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Anthropology and History

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The roots of much of modern anthropology and history lie in the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Kames, Millar, Smith, Robertson, Hume and others speculated in a comparative and historical manner about the development of societies in Europe and elsewhere. Throughout the nineteenth century there was much cross-stimulation between disciplines which were seen as having the same aims and methods, as in the work of Sir Henry Maine. It was only with the rejection of evolutionary and diffusionist frameworks in anthropology and a growing pre-occupation with intensive fieldwork that the discipline of anthropology withdrew from the association. 'Conjectural' history was rejected and the past largely ignored in the functionalist era pioneered by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. This lasted from about 1910 to 1960. During the same period many historians showed a growing absorption in documentary analysis and a concentration on the upper, literate, classes and on political and constitutional history. This further widened the gap between the disciplines. It was believed that anthropology was a science, seeking general laws, history an art concerned with the particular. The accepted form of explanation in anthropology was in terms of context or function, in history it was in terms of antecedent events.

From about 1960 onwards, first heralded in important articles by the anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard and the historian Keith Thomas, the unity and overlapping nature of the disciplines has been stressed. A tradition which had never died out in France, with the work of Bloch, Lefebvre and the 'Annales' school, was reasserted. It became apparent that the aims of the two disciplines overlapped, namely the understanding of man in society, and the methods were complementary rather than opposed. Historians were increasingly ready to learn from the insights provided by a classic period of anthropological study.

Social anthropology is based on the intensive study of small communities. This has re-enforced the pioneering works of local history and made the period between 1960 and 1980 a golden age of historical community studies in England, France, America and elsewhere. Combined with the post-war archival revolution which gave historians a far wider range of sources, it was now possible to attempt 'total' reconstructions of past communities over long periods. This immersion in the multiple social relationships which link individuals drew consciously on the work of anthropologists.

Anthropology helped to provide insights into features of the past which were so strange that modern historians had found them difficult to comprehend or examine. Complex rituals, blood-feud, trance and ecstasy, millenarianism, oath-taking, the Divine Right of Kings, and particularly magical and witchcraft beliefs became legitimate and fruitful topics for study. In the last of these, for instance, models from African witchcraft provided a stimulus for many important works on English, French, Spanish, North American and German witchcraft. Again, a newly stimulated interest was combined with the opening up of the immensely rich archives of the judicial authorities, and in particular the records of the Catholic Inquisition.

Anthropological works also had the effect of distancing the familiar, making historians aware that much of what they had regarded as normal in the past really required investigation because it was, cross-comparatively, unusual. A particularly striking example of this was in the field of family relationships. Much of anthropology is concerned with kinship and marriage. These works helped to stimulate many of the studies of sexuality, marriage, childhood, parental ties, domestic groups, women, love, incest and other topics. The anthropological inspiration joined up with interests from historical demography and women's studies, and thereby opened up the whole field of interpersonal relationships and sentiment.

Historical research into many other topics was stimulated by anthropological enquiries: conflict, ceremony, work discipline, time, space, myths, folklore, style and fashion, oral and literate culture, birth, death, dreams, suicide, animals, and many other subjects were investigated. The formal historical documents usually conceal such topics, so that it was largely under the pressure of anthropology that a vigorous development of the study of past mentality and emotional structures took place, exemplified in the work of historians such as E. Hobsbawm, E. Le Roy Ladurie, E.P. Thompson and Keith Thomas.

Anthropology is an explicitly comparative discipline and this has forced historians to look at their particular studies in a wider context, noting the differences between features of European and American society on the one hand and Asia and Africa on the other. It has helped to prevent the easy assumption that like causes will lead to like effects. It has become possible to avoid some of the dangers of ethno and tempero-centric views that makes an analyst judge the past by the present standards of his or her own society. Social anthropology has made certain features of the past visible for the first time and provided a logic in what was otherwise incomprehensible.

As in any other marriage, there are dangers to be avoided. Some of the analogies drawn between the western past and Third World societies are too glib, there is a danger of over-stressing (e.g. taboos, caste, peasants) which have been found elsewhere and which are therefore presumed to have existed in the past. There is a tendency for all societies to be lumped together, and hence to assume that, as Maine believed, we can infer that the current state of affairs in India or China will tell us something about early European history. There is also the danger that having discovered something to be cross-comparatively very unusual, for example the 'romantic love complex' or 'capitalism', that we are then led to believe that it must be a recent product of those revolutionary events, the industrial and urban developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which separate off the West.

Yet on the whole the renewed association of the two disciplines has been mutually enriching. Both seek to interpret the basic patterns in societies, to contrast and compare in order to separate the universal from the particular, to explain both the single event and the broad institution. Both are interested in continuity and in change, in how things came to be as they are and why they persist. Anthropology stresses the interdependence of spheres, the overlap of economics, politics, religion and kinship, which have superficially been separated in the modern industrial world. It proposes paradoxical and ingenious causes for unquestioned institutions. It stresses the importance of context and the difficulty of ascribing meaning. It is particularly concerned with the symbolic, ritual and conceptual, while being equally interested in the material world and ecology. In the hands of a particularly brilliant group of individuals, anthropology has analysed the workings of three of the four major forms of human civilization, namely hunters and gatherers, tribal and peasant societies.

For the understanding of a past which may have features of these types of social organization, anthropology has proved an irreplaceable guide. As a mirror in which we can now look more dispassionately at the history of advanced industrial societies it has equal promise. Finally, in its analysis of myth, legend and history, and their overlap, it suggests that history and historians need to be constantly aware of the ways in which their own insights are legitimations which are subtly affected by political, economic and social worlds which they inhabit. The anthropology of historical research has still to be written, but it would be a fruitful area of study. There can be little doubt that of all the disciplines which lie adjacent to history, anthropology has had the most marked influence in the period between 1960 and 1985.

Reading

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