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Bearing the Other Anthropological Disciplines in Mind

Maurice Bloch

THE PAST is the past. The constitutive parts of what was anthropology, at the beginning of the twentieth century, have grown apart. This is even true in the mainly American departments, which seem to hold on to the old combination. In fact, within their apparently unified departments consisting of biological anthropology, archaeology and social and cultural anthropology, the reality is that these sub-divisions lead, pretty much, separate lives. For practical reasons, this is probably a good thing. For example, the lab requirements and, consequently, the funding requirements of biological anthropology and social cultural anthropology are quite different. Putting them together in a single structure just leads to irrelevant tensions.

The old combination is not even necessarily beneficial for research. The separation of the constitutive parts has become inevitable. It is right that the various disciplines which once constituted anthropology explore fundamentally different directions. The same has also happened even within the sub-disciplines themselves. What is more, it is not the case that cross-disciplinary fertilisation should privilege, or be limited to, those subjects that were contained in what was once anthropology. Interdisciplinarity is often a good thing and goes quite beyond anthropology. As a social anthropologist, I have obtained much more stimulation from working with other cognitive sciences than by participating in typical debates of biological anthropology such as whether tree shrews should or should not be considered primates.

These issues are one thing, though we should not mix up the practical problems concerning the organisation of universities or departments with more intellectual concerns, which are quite another. What we should be asking are pertinent questions of the following type: would *some* of the scholars who identify themselves as prehistorians not benefit from making more of an effort to know and truly understand the implications for *their*

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work of what social/cultural anthropologists object to in speculations that do not centrally integrate the fact that the people the latter get a glimpse of act from within *their* own world and in terms of how *they* understand it? Would *some* biological anthropologists not benefit for *their* work of fully taking on board the implications for evolutionary theory of Marx's old injunction that «men make their own history but they do not make it as they please»? Would some of the cultural social anthropologists not benefit from making an effort to know and understand, for *their* work, what the other sub-disciplines are documenting?

Since I am a social anthropologist, this last issue is the one I feel most confident in arguing so I will proceed to explain what is involved more fully in what follows. For more than a century, social and cultural anthropologists have been doing two kinds of quite distinct things simultaneously, though often ignoring what this combination implies. One of these things can be called ethnography. It focuses on attempting to understand how people live in their world on their own terms and the other is often labelled theory. Ethnography looks from the inside out, while theory looks from the outside in. However, in the end, these two points of view are not as separate as they seem at first for a number of reasons. I take these two points of view in turn.

Theory is the attempt to go beyond the specificity of particular cases towards something more general. What this generalising concerns is often left vague. I would argue that since anthropological "theory" » implies going beyond particular cases, it can ultimately *only* be about the characteristics of the species *Homo sapiens*. That being so, this means that always in *the back of the mind of the social and cultural anthropologist*, perhaps quite far back, there should be an awareness of the general questions with which biological anthropologists are concerned. Such questions are: what is the relationship between our species and other related species; what are the specific, evolved, human cognitive capacities and how do they articulate with the historical process? Indeed, how does our specialisation for historical culture mesh with our other specific predispositions? Similarly, in *the back of the mind of the social and cultural anthropologist*, perhaps quite far back, there should be an awareness of what prehistorians are demonstrating: such as the very late appearance of the State in human history; the interconnectedness of Palaeolithic societies through trade; the variety and significance, or otherwise, of ritual burial and the significance of technological innovations for our history. If such awareness is absent, as I am afraid is often the case, the result is that «theory» is situated in an indeterminate fog because it is not clear to which kind of phenomena this «theory» might be applied. Anthropological theory should be, and only be, about the nature of human beings on the planet earth.

The necessary awareness on the part of social and cultural anthropologists of the work of biological anthropologists and prehistorians for their «theory» might, at first, seem irrelevant for the other job social and cultural anthropologists have engaged in: that is, ethnography. When doing ethnography, the anthropologist's concern is how to convey, as best she can, what it is like to be those people about whom she writes. Such a task does not seem, at first, to require the expert knowledge specific to biological anthropologists or prehistorians. What is merely required would seem to be simply literary techniques of evocation. This «simply» covers up an illusion for two reasons.

The very idea that one can communicate to others what it is like to be somebody else, to translate in other words, requires a much more complex reflection than is often much too easily assumed. At the very least, this process of translation, if it is to be at all possible, requires the assumption, usually left implicit, of there being common cognitive fundamentals shared by the people studied, the anthropologist/translator and the readers of her work. This assumption is justified because we know, as biological anthropologists have shown, that we are one species and also because we are all living in an environment governed by fundamental laws which exist quite independently of how they are perceived by any particular group of human beings at any particular time. The assumption and implications of such facts are, nonetheless, also treacherous since it is easy to assume that the knowledge of others is just a variation on our common sense. Such an assumption leads to ethnocentrism. The process therefore needs to be very critically and explicitly examined, and this can only be done in the light of a reflection on what we can share because of our common evolutionary origin and the depth of the differences wrought by the long history of mankind. It is for this scrutiny that the general anthropology proposed herein is necessary. Such joint scrutiny can move us forward. For example, I have argued that much of what we take to be universal features of humans throughout their history are, in fact, relatively recent indirect products of the State, which only appeared in the last ten thousand years. In other words, we need to have in the back of our minds the broad lines of the work accomplished by biological anthropologists and prehistorians so as neither to underestimate nor overestimate variation. (In reality, it is the second danger that is more real in anthropology since cultural and social anthropologists are professionally inclined to emphasise variation as a way of glorifying their speciality.)

Further, there is an even more fundamental reason for the ethnographer to bear in mind our evolutionary and long-term history. Ethnography, in anthropology at least, implies explicitly or implicitly asking the remaining,

fundamental question of all types of anthropology: how deep are the cultural and social differences that we find in human populations? Ethnographers cannot help but have this question in the back of their minds, even when they seem to take pride in ignoring it and, consequently, then ignore what is going on in disciplines such as biological anthropology or prehistory. For example, the deeply relativist work of famous foundational anthropologists, such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, could not, in the end, avoid asking these questions: are we really one species and what does this mean? Have the variations in our representations been constrained by our evolved characteristics and by our environment? It is well to note that the same questions are raised, or should be raised, by the revival of such extreme culturalist theories characterising some of the writers who have been recently labelled as ontologists.

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