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Out of Tune

In this small volume, Nicholas Thomas casts out after some big fish. In 122 pages, Thomas takes on Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, Marshall

Sahlins, Clifford Geertz, Jonathan Friedman, Kajsa Ekholm, Irving Goldman, and by implication a whole delinquent wing of the anthropological establishment that has collaborated in masking the historicity of those they presume to study.

In the current round of scholarly self-abuse that attends our discipline's late reflexive mood, Thomas takes up where Johannes Fabian left off (Fabian 1983). *Out of Time* aims to convince us that, in failing to historicize its subjects, ethnological discourse has perpetuated--wittingly and otherwise-- the occidental myth of the historical Self and the timeless Other and thereby abetted the exploitation of oppressed peoples.

"History," Thomas claims, "has not been neglected simply through an oversight, but for complex conceptual and discursive reasons" (p. 1). What better way to lay bare such deeply-rooted error than to expose the faulty assumptions behind the writings of several major figures in anthropology who, at first blush, might seem to be among the most receptive to the historicizing of ethnology. Goldman, Sahlins, Friedman, and Ekholm have all, in different ways, attempted to reconcile anthropology and history. In each instance, though for somewhat disparate reasons, Thomas finds the approach seriously wanting. Pointing to "the absence of historical time, and . . . the explicit or implicit negation of the notion that history has any constitutive effect on the social situation under consideration" (p. 5), Thomas laments the misconstrual of the authentic historicity of human events even in such deceptively sympathetic hands. *Their* history, it appears, is not *his* history, not what he terms "real history" (p. 121).

Thomas positions the trajectory of "real" history somewhere between the Scylla of specific event and the Charybdis of general process. An account of what he terms "the actual process of history" (p. 50) must provide an analysis of change that manages to disclose global processes underlying particular events while somehow remaining "neither directed nor abstracted" (p. 4). Yet it is difficult to imagine how the depiction of historical processes can evade either direction (development, intention, cause-and-effect, evolution) or abstraction (generality) of some sort. This volume never actually discloses what sort of general processes Thomas has in mind (other than a vague and qualified commitment to world or regional systems theory) as the true foundation of historical knowledge.

Though quick to underscore the ideological nature of anthropological discourse with its "unstated rationales, hidden agendas, covert classifications, and simple muddles" (p. 12), Thomas appears to exempt his own work, and by extension the historical project, from the same sort of

critique. This is, at best, ironic, in light of the dependence of much of his argument on unexamined premises, disingenuous metaphors (Western "penetration" of the Pacific being the most egregious), and a presumption of the reader's agreement with the author on the basis of self-evident correctness of the author's implied political and epistemological stance. For example, consider Thomas's strategic deployment of quotation marks to certify the credibility of *history* while discrediting *anthropology* as a kind of contestable knowledge: "'Ethnology' may have been replaced by 'anthropology', but in each case the orientation of the discourse has concealed the actual process of history" (p. 50). The effect is to naturalize history as an unmarked category, cuing the reader through punctuation how to correctly view each of these disciplines--one real, others illusory. Imagine how different this passage would read if the quotation marks were removed, or if they were employed around the term "history" or, even more interesting, around "actual."

Thomas alludes to Radcliffe-Brown's famous antihistorical bias, which he suggests characterizes much anthropology. In Thomas's account no distinction seems possible between *antihistorical* and *non-historical* approaches in anthropological writing. To be antihistorical is to deny significant contingency to human affairs and to fail to understand that the present is always saturated with the past. To be nonhistorical is to focus the analytical lens on something other than this historical dimension of human life.

But while Thomas would join the chorus of voices in contemporary anthropology in privileging a historical perspective in the illumination of human affairs, I would contend that history is only one of a number of important ways of understanding the human condition. History in anthropology takes on its importance only in relation to specifically historical questions. But surely they are not the *only* questions anthropologists have the right to ask.

To suggest that human action is somehow more fundamentally "historical" than it is anything else would amount to a reductionism and a kind of essentialism with which Thomas would probably not be comfortable. Such a position would be incoherent, since a claim that human affairs are *essentially* historical constitutes a paradox.

Thomas is right that synchronic models always exact a cost in perception, by rendering certain kinds of variability, conflict, and history relatively inarticulate. But then historical accounts exact their own costs in explanation. At other times and places, social thinkers have had different intellectual priorities, priorities that themselves usually emerged not from political conspiracy so much as from a sense of the inadequacy of

antecedent theoretical questions. True enough, the anthropological object of knowledge has evolved in relation to particular social and intellectual contexts. But this is inevitable.

Out of Time makes its argument largely in relation to particular ethnological texts by attempting to expose the weaknesses of several influential treatments of Polynesian cultural history. I will devote the remainder of this review to a close reading of only one of these critiques --that of Goldman's *Ancient Polynesian Society* (1970). I have chosen to leave the evaluation of Thomas's critiques of Sahlins, Friedman, and Ekholm to others, and limit my remarks to Thomas's treatment of Goldman for several reasons. First, I know Goldman's book the best of any of the works critiqued in *Out of Time*. Second, since I have long held Goldman's book as a model of fastidious and insightful cultural comparison, I found the scale of Thomas's attack on this book thoroughly provocative. Finally, Thomas devotes the major part of his critique to a deconstruction of Goldman's work, and his most trenchant general criticisms of anthropology are raised in relation to *Ancient Polynesian Society*. A detailed evaluation of this critique is called for.

Ancient Polynesian Society is taken to be paradigmatic of the anthropologists's irresponsible use of time constructs. Thomas faults Goldman for his reliance on empirically and politically untenable notions of unilinear evolution in place of "actual" history. Goldman is accused of confusing geographic variation within Polynesia with a unilinear evolutionary sequence. This alleged theoretical distortion in Goldman's book is perpetrated through "an ahistorical use of ahistorical sources" (p. 15), especially works generated by what Thomas calls "museum anthropology" (notably Bishop Museum monographs). By employing the anthropological convention of an unchanging, precontact baseline culture understood in contrast to postcontact decline, *Ancient Polynesian Society* is accused of denying "real" historicity to Polynesians. Additionally, Goldman's work is held to manifest a disregard (common to many anthropologists) for nonprofessional ethnographic sources by South Seas missionaries and travelers in favor of "professional" ethnology.

These would all appear to be grave defects in Goldman's work. Unless, that is, one is familiar with the book. The book that Thomas claims to be reviewing bears only a faint resemblance to the one that Goldman actually wrote.

In relation to the alleged bias against nonanthropological ethnographic sources, I direct readers to Goldman's book, particularly his extensive bibliography. Not only has Goldman always championed the virtues of what he likes to call "naive ethnography," but such sources are

liberally used throughout *Ancient Polynesian Society*. Moreover, Goldman is always careful to comment on the limits of his sources, both professional and otherwise (see, for example, 1970:70, 73, 115, 117, 118, 204). Readers can decide for themselves, but it seems to me that Goldman is, in fact, far more careful than Thomas to alert readers to the limitations and biases of his historical sources.

What about Goldman's evolutionism? Though a student of Boas, Goldman does employ evolutionary language. Certainly his book would have benefited from an explicit discussion of how his use of the term "evolution" fits the several kinds of evolutionism in anthropology. Nonetheless, it is clear from Goldman's writing that he does not use evolution to mean inevitable, step-by-step "progress" on a single track. His complex and quite subtle position attempts to take account of *both* specific and general evolution, and he is clearly aware of the distinction between the two concepts. He is at pains to clarify his approach from the very outset:

At bottom the aim of evolutionary theory is precisely that of delineating the continuity of patterns of change in specific structures. The linear interest, the concern with stages and direction of evolution, is part of the general aim, but hardly primary. Direction and sequences of stages represent at best selected strands from the multiple foliation of variations. If the characteristics of a structure are to be defined from their variations, then of course all variations must be taken into account. (Goldman 1970:xv)

Yet Thomas inexplicably attributes to Goldman a view of evolution that is as simplistic in relation to evolutionary theory as it is inappropriate to Goldman's book: "'Paths' is perhaps the wrong word [to use in relation to Goldman's theory], since the exercise was directed not at a plurality of meandering routes, expressing the diverse purposes of people . . . but sought instead to define a necessary road which climbed from one condition to the next" (p. 59). Thomas seems to assume that Goldman is employing exclusively a notion of "general evolution" in his division of Polynesian polities into Traditional, Open, and Stratified types.

In a now-classic formulation, Sahlins reminds us that exclusive unilinear evolution is not even assumed by the nineteenth-century evolutionists like Spencer or Tylor with whom it is commonly linked:

It . . . seems grossly inaccurate, however frequently it is done, to characterize the perspective of the anthropological pioneers as “unilinear,” which is the idea that every culture goes through the same general stages. The locus of unilinear evolutionism is not in anthropology, but . . . in “crude Marxism” . . . and Bourgeois History . . . strange bedfellows. . . . [T]he nineteenth century anthropological evolutionists should all be acquitted of the unilinear charge, once and for all. (Service and Sahlins 1960:41)

Thomas appears to have done a highly selective reading of Goldman, culling “progressive” and teleological language to convey the impression that Goldman was employing an unsophisticated notion of evolution as directed development in fixed sequence, from lower to higher social forms. Not understanding the difference and failure to link general and specific evolutionary arguments leads Thomas to claim that Goldman confuses geographic variation with temporal sequencing.

To be sure, Goldman is not always as explicit and lucid as he might be about how he is using and relating these two sorts of argument. For Goldman, what lends directionality to the evolution of Polynesian societies is not a metaphysical *telos* that lies beyond the concrete lives of real people. Rather, directed social transformations in Polynesia are held to be generated *from within* by structural contradictions at the heart of Polynesian political institutions.

Polynesian conceptions of *mana* imply a sort of paradox of power. On the one hand, *mana* is usually associated with only certain descent lines, often those believed to be descended from gods. In this sense, the possession of *mana* was treated as an ascribed attribute *intrinsic* to chiefliness. On the other hand, *mana* can only be known by its effects in the world --by success in warfare, in food production, in fecundity, in physical perfection. This view of *mana* suggests that potency was mobile, even fickle, and was historically contingent.

Status for Polynesians thus involved structural ambiguity, combining considerations of what Goldman calls ascribed “rank” and achieved “power.” While notions of authentic rank provided for Polynesians a chiefly ideology and a charter for political continuity and legitimacy, struggles for power guaranteed that this charter would be frequently reformulated in relation to political contingency and violence.

Although Thomas accuses Goldman of using evolutionary theory to undercut the awareness of local historical developments in Polynesia,

Goldman's understanding of Polynesian political evolution is thoroughly imbued with historical consciousness:

[W]hile prerogatives of rank are, in principle, fixed in an aristocracy, they are, in actuality, subject to the vicissitudes of political life. *The political vicissitudes, it must be realized, are not somehow accidental and extraneous to the "system." They are part of the system; indeed, a central part.* . . . Status and prerogatives are always in active interplay; indeed this particular interplay is at the very heart of active variability in Polynesian status systems. (1970:17; emphasis added)

The variations in political systems that Goldman describes for Polynesia are not understood simply as random events. Nor are they fully determinate, innate properties of structures or systems. The variations he delineates are held to be the outcomes of the interaction between structural constraints of traditional cultural forms and a whole range of political and environmental contingencies. For Goldman, historical variability is not treated as an annoying thorn in the side of a pristine system but is understood as *an intrinsic aspect of the system itself*:

[The ideal of stability] may suit functionalist theory, which regards "equilibrium" as the summum bonum of social life, but hardly historical theory, which sees change, development, growth, conflict, opposition as the most characteristic social processes. Thus we may consider variability not as "instability" in the sense of inadequacy and structural defect, but as inherent flexibility. (1970:436)

In light of these and similar statements that occur throughout Goldman's book, and in light of the pains to which Goldman goes to document the endogenous histories and transformation through which Polynesian societies appear to have gone, it is remarkable that Thomas can still write of *Ancient Polynesian Society*: "The stress upon the ordering role of tradition (or specifically genealogical rank) tends to preclude serious consideration of the dynamics of systems which are never entirely encompassed by the apparently inflexible cultural orders" (p. 40).

The structural predisposition to political transformation that Goldman proposes for Polynesia is not accurately characterized as a steady

and automatic “unilineal path from more to less stratified” societies (p. 59.) It is a highly contingent (and thus highly historical) dialectic with an original (traditionally ranked) system generating its (open) antithesis, leading under certain circumstances to a new (stratified) synthesis. A system based on traditional chiefly authority, legitimated through genealogical rank and seniority, produces the conditions of its own undoing, through alternative sources of power, structural ambiguities in rank, and a dynamic conception of power readily accessible to historical appropriation. Goldman’s open societies are the results of such historical transformations--contingencies constrained by the structural properties of the systems they engage.

But the result of violence and warfare is not only change or disarray. Under certain (or, perhaps, uncertain) historical and ecological circumstances, violence can produce cumulative aggregations of power. Anthropologists have long documented the growth of state-level social formations as conquest states; in this sense, the emergence of stratified societies in Polynesia through cumulative violence has parallels throughout human history.

If this sequence is directional, it is no more so than Weber’s model of political transformation defined by traditional, charismatic, and rational bureaucratic political authority. Goldman does not claim that such transformations are inevitable in Polynesia, only that when internal transformations *did* occur, they were structurally constrained to occur in the predicted direction.

Thomas complains that Goldman approaches purely geographic variation as if it were developmental variation (p. 37). But Goldman’s arguments rest more on the reconstruction of local historical transformations within individual Polynesian societies than they do on cross-cultural comparisons. It is difficult to understand how Thomas can claim that Goldman employed homogenized and ahistorical conceptions of the cultures he was studying when so much of his analysis was an attempt to use archaeological evidence and oral traditions to document the shape of local historical transformations.

Thomas also faults Goldman for excluding consideration of the effects of European interactions with the islanders, treating each society as if it were the product of only its own internal developments (p. 38). Aside from the fact that many of the changes that Goldman documents antedate the European presence, this statement would suggest that he ignores European involvement in Polynesian affairs. This is not the case. Goldman discusses at some length the crucial influence of the English intervention on Pomare’s behalf (1970: 175-176). His position is

that European power and influence were critical catalysts in power struggles that were nonetheless Polynesian in character: "[T]he ultimate unification of the Society Islands must be recognized as the result of adding external means to native intent. Without English arms and missionary effort, Pomare might have been defeated and the balance of unstable powers restored. The intent of conquest, and even the concept of unification were, however, Tahitian" (Goldman 1970: 176). Similarly, Goldman does not ignore the role of Europeans in the evolution of the Hawaiian monarchy. He notes, however, that the consolidation of power in Hawaii that eventually led to the ascendancy of Kamehameha was well underway "even before the newcomers could intervene." Europeans "were only the midwives. Without them the new births might have been delayed, but probably not for too long" (Goldman 1970:200).

Is Goldman wrong here? As a historian of Polynesia, Thomas surely is in a position to have an informed response. By Thomas's standards, Goldman's book undoubtedly underplays the specific role of European influence in the islands. Goldman's assignment of European influence to an enabling and catalytic role rather than a definitive one may be a controversial position. But it is not the account that Thomas describes for Goldman. Though Goldman's claims are open to empirical refutation, none is offered by Thomas.

Ironically, if there is an unsatisfying quality to Goldman's account, it may well have more to do with its overdependence on local historical contingency rather than its overdeterminacy. For anyone looking for watertight explanatory systems, Goldman's vast treatise is not likely to prove satisfactory. In the end, he admits that he cannot explain to his own satisfaction *why*, for instance, Maori warfare never produced a truly centralized stratified hierarchy like Tonga's or Hawaii's. Even in Goldman's own version, there are too many exceptions to the rule to inure his structuralist account from the contingencies of "real" history.

Goldman himself put it best: "Only history can define the character of institutions" (1970:419). His scholarship discloses an impeccable integrity, an antipathy to allowing theoretical predilections to overwhelm the complexity of the material he analyzes. But the cost of this probity is that, as theories go, Goldman's is replete with unanswered questions and finely nuanced descriptions that are not quite explanations.

Though Thomas takes Goldman to task for pretending "that a particular text is simply a 'source' which may contain omissions or even errors but is not laced with interpretations" (p. 51), Goldman is actually far

more modest than this, "Our subject matter" he says in his preface, "is not chemistry. I would be overstating my intentions grossly if I did not make it clear that at bottom this is a work of interpretation. Its findings are to be regarded as hypotheses" (Goldman 1970:xi-xii).

In chapter 5 of *Out of Time*, Thomas sets out to show his hand at last and provide the historically informed alternative account to Goldman's treatment of the Marquesas and Easter Island, two societies that Thomas knows well. Considering the amount of work he has put into clearing the way for this reanalysis by attempting to thoroughly discredit Goldman's work, one has the right to expect a point-by-point refutation of Goldman's account and an equally detailed alternative.

A close look at this refutation is revealing. Thomas's alternative to Goldman's reading is that Marquesan political institutions be seen simply as different from others in Polynesia. Marquesan society had departed "from a Polynesian pattern of hierarchical solidarity in which chieftainship encompassed society and was central to it" (p. 56). Note that here Thomas is willing to accept the existence of some essential "Polynesian pattern," only insisting that the Marquesas be recognized as an anomalous case. Unlike the typical Polynesian case, Marquesan hierarchy was not based on chiefly lines. Both Marquesan and Easter Island societies reveal a distinctive pattern of historical movement "entailing a general shift from the prominence of chiefs to the prominence of warriors. Secondly the chief tends to become less of an orderly ruler and receiver of offerings, and more of a usurper or conqueror" (p. 65). But in Thomas's view (contra Goldman) this shift to warrior power does not suggest that Marquesan society was egalitarian. Flexibility in status, we are told, is not the same thing as equality.

In a peculiar claim in which Thomas seems to actually adopt a kind of evolutionism, he argues that

[t]hese shifts [in Marquesan politics] could be seen as 'devolutionary' in the sense that a centralized structure is diminished, but do not necessarily entail a diminution of inequality or stratification. . . . Societies such as the Marquesas represent a divergent step, which is more likely to have been away from stratified systems than towards them. If 'evolution' is seen as directional change, and 'devolution' its undoing, then it is virtually impossible to understand these cases. (P. 65)

But such cases of "devolution" do not challenge the notion of cultural evolution, only that of unilinear general evolution.

Thomas's claim is simple. The Marquesan divergence from the general Polynesian pattern of hierarchy is simply noncomparable and not some sort of evolutionary development. It is purely a product of local history--"real" history. But this claim simply begs the question of whether such divergent patterns (such as lack of chiefly authority over religious rituals and productive resources) can be viewed as *significant variations* on more general Polynesian patterns of chiefly authority, understandable in relation to the very general historical processes that interest Thomas.

Thomas seems to dismiss such comparison out of hand. For example, he refers disapprovingly to E. S. C. Handy's use of a report of an early visit to the Marquesas by a Russian named Krusenstern. Krusenstern noted that if a chief were to strike anyone, it would inevitably be met by a return blow. Thomas comments:

This observation about behaviour or expected behaviour hardly bears upon larger patterns of respect, authority or dependence. Unless one saw the capacity to hit subjects with impunity as a standard chiefly prerogative, the point has little significance, since there are in many societies people with certain kinds of power or authority (such as European judges) who would meet 'like with like return' or at least public censure if they assaulted others. But there seems to be an uncomplicated notion that power is manifested in various ways which require no contextual specification. (P. 52)

The strained use of the European judges as a parallel for the Marquesan case would be a good candidate for an example of decontextualization of a cultural institution. One would think that a more relevant context of comparison would be with other Polynesian cases, in relation to which the ability to freely return a blow to a chief would be, I think, strikingly anomalous and warrant some kind of explanation.

Despite his recognition of a general Polynesian pattern of political organization, Thomas seeks to cast doubt on the widely shared belief that Polynesia is "a diverse but fundamentally unitary area" (p. 29). While not actually denying or providing evidence against the claimed cultural unity of Polynesia, Thomas still leaves the reader with the impression that this unity is not a fact but rather an ideologically motivated fabrication maintained by interests variously evolutionary, racist, and diffusionist.

This may be because granting that different Polynesian cultures

represented variations on a basic common pattern would open Polynesia to both evolutionary and diffusionist analyses. Rather than empirically refuting the considerable evidence for the unity of Polynesia as culture area, Thomas occludes such analyses by pronouncing the very notion of a culture area in Polynesia to be politically unacceptable. No evidence for the unlikely claim seems to be necessary. Might this political agenda be what motivates Thomas's desire to limit the account of chiefly status in the Marquesas to a local pattern rather than a historical variation of a larger Polynesian pattern?

As to the determinants of this unusual political system in the Marquesas, Thomas stresses the devastating effects of contact "and many sorts of violence" during the nineteenth century (p. 55). Yet this implies that the Marquesan pattern of chiefly power did not evolve or develop *until European contact*. Does Thomas want us to understand historical transformation as beginning only with the coming of the Europeans? In this case we have a highly ironic appropriation of historical process in the Pacific as synonymous with Western "penetration," a position one would assume Thomas would be quick to abjure.

Certainly Goldman's account of the Marquesas suggests a long history of endogenous political transformations preceding the contact era. Archaeological evidence and oral traditions suggest increasingly violent status rivalry between 150 B.C. and 1790, fueled in the expansion period (1100-1400) by population pressure and land shortage. Goldman does not ignore the violence and population decline of the contact period (see 1970: 131). But he does suggest that the erosion of chiefly power was an endogenous development that began long before contact, and thus cannot be sufficiently accounted for by an appeal to contact history alone.

Thomas's precise view of chiefship in the Marquesas is not clear from his account. On the one hand, he insists the traditional Marquesan chiefs were simply different from other Polynesian chiefs and did not have ritual status or significant economic power as chiefs. On the other hand, he also implies that chiefs once had such power but lost it in historical times. Goldman's version seems more coherent, though it is also speculative. Goldman emphasizes the internal struggle in the Marquesas between traditional chiefs (*ariki*) and "made chiefs" (*haka-iki*), which was an honorary title for all first-born males.

Thomas links Goldman via Handy with a view that Marquesan society could be defined as egalitarian and loosely structured, in the interest of placing it at the "open" end of the evolutionary continuum. This seems to be his main complaint against Goldman's account. Yet I have not found where Goldman employs the term "egalitarian" in relation to

the Marquesas. His point is that there is evidence in the Marquesas for the increasing recognition of achieved status (wealth, military conquest, religious potency) beyond the domain of chiefly pedigree.

It was not that the Marquesas became more egalitarian but rather that the basis of inequality was less exclusively chiefly status. As for Thomas, his claims strike me as basically following the same lines as Goldman's, try as he will to differentiate his position:

While Marquesan chiefs were prominent and powerful figures, they were not really central to Marquesan life: a distinct, complicated hierarchy not connected with the chiefly line had developed. Chiefship was disconnected from Shamanism which controlled the fundamental life-giving ritual capacities . . . the privileged positions had become generalized among landholders. (P. 57)

What it would mean for prominent and powerful figures to be "not really central" to their society is somewhat puzzling. Again, Thomas seems to want to acknowledge the power of chiefs and deny it at the same time. If what he means is that multiple and competing channels of status and power had developed in the Marquesas, then all he is doing is making Goldman's point, but less cogently and in far less detail. In any case, Thomas's version does not strike me as a particularly lucid or compelling way to describe the Marquesan polity. And it is certainly no refutation of Goldman's account.

Sophisticated and thoughtful analyses like Goldman's deserve sophisticated and thoughtful critiques, analyses that treat their arguments with the subtlety and seriousness they deserve, even as they seek to improve on them. Spun out in a different key, Nicholas Thomas's *Out of Time* might have stood as a constructive and helpful cautionary tale for the pitfalls of ignoring history in anthropology. Unfortunately, its maladroit theorizing and mishandling of the texts it claims to surpass do not enhance the book's larger purposes.

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