the CAMBRIDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA of ANTHROPOLOGY

History

ERIC HIRSCH, *Brunel University London*

Anthropology and history are inseparable, sharing concerns with societies other than the one we currently inhabit—whether in time or in space. This entry considers how the relation between anthropology and history developed since the late nineteenth century when anthropology professionalised as a discipline. Initially, anthropology was wedded to a form of history that was conjectural, based on hypothetical ideas of societal development deriving from evolution or diffusion. Thus, societies were often held to progress over time, in ways comparable to biological evolution, or they were held to develop through adoption of sociocultural traits from one or several culture centres. Criticism of this conjectural history came from within both anthropology and history. For a period of several decades, then, anthropology had a relatively detached relation from history, but by the mid-twentieth century this all changed. Anthropology was now understood as analogous to historiography—to writing history—as both seek to understand another society or culture and translate it into terms of one's present society. Later, the influences of colonialism and global capitalism on the societies studied by anthropologists were given greater prominence, as was the issue of understanding societies in historical time, i.e. as subject to change over time. However, the supremacy of historical knowledge and historical time was subsequently questioned, as anthropologists asked whether all people should be seen to exist in a single and secular historical time that encompasses other kinds of time. In contrast to the single frame of historical time, with its radical separation of past and present, greater recognition is being given to the multifaceted temporal relationships of past, present, and future as diverse peoples have distinct ways of valuing and communicating temporal categories and their interconnections. Anthropology thus raises the question of whether everything can or should be historicised.

Introduction

Anthropology has a complex yet intimate relation with history; at times close, at other times more distant. In understanding this relation, one can trace the theoretical and empirical interests that have shaped anthropology, and one can learn about the tensions that mark the interplay of history and the social sciences more broadly. By history, reference is made to the study of the past and how, through understanding a particular past, one is able to account for specific changes in a given society. Mainstream contemporary historical practice involves the study of archives and documents from a past time that provide insights into social life at that time and how that social life has changed. Oral history is another form, where accounts of the past are narrated by knowledgeable persons and these narratives are then used as sources for understanding past times and social change. Ethnohistory is an interdisciplinary approach to indigenous perceptions and understandings of the past drawing on anthropology, history, and archaeology. There is also an older kind of historical practice known as 'conjectural history' which enabled historians and anthropologists to speculate on the nature of historical events for which no documents or material evidence existed.

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Anthropology's relation with history has taken various forms and is discussed in the sections that follow. What emerges is a series of debates about the appropriate focus of anthropological study, and how dimensions of the past and its representation are to be incorporated into sociocultural analysis. Some of the complexities of this relation are especially evident when one considers the first fifty years or so of anthropology as a professional discipline. During that time, in the late nineteenth century, anthropology was wedded to a kind of conjectural history which was subsequently displaced. By the beginning of the twentieth century, an emphasis on societies in the present became established as anthropology's focus. However, this 'presentism' was subsequently criticised as it risked ignoring the influence of the past. Anthropology and history came to be understood as inseparable. As the impact of a historical perspective grew in anthropology, including the recognition of colonialism as an intrinsic part of that history, there emerged a critique of the Western assumption regarding the separation of past and present and their causal relations as the foundation of historical inquiry. This was perceived as a provincial, European notion and one that had to be transcended. Parallel to this critique was one concerning the status of historical knowledge: is history a superior form of knowledge, or is it just another form of myth? Finally, a hotly-debated issue that arose was whether people around the world exist in a secular, historical time or whether this view is Eurocentric and our ideas about history need to be rethought.

Conjectural history and its critique

When anthropology began to professionalise in the late nineteenth century—discarding its amateur status—it was heavily influenced by two ideas: evolution and diffusion. The form of evolution prominent in anthropology was one according to which all societies progressed—'evolved'—to a higher and improved state. A group of anthropologists in Britain and the United States, namely John Lubbock, Henry Maine, John M. McLennan, Lewis H. Morgan, and Edward B. Tylor created a coherent discourse about this evolutionary progress. They held that societies evolved over time and that a direct advancement could be determined from 'primitive society' through varied intermediary stages to 'modern society'. Anthropologists, they claimed, were to study the 'primitive societies' seen to lie at the lower rung of this hierarchy.

Diffusion in anthropology, by contrast, saw societies develop through contact, where borrowings of ideas, techniques, and institutions 'diffused' between them. Versions of diffusionist ideas were developed by figures such as Fritz Graebner in Germany and Clark Wissler in the United States while Grafton Elliot Smith in Britain proposed an extreme version that isolated Egypt as the basis of all civilisations (see Kuper 2005). The German view was that cultural change was an outcome of the mixture of peoples. William H.R. Rivers refined this programme arguing that the only consistent evidence of intermixture of peoples was what he called 'social structure', e.g. marriage rules, whereas elements of material culture could be adopted informally. Therefore, studies of social structure afforded the most reliable data of migration and

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diffusion. Based on a range of empirical material and theorising, Rivers argued that patrilineal succession and chieftainship in Melanesian society, for example, were the outcome of immigrant influences on what was a previous evolutionary stage of society. Rivers' interest in diffusion enabled him to account as well for evolution (1922).

These evolutionary ideas in anthropology were subject to critique from within mainstream history at the time. Notable here is the historian Frederic Maitland who was critical of the evolutionary ideas influencing anthropology, as there was no empirical evidence that such different evolutionary 'stages' in social development actually existed. For example, supposed 'laws' were established by the above-mentioned group of anthropologists advocating that the original form of society was based on matriarchal principles which then 'evolved' to one based on patriarchal principles. However, systematic evidence for matriarchal roots in patriarchal societies could not be found.

At the same time, Maitland argued that anthropology had to become more like history in the sense of avoiding generalisations, examining each case carefully because local circumstances are almost certainly crucial, and abandoning the belief in preconceived universal laws of progress. He famously wrote: 'My own belief is that by and by anthropology will have the choice between being history and being nothing' (Maitland 1911: 295). Maitland was a central figure in the professionalisation of history in England (Goldstein 1990). He was a 'master of detail' who swept aside the futile dream of writing a single, universal history (Collingwood 1961 [1946]: 127). Maitland's remark about anthropology and history has been cited by numerous anthropologists over the decades to emphasise the close relation between the two disciplines.[1]

The conception of history Maitland espoused is called 'historicism': 'the idea that to understand anything it has to be seen both as a unity and in its historical development' (Chakrabarty 2008: 6; cf. Mandelbaum 1971: 42). As Charles Stewart notes, the logic of historicism is that 'current happenings may be seen as outcomes of prior events and present events as belonging to the past as time flows on' (2012: 1). Historicism also insists that the past must be understood in its own terms; it has become a key term in modern historiography.[2]

During the first half of the twentieth century, a new generation of anthropologists in Britain soon viewed ideas of evolution and diffusion as 'pseudo-history'. In particular, the 'founding fathers' of modern British social anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, in their different ways found the ideas of the previous generation of anthropologists misleading. Although neither ever explicitly mentioned Maitland, the direction they took anthropology inevitably turned its back on the old form of history applied by their predecessors while practicing and advocating a form of anthropology more in line with Maitland's emphasis on detailed empirical research.

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Both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown were opposed to the conjectural kind of history previously conducted because the evidence supporting either evolution or diffusion, as noted above, did not exist. For example, although life expectancy in many societies may increase over time with better provision of health care and improved nutrition this does not mean that societies necessarily progress through fixed stages of evolutionary or even economic progress (cf. Rostow 1960). What mattered, according to Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, was not the past and what might have happened then, but the present; how societies 'functioned'—how they made living together achievable—and, in Radcliffe-Brown's case, the structure of that functioning.

American anthropology around this same time was debating the extent to which its practice of anthropology was itself a form of history. Franz Boas, the 'founding father' of American anthropology, was critical of evolutionism, yet he saw anthropology as fundamentally a historical science, one 'which centres in the attempt to understand the individual phenomena rather than in the establishment of general laws' (1932: 612). Boas' historical analysis operated on a very limited scale, making cautious historical reconstructions, similar to 'microhistory', in that they captured the fleeting moment (see Faubion 1993: 38). This was a form of history in line with what Maitland advocated, although again, Boas never referred to him directly. Whether such microhistory can be related more easily to the past than can the 'macrohistory' of evolutionism and diffusionism has remained a topic of debate (see Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1958]: 9).

Boas's protégé Alfred Kroeber placed more emphasis on historical reconstruction using archaeological data to establish what cultures may have existed. As an example of this, he cites the case of 'pottery figurines which are found from western Mexico to Venezuela and Peru and from which as principal evidence there has been reconstructed an Archaic Middle American horizon or type of culture' (Kroeber 1931: 151). He suggests that the demonstration of these figurines at several locations given their resemblances provides 'evidence of the spread of a common culture, in spite of local variations'. Kroeber criticised Boas for not developing temporal sequences to the historical issues he encountered in his research or trying to infer or reconstruct the past of a culture (1966: 109). For his part, Boas argued he was not adverse to historical reconstruction but the reconstruction had to be cautious, avoiding sweeping generalisations.[3] It was also observed that although Boas acknowledged that the dynamics of a society or culture were the result of historical processes, he did not hold that these dynamics were fully determined by their history. Rather, like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, Boas saw it was crucial to understand the functioning of a society or culture aside from its history (Hoernlé 1985 [1933]: 9).

These varied historical approaches were assessed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963 [1958]). He reiterated the conjectural nature of evolutionist and diffusionist studies and even included here the work of Kroeber, among others, with their 'more modest and rigorous studies… of the distribution of certain cultural traits in

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limited areas' (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1958]: 6). Lévi-Strauss argued that reconstructions of the past were plausible, but also deceptive. For example, the existence of an Archaic Middle American culture mentioned above remains highly contested until today. Lévi-Strauss also emphasised that reconstructions of the past tell the reader nothing about the conscious or unconscious processes of the actual people who acquired certain institutions. Were they invented, a modification of previous institutions, or borrowed from elsewhere (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1958]: 6)? To support this point, Lévi-Strauss considered the example of dual organisation, a type of social structure often found in America, Asia, and Oceania. It is characterised by the division of the social group into two halves or 'moieties' whose corresponding members have a variety of relations ranging from the intimate to the hostile. He rules out evolutionist and diffusionist interpretations of their existence for the reasons mentioned above. According to Lévi-Strauss, it is clear that historical factors account in part for dual organisation in any social context, yet this history might not be available to the ethnographer studying the particular society, and its exact importance for the institutions in question is hard to determine. Dilemmas of this sort—how to account for the existence of a particular institution or practice—are faced by all anthropologists (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1958]: 10).

History and anthropology as 'inseparable'

Nonetheless, Lévi-Strauss argues that history and ethnography are closely allied—'inseparable'—as they share a concern with societies other than the one we currently inhabit (1963 [1958]: 23). The otherness may be in time (history), however small, or remoteness in space, regardless of how distant (ethnography). Both seek to 'reconstruct'—through historical causation and narrative or through ethnographic description and interpretation—what has or is happening in the society being studied (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1958]: 16). Lévi-Strauss quotes the famous statement by Marx: '[People] make their own history, but they do not know that they are making it' (1963 [1958]: 23). This justifies, Lévi-Strauss observes, 'first, history and, second anthropology'.

A similar point is made by Edward Evans-Pritchard. For all the supposed disregard of history by his anthropology colleagues (see below), Evans-Pritchard asks whether social anthropology is not 'itself a kind of historiography' (1962: 22). The parallel between disciplines exists in the forms of research and how this is then transmitted: the anthropologist 'seeks to understand the significant overt features of a culture and to translate them into terms of [her/his] culture' after living with the people for an extended period of time (Evans-Pritchard 1962: 23). The historian, he suggests, 'lives' in his archives and documents for an extended period of time and seeks to accomplish the same kind of translation. Both are equally selective in the material they choose to use. In making this argument, Evans-Pritchard invokes Maitland's dictum cited above and he develops themes also present in the work of Lévi-Strauss. Evans-Pritchard does mention some work among British anthropologists that adopt a historical perspective, such as John Barnes (1951) and Ian Cunnison (1951). Among these should also be included his own history of the Sanusiya Order, an

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order of Sufis who are Sunni or Orthodox Muslims (Evans-Pritchard 1949). His book focuses on the Sanusi of Cyrenaica, the eastern coastal region of Libya. He gained a familiarity with the region, its Bedouin people, and the Order during the Second World War when he was posted there as part of his military service. Given this, it was not possible for him to carry out systematic studies of an anthropological kind, but his close contact with the Bedouin enabled him to read the literature that forms the basis of his study (Evans-Pritchard 1949: 7).

On the whole, Evans-Pritchard is critical of the lack of attention to historical matters by his contemporaries. He argues that historical awareness is vital for satisfactory understanding in a particular field or in general: '… those who ignore history condemn themselves to not knowing the present, because historical development alone permits us to weigh and to evaluate in their respective relations the elements of the present' (Evans-Pritchard 1962: 56). This is an explicitly Western view of history's significance and one not necessarily shared cross-culturally, an issue returned to later.

Evans-Pritchard's critique of conventional anthropological practice and what he saw as its lack of interest in history was itself subjected to critique (see Smith 1962). The question was raised of '[w]hether anthropologists should be historians' (Schapera 1962). This question suggests that a distinction needs to be made between the social present, which the anthropologist studies, and the social past, which is the interest of the historian. The anthropologist's research is conducted in the social present, but in order to understand that present, the anthropologist may need to consider the social past, conventionally studied by the historian (Schapera 1962: 145). It is noted that Evans-Pritchard's (1949) own historically-oriented book on the Sanusi is not based on anthropological research conducted while he was resident in Cyrenaica. Rather, it is a study of the origins and development of that Order. What would Evans-Pritchard have said about the Order's social past had he written instead a study of its social present (Schapera 1962: 152)?

The more general point to be taken from this debate includes the insight that the relevance of history and the sort of history deployed depend on the kinds of problems being examined (Schapera 1962: 152). Many of the anthropologists that worked in Southern Africa, for example, who were trained by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, studied people that were heavily influenced by European colonialism (e.g. Hunter 1936). The historical changes that resulted could not be ignored and anthropologists considered in their analyses when, how, and why historic change had occurred (Schapera 1962: 145). These anthropologists, then, situated their ethnographies in a social context shaped by the history of colonialism.

Some years before Evans-Pritchard's critique, Edmund Leach also addressed a tension in Evans-Pritchard's writings between a focus on the present purposes and social relationships between people (viz. a 'functionalist social equilibrium'), such as his book *The Nuer* (1940) and Evans-Pritchard's advocacy for the use of history. How could the inconsistencies between these two positions be resolved? Leach's ethnography *Political systems of Highland Burma* (1954) provided an answer. He argued that explaining

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political life with reference to a social equilibrium, as proposed by scholars focusing on the purposes of social action known as ‘functionalists’, was an ‘as if’ description. It is ‘as if’ because it relates to ideal models rather than real societies; ideal models created and held in unique ways by both the people under study and the anthropologist. In the case of the Kachin people of Leach’s study, there were three relevant political forms: an egalitarian form of political life referred to as ‘*gumlao’*, a chiefly or hierarchical form known as ‘*gumsa’* form - a form that seeks to imitate, when the opportunity arises, the neighbouring Shan state on the horizon. These political forms were in recurrent transformation, and Leach draws on historical documentation to describe this over an extended time period. His book seeks to ‘present a convincing model of what happens over time when such functionalist or “as if” systems interact’ (Leach 1954: 285). Like Lévi-Strauss, Leach also shows how history and ethnography are thus inseparable, but via a different route to that outlined by Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1958]: 18; cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 22-3).

Diverse ways of understanding and experiencing history

Although several of the anthropologists cited by Isaac Schapera (1962) considered the historical changes introduced by European influence in Southern Africa societies, colonialism as a specific historical form was not itself analysed. Talal Asad, writing in the early 1970s, notes the ‘strange reluctance’ most professional anthropologists have in sincerely considering ‘the power structure within which their discipline has taken shape’ (1973: 15). He highlights the unequal power relation between Western societies and those societies conventionally studied by anthropology, an encounter which goes back to the ‘emergence of bourgeois Europe’ and of which ‘colonialism is merely one historical moment’ (Asad 1973: 16).

One form of history that was trying to address this shortcoming is ‘ethnohistory’. Its creation is bound up with the particular nature of settler colonialism in the United States and the establishment of the Indian Claims Commission, which served as an arbiter between Native American groups and the federal government between 1946 and 1978. Ethnohistory’s origins were in the law courts to adjudicate indigenous land rights. It was necessary to decide what constituted an ‘identifiable group’ and to establish historical continuity between such groups that had signed treaties decades before that of present activists. Particular contemporary Native American peoples had to make the case that they had not ‘changed’ in order to be successful in court, so paradoxically they had to exist ‘outside of history’ in order to be identified as groups that could demonstrate their historical continuity. Ethnohistorians were thus left with the task of mediating between different notions of ‘history’—Native American and Euro-American (Harkin 2010: 116-8). In very general terms, some of the difference hinges on the idea of the past as a living ancestral presence (Native American) as found in the landscape and the moral power of ancestral place names (see Basso 1996), and one where the past (history) is dead and gone (Euro-American). Archaeologists, for example, continue to speak of ‘prehistory’ for any Native American people before European contact, denying history and historical agency to Native American peoples prior to the arrival of

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Europeans.

In addition, beginning in the early twentieth century, anthropologists argued that no value could be attached to Native American oral traditions as their ‘truth value’ was uncertain (see Lowie 1915). Thus, Native Americans were denied a form of historical awareness which, in turn, became the focus and principle of ethnohistorical method by mid-century (Harkin 2010: 119). The emergence of ethnohistory also called attention more forcefully to the existence of colonial power relations and their effects on native peoples, as well as a re-evaluation of the importance of oral traditions (see Cohn 1987; Vansina 1965).

American anthropologists, like their British counterparts, began to evaluate the wider ramifications of colonialism and anthropological inquiry. The ‘colonial situation’ was not viewed as ‘impact’ or ‘culture contact’ but one in which the ‘the European colonist [whether traders, missionaries or administrators] and the indigene are united in one analytic field’ (Cohn 1987: 44). The anthropologist deploys such an analytical field to show how indigenous peoples become incorporated into diverse colonial and capitalist relations of power and expropriation (cf. Kaplan 1995: 208; Stoler 2002: 105). To ignore this situation ‘is to trivialise the experiences of the natives’ (Cohn 1987: 44; see Wiener 1995: 11; cf. Geertz 1980). Certainly by the 1980s an historical perspective is foregrounded in much anthropological inquiry, no more so than in Eric Wolf’s groundbreaking book *Europe and the people without history* (1982). Adopting a Marxist framework, he describes how the history of European colonial expansion to all corners of the globe since the late fifteenth century, in search of wealth as well as the production and trade of commodities, simultaneously shaped the histories of diverse native peoples (cf. Sahlins 1988; Wallerstein 1974). The explicit global perspective at the core of the book highlights the intricate connections created by capitalist and indigenous modes of production and eschews a focus on self-contained societies and cultures unaffected by wider political and economic forces. For example, in one chapter of the book, Wolf shows how the commercial routes of the fur trade stretched across most of what is now Canada and the northern United States, incorporating numerous Native American peoples (e.g. Cree, Ojibwa, etc.) who supplied the furs valued by Europeans and which transformed, in turn, these societies. The book’s title is ironic: ‘[t]here are thus… no people without history, no peoples – to use Lévi-Strauss’s phrase – whose histories have remained “cold”’ (Wolf 1982: 385).

Wolf’s reference to Lévi-Strauss’s (1978 [1973]) distinction between ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ societies has been generally misunderstood (cf. Bloch 1998: 109). Lévi-Strauss does not suggest that some societies have history while others do not. Rather, the distinction between ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ was used as a metaphor to express different relations with historical change. ‘Cold societies’ seek to annul the effects of historical influences through their social institutions, thus sustaining a stable continuity; ‘hot societies’, by contrast, embrace historical change and perceive its effects as the basis of societal development (Lévi-Strauss 1966 [1962]: 234; 1990 [1971]: 607; Gow 2001: 310-2). The Western ideology of progress is, for example, a potent expression of this ‘hotness’ (cf. Löwith 1949).

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The distinction between the synchronic and diachronic study of people's lives has been similarly commonly misinterpreted. Radcliffe-Brown first introduced these terms into anthropology (see Schapera 1962: 144; cf. Evans-Pritchard 1962: 61). For him, a synchronic description refers to an account of a 'form of social life' (a particular collection of human beings) at a specific time that abstracts from that social context its empirically 'enduring characteristics' (e.g. rules of marriage). Diachronic, by contrast, is an account of the 'systematic change' that has occurred to the form of social life over a period (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 4; Barnes 1971: 542). Lévi-Strauss's use of these terms is different. Synchronic, for Lévi-Strauss, concerns the 'principle of regularity', e.g. that a spoken language at any moment in time has an orderliness that allows it to be understood and communicated. By contrast, diachronic is the accidental and particular. Again, drawing on the example of language, languages continually change due to unintentional circumstances, such as new expressions being introduced, and the individual ways a language is expressed. Lévi-Strauss's use of these terms derives from the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure: synchrony is like *langue* (collective language), diachrony is like *parole* (individual speech)—analogous to stable continuity and historical contingency.

Lévi-Strauss deploys synchronic and diachronic analysis in his monumental set of volumes known as *Mythologique*s (1964-1971). The study of myth he undertakes appears to be the opposite of an interest in history, as there are no dates or chronology. However, myths exist because of history—in a comparable way that language (*langue*) exists because of speech (*parole*) (and vice versa) (see Gow 2001: 11). Myths 'generate the appearance of stability, an illusion of timelessness that cannot be affected by changes in the world, but they do so by means of their ceaseless transformation' (Gow 2001: 11). In order to sustain a coherence of meaningfulness in social life, myths transform in response to a variety of historical events and it is these subtle changes in myth that make it appear as if there has been no change. It is the analysis of these transformations, moving from one people to the next over two continents, which enabled Lévi-Strauss to examine a complex historical phenomenon, i.e. the past peopling of the Americas. This is a process that occurred in historical time where no archival documents are available but where archaeology and historical linguistics provides evidence to support Lévi-Strauss's analysis (see Lévi-Strauss 1990 [1971]).

Marshall Sahlins (1981; 1985) sought to historicise Lévi-Strauss' structuralism (i.e. his study of the structure of human thought and social organisation) by showing how cultural structures order history (in particular historic events) and conversely. His well-known studies of Captain Cook's sojourn among Hawaiians are an illustration. In that example, Sahlins focuses on the dichotomy between 'the contingency of events [Cook's appearance among Hawaiians] and the recurrence of structures [Hawaiian culture]' (1985: xiii). Structures are understood to coordinate events. In other words, '[c]ulture is historically grounded, its constructs (metaphors [historical metaphors]) embodied in events and occasions, but practice has its own dynamics, and what really takes place generates novel myths [mythical realities]' (Strathern 1996: 124). In order to understand the killing of Cook by Hawaiians, Sahlins argues this event needs to be

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seen in relation to a previous set of events which precipitated Cook's demise. The first event is the Makahiki festival and the second is Cook's return to the island not long after departing following the festival. In the Makahiki, a cosmological drama about political appropriation unfolds. The fertility of the land is renewed and reclaimed by the lost god-chief Lono. But this is supplanted by the ruling chief and the chief's sacrificial cult of Ku. Cook's visit to the Islands corresponded with the festival and the return of Lono. The treatment he received from Hawaiians matched the fixed order of ritual events in the Makahiki (Sahlins 1981: 17).

Lono and Ku were rivals for Hawaiian power. When Cook departed after his second visit, it meant his work of fertility renewal was done. Unfortunately, not long after departing, one of Cook's ships sprung a foremast and the vessels had to return to Hawaii. Cook as Lono was now perceived as a threat to chiefly power. The subsequent killing of Cook, Sahlins argues, was not premeditated by the Hawaiians; neither was it an accident. He suggests it 'was the Makahiki in an historical form' (Sahlins 1981: 24). In other words, according to Sahlins, the cultural structure (Makahiki festival) orders events (Cook's killing). Sahlins' description of an historic event attempts to reproduce for Europeans (Cook and his crew) and anthropologists what is also attributed to the Hawaiians. Yet is this how the Hawaiians perceived the 'events'? Would they have been registered as events in such a historical scheme (Strathern 1990)? Or, rather were the 'events' registered as 'performances, in the images they strive to convey, and thereby in how they present the effects of social action to themselves' (Strathern 1990: 28, emphasis removed; cf. Lederman 1986; Neumann 1992)? What Sahlins' analysis does is not so much historicise structure as show how a unique series of events are amenable to structuralist analysis. In doing so, the events are explained by being put into their historical context—a chronology is created, in the sense that they are embedded in Western historical time.

Out of time

An interest in bringing societies into history and historical time is connected with what has been characterised as the problem of 'coevalness'. This is the problem that the people studied by anthropology are often placed in another time, that of the 'ethnographic present' (Fabian 1983: 31). Synchronic forms of analysis potentially place the object of anthropological study in a time different from the anthropologists—such approaches are atemporal, anthropologist and native are not coeval, not in the same time. The issue of coevalness is also connected to the absence of historical time in some anthropological accounts whereby a society is represented as if unaffected by substantial historical change. From this standpoint a consideration of history does not have an essential influence on the social life being studied (see Thomas 1996: 5).

A range of studies that responded to these concerns and incorporated a historical time perspective appeared from the 1980s onwards (see Cole 2001; Ohnuki-Tierney 1987; Ortner 1989; Parmentier 1987;

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Price 1983, 1990, among numerous others). Notable among these is Jean Comaroff's (1985) historical study of power and resistance among the Tshidi of South Africa. Over a period of one hundred and fifty years, their local independent chiefdom became a rural periphery within the South African state. For over eighty years they were part of a poorly paid labour market but still dependent on their own agricultural production. The Tshidi have also been subject to Christian missionisation starting one century and a half earlier. Comaroff's study traces the interchange of Protestantism and proletarianisation which crystallised the Tshidi's consciousness of inequality and constituted the basis for challenging and resisting their subordination. The forces of state power made explicit political expression difficult, however, 'the submission to authority celebrated by the Christian faith was transformed into a biblically validated defiance' (Comaroff 1985: 2). Such defiance was concealed and coded, and Comaroff's study discloses its logic and enduring historical significance.

David Sutton's (1998) study of indigenous notions of history on the Greek island of Kalymnos also responds to the above concerns about history and coevalness. It explores the myriad ways the past forms part of how the island denizens interpret the present—how the past is thus active and alive in the present. It reveals a distinct form of historical consciousness. Sutton shows, for example, how at local level the indigenous word for 'histories' translates as disputes, quarrels and acts of shame, such as stealing or sexual infidelities, that disrupt the conventional pattern of social life. For a person or family to 'have history' indicates they have a 'stained' name due to past misconduct of a sexual, social, or financial nature. Sutton reveals such histories—as disruptive events—operate as well at national level, as in the collaboration with the Italian Occupation of the island.

In Mahajanga, Madagascar, the idea of 'bearing' history is the focus of Michael Lambek's (2002) study. Bearing here is a kind of embodied history that takes the form of spirit possessions. The spirits that possess the Mahajanga's mediums happen in the medium's houses throughout the area and in the course of their possession a juxtaposition of distinct historical epochs occurs. As the spirits that possess and speak through the mediums are usually ancestral members of the royal clan, Lambek argues that spirit mediums sanctify the present through the ancestral past. Conventionally, only royals were entitled to history in this island context, but over time this history has become more widely disseminated through the mediums that bear and articulate it. The mediums live in and with history and Lambek's study focuses on the multiple dimensions of this bearing, including the ethical activity and power relations that such bearing implies (cf. Lambek 2018).

Often, the intention of the authors is to describe the 'making of history' by the people so described. They draw attention to human capacity to intervene in it, as 'history is not simply something that happens to people, but something they make' (Ortner 1984: 159). In contrast to Wolf's (1982) historical account, where the focus is on a global system in the making over centuries and its local effects, the emphasis of writers such as Sherry Ortner is on the historical agency or practice of local peoples. The historian Reinhart

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Koselleck has noted that the very idea of 'making history' is historical and could not have been formulated before Napoleon and certainly not before the French Revolution: '[O]nly since around 1780 was it conceivable that [history] could be made' (2004 [1979]: 193-4). It is both a modern experience and expectation 'that one is increasingly capable of planning and also executing history'. Clearly, people have always planned what they do. However, to plan explicitly to 'make history' is an idea that was possible to articulate at a distinct time and place. Only in the late eighteenth century was one able to talk of history in general or history in and for itself—history as an 'objectless singular'. Previously histories had existed in the plural, and history as an expression was plural (e.g. the history of England, the history of religion, etc.). When anthropologists speak of people 'making history', even metaphorically, it raises the problem of attributing to people a capacity and outlook that is distinctly Western and one of fairly recent origin. An interest in viewing actors as active no doubt arises from the perceived menace of potentially homogenising world capitalism, colonialism, and post-colonialism, and writers such as Ortner and Sahlins have sought to demonstrate this has not been the case. Asad suggests this is 'prima facie a reasonable claim, although it does not tell us whether, and if so how, local peoples make their own history' (1993: 7).

The flipside of the problem of coevalness is the issue of 'homochronism': 'a displacement of those people who are ethnographically represented out of their temporality and their assimilation into academic discourses of history' (Birth 2008: 7). In other words, it is the problem of establishing a single, all-embracing set of time-based tropes. This makes sense if we are wedded to a linear conception of time with a clear distinction between past and present. However, it does not apply if a peoples' understanding of the past and its relation to the present are different than Western ideas of history. Michael Taussig (1980) provides an instance of this potential problem. His work focuses on mining and plantation labour in South America, connecting folk ideas of the devil with Marxist notions of class consciousness. When Taussig discusses the sugar plantations in western Columbia, his narrative is marked by dates and periods to record the relations between Africans, Indians, and Europeans. Contrasting his account with that of Joanne Rappaport's (1990) discussion of the construction of history and time among the Páez in Columbia (Taussig 1980: 42-45), the question arises whether Taussig might be imposing his temporal and chronological sensibilities on his ethnographic subjects (Birth 2008: 10). This issue raises the possibility that a particular conception of history and its representation of time are perceived as privileged forms of understanding that anthropologist might be too readily prostrating to.

Questioning history; the significance of historicity

In a debate with Jean Paul Sartre, Lévi-Strauss (1966 [1962]: 245-69) famously questioned the superiority attributed to historical knowledge. He claimed that historical knowledge was partial in the sense of having a bias even if it declares not to be. He uses the example of the French Revolution. Writing a history of such an event cannot both be a revolutionary Jacobin account and an aristocratic account. It will always remain

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incomplete and subjective (Lévi-Strauss 1966 [1962]: 257-8). This is true to a greater or lesser degree of all history, whether ‘good’ or ‘bad’ history.

The assumed coherency of history that Western historical thought considers as its focus of study is in fact, Lévi-Strauss suggests, the ‘coherency of myth’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966 [1962]: 245-69; 1984 [1964]: 12-3; White 1978: 103). History, seen from this perspective, is the equivalent of ‘myth with dates’ (Barnes 1971: 547). The coherency of myth is created when ‘basic story units (or clusters of events)’ are arranged into narratives in such a manner that an essentially human structure or process may appear as a natural inevitability’ (White 1978: 103). When a historian or anthropologist gives an account of ‘why something happened’, they make a claim to fact, which actually rests on a set of conventions for the construction of a plausible narrative. All such historical stories, then, take part in the mythical realm because they ‘cosmologise’ or ‘naturalise’ that which are nothing but human constructions; they could be other than how they are structured (White 1978: 103).

Historical narratives, as much as mythic narratives, then, constitute particular modes of experiencing time. Nancy Munn draws on the notion of temporalisation to describe the manifold way relations in time transpire. Actors are not only ‘in’ a particular time. They are simultaneously constructing that time and their own experience of that time in the kind of relations formed between themselves and a given set of temporal orientation points. Munn suggests this is a symbolic process that assumes multiple forms ‘all the time’, with time-reckoning being only one form of temporalisation. It entails both implicit knowing as well as explicit attention to the time element in the course of the projects performed by actors (1992: 104; cf. Fabian 1983: 74). More generally, the past-present-future relation is inherent in all forms of temporalisation. This is because ‘people operate in a present that is always infused and which they are further infusing with pasts and futures’ (Munn 1992: 115; Gell 1992: 238-9). Although we all live in one single time, how those past-present-future relations are represented in any social context can never be known, except through careful study.

For example, among the Cumbal Indians of Columbia, reference to a past action is made by saying *adelante* (‘forward’ in time or in space). Cumbales explain this usage by arguing that ‘although events occurred in the past, we live their consequences today and must act upon them now. For this reason, what already occurred is in front of the observer, because that is where it can be corrected’ (Rappaport 1988: 721). In a similar way, the New Zealand Maoris refer to the past as *nga ra o mua*, ‘the days in front’ and the future as *kei muri,* ‘behind’. The use of these terms is explained as follows: ‘They move into the future with their eyes on the past. In deciding how to act in the present, they examine the panorama of [the past] spread before their eyes, and select the model that is most appropriate …from the many presented there’. It would be mistaken to see the Maori living in the past. Rather, the past is drawn on for guidance—the past is brought into both present and future (Metge 1976: 70).

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In referring to these representations of time as 'history', their distinctiveness is obscured, potentially reducing them to the Western concept of history, where the writing of history known as historicism defines how the past should be studied. Historicism insists that the past must be understood on its own terms (see Palmié 2013). For many Western people, it makes perfect sense to say 'the past is dead, you cannot change the past'. It is because it is dead that the past can be an object of historical study (Dening 1991). In a similar fashion, the idea of the past as a 'foreign country' (Lowenthal 1985) also has resonance for many Westerners. In a literal way, the subject of history 'invades' that country, subjects its denizens to this discipline, and appropriates their countries to the present (see Fasolt 2004: xviii). But these ideas do not necessarily apply across societies.

Such a complaint was levelled against ethnohistory (see Krech 1991). As traditionally practiced, ethnohistory has meant the reconstruction of the history of a people that had in the past no written history. Others disagreed with this convention: '[E]thnohistory … must fundamentally consider the people's own sense of how events are constituted, and their ways of culturally constructing the past' (Gewertz & Schieffelin 1985: 3). Similar criticisms were levelled against the formal principles used for assessing the truth value of oral traditions (Vansina 1965) as if they were written archival documents (Rosaldo 1980a; cf. Rosaldo 1980b).

These critiques suggest radically questioning the nature of history and by implication that of historical time. The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has advocated a shift away from two ontological assumptions that inform 'secular conceptions of the political and the social' (2008 [2000]: 15-6). One is that people exist in a 'single and secular historical time' that encompasses other sorts of time (cf. Bear 2014: 5-6). The second is that people are ontologically singular. Entities such as gods or spirits can be represented as 'beliefs' but cannot be ascribed any real agency in historical events (cf. Sahlins 2017). The problem is one of moving beyond Eurocentric histories and the naturalism of historical time associated with the idea that 'everything can be historicised' (Chakrabarty 2008 [2000]: 73, emphasis removed; cf. Hastrup 1992: 11).

Consider the Indian Santal rebellion of 1855. The leaders of the rebellion said they carried out their actions as ordered by their god Thakur. Such ideas can be acknowledged, but to attribute any actual agency to the god in the events that transpired would go against standard historical procedures for resolving debates about the past and the kinds of evidence that can be used (Chakrabarty 2008 [2000]: 104). A comparable example is found among the Kaluli people, Papua New Guinea who contend that, years ago but within living memory, forest animals emerged in large numbers to attack a Kaluli longhouse (Schieffelin 1985). It was a form of revenge. The cause of such an attack was disrespect shown to animals, an event known as *sana mono* ('strike' 'eat'). Accounts from Kaluli people whose longhouses have been attacked in this way are described in detail and it is shown how the attacks have a reality based on Kaluli perceptions of such events (Schieffelin 1985: 44-5). However, Western historians would not accept the *sana mono* as a real event 'because they do not accept the Kaluli epistemological framework which gives the events in question

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their “meaning”’ (Schieffelin 1985: 54). Echoing Chakrabarty’s analysis, *sana mono* highlights the limits of credibility in Western historical consciousness and ways of knowing (Schieffelin 1985: 54).

There is thus no third voice or perspective that can integrate the views of the Santal or Kaluli with that of Eurocentric history. Each has distinct ideas of causality and of the relations between past, present and future. How can this problem of analysis be resolved? Anthropologists and historians have been moving in the same direction in this regard (see Ballard 2014). The historian François Hartog (2015 [2003]) has proposed the notion of ‘regimes of historicity’ to solve this problem. These regimes are analytic constructs that refer to how individuals and groups situate themselves in time, and how they consider themselves to alter over time (cf. Trouillot 1995: 3-4).

As individuals always have degrees of separation and relations from their selves as well as others, it is through the categories of past, present, and future that order and meaning is provided to these forms of division and connection, enabling them to be understood and articulated (Hartog 2015 [2003]: xvi). For example, a Dinka man (in what is now South Sudan) had been imprisoned in Khartoum. In response to this past event, he called one of his children Khartoum in memory of that place and to exorcise the powerful agency that troubling place from the past could have over him in the present and future. This Dinka man’s historicity was bound up with Khartoum in a way not captured by viewing his past through the lens of history (Lienhardt 1961: 149). It is thus possible to recognise historicity separately from the advent of the modern concept of history and historicism.

The significance of historicity in this regard is that it does not assume that events or time exist as a line of occurrences that add together as ‘history’. Whereas orthodox ideas of history (associated with historicism) isolate the past, historicity emphases the multifaceted relationships of past, present, and future (see Hirsch & Stewart 2005; Fazioli 2017: 16). Thus, different peoples will have distinct ways of valuing and communicating these categories and their interconnections (see Argenti 2019). It is this that the analyst might designate as a ‘regime’ or, alternatively, historicity may be understood as part of a cosmology or worldview (Tonkin 1992: 68-70). In both cases, the issue of one of how people make sense and represent their experiences of time.

For instance, what is especially novel in the New Testament is ‘the tension between the decisive “already fulfilled” and the “not yet completed” between present and future’ (Hartog 2015 [2003]: 61). It is upon this tension that a Christian order of time and cosmology was created as well as a Christian influenced history, being a history of salvation (Cullman 1967: 172). To nineteenth century evangelical missionaries in Africa, the Bible was of overriding central importance: ‘[i]t was their supreme paradigmatic history, through which they recognised new situations and even their own actions’ (Peel 1995: 595-6). The missionaries did not just see themselves, but that of the African ‘other’, in this cosmology and narratives of the Bible (cf. Trautmann 1995: 176). Subsequently, a worldview based on ideas of progress supplanted the ‘striving for

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salvation' and appropriated 'the latter's forward focused tension combined with a "hopeful expectation" orientated toward the future' (Löwith 1949: 47). The native who did not pursue such a 'progressive' temporal trajectory could appear as living in another time, as lacking 'modernity', and a proper grasp of history could be viewed as 'history's forgotten doubles' (Nandy 1995). At the same time, it is evident that the contemporary is plural, radically plural, and diverse peoples live their lives according to distinct historicities that highlight the conceptual limits of conventional historical practice, historical time, and thus of historicism.

Conclusion

The professionalisation of anthropology occurred at the same time that historicism became established as the leading paradigm of historical practice. An inescapable fact of the world we inhabit is that everything, potentially, can be placed in a historical context (Nandy 1995: 45). This is the basis of the modern historical consciousness, whereby the past is no longer present and is thus an object of study. But this is only one way of understanding the past and its relation to the present and future. There are other ways of conceiving 'history' and historical consciousness (see Stewart 2012; Hodges 2015).

The dictum 'that anthropology must choose between being history and being nothing' is today widely accepted—at least insofar as certain contexts of study clearly require historical analysis to be understood. The reverse may also be true, namely that 'history must choose between being … anthropology or being nothing'. Although the latter has to some extent occurred (e.g. see Hunt 1989), both anthropology and history can perhaps transcend the supremacy of historicism. This would be by revealing other ways of knowing the inextricable relations between past, present, and future, thereby eschewing the idea that everything can be historicised, and the explicit and implicit power structures that historicism sustains (see Chakrabarty 2008 [2000]; Fasolt 2004).

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Note on contributor

Eric Hirsch is Professor of Anthropology at Brunel University London. He has a long-standing interest in the ethnography and history of Melanesia. He is the author most recently of *Ancestral presence: cosmology and historical experience in the Papuan highlands* (2020, Routledge) and co-editor of *The Melanesian world* (2019, Routledge).

Prof. Eric Hirsch, Anthropology, Brunel University London, Uxbridge, Middlesex, UB8 3PH, UK. Eric.hirsch@brunel.ac.uk

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[1] Among numerous citations, the following are a selection from the past and more recent, some of which are referred to in the text below: Barnes 1971; Cohn 1987; Comaroff & Comaroff 1992; Evans-Pritchard 1962; Hastrup 1992; Radin 1933; Rivers 1922; Stocking 2001; Varisco 2015; White 1957; cf. Axel 2002: 33.

[2] Georg Iggers (1995) discusses the origins and complex of meanings attributed to the term over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

[3] Matti Bunzl (1996) traces Boas's cautious cultural historicism to the German anthropological tradition of Bastian and Ritter, through Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt and ultimately to the Herdian ideal of the Volksgeist.

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