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Anthropology and History in the 1980s

John W. Adams

Consensus, Community, and Exoticism Anthropological concepts, which have been taken out of context and applied without full understanding, have been misused by historians of colonial North America. Part of the difficulty is due to the normal hazards of incorporating the work of another field in one's own; and part is due to the reluctance of historians to employ monothematic explanations. This latter difficulty has led historians to favor those concepts of anthropology which are not easily measured.

ANTHROPOLOGY, HISTORY, AND NATURAL HISTORY The interest of social historians in anthropology has been one-sided. Although historians are excited about the work of Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas, they do not seem to feel the same enthusiasm for the work of such anthropologists as John Whiting, Roy Rappaport, or Marvin Harris, or of Anthony Wallace, David Schneider, or Marshall Sahlins, who are of equal importance within the field. As a result historians have borrowed only what was most like history as currently practiced: studies concerned with ideas.

Anthropology has always been poised awkwardly between history and natural history, its practitioners usually preferring one of the two approaches, while granting that the other is also valid. A recent statement in the *Annual Reviews*, a convenient source for authoritative positions of this sort, sees the field divided into ideational and adaptational conceptions of culture, under the renewed influence of Marxist thinking.¹

There is still no agreement as to whether anthropology is

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1 Roger M. Keesing, "Theories of Culture," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, III (1974), 73–97. A recent addendum is Keesing's review of Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago, 1976), in *American Anthropologist*, LXXXII (1980), 130–131.

like a science which has laws. The statement by Geertz that we must be content with interpretations, not laws, may have been misinterpreted by many historians as a denial that there is much regularity in human affairs—and therefore as a license to search out what appears to be unique. Yet anthropologists of both persuasions stress that regularities and patterning underlie a diverse range of societies or their parts. Many seek broad trends in cultural evolution and explain them using a materialism which historians may find uncongenial. At the same time, most anthropologists deny that differences in cultures are attributable to the biological differences of their members or that history has any predetermined course. Thus the materialist position, best (and certainly most notoriously) represented by the work of Harris, declares that the factors of demography, ecology, and the economy are more fundamental than such superstructural ideas as the sacredness of cows to Hindus. This is an old controversy, but a real one to most anthropologists today. It raises problems for historians who might wish to borrow anthropological concepts, especially those which are ideational.²

UNITS OF ANALYSIS A basic problem for any discipline lies in its choice of phenomena to study which are sufficiently well-defined that they can be located in actual data. Ideationalists focus on rules and symbols; materialists on subsistence strategies and population densities. Between these lie the great common-sense units of study such as marriage, family, and community, which have enabled anthropologists to uncover similarities within cultures around the world. It has been fairly easy to demonstrate that forms which Western Europeans accepted as perfectly natural were only one of several cultural variations on the same institution. But the range of examples discovered has been so great that some scholars doubt whether it is possible to construct a universal definition of these units. Are the most extreme examples really instances of the same thing. Is marriage universal? Do all kinship systems recognize both the father's and the mother's side of the family as kin? Are there families in all societies? Do all societies

2 Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *idem*, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 3–30; Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism* (New York, 1979).

have nuclear families? These and similar questions make it clear that anthropology is presently at the limits of its terminology.³

The choice of significant units entails various conclusions about human nature which become problematic for proponents of different theoretical approaches to the study of man. The task of choosing one for application in another discipline involves a definite choice of theoretical perspective. To choose symbolic dualisms or "role reversal" is to take a position in favor not only of doing a certain kind of history, but also of doing a certain kind of anthropology, and to risk some predictable criticisms. Ideational (or symbolic) anthropology is often seen as being too concerned with the strange, the wonderful, and the subjective at the expense of the ordinary.

A further, disconcerting problem for historians who wish to use the insights of anthropology is that anthropological concepts are not easily transferrable. Their particularity is not helped by the propensity of anthropologists over the years to study cultural processes which have often turned out to have existed only in the minds of the profession, for example the totemic complex, mother right, tribe, clan, and village. Even Turner, who first studied and named "communitas," reports that this concept is so evanescent that it is no sooner noticed than it disappears.⁴

CONSENSUS AND COMMUNITY The most satisfactory, recent work on colonial America which uses anthropological insights is that by Boyer and Nissenbaum on the Salem witchcraft hysteria. By placing the dispute, and the parties to it, within the local network of kinship and marriage ties, they showed how such ties both united and separated the participants. This matter-of-fact account uses the well-replicated and thoroughly discussed findings of anthropology, particularly those of the British structuralist school. Such a study is, no doubt, exactly what Thomas hoped to encourage historians to undertake some twenty years ago when he reviewed the potential of anthropological findings for history.⁵

3 A useful discussion of these problems runs through Ira R. Buchler and Henry A. Selby, *Kinship and Social Organization* (New York, 1968).

4 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago, 1968).

5 Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974); Keith Thomas, "History and Anthropology," *Past & Present*, 24 (1963), 3-24.

However, the early attempts to import the family reconstitution methods of the *Annales* and Cambridge schools and combine them with concepts from social anthropology have resulted in a misapplication of these concepts. For example, Lockridge, in his book on Dedham, Massachusetts, considers the village more or less in isolation from other villages in the Colony and treats it as a “closed corporate peasant community” which is “self-shaping.” To anthropologists a basic attribute of peasant societies is that they are “part-societies with part-cultures” because they exist in relationship to a more urbanized elite. Thus there is a possible theoretical contradiction here between “peasant society” and “self-shaping” which should have been addressed. The basic documentation for the study was derived from town records which do not include the relevant materials from surrounding localities. With regard to marriage, for instance, New England villages during this period were only about 54 percent endogamous; some 46 percent of the young people found spouses in neighboring towns, which suggests that Dedham was not the isolated world of “relentless immobility” which Lockridge supposed.⁶

A different point of criticism would be to ask why a social history is so concerned with the Revolution at the expense of the theme of utopianism, which is stressed explicitly in the book but is never used as a controlling model. Lockridge might equally well have compared the town of Dedham with the many other utopian communities for which we have good records and have drawn some conclusion about the degree to which its fate was typical of the set. Such an examination, however, would have shifted the focus from history to social science. Moreover, we are asked to regard Dedham as a typical example of the transformation of “a world we have lost” into something prototypically American, though this generalization (also one of a social science) goes unsubstantiated. Only later did colonial historians begin to

6 Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (New York, 1970), 18–19; George M. Foster, “Introduction: What Is a Peasant?” in Jack M. Potter et al. (eds.), *Peasant and Society: A Reader* (Boston, 1967), 2–14; Adams and Alice Bee Kasakoff, “Migration at Marriage in Colonial New England: A Comparison of Rates Derived from Genealogies with Rates from Vital Records,” in Bennett Dyke and Warren Morrill (eds.), *Genealogical Demography* (New York, 1980); Lockridge, “The Population of Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636–1735,” *Economic History Review*, XIX (1966), 318–344.

compare their findings about single villages in New England with each other, with other regions, and with Europe.⁷

Often in these studies the word “community” is used not only to denote a small-scale settlement, such as a village, but also to imply a warm and closely knit social group. This implied correlation should alert us to ideological preferences. In the experience of anthropologists small villages are by no means always warm and happy places; they typically have factions, feuds, and even witchcraft accusations as part of their regular functioning. Dissensus occurs with consensus, as happened in the case of Salem.

THE BALINESE COCKFIGHT Recently, colonial historians have shifted from studying towns to trying to discover one social institution—a Court Day, horse racing, gambling, or duelling—which might be the equivalent of the Balinese cockfight which Geertz suggested was a focus of widely held values in Bali. However, the nature of the Balinese cockfight and its possible universality has never been discussed by historians. Is there any reason to believe that an equivalent might have existed in colonial America? To search one out is a task to which many anthropologists would assign a low-priority, for not every culture has a ritual which serves ethnologists as a unique focus for describing values.⁸

The Nuer, who otherwise have a culture of great paradigmatic value, have no institution which sums up their values, although cattle were said by Evans-Pritchard to be at the center of all Nuer interests. Someone searching for potential “Balinese cockfights” among the Nuer would be frustrated, or would have to redefine the concept substantially (making it more operational in the process) to uncover even a reasonable surrogate. Indeed, a more useful search might be for the reason why so few societies develop this kind of focal institution.⁹

Besides the Balinese, the two best known examples of societies which have focal institutions are the Trobriand Islanders,

7 For example, W. R. Prest, “Stability and Change in Old and New England: Clayworth and Dedham,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, VI (1976), 359–374.

8 Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” in *idem*, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 412–453.

9 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (New York, 1940), 16–50.

who observe the Kula ring ritual, and the Kwakiutl, who have the potlatch. Both are original examples of what Mauss called "total social phenomena." But the Balinese, the Trobrianders, and the Kwakiutl have all developed self-consciously stratified societies, and lack an ideology of upward social mobility. Both the Balinese and Kwakiutl conceptualize their societies as sets of permanent statuses which people occupy temporarily. Trobriand chiefs, however, look forward to the receipt, and temporary ownership, of legendary, named valuables which circulate in perpetuity, while their owners are quickly replaced. In all three cases the earthly order of things is permanent, and is suffused with a sense of the importance of etiquette for the proper management of status.¹⁰

The frontier of colonial America is an unlikely place to find the cultural equivalents of a Balinese cockfight, a Kula ring, or a potlatch, given that, for those settlers who were interested in the here and now, it was a new social beginning, and, for those to whom it was but a temporary way station, other considerations took precedence over earthly status. Yet there was a ritual in New England which summed up the values of the society which practiced it: Sunday church-going, with the whole community arranged in pews which reflected the relative social ranking of the parishioners, who came to hear a sermon embodying the dominant values. Although the medium for their expression may seem too prosaic to be a true equivalent of the exotic cockfight, the institution of church-going had the virtue, true as well of the cockfight, that the participants were undertaking a life-or-death wager, not on their social status, but on their chance for salvation.¹¹

If we were to accept this as a reasonable surrogate for the cockfight, we would have to inquire as to whether other parts of the model applied as well. Was New England actually more stratified than is usually thought, or was it more worldly? Or were these attributes of our putative model of a focal ritual simply contingent? Perhaps other attributes were crucial. One possible line of inquiry might be to determine the degree to which such institutions bridge a disjunction between two audiences: the cock-

10 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (London, 1954).

11 Frederick Augustus Whitney, "A Church of the First Congregational Society in Quincy, Mass., Built in 1732," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, XVIII (1864), 117-131.

fight often pits members of one community against members of another, as do the Kula ring and the potlatch. If we take this condition as fundamental, then a Sunday church service in New England would not be a viable example. Moreover, in all three of the anthropological examples the rituals socially humiliate certain participants, without engendering any sense of religious humility in the process. They are the opposite of the ritual activity which Turner has characterized as "communitas": an evanescent historical moment in which a mood of human fellowship pervades the social relations of people who are otherwise caught up in the humanly divisive, hierarchical relations found in all societies. Potlatch, Kula, and cockfight, on the contrary, display social hierarchy.¹²

This is not the place to develop a model of such institutions, but it is appropriate to consider them in order to suggest the kind of comparative work that could be done by historians. No such work was done by Beeman when he advised historians that an unappreciated resource lay in Turner's concept of communitas. In fact he proposed a misreading: Beeman mistakes it for something akin to Redfield's "community." Yet Turner's idea is precisely that communitas, being a transient mood, cannot be captured in any social institution, and that attempts to do so have always failed. There is a certain nostalgia in Beeman's enthusiasm for the concept (possibly true of Turner as well), which anthropology is being employed to erase. It is also symptomatic of the preference for such ideological concepts that, although Beeman should find Turner's work on communitas attractive, he has apparently overlooked the equally substantial contribution which Turner made to the understanding of the politics of small villages in which almost everyone was related and where witchcraft accusations were common. For that matter, which social historians read *The Lele* or *Agricultural Involution*?¹³

Beeman seems to ask of Turner's work on communitas that

12 For a recent study which cites much of the relevant literature on stratification, see William Pencak, "The Social Structure of Revolutionary Boston: Evidence from the Great Fire of 1760," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, X (1979), 267-278.

13 Richard R. Beeman, "The New Social History and the Search for 'Community' in Colonial America," *American Quarterly*, XXIX (1977), 422-443; Turner, *Ritual Process*; Robert Redfield, *The Little Community* (Chicago, 1955); *idem*, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago, 1955); Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (Manchester, 1957). Mary Douglas, *The Lele* (London, 1954); Geertz, *Agricultural Involution* (Chicago, 1963).

it cure the theoretical disjunction which Beeman experiences between structure and psychology, that is, between a science of society which focuses impersonally on the structure of a group and a science which depicts lives of individuals in readily intuited psychological descriptions. Yet the dialectical oscillation between hierarchy and *communitas* is precisely Turner's way of dramatizing the ever-present gap between structure and psychology and his way of asserting that it can never be finally overcome.¹⁴

To investigate historical phenomena by means of concepts like *communitas* and the Balinese cockfight without examining them is to engage in *la pensée sauvage*. It is also utopian thinking in the case of *communitas*, and a complete misunderstanding of the nature of history and cross-cultural comparison in the case of the Balinese cockfight.

EXOTICISM When a ritual event is alleged to be, in effect, the total activity of an entire town, as is the case in so many studies, it is essential to break through that sort of immaterial conception to place it in the more immediate context of ordinary daily life. Waters' characterization of Guilford, Connecticut, as made up of stem-family households is an example of deliberate exoticism used to suggest the rootedness of the settlers as contrasted with our own supposedly more rootless times. He ignores the fact that there must be sufficient people of the right sex and age in Guilford for stem-family households to be common, and that no such type, given the nature of the variables, can ever solely characterize a society. Indeed, if there is any law in anthropology, it is a law of exceptions: that variations will be found in every rule or pattern.¹⁵

The concept of the stem family household cannot be applied to New England, as computer simulation shows. Herein lies a potential trap for unwary historians who use ideas from anthropology: there is a widespread, persistent feeling that anthropologists study exotic customs, whereas it is truer to say that they study the mundane in exotic locales. As for the exotic itself, they seem always to reduce it to some (outlandishly) commonsense

¹⁴ Beeman, "New Social History," 431, n. 18.

¹⁵ John Waters, "Patrimony, Succession, and Social Stability: Guilford, Connecticut, in the Eighteenth Century," *Perspectives in American History*, X (1976), 131-160.

explanation, such as that ritual cannibalism is a response to protein deficiency.¹⁶

Far from examining only the curious ritual occasion, anthropologists begin by counting populations and mapping villages. They hope that, by spending a year in the field, they can shed light, not only on the natives' way of life, but on their unconscious expectations as well. Since the exotic is only so in relation to our own culture, anthropologists have a professional distrust of the exotic, and at times virtually refuse to recognize that it exists.

A major difficulty in the development of knowledge in both ethnography and history is precisely this culture of the investigator, which even now goes largely unexamined because it resists discovery. Outsiders see it readily enough, which makes fieldwork on an island in the Pacific both easy and intellectually satisfying in ways which elude students of their own backyards, including historians of colonial America. What we do need to find out is whether what we study is ordinary and mundane, or whether the ordinary and mundane is merely a more pernicious version of our culture's commonsense understanding of things. Similarly it is important for historians to continue asking why they study particular phenomena.

TOWARD THE 1980S In the next decade both anthropology and history will themselves become topics for investigation, as natural history has become for historians. The emerging ethnology will be one which examines the ordinary and the folklife, not the unusual, the highbrow, or the exotic. As anthropologists we will undertake research which parallels that of history without people, and of processual history, while social historians will examine implicit assumptions of daily life, which are free of the officially declared, contemporary values, and have not been formally ritualized by the community. Demos' use of the implications for daily living of the sizes and locations of rooms in Plymouth houses and Boyer and Nissenbaum's uncovering of the network of kinship in Salem are examples of such research. The common sense of a culture dwells close to material constraints—and does not question them. It will be our job to discover the premises

16 Kenneth Wachter et al., *Statistical Studies of Historical Social Structure* (New York, 1978).

which underlie this common sense and justify behavior as perfectly natural.¹⁷

Anthropologists have had little feeling for how the daily activities of the peoples that they study could become historical. Theirs is a wholly different perspective on daily life from that of historians, who write with the advantage of hindsight. Which historians can look at people's lives and not think of those contemporaneous events which history has singled out as important? Historians implicitly scrutinize all behavior for its potential relationship to the eventful. Anthropologists have their comparable teleological flaw: that everything they see during their short stints of fieldwork must be integrated in some way. Foucault, a social historian, has presented a solution to this latter problem in his call for an archaeology of knowledge. He suggests that we regard the array of facts at a given moment as if it were one layer of an archaeological dig, in which some elements cluster in meaningful association, but where others simply happen to be there and elude connection with the clusters. Anthropologists might, in turn, remind historians of colonial America that not every action has a cumulative historical goal.¹⁸

Here are two very different conceptions of human activity: the anthropologist's, which seldom conceives of the possibility that the moments of daily life might lead to anything for the history books; and the historian's, which often must see in each and every moment a determinant of some significant future or an exemplification of some significant past. At best (or worst?) anthropologists think of mundane actions as representative of sociological principles—although these principles are *not* confused with the actor's motivations.

At first anthropologists considered human action as something of an end in itself, a timeless round of custom. But this false start gave way to the discovery of a repertory of goals which were commonsensical and maximizing: to obtain a good harvest, to outdo a neighbor in gift-giving, to marry well, to get better

17 On anthropology see Robert A. Levine and Donald T. Campbell, *Ethnocentrism* (New York, 1972); on "history" see Ioan M. Lewis, "Introduction," in *idem* (ed.), *History and Social Anthropology* (London, 1968). Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York, 1970). John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth* (New York, 1970); Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*.

18 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, 1972).

land, or to maintain one's following. This discovery restored to the pages of ethnographic description a goal-oriented actor, but one who was concerned with everyday activities not epic deeds. To anthropologists who are not much concerned with action from its historical perspective, many historians of colonial America seem to have their ears always cocked to the distant rumblings of the Revolution. This teleology gives the work of historians an idealistic cast. Historians might try to forget the eventful in favor of a history of simpler, everyday life. There is after all a major difference between behavior which is self-consciously trying to be historical and behavior which turns out to be historical.

THE METAPHOR OF TEXT Recently Geertz suggested the metaphor of social behavior as text as a supplement for, or replacement of, the current metaphors of role-playing and games. To anthropologists this would transfer the traditions of literary interpretation to the study of behavior and thereby reframe behavior in a less reductionistic manner by suggesting that it is at least as complex, meaningful, and ambiguous as a good novel or poem. If the metaphor of text were to be adopted generally as a perspective, social anthropology would be even less inclined to turn the salient institutions of one society into ideal types for use in examining the social life of neighboring societies.¹⁹

However, if text were to become fashionable as a way of bringing to anthropology the baggage of post-structuralist literary criticism, with its concern for conjunctures, the mirror phase, and intertextuality, the course of inquiry in social anthropology would probably shift to a rethinking of normative authority; to a deemphasis on the psychic unity of mankind in favor of uncovering the significant differences between ourselves and "The Others" whom we study; and to a concern with what is missing in a people's discourse and in our ethnographies.

What this refocusing would not emphasize is the sense of text as historians most frequently use it—as a vehicle for knowledge about the past. To be more relevant for historians the metaphor would have to be extended from the documents themselves

19 Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *The American Scholar*, XLIX (1980), 165-179; see also Alton L. Becker, "Text-Building, Epistemology, and Aesthetics in Javanese Shadow Theater," in *idem* and Aram Yengoyan (eds.), *The Imagination of Reality* (Norwood, N.J., 1979), 211-243.

to the behavior described within them, behavior which is often ambivalent and polyvalent.

The sense of unity and decorum of a narrative, the sense of what is an integral part of any story is a basic part of the everyday culture in which it is told. When Greven tells us that the basic goal of the inhabitants of Andover was to remain in Andover, preferably on the family farm, but that demography and land shortage prevented them from doing so; that in the third generation the sons of Andover were obliged to migrate to new lands; and that this restlessness was a cause of the Revolution, we have not progressed very far from the old-fashioned history of events. Demography merely replaces Governor Thomas Dudley (or whomever) as the villain of the story. It behooves historians to learn about the general form of narrative. The metaphor of text should be useful in this discovery, especially since there has been a recent call to return to the narrative.²⁰

Historians of colonial America, often portray their subjects as behaving with a view to their place in the history books. This is especially noticeable to anthropologists because we are so often unable to give any account of history in our descriptions. The subjects of ethnographies are usually constrained to behave only with regard to finite tasks in the realm of common sense. This perspective presents us with problems but, from the anthropologists' point of view, much of social history is misconceived because of the teleology of historians' hindsight.

My depiction of social history is obviously too dark and too much drawn with the parochial bias of an outsider. But it raises important issues for the writing of history and of anthropology. First, to what extent do our data really mesh? And second, to what extent does social life have a historical goal which transcends immediate situations? My answers are those of the skeptic.

Historians have worried about these same issues and anthropologists have not absorbed everything they might from the practice of history. The place of a historical consciousness in ethnog-

20 Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, 1970). A useful introduction to narrative analysis is Claude Bremond, *Logique du récit* (Paris, 1973). Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past & Present*, 85 (1979), 3-24.

raphy will have to be reassessed. First, historians who are interested in social or cultural history should try to eliminate exotica and fantasies of a Golden Age of community. Instead, they should turn more scrupulously to the mundane, with its pettiness and dissensions, as well as its cooperativeness. If historians borrow from anthropology, it should be with the intention of developing the concepts borrowed and of making, in return, a contribution to anthropology. Either social history is anthropology or it is nothing. Dabbling with it will do no good. Historians must reflect on what they borrow.

Second, as part of a general trend toward self-consciousness, both historians and anthropologists will study history and folk history in particular, and its uses in our own culture. What do ordinary people take to be history? Why do television writers see history as a series of lucky moments for the uniquely gifted protagonists of a true story? These are the kinds of questions which anthropologists ask of preliterate peoples. As they shift their attention to groups within our own culture, they will ask these questions of us.

Third, when anthropologists have identified the common sense of our culture, they will want to see how and when it was institutionalized. Research along these lines would be a useful extension of Foucault's attempts to uncover the archaeology of the more highbrow concepts in our society. An even more recent example of a historian's work along these lines is Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes."²¹

History must become more reflexive about its goals and about the means it uses to realize its ends. To anthropologists the lack of interest in theory among historians still seems great. But borrowing concepts from another discipline does not hold out much promise either if the concepts are simply misused in a thoughtless way.

21 For example, Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York, 1965); *idem*, *Discipline and Punishment* (New York, 1979). Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes," *History Workshop*, IX (1980), 5-36.