

ANTHROPOLOGIZING HISTORY AND HISTORIZING ANTHROPOLOGY

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Within anthropology the turn to history appears to have received legitimacy and gathered momentum in recent years. Between the 1920s and 1970s, the discipline was largely dominated by two overarching 'ahistorical' theoretical discourses, Functionalism and Structuralism. The emphasis on the central methodology of participant observation in 'the field' may also have contributed to the neglect of history in anthropology. Under this methodological approach, anthropologists had been encouraged to concentrate on what Roger Sanjek calls "the ethnographic present" (1991) so the appearance of history in the conventional ethnography was limited. However, in his 1961 lecture "Anthropology and History", Evans-Pritchard appealed for an integration of functionalist and historical interpretation in anthropology. His stress on the need for greater historical understanding in anthropology echoed Levi-Strauss, albeit from a different perspective. For Levi-Strauss had earlier argued, 'a little history - since such, unfortunately, is the lot of the anthropologists - is better than no history at all' (1968: 12; cf. Nissan 1985: 345).

But anthropology did not turn towards history until the early 1980's. However, it is important to note here, by early 1960s historical analysis is quite evident in anthropology of India and Sri Lanka through the works of Marriortt (1955), Srinivas (1976), Ralph Pieris (1956); Edmund Leach (1961), Gananath Obeyesekere (1964, 1984) and others. Their village studies did offer a model of collaboration between history and anthropology that has renewed relevance in the contemporary context¹. Nevertheless, broadly speaking by 1980s the importance of history in anthropology was revived, particularly after the works of well-known anthropologists such as Michael Taussig (1980), Bernard Cohn (1980, 1981), Marshall Sahlins (1981, 1985), and also the writings of historians like Ranajit Guha (1982) and his group of subalternists². Bernard Cohn's call for anthropology to collaborate with history in his land mark essay "An Anthropologist Among the Historians" first published in 1962, represented an early attempt by anthropologists to take the question of history seriously. Indeed, today, both anthropologists and historians probe into the dynamic interrelationship between culture and history, to understand

'culture mediated by history and history mediated by culture' (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990: 5). This is because many critical historians have realised the need to move from the archive to the field, in order to 'explode the concept of history through the anthropological experience of culture' (Sahlins 1985: 72). This 'historicization' of anthropology and 'anthropologization' of history has come about as the result of several important processes³. One is the decolonisation of the 'third world' nations from the late 1940s through to the 1960s which served to produce questions about the traditional binaries (e.g., 'modern' and 'primitive', 'dynamic' and 'static') of anthropological enquiry. The perceptions and assumptions of European colonisers about the colonised, and the methods by which they categorised the subject populations, came in for radical criticism. Under these conditions anthropologists began to study 'native' intellectual traditions and historical schools, and elaborated upon indigenous renderings of history (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990: 3). This move led to dissatisfaction with conventional anthropological theories and marked the beginning of a new mode of anthropological enquiry.

Many of the more recent critiques of anthropology and ethnography have been elaborated from within the discipline.⁴ Discomfort with anthropological definitions of the 'other' has prompted an interrogation of the process by which this 'other' is created. The 'other', in the practice of early anthropology, was represented as existing 'there and then', far from the 'here and now' of the anthropologist. Hence, the writing of anthropology came to be seen as an essentially political act (Clifford, J. and G. Marcus 1986). This questioning of the assumptions and premises of anthropology has been complemented by an interrogation of its method. It has been pointed out that the concentration on the 'local', and the great dependence on 'fieldwork' do not necessarily make ethnographic accounts authentic and authoritative representations of other societies. The privileging of knowledge derived from experience in the 'field' serves to foreground face-to-face relations of community, neglecting or disregarding other, less localised relations (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 15). The nature of fieldwork in anthropology conceals the way in which the

'field' is constituted, the imperatives and assumptions that underlie the configuration of 'place' and 'culture' in anthropology.' Indeed, the immediacy of fieldwork reduces writing to method, thereby concealing 'the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts' (Clifford 1986: 2). Thus ethnography is caught in an 'historical predicament' where it often invents rather than represents cultures. So, for James Clifford ethnographic truths are 'inherently partial--committed and incomplete' (ibid. 7).

However, this provocative critique of anthropology from the perspective of an experimental ethnography has not been received without reservation. There has been criticism made of its tendency to seize upon texts as 'formal objects' totally disregarding their context and the conditions of their production, and also for ignoring the relationship between institutional structures and styles of writings, and for overlooking the linkages between anthropological work and anthropological writing. The most dangerous aspect of this exclusive concern with anthropologists themselves, according to Jonathan Spencer, is that it encourages a trend away from doing anthropology, and towards ever more 'barren criticism' and 'meta-criticism' (Spencer 1989: 145-164). In order to avoid such criticism, he argues for a more open style of ethnographic writing in the sense that 'both writer and reader should be paid explicit attention to the specific historic and social sources of anthropological representations' (ibid. 161). Similarly, there have been other assertions about the usefulness of fieldwork, which acknowledge its limits, yet attempt to rethink and revitalise the practice (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). After all, anthropology does not speak *for* others, but *about* them. Ethnography is not merely an ineffective attempt at literal translation, rather it is an endeavour to decode the various signs and symbols of culture that 'disguise themselves as universal and natural' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 9-10). In the same way, ethnographers do not depend entirely on the observations of fieldwork. 'Along the way, ethnographers also read diverse sorts of texts: books, bodies, buildings, sometimes even cities' (ibid. 11). My effort at outlining some of the ongoing debates and discussions in ethnography is directed toward indicating the mood of questioning and introspection that encompasses the discipline. This questioning has led ethnographers to acknowledge not only their own 'subjectivity' but also the larger limitations of fieldwork. One of the ways to overcome such limitations has been the ethnographers' effort to relate their experiences in the field with the reading of texts and archives. These moves have been part of larger attempts to locate peoples within processes and cultures in time, to

theorise the relationships of the local to the global, and to question the notion that the 'visible' and the 'double' are the only legitimate objects of anthropological study (Des Chene 1997: 66-85). As I have mentioned before, such ethnographers have already created meaningful collaborations of anthropology with history. On the one hand, it has been seen that documents 'alter the circumstances of fieldwork' by making the 'fieldworkers aware of the deep roots of their case studies' (Fernandez 1990: 119). On the other hand, it has been recognised that documents, by virtue of the fact that they can never all be consulted, and are generally subject to variable interpretation, 'recast fieldwork from a descriptive and conditional into a reflective and subjunctive mode' (ibid.). Thus, anthropology in a historical mode has moved away 'from the objectification of social life to a study of its constitution and construction' (Cohn 1980: 217).

The close scrutiny and consequent critique of the ways in which colonial states generated knowledge of the people they colonised has also directly influenced the dialogue between history and anthropology. This critique became centrally visible after the groundbreaking work of Edward Said, *Orientalism*, appeared in 1978. Said argued that European knowledge about the Orient enabled Europe to define, classify, dominate, and restructure - to thus have authority over - the Orient (1978: 3). This enduring discourse placed a 'tremendous burden' upon the spatial distinction between East and West, and endowed and eternalised these totalities with 'truth' (Thomas 1994: 23). From its beginning, *Orientalism* was nurtured by scholars and intellectuals, and it continues to live on academically (Said 1978: 2). While it is true that Said's *Orientalism* frequently relapses into 'essentializing modes' (Clifford 1988: 271), particularly by over-emphasising the negative dimensions of *Orientalism* and imputing varied discourses of cultural difference with 'hostility and aggression' (Thomas 1994: 26), it also succeeds in questioning a number of important anthropological categories, and challenging the progressive and liberal idea that former stereotypes have been superseded by a more objective way of seeing (Clifford 1988: 271; Thomas 1994: 25; Scott 1999: 1-10).

The immense challenge posed by Said's arguments has prompted scholars to reflect on their assumptions, sources, and methods. Historians and Anthropologists working on South Asia have sought to extend Said's analysis (e.g., Inden 1990; Breckenridge & van der Veer 1993; Scott 1994) by penetrating scholarship on others, a scholarship that viewed the Orientalist in a relation of intellectual dominance over

the Orientals whom they studied and represented (Inden 1990: 38). This 'other', carefully constructed by bestowing upon it an unchanging essence, and carefully setting it apart from the 'self' of the Orientalist, had two simultaneous consequences: it served to deprive the 'other' of all agency; and it endowed the Orientalist with the authority to present the Oriental, 'not only to Europeans and Americans but also to the Orientals themselves' (ibid.). All these interventions have prompted historians and ethnographers to abandon the search for the 'real' or the 'essential', and replace it instead with a sense of the production of culture (e.g., Dirks 1992, Hagberman 1994).

The conjunction of history and anthropology is not just 'another new speciality', a means for the writing of hyphenated histories and anthropologies (Cohn 1980: 216). 'Ethnographic history' and 'historical anthropology' are hybrid labels that strive to bring about a meaningful collaboration between the two disciplines so that the subject matter common to both may be reasserted, and the limits of each transcended.

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Notes

1 Saloni Mathur argues that the importance of history in the anthropological study of South Asia can be traced at least to the 1950s, when American anthropology consolidated itself through an ethnographic interest in the Indian village (2000: 91).

2 Veena Das has suggested that many of anthropology's prevailing conceptions of tribe, caste, and social structure have been positively challenged by the project of subaltern history and even "restored to their historical being" but others fear that such Foucauldian turn has shifted the focus away from anthropology and closer to the concerns of literary criticism (1989: 314).

3 Also for a fruitful discussion on South Asia particularly India (see Mathur 2000), and Sri Lanka (see Roberts 1997: 9-26; Kaplerer 1990: 280-302).

4 For an excellent summary of these criticism and counter-criticism, see Spencer (1989).

5 For a critical and insightful analysis of the idea of the 'field', see Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 1-25).

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