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Time Is History?

E. H. Carr asked not so very long ago, "What is history?" It is a question that haunts my reading of Nicholas Thomas's essay on history and evolution in anthropological discourse. Thomas's primary concern is to

reveal the discipline of anthropology's conscious neglect of history and the theoretical errors and substantive misinterpretations that such neglect has engendered. A consideration of such an important, worthy topic requires meticulous definitions of the key concepts involved; yet, such definitions remain elusive in Thomas's text--intentionally so. In the introduction, Thomas writes of his belief that meanings subsist in the uses of concepts in text; hence, he has refrained from any extended definitional consideration of terms such as "history" and "evolution." This posture leaves the reader to manage the intellectual void and confusion that result.

Throughout much of his text, Thomas seems to confuse history with time or temporality. At other times, there are references to history as "events and social processes" (p. 4), "systemic process" (p. 121), and "the orderly march of people and their thoughts and doings" (p. 118), but there are no attempts to explain these ideas. Thomas's statement that history itself possesses no unified theory of cultural or social systems only compounds the dilemma of meanings. Given the fact that most historians acknowledge the incredible diversity of topics involved in the study of the human experience, concede their efforts to be essentially interpretive, and admit to the plurality of contending interpretations for any given event, Thomas's references to "actual history" (p. 115) and "real history" (p. 121) become highly problematic, even disconcerting. Do these labels represent a regression to an earlier, archaic understanding that the historian's task lay simply in the development of a single, authoritative, and uncontested exposition of what really happened in the past through the professional examination of written documents? Thomas's general sensitivity to the issues of historical representation and cultural context suggest not, but there persists an ambiguity toward concepts and their definitions that permeates the text and confounds its reading.

The book's position on evolution is likewise perplexing. Thomas is clear enough about the atemporal bias in "old" evolutionary thought, but fails to be specific about a more historically sensitive, reconstructed evolutionary approach. What constitutes this "new" approach to evolutionary analysis other than its incorporation of change over time? Evolutionary ideas have often provided both a powerful political instrument and an intellectual justification for the colonization of non-Western peoples. Thomas's writing certainly evidences a consciousness of these facts, but his apparent endorsement of a still evolutionary, albeit radically altered, scheme for the discipline of anthropology necessitates a careful elaboration of the argument being made. There is little.

Problems involving the issues of theory and methodology follow from the author's failure to be more specific about his understanding of what history is. Thomas's disdain for "conventional, uncompromising empiricists" is unequivocal, as is the general inadequacy or ineffectiveness with which he regards Marxist, *Annales*, and regional systems approaches. Recent efforts by different schools of anthropological thought to address the past through symbolic or structural approaches are all held to be seriously flawed by pronounced professional biases, inappropriate concepts of time and change, or implicit evolutionism. Thomas, however, offers little indication in this work of how he would go about the practice of history or a more historically sensitive anthropology. There is repeated reference to the incorporation of archaeological evidence in a refocused anthropological vision, but this proposed agenda ignores the heavy evolutionary bias and lack of critical thought that underlie much of the archaeological endeavor.

What Thomas would have us draw from archaeology is something much closer to chronology than history. Relying heavily on archaeological research from Rapa Nui and the Marquesas, Thomas writes of the patterns in the eastern Polynesian past, patterns that diverge significantly from the still current preoccupation with chieftainship as the sole locus and measure of stratification and power in greater Polynesia. The end result is an evolutionary revision that depends heavily upon simple linear developments and that expresses itself in the tentative language of "probably," "likely," and "seems to have." A speculative chronology is thus substituted for an old, unilineal, evolutionary progression and with none of the "conditions of life and cultural variables across time and space" (p. 109) that Thomas later castigates structural historians for ignoring. The author's recasting of the patterns of the eastern Polynesian past is not history; it is instead something much closer to a redirected time line.

The problems in translating between "prehistoric" and more recent sociohistorical concerns involve more than differing time scales and limited number of long-term processes. There are the critically divergent constructions and perceptions of time that separate the observer from the observed. The temporality or sense of time endorsed by Thomas is very much a culturally determined one. The text in question evidences no appreciation for the ways in which other societies might construe, express, and utilize a very different sense of time. Thomas, in effect, suggests that others' pasts can be discerned, charted, and understood through Western notions of change over and in time. Rather than destabilize the existing evolutionary paradigm, Thomas inadvertently

promotes it by limiting anthropological understanding to a very specific cultural understanding of chronology and sequence. The discipline of anthropology thus remains constrained within a Western construction of temporality, oblivious to or unconcerned with local conceptions of time.

Bound by its own professional agenda, *Out of Time* also gives little attention or credibility to indigenous sources and modes of historical expression. In challenging the late E. S. C. Handy's study of Marquesan society, Thomas attempts to discredit the memories and histories of his informants. Indeed, the only consideration given to indigenous conceptions of colonial contact is an oblique reference in footnote 7 of chapter 5 to Marquesans' designation of the "time of foreigners" as *te tai hao'e*. Such limited frames of analysis do not take anthropology very far away from the neocolonial contexts that Thomas says still influence its practice. Until historians and anthropologists alike understand that history (which I would define as the present's expressed consciousness and understanding of the past through a variety of forms) is culturally distinct in both its practice and articulation, efforts to decolonize the study of others' pasts will continue to founder.

There is a manner in which Thomas's book is itself somewhat "out of time." As the author notes, there is currently a surge of interest in the conjuncture between history and anthropology. Thomas cites a number of these works favorably, including Renato Rosaldo's *Ilongot Headhunting*, James Fox's *Harvest of the Palm*, and Jean-François Baré's *Le Malentendu Pacifique*. Marshall Sahlins has in recent years turned to the consideration of history and anthropology, though not to the author's liking because of his alleged failure to allow for an identification of longer-term structural transformations. The fact of this surge of interest between the two disciplines suggests to me that anthropology's aversion to history may not be as pronounced or as deep-seeded as Thomas argues. Rather than focus exclusively on anthropology's ahistorical (atemporal?) bias, Thomas might have undertaken an extensive examination of the ways in which historical anthropology or ethnographic history has sought to reconcile culture and event. Thomas, however, declines the task, claiming that the above-cited works and like others are "concerned much more with local substantive issues than with the question of compatibility or otherwise of particular forms of knowledge" (p. 7).

There are problems with emphasis, orientation, and evidence of argument on other issues as well. Thomas takes pains to delineate anthropologists' calculated disregard of voyager, missionary, and other

forms of early "amateur" ethnography; yet, Handy and Sahlins, two of Thomas's principal antagonists who have indeed made extensive use of such writings, are indicted for their uncritical or overly structured approach to these historical sources. Perhaps Thomas would have been better advised to formulate his general intellectual concern around "how" rather than "whether or not" early ethnographic sources are used. There are also larger claims in the text that do not get much beyond the realm of contention. Never fully developed or substantiated are Thomas's insistence that synchronic thought overwhelmed arguments for a more diachronic analysis and that complex conceptual and discursive reasons led to the *deliberate* exclusion of history from most anthropological practice. What is needed to sustain his overall critique is an intensive intellectual history of anthropological thought of the kind called for by Johannes Fabian and, ironically, acknowledged by Thomas himself.

In the end, the author's own words best describe his text. The reader is presented with a polemical collage that jumbles and tangles together epistemological critique, evolutionary theory, a revision of Polynesian anthropology, and thoughts on the practice of Pacific history. I do not mean, however, to be demeaning of Nicholas Thomas's efforts; I find some of his more recent journal articles, especially those on Fijian colonial history, to be quite scintillating. In writing *Out of Time*, he is to be thanked for challenging persisting paradigms of evolutionary thought, for reminding us-- as have Clifford, Marcus, and others--of the contexts that promote and shape ethnographic investigation, for calling attention to professional biases that are at once limiting and exclusive of alternative ways of knowing and understanding, and for affirming that there is more to the study of the past than its historical representations. Given more time, a clearer idea if not definition of history, and a better sense of the politics and poetics involved in studying the pasts of others, Thomas might well have produced a more profound, convincing, and needed challenge to some of the reigning categories of Western anthropological inquiry.