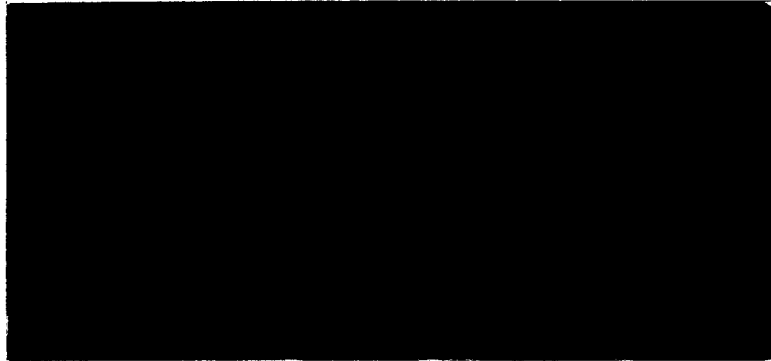




**TRANSFORMATIONS**  
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**"Is Vice Versa?  
Historical Anthropologies and  
Anthropological Histories"**

Nicholas Dirks

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IS VICE VERSA? HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGIES AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL HISTORIES

Nicholas B. Dirks

The University of Michigan

"The problem now is to explode the concept of history by the anthropological experience of culture."

Marshall Sahlins

"To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."

Walter Benjamin

PART I.

The Concept of Culture

The concept of culture has been anthropology's signal -- and perhaps single most important -- contribution to recent social theory. In American cultural anthropology, the name most recently and most clearly associated with the development of culture as a concept is Clifford Geertz, who has provided elegant definitions of culture and inspired much of the most interesting work in cultural analysis. Geertz' definition of culture has always been a semiotic one, predicated on the notion that culture has to do with meaning, with the way experience is construed rather than with some unmediated notion of experience itself, with the centrality of symbols for conducting and expressing meanings that are systematic as well as shared.

Although Geertz gave culture a new set of glosses and spins, he developed his sense of the concept out of certain fundamental traditions in anthropology, as also out of his ethnographic encounters in Indonesia and Morocco, not to mention Chicago and Princeton. His culture, like anthropology's culture more generally, was not Arnoldian, not the high (and capitalized) culture that had in the nineteenth century been identified with Western civilization and a Kantian aesthetic of the sublime, the very view that has now been accorded the official sanction of the NEH and the NEA. Anthropology has been guilty of reifying and, in Said's sense, Orientalizing other cultures, but in identifying non-western cultures as coherent, meaningful, and integral structures it has also been instrumental in shifting culture from its high enlightenment position to the terra firma of lived social experience.

It is no accident that when social historians sought to register their concern about the exclusion of politically marginal groups from the master narratives of history they turned to anthropology and its notions and examples of cultural life to enrich their own sense of what it meant to study historical "experience." Historians had first turned to quantitative methods and formal social science, which made possible the recuperation of the myriad numbers and reports that had been compiled to document and control non-elite social groups. But quantitative methods could not answer some of the most basic questions about the meaning and shape of lived experience among ordinary people. Nevertheless,<sup>1</sup> when historians turned to anthropology for inspiration about such questions as tradition, community, family organization, and agrarian social structure, they tended to borrow concepts and attitudes out of the contexts of disciplinary debate within anthropology, often ending in a parody of their own political justifications for social history in the first place. As Bernard Cohn has elsewhere warned, historians should beware of buying used concepts from other disciplines. When historians entered anthropologyland, they left their political scruples at home.

If anthropology might be said to have invented culture, it no longer owns it. As in other areas where the incitement to consume is endemic, Cohn's warnings have stopped nobody. Culture is a term that is cropping up all over. The Sociology of Culture seems to be a new growth industry in Sociology Departments. Cultural studies programs are being set up in many American Universities, reflecting not only the currency of anthropological notions of culture but more generally the current rapprochement between the traditional humanities -- English, comparative literature, history of art, critical theory -- and those areas in the social sciences that have until recently been more keen to cultivate their affinity to the sciences than the softer humanities. All of these groups, and perhaps last of all anthropologists too, have become increasingly aware of a parallel interdisciplinary phenomenon, or movement, in Britain called "cultural studies." This movement has been of tremendous importance in calling for increased attention to the political character of culture.

### The Politics of Culture

British cultural studies has often been located in departments or programs of sociology but grew out of the literary criticism of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart and the social history of E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. It is now principally associated with the activities of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham and the writings of Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. According to Richard Johnson, "Cultural processes do not correspond to the contours of academic knowledges, as they are. No one academic discipline grasps the full complexity (or seriousness) of the study.

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 1the great academic divide between those interested in meaning and those interested in reality has obscured the fundamental agreements in American social science.

Cultural studies must be interdisciplinary (and sometimes antidisciplinary) in its tendency." He goes on to say that for him, "cultural studies is about the historical forms of consciousness or subjectivity, or the subjective forms we live by, or (...) the subjective side of social relations." As interesting as these statements are, culture appears here as little more than class specific subjectivity. We are left to wonder why cultural studies has not adequately theorized its concept of culture (and the lack of a vigorous interest in culture among British social anthropologists is perhaps one of the problems). However, Stuart Hall is clearer and more interesting when he notes that cultural studies grew out of a sustained and even dialectical reading of structuralism and culturalism in the light of a concern about the residual determinisms in any mode of production, be it social or cultural. Hall, following Williams and others, takes a Gramscian reading of hegemony as central to any study of cultural phenomena, and the constant concern with the political and class based dynamics of culture finds its justification here. In any case, cultural studies is as cultural studies does. People associated with the label have worked on the cultural forms and activities of marginal and non-elite groups, as for example the worlds of factory workers, Rastafarian slum dwellers, Pakistani immigrants, or dispossessed women. Cultural studies has continued as well to focus on cultural production, in particular on film and mass media, popular literature, and the functions and festivities of ordinary folk. In all its guises, the cultural studies movement has debated and adopted different approaches to the "politics of culture".

The strengths of British cultural studies have in part to do with the level of political commitment and engagement that have been fundamental to the movement. At last, culture has been genuinely politicized in academic writing. However, this very engagement has led to certain weaknesses as well. In particular, the definition of culture is somewhat narrowly tied to the neo-Gramscian interest in hegemony and counter-hegemony, leading to an emphasis on consensus within class boundaries and resistance across them. This concern does not allow a lot of room for critical discussion about the assumptions implicit in most notions of consensus and resistance, for example the conventional categories of agency, subjectivity, and experience. In addition (and not unrelated), the cultures chosen for analysis are principally contemporary and located within Britain itself. Class and ethnicity are taken to be the relevant categories of analysis in ways that seem to outsiders as most relevant to contemporary post-colonial British society. While anthropology has still not successfully engaged its own historical implication in European colonialism, it has at least insisted that if culture be celebrated as a popular rather than an elite phenomenon, the populace -- and our theories of cultural production -- must be genuinely international. Nevertheless, British cultural studies has demonstrated some of the weaknesses of anthropology's culture concept, and anthropologists are increasingly recognizing that their notion of culture can no longer be silent about the continual political valence and mobility of all cultural forms. Williams is turning up as a reference for considerations of the culture concept almost as frequently as Geertz in recent anthropological writing.

## Culture and History

In American cultural anthropology, the first major reconsideration of a semiotic theory of culture came more from recognizing the historicity of cultural forms than it did from the academy's engagement with the politics of class. One of the most dramatic interventions in recent years has been that of Marshall Sahlins, who through his own appropriations of French structuralism had locked himself into a far more formal cultural semiotics (See Sahlins 1976) than the fluid Weberianism of Clifford Geertz. In his recent writing (1981, 1985), Sahlins has regaled us with stories of what happened when Captain Cook went to Hawaii. As he did so, he also announced with great fanfare that he had discovered history, or, rather, the event. He argues persuasively that a Saussurean theory of structure cannot withstand the pressures of the conjuncture, and in several brilliant theoretical essays undermines the structuralist foundations of his own earlier claims about meaning and cultural form.

However, Sahlins neither provides examples of what historical process might look like apart from dramatic moments of culture contact and colonial conquest, nor does he sufficiently incorporate his notion of event into the contingent complexities of cultural formation. As always, Sahlins is elegant, and his gesture towards history has undoubtedly had a salutary impact on anthropological practices in America. As his last word in Islands of History, he writes that, "The truer issue lies in the dialogue of sense and reference, inasmuch as reference puts the system of sense at the risk of other systems: the intelligent subject and the intransigent world. And the truth of this larger dialogue consists of the indissoluble synthesis of such as past and present, system and event, structure and history (156)." What this seems to mean is that systems of meaning have constantly to be practiced, and that, as he says elsewhere, "Every implementation of cultural concepts in an actual world submits the concepts to some determination by the situation (149)." But systems of meaning, or culture, are formulated prior to and autonomously from the moment of risk or determination, and the situation, or the intransigent world, is, like the British and American military forces that came back to wreak revenge for Cook's murder, nothing more (or less) than a periodic, if occasional, check on the steady reproduction of cultural systems. Culture may have become situated in history, but culture has still not been genuinely historicized. Sahlins may be correct to assert that we should attempt, "to explode the concept of history by the anthropological experience of culture (72)," but by leaving his concept of culture unexploded by history he has merely reproduced the tendency for interdisciplinary formulations to swing only in one direction. If history should be exploded by culture, then culture should likewise be exploded by history.

The structuralist modes of reasoning deployed by Sahlins engage history at a level that makes little sense to most historians, who tend to feel much more comfortable turning to Geertz, Turner, or Evans-Pritchard. In a recent essay on historical anthropology, Aletta Biersack recommends Sahlins to historians, saying that Sahlins resolves many of the fundamental debates in the historical study of culture (Hunt 1989, 72-96). But while Biersack is correct to point out that Sahlins engages these

debates with extraordinary skill and clarity, he does so in ways that are specifically situated in anthropological discourses and problematics. Sahlins' work reveals some of the fundamental commitments of anthropology as a discipline, and why it is that historical anthropology still looks so different from history when in the hands of historians. Most historians find it difficult to relate to Sahlins's principal concern, namely his argument that no synchronic theory of structure can account for the way in which structures must always reproduce themselves, and that in every moment of reproduction the structure is at risk. Although Sahlins insists that "cultural schemes are historically ordered (1985, vii)," his elaboration of the concept of culture is little different from his concept of structure (as Roseberry recently commented (1989, 8), if you look up the word "culture" in the index to *Islands of History* one reads, "see structure.") Historians are perplexed by the fact that for Sahlins meaning itself is as much about the structuring principles of social determinations as it is about ideas, signs, or beliefs. Whereas for Sahlins the event enters as a disruptive force, challenging structuralist assumptions about reproduction, for historians events are everywhere, challenging structuralist notions of structure itself.

### The Subjects of Culture

Sahlins views culture as "the codification of man's actual purposeful and pragmatic action (1976, 55)." This concern with collective codes as sediments of human action underplays for most historians the importance of the historical actor or agent; indeed, historians find it difficult to recognize any theoretical space at all for agency, for individual actions or voices. Historians believe in the need to identify and privilege historical subjects. So although for Sahlins culture may be subject to history, it is culture itself that is the subject of history. Historians recognize this kind of concern from other structuralisms, particularly from Althusser's insistence that subjects are produced by history rather than the other way round, but they are rarely persuaded. Instead, historians tend to prefer vague notions of experience to formal conceptions of either structure or culture, and, as Joan Scott has noted, the notion of "experience" always establishes the prior existence of subjects. Even so, there is much in anthropological views of culture that is similar, say, to E.P. Thompson's notion of experience, in which class is both the determination and distillation of subjective meaning, and the conceit of experience becomes specifically tied to the material life and social position of a class. Sahlins and Thompson represent tendencies in cultural anthropology and social history to focus on ideas, cultural practices, shared beliefs and attitudes. And the similarities do not end here, for both Sahlins and Thompson invoke history as critical to their method, but fail to historicize their key categories, culture and class respectively.

Sahlins' insistence that culture is the subject of history flies directly in the face of the concerns of historians about agency and subjects. Historians are in any case reluctant to engage the totalizing propensities of structuralism, even in Sahlins' version of an historical anthropology. But Sahlins raises one issue that historians, I believe, must attend to, and that interestingly aligns post-structuralist critiques of the unitary/originary subject with anthropological commitments to the

specificity of cultural regimes. Sahlins makes with particular force the anthropological point that different cultures entail different historicities. Indeed, not only does anthropology insist that experience is never immediate, never the kind of unmediated reality -- whether affective or cognitive -- that Scott so effectively critiques in her essay (1990), anthropology suggests that there are immense differences in the way in which the past, narrative, event, historicity itself can take form in different cultural contexts. If historians at some level would invariably align themselves with Collingwood's "commonsensical" notion of experience, anthropologists are aware of how culture bound this desire is. But to insist that experience itself is culture bound is not to solve the problem of how to bound culture. Experiences differ radically within single cultural domains, according to such factors as class, race, and gender. The notion of the uniform character of cultural experience seems unlikely to survive either the scrutiny of historians or the poststructuralist commitment to multiplicity. If anthropology correctly insists that at one level culture is the subject of history, we must remember that different groups have different histories, as also that the subject (or, rather, the unitary bourgeois subject lurking behind most historical understandings of the subject) has been fractured and dissolved in recent critical theory.

It has been many years since anthropology as a discipline was defined by a particular preoccupation with primitives, and because of the decolonization both of the world and of anthropology's geographical (and theoretical) provenance there is no longer any defensible reason that the notions of a people and of a culture should be seen as in any sense coterminous. One of the most important implications of Geertz' insistence that culture be defined semiotically has been that culture could be detached as an analytic domain from any particular social referent. But anthropologists often continue to think of culture as writ large, as most meaningful when descriptively attached to such labels as "Nuer," "American," or "Indian," as the largest possible domain of agreement, belief, and shared understanding, and as bounded by such modern social units as nation, tribe, or island. While culture as a category clearly does operate at these levels, social historians among others have now established that cultural forms are developed, transformed, manipulated, and appropriated in different ways within what have traditionally been deemed as anthropological units of analysis. In this respect, E.P. Thompson has only been one of many historians who has claimed that when history is practiced "from below" it changes, that a commitment to study the life worlds of various subaltern groups genuinely subverts master histories. The theoretical locus of much recent rethinking of the tensions and disjunctions in cultural configurations across social/class groups has been the work of Antonio Gramsci, in particular his suggestions about the nature of hegemony.

Gramsci uses the concept of hegemony in at least two ways, to mean domination itself, and to refer to the means by which the consensus which allows rule to take place is formed and transformed. For Gramsci, hegemony is never total; it is always multiple, contradictory, and contested. As Raymond Williams has made clear in his cogent reading of Gramsci, hegemony always implies counter-hegemony: "[Hegemony] does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be



renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. We have then to add to the concept of hegemony the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent elements of practice (1977, 112,113)." For Williams, as indeed for all those who have been influenced by Gramsci, hegemony dramatically supplements any previous definition of culture because it insists that culture is a human activity that always exists in relationship to dominance and subordination. Culture is thus linked to the continuing and pervasive processes of rule, politics, and struggle. The units of anthropological and historical analysis must now contain multiple cultures and histories.

Gramsci does not address the question of the subject itself, though he is concerned about the way in which hegemonic processes limit the extent to which culture is a purposeful human practice. But when historians learn from Gramsci's insights, they tend to celebrate those very subjects whose subjectivity is shown to have been most in question throughout history. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak has recently discussed this problem in her provocative essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak" (Nelson and Grossberg 1988, 271-313). But she begins her essay, and today it seems difficult to imagine doing otherwise, with a consideration of the powerful critiques of the subject that have emerged from poststructuralist theory.

Foucault developed and refined Althusser's sense of subject production, writing that, "It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects... power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his identity, imposes a law of truth on him (Dreyfus and Rabinow, )." In works such as Discipline and Punish, and the History of Sexuality, as well as in essays and interviews of the late seventies and early eighties, Foucault insisted that subjects recognize themselves as individual, purposeful, autonomous, and originary in relation to the operations of power; the subject itself is one of the effects of power. Even in his early writings, Foucault proposed the fundamental historicity of the subject, with Man himself not arriving on the scene until the sixteenth century. The unitary subject has been further demolished by Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, and by Lacan's psychoanalytic insistence that the supposedly immediate certainty of self-identity is imaginary. If poststructuralism has a single dogma, one that also expresses its genealogical connection to structuralism itself, it is that the imagined sovereign bourgeois ego is a product of ideology.

The poststructuralist assault on the subject does not, however, provide the basis for any simple recuperation of older anthropological notions of culture. As noted above, Sahlins' insistence on multiple cultural forms and historicities is always made in the context of his sense that cultures are total systems with internal uniformity of structure and signification. And Sahlins' turn to history seems similarly limited by his location of events outside of culture. The problem is not so much that Sahlins has not worried the question of agency as much as historians would like, but that his conception of culture has remained

impervious to the historic turn. Sahlins has added history but failed to historicize culture.

### The History of Culture

Sahlins is by no means the only anthropologist to have made the historic turn. In fact, other anthropologists have gone much further in historicizing culture, seeing it as contingent, conjunctural, invented, transacted, and manipulated. A recent book of essays by William Roseberry (1989) takes on both Geertz' and Sahlins' sense of culture by reference to some of the same social theorists whose footnotes already grace this paper. There is much in Roseberry's book that parallels my own critique. He writes, for example, that Sahlins emphasizes practice as a theoretical category, "rather than the practices of differently situated and positioned actors within contradictory social relations (10)." He also notes that Sahlins finally fails in an effort to incorporate events "within preexisting conceptual schemes (9)." And Roseberry criticizes Geertz for removing culture from the process of cultural creation and historical production, thereby making possible, "the constant reproduction of an antinomy between the material and the ideal (29)."

But there is something in the critique that falls flat, and it is worth examining the rhetoric of this particular anthropological polemic in order to isolate some of the strengths and weaknesses of anthropology's turn to critical theory and historical analysis. For having begun to make an important intervention in the anthropological debate about culture, Roseberry then reinvokes -- without reflection -- the same antinomy between the material and ideal that he began by criticizing. He writes that "The resolution of the antinomy, and the concept of culture that emerges from that resolution, must be materialist (26)." Roseberry simply reverses the terms of the debate; he accuses Sahlins of subordinating history (by which both Sahlins and Roseberry mean material process) to culture, and counters by subordinating culture to history. Perhaps this is why anthropology as a contemporary discourse has become surprisingly irrelevant to current developments in cultural studies in American academic life today.

Roseberry's hero is Eric Wolf, for whom history is a "material social process, one characterized by economic and political inequality and domination, and by transformation not only of the relations among cultural terms but of entire social orders (11)." And Roseberry asserts that Wolf's approach is completely incompatible with that of Sahlins or Geertz. Whereas for Sahlins and Geertz, "the Other ... [is] different and separate, a product of its own history and carrying its own historicity," for Wolf, "the Other ... [is] different but connected, a product of a particular history that is itself intertwined with a larger set of economic, political, social, and cultural processes to such an extent that analytical separation of "our" history and "their" history is impossible (13)." While there is much in this critique that rings true, Roseberry's characterization leaves all terms other than culture unexamined. Roseberry seems content to be the flip side of Sahlins's coin, and by invoking Wolf as his primary exemplar leaves his claims about the importance of such theorists as Gramsci and Williams entirely without explanation. Roseberry also lays claim to a universal history that

necessarily consigns other histories (and other historicities) to a position of relative insignificance.

Roseberry's general formulation becomes clearer if we examine some of his concrete examples. In his critique of Geertz, he refers to a recent article by Taylor and Rebel about the meaning of Grimm's folk tales. According to Roseberry, Taylor and Rebel situate the tales in the real historical context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and suggest that the tales were, in the final analysis, "attempts by peasant women to respond to the disruption of families and the drafting of their disinherited sons (28)." Thus the tales recommend that "inheriting daughters should renounce their inheritance, move from the region, marry elsewhere, and offer a refuge for the fleeing brothers." The ultimate historical evidence is demographic, despite the acknowledgement that "it cannot yet be demonstrated whether the process they suggest actually occurred (28)." While Roseberry is undoubtedly correct in suggesting by analogy that Geertz could have situated his analysis of the cockfight more saliently in the political and economic contexts of mid 1960s Indonesia than in his own narrative account of ethnographic empathy, the above example does not shed nearly as much light on what is missing in Geertz' (or in other brands of) anthropological analysis as Roseberry asserts. Roseberry seems unaware that he is reducing cultural meaning to historical process, that he is reifying a concept of the purposive subject (the collective rational subjects identified as peasant women) in ways that are completely compatible with bourgeois social theory, that history itself might as a procedure and a context be more than demographic trends, family maintenance, and dilemmas concerning inheritance, indeed that history as his ultimate referent might be more (or less) than what "actually occurred," whether we know it "yet" or not.

Roseberry seems equally reductionist in claiming elsewhere in his book that the work of Arnold Strickon demonstrates his own putatively post-antinomial sense of historical anthropology. Roseberry argues that Robert Redfield's sense of cultural and historical transformation in the Yucatan was limited by his lack of attention to the "transformation of ecology and economy in the area as a result of the development of estate agriculture and ranching." Strickon's work, we are told, "shows that all of the communities can only be understood in terms of that history (214)." As with Sahlins, history continues to exist outside of culture; but whereas Sahlins introduces history after culture (and shows how it is often determined by it), Roseberry puts culture after history (and demonstrates the same logic of determination).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I am not in complete dispute with all of Roseberry's analysis, and agree with him that Redfield's modernization schema misses the way in which the antipodal poles of his analysis do not correlate with traditional and modern but rather with the complementary products of modern historical change. However, Roseberry's sense of this transformation is similarly limited by his analytic insistence that the modern world system necessarily and inevitably produces only certain kinds of products and meanings.

Roseberry's lineage within anthropology, revealed both by his choice of ancestor and his world of reference and association, is clearly identifiable as a distinctly anthropological brand of political economy. He prefaces his book by announcing that he wishes to explore the nature of a "political economic understanding of culture," something he notes that is dismissed equally by critics of political economy as by most practitioners of political economy itself. But in attempting "to place culture and history in relation to each other," (ix), Roseberry has simply widened the net of subjects which political economy can address and explain, proceeding in much the same way as it does when on more familiar ground. My purpose in rehearsing this attempt is not to vindicate Sahlins (or Geertz) from critique, but to suggest that Roseberry takes culture as a fixed and unproblematic category. Roseberry proceeds to argue that culture should be explained not in reference to itself (as he argues Sahlins and Geertz do) but as it is determined by what "political economy" highlights as historical and material process. Not only does Roseberry fail to attend to recent developments in critical theory which call into question some of the theoretical terms and assumptions of his own political economy (and precisely his own assumptions about historical and material process), he fails to suggest any ways in which anthropological analysis might be of interest to the growing group of people committed to cultural studies, most of whom begin their studies of culture with apparently compatible premises, such as the need to politicize and historicize the study of culture. As it turns out, not only does Roseberry lack any sense of the complex dynamics of cultural production, he seems genuinely uninterested in cultural analysis itself.

### The Culture of History

If Sahlins failed to explode his own sense of culture through his turn to history, Roseberry has failed not only to explode but even to problematize his own sense of history. Even when critiquing the parallel antinomies between the ideal and the material and between culture and history he resolutely keeps history exempt from culture. This failure is not untypical. The recent turn to history on the part of many disciplines in the human sciences has generally been in response to specific disciplinary debates and concerns, but has rarely been accompanied by any serious theoretical reflection about history itself, as well as about how historical process and method might be examined in light of different disciplinary dilemmas. At least Sahlins and Geertz have used their sense of anthropological method to call history into question. I have already suggested some of the difficulties in these formulations, but it is worth remembering some of the ways in which cultural anthropology has anticipated poststructuralist critiques of the objectivist and unitary master History of enlightenment thought before engaging in yet another critique of anthropological practice.

Sahlins, for example, has quite explicitly argued that "different cultural orders have their own modes of historical action, consciousness, and determination -- their own historical practice (34)." In the case of Polynesian cultures, Sahlins lays out a notion of heroic history, which has to do with the social fact that in "heroic polities the king is the condition of the possibility of community (36)." Thus he quotes Feeley-

Harnik to underscore one of his points, that, "History is not evenly distributed because to have it is a sign of politico-religious power and authority (49)." This uneven distribution is valorized through chiefly logics of hierarchy, which seem unjust to modern Western ideologies of social formation. All very well, except that cries of injustice seem mostly to valorize a capitalist logic of putative equality. As Sahlins notes, "The native "Boo-jwas" theory is that social outcomes are the cumulative expressions of individual actions, hence behind that of the prevailing state of people's wants and opinions, as generated especially out of their material sufferings. The society is constructed as the institutional sum of its individual practices (52)." Sahlins forcefully parodies the market driven conceits of bourgeois rationality: "The prevailing quantitative, populist, and materialist presuppositions of our social science can then be no accident--or there is no anthropology (53)." By implication, Western assumptions about universal historicities are deeply problematic and profoundly tied to the ideological formation of capitalism.

The problem with Sahlins' critique is that he reserves his hermeneutic of suspicion for contemporary Western ideologies. Sahlins' version of chiefly politics replaces one conceit with another, and never includes a politics of hegemony or resistance, of domination or dissent. As "Western" as these terms may be, their anthropological opposites are no less foreign to the fundamental categories of Western social thought<sup>3</sup>. When Sahlins suggests that the main relationships of Fijian society work through persons of authority, he invokes the standard antinomy of "consensus" (or influence) and "coercion." And Sahlins is strangely uncritical of European descriptions and sources that provide the evidence for and ground of much of his ethnographic characterization (e.g. see Cohn, Dening). Sahlins' commitment to extreme anthropological relativism may be linked to his own critique of capitalist ideology, but is equally subject to it (see Mohanty), as well as to forms of nostalgia that themselves depend upon capitalist alienation. Surely a version of a cultural order which is depicted as a seamless whole and as exempt from critical theory's attack on the conventional categories of political theory deserves to be attacked.

Furthermore, recent critical attention to anthropology, and its implication in the discourses of colonial rule, has identified the tropes of reification and denigration that lurk just below the textual surfaces of much cultural anthropology (Clifford, Said). For a variety of reasons, though perhaps most because of increasing attention to the way our forms of knowledge are shaped by the relations of power and interest (from the influence of Foucault), we must now question the integrity, possibility, and authenticity of any properly anthropological object. We are now correctly suspicious of the categories of "otherness" and "difference" that have historically been caught in logics of domination, whether "orientalist," "primitivist," or "colonialist." And we must maintain this suspicion despite the fact that Sahlins uses his anthropological characterizations to critique Western thought and assumption, in particular the values of capitalist accumulation,

3 See my critique of Louis Dumont, in The Hollow Crown: ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom.

predicated as he sees them in the Augustinian tragedy of unending desire and material obsession (Sahlins, 1987). One of the central critiques of Sahlins from within anthropology has been that he denies non-Western or pre-capitalist peoples of economic rationality, a charge he would happily acknowledge. Indeed, Sahlins provides a salient example of how anthropology has always promised the possibility of encountering other worlds and other modes of being that can work to defamiliarize and denaturalize the world we take for granted. But even the most salutary aims in anthropology may deploy dangerous cargo. The operations of difference seem always to produce hierarchical relations between "us" and "them" (however these categories are constructed), and never exist outside of representation itself.

The realization that anthropology has its own history and politics of representation does not, however, solve the methodological or theoretical problems raised in my consideration of the relations of history and culture. And if otherness is a category that must always be suspected, that continually reinscribes colonialism into the postcolonial procedures of anthropology, it nevertheless may facilitate our attempt to listen to the voices of anthropological informants and colonized subalterns. Reflexive anthropology seems often to suggest that we have a choice to make as to whether we read the anthropological text as a product of either the subject or the object, the author or the informant (or, even more simply, that the incorporation of objects as subjects and informants as authors removes the politics from representation). But this is not a choice that should have to be made, any more than the recognition that meaning is contingent and conditional need necessitate a suspension of our effort to engage the effects of the world "out there" (or the acceptance that god is dead lead necessarily to suicide).

Similarly, we should not have to choose between forgetting anthropology's colonial legacies and forfeiting anthropology's insistence on the importance of studying cultural difference. The critique of anthropology's role in reflecting and enabling colonialism as an historical practice and mode of thought simply raises the stakes of the historicizing enterprise. The question remains, however, as to what exactly it might mean to historicize both anthropology and its concept of culture.

### The Concept of History

Historians have typically made less impact on social theory than anthropologists, literary critics, or other disciplinary practitioners in part because of their resolute refusal to theorize, to put their own culture of history at risk by the reference of metahistorical thinking. If there is, as Terrence McDonald has suggested, an historic turn -- a general turn to history by anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and literary critics -- it is also the case that these non-historians are often sorely disappointed when historians fail to appreciate what they do, and sometimes even to recognize it as history. Non-historians are often deeply puzzled why those very professional academics who would seem from the outside to hold the keys to the kingdom of enlightenment refuse to think helpfully about E. H. Carr's age

old question, what is history? Historians are quick to say what history is not, but find it much more difficult to say what it is.

Most historians would agree that history is fundamentally about change. It is certainly the case that anthropology has generally been held up by historians as unhistorical because it has not been primarily concerned to delineate change. But aside from the fact that change can be as fetishized a concept for the past as continuity is for the present, it is clear that many historians seek to identify change only to control it. Change is seized to be normalized, to be explained by reference to structural conditions or personal actions. Positivist historians are explicit in their attempts to identify not just causes but the universal laws that determine historical properties. Narrative historians are far less concerned with laws, but are committed to the task of isolating and narratively encoding the finite segments of the past that render the particularities of the historical record comprehensible in retrospect (White 1978, 54,55).

If historical interpretation is about control, about mastering narratives of the past and establishing authoritative ways to order events into logics of causation and explanation, interpretation is always characterized by ambivalence. The more the historian reflects about the selection and evaluation of evidence, the more credit a scholar gives to the imaginative acts of analysis and interpretation, the more the past is acknowledged to be constructed. But historians have for the most part responded skeptically at best to the assertions of theorists such as Hayden White that history is basically about interpretation. As White has noted, "Once it is admitted that all histories are in some sense interpretations, it becomes necessary to determine the extent to which historians' explanations of past events can qualify as objective, if not rigorously scientific, accounts of reality (51)." Concerns about objectivity lead to claims about the character of reality, the irreducibility of facts, the ultimate referent of truth. And these concerns tend to controvert the historicizing impulse, which should lead instead to the subversion of essential categories and the celebration of doubt.

Historicizing is nothing more nor less than the constant asking of questions about how something came to be, and about what effects things have had over time. To historicize is to accept that the past is constructed, that things are not given but made, and made sense of. The historicizing operation probes the way categories and identities become formed and fixed, and in so doing it must of necessity be reflexive, framing its own interpreting movement as part of the historicizing field. And the historicizing operation is concerned not only with causes (always multiple) but with effects, with the residues and consequences of the past itself, as also with the present significance of these residues and effects. As LaCapra has suggested, "historians are involved in the effort to understand both what something meant in its own time and what it may mean for us today. The most engaging, if at times perplexing, dimensions of interpretation exist on the margin, where these two meanings are not simply disjoined from one another, for it is at this liminal point that the dialogue with the past becomes internal to the historian (1983, 18)." But LaCapra writes without the urgency and the

political commitment of Benjamin, who puts the point about history better than anyone else. As genealogists of the past, historians are responsible for the safety of the dead. History is really about the dangers that haunt both the living and the dead.

The only problem with this formulation is that most historians do not accept it. When historians are most political and critical, they tend to be uninterested in epistemological questions that might lead to the suspension of the reality effect. And when historians are most concerned about the crafted conceits of narrative representation, they tend to be least interested in making explicit the specific ways in which the past has been made a compelling story by them, for certain purposes, with particular effects. And in spite of the politicization of history in recent years through social and feminist history, historians have only begun to examine critically the ideological effects of their story making in terms of the kinds of concerns about historicizing mentioned above. As just one example, there has so far been remarkably little critical concern about the way in which history is organized in terms of the imagined communities<sup>4</sup> of nations; we think far too little about how

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4 I take the phrase, of course, from Benedict Anderson.



historians legitimize and naturalize the boundaries and political imperatives of the nation state as a form (as well as of some nation states vis a vis others), as also the political organization and balance of power in the world today, through their curricula, their professional training and reproduction, and their teaching. If anthropologists have traditionally neglected the political dimensions of social and cultural life, historians have typically been dominated by them.

Debates about the extent to which history is interpretive, about the relationship between interpretation and objectivity, and about the status of historical reality have in recent years been conducted around the metaphor of textuality. Although most observers would attribute this turn to the cancerous influence of literary criticism, the initial textual turn was taken by historians largely through the influence of anthropology, especially the work of Clifford Geertz. Although Geertz himself acknowledged the literary influences of scholars such as Paul Ricoeur, Kenneth Burke, and Northrup Frye, he grounded his statements about texts in anthropological terms and with reference to the large world of cultural meaning. In his well-known essay on the Balinese cockfight, he wrote that, "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong (1973, 452)." Geertz's sense of textuality had principally to do with interpretive strategy; his injunction was that the anthropologist should read culture as if it were a text. Because of his emphasis on reading, Geertz could extend the metaphor of the text beyond the usual range of cultural products. As he wrote in *Negara*, "Arguments, melodies, formulas, maps, and pictures are not idealities to be stared at but texts to be read; so are rituals, palaces, technologies, and social formations (1980, 135)." All of culture is a text, not so much because it looks like one but because it can be read as one.

Historians could invoke Geertz' influence because it seemed tremendously liberating to be able to engage in interpretive readings of the stuff of history, of symbolic actions, social movements, material remains. And Geertz seemed far less threatening than White, who suggested that historical writing itself was textual, prefigured by its rhetorical tropes and ideological commitments. Geertz only pointed the way. Historians now debate their methods, politics, and epistemes in reference to an increasingly wide range of literary theories.<sup>5</sup> But the debate continues for the most part to be the same, and textuality is seen less as a metaphor inviting a new range of critical interpretive practices than an invitation to nihilism and relativism. If historical reality is a text, then it can neither be important nor real.

If the metaphor of textuality seems to invite the same old antinomies and debates, as even the deconstructionist historian LaCapra acknowledges (19,20), Foucault's use of the term discourse has radically shifted the terms of debate. Not only is discourse not the same as text,

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 5 Curiously, with the exception of only a few historians, these literary theories tend to be the ones that are least concerned with history. Historians tend not to be aware of the historicist work of critics such as P. Macheray, J. McGann, L. Patterson, D. McKenzie, and J. Sutherland.

discourse is defined in ways that sharply distinguish it from language. Discourse is about the conditions under which the world presents itself as real, about the way institutions and historical practices become regimes of truth and of possibility itself. While most historians have continued to view Foucault as if he is only concerned with language (and not material reality), Foucault has provided new ways to think about the past, how the effects of history are more salient for historical investigation than the causes, how knowledge and power are inexorably linked, how historical categories themselves are produced by and in relationship to the objects of historical scrutiny. Foucault has trained his skeptical eye on practices as various as philology and sex, and on institutions such as the clinic and the prison; and he has shown in these stunning historical exercises that the institutional history of modernity is riddled with terror and contradiction. If there are numerous problems with Foucault's theoretical proposals and practical investigations, historians should at least recognize that for Foucault theory is nothing more nor less than history itself.

### Suspicion and the Supplement

Within anthropology, attempts to theorize a new relationship between "culture" and "history" have so far failed. And historians have been of little help. Typically, one of the two terms is subordinated to the other, and despite attempts to set some kind of dialectic in motion we are left with a sterile debate. This failure accounts at least in part for why anthropology is seen as far less relevant than it should be, and by all historical accounts ought to be, to recent developments in cultural studies in the American academy. This failure also accounts in part for why it is that historians have begun to turn from anthropology to other disciplines in their most recent attempts to understand cultural history.

Although the theoretical failure I have identified is itself only part of a larger set of problems in the human sciences, I would suggest that Derrida's notion of the supplement might provide a way to rethink the categories of history and culture both within and outside the disciplinary borders of anthropology. Supplementarity reveals, as LaCapra has put it, "why analytic distinctions necessarily overlap in "reality" and why it is misleading to take them as dichotomous categories (152)." Reflecting on Rousseau's notions about the relations of writing and speech, Derrida proposed that when writing supplements speech it does far more than add a new, and for Rousseau unnatural, dimension to language. Derrida writes that, "The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence (1974, 144)." Derrida challenges Rousseau's conviction that nature after culture can be imagined ever to have existed, that nature could any more be seen as self-sufficient. He goes on to say that the supplement "adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void (145)." A supplement is something which is added as if external to the thing itself, but its necessity paradoxically proclaims the essential inadequacy of the original. Supplementarity suggests why every dialectical structure must remain open, why no synthesis can be anything

more than provisional. The supplement co-exists with that which it supplements in a fundamentally destabilizing way.

If we can now consider the relationship between culture and history as supplemental rather than additive, as subversive rather than complementary, it becomes clear that neither Sahlins nor Roseberry have adequately reconsidered their fundamental categories. "Cultural orders" and "historical processes" have survived relatively in tact. The suspicion that should be generated from recognizing the logic of the supplement has not been deployed against the foundational assumptions of analytic practice.

A similar call for post-foundational scholarship has been made by Gyan Prakash, in a recent review of Indian history (1990). Prakash traced the ways in which Indian historiography in its different stages and modalities has always relied upon certain foundational categories and procedures: e.g. the nation, civilization, or class. Prakash has proposed that a post-Orientalist historiography, "visualizes modern India, for example, in relationships and processes that have constructed contingent and unstable identities," thereby displacing "the categories framed in and by that history." But Prakash is no epistemological nihilist, and recommends concrete strategies for historicizing the analytic object (Indian history) without taking ones' own analytic categories as foundational, or, to use Derrida's language, as essences that can be conceived apart from the supplement of some subsequent analytic operation.

The utility of supplemental reasoning for an historical reading of culture can be seen by contrasting the sense of historicizing that I have outlined with Frederic Jameson's call to "Always historicize," with which he begins his most influential book of Marxist literary criticism, The Political Unconscious. Jameson predicates his injunction on the contention that there are two distinct paths for the historicizing operation: namely the path of the object and the path of the subject. The first path is that of the historical origins of the things themselves. The second path is that more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand these things. I argue instead that these paths are necessarily indistinct, that the things themselves are never separable from the categories and concepts that make it possible to recognize and taxonomise those things. History too must be seen as having historicity.

Sahlins is correct to suggest that history should be exploded by culture, but as I earlier observed, the explosion must work both ways. Supplementary reasoning promises the theoretical means to develop some sense of how the terms "culture" or "history" can continue to have utility while at the same time never representing isolable or essential referents, whether empirical or analytic. Richard Johnson may perhaps be correct that what is needed more than interdisciplinary research is an antidisciplinary attitude. Anthropologists and historians should both feel uncomfortable with their forms of interdisciplinary appropriation. The commitment to multiple historicities -- whether anthropological or poststructuralist -- should disfigure -- to use a phrase of Peter de Bolla's (1986) -- the certainties of historical analysis. And the

commitment to refiguring a concept of culture which can be simultaneously historical and subject to its own historicizing moment might well dissolve for good the anthropological commitment to seeing culture in terms of words like "system" or "order."

Proposing Derrida's concept of the supplement, or invoking Prakash's call for a post-foundational Indian history, still hardly clarifies what kind of historical anthropology I would recommend over that of Sahlins or Roseberry. In the second part of this paper I will attempt to provide some examples to illustrate what I have in mind, and how I see culture and history as useful categories insofar as they destabilize each other.

## PART II.

### Culture in History

Benjamin rescues history by insisting that the safety of the dead depends upon it. Analysis is not just a game; it has real stakes and real effects, even when its epistemological claims would seem to compromise the possibility of knowing the real in any absolute way. Benjamin has anticipated this worry, by arguing that history is not about ascertaining how things really were but in seizing hold of memories and fanning the sparks of hope.

Similarly, anthropology need not be about establishing in some absolute or abstract sense what things really mean, but rather about contesting meanings that appear to be natural, and exploring the means by which cultural forms are inscribed into the world of nature. Culture thus appears not as something which is simply arbitrary rather than natural in the usual terms of semiotics, but as a particular conglomerate of constructions set in motion by agents, produced within and through social practices (especially practices involving power and inequality), frequently operationalized through the agencies of the state. Culture in the end must be contested through institutional means that themselves have been naturalized through the very denial of history which is encoded in most cultural experience. Culture can no longer be assumed to be about consensus or shared meanings, and culture can no longer be happily abstracted from the conditions of its production or the effects of its use. At one level, culture can be seen as a material force, as it must be analyzed in relationship to the interests and identities of ruling classes and institutions. But in so far as culture is genuinely political, in the modern world implicated in state projects which naturalize the social and claim to liberate the cultural, we must challenge those claims about determination and reflexivity that depend upon economistic epistemologies (see Taussig 1987). Culture (like power) is and can be contested; but at another and perhaps more fundamental level culture (or power) is the abstraction of discursive and institutional sites which contain contest: define its antipodes, seal its interpretations, and configure its possible resolutions. Thus the political components of culture are made invisible. Like the state itself,

the "political" deploys cultural hegemony through paradoxical forms of preemption and deferral.

To illustrate these claims, I will summarize some of my recent work on the history of the caste system in India. For anthropology, and for social theory more generally, culture in India has always been principally defined by caste. Caste has been seen as always there in Indian history, and as one of the major reasons why India has no history, certainly no sense of history. Caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and caste is today the major threat to Indian modernity. However, by subjecting caste to historical analysis, I have been able to demonstrate that much of what has been taken to be timeless tradition is in fact the paradoxical effect of colonial rule, where culture was carefully depoliticized and reified into a specifically colonial version of civil society.<sup>6</sup> In my fieldwork, in my reading of texts traditionally dismissed as so much myth and fabulous legend, in looking for the historicity of caste or kingship, in reading colonial texts, in charting the contradictory effects of colonial hegemony, I found that the categories of culture and history constantly engaged and subverted each other. Historical methods revealed that modern notions of caste were produced both indirectly (e.g. through the introduction of new revenue systems) and by the cumulative impact of colonial discourse and legislation specifically about caste.

This is not to suggest that caste was invented anew by the British, but rather that caste was refigured as a "religious" form of organizing society in a context where politics and religion had never been distinct domains of social action. The religious definition of caste enabled colonial procedures of rule through the characterization of India as essentially about spiritual harmony and liberation; when the state had existed in India, it was despotic and epiphenomenal, extractive but fundamentally irrelevant. British rule could thus be characterized as enlightened even when it denied Indian subjects the minimal rights extended to propertied males in nineteenth century Britain. This is also not to suggest that one culture simply gave way to another, nor that the politics and historicity of caste in the seventeenth century were the same as the politics and historicity of caste today. Rather, I suggest the complex ways in which certain cultural forms became represented as non-historical at the same time that these representations were profoundly situated in the historical conditions of colonialism. Under colonialism the colonizers and the colonized were increasingly implicated in new discourses on social identity that led to subtle shifts in social relations and political control. The success of colonial discourse was that through the census, landholding, the law, inter alia, some Indians were given powerful stakes in new formulations and assumptions about caste, a version of caste that increasingly resembled the theoretical statements of anthropologists such as Louis Dumont that are putatively based on an Indological reading of Indian civilization. Caste became the essence of Indian civilization through historical process, through the history of colonialism.

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6 This is an extremely compressed summary of one of the major arguments in my book. Also see my, "The Original Caste."

The turn to history does not, however, make culture go away. To find a politics in culture does not necessarily make culture readily comprehensible, or subject to economistic or naively materialist appropriation. Social relations in precolonial India had a distinct and complex politics, having to do with notions and procedures of kingship, order, control, domination, and rule that were specific to a particular historical moment. This formation, however much historical study and analysis is directed at it, remains resistant to final interpretation and understanding. Attention to cultural difference can enable a better and more historically grounded appreciation of the epistemic conditions and limits of interpretation than most historians, and other disciplinary advocates of the historic turn, would be willing to concede. An anthropological commitment to the study of cultural difference can also raise serious questions for both historical practice and critical theory. And if anthropology can help demonstrate that there are multiple histories and multiple historicities, historians and critical theorists may have to reconsider what they mean when they attempt to "Always Historicize."

### History and Truth

If anthropology is still compromised by its colonial past, it may also be remembered that anthropology has other histories as well. Indeed, anthropology has often played an unsettling role in social theory, providing grounds and opportunities for social criticism of a variety of kinds. Whether in Rousseau's suspicion of social contracts, Engel's dislike of private property and modern family formation, modernist disdain for certain conventions of realism and civilization, or finally in Sahlins' critique of bourgeois culture, anthropology can render other worlds and ways of living as not simply plausible but enviable. Given this background, we might ask whether it is possible that anthropology's traditional concerns with such subjects as kinship, ritual, myth, witchcraft, shamanism, and possession, to leave aside the usual utopian appropriations of stateless societies and egalitarian communities, might not raise serious questions about the categories and conventions of even the most critical contemporary social theory. This latter concern is amplified by recent calls to remember, rehearsed earlier in this paper, that the so called universals of western thought - the unitary subject, the character and consciousness of history, modern rhetoric and narrative, reason itself -- are highly particularistic, profoundly Western, essentially modernist. In critical theory's historicizing turn, the enlightenment project is being dismantled by a concept of history that was produced by the enlightenment itself.

The concept of history of greatest attraction in the last few years for historical anthropology has come to be known under the banner of the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Recent work, including my own on the history of caste, has delighted in demonstrating that those very traditions that had been thought to be timeless have histories of their own, that state rituals celebrating nations or monarchs (Cannadine, Cohn, Hobsbawm), symbolic markers of identity such as kilts or turbans (Trevor-Roper, Cohn), and institutions such as the village community and the tribe (Perlin, Bremen, Ranger) were all invented at specific times, often in ways that served the purpose of some class

interest or ruling power. One of the most promising revisionary movements in anthropology has been the recognition that many of the old chestnuts of anthropological assumption were produced through encounters with colonial powers and modern influences, rather than representing the residual hold of the past in "traditional" (as opposed to "historical") societies. But in our enthusiasm for this kind of historicizing there are certain dangers, perhaps not least the loss of the possibility of otherness.

For Hobsbawm and Ranger, historicizing tradition means finding the historical means by which a tradition was first invented and then naturalized as tradition. Tradition is sharply distinguished from custom, "which dominates so-called 'traditional' societies." Custom is not invariant, because life in traditional societies is not invariant, but neither is custom subject to historical scrutiny. Custom simply refers to a set of practices that combine flexibility in substance with formal adherence to precedent, and Hobsbawm stresses the praxical character of custom as also its embeddedness in institutional forms such as peasant society. Tradition, on the other hand, is a set of rituals and symbolic practices that are fundamentally ideological rather than practical. Tradition, as Hobsbawm uses it, is bad, because it is usually a kind of modern ideological mystification which is installed as a constant by the elites and governments whose real interests are thereby served. To show that traditions are invented is in effect to show that traditions are not true, nor real, not legitimate.

While I share Hobsbawm's concern that traditions are frequently appropriated, invented, and manipulated by elites and states, it is also true that elites and states can assert cultural hegemony by defining certain things as tradition and certain things as bogus, that the same technique of separating tradition from custom -- or the legitimate from the illegitimate -- can and has been used in far more sinister ways than Hobsbawm concedes possible. Indeed, in colonial situations states and colonial elites invented tradition precisely by engaging in the kind of history Hobsbawm seems to advocate, at the same time that colonialism deauthenticated certain colonized history as tradition by deploying a universal sensibility of what historical consciousness should entail. All tradition (and all "custom" too) is historical, but it also engages different forms of historicity. Attention to these alternate historicities might compromise our confidence in debunking fraud and mystification, perhaps even exposing the forms of mystification that are part of our own historicity.

The clearest example of how the "invention of tradition" ploy can go wrong can be seen in the article by Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 15-41)." Trevor-Roper begins by arguing that the kilt, the tartan, the clan, and even the bagpipe, rather than being signs of great antiquity and cultural distinction, are "in fact largely modern." If these things existed before the Union with England at all, Trevor-Roper asserts, they did so only in "vestigial form," and as signs of "barbarism." Trevor-Roper goes on: "Indeed, the whole concept of a distinct Highland culture and tradition is a retrospective invention. Before the later years of the seventeenth century, the Highlanders of Scotland did not

form a distinct people (15)." And so Trevor-Roper proceeds to demonstrate, with convincing historical flair and wit, the recent vintage of Scottish national culture.

The only problem with Trevor-Roper's argument is that while Hobsbawm debunks mystification in general as well as in the particular forms of its manipulation by states, ruling classes, or colonial powers, Trevor-Roper debunks the the necessary claims of Scottish nationalists -- necessary because of the hegemonic terms that became set in the eighteenth century for nationalist or populist political aspirations -- that Scotland had its own authentic traditions, epics, and histories. Indeed, Trevor-Roper's argument has a genuine colonial ring to it, for, in recounting the invention of clans and kilts and the forgery of the great epic Ossian, it uses smug notions of authenticity and historical privilege to contest what appear to be absurd claims about Scottish customs and traditions. At the same time, and with similar colonial resonance, Trevor-Roper uses his historical mastery to conceal his own moral position, one that appears to justify, at least to support, the unification claims of the British state. The effort to historicize tradition and custom can thus both expose the mystifications of cultural hegemony, and be appropriated by them. When historical methods are used as if the methods themselves are exempted from historical scrutiny and critique, history becomes a way of deauthenticating everything but its own authority, denigrating difference and displacing the categories and logics of historical discourse. It can become far too easy to end up privileging certain kinds of histories, or texts, or traditions over others, rather than realizing that all such "things" -- including our own histories, texts, and traditions -- are constructed in historical and ideological contexts.

Trevor-Roper's argument about historical authenticity both recounts and recapitulates arguments over the authenticity of a text that was said by one James Macpherson in 1760 to be the national epic of highland Scotland. Macpherson apparently put together fragments of written poems and tales, oral traditions of highland Scot families, Irish ballads, and material of his own (including passages evocative of Milton and Shakespeare) to create -- he said discover -- the epic poem Ossian. The epic provided Scotland with a heroic and distinctive past, a claim to epic glory and a legitimate folk tradition. In particular, the epic marked off Scottish history from Ireland's, and established the basis for the rise of a new cultural nationalism in the wake of England's suppression of the Highland clans after the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. Or, as Trevor-Roper puts it, through the Ossian, "the Scottish Highlands had acquired -- however fraudulently -- an independent ancient culture... (18)." And Trevor-Roper is fully aware of the political implications of culture; the tone of his history dismisses outright any distinct Scottish political or cultural aspirations.

The debate over the Ossian took the form of a scholarly inquiry into the question of textual authenticity and forgery.<sup>7</sup> Samuel Johnson, perhaps the most influential arbiter of letters in his day, declared the

7 See Hugh Blair, "A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal," 1863; Samuel Johnson, Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland;



text to be an imposture and the author a sham. Indeed, it was through the Ossianic controversy that Johnson set himself up as champion of the truth, committed not to sentiment but rather to precise empirical standards for textual scholarship and historical investigation. David Hume was equally scornful of the authenticity of the text. However, as embarrassed as he was by Macpherson's forgery, and by Macpherson's attempt to restore interest in the clan system, Hume was deeply offended by Johnson's attack. Johnson betrayed his prejudice by writing in his account of his journey to Scotland and the Western Islands that he considered Gaelic "the rude speech of a barbarous people, who had few thoughts to express," announcing wrongly that the language never had a written form.

The Ossian had its critical defenders. Dr. Hugh Blair, a literary critic, theologian, and friend of Macpherson's published a "Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal" in 1763, and argued that Ossian, Homer, and Aristotle enjoyed a natural affinity, the first two having been inspired by nature, the latter having studied it in Homer. Although Blair admitted that there were legitimate queries, and felt embarrassed by Macpherson's inability ever to produce the originals of his text, he held fast to his defense, and was by no means alone in making it. In Germany Herder and Lessing gave further credence to the poems and their heroic traditions by celebrating Macpherson's accomplishment. And in Scotland scholars attempted to find ways to defend Gaelic traditions without allowing the critiques of Macpherson to serve as some kind of final judgment. The controversy raged on, and in 1797, a year after Macpherson's death, the Highland Society of London established a committee to investigate the authenticity of the Ossian. The Committee circulated questionnaires through the Highlands and commenced an extraordinary scholarly effort to discover the folk and textual bases for the Ossianic tradition. The final report, completed after seven years, consisted of an 155 page essay and 200 pages of documents. The Committee reported that although it found impressive examples of a revival of interest in Scottish literature and culture, including myriad examples of Gaelic oral and literary tradition, there were few direct parallels to Macpherson's text in what they collected. The Report makes for fascinating reading, as it documents the extraordinary changes in Gaelic oral tradition during the second half of the eighteenth century, as well as the deliberate attempt on the part of many respondents to withhold or refashion information so as not to tarnish the reputation of a man they considered their cultural hero. Although the Committee admitted that Macpherson had tampered with tradition, changing what was "too simple or too rude for a modern ear," they stopped short of charging him with forgery. Some critical reviews of the Report in London found sufficient evidence to declare Johnson vindicated. Sir Walter Scott, who wrote a review of the Report in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1805, was more ambivalent. Although Trevor-Roper reads his review to suggest that Scott "decisively rejected the

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James Boswell, *A Tour to the Hebrides*; Henry Mackenzie, ed., *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1805; Thomas Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson*, New York, 1968; Paul J. deGateno, *James Macpherson*, Boston, 1989; Fiona J. Stafford, *The Sublime*

authenticity of the epic which the Scottish literary establishment in general, and the Highlanders in particular, continued to defend (18)," Scott took a nuanced view of the question of authenticity, at the same time questioning the empirical premises of both Johnson and Trevor-Roper. Scott wrote that Macpherson had been "capable not only of making an enthusiastic impression on every mind susceptible of poetical beauty, but of giving a new tone to poetry throughout all Europe." And Scott went on to reproduce the poetic effort of Macpherson by publishing his own "Border Poems."<sup>8</sup>

The Ossianic controversy illustrates how the development of empirical procedures in textual criticism collaborated with English confidence in its own cultural heritage -- confidently extended by all educated Britons in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to the Hellenic past -- and its general assumptions about the barbarism of marginal places and peoples. Oral traditions had to be sanctified by the kind of canonization and appropriation directed at Homer in order to be appreciated; closer to home in time and place these same heroic traditions were ridiculed and dismissed. Educated Scots found themselves in a difficult predicament, forced by the logic of the debate to choose between truth and culture. It was only Walter Scott, who came to have a critical role in the development of the English novel, as well as in the development of the standards of historical narrative that have since become basic to our empiricist historical sensibility, who was ironically able to see the issue more clearly. Scott was certainly aware that Macpherson had contributed to the general history of English poetry, and directed welcome public attention to the myriad and extraordinary folk traditions of the Highlands, even if he had exaggerated the Homeric character of these traditions, and misrepresented his own role in the production of the Ossian text.

In part because of the limited professional opportunities available in Scotland, in part also because of the growing importance of India for Britain's political, military, and economic fortunes, an extraordinary number of gifted Scots played key roles in the operations of the East India Company in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Scots seemed particularly ubiquitous among those East India Company servants who became known during this period for their specialized knowledge about India, often as antiquarians and Orientalists. The names of Alexander Dow, Montstuart Elphinstone, Thomas Munro, Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, Colin Mackenzie, Walter Elliott, and John Malcolm represent just a few of the growing cadre of British officers who studied Indian languages, history, and society. I can cite no direct evidence to suggest that Scots were more inclined to participate in the study and recuperation of Indian textual and historical traditions than their English colleagues in the East India Company. However, the antiquarian obsessions of men such as Colin Mackenzie could not have been formed without some kind of critical awareness of the Ossianic controversy.

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Savage: A Study of James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian, Edinburgh, 1988; James Macpherson, tr., The Poems of Ossian, Leipzig, 1847.

<sup>8</sup> collected with the assistance of John Leydon, who went on to become a noted Orientalist in India and Indonesia.

In Mackenzie's case a logic of displacement seems particularly plausible. Mackenzie, born in the Outer Hebrides in 1754, went to India in the army as an engineer in the 1780s and rose to become the first Surveyor-General of Madras in 1807 and of India in 1815.<sup>9</sup> Through his long career in southern India as cartographer and surveyor, Mackenzie was obsessed with an interest in collecting texts and facts to supplement the maps he and his associates made of Hyderabad, Mysore, and other regions of the southern peninsula. On his own initiative and with his own resources he hired and trained a group of Brahman assistants who helped him collect local histories of kingly dynasties, chiefly families, castes, villages, temples, monasteries, as well as other local traditions and religious and philosophical texts in a wide variety of Indian languages. When Mackenzie died in 1821 he had amassed a collection of 3000 stone and copper plate inscriptions, 1568 literary manuscripts, 2070 local tracts, and large portfolios and collections of drawings, plans, images, and antiquities (see Taylor 1858, Wilson 1828, and Mahalingam 1972 and 1976). This collection contains by far the largest set of sources for the study of southern Indian history and literature.

Two things distinguished Mackenzie and his general project from most of his colonial contemporaries. First, Mackenzie was unusual in his respect for and reliance on local Indians for information and scholarly assistance. Secondly, Mackenzie was unusually open to and interested in the wide variety of texts and sources that were collected through his local assistants and contacts. Whereas his contemporaries tended to disparage the scholarly judgement of any Indians, or dismiss out of hand genealogical or "mythical" sources as completely lacking in historical sensibility and value, Mackenzie realized that historical genres and sensibilities differed in India. It is not that Mackenzie had the kind of anthropological sensitivity to multiple historicities that Sahlins might advocate, but rather that Mackenzie believed that history and literature were alive and well in India, both in India's traditions and in India's literati. And while the East India Company professed their admiration for Mackenzie's zeal, they rarely shared his enthusiasm for his actual researches, often complaining that his collections of materials other than inscriptions seemed worthless. Empire and India softened and sometimes obscured the kind of debate that took place between Hugh Blair and Samuel Johnson, but in fact this debate took place over and over again in the colonial theatre. The Enlightenment project was not only always organized in the service of empire, but it gave shape to and then progressively intensified the taxonomical fault line between history and culture. History and culture could only be united when both were hegemonic, the mutually enabling conditions of power and domination.

Historical methods and textual empiricism were about far more than establishing truth and detecting forgery; they concerned questions about what tradition and history could consist of, about regimes of epistemic possibility. Since all history and all tradition is fabricated, we must realize the potentially pernicious effect that historicizing culture or tradition can have. The experiences of Macpherson and Mackenzie suggest not only that there are many histories, there are also

9 See my paper, "The Invention of Caste," in *Social Analysis*, Autumn 1989. Also see H.H. Wilson, *Catalogue of Oriental Mss. of Col. Mackenzie*, Calcutta, 1828.

many truths, truths that take many cultural forms. In our general turn to history, and in our enthusiasm that the historicizing move will settle the debate or solve the problem, we must never assume that history itself should not be called into question, or that our capacity to outrun the historicizing imperative is ever more than partial and provisional. And in the present academic conjuncture, it seems clear that some kind of attention to the concept of culture, however flawed and unhistorical the concept might be, can help.

#### Postscript: History, Anthropology and Cultural Studies

In recent years, the emergent field of "cultural studies" has been attracting a great deal of excitement in the human sciences in America. As I noted earlier, culture has become a buzz word, fueling new subfields and professional enthusiasms in a wide range of disciplines (e.g. the new cultural history, the new sociology of culture, and the new importance attached to film and media studies in general). And "cultural studies" itself, which used to refer specifically to the activities of the Birmingham Centre, now signifies factional affiliations in English Departments, cross-disciplinary Institutes, Centers, and Conferences, and an increasingly distinct constellation of theoretical and practical interests that may yet produce a new academic discipline. Particularly noteworthy about cultural studies today is its general commitment to considering the politics of culture -- in part an inheritance from the pioneering work of Hoggart, Williams, and Hall -- and also its capacity to bridge the usual chasms between the humanities and social sciences in the American academy.

Nevertheless, it is clear that much of the enthusiasm for cultural studies in the American academy today comes from members of the traditional humanities. And, it is also clear that anthropology no longer has any proprietary claim to culture. In a recent and extensive survey of cultural studies in Britain and America by Patrick Brantlinger (1990), anthropology is conspicuous by its absence. For anthropologists this is particularly alarming because of the way Brantlinger problematizes cultural studies; as he writes, "'difference' -- the threat or promise of 'the Other' -- will continue to be the central organizing category for postmodernist cultural and literary theory (163)." But instead of calling on anthropologists here, the case for "otherness" and "difference" is made for him by literary/cultural critics such as Houston Baker, H.L. Gates, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. As the "subaltern" is finding her voice in the American academy, anthropology has grown hoarse.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This observation implies a critique of both cultural studies and anthropology, the former for its ethnocentrism and conventional academicism, the latter for its inability to address the concerns and issues that have been importantly raised in cultural studies. Indeed, my critique of Sahlins and particularly of Roseberry is meant to suggest

In my opening critique of British cultural studies I noted that one of the problems with the Birmingham Centre as a model for a new culture concept is that the activities of the Centre have been based and oriented solely within the borders of Britain. A similar ethnocentrism affects the growth of cultural studies in America.<sup>11</sup> It is time for anthropologists, and comparative historians, to argue and demonstrate that the theoretical excitement and power of cultural studies need not be limited to, and is seriously compromised by, its domestic provenance. If history and culture -- as conceived by professional historians and anthropologists -- need to supplement each other, cultural studies needs them both.

Brantlinger makes the point that cultural studies should provide the space for a dialectical encounter between the two fundamental problematics engaged in studying the "other": relativism and universalism. In the first, the other seems totally different, incommensurable, and incomprehensible. In the second, the other reveals a deeply shared common humanity. Both seem flawed, the first by sacrificing critical engagement for fear of misplaced judgement, the second by sacrificing difference itself. But given the limited scope of his academic canvas, Brantlinger's worries seem exemplified only in the debates over the canon that preoccupy American Professors today. As important as these debates are, they do not seem to provide Brantlinger with a sense either of the costs of epistemic violence -- as for example does the history of colonialism -- or the contingency of his own epistemological concerns -- as more attention to anthropology might afford.

I have only begun to suggest some of the ways history and anthropology might better engage each other, as well as some of the uses of this engagement for developments in cultural studies in America today. In addition to exploring the limits of the concepts of culture and history that animate current interdisciplinary discussions and debates, I could have attempted to conduct more thorough ethnographies of other historical/narrative sensibilities (e.g. providing an analysis of either Macpherson's or Mackenzie's texts), or other forms of subjectivity and agency (e.g. an analysis of possession), in order to question further the constructional certainties of our current metadisciplinary discourse. If culture and history are riddled with difficulties, so too are the meanings implied by terms like "voice," "subject," "agency," "event," "experience," not to mention the "other". But I hope at least that I have illustrated some of the problems with the historic turn in anthropology, at the same time I have indicated that, when all is said and done, it has been a turn for the better.

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some of the reasons why anthropology's insularity is both unwise and unnecessary.

<sup>11</sup> An important exception here has been the publishing work of Carol A. Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai. See the new journal: Public Culture. Also, the pages of Comparative Studies in Society and History are full of examples that demonstrate the limits and stretch the theoretical provenance of cultural studies.

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