NOTES ON GENERAL THEORY AND PARTICULAR CASES
alan macfarlane

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

general theory, bias and correctives

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 The danger for the growing number of historians interested in study of local history and particular delimited sets of historical documents is clearly greatest of all.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

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

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

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

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

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

All historical work needs a framework to deal with the passage of time and local history is no exception. It is tempting to slot the massive detail of local records into some grander theory and such a tendency is often an unconscious one. In the case of the assumed that societies move through a series of stages, predictable and determined, 'up' to the present. The cruder versions of 'modernization' and 'Marxist' theory suffer from this tendency to equate history with the 'growth' of a child or the movement from lower to higher. Yet the local historian, who often finds that his material gives a picture of circularity or even decline, should be wary of such schemes. The...
nature of his material is likely to protect him from
another danger, that is the tendency to see historical
anthropological reading by historians. Yet such
absences are as interesting as the similarities.

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

the methods in practice: two examples

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

One of these is in relation to the question of
peasantry. (5) I had been working for a long time on
the social and economic history of England in the
sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and specifically
on the documents relating to two villages, one in
the southern county of Essex (Earls Colne) and one
in the northern county of Cumbria (Kirkby Lonsdale).
The material being analysed by hand and computer
did not make a great deal of sense within the general
framework of understanding which I had imbibed from
anthropologists, sociologists and historians concerning
the supposed great revolution from a peasant/feudal/
pre-capitalist society up to about 1500 to a modern/
capitalist society. This is one of the reasons for the
'differences and absences' appears muted or even non-
existent at the local level. Thus local history can be
an important corrective to national historical
work.

We may now turn to a few of the strategies which
can help to minimize distortion. One is to use as a
basis for comparison or abstraction fairly wide
comparisons in time and space. Hence the need for
interrogation of the source of information. While
this may seem less obvious and easy for the historian.
Yet Bloch wrote that "A document is a witness; and
like most witnesses, it does not say much except under

In the process of testing theories against
particular documentation the skills of the

document to what was assumed rather than what was said,
the documents must be checked. Any single source,
however good, gives a distorted picture compounded of
omissions, wrong emphasis, misrepresentations and,
occasionally, lies. Hence the need for multi-source
work. Here the local historian is particularly well
placed since he is likely to be engaged in multi-
source work where he can compare taxation, notarial,
judicial, memorial and other documents against each
other. This is one of the reasons for the "total"
study of particular communities or groups. Though they
may constitute artificially bounded objects of study
for observation, they allow one to bring together a
number of levels of documentation on the lives of
individuals or problems. In theory the interpretation one places
on such evidence should also be open to checking by
other historians or anthropologists. The raw material
which Malinowski, Mead or Evans-Pritchard based their
theories should be accessible. F.W. Maitland, for
example, was a great editor of historical documents,
opening up the whole of medieval history through his
editions of court rolls, common law records and
Bracton's notebooks. It is a tradition which I have
attempted to continue: all the cases upon which my
witchcraft book was written are given in an appendix;
the diary upon which I based a study of a seventeenth
century clergyman has been published in full; and we
have produced three sets of microfiche which will
contain the transcripts of 7,000 typed pages of
transcripts of all the records of an Essex village
upon which I have based more general theories.(4)
The ease with which a historian or anthropologist can
manipulate his data makes this a necessary, if
somewhat uncomfortable, duty.

the methods in practice: two examples

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

One of these is in relation to the question of
peasantry. (5) I had been working for a long time on
the social and economic history of England in the
sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and specifically
on the documents relating to two villages, one in
the southern county of Essex (Earls Colne) and one
in the northern county of Cumbria (Kirkby Lonsdale).
The material being analysed by hand and computer
did not make a great deal of sense within the general
framework of understanding which I had imbibed from
anthropologists, sociologists and historians concerning
the supposed great revolution from a peasant/feudal/
pre-capitalist society up to about 1500 to a modern/
capitalist society. This is one of the reasons for the
'differences and absences' appears muted or even non-
existent at the local level. Thus local history can be
an important corrective to national historical
work.

We may now turn to a few of the strategies which
can help to minimize distortion. One is to use as a
basis for comparison or abstraction fairly wide
comparisons in time and space. Hence the need for
interrogation of the source of information. While
this may seem less obvious and easy for the historian.
Yet Bloch wrote that "A document is a witness; and
like most witnesses, it does not say much except under

In the process of testing theories against
particular documentation the skills of the

comparisons a little closer with three studies of Franche from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. (5) These were at a particular studies and be chosen to complement them. I added the two studies of Hobabwam who had tried to set up a general model of the nature of banditry. (6)

From these descriptions and accounts it was possible to arrive at some kind of predictive model. It could be argued that violence, banditry and feud are endemic in most 'traditional' peasant societies, and that they will become epidemic in periods of the major transition from peasant to capitalist formations. Social banditry, for example, "seems to occur in all types of human societies. In the evolutionary phase of tribal and kinship organisation, and modern capitalist and industrial society..." but tended "to become epidemic in times of pauperisation and economic crisis", as in the sixteenth century in the Mediterranean region, or seventh century Germany during the Thirty Years War. Thus, the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries are probably "the great age of social banditry... in most parts of Europe", since one system is changing into another. (10) Such banditry is most noted on the margins of society where the local community, whether in the city or especially in pastoral, mountainous regions where the surplus population has little other outlet - Corsica, Sicily, the Water Margin in China, the Scottish Highlands. There are many other features associated with this sort of violence, personal and physical violence - rape, murder, assault; long sustained family feuds; heavily fortified houses and widespread ownership and use of weapons; a mounted, armed and hated police force; large bands of wandering beggars feared by villagers and townsmen; the existence of a class of 'entrepreneurs of violence', the marfici, who lived between the absentee landlords and the peasants. When anthropologists or historians of France, China and the Middle East use the word 'violence' they have this in mind and while it would clearly be wrong to label all peasant activities in this way, it is often an important dimension and helps to explain the violence of peasant rebellions.

With this comparative framework in the back of my mind I turned to the English evidence. Specifically, this was of three kinds, all bearing on one series of events. In the 1630's a loose association of highwaymen operated in the Scottish/English border area of Cumbria, a pastoral upland area of mountains and heath. These men engaged in a number of activities including burglary, theft, clipping the edges of coins and pickpocketing. In these activities they encountered one of the Crown's officials, Justice of the Peace, Sir Daniel Fleming of Rydal Hall. By chance this confrontation enables us to do something which is very rare in history, namely to enter into the minds and thoughts of ordinary people. Fleming and the other justices were determined to prosecute the felons and consequently gathered many pages of depositions. These have by chance survived in the one English circuit Assize depositions which still exist for the period before the middle of the eighteenth century. They give the verbatim statements of many of the witnesses as regards the crimes. They could be checked and supplemented because, again almost uniquely, Fleming's papers have survived, including drafts of letters he sent out, copies of letters he received, and notes on the case. A further check and further details can be obtained from the parish records. The central characters lived in the parish of Kirkby Lonsdale, a parish whose probate, court and other records we have been studying for a number of years. We can watch the activities of the felons, how they were caught, how they were tried, their escape and subsequent activities and be able to see the nature of the crimes against the general model, we may be surprised. The nature of the crimes in the comparative model and the specific case are different; physical violence predominates in the former, while monetary crimes are foremost in the latter. The motives and background of the criminals are different; there is no sign of an impoverished peasantry committing offences out of anger or present need, but rather a prosperous middling set of farmers engaging in crime as a bi-occupation, a short-cut to greater wealth. The difference also emerges in the nature of the victims; they are relatives, neighbours, not the hated townsman or merchant or landlord. There is no evidence of blood feuding. There is an apparent absence of fear of assault. There are no bands of wandering, half-starved peasants. There are no violent fights between gangs of youths or between different parishes, common in France until the twentieth century. There are few dangerous weapons and few fortifications. There is a curious absence of pitched battles between the robbers and the forces of order of the kind what we find in China, France and Sicily, it is the absence of anything like the marfici, the violent middleman, or of a system of patron-client relations. There is no sign of 'mob' violence or vengeance. There is an obvious reluctance on the part of many to convict, and an extreme tolerance of known law-breakers. In other words, the dimensions and features of violence do not fit the predictive model at all; it is difficult to imagine how the particular system could have been more different from the general model. Thus, while there are considerable structural similarities between France, Sicily, and China, and England in this period seems very different in its patterns of violence. (11)

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

notes

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

1. Marc Bloch, The Historian's Craft (Manchester, 1954), 86