

(theory)

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NOTES ON GENERAL THEORY AND PARTICULAR CASES

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The necessity for general theory

The following pages are rough ideas written down to encourage and stimulate discussion. It is argued that it is necessary to theorize, to use comparative models, and then to test these against specific historical or anthropological data. But such theory building contains various kinds of bias, some of which are described. A number of practical suggestions are then made to provide corrections to such bias. Finally two examples of theory-building combined with specific historical work are briefly described.

There is no escape from the necessity to theorize. It may once have been believed that the historian or the anthropologist was merely an organizer of 'facts' which existed independently of him. If this were the case, he (or she) would require little imagination or intuition. Dr. Johnson, the eighteenth century English sage, described a historian thus: 'He has facts ready to his hand, so he has no exercise of invention. Imagination is not required in any high degree...But what is described as the 'Copernican revolution' in historiography has occurred; 'the discovery that, so far from relying on an authority other than himself, to whose statements his thoughts must conform, the historian is his own authority...possessed of a criterion to which his so-called authorities must conform...He must himself judge, evaluate and interpret the past or other societies. In order to do this he must explicitly formulate theories about possible worlds and then test these against the observations of other societies.

Such theory-building is not only inescapable but invaluable. If we do not speculate at this more general level we are the prisoners of whatever narrow study we are engaged on. The dangers for local researchers of an absence of theory was well described by Maurice Bloch: 'No longer guided from above, it risks being indefinitely marooned upon insignificant or poorly propounded questions. There is no...pride more vainly misplaced than that in a tool valued as an end in itself. If the questions are trivial or badly put, the answers will be uninteresting or meaningless. The triviality, for instance, often arises from the historian's or anthropologist's growing fascination with his painfully collected data. This is an absorption which is absolutely necessary. But it insidiously blots out the original intentions and begins to impose source-based questions. When it begins to take as ends what were originally only thought of as means to a end, it can lead to disappointment and futility.

The construction of general theories by the use of comparison is essential if one is to understand any particular instance. This has been widely recognized by many anthropologists and historians. For example, Tocqueville wrote that 'no one who has studied and considered France alone will ever, I venture to say, understand the French Revolution'. He used England and America as external models, alternative possibilities which by a shock of contrast made it possible to understand the special features of pre-revolutionary France. The need to compare and to think broadly is necessary whether we wish to study differences between societies or whether we wish to see what is essential and unchanging in

man. Such a comparative method has been superbly described by Bloch.

A further advantage of the creation of conscious theories is that it helps to keep at bay, or at least make explicit, both our 'ethno' and our 'temporo-centricism', the innate tendency of all of us to judge other societies and cultures by our own standards. Two of the dangers here may be mentioned. The first is the tendency to make all other societies too like us. An illustration would be a remark by the English historian Maurice Ashley: 'Were the Stuarts whose loves and marriages have been described merely ourselves wearing different clothes and lit by lights other than ours? Of course they were'. The second danger, which tends to follow from this, is the tendency to leave unquestioned and hence unexplained and unobserved a great deal of behaviour in the past or in other societies because it is similar to our own and hence self-evidently 'normal'. As David Hume the philosopher wrote, 'the views the most familiar to us are apt, for that reason, to escape us' or as Braudel put it, '...surprise and distance...are both equally necessary for an understanding of that which surrounds you - surrounds you so evidently that you can no longer see it clearly'. An illustration of this in action would be the work of Keith Thomas on magical systems of thought: 'What is certain about the various beliefs discussed in this book is that today they have either disappeared or at least greatly decayed in prestige. This is why they are easier to isolate and to analyse'. The problem is acute for the historian of his own culture who needs some 'external fulcrum' in order even to be able to be aware of the central features of the past. Such a fulcrum is automatically present for an anthropologist who works in an alien culture, but even he needs support for, as Homans argued 'when a man describes a society which is not his own, he often leaves out those features which the society has in common with his own society.

It is not merely a problem of being too near to the material; often the historian of long-distant times or of social groups of which he is not a member, finds himself regarding a world which is based on premises so alien to his own that he cannot understand it at all. Collingwood argued in relation to Roman religion 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. The difficulty was well described by David Hume: 'Let an object be presented to a man of never so strong natural reason and abilities; if that object be entirely new to him, he will not be able, by the most accurate examination of its sensible qualities, to discover any of its causes or effects'. The usual temptation is either to avoid the subject altogether, or to dismiss it as irrational nonsense. The combined effect of these two limitations is that if we rely merely on the commonsense experience of everyday living and then look at the historical past or another society, we see very little and understand even less. It is essential that we make our comparative theories as explicit and as wide as possible.

If we make these comparative theories fairly abstract and do not locate them in any specific society, they become what are often called 'ideal types' or 'models'. A model has been defined as 'an elegant analytical framework that can be used to organize data with economy and without serious distortion'. Certain features need to be stressed. Unlike the normal comparative method where two actually existing societies are compared, the model or ideal type is a simplification of reality and is 'not actually exemplified in reality'. As Weber wrote of his ideal types of power, 'Their 'pure' types, after all, are to be considered merely as border cases which are especially valuable and indispensable for analysis. Historical realities, which almost always appear in mixed forms, have moved and still move between such pure types'. Such models or abstractions are, Weber believed, in the minds of historians and others in any case; model building is merely a matter of trying to make them as explicit as possible. The aim is

utility not truth; 'a good model is heuristic and explanatory, not descriptive, and it has predictive value'. In other words it alerts the thinker to possible connections and possible features. This is especially important for the treatment of the totally alien, such as witchcraft beliefs, or the totally accepted, such as the nuclear family system, for it prompts the mind to see and to question.

The creation of such models is an individual matter and arises from that constant interplay between general speculation and work on specific material. It is an art or skill which can be developed, but it is not a mechanical procedure for which a series of rules can be laid down. The best one can do it to point out some of the very serious dangers of the process, a few of the ways in which they can be partly avoided, and then to end by giving two illustrations of such activity.

Sources of bias and possible correctives.

It is only possible to list a few of the sources of bias and to do so very briefly. One danger is over-ambition or over-abstraction. This is manifested in the setting up of a series of questions which are quite unanswerable from the evidence; there are a very large number of these over-ambitious models now in the field of social history, where many are engaged in trying to answer questions of a psychological or other kind which are unanswerable from the material. The usual result is that the historian twists and stretches the evidence to answer his questions about child-rearing or the growth of emotion, not noticing that he has exceeded all the bounds of credibility. As Elton warns: 'tight questions means fruitful questions, questions capable of producing answers. They must therefore be geared to what is contained in the matter to be enquired from'. The corrective is obvious, yet often too time-consuming to be used. It is that the historian or anthropologist must pay a great deal of attention to his sources - how they were constructed, what they meant to the people who created them, and what inferences can be drawn from the information, Hence the need for a constant tension between general reflection and particular detailed study.

But theories and models may also become too concrete. That is, they may become too closely associated with the historical material. Anthropologists are constantly being warned of the danger of presenting as their own model what is, in fact, only the dressed up version of the 'folk' model of the actors themselves. There is nothing wrong in so doing, in presenting, as did great anthropologists such as Malinowski or Evans-Pritchard, the natives view of their world. But this must not be confused with an analytic theory or external model. The danger for the historian is as great, especially when we consider that the 'actors' he may be dealing with can be men far more sophisticated and cunning than himself; in England, for instance, one may be dealing with Bacon, Coke, Hobbes, Locke, Newton, who have themselves shaped the way we perceive the world. To see them and ourselves in perspective, to step back to another level, requires a fulcrum right outside western civilization.

Another source of bias lies in what might be called materialism. The huge influence of a vulgar interpretation of Marx has combined with a certain bent in western societies to give excessive weight to material factors. As the philosopher Whitehead wrote, 'we are now so used to the materialistic way of looking at things...that it is with some difficulty that we understand the possibility of another mode of approach to the problem of nature'. This tendency is exacerbated by the nature of the historian's evidence: 'To give too much weight to the economic forces in history is easy, because in general more is known about these forces than about others'. It is very easy to fall into the lazy but seductive habit of

assuming that what we know most about, usually material culture, economic relations or demography, must 'in the last instance' be the determining factor. This not only precludes much interesting work, but it may lead to direct falsehood. In the end we must remember that the material world as well as the demographic one is a product of thought and culture. We should remember the words of Collingwood that 'they neglect their proper task of penetrating to the thought of the agents whose acts they are studying', who merely 'content themselves with determining the externals of these acts, the kinds of things which can be studied statistically'. The poverty of materialist explanations has, for example, recently been shown by the anthropologist Sahlins.

Another bias in the construction of theories, especially very grand ones, is to assume an evolutionary series of stages in which all societies move through various predictable and similar phases 'up' to the present. The cruder versions of 'modernization' and 'Marxist' theory both suffer from this. This makes the present into a high point and watches the inevitable march of societies through the various 'modes of production', inevitably moving from stage A to stage B. This may be a useful device for development economists or political reformers who wish to show the inevitability of a certain line of development, and it proved a useful justification for the 'higher' cultures of the imperial age to patronize or exploit the 'lower' ones. But it can very seriously distort the past, especially when the stages are transferred from the realm of material production or agriculture to such areas as the history of human emotion. What often happens then, and this is the great danger of all theories or models, whether implicit or explicit, is that the evidence is invented, distorted or suppressed in order to fit some over-arching model. A guide to all the major techniques one may use in order to cram resistant data into a basically inappropriate model is given in a recent work by Stone.

Another strong bias in many historical models is towards what might be called 'catastrophe' or 'revolutionary' theories of change. Many models assume that the best way to describe long time periods is in terms of a series of 'revolutions'. There are political revolutions such as the French or English ones, economic revolutions such as the agricultural or industrial ones, religious revolutions such as the Reformation, cultural revolutions such as the Renaissance, social revolutions such as the destruction of peasant societies in the nineteenth century, and now emotional ones such as the discovery of childhood or the invention of love in the early modern period. Everything is changed, if not overnight, at least in a very short period. Clearly there are revolutions, but the need to create many others arises from the professional and political needs of historians. Such revolutions provide the historian with a purpose, for if he can describe a mighty change, his study becomes important. Furthermore, he may use his history to justify political remedies; if, for example, the present state of affairs is the result of recent revolutions, it is less immutable and can presumably be changed once again by another such revolution. Such theories of constant revolution overcome the difficulty of conceptualizing any other type of change. How does one put into words the fact that over long periods there may be no 'revolutions' (used in the incorrect sense of change from A to B, not in the correct sense of a movement from A through B to A, as in the revolution of a clock) yet there is change. This is a problem for example, in relation to the history of England over the period from the eighth to the eighteenth centuries. Many historians would regard the supposed 'revolution' of the Norman Conquest, the Reformation, the Civil War, and agricultural changes, not to be revolutions at all, but developments, elaborations or disturbances. Yet England in the eighteenth century was clearly not the same country as England in the eighth century. In one sense it was similar, in another sense entirely different. The paradox of continuity in change was given one sort of solution by the great English historian of the Common Law, Sir Matthew Hale. 'One of Hale's metaphors to embrace the

history of English law was the Ship of the Argonauts. The ship went on so long a voyage that eventually every part of it decayed and was replaced; yet (says the paradox of identity in spite of change) it remained in a meaningful sense the same ship!' Is this just a 'folk' or actor's model, or could it be true? Whatever we feel, what we need to be careful of is the tendency to assume that change can only occur after 'radical breaks', a tendency which tends to be based on the assumption that what is happening in much of the Third World today with the destruction of indigenous cultures, or happened in much of western Europe in the century between 1830 and 1930, must find a parallel in the history of all human societies.

Omitting other sources of bias, we may now turn to a few of the strategies which may prevent or minimize distortion. One is to use as the basis for comparison or abstraction fairly wide comparisons in time and space; at the least, one should be aware of the features of societies which are from a time or an area a long way away from the one being studied. Hence the need for anthropological theories for historians, and historical reading for anthropologists. This will help to overcome some of the temperocentric and ethnocentric biases to which the two disciplines are prone. Secondly, the models or theories must be tested against a specific set of materials. Often this testing will provide negative results, showing that certain features are absent, which, in itself, can be extremely useful. For example, that English witches did not fly, commit sexual offences, hang upside down in trees, or eat their children, is as interesting as the fact that, like witches all over the world, they used mystical power to harm others over long distances, or tended to bewitch those they knew.

It is in the process of testing theories that the traditional craft skills of the disciplines come in. Three of these may be mentioned. The first is the thorough interrogation of the source of information, whether an informant or a piece of parchment or a physical object from the past. This may seem self-evident and practicable for the anthropologist, but less obvious for the historian. Yet Bloch wrote that 'A document is a witness; and like most witnesses, it does not say much except under cross-examination. The real difficulty lies in putting the right questions. This is where we return to the necessity for models once again. Likewise, the English legal historian S.F. Milsom writes that 'It is a property of legal sources, especially from the middle ages, that they will tell the investigator nearly everything except what he wants to know...it is what was assumed that we need to know, not what was said....' In order to understand what was **assumed** we have to go deep into the process of the creation of the documents: who wrote them, for what purpose, with what audience in mind, what has been lost, what was never written down because it was obvious? Although, in theory, historical researchers learn to ask these questions, it is a sad fact that the world tends to be divided into those who ask interesting questions, but have never learnt to understand the sources which would give the answers, and those who know their sources, but have forgotten what the questions were.

Understanding the witness is one task, another is to check his evidence against other material. Once again Bloch alluded to this when he wrote that 'the deeper the research the more the light of the evidence must converge from sources of many different kinds'. Any single source, however good, gives a distorted picture; there may be lies and misrepresentations, but it is more likely that there will be omissions or wrong emphasis. Hence the need for multi-source work. An anthropologist will check an informant's statements with others and will collect four or five different kinds of evidence bearing on a particular problem. Likewise, while a particular source, for example diaries for family life, parish registers for demography, taxation documents for distribution of wealth.

Notes:

1. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester, 1954), p.86
2. Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970)
3. Marc Bloch, *Land and Work in Medieval Europe*, trans. J.E. Anderson (1967), 48
4. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft*; Macfarlane (ed.), *The Diary of Ralph Josselin 1616-1683* (Oxford, 1976); Macfarlane et al (eds.), *The Records of an English Parish: Earls Colne 1400-1750* (Chakdwyck-Healey microfiche Co. Cambridge 1980)
5. Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford, 1978)
6. Jonathan D.Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang: Rural Life in China in the seventeenth century* (1978)
7. Anton Blok, *The Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1860-1960* (Oxford, 1974)
8. T.J.A. Le Goff and D.M.G.Sunderland, 'The Revolution and the Rural Community in Eighteenth century Brittany', *Past and Present*, 62 (Feb, 1974). Olwen Hufton, 'Attitudes towards authority in eighteenth-century Languedoc', *Social History*, 3, no.3 (Oct. 1978); Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen; the Modernization of Rural France 1870-1914* (1977)
9. E.J.Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester, 1959); E.J.Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (Pelican edn., 1972).
10. E.J.Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 18, 22,23
11. Alan Macfarlane and Sarah Harrison, *The Justice and the Mare's Ale; Law and Disorder in Seventeenth-Century England* (Blackwells, Oxford, 1981).