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The sociological Study of Past Societies with special reference to Witchcraft in Essex.

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'What social science is properly about is the human variety, which consists of all the social worlds in which men have lived, are living, and might live.'¹

Introduction

The pioneer local historian W.G. Hoskins recently wrote, 'the good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies'² - another way of stating the sentiment expressed by Wright Mills in the opening quotation. I am grateful to Professor Marwick and this audience for the opportunity to describe what seem to me to be some particularly attractive man-hunting grounds, where sociologists and historians could beat the bush together. Though their quarry is the same, some would argue that their weapons are too different for co-operation. I do not intend to go deeply into this problem, for there are already many discussions in print as to the relationship between the social sciences and history in general and a growing number of examples of the fruitful use of records by sociologists, and sociological models by historians. What I would like to do is to examine very briefly the way in which historians and sociologists would benefit from being aware of each other's problems and sources. I will illustrate some of the generalizations from recent work undertaken on witchcraft in pre-industrial England, but since the results have now been published I do not wish to waste time with a mere repetition of these findings, but refer those interested to papers in the A.S.A.(9) volume on **Witchcraft Confessions**, and Keith Thomas', **Religion and the Decline of Magic**. I should stress that by 'sociological study' I mainly mean the study of non-industrial societies, and that the only historical society of which I have detailed knowledge is that of C16-C17 England. Finally I would like to admit that there are obviously many dangers in an over-enthusiastic coalescing of two academic disciplines: the case of Margaret Murray's application of Frazerian theories to European witchcraft is a useful warning. But there are plenty of boundary keepers in both disciplines to warn us of the mystical dangers of contamination, so I will here concentrate on the positive side of a process which it is already too late to halt.

Part 1. The benefits for historical studies

It appears that human beings are only capable of studying phenomena at a certain, medium, distance from their own situation. If the topic is too alien to anything they have experienced it will be incomprehensible, dismissed as childish mumbo-jumbo or ignored. This, of course, was one of the main obstacles to the understanding of non-European cultures, only recently partly overcome by anthropologists. Likewise it helps to explain the bewildered or supercilious accounts of supposedly

¹ □C. Wright Mills, **The Sociological Imagination**, Pelican 1970, p.147

² □Hoskins, *Fieldwork*, p.184

'irrational' topics such as witchcraft, astrology, ecstatic religion and others treated so superbly in Keith Thomas' book. It seems probably that these would have continued to confuse historians if it had not been for the inspiration of anthropological field studies. It is impossible, using written documents alone, to let the imagination leap back into past ages. Thus, e.g. W.G. Collingwood wrote that 'though we 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.'³ But the experience of living with people who live in very different mental worlds, where magical/witchcraft beliefs still exist, has enabled anthropologists to see the social and philosophical functions of such beliefs. It is now possible for historians to see how people can genuinely believe in witchcraft, and how such beliefs have considerable rationality given the other general assumptions of the time and the social and technological background. Thus the first thing sociology can do for historians is to bring a whole series of topics into their range; the material has always been there, but has been largely meaningless.

If the topic is too close to the observer it is also impossible to study it. Tawney once wrote that 'Men are rarely conscious of the quality of the air they breathe...The course of wisdom, therefore, is to consult observers belonging to other nations.'⁴ Historians tend to belong to the culture they study and much of what they find in the past appears to be so similar to what they now believe to be normal that it requires no explanation or investigation. Moreover, many historians tend to start with the assumption of similarity, until difference is proved; thus one writes 'Were the Stuarts whose love and marriage have been described really ourselves wearing different clothes and lit by other lights than ours? Of course they were!'⁵ Only when a gap has emerged can a historian get to work. Thus it is plausible to argue that it is in the areas where there was moderately rapid change that C19 and early C20 historians concentrated their attention. Constitutional, political, legal and ecclesiastical history flourished and still, of course, dominate the field - at least in terms of resources. Then, when the full impact of industrialization was felt, there grew up the renewed discipline of economic history. It could be argued that the fast-growing interest in social history is a belated response to recent social changes which have emphasized our distance from 'The world we have lost'. Topics such as the age at marriage, birth control, family life, child-rearing, crime, which once seemed non-problems, now seem interesting, because change has made us realize that what our ancestors did in the past was not **necessarily** the right and only way human beings could behave. Here again the anthropologist can help. The renowned 'cultural jolt' which forced anthropologists into examining the basic structure of kinship, exchange, ritual and many other topics can help the historian attain a sense of the strangeness and uniqueness of his own historical society. When he learns that many hundreds of societies order their marriages, economics, sex life, political organization, beliefs in the after-life and so on, in ways different to his own, and would consider the situation in, say, a C16 English village or parliament or church, as exceedingly odd and needing explanation, he can turn to his evidence with renewed interest. When he does so, he finds that a miracle has occurred; many little things he did not notice before - dress, manners, eating-habits, jokes etc. seem both more familiar (like, in type, what he has read about for Melanesia or the Sudan) and yet strange. They seem infinitely worth investigation. This distancing is liberating but also disconcerting, both for the historian and his colleagues. Both may find it worrying to have beliefs and assumptions which they still hold, treated as worthy of detached analysis. The relativity inherent in good anthropological investigation is unfamiliar to many historians, and they are often well protected against it by the system of education which makes sure that they spend most of their time

³ □ Idea of History, p.329

⁴ □ Tawney, Equality, p.35

⁵ □ Ashley, Stuarts in Love, p.242

reading second-hand summaries by other historians of that tiny portion of the past which is officially entitled 'history'.

Perhaps the greatest temptation for both historians and sociologists is for the giant to become so involved in the joy of the hunt, in the mechanics of the traps which he sets and the beauties of the country he crosses, that in the end he forgets he is after human flesh at all. After many years conscientious endeavour he ends up miles from any human being. Means have become ends, 'Methodology, in short,' (as Wright Mills puts it), 'seems to determine the problems.' The difficulty of following the simple observation, 'let the problem not the source set the task', or as Action put it 'study problems not periods', is enormous. In history one comes across a particularly fascinating sources, say a diary, a set of court records, probate inventories, parish registers or some such, and imperceptibly one's questions become moulded by the type of question such a source will answer. The parallel with anthropology is to go out with a set of hypotheses, and then to become so fascinated with the life of a certain people that one limits one's problems and turns to descriptions of a source, rather than analysis of a comparative nature. Of course a vast amount of useful material has been produced by antiquarianism in history, and ethnography in anthropology and there is an equal danger of forcing the sources to answer problems they were never designed for.

How can sociology help the historian here? Above all, it seems to me, it can give him a number of helpful working models of how the various parts of a society are interrelated. Historians obviously must have a set of theories about human motivation and the likely connection between things in order to select and evaluate their material. Usually such a scheme is never openly stated, and naturally it is based on the experience of living in a post-industrial society - usually in a restricted section of such a society. Now to what extent does the life of the average academic prepare him for understanding the past? 'How, I must ask, can an Oxford don work himself into the mind of a serf of Louis the Pious?' wrote Evans-Pritchard, and Tawney stated the same problem concerning economic history. Many historians have shared Collingwood's belief that imaginative reconstruction is the basis for real history, that the historian must construct in his mind both the 'web' between pieces of data, and also the data itself. They also tend to assume that any sensitive, sympathetic person can spin such a thread, whatever his or her background. But there are reasons for thinking that this common sense approach is not enough. Nor is it necessary. To be aware of the many studies of a wide range of human societies, and to construct out of this a flexible, overt, model of possible human behaviour reinforces the unaided imagination. Such a model has several advantages. Firstly, as argued above, being aware of the almost infinite variability and hence **non-necessity** of human institutions and modes of thought makes us ask **why** of many otherwise taken-for-granted features of our own historical past. Secondly, being self-conscious and hence explicit, such an approach can be criticized more easily both by the historian and his colleagues. Thirdly, it is more useful. For the very hazy, unstated, picture of the total world out of which the fragments of 'evidence' have dropped, the historian is able to substitute a stronger more concrete picture. Even if incorrect, it gives one the confidence to ask questions about problems for which the evidence is not easy to find. Finally, it is possible that the model may be more accurate. There are now studies of so many societies that it is usually possible to find some fairly similar to that in which one is interested - certainly much nearer in many ways than C20 England.

To take these advantages with reference to C17 witchcraft, it seems clear that without the many descriptions of the way witchcraft functions in various parts of the world, of the importance of the relationship between witch and victim, of the way in which divination occurs, of the importance of witch-doctors in upholding beliefs, it would have been impossible to write any kind of satisfactory account from the fragmentary, and to us extraordinary, evidence that survives. It is likely that future research will show that some of the webs between the evidence have been woven using the wrong analogy, but there seems to me little doubt that Keith Thomas' work is an infinitely 'truer' and more satisfying account of many aspects of pre-industrial witchcraft, magic and religion than anything written before it.

We have now moved on to sociology's second major value; it not only opens up a whole range of subjects for examination, but appears to offer an explanation of these and more familiar topics which is richer than previous historical ones. It is a 'total' approach in which sectors of life which now appear split are re-united, and there is a peculiar intellectual satisfaction in finding that, for instance, intellectual, economic, demographic or other phenomena are interlinked in a way we had never before perceived. Keith Thomas some time ago pointed out⁶ that by overcoming artificial segmentation, anthropology provided in a much more flexible and satisfying form interconnections which, for an earlier generation of historians, had been provided by Marxism. This interconnectedness is particularly useful since the agrarian societies which historians often study did perceive connections which we no longer recognize. Economics, religion, politics, etc. were differentiated along different lines from today. It is scarcely possible, without help, for us to understand what this meant.

One of the strangest things that happens when one starts to ask the new questions posed by sociological reading is that the evidence for answering them miraculously appears. A well known example occurred recently when Laslett and the Cambridge group began to get interested in C17 social structure; listings of inhabitants, hitherto of no interest and hence not known to exist, emerged in their hundreds. This confirms that many of the remarks about the 'short and simple annals of the poor' reflect the 'short and simple' interests of past generations of historians more than anything else. If one really wants to find out about a subject in the past, and is prepared to be patient, there is **usually** a massive amount of evidence. Perhaps I may illustrate the way in which sources expand with expanding interest and a change in questions with reference to witchcraft in Essex.

Diagram 1 Sources and problems in Essex witchcraft

Nos of witchcraft cases	Author	Sources used	Theoretical approach
half a dozen trial pamphlets	various (eg Walter Scott)	literary sources & pamphlet accounts	witchcraft beastly superstition
15 trials (40 individuals)		1911 Notesteinas above, in more detail and printed court records	as above, but also traces of a
473 indictments and a few other	1919/1933 Ewen	unprinted records, esp. central courts	sociological analysis cases
1,220 references	1970 Macfarlane	(Assize) further unprinted records, esp. ecclesiastical - local records	sociological

The vast expansion of sources means that one can ask many new questions concerning the

⁶ □1963, p.7

sociological distribution of accusations which previously seemed impossible, but one is also forced to narrow down in time and area because of the huge quantity of material. The question of how such material compares in quality to that which most sociologists are used to, will be touched on at the end of this paper.

This brings us to the question of whether all historical societies are equally susceptible to analysis, or whether we must limit ourselves to certain periods. This, of course, depends on the questions being asked. To try and ask the questions I did for Essex in the C16 and C17 of that county some two centuries earlier would have been impossible. But this does not mean that sociology is of no value for medieval historians. If the questions asked are broad functional ones, for example, what are the functions of certain customs, myths, legal institutions, then we can study almost any period. Medieval feuds, ordeals, wars, kinship, kingship, all have and are being subjected to such an analysis. It is especially effective for two reasons. Firstly it is reasonable to argue that the social and mental phenomena at that time are even closer to the traditional hunting-ground of anthropologists than are the same type of phenomena in more recent periods, and hence analogies are especially fruitful. Secondly, there is more in the period that seems at first sight irrational and 'superstitious' to us. By taking one particular institution or belief and examining it in all its aspects, searching for its latent functions, and comparing it to similar institutions encountered throughout the world, it is possible to gain a new sympathy for ways of thought and action now completely lost to us. But what it is impossible to do is to carry out the type of rural sociology or community study which requires that we analyse a **total** community. Recent studies of medieval villages have shown that the sources for economic history of particular communities are much richer than many people imagined. But it is widely recognized, e.g. by Homans in his study of C13 English villages⁷, that it is impossible to carry out, for example, a detailed study of kinship. Thus the older type of anthropology may be attempted, but the community-study approach may not.

Much sociology is concerned with following particular individuals or small groups and seeing the way in which they act and think in different contexts. For this it is not sufficient to be able to draw examples from widely differing areas and times and draw a composite picture. We must know, for example, how much land a particular person owns, how many children he has, his religious affiliations, how he was educated, what goods he had in his house, etc. Although it is only with an exceptional diary plus local sources that we can really gain anything like a full picture, it is reasonable to argue that for the first time in the history of civilization it is possible to go a long way towards rural community studies from about the mid-C16 onwards. This is because there is a sudden enrichment of the sources.

There are many such sources, but here I will mention only three major types which exist for most English communities from the C16 onwards. There are the tons of wills and inventories, from which one can reconstruct the physical living conditions and family ties of villagers. There are the parish registers of births, marriages and deaths, essential for the study of illness, marriage, the family and many other topics. Finally there are court records. Those of the secular courts, principally Assize, Quarter and Petty session, show us many other features as well as crime, while the records of the ecclesiastical courts, again surviving in their fullest form c.1550-1640 afford insight into popular mentality - sex, gossip, marriage, drunkenness etc. - in incredible detail. Other more general sources - diaries, letters, listings, pamphlets on controversial subjects, village histories, also begin to survive in increasing quantities and increase in volume up to the present. But towards the end of the C17, and a little later as one moves north, some of the sources which are essential to detailed community study begin to decline in quantity and quality and are not replaced by new material until the late C19. It could well be argued, therefore, that the period 1550-1700 in England provides us with a better chance of studying the sociology of a pre-industrial historical society than any other, earlier or later. By the C19 we will be studying the sociology of a semi-industrial society; before 1500 we

⁷ □English Villagers, p.109

cannot go. (Illustrate with slides; type of source - 6 historical, 6 anthropological).

Part 2. The benefits for the 'sociologist'.

'To understand the nature of a body at rest it is sometimes advisable to look at the same body when it is in motion.' Thus wrote Tawney⁸ and it is a conclusion with which few sociologists in the present generation would disagree. The difficulty is - how is it to be done? Firstly there is the problem of evidence; secondly there is the question of whether the models derived from studying a body at rest will still apply to such a body when it is in motion. I want in this final section to shift the emphasis to a discussion of some of the benefits which sociologists gain if they use historical material.

The necessity for both synchronic and diachronic analysis is, theoretically, obvious to all. Demographers recognize that a census cannot be understood without vital registration over time, while vital registration cannot be understood without a census. The difficulty is that the nature of the evidence has meant that history has been forced into vital registration without the census, and anthropology the census, without vital registration. Though I am over-simplifying here and constructing 'ideal' types, it is true to say that on the whole the 'structural' studies of the anthropologist, often lacking the material for any estimate of institutions in movement, are as brittle and artificial as are those of the historian who can never stop the process at a point in time and examine the possible inter-relation between different, and at first sight seemingly unconnected, spheres of human activity. Yet the necessity for both cross-section and longitudinal information is, as stated before, very strong in whatever one studies. For example in the analysis of domestic economics one not only needs consumption and production statistics over time, but also a full inventory of resources at a certain point in time.

But it is now beginning to appear as if the two approaches may be fusing. Anthropologists on the one hand are moving into more sophisticated societies with longer stretches of recorded time, or revisiting and re-analysing societies earlier studied by themselves or their colleagues. As interest grows in the historical roots of contemporary societies, enormous deposits of records, hitherto ignored, are often found in even supposedly pre-literate societies. Thus I was able to find considerable historical records relating to the small tribal group in the Himalayas where I did my fieldwork, and large deposits of historical material are being discovered for other groups nearby (e.g. the German work on Sherpas) - where previously nothing was known to exist. That there are considerable problems in presenting detailed historical material within an anthropological framework is shown by the 'social drama' monographs of Vic. Turner and others, which read like novels, and the works on land tenure in Ceylon, which are almost unreadable, and at their best sound like agricultural historians with a strong interest in kinship and marriage. On the other hand, by delimiting their time span and area, and concentrating on more detailed local sources, historians are now producing works which read very much like those of rural sociologists. Equipped with anthropological models they could well attempt to correlate spheres of activity and undertake microscopic community studies which were once deemed impossible. Even though the mental dimension, arising from the anthropologists ability to ask people why they are doing things, would inevitably be missing and this is a huge loss.

The trouble is that one wants something more than this. If all that can be offered are further community studies, even if they are of communities over a period of 150 years or more, then sociologists may be disappointed. The artificial delimitation and shortcomings of the 'community study' approach are too well known to make this entirely satisfactory. Furthermore they feel that not very much has been achieved if historians merely appropriate their clothes-horse and hang different cloths on it to dry - as to a certain extent seems to have been the case with witchcraft studies. What

⁸ □ Agrarian Problem, p.322

then are the possible outcomes of the fusion of the two disciplines? Here we are in very difficult territory and my guesses are only tentative. Firstly there is the model-borrowing mentioned above - which is obviously of great use to historians. At the next level the student of a historical society may start with the best hypotheses that sociology can supply, and then find that they are not entirely satisfactory, needing modification in the context of fuller material, leaving many questions unanswered by not even asking them. This again is the case with the historical study of witchcraft; anthropological studies give little help in explaining how people break out of a magical/witchcraft world view, and many anthropological hypotheses have over stressed the conservative effects of such beliefs. More generally, anthropologists have concerned themselves with just as delimited a sphere of human activity as historians - an obvious case is demography, a central preoccupation among historians but practically ignored by anthropologists. The different nature of the evidence has built up for each discipline a corpus of problems; the two do not entirely overlap and each set of scholars can profit from looking at the findings of the other. Yet though this necessitates making models more complex, the techniques for solving problems are conceived to be as they always were - a judicious combination of the qualitative and quantitative, propped up on a series of assumptions about how human nature operates.

But the next level to which a fusion might attain requires the rejection of many of the unquestioned assumptions of each discipline. Until it has been achieved it is impossible to describe, for we are trying to gaze on something that does not yet exist. It is as if we had asked Malinowski to define what social anthropology would be like before he went out to the Trobriand islands. All we can start with is dissatisfaction. Despite the huge benefits to be derived from the social sciences as they are now constituted if applied to historical material, the gap between what they explain and the dimensions of the phenomena to be explained is likely to grow too large and, like its predecessor in the C17, astrology, the whole complex of so-called laws and predictions will turn out to be based on false analogies and mistaken assumptions. This may be the ultimate function of historical material; it may destroy sociology as we know it. When we discover that many parts of the whole sociological approach, especially its emphasis on social groupings as opposed to ideas as the determinants of action; its materialist (Marxist) assumptions concerning the relations between social structure and cosmology; its dependence on false analogies with the mechanical world-view (most recently adopted in the form of analogies with 'linguistic structures'); and its incredibly constricted range of subject-matter - when we discover that these do not help to account for many historical problems, we may be forced to make the system so complex that it crashes out under its own weight. Out of it could grow a new world view, richer and more satisfactory - for it is clear that sociology is not just a discipline, it **is** a whole world view, a substitute for magic and witchcraft if you like. The task is enormous and cannot even be begun satisfactorily until both historians and sociologists are thoroughly aware of the advantages and draw-backs of their relative disciplines, and have moved beyond this to dissatisfaction.

In the mean-time there are a number of pressures which are likely to lead to a growing number of sociologists becoming historically-minded; for, as many people have now said, 'anthropology must become history or become nothing.' The sources for traditional anthropological study are disappearing rapidly. This is partly because most classic 'primitive' societies are becoming rapidly changed into industrializing off-shoots of western culture; partly because there is growing opposition to the patronizing and imperialistic assumptions that lie behind anthropology; partly because there is a growing feeling among western academics that such traditional studies are trivial and escapist. There appear to be four ways out for a profession which is simultaneously losing its ecological niche and suffering a population explosion. The second and third involve hunting in others territory and all the dangers attendant on this. Firstly, they may transfer their energies to recorded history of third world societies - hence the school of African history etc. (cf also ethno-musicology, ethno-art etc.) Secondly anthropologists may apply their techniques to small 'communities' in more economically differentiated societies - studying street gangs, urban housing estates, Scottish islands or whatever. Thirdly, we are invited to work over traditional field-work reports and combine them and other contemporary evidence into a new synthesis. This is the

promise associated with the 'structural' approach symbolized by the name of Levi-Strauss. There is an almost infinite amount of re-working to be done if we break traditional field-work into small enough units, whether 'mythemes' or anything else - and then re-assemble them into new imaginative patterns. As yet little historical material has been used by this school - that is historical material from a western country where there are many specialists who would spring out to show that many of the items selected were meaningless taken out of their background. The fourth approach is the one suggested in the earlier part of this paper; to use the archives of a society such as England or North America or France. This approach also has certain intellectual advantages. Firstly the material is much fuller than that for the 'structural approach'. All the data concerned in the biggest collection of field-work monographs in Great Britain - the R.A.I. - is less than the material available for the study of one medium-sized English county for 100 years at any point from 1600 onwards (if all such material were accumulated in one place). Another advantage may be termed the virtue of 'purity'.

By this I mean that the phenomena under observation are contaminated neither by the presence of the investigator nor by external pressures from western industrialized society. This advantage moved the French demographer, Louis Henry, to use historical material for this study of 'natural' population characteristics. If we wish to study 'natural' pre-industrial behaviour, then historical societies provide the only material we can use. We need not, like Malinowski, shut our eyes to the effects of the presence of missionaries from another civilization; such missionaries do not exist. But this makes the task both more interesting and more complex. For we now have to explain autonomous, indigenous, change. While anthropologists are now usually faced with the problems of why people do or do not accept models and technologies from outside, historians have to explain how such models and technologies first evolved. Thus with witchcraft also. In modern conditions it is too easy to ascribe the decline of witchcraft beliefs to the introduction of a superior (medical) technology, or the higher prestige or rival theories of causation introduced from outside. But in the historical situation, as Keith Thomas has so brilliantly shown, there is no dominant, external, variable which will solve the problem for us. Intellectual and religious change are themselves the cause of technological and social change as well as the other way round. This inter-dependence is one of the reasons why historical sources correct the materialist bias of modern sociology. Many anthropologists are so used to seeing small societies crushed by external economic and social pressures, that they come to fall into the fallacy of arguing that economic motives are somehow 'deeper', and the mind and society only a reflection of the economic substructure. But historical material made Weber and Tawney, and now Keith Thomas, reconsider this whole problem. The immense survival of records makes it possible to examine in detail over time the interrelation between various pressures where the outcome is **not** inevitable. Anthropological material often leads one to theorize as to how the pressures in a society could not but have led to the present situation, whereas historical material leads one to be amazed that they ever **did** reach the present situation.

A specific instance: witchcraft in C16-C17 England

I would like finally to look at one piece of recent research, that on witchcraft in C16 and C17 England, to see how it may be of value to sociologists.

1. The data for the historical study of witchcraft, as for many other subjects, is usually much more plentiful - in quantitative terms - that it is for anthropologists. Thus a year spent on Essex sources revealed the existence of over 1,000 witchcraft accusations, involving many hundreds of suspects, whereas a year in a Nepalese village where witchcraft beliefs were very strong only elicited the names of some 26 witches and a dozen or so acts of witchcraft. It was impossible to quantify or to analyze distribution either by time or space. One could only work at the notoriously deceptive level of what was thought to happen - by villagers and anthropologists.

2. The data for the study of the various phenomena one might want to correlate with witchcraft beliefs is often more accessible in a historical society. Despite the lack of many of the conventional

studies of topics such as kinship, conflict, neighbourliness etc. at the village level, it is often possible to use records which the anthropologists does not have access to. The historian has, so to speak, an army of research assistance working for him in the past - parish clerks, manorial officials, poor law officers, clerks of the courts etc. Thus, for example, if we wants to compare the incidence of witchcraft prosecutions with population density in various parts of Essex, or mortality fluctuations in a particular village with accusations, he can usually do so. This would have been quite impossible in Nepal. Multi-variate analysis on a large scale is out of the question where the anthropologists is mainly dependent for all statistics on himself. This debar the anthropologist from even asking a whole set of questions.

3. The historical material makes the historian very aware of the dangers of mixing the levels of what is thought **ought** to happen, what is thought **does** happen, and what, **statistically**, does happen. Anthropologists, perforce, have largely worked at the two former levels, often accepting uncritically the stereotypes presented by their informants, of generalizing from their own inadequate and restricted viewpoints. With no adequate sampling frame, they cannot sample, and have to rely largely on guesswork. It seems likely that in the years to come we will become increasingly aware that much of what was written down by anthropologists as the **actual** order, was in fact the **ideal** order - a deliberate or unconscious ideal worked out in collusion between anthropologist and informant. To a certain extent the historian is warned against this because he is presented with such conflicting evidence from such varied sources; his main expertise is in assigning such evidence to one of these levels, though there are, of course, many notorious examples of confusing them.

4. Finally, historical material shows the final inadequacy of all the explanations proffered by sociologists. We still do not know why witchcraft beliefs decline, even if we now have a better idea of how they could exist at all. The sociological approach applied in Essex takes us a certain way, and helps to show why certain people accused others, given the existence of a certain world-view. We also see how such accusations may have been a radical attempt to change the relationships between neighbours. Keith Thomas' approach, in its analysis of the philosophical and religious changes of the period and their relation to magic, shows us another strand. But in the end he also is baffled. In the case of why certain objects are regarded as omens he briefly examines the utilitarian, functional and symbolic (structural) approach and acknowledges that each helps us to understand a little more about the phenomena.⁹ But in the end we still do not know why hares were considered to be unlucky. Likewise, in the end, though much stimulated and aided, we must return the challenge to sociologists: we still do not know why witchcraft beliefs and accusations rose and declined in C16 and C17 England.

⁹ □ pp. 626-8