

Berichte und Kommentare

History and Culture

Problems of Cultural Anthropology and Historical Anthropology

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In its early days as a field of research, history was in fact a history of culture (the “spirit,” “genius,” “characters” of peoples, nations). As time went on and for a long time, cultural history became a marginal occupation practised by few historians, in much the same way as cultural sociology it was, until recently, not popular in the community of sociologists. The term culture was at the time usually defined as a custom or as mentality, ideology, social awareness, a superstructure, in terms of its self-sufficiency, cumulativity, progress (Wierzbicki 1999; Grabski 2000). In recent decades, culture has become one of the key terms in the so-called new history/cultural history, historical anthropology, ethnohistory, as well as one of the main problems in the new cultural sociology. Today, culture is perceived in anthropological terms or anthropologically sociological terms. This, as Aaron Guriewicz predicted years ago, will “transform history into a study of Man” (1997: 20).

History and ethnology/sociocultural anthropology have developed parallelly. Ethnology/sociocultural anthropology, in its early days, preferred historical explanations, while considering ethnographical materials as historical documents to subsequently adopt, mainly thanks to functionalism and structuralism, an ahistorical or even an antihistorical position. It was then that the following distinctions crystallised:

- the time of the savage belongs to anthropology, as our time belongs to sociology, while the past belongs to history;
- anthropology is concerned with (to use Claude Lévi-Strauss’s terminology) “cold” societies (so-

cieties without a history); historians study “hot” societies or the history recorded in writing; cultures without a writing system belong to archaeology and ethnography;

- anthropologists are interested in cultural reproductions, invariants, systemic explanations, synchrony, since historians are interested in change perceived as cause-effect relationships, chronology, diachrony (Pomian 2006: 199–202).

This anthropology, which predominated for a large part of the 20th century, did not need history for empirical and theoretical reasons. This reluctance towards historical explanations was caused by a lack of historical sources; this reluctance resulted from anthropologists’ ethnographic experience of fieldwork, where they are always faced with transformations of even fairly recent historical events into mytho-history, equating myths, as the “model history,” with history (and equating cosmogenesis with cosmology, anthropogenesis with anthropology). Studying history diverges from the purpose of anthropology, also for the reason that Lévi-Strauss indicated most clearly: the sociocultural processes studied by ethnologists are repeatable and reversible, therefore, in ethnological cultures, the present is not different from the past and events are predictable; nothing here happens for the first time and once only; events are a realisation of permanent patterns (Lévi-Strauss 1968). This reconstruction of culture results in repetitions, thus in a history that is sacred, preventing the origination of a history that is secular – a history without necessity, meaning, purpose, as Leszek Kołakowski wrote in connection with the statement that without methods that explain history, a history that is purely empirical is absurd and only Cleopatra’s nose exists in it (1990: 58–68).

The anthropology, concerned with proving the systemic and structural character of societies and “stable” cultures (in these cultures it is easier to identify what is typical) and thus proving their self-sufficiency, self-control, homogeneity, resistance to change (these, according to the theory of

the systems of value, are the properties of a system as such), was falling into an “ethnological eternity” and keeping the myth of “peoples with a history” alive. Folk-type cultures are closed cultures, determined by their isolation in space, by class and awareness, cultures that transform history into a myth. That is what not long ago Ludwik Stomma (1986) wrote in “Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej XIX wieku” (An Anthropology of the Culture of the 19th Century Polish Countryside), following the structuralistic pattern. Such a theory cannot explain the sometimes violent invasions of history by people, as during the Galician Slaughter or the Bolshevik Revolution, or people’s participation in national or political movements.

Historical anthropology could not accept such presentations of culture and history from ethnology/cultural anthropology. Therefore, it critically accepted selected theories and procedures, even topics (according to Le Goff 2007: 281, history became too similar to ethnology at the expense of sociology and other exact sciences) and now it teaches us, according to the German ethnologist Hermann Bausinger (1985), that

- folk-type cultures are open systems with history being their intrinsic part; that such cultures are parts of more general sociocultural, economic, political, and similar systems;
- as a result, it is impossible to determine the meaning of historically changeable cultural phenomena only with the use of hermeneutics if that culture is the result of transformations of elements derived from other cultures – its partial and temporary coherence is the result of local praxeologies;
- the scope and content of such cultures are historically changeable (a different thing was the mediaeval folk culture described by Guriewicz, another thing was the folk culture in modern times described by Peter Burke or Norbert Schindler, and yet another thing was the folk culture in the time when it became the “property” of folk culture experts and ethnographers).

Therefore, the main objectives this history has against ethnology was the fact that the latter considered cultures as autonomous and isolated, coherent, static, approached ethnological concepts and patterns ahistorically, avoided combining synchrony with diachrony, and was more concerned with what people had in their heads rather (notional concepts) than what was really happening in the streets (social practices).

This criticism only indirectly results from histo-

ry’s practice of ethnology/anthropology. It is rather the result of the influence of post-structuralism and (postmodernism) in the new history and, even more, in cultural anthropology. Post-structural anthropology radically questioned the existing theories: the idea of culture has compromised itself because, inter alia, it reifies social life, presents it as static, homogeneous, continuous, systemic, holistic, while in reality an anthropologist should be interested in what is referred to as conflict, contradiction, difference, fragmentation, and variability and should reject the ethnographic present and the terms that generate alleged similarities, continuity and that exclude time, events, history, etc. Contrary to appearances, this version of anthropology is not closer to history, because its criticism concerns contemporary cultures, not historical cultures, because it – yes – emphasises the eventualization, but it also questions long-lasting structures. It is senseless to historical anthropology, which, if it wants to be history – if we agree with Paul Ricouer (2008: 133–154) and Le Goff (2007: 176–191) – must move between “event” and “system.”

Ethnographic data normally do not invalidate anthropological theories. The theories of myth, ritual, symbolism, etc. are, however, influenced by the places where ethnographic material is obtained and the methods employed to do so, and from the “theory of the indigenous product,” in the same way as history as a field of research is influenced by historicity – this being a result (such as “corporeality” in M. Foucault’s projects) of the influence of knowledge, power, and experience.

Discovering history for anthropology was influenced by fieldwork experience (e.g., R. Firth’s or E. Leach’s):

- working among “peoples without a history” during their sometimes violent changes,
- realising the fact that many of such peoples created their histories in their own way and for their own use (and myths and rituals are not always ubiquitous in them, not always seen as absolutely true and effective – the total mythical thinking model is not justified in any sources) which were so perceived as a result of revisions and modifications of existing theories and procedures, their radical rejection,¹

1 E.g. by E. Evans-Pritchard, who, influenced by Collinwood, considered anthropology as a historically idiographic field of research, not a sociologically-nomological one, who considered ethnography as the practice of history through fieldwork and who claimed that not only cause-effect relationships but also semantic relationships between facts are historical explanations) (Gellner 1995: 15–36).

- contrasting anthropological knowledge with the knowledge of new French history, with the new sociocultural history, particularly as a result of the occurrence of post-structuralism and post-modernism in the humanities, social sciences, and philosophy.

Historical anthropology is created within the limits of sociocultural anthropology, even within the framework of its classical models. Anthropologists make attempts to explain by experiencing culture anthropologically, though mainly in relation to ethnological societies and cultures. Interestingly, what they use in their attempts are mainly historical materials and publications, e.g., Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere, when they anthropologically interpreted the story of Captain Cook in Hawaii, or Victor Turner, when he interpreted the history of the Hidalgo revolt in Mexico in 1809 using the methodology of social anthropology and symbolic anthropology. Obviously, no documents produced by ethnography exist that would relate to the time before those events. Even if such documents existed, they would not enable presentations of historical anthropology, because the existing ethnographic materials are descriptive, systematic, synchronic (such materials are always atemporal, presenting societies and cultures as static); ethnographic studies conducted in the same places (e.g., Firth's research on the island of Tikopia) allow for considering general problems of change, but not for considering history. In historical materials, on the other hand, it is often difficult to distinguish real events from their presentations, and historical facts from anthropological facts. Anthropologists consider these materials not as sources but as (in the same way as semiotics does) texts – the remains of old discourses in nonexistent “languages” of culture. Therefore, it is pointless to distinguish, in such materials, the true and the false, real events and fantasies – all the events described there were true if the participants of the events considered them as true and real and if they were guided in those events by their own beliefs. An anthropologist and a historian will never find identical facts in the same materials. Different anthropologists discover different facts in the same historical materials. In these, M. Sahlins discovered data on the mythology and rituals of the Hawaiians, which explain the apotheosis and death of Captain Cook in Hawaii. G. Obeyesekere (2007) considered the documents as evidence of the mythmaking of the Europeans and Sahlins himself as a mythmaker. Although the discussion between them is considered as not concluded, they can easily be considered as mythmakers (in the same senses as they accused

each other), as can any other anthropologist and non-anthropologist, if we invoke C. Lévi-Strauss (and J. Derrida's deconstruction of his writings): an anthropologist works in much the same way as the *bricoleur* or the mythmaker does (C. Lévi-Strauss made it clear: my books on myths are myths of the next grade) – he uses his toolbox – with tools such as culture, tradition, system, structure, sign, process, event, myth, ritual, symbolism, etc. to create appropriate knowledge (Derrida 1992: 163–167). This is connected with our regular problem: How far do those surveyed, asked about their ethnographic authorities, recognise themselves in anthropological presentations?

The problems of C. Lévi-Strauss' cultural anthropology, i.e., the relation between “system” and “history,” between “structure” and “genesis,” “synchrony” and “diachrony,” reformulated by Marxism (M. Godelier, L. Althusser) were adopted by M. Sahlins, while retaining the traditional belief of American anthropology (F. Boas and L. Kroeber) that culture is a form of articulating the world, programming people's actions, influencing history – in his presentation of the story of Captain Cook in Hawaii in the structural historical anthropology manner. The events that happened then, i.e., from the apotheosis to the death of Cook, are evidence of the thinking of those natives for whom the events were realisations of mythical stories; the participants in the events were mythical characters. Therefore, when Cook arrived in Hawaii during a Hawaiian ritual situation favourable to him, he was found to be an embodiment of a local fertility deity. He returned in a ritually unfavourable situation, so he had to die. Myths explain events, describing them according to their own scripts. The reconstruction of myths, this mytho-practice, is never the ideal reproduction of the original; a series of events disturbs the structure of the myths, makes changes to it (in the same way as speech makes changes to language, according to structural linguistics), which resulted in later social, political, etc. changes in Hawaii (Sahlins 2006, 2007). It is an explanation of a story, an explanation that departs from diachrony where it loses the meanings of particular instances to finally reach the continually recurring structures, hidden models of behaviour, i.e., to return to synchrony. That is the idea behind structural analysis: decoding means to indicate what is repeated continually, since events as such, sequences of events themselves have no meaning; meaning does not lie in a linear sequence of time but in structure, not in a syntagm but in a paradigm. That is how C. Lévi-Strauss analysed myths and that is how E. Leach analysed biblical tales. M. Sahlins applied the myth

transformation model (structural transformations of myth) to history, thus presenting history as sequences of transformations where no moments are preferential (in the same way as there is no main basic or starting myth in myths in general) – history is a continuous and non-oriented system of transformations.

“There are as many histories as there are cultures,” said M. Sahlins. However, in the same way as cultures differ in the meaning of myth, ritual, magic, symbols, rationality, truth, etc (if only to cite E. Evans-Pritchard or Dan Sperber), they must be different in terms of historicity and the practice of historicity. Native histories cannot be described in the same way as classical history, since they are the practice of myths, the product of local discourses. The memory of the past is recorded in various forms of culture, folklore: some of these are concrete and chronological, others focus on historiographical content, etc. No distinction exists here between history as a field of the practical mind, truth, rational calculations and myth as a field of imagination, faith, irrationalism. In hierarchical societies, with royal authority of divine nature, history is qualitative, not quantitative, as the ruler is both a prerequisite for the existence of a community in society and the foundation of the system that determines whether the community will continue or cease to exist – history is here a mytho-history of rulers, battles, and great deeds. In such societies, no single historical knowledge exists. Rules have their dynastic traditions, genealogies, ceremonials, epics, legends, etc., while the others live apparently outside history. This, however, according to M. Sahlins (as well as M. Foucault and P. Bourdieu), is the result of the ordinary division of knowledge in line with the divisions of power. Rulers and their subjects live according to the same rules of thinking and behaviour and the historical knowledge of the latter lies in practical actions, local tales, and habits (Sahlins 2007).

Historical events correspond to the structure of rituals. According to V. Turner, the Hidalgo revolt of 1809 is, in the history of Mexico, a threshold between the colonial system and contemporary times, thus corresponding to the liminal phase of the rites of passage, to the period of *communitas* and anti-structure (according to van Gennep’s theory of the rites of passage, developed by Turner). He presented the events in terms of symbolic anthropology, myths, ideologies, rituals and symbols in action, considering history as a social game – according to the rules of social anthropology and processual sociology. Social games and symbols in action are the driving force behind the reproduction of order, which is what ethnologists are usually more inter-

ested in, but they can also be a source of changes, events, and processes (which, in turn, historians are more interested in). Analyses of social games encompass the dynamics and processual dimension of society and do not require abandoning synchronic analyses. Synchronic presentations that identify order, harmony, and statics are too one-sided, excessively idealised, and need to be supplemented with presentations of dynamics and processes. Order and stability lie in structure, while change lies in antistructure and *communitas*, which manifest themselves in liminal situations, as in millenarianistic movements, revolutions, rebellion, as during the Hidalgo revolt. Each such event has its own etiology, its scenarios, aspirations to reach “the end of history,” to create a new structure. They are not spontaneous processes, but are channelled by social structures, by systems of symbols, by ideologies, etc. The social games already taking place and the patterns produced by a system of social symbols are realised by the participants of events in social space as mytho-ritual scenarios. This is accompanied by the formation of the feeling that history repeats itself continually (Turner 2005: 81–127).

Historical events are a problem of social communication, a confrontation of disparate hermeneutic systems, a clash of semiotic systems, if only we consider culture as a semiotic system that determines the way people behave and the results of their behaviour. Considering events as a semiotically cultural problem does not rule out explaining the events in ways that are typical of classical history (using reconstructed motivations and analyses of factors), though it weakens the persuasive power of at least some of them (e.g., psychological ones). This is the starting point for Tzvetan Todorov, a theoretician of literature and culture, to culturalistically explain the conquest of America in the 16th century, Cortés’s rapid and easy victory with a few hundred people over the powerful Aztec Empire of Montezuma (Todorov 1996). Todorov, as a hermeneuticist, corresponded to the semiotics of the European Middle Ages: he considered signs as symbols, while Cortés corresponded to the semiotics of the Renaissance, as signs were mere tools for him. The Aztecs regarded the world as a great book of symbols, a world where everything is connected with everything else, where everything is hierarchically and permanently arranged. In a world dominated by myth, a world where the present is a form of the past, a world excessively ritualised where an ordinary conversation, a gesture, the waging of a war or a battle is a ritual, and by magic, the Aztec tried to defeat the Spaniards using magical practices and using prophecies. It is a world where only what

previously was a word can be an act, so each decision depends on a prophecy. It is a world where the Spanish conquest of America took place, where the Indians, as prisoners of tradition, met the Spaniards, who acted in line with their judgments of situations and who were capable of improvising. The winners in this war of semiotic systems were those who manipulated signs as tools, who preferred syntagms at the expense of paradigms and who preferred contexts at the expense of codes.

Anthropological explanations of history and the categorisation of events by means of culture, myth, religion, ritual, symbols, or social games are criticised for cultural and sociological determinism (this does not apply to each historical anthropology, e.g., that of E. Wolf [2009], who described the history of alleged peoples without a history not in terms of notional systems but in terms of the political economics of Marxism), and for semiotic determinism, when history is explained using structural semiotics. Such accusations are easy when the ideal is still to explain social life in the past and in contemporary times not with the use of selected factors but rather by considering such factors as mutually-conditioning elements.

Semiotics, which has recently been transformed, in the work of Jurij Łotman (2008) or the work of Boris Uspensky (1998) on cultural semiotics (systemic and synchronic presentations), into historical semiotics (considerably influenced by the “new history”), expresses individual culturalistic explanations of history in homogeneous language – the theory of semiotics is the general theory of culture (“and, at the end of the day, a substitute for cultural anthropology”; Eco 2009: 28) – demonstrates its capabilities and limitations, thus the capabilities and limitations of the ethnological versions of historical anthropology. After all, historical semiotics concerns a certain aspect of history. It considers histories as reconstructions of cultural semiotics; these are always the result of a semiotic transformation of the past into cultural texts. It considers culture as a form of articulating the world and, at the same time, as a programme of behaviours, a “semiotic system” that determines the sequence of events and their results in practical life. The reconstruction of culture initiates history – synchrony and diachrony are inseparable. The events, persons, and things that constitute history must be considered as significant structures applied to the model of the world as used in a given tradition, with its valuation of time and space, with its chronology, casuistry, etc. so that they could be considered as meaningful and purposeful. By considering people as subjects of history, whose actions are determined by cultural rules and texts,

cultural semiotics presents histories (in the same way as ethnology presents cultures) somehow from their interior, in a microscale (ethnographically). As a result, semiotics proves effective mainly in those cultural histories where “the plan of expression” and “the plan of content” are reversible according to Bogusław Żyłko (1998: 10), which are “expression-oriented” according to Jurij Łotman and Boris Uspensky, which are “closed”-type cultures according to Alexander Piatigorski (1975:100–111), i.e., in relation to ethnological cultures, which cultural anthropology presents as cultures dominated by myths, rituals, symbols, and magic.

Are, therefore, the ethnological versions of historical anthropology and its theories of culture acceptable to historians looking for solutions to problems in sociocultural anthropology? And, is the very fact of not respecting the divisions of knowledge into history and anthropology sufficient for A. Guriewicz’s prediction to come true?

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Artificial Modification of Skulls and Teeth from Ancient Burials in Armenia

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Although the idea of “creating man in the image and likeness of God” had a worldwide popularity, almost as widespread in traditional cultures was the attempt to “fix the work of the Creator.” And if some of these attempts have received a pragmatic interpretation, others still store secrets. In many cultures, and in various socio-cultural circumstances, we find proofs of artificial shaping of the human skull which correspond to the period between 45,000 B.C.E. and 600 C.E. (see also Lorentz 2010). Each category of such deformations contains several sub-types and variations. In this article, I concentrate on artificially deformed skulls from the burial grounds located on the Shirak Plateau in Armenia that date back to the period between 100 and 300 C.E.

Artificial Modification of Ancient Skulls from the Benjamin and Karmrakar Burial Grounds

The number of individual skulls found at the Benjamin burial ground¹ amounts to 218 (Khudaverdyan 2000). Clear signs of artificial deformation are noted in 4 adults and 26 children (Figs. 1–4). The deformation was achieved by various means and methods, such as bandaging and placing wooden, bone, or stone objects on the frontal and parietal bone. In

1 The Benjamin burial ground is located on the Shirak Plateau in western Armenia. The anthropological material presented in this article was collected during the research conducted between 1990 and 1997 by the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography under the guidance of Ter-Martirosova, and the employees of the city museums of Gyumri, with the assistance of Anahit Khudaverdyan.