

(leaps)

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Imaginative Leaps

Alan Macfarlane argues the benefits which social anthropology could bring to the study of history.

The insights of social anthropology have not, until recently, been held to be of much value to the historian. As long as the law, the constitution, politics, ecclesiastical affairs and economics were the central preoccupations of historians it could plausibly be argued that the life experience of academics gave them some personal understanding of the problems of the elite of any century. But interest is shifting towards the social history of the majority, and present-day urban professionals can hardly pretend to identify emotionally with mainly rural, frequently illiterate people, who lived before the revolution in transport, drainage, medicine and power.

For this reason, acquaintance with social anthropology might be of value to researchers. Students might also benefit. The study of history in school or university is not now for the purpose of learning a set of precedents in order to be able to take effective political, legal or other decisions (often in a colonial situation) or to justify and perpetuate privilege. History is no longer a training in 'leadership' or genealogy, but a subject which must have both an intrinsic interest and be an aid to understanding a rapidly changing and relativistic world. A kind of history teaching is needed that will help resolve the complexities of related phenomena; will help a student to understand himself in time, and to see the functions of war, sex, religion, irrationality; and will make him aware of all these things on a world scale, not only in relation to western Europe.

Very simply, the hallmarks of good anthropology are three. First, it refuses to be deterministic, denies that the physical background, economic situation or structure of the brain is a determining variable for all thoughts and behaviour. Rather, its approach is total, recognizing that social, economic, physical and mental factors are mutually influential. It allows to human institutions and thoughts an almost infinite flexibility, convinced that they are interdependent, but with a conviction far less dogmatic than, for example, Marxism. This totality of approach arose 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.

Second, anthropology is based on a timeless but satisfying explanatory system which has been termed 'functionalism'. Rather than seeing the roots of actions and thoughts in random past events, it was argued that both actions and ideas could be explained by their present 'functions'. This was especially important since it helped to de-mystify much of what had earlier been dismissed as 'irrational' or 'superstitious'. For example, witchcraft beliefs serve a 'function' in many societies, both to explain misfortune and as a form of social control. Functionalism was later modified by a structural interpretation. Likenesses were 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 or lay-out of a village site, or the structure of agricultural activities. 'Conjectural history' was avoided, and it became possible to compare different societies, our own included. Functionally a witch doctor is only a psychiatrist writ large.

Third, anthropology recognizes the need for an 'imaginative leap'. Faced with a totally new language and institutions, anthropologists were forced to suspend most of their inherited assumptions; they had to try to get 'inside' the ways of life and thought of another people.

This led them to examine fundamental matters - childbearing, kinship relations, symbolism, ritual - in a way that had never been attempted before. Proper historical study should have the same aim, taking nothing for granted and seeking to explore even where the explanation seems obvious. Yet necessarily documentary evidence has a deadening effect, its impact is less immediate and devastating than the cultural shock experienced by the anthropologist. Most historians can retain a feeling of superiority towards the objects of their study, often coupled with the suspicion that they, the inhabitants of the past, never *really* existed.

So anthropology can help the historian feel the unfamiliarity of the familiar; it can distance him from himself and make the obvious seem strange, turning his eyes towards new areas of research. Equally it can make the unfamiliar more familiar.

The modes of thought that flourished in Europe before 1800 have largely disappeared, and it is hard to understand the emotional appeal of such rituals as magic or the blood feud. But anthropologists meet with such institutions in a wide range of societies. To see a 'strange' belief in practice, to have dinner with a reputed witch, takes away much of the irrationality. Thus a whole range of inquiries, particularly relating to the period before about 1500, which were beyond the reach of industrial man's imagination, are opened to him.

There is another, methodological, advantage. Broadly speaking, anthropology can be divided into two types, thematic and community study. Thematic anthropology selects a major feature of human activity - right and left symbolism, purity beliefs, marriage - and the whole range of human societies are examined for this particular feature, and by the 'comparative method' co-variations are sought. Historians also employ this device, as in the examination of the 'Protestantism and Capitalism' thesis, but it is often under-emphasized in the search for temporal changes.

Community studies, on the other hand, take broad-ranging topics such as the nature of kinship or the function of guilt, and study them in a particular, microscopic, setting. Whereas most historians have written about whole countries comprising several million people over a period of hundreds of years, an anthropologist typically studies about 1,000 people over a couple of years. Generalizing from very small samples presents great difficulties, but anthropological methods have much to teach the historian. Up to now he has ignored these techniques, and we still do not have studies of many of those topics which anthropologists make the centre of their research (1). Obvious exceptions are the recently published work on witchcraft and magic, and earlier work on the thirteenth-century peasantry (2).

It would seem likely that there will be development in two directions: an opening up of new areas of inquiry as suggested in the work of Keith Thomas, and far more rigorous local community studies. The latter have progressed slowly because of the immense effort needed to reconstruct a past community. An anthropologist walks into a living culture, and, once the language is mastered, can collect in one morning the evidence that it would take an historian a lifetime to find. Both their skills lie in asking the right questions, but the historian is faced with the simultaneous over-abundance and scarcity of sources. If he decides to do a total study of a particular community it will take him 10 years merely to gather and arrange the material before he can start solving problems. Such prolonged preparation makes for tedium and a deadening of the mind.

Yet a number of developments in the last decade make a new type of historical community study at least possible. The establishment of local record offices and further depositing of documents makes the use of material much easier. Rapid improvements in photographic techniques allow the historian to work at home, at least twice as fast as before.

The complexity of the inter-relations revealed in the documents, beyond the capacity of the human brain to disentangle, becomes manageable with the help of a computer. Perhaps most important of all, partly thanks to the work of the Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structure and extra-mural classes, the old prejudices against collaborative research are breaking down. The task is too great for the individual; it requires teamwork.

Notes

(1) An excellent outline of what could be done is Keith Thomas, 'History and Anthropology', *Past and Present*, 24 (1963). On the relationship between the two disciplines there are two superb essays by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, reprinted as chapters one and three in *Essays in Social Anthropology* (London, 1962). Among the many introductions to anthropology, Clyde Kluckhohn's *Mirror for Man* (1957) and Godfrey Lienhardt's *Social Anthropology* (Oxford, 1966) describe the central preoccupations of American and British anthropologists.

(2) It is invidious to single out names since many historians have done research which in many ways parallels that undertaken by anthropologists. But very few have drawn direct analogies or consciously applied anthropological theories; among the few that have done so are the following - Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic; Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London, 1970); C.G. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (New York, 1960); Alan Macfarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin, an Essay in Historical Anthropology* (Cambridge, 1970).