

Review, I, 3/4, Winter/Spring 1978, 207-213.

Anthropology, History, and the *Annales*

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At first glance, anthropologists and historians seem to have been made for each other. Their romance was bound to occur, one might think, and likely to thrive. After all, both anthropologists and historians tend to be fastidious about the particular, even when they are hoping to generalize. Anthropologists and historians frequently hold up as an ideal the form of analysis which Clifford Geertz, following Gilbert Ryle, called "thick description": the grasping and rendering of "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit. . . ."¹ In short, they interpret cultures.

That concern sets anthropologists and historians off from most economists, sociologists, and other social scientists. Ethnographic field work resembles the historian's archival research more than it does the sociologist's survey design or the economist's national income accounting. The Pago-Pago Principle (as Arnold Feldman once called it) unites them. Whenever some social scientist hazards a world-wide generalization about economic development or changing fertility patterns, reported Feldman, someone in the back row stands up and says, "But not in Pago-Pago!" That someone is likely to be an historian or an anthropologist.

On closer inspection, we can discover possible grounds for dissension between

¹. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10.

the *inamorati*. Historians tend to be especially concerned about fixing human actions in time, while being less concerned — or ambivalent — about fixing them in space. In a generalization about eighteenth-century America, an historian must be very careful to place the statement (and its documentation) before, during, or after 1776; if information from Boston is not available, however, information from Providence or Hartford may well do the job. Anthropologists, on the other hand, tend to be much attached to place, and somewhat more relaxed about fixing human actions in time. The “anthropological present” for a given village may well span a generation. Historians tend to be hesitant or hostile when it comes to the use of categories which were not part of the period’s own conceptual apparatus — for example, the application of the vocabulary of class to an era before the emergence of that vocabulary. Anthropologists quite regularly apply analytic frameworks which would be unfamiliar, incomprehensible, or even offensive, to the objects of their study: formal models of kinship, tracings of interpersonal influence, and so on. The historian’s greater anxiety about situating human affairs in time could very well be the basis of serious misunderstanding and disagreement with anthropologists.

As the specialists in time, historians have more than one way of rooting their analyses in time. Let us consider only two alternatives: first, the simple attachment of each action to a particular time; second, the deliberate analysis of change over time. In the first case, we carefully situate American reactions to Britain in 1765 before or after Britain’s efforts to impose the Stamp Act, and rule out evidence from after the Stamp Act repeal of 1766 as a tainted guide to American orientations in the previous year. In the second case, we purposefully reconstruct the process by which American opposition to Britain crystallized, and then developed into a revolutionary challenge. The second is more complex than the first, because it includes the first, and adds the problem of establishing causal sequences.

Historians doing both the simple and the complex rooting of analyses in time have recently turned to anthropology for ideas and approaches. The turn has been especially visible among historians who have wanted to build a rigorous, autonomous social history, a social history which was not a simple appendage to political or intellectual history. Historians of family structure, of popular movements, of peasant life, and of similar topics have reached toward anthropology for insights, methods, and explanations.

The path from social history to anthropology has generally been indirect. No doubt the most important single innovation in the social history of the last few decades was the widespread adoption of one form or another of collective biography: the systematic accumulation of multiple life histories, of fragments of life histories, in order to aggregate them into a portrayal of the experience of the population as a whole. Historians of class structure have looked at the occupational lives of hundreds of people in one city or another, then compounded them into rates of occupational mobility by class of origin, by religion, by race, by national background, by locality, or by some other criterion. Demographic historians have brought together multiple observations of individual persons and events from censuses or vital records, linked the records together, and then used the linked records to examine variations in fertility, morality, and nuptiality. Historians of popular movements have collected information about individual

participants, connected the various scraps of evidence concerning the same individuals with each other, then drew from the connected scraps an analysis of the movement's social composition.

In these and many other applications of collective biography, the point is to move beyond the general impression or the well-chosen example without losing the ability to talk about what happened to the population as a whole. Although the approach of collective biography is not necessarily incompatible with the usual procedures of anthropologists, its logic has much more in common with the routines of demographers and sociologists. In itself, then, we might have expected the adoption of collective biography to draw historians *away* from anthropology rather than toward it.

It is the limits of collective biography as a source of satisfying *explanations* of social action which have often driven historians toward anthropology. Take demographic history as an example. The collective biography of vital events and population characteristics is a powerful way to rule out bad explanations. If it turns out, for example, that the chief difference between periods of rapid growth and of stagnation in the development of a particular city is the rate at which migrants come and go, then any explanation of the city's growth and stagnation in terms of the resident population's vigor is at least seriously incomplete. Yet the strength of collective biography is not in supplying alternative explanations, but in specifying what is to be explained. Historians who have specified what is to be explained via collective biography often find themselves turning to explanations stressing the immediate setting and organization of everyday life, or relying on something vaguely called "culture". That moves them back toward anthropology.

The evolution shows up clearly in the study of popular protest and collective action. Let us stick to France, partly because the French and francophiles have pioneered in such studies, partly because we are training attention on a great French historical school. Until early in the twentieth century, the standard French approach to popular protest and collective action was to infer the attitudes of ordinary people — "the mob" to authors on the right, "the people" to authors on the left — from general principles, or from the pronouncements of spokesmen, self-appointed or otherwise, of ordinary people. The attitudes then provided the explanations of collective action. Michelet, despite his greater enthusiasm for the People, was no more sophisticated than Taine in this regard.

The socialist historians who began to thrive toward World War I (Jean Jaurès and Albert Mathiez are examples) added substance to the analysis of popular movements, but still worked mainly from the top down. History from below became a general and influential model for the study of popular protest, and collective action with the work of Georges Lefebvre from the 1920's onward; Lefebvre's *Paysans du Nord* made it clear that the materials existed for a rich portrayal of routine social life and of ordinary people in something like their own terms, and for the linking of that portrayal with general accounts of the French Revolution and other major political changes. In the 1950's, collective biography *stricto sensu* entered the scene with Albert Soboul's reconstruction of the life and composition of Parisian working-class neighborhoods during the early Revolution. Richard Cobb's treatment of the revolutionary militias, George Rudé's analyses of the participants in major revolutionary *journées*, and many

other studies along the same line cemented the joint between collective biography and French revolutionary history.

Yet these authors and their successors soon discovered the limits of collective biography: collective biography told them who was there and something about how those who were there behaved, but collective biography did not in itself provide compelling explanations of the behavior. In the 1960's and 1970's, the successors turned increasingly to anthropology as a source of explanations, insights, and methods. Two broadly anthropological styles of work became prominent in the study of popular protest and collective action. The first was the close analysis of the cultural materials used or produced by historical actors: songs, sayings, iconography, forms of retribution, and so on. The second we might call "retrospective ethnography", the effort to reconstitute a round of life from the best historical equivalents of the ethnographer's observations, then to use the reconstituted round of life as a context for the explanation of collective action. In America, Natalie Zemon Davis' sensitive portrayals of sixteenth-century French conflicts illustrate that effort to give an anthropological tone to historical analysis. In France itself, Maurice Agulhon's treatments of nineteenth-century sociability and symbolism illustrate the richest outcomes of the anthropological approach.

In almost none of this work was the influence of academic anthropology very formal or very intrusive. The work nevertheless deserves to be called anthropological because, as compared with previous historical work, it stresses the reconstruction of a round of life and a body of meanings from the perspective of a participant observer on the ground. It also relies on the borrowing of insights from other ethnographies, both historical and contemporary.

That is where the *Annales* and its collaborators come in. Until the 1960's, popular protest and collective action occupied a very modest place in the pages of the *Annales*, and the historians most closely associated with the *Annales* played no more than a secondary role in such developments as the introduction of collective biography into studies of the French Revolution. But in the 1960's, the increasingly catholic *Annales* became an important vehicle for studies of popular protest and collective action. That was especially true of anthropologically-tinged studies of the subject. The work of the American Natalie Davis and of the English E. P. Thompson first became widely known to French audiences through the pages of the *Annales*. There was plenty of room for their French counterparts: Mona Ozouf, Michel Vovelle, and many others all found their places in the journal. The *Annales*, it seems, helped promote this recent convergence of anthropology and history.

The people of the *Annales* helped in other ways as well. Instead of employing retrospective ethnography and the sustained analysis of symbolic structures as a means to the explanation of collective action, a number of French historians have taken them up as worthy enterprises in their own right. The lives of peasants and artisans, in particular, have come in for anthropological scrutiny. Some of the inspiration flowed directly from Fernand Braudel's program of "total history". One of the most impressive and influential examples was Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie's vast portrait of the peasants of Languedoc from the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries. It followed the program of "total history" in synthesizing observations on climate, land forms, demographic

changes, prices, agricultural technology, religious beliefs, popular movements, and power structures. It followed the lead of collective biography in building much of the analysis on a massive parcel-by-parcel reconstruction of the uses and ownership of the land over the centuries. The resulting organization of the book was powerfully two-dimensional. The collective biography of the land provided the first dimension, the fluctuations of prices, production, and population the second.

In the squares of the two-dimensional grid LeRoy Ladurie inserted his retrospective ethnography. One stunning example was his reconstruction of the 1580 Mardi Gras festivities in Romans, a small city near the Rhône south of Lyon. There, in a time of famine, artisans and peasants "danced their revolt in the streets of the city" before putting it into operation. Jean Serve, a popular local leader, donned a bearskin, placed himself on the consular throne, declared price controls, and led a series of bizarre ceremonial denunciations of the rich of Romans. The events have come to be known as the Carnival of Romans. The rich struck back, murdering Serve and many of his companions. "Thus ended the Carnival of Romans," wrote LeRoy Ladurie, "a failed attempt to invert the social order: everything was put back in its proper place, and the dominant classes, at bay for a while, landed back on their feet. To confirm that return to good order, the judges had the effigy of Jean Serve, the rebel chief, hanged upside down, feet in the air and head down."² Small wonder that LeRoy Ladurie's reconstruction of the Carnival gave rise to a much-watched television dramatization. His analysis exemplified the application of Geertz's thick description to the distant past.

A number of French historians have followed LeRoy Ladurie's lead, and others have arrived more or less independently at the same project of integrating ethnography into history. Eugen Weber's widely-praised *Peasants into Frenchmen* used the local chroniclers, commentators, and folklorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as proxy ethnographers. Michel Vovelle and Yves Castan have undertaken the close inspection of routine written materials and iconography for their symbolic content, and for the light they shed on the systems of meanings within which people lived out their lives. Many other varieties of a broadly anthropological approach to historical subject matter have appeared in the last decade. Much of that work has been initiated, inspired, publicized, or actually done by historians closely associated with the *Annales*.

Let us consider just two samples of first-rate retrospective ethnography which have come from the milieu of the *Annales*. The first is André Burguière's *Bretons de Plozévet*, the second Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie's *Montaillou, village occitan*. In different ways, both books illustrate the strengths and the limits of the recent alliance between history and anthropology.

André Burguière received one of the most flattering and challenging assignments a historian has received in some time. In 1962, a team of geneticists, anthropologists, demographers, sociologists, and other observers had descended on a Breton village. The village was Plozévet: the famous Plozévet of Edgar Morin's *Commune en France*. It had about 3,800 inhabitants. The group had fixed on Plozévet, among other reasons, because the recurrence of a genetically-

² Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Les paysans du Languedoc* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N. 1966), I, 397.

based deformity (a displaced hip) suggested an endogamous genetic isolate. Originally, the team had excluded history and historians from the inquiry. As the project wore on, they recruited the historian Burguière to write the general report of their findings. *Breton de Plozévet* is the result.

Burguière's assignment had three parts: first, to write the history of the research project; second, to sum up and (where possible) to integrate the project's diverse findings; third, to write the history of Plozévet as a context for interpretation of the findings. He found it easier to do the third than the second, easier to do the second than the first. The book he produced is full of valuable juxtapositions and insights. For example, we learn something important about the constant creation and re-creation of "tradition" in discovering that the great decorative *coiffes* worn on the heads of Breton women were essentially a product of the later nineteenth century. Burguière raises important doubts as to whether the village as such played, or plays, a fundamental role in local endogamy, or, by extension, in a variety of other social relations.

But the point here is not to review the varied results of the inquiry. The important thing for present purposes is the difficulty Burguière had in devising an analytic framework which would be at once adequate to the subject matter, consistent with the objectives of the non-historians on the project, and faithful to his historical calling. Burguière devotes some thoughtful pages to that confrontation. He points out the problem of integrating an inquiry which began oriented to the idea that the ultimate and constraining reality was individual and biological, which soon brought in researchers who were convinced that social structures had their own histories and consequences, and which fixed its attention on those aspects of social reality which could be observed and measured directly. Burguière searched for an all-encompassing temporal framework, but finally settled for an old, effective historical device: he organized his account around the vicissitudes of the political elite, and especially around the fate of a single, influential family, the LeBails. Thus in order to integrate his retrospective ethnography, he had to reach outside the ethnographic framework.

Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie's *Montaillou* remains more completely within the confines of retrospective ethnography, at the cost of ending up without a general analytic framework. Lest those words sound deprecating, let me say at once that the book is a joy and a revelation. Montaillou, a small village in the Pyrenees, was a hotbed of heresy in the late thirteenth century, and the object of a searching inquiry by the Inquisition in the 1320's. The inquisitor, the clever and persistent bishop Jacques Fournier, left behind a transcript of his inquest which is full of direct quotations from his interviews with the villagers.

What a source! LeRoy Ladurie treats it as a voluminous set of ethnographic field notes. He adopts a simple and relatively conventional outline for the report of findings: "ecology" (that is, social geography), then "archaeology" (that is, social relations). Within the two major sections, we find chapters on standard ethnographic topics: sexuality, courtship, marriage, life-cycles, gathering-places, forms of solidarity, and so on. LeRoy Ladurie brings the material into brilliant light by embedding chunks of the transcript in his text, by ingenious portrayals of the village's principal characters (including the sexual adventures of the local priest, Pierre Clergue), by punctuating the description with unexpected but often revelatory references to distant times and cultures, by an agile play of

hypothesis, inference, and speculation. The result may well be our most comprehensive account of the daily life of a medieval village. LeRoy Ladurie gives the lie to the historians' frequent complaint that their sources do not permit them to reconstruct the vulgar details of everyday existence.

The works of LeRoy Ladurie and of Burguière give us enviable models for the integration of historical and anthropological concerns. Yet they do not really illustrate the *convergence* of history and anthropology. Nor do they display any major contribution of historians, or of the historians most closely associated with the *Annales*, to the practice of anthropology. The discipline of anthropology is far broader than ethnography. Indeed, important segments of the profession consider the standard forms of participant observation to be relics of the past. Much of the current action in anthropology concerns the formal analysis of symbolic structures, the humanization of biology and ecology, the development of evolutionary models, the rigorous treatment of kinship, demography, and household structure. All these anthropological concerns have, to be sure, left traces in the pages of the *Annales*. But they are for the most part alternatives to ethnography, not additions to it. The portion of anthropology with which French and francophile historians have worked most effectively is only a small part of the field, and in some regards a backwater.

Furthermore, the influence of historical work — including that of the *Annales* — on anthropological practice has been slight. Few anthropologists know much history, fewer know much about historical research, and fewer still employ the historian's models, materials, or insights in their own work. The flow of influence between anthropology and history, as practicing disciplines, has been largely one-way. Under these circumstances, to speak of convergence between the fields is an exaggeration. To speak of the influence of the *Annales* on this particular branch of the social sciences is wishful thinking.