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SENTIMENTS AND ACTIVITIES IN HISTORY  
A TRIBUTE TO GEORGE HOMANS' HISTORICAL WORK

Charles Tilly  
University of Michigan  
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330 Packard Street  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104

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presented to a meeting in honor of George Homans  
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"The Law of civilization and decay," writes today's poet, "Decrees each culture its memorial/And travelers through history shall say/Dis-covering a carving on a wall

No army but the desert could have stormed;  
"This shows a race by no means as they were  
But as they saw themselves. This legend warmed  
The remnant that outlived defeat. O stir

Gently the dust these crevices to clear.  
Our epitaph will be such food for weather  
Soon, for in time's perspective we are near  
These others. We shall spend the dark together."

The poet, himself of that "remnant that outlived defeat," goes on to sketch the house and the garden in which four generations of the race dreamed and grew. The sketch has the suffused brilliance of a Turner painting: object, percept and precept at one with each other. "Such is the spring," our poet says, "and by this cycle span

The longer cycle of the family.  
The processes of nature measure man  
Last and most surely. He himself may be  
Only a world's reply to entropy.

In George Caspar Homans' poem about the Adams mansion in Quincy, the themes of his kinsman Brooks Adams -- entropy, civilization, and decay -- touch the entire lineage of the Adams, then mankind as a whole. The poet links the particular time and place on two opposite sides: to himself, and to all of history.

Yet Brooks Adams is not the poet's true guide. For all his searching after generality in other pursuits, our poet scans history in the manner of a historian: he scans history for continuities and particularities.

Henry Adams comes closer. Henry Adams summed up a coherent, believing age in the architecture of Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres. The poet epitomizes that same age in the English village. Henry Adams begins our inspection of Mont-Saint-Michel on the parvis. There we are, he says,

looking out over the sea and sands which are as good eleventh-century landscape as they ever were; or turning at times towards the church door which is the pons seclorum, the bridge of ages, between us and our ancestors.

The poet likewise takes us across the bridge of ages. The village is his cathedral. Like Will Langland, however, he prefers a field full of folk to a basilica bursting with bishops.

Not that our poet-historian settles for the impressionism of Henry Adams. After all, Henry Adams tells us that when he first faced a class in Harvard College, as its new assistant professor of Medieval History, "he had given, as far as he could remember, an hour, more or less, to the Middle Ages." Our poet-historian, by contrast, early made it his business to become expert in the materials and methods of medieval history. Under his scrutiny, the English village becomes an object of painstaking documentary reconstruction, rigorous comparison, ingenious structural analysis.

The village also becomes two other things. It serves as a microcosm of an entire social order, and even of all social orders; the closing pages of English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century bear the title "The Anatomy of Society." They lay out a general scheme in terms of institutions, organization, interaction, sentiment and function. Here we find the author seeking to synthesize ethnography and historiography.

The English village also serves as a point of reference for the present. Although English Villagers barely alludes to those connections with

the present, the author mentions them elsewhere. In voyaging from New England to Old England, the Yankee retraces his own origins, seeks his own identity. This particular Yankee's historical explorations, indeed, lead back from the present to pre-revolutionary Massachusetts, to the English Puritans, to medieval England, to the settlement of East Anglia. In the frank and graceful memoir which opens his book Sentiments and Activities, George Homans says as much. The silver thread which attaches him to an old house in Quincy is centuries long; it winds back to the Frisians who inscribed their ploegs and leets on the landscape of Norfolk. Happily, the thread does not lead through the cramped ways of genealogy and self-justification, but across the plains of human existence. The subject, to paraphrase our author, is not Homans, but humans.

How does this poet-historian-ethnographer carry on his work? We notice first of all that he seems to enjoy it. "No one who works in modern sociology," he confides at one point, "where data are so plentiful they become mere statistics, can know the joy sheer, single facts can give of their own sweet selves." His historical work conveys that pleasure. It consists for the most part of tracing the hidden connections among small arrays of large facts. A paper on the Puritans and the clothing industry in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, for example, draws on the Calendar of State Papers and a few other publications to argue a three-way correspondence: woollen manufacturing, Puritanism, emigration to America. Recurrent depressions in the clothing industry, according to this analysis, operate as a pump driving Englishmen across the Atlantic. Rich Winthrops and poor weavers alike join the stream. The evidence comes mainly in the form of geographic correspondences: the early immigrants and place names of New England reveal the influence of

East Anglia and the West Country, the clothing districts stand out among those origins of migrants, and so on. The similarity of patterns argues for connections among the patterns.

The method is quite general: identify a characteristic pattern in one setting; locate a homologous pattern in another setting; use the homology to argue a relationship between the settings. The relationship may be one of historical continuity, or diffusion, or of functional similarity. In the historical work, it is usually either continuity or diffusion.

An even more formidable exercise of scholarship appears in "The Frisians in East Anglia." The title itself must be one of the most esoteric in the bibliographies of major contemporary sociologists. We could make it compete with the most recondite historical titles by adding dates and a subtitle. What about "The Frisians in East Anglia, 400-500 A.D.: Further Reflections on Dr. Siebs' Analyses of Friesland"? Indeed, the preparatory work for the article required an impressive array of knowledge and skills. The crucial parallels to East Anglia turned up in an obscure German study of Frisian land systems, that of Dr. Siebs. The basic sources require a knowledge of Medieval Latin, Middle English and Frisian. (Not long after the article appeared, I walked into the author's office to congratulate him. Struggling with the technical demands of a much easier body of material, I was greatly impressed with the skills he had deployed. After talking about the more salient and important features of the work, I got to the question that really intrigued me. "How in the world," I asked, "did you ever learn Frisian?" "Oh, Charlie," he replied, "It's easy if you know Anglo-Saxon!") As a matter of fact, a number of people have had the necessary technical skills. A few have also had the requisite knowledge of English field systems, inheritance patterns and local structures of power. But no one, to my knowledge, had previously seen the homologies

in these regards between Frisia and East Anglia.

The argument of "The Frisians in East Anglia" runs through a careful comparison, cluster by cluster, of the local institutions on both sides of the Channel. On the English side, the documentation issues from the whole of George Homans' previous work on the medieval period. On the Dutch side, Siebs' Grundlagen und Aufbau der altfriesischen Verfassung summarizes the evidence. Thus we encounter similarities at the level of the basic tenement, a compact body of land which appears to have borne collective responsibility for legal duties and to have owed ten men for military service. On both sides, we find suggestions of lineage control over those tenements, compromised by well-defined systems of partible inheritance. We discover similarities in the vocabularies applied to inheritance and to the major classes of the population.

The demonstration moves on. The parallels accumulate. At the end, our author is saying

As Frisian is the language most closely related to English, so Frisian institutions are the institutions most closely related to East Anglian ones. The conclusion must be that Frisians invaded East Anglia in the fifth century. The similarity of institutions, in spite of the fact that something like adequate written records about them begin to appear only in the eleventh century, at least six hundred years after the new Frisians must have separated from the old, seems to me to strengthen this conclusion rather than weaken it. How much more eloquently do the institutions speak for a common origin when they had so much time, opportunity, and reason to diverge.

The method of argument recalls the ethnologist who retraces the movements and divisions of a common culture, the linguist who reconstructs diffusion and elaboration of a family of languages. Both reason from distributions observed long after the processes in question.

Plenty of the same sort of analysis appears in George Homans' first and largest examination of medieval history, his English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century. Now thirth-five years old, the book is still a stan-

dard authority. Contemporary scholars pay it the compliment of contesting its interpretations as they pass on to their own. True, some features of the book mark it as a product of the 1930s. Nowadays, such a book would almost certainly include more extensive observations on climate, on conjunction, on demography, on the structure of marketing, on the findings which have come in from the archeology and aerial photography of village sites. In the face of more recent evidence concerning medieval shifts in production as a function of market conditions and labor supply, the book's emphasis on subsistence farming and the predominance of custom might well be qualified. (Given the author's character, however, we would not be surprised to find the contested arguments stated all the more firmly.)

In any case, the last few decades' changes in medieval historiography bear mainly on the context of village life rather than on its internal organization. English Villagers deals chiefly with that internal organization. As compared with such an essay as "The Frisians in East Anglia," the book relies more heavily on the study of concomitant variation. We begin with the grand contrast of woodland and champion country, enclosed and openfield landscapes. That gives us the means to see the special properties of openfield areas, which are to be the chief object of study. From there on, the book proceeds like an ethnography. First the land, agriculture and villages. Then the family, marriage, kinship and inheritance. Later, the manor, class divisions and power structure. At last, the yearly round, the church, a vision of life as a whole.

Throughout, we find our author scrutinizing the meanings and origins of common terms, making comparisons, posing hypotheses concerning the sources of standard institutions. In the course of his illuminating exposition of the logic of the scattered, intermingled fields in the champion country, for instance, he speculates:

There is the stronger reason to guess that there was once in England a system of laying out the strips of the different holdings in a regular order of rotation, and that the order was related to a conventional conception of the direction and course of the sun, in the fact that such a system is known to have been in force until recent times in villages of Denmark and Sweden which had the general characteristics of English champion villages.

But the most extensive and characteristic arguments of the book relate one well-defined institution to another. In an example which has since become commonplace, English Villagers identifies the intimate connection of marriage opportunities to inheritance of land. "The working of the rule, no land, no marriage," it says, "had two aspects. First, men and women who were not to inherit a family tenement did not marry unless they could secure land for themselves. Second, in many places, the man who was to inherit the tenement did not marry until its last holder was ready to turn it over to him. In this manner the sentiments and customs of men secured a stable adaptation of society to its economic conditions. Despite the logic of Malthus, they limited the number of persons who pressed on the land for subsistence."

In English Villagers and the other writings on medieval history, we discover two complementary methods at work. The first takes one piece of social behavior, identifies its dependence on another piece of social behavior in the same setting, and so on until a coherent, interdependent pattern of social behavior is in view. The second matches patterns in different times, places or realms of behavior, then accounts for the match through continuity, diffusion or functional interdependence. Readers of social anthropology will find both methods familiar.

Perhaps this sounds like what everybody does. Much as Kingsley Davis once told us that all sociologists search for functional relationships, someone might object that all historians search for matching patterns. They do not. Consider Henry Adams. He declared that "Historians

undertake to arrange sequences, --called stories, or histories--assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect." Adams was describing the historian as Narrator, who is still with us today. Toward the end of his life Adams came to think that the sequences would take on meaning if they measured the distance from--or to--some fixed point in history. In his own case, as he said, ". . . he might use the century 1150-1250, expressed in Amiens Cathedral and the Works of Thomas Aquinas, as the unit from which he might measure motion down to his own time, without assuming anything as true or untrue, except relation." Although High Medieval Culture has lost its popularity as a reference point, many contemporary historians attempt to "measure motion" with respect to the Industrial Revolution, twentieth-century states or some such marker.

Or think back to Brooks Adams, who tried to discern great cycles and giant laws in history. It was Brooks Adams who asserted ". . . the exceedingly small part played by conscious thought in moulding the fate of men. At the moment of action," he wrote, "the human being almost invariably obeys an instinct, like an animal, only after action has ceased does he reflect." It was he who claimed to have found ". . . that the intellectual phenomena under examination fell into a series which seemed to correspond, somewhat closely, with the laws which are supposed to regulate the movements of the material universe."

Universal history of this sort has lost favor in the twentieth century, but other modes which avoid George Homans' pattern-matching abound. Some historians seize on a single person and hope at best to find a distinctive formula which will characterize and illuminate that person's life. Others attempt to apply the same, essentially biographical, procedure to a whole people or a whole era. Still others attempt to trace some momentous event to the peculiarities of its immediate context. Those modes

of argument do not exhaust the possibilities. Historians have found a number of ways of doing history which do not consist of point-for-point comparisons between patterns.

When sociologists move into history, furthermore, they do not ordinarily take up comparison of patterns in the manner of our ethnographer, historian and poet. They more often dig into history to locate samples which they then truck out for use as cases in multivariate analyses; the analyses typically bear on arguments cast so generally as to have little bearing on the settings from which the samples were originally drawn. Or the sociologists use the softer version of the same procedure which consists of ransacking readily available historical sources to find support for a non-historical argument. There is the working-up of history which fills the obligatory dull first chapter on the past in textbooks on cities or stratification. And there is the occasional sociologist who takes on an established historical problem by applying the standard sociological estimation procedures to materials which have never before been so insulted. Only the last of these approaches the Homansian effort to identify and match patterns. Even there, in most cases the difference between pattern-matching via statistical estimation and via simple, salient correspondences remains enormous.

Stop. Following the plodding routines of everyday scholarship, I have thoughtlessly stuffed a noble hawk into an ordinary pigeonhole. The hawk bats his wings in the pigeonhole, and eventually smashes it to smithereens. Who ever heard of relegating a poet, sailor, sociologist, historian, ethnographer and stentor to mere pattern-making? Why, it almost sounds like . . . pattern-maintenance. You probably know Turner's 1840 painting, "Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and Dying." It once belonged to John

Ruskin, and now belongs to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Sun and sea are both aflame as the ship pitches in the middle left, and gulls flap around the chained leg thrust above the waves in the right foreground. At the painting's first showing, Turner displayed with it these lines from the Fallacies of Hope:

Aloft all hands, strike the top-masts and belay;  
You angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds  
Declare the Typhon's coming.  
Before it sweep your decks, throw overboard  
The dead and dying--n'er heed their chains.  
Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!  
Where is thy market now?

Reviewing the show, Thackeray wrote that "The sun glows down upon a horrible sea of emerald and purple . . . If Wilberforce's statue downstairs were to be confronted with this picture, the stony old gentleman would spring off his chair and fly away in terror!" The Art Union called the painting "a gross outrage on nature." But Ruskin wrote of "the noblest sea that Turner has painted and, if so, the noblest certainly ever painted by man." Today we look back at that painting and its companions to see the savage color and daring form breaking through the academic order, anticipating the Impressionists by fifty years. To approach historical materials as an ethnographer is now so commonplace that we easily catalogue George Homans as no more than an early exemplar of a well-established style. Such are the perils of success. If you go back to the Jolliffes, the Stentons, the Stubbs that one read to learn medieval history in the 1930s, however, you will see instantly how brash and disrespectful it was then to treat the English village as an anthropologist's domain, pipe rolls as field notes, field systems as patterns of culture.

Not that our author labors alone, a quirky original. Some of the masters of social history have displayed the same bent for argument from

patterned correspondence. Marc Bloch assembled much of his great synthesis of French rural history in that manner. Fernand Braudel commands our admiring assent precisely by his ability to pick up two historical shards and fit their edges together. G. William Skinner's remarkable analysis of Chinese marketing systems depend on an ingenious, unexpected identification of correspondences. Need I mention Michael Ventris and the decipherment of Linear B? Models of the style are available in history, but the style is neither obvious, easy, nor common.

George Homans' style extends to the way he reports his findings. What a pleasure it is to read historical work in well-made sentences and coherent paragraphs! The prose is all bone and sinew. It knows where it goes. A close reader notices that every sentence identifies its agent, that weak verbs and passive voices rarely appear, that if a complication or reservation arises it occupies a separate statement instead of dragging down the initial sentence. He also senses the absence of neologisms, the sparing use of metaphor, the unembarrassed employment of "I" when the author speaks for himself. Many students of sociology and history have the right to roar with Caliban at their professorial Prosperos: "You taught me language, and my profit on't/Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/For learning me your language!" George Homans knows how to curse, but does so in plain language. That sociological prose seldom has these qualities is notorious. For some reason, the writing of academic historians has never achieved the reputation for drabness that it generally deserves. The vigor and clarity of a veteran versifier show up in our author's historical writing.

You probably know the advice that another veteran versifier prepared for a Harvard commencement thirty years ago. Part of W.H. Auden's

Hermetic Decalogue runs:

Thou shalt not do as the dean pleases,  
Thou shalt not write thy doctor's thesis  
On education,

Thou shalt not worship projects nor  
Shalt thou or thine bow down before  
Administration.

Thou shalt not answer questionnaires  
Or quizzes upon World-Affairs,  
Nor with compliance  
Take any test. Thou shalt not sit  
With statisticians nor commit  
A social science.

If we read only our author's historical work, we could easily interpret it as an expression of Auden's hermetic creed.

Unsettling, but true. The zealous generalizer of Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms is also the meticulous particularizer of "The Frisians in East Anglia." The theoretician of "Bringing Men Back In" also wrote this: "History had never needed a Newton; from the beginning it had known its principles, at least in their vulgar form as the characteristics of human nature."

The contradiction is manifest. Yet it resembles the contradiction of sailing east or sailing west to get to the other side of the world. The antipodes for both voyages are the elementary, universal traits of individual human behavior. Unfortunately for our understanding, the historical flotilla stops short of its destination. If English Villagers closes with broad reflections on the structure and importance of small social units, such subsequent essays as "The Rural Sociology of Medieval England" settles for analyzing the interdependence among inheritance arrangements, field systems, migration patterns and other features of local social life. It is up to us -- or up to our author's as-yet unpublished writings -- to drive historical analysis back to elementary social behavior.