of the connections, both practical and theoretical, between the two disciplines.⁷³ This includes another short but important article by Thomas as

⁷²K.V. Thomas, 'History and social anthropology', **Past and Present**, XXIV (April 1963).

⁷³For example, E.P. Thompson, 'Anthropology and the discipline of historical context', **Midland History**, III (Spring, 1972), 41-55; M.I. Finley, 'Anthropology and the classics' in **The Use and Abuse of History** (1975), 102-19; and the various essays in I.M. Lewis (ed.), **History and Social Anthropology** (1968).

well as his own application of a particular branch of that discipline to the study of witchcraft and magic.⁷⁴ Yet the land described by Thomas in his various works still basks in the twilight glow of British structural-functionalist anthropology. The names to conjure with are Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Gluckman, Firth et al. Symbolically, the name of Levi-Strauss is mentioned only once. There have been rapid developments since those days. Many confusing new voices are heard in the land. There is the application of linguistics through the work of Levi-Strauss, leading to the whole structuralist movement in anthropology;⁷⁵ there is the application of linguistic models to kinship terminology which is known as 'componential analysis';⁷⁶ there is a growing interest in systems models, partly drawn from biology and known collectively as the 'ecological approach';⁷⁷ there is an increasing interest in peasant societies and particularly in the domestic economics of peasantry;⁷⁸ there is a loud debate over the relevance of Marxist theories to the economics and social structure of non-western societies;⁷⁹ there is suggestive new work in the field of ritual⁸⁰ and concerning the relation between kinship and economics.⁸¹ Conventional theories are in disarray.⁸² In this busy world it is perhaps worth stating again very briefly some of the rather obvious lessons which the historian can learn concerning the study of small areas. These are stated at a very general level, though a historian who read some of the classic 'community studies' by social anthropologists would also find a considerable number of specific hypotheses to test.⁸³

Social anthropologists emphasize the 'total' approach. We need to stress all possible aspects of human life whether in the present or past. There are interconnections, often clouded over in our own society, between different spheres of human activity and thought. Partly arising out of the normal fieldwork situation, where one individual observer seemed able to gather information concerning all the activities and thoughts of a delimited group of individuals, anthropologists have always stressed interconnections.

⁷⁴'The tools and the job', **Times Literary Supplement**, 7 April 1966; **Religion and the Decline of Magic** (1971).

⁷⁵The classic exposition is in C. Levi-Strauss, **Structural Anthropology** (1958; English edition, 1968). For a brief introduction see Edmund Leach, 'Structuralism in social anthropology' in David Robey (ed.) **Structuralism, An Introduction** (Oxford, 1973), and the same author's **Levi-Strauss** (1970).

⁷⁶For an introductory description see 'Componential analysis' in **International Encyclopedia of Social Science** (New York, 1968), and the references therein.

⁷⁷A collection of essays utilizing this approach is Andrew P. Vayda (ed.), **Environment and Cultural Behaviour** (New York, 1969). A good monograph illustrating the method is Roy A. Rappaport, **Pigs for the Ancestors, Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People** (New Haven, 1968).

⁷⁸For example, Eric R. Wolf, **Peasants** (New Jersey, 1966); Marshall Sahlins, **Stone Age Economics** (1972), chs. 2,3 and 5.

⁷⁹An introduction is Raymond Firth, 'The sceptical anthropologist? Social anthropology and Marxist views on society', **Proceedings of British Academy LVIII** (1972). One example of the approach is Emmanuel Terray, **Marxism and 'Primitive' Societies** (1969; translated 1972).

⁸⁰Turner's most stimulating general work in the field is **The Ritual Process** (1969).

⁸¹For example, the first essay in J. Goody and S.J. Tambiah, **Bridewealth and Dowry** (Cambridge, 1973).

⁸²This is true even in that central area of anthropology, kinship theory. For example, Needham has declared that 'there is no such thing as kinship, and it follows that there can be no such thing as kinship theory', Rodney Needham (ed.) **Rethinking Kinship and Marriage** (1971), 5. Both the essays by Needham in this volume illustrate the general confusion in the field.

⁸³Some of the best anthropological studies have already been cited. One could add J.K. Campbell, **Honour, Family and Patronage: A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community** (Oxford, 1964) and W.M. Williams, **The Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth** (1964).

Sex, religion, exchange, kinship and many other areas which we are tempted to keep apart are seen as permeating each other. This realization also arose out of the fact that the divisions between areas of life and thought which are accepted in western societies are often absent in many other parts of the world. In practice this means that the anthropologist should collect information on everything he can concerning the group he has chosen to study and this is a pressure which would justify a 'total' approach has many attractions for historians. Although theories which make the physical background, the economic substructure, social organization, system of beliefs and ideas or structure of the brain the determining feature of everything else have a certain initial attractiveness, most anthropologists are prepared to draw on Malthus, Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Levi-Strauss. Thus social anthropology will provide the historian with the justification for studying everything about a particular area, and help to prevent him from concentrating on any of the sub-branches of history at the expense of the others.

A second advantage is that social anthropology has developed a set of explanatory frameworks which help to fit the data together. Much of the best social anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century was based on the timeless but satisfying system which has been termed 'functionalism'. Rather than seeing the roots of actions and thoughts in a series of apparently random past events, it was argued that both actions and ideas could be explained by their present 'functions'. This made it possible to understand much of what had earlier been dismissed as 'irrational' or 'superstitious'.⁸⁴ A great deal of work still has to be undertaken in this mode and its utility in understanding small areas in the past is probably considerable. During the last fifteen years the functionalist approach has been partially replaced by a 'structural' interpretation which seems to provide an equally coherent way of fitting together the parts of the world we observe in past or present. Likenesses are found between the actual composition or structure of physical and mental forms; the 'structure' of a myth might correspond (sometimes in an inverted form) with the 'structure' of a village site or the 'structure' of agricultural activities.⁸⁵ The basic advantage of both these sets of explanation is that they break down the barriers which prevent comparison. It becomes possible to abstract the general feature from the particular case. Thus it seems possible to compare different societies, our own included. Functionally, a witch doctor might be the same as a psychiatrist; structurally, the myths of Christianity can be discussed in the same ways as those of any other civilization. Both theoretical systems will have a liberating effect on historians, but it will no doubt strike them that both are profoundly e-historical. Neither begins to face the problems of change. In fact, both deny the need for any explanation of change. Things are as they are because they fit in or have a function; things are as they are because their structure reflects deep ordering mechanisms in the human brain. It seems likely that in importing these types of explanation, historians will need to modify them considerably, or even re-think them entirely, if they are to be of any use.

A third major stimulus which historians may find in the work of social anthropologists is in the distancing of their own past; in other words that discipline can open up a whole range of subjects for study, including small 'communities'. Social anthropologists consciously recognize the need for an 'imaginative leap' when studying other societies. Faced with a totally new language and institutions, investigators were forced to suspect most of their inherited assumptions; they had to try to get 'inside'

⁸⁴There is a clear exposition of functionalism and structural-functionalism in John Beattie, **Other Cultures** (1964), ch.4.

⁸⁵Previous notes indicates some preliminary reading on structuralism.

the ways of life and thought of another people. This led them into examining fundamental matters such as child-rearing, kinship relations, symbolism, ritual, concepts of space and time, in a way that had never been attempted before. Historical study should have the same aim and detailed local studies can provide some of the essential material for meaningful answers. Historians should take nothing for granted and seek to explore even where the explanation seems obvious. Yet there are hidden obstacles in the way. One of these is the result of studying a society merely through documentary evidence. The impact of that society is less immediate and devastating than the 'cultural shock' experienced by the anthropologist. Furthermore, as we saw in relation to local records, there are many topics which are never directly mentioned in the records. It is easy to find ourselves forgetting such basic things as night and day, hate and fear, a patterning of every moment of the day and every feature of the natural world and many other fundamental features of the past. Documents lull one into a sense that the past never really **fully** existed; one can retain one's superiority and distance. A further obstacle is the tendency for historians to study the history of their own or a neighbouring society. Many of the basic assumptions and ways of organizing human life in the past are those which are shared by the investigator and consequently never strike him as worthy of examination. This is what Sir Henry Maine meant when he stressed the 'difficulty of believing that ideas which form part of our everyday mental stock can really stand in need of analysis and examination'.⁸⁶ It is this largely unconscious obstacle which helps to explain why there have been so few satisfactory attempts by historians of western Europe, at least until the last ten years when social anthropology began to influence their works, to ; it study such topics as kinship, the family, marriage, sexual behaviour, child-rearing, literacy, astrology, witchcraft, popular religion, concepts of sin, death, time, and a host of others listed twelve years ago by Thomas.⁸⁷ Most anthropologists are forced to accept that, implicitly, if not explicitly, they are comparing other societies with their idea of their own. Historians are also bound to work with implicit models of human behaviour and motivation drawn from their own background. Whether they like it or not, confining themselves in this way inevitably blinds them to up to three quarters of what was important and meaningful to their ancestors. This is especially relevant to the study of small areas in the past for, as we have seen, the data tend to be more than usually devoid of statements of feeling, purpose and belief. We have to guess these. It is much more tempting to believe that the motivations were similar to our own if they are seldom stated. At least the historian of ideas is constantly being brought up with a jolt against the foreignness of his material. Local records lull one into a belief that people in the past were just like us, except that they lived in a less comfortable physical environment.

Thus a study of the work of social anthropologists can help the historian feel the unfamiliarity of the familiar; it can distance him from himself and make the obvious seem strange, making him an alien in a new landscape. On the other hand, it can make the unfamiliar and incomprehensible seem more familiar. The modes of thought that flourished in Europe before 1800, for example, have largely disappeared and it is hard for us to understand the emotional appeal of magic or the need for the blood feud. Collingwood noted on several occasions that if the gap between the historian's own experience and his subject matter is too great, then the past is unintelligible.⁸⁸ We are separated from our ancestors by the motorcar and aeroplane, electricity and steam, wireless and television, life insurance and antibiotics, widespread literacy and computers, urbanization and industrialization, It is not difficult to see the very

⁸⁶Sir H.S. Maine, **Ancient Law** (1890), 171

⁸⁷K.V. Thomas, 'History and Anthropology', **Past and Present**, xxiv (1963).

⁸⁸For example, he wrote that 'though we have no lack of data about Roman religion, our own religious experience is not of such a kind as to qualify us for reconstructing in our own minds what it meant to them' R.Collingwood, **The Idea of History** (Oxford, 1946), 329.

great imaginative effort required by both historians and social anthropologists when attempting to study past and non-western societies. At least the anthropologist can go to live in a world where the institutions and modes of thought, different though they are, still exist. To see a 'strange' belief in practice, to have dinner with a reputed witch or watch people in a trance, takes away much of the apparent irrationality. Reading about such experiences can help to make the past less incomprehensibly bizarre. For the historian of a local community, for example, the insecurity of the physical environment as shown in reference to illness, accidents and death will take on a new meaning and the various attempts to deal with through ritual and magic will be more intelligible.

It is possible that when people look back on the development of academic disciplines it will be recognized that history in 1977 resembled in a number of ways anthropology in 1914, at the point when Malinowski set off on his field fieldwork trip. He had little idea of the methods he would develop which would have the effect of opening up new worlds to the western mind. Yet he was filled with excitement and apprehension.⁸⁹ It is certainly possible that a judicious use of the new tools will make it feasible to explore the past in a way which is qualitatively different from anything that has been achieved before.⁹⁰ In this process, it is likely that historians will give back as much to social scientists as they themselves have received by supplying them with data of a quality and quantity hitherto undreamed of and by re-thinking originally borrowed concepts. This will be material which will at last expose the flimsy functional and structural models of society to real tests. It will force us to construct, for the first time, really flexible models of change over long periods.

⁸⁹See his own account in B. Malinowski, **A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term** (1967).

⁹⁰This is recognized, for example, by Goubert, **op.cit.** 303, who writes that 'only in the last twenty years has a new kind of local history become possible'.