NOTES ON GENERAL THEORY AND PARTICULAR CASES

alan macfarlane

Dr. A. Macfarlane is als 'Reader in Historical Anthropology' verbonden aan het Department of Social Anthropology van de Universiteit van Cambridge.

general theory, bias and correctives

There is no alternative to theorizing. It may once have been believed that the historian was merely an organizer of 'facts' which existed independently of him, but we now know that this is not the case. The historian must himself judge, evaluate and interpret the past. In order to do this in a way that is both productive and open to criticism he must explicitly formulate theories about possible worlds and then test these theories against the observations of particular societies. Such theory-building is not only inescapable but invaluable. If we do not speculate at this more general level we are the prisoners of whatever narrow study we are engaged on. The danger for the growing number of historians interested in the study of local history and particular delimited sets of historical documents is clearly greatest of all. When history was mainly concerned with the political and economic circumstances at the higher levels of society the historian was forced to consider his material at a high level of abstraction. When dealing with the nature of political change in a nation over three centuries, for example, it was impossible to avoid theorizing and very general speculation. But if one spends three years studying the field system of one village over twenty years it is very easy to become oblivious to wider ideas.

The dangers for local researchers of an absence of theory were well described by Bloch: "No longer guided from above, it risks being indefinitely marooned upon insignificant or poorly propounded questions. There is no ... pride more vainly misplaced than that in a tool valued as an end in itself".(1) If the questions are trivial or badly put, the answers will be uninteresting or meaningless. The triviality often arises from the local historian's growing fascination with his painfully collected material. A total absorption with detail is absolutely necessary in order to study the tiny microcosm that has been chosen. Yet this absorption insidiously blots out the original intentions and begins to impose source-based questions. When the research begins to take as its ends what were originally only thought of as means to an end the final outcome is likely to be disappointing.

One of the major ways in which to avoid parochialism is through the use of wide comparisons. It is well known that in order to understand one instance we need to compare it with others. Such comparisons also help to keep at bay, or at least make explicit, both our 'ethno' and 'tempero' centricism, that innate tendency of all of us to judge other societies and cultures by our own standards. For instance, it helps to avoid the tendency either to make all other societies too like us or else totally strange and irrational. If we make these comparative theories fairly abstract and do not locate them in any specific society they are what are often called 'ideal types' or 'models'. Of course, every historian, the moment he starts to talk about 'peasants', 'capitalism', 'feudalism', 'class' or any other abstract categories is using such models. The local historian often uses the comparisons implicitly and often unconsciously. The effort to make them conscious is considerable, but a necessary corrective.

Yet there are as many difficulties in the process of constructing comparisons and general models as there are difficulties in pretending not to use this methods. One danger is over-ambition or over-abstraction. This is shown when the historian sets up a series of questions which are quite unanswerable from the evidence. This is a particularly grave danger in the field of local history. Many of the most exciting current questions cannot be answered without using local historical materials, yet it is also seldom the case that such materials will completely answer any question. Furthermore, there are very large areas where such documents are silent. Even relatively experienced historians are often unaware of the limitations in the source material. There is a very strong temptation for the historian to twist and stretch the evidence to answer his questions about child-rearing or the growth of emotion or attitudes towards death, unaware that he has exceeded all the bounds of credibility and perverted his sources.

Another danger is that the theories and models may become too concrete, that is to say that they may become too closely associated with the historical material. Like the anthropologist, the historian may think that he is analysing his material from the outside when all he is doing is presenting the 'folk' model. This is obviously a greater danger when dealing with the sophisticated thinkers who have shaped the present world, in England, for instance, Bacon, Coke, Hobbes, Locke, Newton. But even in a local study it is possible to become absorbed in the actor's view to such an extent that one loses the capacity to analyse.

Two further biases may be mentioned briefly. One is what might be termed 'materialism', the huge influence of a vulgar interpretation of Marx which has combined with a certain tendency in western societies to give excessive weight to material factors. This is a particular danger for local historians since so much of their material tends to deal with the material and economic. Often over three-quarters of the material concerns economic transactions and there is very little direct evidence on thought, feeling, religion. It is easy to assume that what has survived represents the period accurately and that 'in the last instance' everything can be related to the material culture or economic relations.

All historical work needs a framework to deal with the passage of time and local history is no exception. It is tempting to slot the massive detail of local records into some grander theory and such a theory is often of an evolutionary kind. It is assumed that societies move through a series of stages, predictable and determined, 'up' to the present. The cruder versions of 'modernization' and 'Marxist' theory suffer from this tendency to equate history with the 'growth' of a child or the movement from lower to higher. Yet the local historian, who often finds that his material gives a picture of circularity or even decline, should be wary of such schemes. The

nature of his material is likely to protect him from another danger, that is the tendency to see historical change as the result of a series of catastrophes or 'revolutions'. The sudden and sweeping effects of political, agricultural, industrial, intellectual or other 'revolutions' appears muted or even non-existant at the local level. Thus local history can be an important corrective to national historical work.

We may now turn to a few of the strategies which may help to minimize distortion. One is to use as a basis for comparison or abstraction fairly wide comparisons in time and space. Hence the need for anthropological reading by historians. Yet such comparisons at first sight appear unhelpful for they show complete differences. Yet the differences and absences are as interesting as the similarities. That English witches did not fly, commit sexual offences, hang upside down in trees, or eat their children, is as interesting as the fact that, like other witches all over the world, they used mystical power to harm others over long distances, or tended to bewitch those they knew.(2)

It is in the process of testing theories against particular studies that the traditional craft skills of the discipline of history are necessary. Three of these may be mentioned. The first is the thorough interrogation of the source of information. While this may seem practicable for an anthropologist, it may seem less obvious and easy for the historian. Yet Bloch wrote that "A document is a witness; and like most witnesses, it does not say much except under cross-examination. The real difficulty lies in putting the right questions".(3) In order to get behind the document to what was assumed rather than what was said, we have to go deep into the process of the creation of documents: who wrote them, for what purpose, with what audience in mind, what has been lost, what was never written down because it was obvious? Furthermore, the documents must be checked. Any single source, however good, gives a distorted picture compounded of omissions, wrong emphasis, misrepresentations and, occasionally, lies. Hence the need for multi-source work. Here the local historian is particularly well placed since he is likely to be engaged in multi-source work where he can compare taxation, notarial, judicial, manorial and other documents against each other. This is one of the reasons for the 'total' study of particular communities or groups. Though they may constitute artificially bounded objects of study for observation, they allow one to bring together a number of levels of documentation on certain individuals or problems. In theory the interpretation one places on such evidence should also be open to checking by other historians or anthropologists. The raw material which Malinowski, Mead or Evans-Pritchard gathered should be made available, just as the documents upon which Bloch or Maitland or Braudel based their theories should be accessible. F.W. Maitland, for example, was a great editor of historical documents, opening up the whole of medieval history through his editions of court rolls, common law records and Bracton's notebooks. It is a tradition which I have attempted to continue: all the cases upon which my witchcraft book was written are given in an appendix; the diary upon which I based a study of a seventeenth century clergyman has been published in full; and we have produced three sets of microfiche which will contain the approximately 7,000 typed pages of transcripts of all the records of an Essex village upon which I have based more general theories.(4) The ease with which a historian or anthropologist can manipulate his data makes this a necessary, if somewhat uncomfortable, duty.

the methods in practice: two examples

It would be possible to illustrate the difficulties and advantages of combining general theory with a specific detailed study through many great or less great works, but perhaps I may be permitted the indulgence of illustrating a few of the abstract ideas listed above by two examples from recent work that I and others in the S.S.R.C. supported project at Cambridge have been engaged in.

One of these is in relation to the question of peasantry.(5) I had been working for a long time on the social and economic history of England in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and specifically on the documents relating to two villages, one in the southern county of Essex (Earls Colne) and one in the northern county of Cumbria (Kirkby Lonsdale). The material being analysed by hand and computer did not make a great deal of sense within the general framework of understanding which I had imbibed from anthropologists, sociologists and historians concerning the supposed great revolution from a peasant/feudal/pre-capitalist society up to about 1500 to a modern/capitalist society during the period 1500-1700. This weakness only really emerged clearly when I tried to set down on paper what this transition was about. On the basis of anthropological studies of peasantries, as well as the works of historians and sociologists, I created a fairly 'pure' or 'ideal' type model of peasantry as a specific system of production, consumption and ownership. It appeared that there was a whole set of associated features, for example concerning the nature of the family, the use of cash and marketing, the marriage pattern etc. Having formalized the various features, providing a check-list so to speak, I then re-examined the English evidence. What I found astonished me, for it was contrary to my conscious expectations. Like most other recent writers, I had assumed that there had been a massive shift in England; instead I found continuity, with private property and a monetized economy going back into the thirteenth century. It appeared that Marx, Weber and many recent historians were creating myths, not history. It would have been surprising if such a contention would please either historians or certain sociologists, but the reaction has, on the whole, been encouraging. For myself, the process has helped me to understand the historical evidence that has survived.

A second example is a more delimited one. It is widely believed that people in the distant past were more violent, not to say brutal, then we are. This may arise either from the weakness of their social institutions, or from certain childrearing or other features which led to the coarsening of human nature. The 'civilizing process', to use Elias' phrase, has gradually led from that world into our own. Since such ideas were once held about all 'primitive' people, but subsequently found to be incorrect in relation to many of them by anthropologists, I thought it would be interesting to test them. The growing availability of legal records made such an enterprise possible, but how was one to provide a framework? When we talk of brutality, violence, aggression etc. what do we mean and with what can one compare the evidence? One approach, and the one which I adopted, was to read a number of studies of 'pre-modern' or 'modernizing' societies and to see what general features one could find. In order to use a wide range, I chose one Chinese example which described in great detail life in the second half of the seventeenth century, exactly the period in England with which I was primarily concerned.(6) Then, to bring it nearer home, I drew on a recent historical/anthropological study of violence in Sicily, 1860-1960.(7) Since Sicily is in the Mediterranean region, I brought the

comparisons a little closer with three studies of France from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. (8) These were all particular studies and to complement them I added the two studies of Hobsbawm who had tried to set up a general model of the nature of banditry.(9)

From these descriptions and accounts it was possible to arrive at some kind of predictive model. It could be argued that violence, banditry and feud are endemic in most 'traditional' peasantries, and that they will become epidemic in periods of the major transition from peasant to capitalist formations. Social banditry, for example, "seems to occur in all types of human society which lie between the evolutionary phase of tribal and kinship organization, and modern capitalist and industrial society..." but tended "to become epidemic in times of pauperization and economic crisis", as in the sixteenth century in the Mediterranean region, or seventeenth century Germany during the Thirty Years War. Thus, the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries are probably "the great age of social banditry ... in most parts of Europe", since one system is changing into another.(10) Such banditry is most noted on the margins of society where the central government cannot reach, and especially in pastoral, mountainous regions where the surplus population has little other outlet - Corsica, Sicily, the Water Margin in China, the Scottish Highlands. There are many other features associated with this situation. A great deal of interpersonal physical violence - rape, murder, assault; long sustained family feuds; heavily fortified houses and widespread ownership and use of weapons; a mounted, armed and hated police force; large bands of wandering beggars feared by villagers and townsmen; the existence of a class of 'entrepreneurs of violence', the mafiosi, who stood between the absentee landlords and the peasants. When anthropologists or historians of France, China and the Middle East use the word 'violence' they have this in mind and while it would clearly be wrong to label all peasantries in this way, it is often an important dimension and helps to explain the violence of peasant rebellions.

With this comparative framework in the back of my mind I turned to the English evidence. Specifically this was of three kinds, all bearing on one series of events. In the 1680's a loose association of highwaymen operated in the Scottish/English border area of Cumbria, a pastoral upland area of mountains and heath. These men engaged in a number of activities including burglary, theft, clipping the edges of coins and pickpocketing. In these activities they encountered one of the local law officials, Justice of the Peace, Sir Daniel Fleming of Rydal Hall. By chance this confrontation enables us to do something which is very rare in history, namely to enter into the minds and thoughts of ordinary people. Fleming and the other Justices were determined to prosecute the felons and consequently gathered many pages of depositions. These have by chance survived in the one English circuit Assize depositions which still exists for the period before the middle of the eighteenth century. They give the verbatim statements of many of the witnesses as well as the suspects. They can be checked and supplemented because, again almost uniquely, Fleming's papers have survived, including drafts of letters he sent out, copies of letters he received, and notes on the case. A further check and further details can be obtained from the parish records. The central characters lived in the parish of Kirkby Lonsdale, a parish whose probate, court and other records we have been studying for a number of years.

We can watch the activities of the felons, how they were caught, how they were tried, their escape and subsequent activities, and their final trial before 'Bloody' Judge Jeffreys. We can still visit the house in which they lived and find that three hundred years later, the legends concerning their supposed execution lingers on. If we examine the evidence with care and measure it against the general model, we may be surprised. The nature of the crimes in the comparative model and the specific case are different; physical violence predominates in the former, while monetary crimes are foremost in the latter. The motives and background of the criminals are different; there is no sign of an impoverished peasantry committing offences out of anger or present need, but rather a prosperous middling set of farmers engaging in crime as a bi-occupation, a short-cut to greater wealth. The difference also emerges in the nature of the victims; they are relatives, neighbours, not the hated townsman or merchant or landlord. There is no evidence of blood feuding. There is an apparent absence of fear of assault. There are no bands of wandering, half-starved peasants. There are no violent fights between gangs of youths or between different parishes, common in France until the twentieth century. There are few dangerous weapons and few fortifications. There is a curious absence of pitched battles between the robbers and the forces of order of the kind what we find in China, France and Sicily. There is no hint of anything like the mafiosi, the violent middleman, or of a system of patron-client relations. There is no sign of 'mob' violence or vengeance. There is an obvious reluctance on the part of many to convict, and an extreme tolerance of known law-breakers. In other words, the dimensions and features of violence do not fit the predictive model at all; it is difficult to imagine how the particular system could have been more different from the general model. Thus, while there are considerable structural similarities between France, Sicily and China, England in this period seems very different in its patterns of violence.(11)

Such a discovery, of course, only poses other questions. What were the causes of the difference, when had it begun, what effects did it have? To answer these further questions in turn one has to move on to further theories and to further historical material. But I hope that I have been able to illustrate very briefly one way in which one may move from the general to the particular and back again. This is not something new or original, but it is something useful for my work and, I hope, of interest and use to others engaged in the endless task of understanding their own and other cultures.

notes

(All places of publication are London, unless otherwise stated)

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2. Alan Macfarlane, Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England (1970).
3. Marc Bloch, Land and Work in Medieval Europe, trans. J.E. Anderson (1967), 48.
4. Macfarlane, Witchcraft; Macfarlane (ed.), The Diary of Ralph Josselin 1616-1683 (Oxford, 1976); Macfarlane et al. (eds.), The Records of an English Parish: Earls Colne 1400-1750 (Chadwyck-Healy microfiche Co. Cambridge, 1980/1,4 parts).
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8. T.J.A. Le Goff and D.M.G. Sunderland, "The Revolution and the Rural Community in Eighteenth-Century Brittany", Past and Present, 62, (Feb.1974);

vervolg op pagina 13