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Time, History, and the Future of Anthropology.

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Abstract:

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Article:

Introduction

The American Society for Ethnohistory is now entering its twenty-third year, its second generation of existence, and it appears quite viable. The number of new faces added to the ranks of those who founded the Society and who supported its first two decades clearly attests to the continued strength of the Society. These new members also affirm the emergence of a new generation of anthropologists who are interested in history and diachronic phenomena and who recognize the value of written records and archival documents for ethnological and archaeological research. Some of these new members have been trained as historians, and they are doubly welcome, for the strengthening of ties between anthropology and history remains one of the most cherished purposes of this organization.

In some respects the concern with effecting closer rapport between anthropology and history continues an anthropological perspective that has persisted throughout the life of the discipline. In other respects an interest in temporal phenomena and the written record of past ages appear distinctly as a side channel of the anthropological mainstream, reflecting the hoary and unwarranted distinction between "history" and "science" (see Nagel 1952) which has plagued us far too long. The anthropological literature on the subject is not much help in deciding the matter, although much has been written on the subject of anthropology 2-nd h. tory. Periodically over the years we find assurances that anthropologists are interested in history and, indeed, that interest appears to be growing. Yet these claims are generally outweighed by a stronger body of evidence suggesting that anthropology, at least 20th century anthropology, if never really anti-historical in principle more often than not has been a-historical in actual practice. To be sure, it is recognized by many that "there has been a pronounced shift of interest in anthropology toward

history since the end of World War II" (Carmack 1972:228), but it is a relative matter in many respects. The interest may be more pronounced, but, as Robbins Burling has put it, "even if written records exist [the typical ethnologist] will have neither the training nor the temperament to use them" (1974:5). Similarly, theoretical concepts currently in vogue among anthropologists are strongly functionalist and synchronic in tone.

At the same time, during the past decade there has been recurrent discussions concerning a lack of certitude and consensus in today's anthropology. We recognize the apparent failure of many of our theories and concepts to satisfactorily explain cultural phenomena, particularly culture change. There is a sense in the prevailing climate of opinion that the discipline may be reaching a significant turning point in its own history, and we are searching for new directions and approaches. Periodically various "breakthroughs" have been enthusiastically proclaimed, but none has provided the sought-for revitalization or refocusing. Instead, we have a multitude of approaches and directives under consideration, and a certain sense of disappointment in all.

To some degree this is probably the normal state of affairs for a discipline with such a wide scope of interests and to some extent we will always have it with us. But some of our colleagues have argued gloomily that the current uncertainty reflects the downward trend of anthropology, hastened by the apparently inevitable decline of indigenous native peoples and cultures, and heralds the time when there will be no place for a "science of Man" as we have traditionally conceived of it (see sources in Lewis 1968 :xv).

The present condition of anthropology, however, also suggests to me an analogy with the state of the natural sciences in the early decades of the 19th century just prior to Darwin's and Wallace's successful presentations of the "grand strategem" of natural selection which launched the naturalists on a bold new direction. In the years immediately prior to Darwin's and Wallace's publications we find a familiar restlessness among natural scientists. A familiar eclecticism appears in their work, too, as every conceivable combination of theories and paradigms was explored. Thus Lamark, for example, mixed the geological theory of uniformitarianism with the concepts of biological variation and acquired characteristics to explain how life forms moved toward a deistically ordained perfection. Lyell, on the other hand, explained biological change by combining uniformitarianism with an element of progressionism modified by select elements of the biological variation view. Patrick Matthew, of lesser fame, ingeniously combined the principles of geological catastrophism and biological variation, and proposed that new life forms were created by natural selection while extinctions were produced by catastrophic geological upheavals. Robert Chambers, a layman scientist who wrote anonymously, rested his interpretation simply on uniformitarianism combined with biological variability. His book, which anticipated the work of Darwin and of Wallace in many ways, was decried by the critics as ungodly and immoral, and thus became an instant bestseller. It thereby paved the way for readier acceptance of Darwin's and Wallace's respective interpretations which also combined uniformitarianism with biological variation but added to this the fullest elaboration to that date of

the concept of natural selection to explain the diversity of life forms past and present (see Eisely 1961).

Contemporary anthropology, like the 19th century natural sciences, contains multiple theoretical guidelines and conceptual models which are explored and combined in various ways. But so far the development of that particularly useful and informative combination of theories and models that could lead to powerful new "grand strategems" and might generate a renewed sense of consensus and certitude among us seems allusive.

The Study of the Present

I strongly suspect that the quest for satisfactory new paradigms alludes us at least in part because many contemporary anthropologists, operating within the paradigms generally supported by the discipline as a whole, fail to give proper and sufficient weight to history in their researches. By that I mean (for the term history carried numerous connotations) a failure to adequately recognize the basic significance of diachronic or historic time as a preliminary premise for the understanding of cultural processes. The work of the 17th, 18th, and 19th century naturalists was seriously impaired until they recognized the fundamental importance of generous quantities of linear secular time as a framework within which geological and biological processes worked. Only when the significance of such time spans was grasped could the doctrine of uniformitarianism be proposed and eventually become preeminent over the more traditional cyclical views of catastrophism in geology. Only when the significance of longer time spans was understood could the concept of natural selection be appreciated, and the effects of natural selection acting on biological variability successfully challenge the prevailing concept of fixed species as an interpretation of life processes.

This same expansive sense of time underlay the work of the 19th century cultural evolutionists who studied the accounts of travelers, missionaries, and explorers concerning the strange and curious customs of the savages resident at the ends of the earth - at least the ends of the Western - or European-known earth. Following the probably ancient and widespread tendency to equate geographical distance with temporal distance and temporal distance with moral distance (see Gossen 1974), the evolutionists projected the life styles of these contemporary natives onto evolutionary stages "purporting to exhibit in macrocosmic dimensions the natural course of cultural change in past time" (Hodgen 1974:4).

The reaction generated by the ambitious evolutionary and historical perspectives developed a century ago is well known. Anthropologists of the earlier decades of the 20th century replaced these broad diachronic dimensions and evolutionary speculations about the origins and antecedents of cultural systems with distinctly more controlled concerns which placed emphasis primarily upon investigation of the life-styles of existing natives themselves and replaced documentary research with the direct confrontation of the anthropologist and his subject matter through informant interviews and participant-observational fieldwork. To be sure, in the United

States temporal questions and "historical methods" were not officially renounced nor totally abandoned by ethnologists. But these matters often became confined to the elucidation of "memory cultures" from aged informants and to the reconstruction of limited culture histories of native North American peoples via consideration of patterns of purportedly diffused culture traits. In Europe the global hypotheses of the Kulturkreise School seemingly continued broad "historical" or time-depth perspectives, but the interpretation of extensive layers of diffused culture traits was apt to be applied with more enthusiasm than scholarly caution (Evans-Pritchard1 962:172). Furthermore, as in the United States, the temporal element inherent in such studies of culture history on the whole became secondary to concern with the spatial perspectives of culture areas (see Newman 1971).

Emphasis on fieldwork, on patterns of culture traits, and on culture areas generally encouraged synchronic and functionalist perspectives more than historical-temporal ones. Many ethnologists were disinclined to take too keen an interest in the past of so-called primitive peoples. Their history, being unrecorded in written records, was regarded as largely unknowable, at least by scientific standards - and anthropology, as a new discipline, was sensitive to its claim for scientific respectability. Radcliffe-Brown, a major spokesman on the matter, commented that the difficulty in dealing with the history of non-literate peoples was not that it required an historical approach, but that such histories were unavoidably conjectural (see Gellner 1958:198; Lewis 1968:xi-xiii; Sturtevant 1968). Ernest Gellner has suggested, however, that the issue at stake was not a question of conjecture, for the functionalist theories encouraged by Radcliffe-Brown could also be conjectural. Nor was it a question of the validity of speculative history as opposed to presumably tested truths about the present. Rather, Gellner suggests, the opposition to historical work in anthropology led by Radcliffe-Brown was a recognition that past events, by themselves, offer no explanation of things, although they present a storehouse of evidence for further testing of the truths derived from investigation of the present (1958:198,200). Whatever the case, investigation of the present came to hold a high priority in anthropology.

Furthermore, trained methodologically to be participant-observers in real-life situations, many ethnologists have chosen to interpret the present strictly in terms of the present. They have been hesitant to go much beyond the annual seasonal round or the life cycle and often still consider the reminiscenses of aged informants to provide sufficient background "history." Grounded theoretically in one or another of the current structural-functional positions, they generally treat their data within synchronic frameworks existing outside history or within a temporally collapsed "ethnographic present" which not infrequently assumes a timeless quality (see Lewis 1968:xiii; Murphy 1971; Vansina 1970:163). To be sure, practitioners of this form of the anthropological art have professed for some time now to be moving away from static views of structural-functional integrations toward more dynamic organizational perspectives, and anthropologists in general may be said to have made some significant progress towards recognition of the complementarity of structural and temporal explanations (see Eggan 1954; Sturtevant 1968; Lewis 1968:xiv; Vansina 1970; Carmack 1972; Burling 1974; Helms 1978). Nonetheless, this

complementarity is not included in most formal theories or paradigms. Similarly, to many ethnologists the written evidence of historical sources, if utilized at all, is still considered decidedly secondary to data acquired through direct field experience (Sturtevant 1968:457).

The advocates of the so-called "historical materialism" or "dialectical anthropology," when shorn of their political rhetoric, come closer than any other contemporary anthropological school of thought to actually expressing in their paradigms the complementarity of structural and historical explanations (see O'Laughlin 1975). The work of the historical materialists, however, although holding great promise, has yet to have notable impact on anthropology as a whole. For most ethnologists the explanation of the present continues basically to be sought in itself, perhaps, as Gellner has again argued, not only because of an objection to unverifiable speculations about the non-documented past of native societies but also because we are basically repelled by the idea "that what goes on here and now . .. requires for its understanding the specification of events or situations long past . [f] or in some sense," Gellner adds, "it is true to say that the past does not exist and the present does." He continues:

> How could . . . the unreal and non-existent shackle the real and existing? When anthropologists say as they sometimes do, that 'there are no survivals' meaning that present goings-on must be explained in terms of their present role and not genetically, what they say seems equivalent to saying that the past has no effects, or no significant ones. [But] if the past has no effects, what has? Is not the past the only thing that could have effects. [It is valid to argue that] only present forces can operate at present .... [However,] the past may be and often is a necessary source of evidence about what forces are operating at present . . ., the dynamics of a situation could never be worked out from a snapshot alone (1958:193-194).

Yet many anthropologists continue to focus mainly on the snapshots. The element of time by which the past can be recontacted is still often treated essentially as a synchronic element operating within models of structural-functional integration or of cyclical equilibrium or of "stationary states" (Nadel 1957:133-134). In these interpretations time and the activities that carry a temporal quality are reduced to recurrent phenomena such as the seasonal round or the unending procession of generations or the reformulating of gumsa-gumlao politics. This limited temporal perspective brings to mind the traditional Christian concept of a limited earthly time. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to suggest analogy - indeed even homology - between the cyclical concept of time that has been predominant in contemporary anthropological studies and the ancient classical views of time as cyclical or oscillatory processions of events that come and go and come again. Such temporal interpretations also predominate among the indigenous societies which, until fairly recently, most anthropologists have concentrated upon in their fieldwork (see Lewis 1968:xiii; Leach 1972).

Whatever the case, the impact of such perspective threatens to be as stultifying for anthropology as was the impact of traditional Christian belief on the budding naturalistic studies of the 17th

and 18th centuries. The problem basically resides in the assumption that investigation of the present in terms of the present is not only necessary but also sufficient for understanding both the present and the preconditioning past. To take one example, an affinity for temporal recurrences (together with the heavy preference for participant-observation field study) leads to unquestioned assumptions concerning the applicability of the doctrine of uniformity within anthropology. This "doctrine" assumes that that which occurs in the observable cultural present is essentially a replication of processes that have acted also in the past, and that explanatory models based on contemporary data can, therefore, be projected broadside onto earlier eras (see Hodgen 1974:15, 19, 70). It may be said that such an assumption is one of the tenets of the discipline, at least it is implied by anthropology's reputed search for cultural processes and regularities.

Nonetheless, Morton Fried (1975) has suggested in his investigation of the "notion of tribe," that assumptions of processual uniformity, if applied too liberally and without sufficient controls for the effects of particular types of past culture contact (particularly of the historical influence of state political forms on non-state peoples) can dangerously skew our understanding of cultural phenomena (see also Service 1971b). On the other hand, sometimes we find that investigation of the present in terms of the past might encourage greater application of the principle of uniformity. I am thinking of those not infrequent circumstances in which the ethnographer finds himself, or thinks he does, in field situations purportedly revealing the final breakup of traditional culture under the pressure of modern ways. Hardly able to believe his good fortune in having turned up at just the crucial moment to record this momentous event, the investigator pursues with vigor the evidence of disintegrating extended families and disastrously disrupted subsistence cycles, encouraged in his interpretation by the declarations of informants that things never were so bad before, nor young people so disrespectful of their elders and so hard to control. Perusal of historical material relevant to the group in question might well indicate that family sizes and subsistence patterns have periodically changed over prior centuries and that elders have usually complained about young people.

The Perspectives of the Past

If Thomas Kuhn's study of the nature of scientiful revolutions is correct, it may be predicted that a successful reconditioning of the anthropological instrument will require not a continued reworking of the current anthropological climate but a sharp turn onto distinctly different paths; paths which are by no means unknown but which have become somewhat overgrown with bush and brambles through lack of recent use. Such a redirection produces a shift in the problems available for scientific scrutiny and in the standards by which the profession determines what should count as an admissible problem or as a legitimate problem-solution. Prior theories and prior "facts" come under closer scrutiny and re-evaluation (Kuhn 1970:6-7).

One contrastive approach currently in vogue among anthropologists replaces concepts of social order and stability inherent in classic structural functional views with models based on investigation of conflict, tensions, disorders, and absence of social equilibrium. Another current

anthropological tangent explores the intricate maze-ways of Levi-Straussian structuralism and symbolism as a reaction or alternative to environmental-ecological emphases. Yet a third obvious contrast that is at best only partially considered by anthropologists today balances participant-observation fieldwork, synchronic emphases, and structural or cyclical or equilibrium models with methodologies emphasizing historical research and paradigms incorporating diachronic perspectives. Concurrent with this approach to an understanding of cultural phenomena is a need for reexamination of our interpretations of directional or quantitative variables as factors in culture change.

Recognition of the quantitative aspects of culture, like recognition of diachrony, is by no means new to anthropology. The 19th century evolutionists believed that the world in which they lived could be illuminated by the hypothesis that culture as a whole had undergone quantitative change - in this context understood to mean cumulative and progressive growth (see Wolf 1964). More recently, we have seen renewed attempts to discuss select features of culture, such as the amount of energy harnessed per capita per year or the ability to utilize natural resources, in terms implying quantitative differences among cultures. Population, of course, is another variable which is quantitative, which changes by increments or by degrees. Knowledge is yet another, as is social power - the ability to control peoples and natural resources and knowledge. These and other factors of a similar quantitative nature appear to be inter-related and, as Eric Wolf has noted, the possibility of establishing a "master formula" of culture change relating some or all of these terms seems within our grasp (1964:111).

Wolf penned his observations more than a decade ago, but the realization of such a "master formula" continues to elude us. There is good reason to believe that it does so in part because we have slighted the historical documentation which can give increased temporal perspective and sometimes actual data pertinent to questions concerning quantitative variables. In part the quest alludes us, too, because those who have continued the investigation of quantitative elements have tended to emphasize the primacy of one specific element as fundamental to any grand strategem. That is, they have viewed technological specialization or demography or social power as a kind of prime mover underlying cultural dynamics.

To date, however, concepts of prime movers for cases of specific culture change have been found wanting as ultimate explanatory mechanisms (Service 1971:15-26). We might be more successful if we shifted our emphasis away from specific or individual quantitative factors to investigate more thoroughly the common property of quantitativeness, of incremental variation, of fluctuation by degrees, which they all share. This systemic approach, a form of which has become popular particularly through ecological studies, must, however, be given appropriate temporal depth. Consideration of the shifts in culture patterns produced in a given society by various quantitative changes occurring over linear time (rather than cyclical time) in the several interrelated natural and cultural factors susceptable to incremental movement might add significantly to our knowledge of cultural process. Our insights would be deepened even more if, whenever possible, we viewed these quantitative changes over periods not only of months or of

decades but of centuries, conceivably even of millenia in very unusual circumstances; if, in other words, we were to recognize more fully the importance of long periods of time in cultural phenomena as the anthropological analog of the limitless geological time envisioned by the 19th century naturalists and, more important, if we implemented this perspective as a necessary element in the actual study of cultural processes (see Hodgen 1974:69).

It is obvious that all concepts of process and of change imply temporal duration by definition. But it is insufficient to repeat the truism that time is necessary for things to happen and that, therefore, the significance of time lies simply in its existence as a necessary precondition for events to occur. By this argument the structural-functionalists and contemporary ecologists have claimed that their work must - and does - carry a temporal aspect, since the recurrent domestic groups and lineages, rituals and roles which provide institutional stability and social order can only exist through time and can only appear to be stable when their existence through several generations proves them so to be (cf. Nadel 1957:128-130: Evans-Pritchard1 974:69; Lewis 1968:xvi). But this perspective is not enough. Just as in the biological world "there are . . . numerous essential factors of evolution that cannot be studied in the laboratory at all because they demand [a] longer-time scale" (Simpson 1965:4), so we must extend our vision of temporal phenomena and our concept of anthropologically significant historic time beyond the short-range "living laboratory" view of a few months or a year or two of fieldwork. To be sure, some anthropologists have long argued for this case. Twenty years ago S. F. Nadel (1957:143-144, 147) advocated use of longer time-scales in anthropological theory and research and anticipated such an approach in the future, when we would have sufficient accumulation of descriptive data combined with restudies of peoples and communities to give a time depth of perhaps ten or fifteen years (see also Vansina 1970).

The future Nadel envisioned is with us now, and we need not wait for yet a later era to add an extended temporal perspective to anthropology. We already have a massive corpus of data drawn from ethnographic studies, not to mention the tremendous amount of information available in historical documents, which can cast considerable light on cultures of earlier eras. Nor should we limit the temporal view to a few decades or a few generations. If we concentrate on too shallow or contracted a time scale we may recognize only the more rapid forms of change or adaptation and risk missing or rejecting or unduly slighting some fundamental concept or interpretation of process observable only in longer temporal perspective (cf. Nadel 1957:142; Simpson 1965:4-5; Hodgen 1974:70-71). Which is to say, if we concentrate on too shallow or contracted a time scale we may continue to perpetuate errors based either on the overly enthusiastic application of the principle of uniformity or on too limited an application of this principle.

"Time" is an ambiguous term in English and an elusive concept in any language or conceptual system, including those of the scientist and those of the historian (however these equally vague terms be defined). Time has many meanings and takes many forms. It can be absolute or relative or recurrent. It can be viewed as a dynamic entity or variable in the real-life conduct of cultural activities and as an element or perspective in the analytic explanation of cultural processes. From

the latter point of view it has been said that to the historian, viewing specific past events in a context of retrospection and anticipation, time is a perspective with properties of past, present, and future, whereas to the more structurally oriented anthropologist the temporal perspective has properties of "before" and "after"(Morton-William1s 968:4; Nadel 1957:128). Within the realm of cultural activities time is also an element of "thing" that can be divided into fixed chronological units – wet seasons and dry seasons, days or months, years or centuries. Time spans themselves can be of equatable length (20 katuns equals 1 baktun) or they may be relative in length, as when comparable cultural events require different periods of time for their expression. Margaret Hodgen has illustrated this latter point with a comparison of the introductory distribution of printing presses and of Christianity in Europe - both showing similar patterns in dissemination and acceptance, but the first requiring fifty years and the second 400 years for the same type of patterned "event" to occur (1974).

As anthropologists and historians interested in cultural processes and their interpretation we should explore much more thoroughly the diverse concepts and applications of time. We should consider further the analytical value of recognizing relative time scales in which processes visualized in operation over a shorter period of time take on different dimensions of stability or change when examined on a longer time scale, and appear differently still when examined over very long periods (cf. Nadel 1957:142-144). We might also investigate with greater precision various emic conceptions of time and time reckoning and consider how these conceptions affect cultural activities, for the concept of time requires cultural definition if it is to be made "material," "real," and culturally significant; and such definitions and the activities influenced thereby may vary significantly cross-culturally (see Bohannon 1953; Leach 1972; Pocock 1967; Evans- Pritchard 1942; Peacock and Kirsch 1970:12-14, 93; Furst 1975:3940). We might consider, too, how our own abstract concept of time and our tendency to objectify this abstraction in our own cultural system influences our anthropological perspectives.

Recognition and exploration of any of these problems of history and time within anthropology must begin with greater acceptance in ethnological studies of the fundamental significance of a general sense of time in the interpretation of human affairs, and with a greater acceptance of the "explanatory powers of the recovery of the past" (Hodgen 1974:6). This perspective is by no means novel to the discipline. It has been formally espoused by anthropologists both in Europe and the United States for many years (see Hodgen 1974:chap. 2), but it has been implemented much less frequently. (The symposium on "Time Dimensions in Society and Culture" held at the 1976 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association is noteworthy in this respect.)

The founding of the journal Ethnohistory some twenty-two years ago was a significant development in this direction, for it provided a forum for anthropological research utilizing data contained in written documents from the past and expressing a sense of historic time in anthropological perspectives of one sort or another. During these past two decades individual spokesmen also have eloquently expressed the role which ethnohistory and ethnohistorians have

come to play in anthropology and have emphasized anew the potential which the conjoining of synchronic and diachronic materials, of structural and historical explanations, holds for future anthropological research (see Eggan 1954; Hudson 1973; Sturtevant 1968; Carmack 1972). The number of anthropologists who claim ethnohistory as an area of interest and methodology has steadily increased during these years, too, as have the number of anthropology journals which recognize historical research. (My railings against the continued synchronic sins of the discipline must in all fairness be balanced with due recognition that there have been on-going currents of anthropological thought concerned with the use of historical or diachronic perspectives in anthropological investigation.)

In our continued work as ethnohistorians and through the functioning of this society, which has now begun its second generation, we can expect to continue to play significant roles in this respect. To date the research designs of ethnohistorians have taken diverse forms (see Sturtevant 1968; Hudson 1973:132-133; Carmack 1972), all of which have been vitally important in developing the historical sense within anthropology. As this historical awareness expands, as we may hope it will, we can expect new theoretical directives to emerge within the discipline; new questions generating new answers which may well become elements in the conceptual turning point which anthropologists seem to be anticipating. As researchers already trained and experienced in the problems and rewards of historical research, as historians and anthropologists best equipped to carefully and judiciously apply the doctrine of uniformity, and as social scientists willing to grapple with concepts of diachronic time. We, as ethnohistorians, stand at the forefront of these new directives, and we must be alert to their potentialities

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