

*History and Anthropology:
A Marriage Made in Heaven*

Working Paper

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Anthropology is not one of those disciplines, such as history or philosophy, that has been a basic component of the Western academic tradition for a long time. Indeed, anthropology only entered into the curriculum a scant hundred years ago. Its first teachers were scholars who lacked what we today would consider professional training. Among them, I have in mind, for example, the great Scottish student of comparative religion and kinship, William Robertson Smith (1845-94); Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), appointed anthropology professor at Oxford in 1896; Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), the student of the folklorist Sir James Frazier; and Franz

Boas (1858-1942), whose doctoral degree was actually in physics. None of these founding figures could be said to have been "trained" in anthropology, for no anthropology existed to train them.

But to speak of a discipline of anthropology, I should first offer a definition of the field, to spell out what I think it includes. Defining it helps us think about what happens when something that people may have been doing for a long time -- as a hobby, as a source of entertainment, or for fundamental reasons that then become the basis for a new field -- changes into something else: a field of study society formally anoints as a profession. When such a field becomes useful (or profitable) to society, educators may decide to include it in the offerings of the Academy, or as we say, "to put it in the curriculum."

Of course, if we mean by "anthropology" merely looking at the way other peoples live, then anthropologists have been around as long as our species has. Many decades ago when I asked one of my Yale undergraduates to tell me what his term paper was going to be about, he replied that he wanted to write about "why the Crow Indians were so weird." That sort of "anthropology" must be very old. From the first, understandably ethnocentric humans surely responded with great curiosity, and probably at times with hostility, to the differing behaviors of other peoples. Instantly apparent (visible) differences in coiffure, clothing, gait, face and body markings such as tattoos, facial expressions -- for example, how much people from a different group are given to smiling, how frequently, and on what occasions -- probably excited both negative and positive reactions among our ancestors, since our human beginnings.

As soon as I say that, though, we are impelled to wonder why human groups were different from each other in these ways. Of course that was a question that much concerned those whom we think of as our anthropological ancestors, even before there was any anthropology. Why do the people in that place speak a different language from us? Why do they eat foods that we find disgusting, and even worse, do so with such pleasure? Why are the feathers they wear in their hair dyed red, when *we* know that any really normal human being wears green feathers? Why do they eat with those barbaric knives and forks, when all civilized people eat with pairs of little sticks, like us? And so on, and so on.

Anthropology began, I would dare to say, as *a science of inquiries about the origins and continuities of the patterned differentiation of human beings into distinguishable groups*. We

know that the Japanese, for example, smooth wood surfaces by pulling the plane toward them, while the Europeans do the same thing by pushing the plane away from them. But we don't know why. A lot of the early answers to such inquiries were simply wrong, even if the theorists who came up with those answers were quite sure they were right. For instance, many observers decided with perfect certainty that the patterned behavioral differences between groups could be attributed to group physical differences -- that is, to their race. So-called "explanations" of this kind die hard, as we all know; many people throughout the world still think that "race" is the fundamental explanation of behavioral differences between groups, even if they are now more reluctant to say so out loud. There were other such explanations, such as the effects of climate on temperament. Supposedly, cold weather made a people taciturn, whereas hot weather made another people talkative, emotional, passionate, or even violent. Some saw the answer to such differences as originating in the differing environments in which people lived -- a view that is seemingly a bit more persuasive. But no explanation was so powerful -- so satisfying -- at least in the view of ordinary people, as the idea of race, and unfortunately that idea is still disturbingly powerful.

But in the course of one century, owing mostly to the research of anthropologists -- and among them most of all, I would say, a single scholar, Franz Boas, and his students -- a scientific basis for a wholly different explanation was erected (Mintz 1982). I think the anthropological profession largely arose out of that research. There is more to be said about it, once it becomes clearer what my definition of anthropology includes.

Here is that initial definition again: *A science of inquiries about the origins and continuities of the patterned differentiation of human beings into distinguishable groups.* During the last hundred years, most such inquiries in academic anthropology could be organized under four headings, and in the U.S., these headings became the subfields of anthropology: physical anthropology; archaeology; linguistics; and cultural anthropology or ethnography. Each one of these subfields has a historical component. This is so obvious for archaeology and for physical anthropology that they are omitted from the balance of this paper. That enables me to concentrate on linguistics and cultural anthropology here, to suggest how these fields took on their modern form.

My purpose is to show how the idea that our physical nature explained patterned group differences among us was supplanted by a basically different kind of explanation, one that would look at our social behavior, in order to grasp how individual behavior was shaped. This alternate view has no need to call upon group differences in appearance for a convincing explanation of how patterned behavioral differences appear. Let me refer first to language in making my case.

The capacity for speech is clearly grounded in our biological endowments. All normal, healthy human infants mature to the point when, one by one, all over the world, each is ready to learn to speak. But if we put alongside that universal, biologically-tuned capacity for speech a question about what it is that each such infant learns to speak -- when we think about the bewildering number and variety of human languages -- we see that the capacity for speech on the one hand, and speaking a particular language on the other, are completely different matters. More, we must concede that the explanations for these two seemingly linked phenomena are entirely different.

Being able to speak turns on our genetic endowments as a species. But if the language we spoke were a genetic matter, we would of course all speak the same language, and we would not have to learn to speak it. Each language is a social invention, something created at some past point in time by other human beings, collectively, as a form of communication. It is a human artifact-- not a natural event, but human-made, and hence an event of history. A language grows over time, shrinking here, expanding there, changing; but as long as people keep speaking it, it continues to exist and grows older. When we notice that each such language must be learned, learned socially, and learned by every single individual who speaks it, we uncover the boundary between our natural history as a biological species, and our history as a species that learns and uses many different tongues, each one a historical product. Language, in other words, is engrafted upon our organic nature; as Alfred Kroeber wrote long ago, it is extra-organic, or superorganic (Kroeber 1948: 253-255).

Such an insight moves us away from explanations that attribute our differing group behavior to our physical type. It is through such insights that anthropology began to grasp more firmly the significance of social life in the emergence of patterned group differences among humans.

Language is important in this picture, because each of the thousands of different human languages is a unique system of symbolic communication, and an essential pillar in the social life of the group. We learn the one spoken by those who raise us; and we speak it the way they speak it -- that is, we get it ready-made. None of us, not even a Shakespeare, can ever give back to one's own language what the language gave to him or her. As groups of human beings created these different communication systems, each language seemed to take on a life of its own -- but I say that cautiously, because it does not really mean what it appears to mean. It is through language, most of all, that each group conceptualizes and communicates its distinctive version of reality. It may do so as well through pictures and in many other ways, but most of all, and most importantly, through the system of spoken symbols we call language. All I mean by language seeming to take on a life of its own is that it appears to change by itself, even as people go on speaking it. It is a social phenomenon even though its community of speakers is made up of hundreds -- or even hundreds of millions -- of individuals.

The final category of the four subfields that I noted -- those behaviors which cultural anthropology or ethnography addresses -- has to do with culture. The word "culture" today is so overused that people hardly hear it any more when one says it. Just as the language of Freud was made nearly meaningless by popular usage, so the term "culture" has been emptied of meaning. We now have the culture of the locker room and the boardroom, and people speak of creating a culture as if they were growing cherry tomatoes. But it was the anthropologists who first developed the concept of culture, and it still has real meaning.

Anthropologists have given two primary but different meanings to "culture." One meaning has to do with its distribution. For anthropologists, *all* human beings have culture, just as all human beings have language; it is a property of our species, and it has nothing to do with the way we look, or what kind of technology we have, or whether or not we like Beethoven or Shakespeare.

But in its second meaning, culture, like language, can be differentiated into blocks or segments, assignable to different groups. Cultural boundaries are nowhere so neat as language boundaries. But we are used to speaking of Chinese culture or Trobriand culture or Kwakiutl culture. There are genuine problems associated with this practice, because a group and its culture

are both abstractions, and are never so neatly correspondent to each other. But it is nonetheless a useful descriptive tool, as long as its limitations are recognized.

One way to use the term "culture" in describing all human beings is to say that culture is *all behavior mediated through symbols* -- a concise phrasing attributed to Read Bain (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1963:137). When we speak not of "culture" but of "*a* culture," we refer to the same kind of behavior, but we mean it with reference to a particular human group. The consequences of that behavior are cumulative. I mean that the consequences pile up behind us, so to speak. Cumulateness is to some degree a characteristic of our communicative ability. We communicate freely among ourselves -- females to males, young to old, poor to rich, whatever -- and this symbolic communication enables us to make our experiences continuous. As the archeologist V.G. Childe once wrote (Childe 1947:12), we humans are able to bind time. For us, experiences and thoughts flow on in a sort of endless river. In contrast, most animal experiences are disjunct, separate. We can speak of past events and even of future events; we can link past, present, and future by what we say. In short, we have become historical animals, rather than simply natural historical animals, like other living things.

Moreover, the results of our symbolically-mediated behavior -- both material results, like Kleenex, K-Mart and Kalashnikovs, and non-concrete results, like religious and political beliefs -- are similarly cultural in nature, because they are both the residues of past symbolic activity, and the basis for ongoing symbolic activity. I think that language is a good place to see how those results pile up; half of the dictionary is a resting place for such residues, as are patent offices, archives, libraries, and many of our museums. Our minds are also museums of a kind for such materials, though different peoples surely have different libraries in their heads -- and to some extent, individuals within a single group also have somewhat different mental libraries.

Though I have not made my case fully yet, this may be a good place to offer an illustration of what I mean by "culture," and how -- when it is viewed historically -- it seems to live and breathe. Let me do so with an example drawn from the so-called "primitive" world. Some of you may know that there were horses in the New World, but that they became extinct either before the arrival of Old World peoples, or soon after. And so the domesticated horses brought to the New World by the Spaniards were a new thing for the people called American Indians. Horses were taken up by Indian peoples as soon as they could get them. They were

effective transportation; they could be used to hunt; they could drag or carry things; and they could even be eaten. They could also be used to make war. Not surprisingly, the Spaniards sought to stop the transfer of horses to the Indians, because they were both a symbol of power and a means to obtain or validate power. But the transfer of horses to Indians happened all the same, both in South and in North America.

In North America, the horse became enormously important in changing subsistence; it allowed Indians to hunt the bison much more effectively, and many agricultural peoples, such as the Omaha, the Crow and the Cheyenne, gave up farming and settled life to become nomadic equestrian hunters. It was one of the causes of increasing warfare among Indian peoples, as they jostled for space on the plains, where they pursued their new food quarry. Horse use even changed gender relations, as sedentary farming people became mounted hunters, and their wives had to give up settled agriculture for the drudgery of a nomadic life based on hunting. Inevitably, the coming of the horse vastly altered the material culture of the people.

Though Hollywood westerns lead us to think of the Indian horsemen as riding bareback, all Indians preferred to use saddles; and Indian saddles did not differ in a single detail from European saddles. Only one or two minor features of horse use were added by the Indians; everything else was carefully copied. But there was one important way in which Indian riders differed from European riders: they mounted the horse from the right. Now we may ask why they did this; but perhaps it is more useful to ask first why Europeans mounted from the left. And this is another instance where we end up confronting the difference between our biological nature on the one hand, and what culture is on the other. Most humans are naturally right-handed. The reason that the Europeans mounted from the left was that they wore swords on the left side. This was necessary because they drew their swords with their right hands. If a mounted swordsman had tried to mount from the right side, he would have fallen off his horse. The Indians mounted from the right; they had no swords to wear.

We can isolate the feature of this picture that is genetic -- our species-predominant right-handedness -- and silhouette it against the cultural differences between groups. And we can do so in the light of *history*. The patterned group difference does not depend on race, on climate, on temperament; it depends, simply enough, on a *historical* difference between the two groups. It also points to an enormously important fact about culture, as anthropologists read it:

"in practice, a cultural fact is always an historical fact; and its most immediate understanding, and usually the fullest understanding of it to which we can attain, is an historical one" (Kroeber 1948: 252). We could do a similar exercise with wearing pants, shaking hands, using chopsticks, or any of a thousand other bits of patterned group behavior. Let me offer another example.

There is much talk all the time about which foods are natural in the case of human beings. But in my opinion, at least since we humans gained the control of fire, the whole idea of a genuinely natural food has simply disappeared, unless what we have in mind is mothers' milk. That is because with fire, human beings began to transform what were previously inedible substances for us -- especially cereals, tubers and legumes (e.g., rice, sweet potatoes and soybeans) -- into edible foods. All of these foods became food only because of our distinctively human behavior in controlling the environment, including its living parts. Those foods now have both natural histories and histories -- their histories were created by those of our ancestors who domesticated them.

The domestication of plants and animals is another of the most powerful markers we have of how culture transforms nature into more culture. It happened many millennia, possibly even hundreds of millennia, after the mastery of fire. Most scholars date domestication of animals and plants from about 12,000 years ago. It is a human achievement that forever changed our lives and our eating habits. Much as I would like, I cannot dwell on this achievement, which we owe at least as much to women as to men; and which -- like all science before there was something *called* science -- took shape in a highly democratic manner. No lab coats, no schools of agriculture -- just generations of smart, problem-oriented human beings of all races in nearly all places, making their lives and ours easier by their skills in mastering nature. Domestication, like fire, allowed us to *create* our foods. Since they could become our foods only by a transformation that we humans put in place, our ancestors changed our world irreversibly. Though different from my case of horseback riding, where we can see quite exactly how a previous practice affected the way things would turn out in the future, the control of fire and domestication were alterations that also had cumulative effects.

Of course we can study many problems without recourse to history. The British school of social anthropology, which flourished half a century ago, largely ignored history in favor of

functional or synchronic analyses, and many of those analyses are elegant and penetrating. But that does not mean that the phenomena they were studying were not intrinsically historical. It was in fact because scholars despaired of ever reconstructing historical processes effectively that they opted for a different analytical method. Functionalism in its purest form came, conquered -- and then, in that extreme form, disappeared.

Before closing, I want to take a brief look at a different topic: in what way anthropology may prove useful to historians. In my own case, I think that I have been able to be helpful to historians of slavery in the New World because of my work on the economic and spiritual life, language and customs, and historical consciousness of the rural peoples of Afro-America. Historians work primarily with documentary materials, but may not have personal contact with the descendants of those whose pasts they wish to learn more about. In my own work, which usually involved living for extended periods in rural communities where I was able to learn how people worked, what they talked about, how they viewed themselves, I often stumbled upon words, incidents, even folktales, that threw light upon the past. My studies of a peasant community on the island of Jamaica, where nearly everyone is descended from the enslaved Africans with whom the British sugar plantation owners produced the sugar, rum and molasses consumed by the British working classes, allowed me to learn how people had begun working the land to produce their own food, even while they were still enslaved. Many of the farming skills that I was able to watch in the 1950s had been practiced by local people before slavery ended in 1838; even the words that they used could be traced back in time. It was on the basis of such work, as well as my work in Puerto Rico and Haiti, that I had the pleasant experience of hearing historians react with enthusiasm to observations I made about current peasant agriculture, family life, craftsmanship, life-crisis ceremonies, and other activities. Because there is accumulation in culture, the continuities are sometimes very plain to see. Even more important, perhaps, anthropological observations about daily life can often provide important clues for historians about what to look for, as they search through early texts, and as they try to build a composite picture of life as it once was.

But just so much can be packed into a single paper. I called my paper a comment on a perfect marriage. I meant by this to express my firm belief that anthropology is by its nature a historical form of inquiry, and that history and anthropology can be mutually helpful in our

pursuit of knowledge. Having argued in this manner, I should stop here, now that bride and groom have exchanged their vows and kissed, and rice has been thrown upon them by their friends and families.

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