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Ethnography and the Historical Imagination

MYSTIC WARRIORS GAINING GROUND IN MOZAMBIQUE WAR." The headline was exotic enough to make the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* one Sunday.¹

"Call it one of the mysteries of Africa," the report began. "In the battle-ravaged regions of northern Mozambique, in remote straw hut villages where the modern world has scarcely penetrated, supernatural spirits and magic potions are suddenly winning a civil war that machine guns, mortars and grenades could not." The account went on to describe an army of several thousand men and boys, sporting red headbands and brandishing spears. Named after their leader, Naparama—who is said to have been resurrected from the dead—they display on their chests the scars of a "vaccination" against bullets. Their terrain is the battle-scarred province of Zambesia, where a civil war, with South African support, has been raging for some fifteen years. Now heavily armed rebels flee at the sight of the Naparama, and government troops appear equally awed. Western diplomats and analysts, the report recounts, "can only scratch their heads in amazement." The piece ends in a tone of arch authority: "Much of Naparama's effectiveness can be explained by the predominance of superstitious beliefs throughout Mozambique, a country where city markets always have stalls selling potions, amulets and monkey hands and ostrich feet to ward off evil spirits."

Faced with such evidence, anthropologists might be forgiven for doubting that they have made any impact at all on Western consciousness. It is more than fifty years since Evans-Pritchard (1937) showed, in the plainest prose, that Zande magic was an affair of practical reason, that "primitive mentality" is a fiction of the modern mind; more than fifty years of writing

in an effort to contextualize the curious. Yet we have not routed the reflex that makes "superstitious" most aptly qualify African belief. No, the straw huts and magic potions are as secure in this text as in any early nineteenth century traveler's tale. There is even the whiff of a traffic in flesh (the monkey *hands*; the ostrich *feet*). No matter that these wayward warriors are in fact the victims of a thoroughly modern conflict, that they wear civilian clothes and file into combat singing Christian songs. In the popular imagination they are fully fledged signs of the primitive, alibis for an evolutionism that puts them—and their fascinating forays—across an irretrievable gulf from ourselves.

These sensorialized savages, thrust across our threshold one snowy Sunday, served to focus our concerns about the place of anthropology in the contemporary world. For the "report" told less of the Mozambican soldiers than of the culture that had conjured them up as its inverted self-image. Despite the claim that meaning has lost its moorings in the late capitalist world, there was a banal predictability about this piece. It relied on the old opposition between secular mundanity and spectral mystery, European modernism and African primitivism.² What is more, the contrast implied a telos, an all too familiar vision of History as an epic passage from past to present. The rise of the West, our cosmology tells us, is accompanied, paradoxically, by a Fall: The cost of rational advance has been our eternal exile from the sacred garden, from its enchanted ways of knowing and being. Only natural man, unreconstructed by the Midas touch of modernity, may bask in its beguiling certainties.

The myth is as old as the hills. But it has had an enduring impact on post-Enlightenment thought in general and, in particular, on the social sciences. Whether they be classical or critical, a celebration of modernity or a denunciation of its iron cage, these "sciences" have, at least until recently, shared the premise of disenchantment—of the movement of mankind from religious speculation to secular reflection, from theodicy to theory, from culture to practical reason (Sahlins 1976a; n.d.). Anthropologists, of course, have hardly ignored the effects on the discipline of the lingering legacy of evolutionism (Goody 1977; cf. Clifford 1988). Nonetheless, it remains in our bones, so to speak, with profound implications for our notions of history and our theories of meaning.

The mystic warriors underscored our own distrust of disenchantment, our reluctance to see modernity—in stark contrast to tradition—as driving a "harsh wedge between cosmology and history" (Anderson 1983:40). To be sure, we have never given any analytic credence to this ideologically freighted opposition or to any of its aliases (simple:complex; ascriptive:achievement-driven; collectivist:individualist; ritualist:rationalist; and so on). For, dressed up as pseudohistory, such dualisms feed off one another, caricaturing the empirical realities they purport to reveal. "Tra-

ditional" communities are still frequently held, for instance, to rest upon sacred certainties; modern societies, instead, to look to history to account for themselves or to assuage their sense of alienation and loss (cf. Anderson 1983:40; Keyes, Kendall, and Hardacre n.d.). What is more, these stereotypic contrasts are readily spatialized in the chasm between the West and the rest. Try as they might, the Naparama will never be more than primitive rebels, rattling their sabers, their "cultural weapons," in the prehistory of an African dawn. As Fields (1985) has noted, their "milleniary" kind are seldom attributed properly political motives, seldom credited with the rational, purposive actions in which history allegedly consists. In the event, the Western eye frequently overlooks important similarities in the ways in which societies everywhere are made and remade. And, all too often, we anthropologists have exacerbated this. For we have our own investment in preserving zones of "tradition," in stressing social reproduction over random change, cosmology over chaos (Asad 1973; Taussig 1987). Even as we expose our ethnographic islands to the crosscurrents of history, we remain fainthearted. We still separate local communities from global systems, the thick description of particular cultures from the thin narrative of world events.

The bulletproof soldiers remind us that lived realities defy easy dualisms, that worlds everywhere are complex fusions of what *we* like to call modernity and magicity, rationality and ritual, history and the here and now. In fact, our studies of the Southern Tswana have long proved to us that none of these were opposed in the first place—except perhaps in the colonizing imagination and in ideologies, like apartheid, that have sprung from it. If we allow that historical consciousness and representation may take very different forms from those of the West, people everywhere turn out to have had history all along.

As it has become commonplace to point out, then, European colonizers did not, in an act of heroism worthy of Carlyle (1842), bring Universal History to people without it. Ironically, they brought histories in particular, histories far less predictable than we have been inclined to think. For, despite the claims of modernization theory, Marxist *dependistas*, or "modes of production" models, global forces played into local forms and conditions in unexpected ways, changing known structures into strange hybrids. Our own evidence shows that the incorporation of black South Africans into a world economy did not simply erode difference or spawn rationalized, homogeneous worlds. Money and commodities, literacy and Christendom challenged local symbols, threatening to convert them into a universal currency. But precisely because the cross, the book, and the coin were such saturated signs, they were variously and ingeniously redeployed to bear a host of new meanings as non-Western peoples—Tswana prophets, Naparama fighters, and others—fashioned their own visions of modernity (cf.

Clifford 1988:5–6). Neither was (or is) this merely a feature of “transitional” communities, of those marginal to bourgeois reason and the commodity economy.

In our essays, as we follow colonizers of different kinds from the metropole to Africa and back, it becomes clear that the culture of capitalism has always been shot through with its own magicalities and forms of enchantment, all of which repay analysis. Like the nineteenth-century evangelists who accused the London poor of strange and savage customs (see Chapter 10), Marx insisted on understanding commodities as objects of primitive worship, as fetishes. Being social hieroglyphs rather than mere alienating objects, they describe a world of densely woven power and meaning, enchanted by a “superstitious” belief in their capacity to be fruitful and multiply. Although these curious goods are more prevalent in “modern” societies, their spirit, as Marx himself recognized, infects the politics of value everywhere. If, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, we cast our gaze beyond the horizon where the so-called first and third worlds meet, concepts like the commodity yield useful insights into the constitution of cultures usually regarded as noncapitalist. And so the dogma of disenchantment is dislodged.

Save in the assertions of our own culture, in short, assertions that have long justified the colonial impulse, there is no great gulf between “tradition” and “modernity”—or “postmodernity,” for that matter. Nor, as others before us have said, is much to be gained from typological contrasts between worlds of *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft*, or between economies governed by use- and exchange-value. But we are less concerned here to reiterate this point than to make a methodological observation. If such distinctions do not hold up, it follows that the modes of discovery associated with them—ethnography for “traditional” communities, history for the “modern” world, past and present—also cannot be sharply drawn. We require ethnography to know ourselves, just as we need history to know non-Western others. For ethnography serves at once to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar, all the better to understand them both. It is, as it were, the canon-fodder of a critical anthropology.

In respect of our own society, this is especially crucial. For it is arguable that many of the concepts on which we rely to describe modern life—statistical models, rational choice and game theory, even logocentric event histories, case studies, and biographical narratives—are instruments of what Bourdieu (1977:97f), in a different context, calls the “synoptic illusion.” They are our own rationalizing cosmology posing as science, our culture parading as historical causality. All this, as many now recognize, calls for two things simultaneously: that we regard our own world as a problem, a proper site for ethnographic inquiry, and that, to make good this intention, we develop a genuinely historicized anthropology. But how

exactly are we to do so? Contrary to some scholarly opinion, it is not so easy to alienate ourselves from our own meaningful context, to make our own existence strange. How do we *do* ethnographies of, and in, the contemporary world order? What, indeed, might be the substantive directions of such a “neomodern” historical anthropology?

 II

Both history and ethnography are concerned with societies *other* than the one in which we live. Whether this *otherness* is due to remoteness in time . . . or to remoteness in space, or even to cultural heterogeneity, is of secondary importance compared to the basic similarity of perspective. . . . [I]n both cases we are dealing with systems of representations which differ for each member of the group and which, on the whole, differ from the representations of the investigator. The best ethnographic study will never make the reader a native. . . . All that the historian or ethnographer can do, and all that we can expect of them, is to enlarge a specific experience to the dimensions of a more general one.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963a:16–17)

These questions parse into two parts, two complementary motifs that start out separately and, like a classical *pas de deux*, merge slowly, step by step. The first pertains to ethnography, the second to history.

As we have noted, the current status of ethnography in the human sciences is something of a paradox. On the one hand, its authority has been, and is being, seriously challenged from both within anthropology and outside; on the other, it is being widely appropriated as a liberalizing method in fields other than our own—among them, cultural and legal studies, sociology, social history, and political science.³ Are these disciplines suffering a critical lag? Or, more realistically, is a simultaneous sense of hope and despair *intrinsic* to ethnography? Does its relativism bequeath it an enduring sense of its own limitation, its own irony? There does seem to be plenty of evidence for Aijmer's (1988:424) recent claim that ethnography “always has been . . . linked with epistemological problems.” To wit, its founding fathers, having taken to the field to subvert Western universalisms with non-Western particularities, now stand accused of having served the cause of imperialism. And generations of journeyman anthropologists since have struggled with the contradictions of a mode of inquiry that appears, by turns, uniquely revelatory and irredeemably ethnocentric.

The ambivalence is palpable also in critiques of anthropology, which accuse it both of fetishizing cultural difference (Asad 1973; Fabian 1983; Said 1989) and—because of its relentlessly bourgeois bias—of effacing

difference altogether (Taussig 1987). In a recent review, for example, Sangren (1988:406) acknowledges that ethnography does "to some degree, make an object of the 'other.'" Nonetheless, he goes on to assert, it was "dialogic long before the term became popular." Similar arguments, one might add, are to be heard in other scholarly fields that rely on participant observation: Surveying the growing literature in cultural studies, for instance, Graeme Turner (1990:178) remarks that "the democratic impulse and the inevitable effect of ethnographic practice in the academy contradict each other."

But *why* this enduring ambivalence? Is ethnography, as many of its critics have implied, singularly precarious in its naive empiricism, its philosophical unreflectiveness, its interpretive hubris? Methodologically speaking, it *does* have strangely anachronistic echoes, harking back to the classical credo that "seeing is believing." In this it is reminiscent of the early biological sciences, where clinical observation, the penetrating human gaze, was frankly celebrated (Foucault 1975; Levi-Strauss 1976:35; Pratt 1985); recall, here, that biology was the model chosen, in the golden age of social anthropology, for a "natural science of society" (Radcliffe-Brown 1957). The discipline, however, never really developed an armory of objectifying instruments, standardizing strategies, and quantifying formulas.⁴ It has continued to be, as Evans-Pritchard (1950; 1961) insisted long ago, a humanist art, in spite of its sometime scientific pretensions. And while it has never been theoretically homogeneous, internal differences and disputes have seldom led to thoroughgoing revisions of its *modus operandi*.⁵ Indeed, the unsympathetic critic could claim that ethnography is a relic of the era of travel writing and exploration, of adventure and astonishment;⁶ that it remains content to offer observations of human scale and fallibility; that it still depends, disingenuously, on the facticity of first-hand experience.

Yet it might be argued that the greatest weakness of ethnography is also its major strength, its paradox a productive tension. For it refuses to put its trust in techniques that give more scientific methods their illusory objectivity: their commitment to standardized, a priori units of analysis, for example, or their reliance on a depersonalizing gaze that separates subject from object. To be sure, the term "participant observation"—an oxymoron to believers in value-free science—connotes the inseparability of knowledge from its knower. In anthropology, the observer is self-evidently his/her "own instrument of observation" (Levi-Strauss 1976:35). This is the whole point. Even if they wanted to, ethnographers could not, *pace* the purifying idyll of ethnoscience, hope to remove every trace of the arbitrariness with which they read meaningful signs on a cultural landscape. But it would surely be wrong to conclude that their method is especially vulnerable, more so than other efforts, to know human (or even nonhuman) worlds.

In this sense, the "problem" of anthropological knowledge is only a more tangible instance of something common to all modernist epistemologies, as philosophers of science have long realized (Kuhn 1962; Lakatos and Musgrave 1968; Figlio 1976). For ethnography personifies, in its methods and its models, the inescapable dialectic of fact and value. Yet most of its practitioners persist in asserting the usefulness—indeed, the creative potential—of such "imperfect" knowledge. They tend both to recognize the impossibility of the true and the absolute and also to suspend disbelief. Notwithstanding the realist idiom of their craft, they widely accept that—like all other forms of understanding—ethnography is historically contingent and culturally configured.⁷ They have even, at times, found the contradiction invigorating.

Still, living with insecurity is more tolerable to some than to others. Those presently concerned with the question of authority fault (unenlightened) ethnographers for pretending to be good, old-fashioned realists. Thus Clifford (1988:43) notes that even if our accounts "successfully dramatize the intersubjective, give-and-take of fieldwork . . . they remain *representations* of dialogue." As if the impossibility of describing the encounter in all its fullness, without any mediation, condemns us to lesser truths. Likewise, Marcus (1986:190) counterposes "realist ethnography" to a new "modernist" form that, because it "can never gain knowledge of the realities that statistics can," would "evoke the world without representing it."⁸ If we cannot have *real* representation, let us have no representation at all! Yet surely this merely reinscribes naive realism as an (unattainable) ideal? Why? Why should anthropologists fret at the fact that our accounts are refractory representations, that they cannot convey an undistorted sense of the "open-ended mystery" of social life as *people experience* it? Why, instead, should ethnographers not give account of how such experiences are socially, culturally, and historically grounded or argue about the character of the worlds they evoke, with the aim of fructifying our own ways of seeing and being, of subverting our own sureties (cf. van der Veer 1990:739). Ethnography, in any case, does not speak *for* others, but *about* them. Neither imaginatively nor empirically can it ever "capture" their reality. Unlikely as it may seem, this was brought home to us in a London School of Economics toilet in 1968. It turned out to be our first foretaste of deconstruction; perhaps it was where postmodern anthropology all began. On an unhinged stall door, an unknown artist—perhaps an unhinged student—asked nobody in particular, "Is Raymond Firth real, or just a figment of the Tikopean imagination?"⁹

Ethnography, to extend the point, is not a vain attempt at literal translation, in which we take over the mantle of an-other's being, conceived of as somehow commensurate with our own. It is a historically situated mode of understanding historically situated contexts, each with its own,

perhaps radically different, kinds of subjects and subjectivities, objects and objectives. Also, it has hitherto been an inescapably *Western* discourse. In it, to pick up our earlier comment, we tell of the unfamiliar—again, the paradox, the parody of doxa—to confront the limits of our own epistemology, our own visions of personhood, agency, and history. Such critiques can never be full or final, of course, for they remain embedded in forms of thought and practice not fully conscious or innocent of constraint. But they provide one way, in our culture, of decoding those signs that disguise themselves as universal and natural, of engaging in unsettling exchanges with those, including scholars, who live in different worlds.

For all this, it is impossible ever to rid ourselves entirely of the ethnocentrism that dogs our desire to know others, even though we vex ourselves with the problem in ever more refined ways. Thus many anthropologists have been wary of ontologies that give precedence to individuals over contexts. For these rest on manifestly Western assumptions: among them, that human beings can triumph over their contexts through sheer force of will, that economy, culture, and society are the aggregate product of individual action and intention. Yet, as we shall point out again below, it has proven extremely difficult to cast the bourgeois subject out of the anthropological fold. S/he has returned in many guises, from Malinowski's maximizing man to Geertz's maker of meaning. Ironically, s/he appears again in the writings of those who take ethnography to task for failing to represent the "native's point of view." Sangren (1988:416) argues vigorously that this is a legacy of American cultural anthropology or, at least, the version of it that would sever culture from society, experiencing subjects from the conditions that produce them. Under these conditions, culture becomes the stuff of intersubjective fabrication: a web to be woven, a text to be transcribed. And ethnography becomes "dialogical," not in Bakhtin's thoroughly socialized sense, but in the narrower sense of a dyadic, decontextualized exchange between anthropologist and informant.¹⁰ We would resist the reduction of anthropological research to an exercise in "intersubjectivity," the communing of phenomenologically conceived actors through talk alone. As Hindess (1972:24) remarks, the rendering down of social science to the terms of the experiencing subject is a product of modern humanism, of a historically specific Western worldview. To treat ethnography as an encounter between *an* observer and *an* other—*Conversations with Ogotemméli* (Griaule 1965) or *The Headman and I* (Dumont 1978)—is to make anthropology into a global, ethnocentric interview. Yet it is precisely this perspective that warrants the call for ethnography to be "dialogical"—so that we may do justice to the role of "the native informant," the singular subject, in the making of our texts.

Generations of anthropologists have said it in a wide variety of ways: In order to construe the gestures of others, their words and winks and more

besides, we have to situate them within the systems of signs and relations, of power and meaning, that animate them. Our concern ultimately is with the interplay of such systems—often relatively open systems—with the persons and events they spawn; a process that need privilege neither the sovereign self nor stifling structures. Ethnography, we would argue, is an exercise in dialectics rather than dialogics, although the latter is always part of the former. In addition to talk, it entails observation of activity and interaction both formal and diffuse, of modes of control and constraint, of silence as well as assertion and defiance. Along the way, ethnographers also read diverse sorts of texts: books, bodies, buildings, sometimes even cities (Holston 1989; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; see below). But they must always give texts contexts and assign values to the equations of power and meaning they express. Nor are contexts just *there*. They, too, have to be constructed analytically in light of our assumptions about the social world.

"The representation of larger, impersonal systems," in short, is not untenable in "the narrative space of ethnography" (Marcus 1986:190). Apart from all else, such systems are implicated, whether or not we recognize them, in the sentences and scenes we grasp with our narrow-gauge gaze. But more than this: Ethnography surely extends beyond the range of the empirical eye; its inquisitive spirit calls upon us to ground subjective, culturally configured action in society and history—and vice versa—wherever the task may take us. That spirit is present, we shall see, in the work of historians who insist that the human imagination itself is performative a "collective, *social* . . . phenomenon" (Le Goff 1988:5; our emphasis). In this sense, one can "do" ethnography in the archives, as Darnton (1985:3) implies by the phrase "history in the ethnographic grain" (see p. 14). One can also "do" the anthropology of national or international forces and formations: of colonialism, evangelism, liberation struggles, social movements, dispersed diasporas, regional "development," and the like. Such systems seem impersonal and unethnographic only to those who would separate the "subjective" from the "objective" world, claiming the former for anthropology while leaving the latter to global theories (Marxism, world-systems, structuralism), under whose wing ethnography may find a precarious perch (e.g., Marcus 1986). In fact, systems appear "impersonal," and holistic analyses stultifying, only when we exclude from them all room for human maneuver, for ambivalence and historical indeterminacy—when we fail to acknowledge that meaning is always, to some extent, arbitrary and diffuse, that social life everywhere rests on the imperfect ability to reduce ambiguity and concentrate power.

Of course, like all forms of inquiry, ethnography objectifies as it ascribes meaning—albeit perhaps less so than do those methodologies that explain human behavior in terms of putatively universal motives. An exacting critic from a neighboring discipline recently allowed that the work of anthropol-

ogy, "which combine[s] a passion for detail with a humane aspiration, does not suffer in comparison with its ethnocentric competitors" (Fields 1985:279). In this respect, ethnography seems no more intrinsically "arrogant" than do other modes of social investigation (*pace* Turner 1990:178). Much of the difficulty has come from the fact that, for reasons deeply inscribed in the politics of knowledge, anthropologists have classically studied populations marginal to the centers of Western power—those who were unable, until recently, to answer back. In this, as we will argue, our position is little different from that of often radical social historians concerned with society's nether regions, the lives of "little people" viewed from the bottom up (Cohn 1987:39). The dangers of disclosure in such situations are real enough. Indeed, while all representations have effects, those imposed by academic brokers on communities without cultural capital are more likely to have deleterious consequences. At the very least, we have to confront the complexities of our relations to our subjects, texts, and audiences—especially because the impact of our work is never fully foreseeable. This not only demands a serious regard, once again, for contexts, our own as much as those we study. It also calls for a careful consideration of the real implications of what we do, a consideration that must go far beyond the now routine recognition that our writings are potential instruments of "othering."

But ethnography also has positive political possibilities. We ought not be too quick, for instance, to disregard the challenge that cultural relativism poses to bourgeois consciousness. Why else the special opprobrium heaped upon us by shrill absolutists, essayists of the closed mind like Alan Bloom? The fate of the Naparama may tell us that we are less influential than we often suppose. Nevertheless, our work *does* reverberate in and beyond the academy, although its legitimacy and impact vary with the way in which we choose to phrase our questions. An important moment of choice is now upon us. If we take our task to be an exercise in intersubjective translation, in speaking for others and their point of view, our hubris will cause us no end of difficulties, moral and philosophical. And if we see it to lie in the formal analysis of social systems or cultural structures, statistically or logically conceived, we evade the issue of representation and experience altogether. But if, after an older European tradition, we seek to understand the *making* of collective worlds—the dialectics, in space and time, of societies and selves, persons and places, orders and events—then we open ourselves to conventions of criticism widely shared by the nonpositivist human sciences. Then, too, we may traffic in analytic constructions, not in unverifiable subjectivities, and can acknowledge the effects of history upon our discourses. Then we may focus on interpreting social phenomena, not on the endless quest for textual means to exorcise the fact that our accounts

are not realist transparencies. Then, finally, we will be on epistemological turf that, if only provisionally, we comprehend and control.

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The second motif, recall, is the question of history. Or, more precisely, of historical anthropology.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, it became common to temper the anthropological turn toward history-as-panacea by posing the problem: "What history? Which anthropology?" We ourselves raised the issue, arguing that

any substantive relationship between disciplines is determined *not* by the intrinsic nature of those disciplines—if any such thing exists—but by prior theoretical considerations. It would seem obvious, for example, that historical analysis assumes different significance for structural functionalists than it does for either Marxists or structuralists. . . . Hence to assert that anthropology should be "more" historical, or history "more" anthropological, may be well-intentioned; but . . . the assertion remains vacuous without further rhetorical specification. [In our view] there ought to be no "relationship" between history and anthropology, since there should be no division to begin with. A theory of society which is not also a theory of history, or *vice versa*, is hardly a theory at all.¹¹

But there was more to the matter than this. For the space of intersection between the two disciplines was (inevitably, it now seems) pervaded by a particular *Geist*—a politics of perspective, so to speak. Clearly, the kind of histories that were to find a sympathetic ear among anthropologists were unlikely to be the Chronicles of Courts and Kings. Neither were they liable to be event-full political narratives, however fascinating, of embassies among empires, strife between states, or trade between chieftains; nor latter-day quantitative accounts of past worlds that, by appeal to synchronic sociology, sought to write "general histories" in "numbers and anonymity."¹²

Bound to be much more attractive, save in some structuralist and Marxist circles, were richly textured accounts of things similar to what we ourselves study—analyzed, broadly speaking, in similar ways. If the description was suitably thick, the subject matter obviously remote, so much the better. How could we not be appealed to by, say, Carlo Ginzburg's (1983) tale of sixteenth-century witchcraft and agrarian cults in Europe, or his account (1980) of the cosmos of a contemporary miller. Such studies in *l'histoire des mentalités*¹³ are not just chronicles of the quotidian, of "little people" and their ordinary practices; nor—like their even more everyday English equivalents—are they merely studies of "the *experience* of living men and women" (Thompson [1978a] 1979:21; cf. Thomas 1971; Hill 1972). As

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But there was more to the matter than this. For the space of intersection between the two disciplines was (inevitably, it now seems) pervaded by a particular *Geist*—a politics of perspective, so to speak. Clearly, the kind of histories that were to find a sympathetic ear among anthropologists were unlikely to be the Chronicles of Courts and Kings. Neither were they liable to be event-full political narratives, however fascinating, of embassies among empires, strife between states, or trade between chieftains; nor latter-day quantitative accounts of past worlds that, by appeal to synchronic sociology, sought to write "general histories" in "numbers and anonymity."¹²

Bound to be much more attractive, save in some structuralist and Marxist circles, were richly textured accounts of things similar to what we ourselves study—analyzed, broadly speaking, in similar ways. If the description was suitably thick, the subject matter obviously remote, so much the better. How could we not be appealed to by, say, Carlo Ginzburg's (1983) tale of sixteenth-century witchcraft and agrarian cults in Europe, or his account (1980) of the cosmos of a contemporary miller. Such studies in *l'histoire des mentalités*¹³ are not just chronicles of the quotidian, of "little people" and their ordinary practices; nor—like their even more everyday English equivalents—are they merely studies of "the *experience* of living men and women" (Thompson [1978a] 1979:21; cf. Thomas 1971; Hill 1972). As

Darnton (1985:3) notes, they also "[treat] our own civilization in the same way that anthropologists study alien cultures." Hobsbawm (1990:47-48) puts it in the words, more or less, of the English novelist L. P. Hartley: For these historians "the past is another country where things are done differently . . . [in which even] the best interpreters still remain biased strangers."¹⁴ However, it is Raphael Samuel (1989:23) who probably comes closest to us in spirit. Arguing for the kind of history that might best be taught in British schools, he says, wryly: "If one were not, like the historians of high politics, mesmerized by the glamour of power, one might suggest that horses were more interesting to study than politicians and, at least for younger children, more appealing." Perhaps for anthropologists as well. But the intention here is not to jest at the expense of politicians or historians. It is to make a profound methodological point. As Samuel shows, the move from cavalry charge to hay wain and horse-gin, from sporting prints to the text of *Black Beauty*, lays bare the cultural texture of an age. "*Cherchez la vache!*" says Evans-Pritchard of the world of the Nuer—advice offered on the same conviction: that, in the career of everyday goods, of valued things, we grasp the constitution of complex social fields. We ourselves follow this object lesson in Chapter 5, extending the concept of commodity fetishism to explore how cattle give analytical access to a changing Southern Tswana universe. In fact, in making his case against history as the biography of big men, Samuel voices the same concern as we did about an anthropology "from the native's point of view": that it tends to focus on individual intention and action at the expense of more complex social processes. Take, for example, the Battle of Trafalgar, which looms large in standard British textbooks, not least because of Nelson's heroic death. This event, claims Samuel, was far less important to the making of an epoch than, say, the Married Women's Property Act of 1882. A product of drawn-out social struggle, the act had critical consequences for marriage, family, and gender in late nineteenth century England—in other words, for the construction of modern British society *tout court*. Yet it barely rates a footnote in any major work.

Cultural historians like Le Roy Ladurie, Ginzburg, Darnton, and Samuel give us comfort in the face of less friendly interlocutors partly because they reassure us that our methods ("suspiciously like literature" to the hard social sciences [Darnton 1985:6]) are more rigorous and revealing than they appear. But most fundamentally, they see virtue in—indeed, make no apologies for—disinterring and disseminating the lives of insignificant "others." For many of them, far from an act of domination or appropriation, this is the first step in a subversive historical sociology, a history written against the hegemony of high bourgeoisies, the power of parliaments, and the might of monarchies. Their work, moreover, bears more than passing similarity to colonial historiography in the so-called subaltern

mode. This is not merely because the latter concerns itself with "faceless masses," people who have left few documentary traces of Promethean careers. Subaltern historiography also challenges the very categories through which colonial pasts have been made. In so doing, it resonates with the democratizing impulse of our own craft, of which we have already spoken: the well-intentioned—some would say self-satisfied—view that ethnography celebrates the narratives, the consciousness, and the cultural riches of non-Western populations, especially those threatened with ethnocide.

In anthropology, as we have noted, the liberal urge to speak for others has had its comeuppance. Social history may seem less vulnerable to counterattack: Its subjects, often well dead and buried, can neither answer back nor be affected any longer by the politics of knowledge. This, however, is much too simple. Not only do scholars work increasingly on history-in-the-making (cf. Bundy 1987), but also anyone who writes of times past must recognize that there will be people who stand to suffer from the way in which social memory is fixed (cf. Ashforth 1991). In addition, there are those, both revisionist and radical, who champion the cause of historical populations. Thus Rosaldo (1986) contends that, for all his efforts to capture the life-world of the peasants of Montañou from within, Le Roy Ladurie (1979) derives his narrative primarily from the standpoint of a contemporary inquisitor; Rosaldo, in fact, likens his perspective to that of a colonial anthropologist. Spivak (1988) goes yet further: She questions whether the subaltern can speak at all, even through the texts of a radicalized history. It appears that in representing the point of view of "natives," living or dead, cultural historians are on no firmer epistemological ground than are ethnographers—and no less embroiled in the politics of the present (Croce [1921] 1959:46f).

This calls to mind Jacques Derrida's critique of Foucault's history of madness and, as significantly, Ginzburg's rejoinder. Both are instructive for anthropologists—especially for those drawn by deconstruction, those troubled by the tyranny of a totalizing social science. They are also salient in light of our own analysis (Chapter 6) of the historical consciousness borne, in apartheid South Africa, by an alleged "madman." It is impossible, says Derrida (1978:34f) in dismissing Foucault's *History* (1967), to analyze dementia save in "the restrained and restraining language" of Western reason. Yet this is the very language that constituted *folie* in the first place—the very means of its repression. It follows, therefore, that there is no point in the discursive structure of Western rationalism from which an interrogation of abnormality may proceed. Derrida (1978:35-36) adds: "All our European languages, the language of everything that has participated, from near or far, in the adventure of Western reason [are implicated in the objectification of madness]. . . . *Nothing* within this language, and *no one* among those who speak it, can escape. . . . [T]he revolution against reason

can only be made within it . . . [and] always has the limited scope of . . . a disturbance." For all his determination to write a history of insanity "without repeating the aggression of rationalism," then, Foucault is accused of self-delusion; the project, implies Derrida, was itself pure folly, madness. And so his act of subversion disappears before the deconstructive eye. The parallel with the politics of ethnography is obvious. Its analytic gaze, too, appears entrapped in Western reason, a party to the very relationship—between subject and object, the surveyor and the surveilled—on which colonizing power/knowledge is based.

To Ginzburg (1980:xvii), however, Derrida's critique is both facile and nihilistic. For, against all the forces of repression in the world, it allows little by way of legitimate reaction: inaction, ironic indifference, silence (cf. Said 1978).¹⁵ Even worse, it misses the fact that "the only discourse that constitutes a radical alternative to the lies of constituted society is represented by [the] victims of social exclusion." Extraneousness, irrationality, absurdity, rupture, contradiction in the face of dominant cultures, to take the point further, are all mirrors of distortion, angles from which are exposed the logic of oppressive signs and reigning hegemonies. Despite his location within the discourses of Western reason, concludes Ginzburg, Foucault *did* succeed in using the history of madness, the politics of sanity, to unmask the coerciveness of convention and (self-)discipline.

We should not draw false comfort from this. It is one thing to acknowledge the *possibility* that rupture, absurdity, or resistance may disclose—even disable—the world from which it emanates, but quite another to ensure that it does. More immediately, though, there is relevance for us in the methodological implications of Ginzburg's argument, in the kind of history to which it is dedicated. The latter, by definition, must be grounded in the singular. It can make no pretense of representativeness, of disinterring a typical seventeenth-century European villager or nineteenth-century urban merchant. For all the cultural historian can ever "see" are the dispersed fragments of an epoch—just as the ethnographer only "sees" fragments of a cultural field. However, the point of recovering these fragments—be they individuals or events—is to "connect [them] to an historically determinate environment and society" (1980:xxiv).¹⁶ They may come to us largely by chance and may in some measure be unintelligible. But to recognize and respect that unintelligibility, which we have perforce to do, "does not mean succumbing to a foolish fascination for the exotic and incomprehensible." It is, rather, to undertake redeeming them. For "redeemed [they are] thus liberated" (1980:xxvi). Liberated, that is, in the sense of being restored to a world of meaningful interconnections.

Ginzburg's insistence on the redemptive connection between fragments and totalities brings together two critical points about cultural history in general and, in particular, its subaltern variants. The first echoes Samuel's

(1989:23) observation that "'History from below' . . . without some larger framework . . . becomes a cul-de-sac and loses its subversive potential." Improperly contextualized, the stories of ordinary people past stand in danger of remaining just that: stories. To become something more, these partial, "hidden histories" have to be situated in the wider worlds of power and meaning that gave them life. But those worlds were also home to other dramatic personae, other texts, other signifying practices. And here is the second point: there is no basis to assume that the histories of the repressed, in themselves, hold a special key to revelation; as we show in Part Three, the discourses of the dominant also yield vital insights into the contexts and processes of which they were part. The corollary: There is no great historiographic balance that may be restored, set to rights once and for all, merely by replacing bourgeois chronicles with subaltern accounts—by "topping and tailing" cultures past (Porrer 1989:3). History, Antonio Gramsci reminds us, is made in the struggle among the diverse life worlds that coexist in given times and places—between the "tendentious languages" that, for Bakhtin (1981:263; Holquist 1981:xix), play against one another and against the "totality" (posited, *realized*) that gives them meaning. For historiography, as for ethnography, it is the relations between fragments and fields that pose the greatest analytic challenge.

How, then, do we connect parts to "totalities"? How do we redeem the fragments? How do we make intelligible the idiosyncratic acts, lives, and representations of others? How do we locate them within "a historically determinate environment"? It is here that cultural history, for all its brilliant achievements, runs out of answers for us. Not that this should be a surprise. Just as we were turning to history for guidance, at the moment when our early paradigmatic foundations were crumbling, many historians began to repay the compliment. Just as we were inclined to see history as "good"—as if time might cure everything—they seemed to see ethnography as a panacea. This should have warned us that they were in as much theoretical trouble as we were ourselves.

In fact, much historiography still proceeds as if its empirical bases were self-evident, as if "theory" were an affectation only of those of philosophical bent (Thompson 1978b; cf. Johnson 1978). Collingwood (1935:15) might have asserted, long ago, that the "points between which the historical imagination spins its web . . . must be achieved by critical thinking." But there has been relatively little effort to interrogate the constructs through which the silences and spaces between events are filled, through which disjointed stories are cast into master narratives. In practice, of course, the way in which the "historical imagination" does its work is culturally crafted; so, too, is the fabrication of events, as we are reminded by old debates over *l'histoire événementielle* (see below). As this suggests, the cultural historian is no less prone than the cultural anthropologist to read with an ethnocen-

tric eye. In the absence of principled theory, ethnographers of the archive and the field alike tend to become hermeneuts by default, finding in interpretive anthropology a confirmation of their own phenomenological individualism. Of those who did turn to systematic approaches—especially to some form of structuralism or materialism—many have been attracted, in the wake of recent crises, by the less deterministic visions of a Gramsci or a Foucault, or to such “counternarratives” as feminism, psychoanalysis, and subalternism. They have drawn, in other words, on an increasingly global legacy of social thought, to which we anthropologists have equal access.

What, in sum, are the lessons to be taken from this excursion into history? Clearly it is cultural historians, more than any other social scientists, who validate our endeavor as ethnographers. This they do by asserting the possibility of a subversive historical anthropology, one that focuses primarily on little people and their worlds. Like cultural studies, with which—at least, in Britain—it has had a rich conversation (see Turner 1990:68f; Johnson 1979), cultural history has been especially adept at revealing that all social fields are domains of contest; that “culture” is often a matter of argument, a confrontation of signs and practices along the fault lines of power; that it is possible to recover from fragments, discord, and even from silences, the raw material with which to write imaginative sociologies of the past and the present. But eventually we must part company. Given the reluctance of historians to reflect on matters of theory, their tendency to look to empirical solutions for analytic problems, we must find our own way through the maze of conundrums that lies along the road to a principled historical anthropology.

III

So, with all this in mind, toward what kind of historical anthropology do we strive? And how, exactly, does ethnography fit into it? It follows, from the way in which we call the question, that we do not find a ready answer in the methods and models spawned by the recent rapprochement of history and anthropology—or by its intellectual precursors, which go back much further than we often realize (see, e.g., Cohn 1980, 1981; J. L. Comaroff 1984; Rosaldo 1986). Nor, as our brief excursion into *l'histoire des mentalités* indicates, is one to be found by surveying existing historiographies and choosing the most congenial candidate. Recall Thompson's (1978b:324) admonitory metaphor—a little shopworn now, but still valuable—that ideas, ways of knowing, are not like objects in a supermarket, perishables casually bought or brushed aside, cast out or consumed.

Let us begin to answer the question in the negative voice—by disposing, that is, of the kinds of historical anthropology that we seek specifically to avoid. The method in our malice, to invoke the memory of Edmund Leach (1961:2), will reveal itself as we proceed: Some ground clearing is necessary if we are to cut fresh pathways through old thickets.

Many years ago, Nadel (1942:72) drew the attention of anthropologists to the distinction, already well inscribed in social theory and philosophy, between “ideological” and “objective” history. The first recalls Malinowski's (e.g., 1948:92f) description of myth: It is the past as told by people to account—authoritatively, authentically, audibly—for the contemporary shape of their world. By contrast, “factual” chronicles, the work of dispassionate observers, are scripted “in accordance . . . with universal criteria of connexion and sequence.” Nadel did not go on to point out that “ideological” history rarely exists (or ever existed) in the singular. He wrote, after all, long before culture was seen to be a fluid, often contested, and only partially integrated mosaic of narratives, images, and practices (see below); before we even perceived that, in a single African society, there may be alternative (gendered, generational, even stratified) histories and world-maps.

The distinction between ideological and objective history may no longer go unquestioned in the musings of metahistorians. But it remains deeply entrenched in Western popular discourse and, implicitly, in much historical anthropology. How often are we not at pains to show that the chronicles of kings, conquerors, and colonizers—we follow Croce's ([1921] 1959:51) usage here¹⁷—are distortions, pure ideology in servitude to power, the corollary being that our version is more objective, more factual? The same is true of the past as perceived, from the bottom up, by the dispossessed and the disenfranchised, the mute and the muzzled. How often do we not explain away their failure to act in their own interest, or to act at all, by seeking to show that they perforce misrecognize the “real” signs and structures that sustain their subordination? In so doing, it is all too easy to cross an invisible boundary, the now familiar line that marks out the limits of authority, ethnographic and historical alike. For it is one thing to assume that no human actor can ever “know” his or her world in its totality; one thing to situate the natives' points of view—note, now, the plural—in their appropriate context. That, as we have suggested, is entirely legitimate. But it is quite another thing to arrogate to ourselves an exclusive, emancipatory, suprahistorical purchase on reality. To dredge up the lexicon of an age gone by, social knowledge is never value-free or priceless. And there are no “universal criteria of connexion and sequence”; *vide* Joan Kelly's (1984) feminist critique of orthodox practices of periodization in European history. Universal historiography, as we should all be aware by now, is itself a myth—worse, a conceit. Indeed, the most striking thing

about the very idea—the Western idea of universalism, that is—is how parochial it is.

Any historical anthropology that sustains a fixed dichotomy between the ideological and the objective is bound to run into all the old problems of brute empiricism—not to mention accusations of insensitivity to its own positioning and provisionality. In short, it invites the justifiable criticisms raised most recently by postmodernism but also by many before on the long road from the early Marx to late phenomenology. If a distinction between the ideological and the objective is to appear in historical anthropology at all, we would argue, it is primarily as a cultural artifact, a distinction that itself is to be interrogated wherever it surfaces. Who does it empower and in what manner? Are there other forms of historical consciousness in the same contexts? Are they expressed or suppressed? By what means? In sum, our historical anthropology begins by eschewing the very possibility of a realist, or an essentialist, history. This is not to say that there are no essences and realities in the world. Quite the opposite. But our objective, like the objective of many others, is to show as cogently as possible *how* they are constructed: how realities become real, how essences become essential, how materialities materialize. “Symbolic realism,” a figure of analytic speech used for rather different theoretical ends by Brown and Lyman (1978:5), captures well the spirit of the matter. To the degree that our analytic strategy may still count as objectivist, then, it is highly provisional and reflexive. Perhaps this is the hallmark of a neomodernist anthropology.

If our historical anthropology is anti-empiricist, anti-objectivist, anti-essentialist—except in the amended sense in which we deploy these terms—it is also anti-statistical and anti-aggregative. Let us explain what we mean with reference, once again, to our intellectual heritage. Recall the early days of the controversy in Britain over the relationship between history and anthropology. These were the days when Evans-Pritchard (1950, 1961:20), invoking Maitland (1936:249), lined us up with art and aesthetics against science; when Leach (1961), Schapera (1962), and Smith (1962) argued that, in spite of our claims to the contrary, we had been doing history all along—and neither could nor should do otherwise; when the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth finally blessed the rapprochement with our “sister discipline” at its annual conference (Lewis 1968).¹⁸ It is clear, with hindsight, that there were three quite different forms of historiography being discussed.¹⁹ But nobody, other than Leach (1954), seems to have said as much.

The first form was confined to analyses of repetitive processes of the short and medium term—analyses we would barely recognize as historical at all now, although they were often cited as proof that anthropology really *was* concerned with time (as if this were the same thing; see Chapter 4).

Most notable among them were studies of domestic groups (Fortes 1949; Goody 1958) and villages (Mitchell 1956b; Turner 1957) that sought to arrive at *aggregate* descriptions of social structures by illuminating their cyclical dynamics. Do not misunderstand us: Some of these studies, especially those of the Manchester School in Central Africa, were based on perceptive, blood-and-guts narratives of social struggles. But the latter were removed from history, consigned to the uneventful register of “structural time.” However much human beings railed against the contradictions of their world, or fought with one another, their actions were always seen to reinforce the system in place, never to transform it. This reduction was not purely the preserve of British functionalism: It was to reappear later, more fashionably addressed, among Marxists concerned with the reproduction of systems of domination (e.g., Meillassoux 1981).

Altogether more recognizably “historical,” if utterly undiachronic, was the second use of the past. Reminiscent of Levi-Strauss’s (1963a) statistical models, of historiography founded on the “anonymity of numbers” (see p. 14), its point was to verify, in rates and incidences, descriptive accounts of existing social systems. Evans-Pritchard ([1961] 1963:55) observed that “a term like ‘structure’ can only be meaningful when used as an historical expression to denote a set of relations known to have endured over a considerable period of time.” Echoes of *Annales*, by way of Braudel (e.g., 1980). Thus Barnes (1954:171) retraced 130 years of Ngoni history in order to show that “the form of [their] social structure [had] remained the same”; and so a long, tortured story of state formation, migration, and colonial conquest is distilled into a two-dimensional, lifeless aggregate termed “[the Ngoni] political order.”²⁰ Less grand in scope, but similar in object and spirit, was the historical study of social institutions. If we could show, for instance, that succession among the Zulu had actually passed from father to senior son a certain number of times, we had empirical justification for the claim that the “principle” of primogeniture obtains. Similarly, if Highland Burmese men had married the daughters of their mothers’ brothers in a given proportion of cases, we might be persuaded to say that they “have” an asymmetrical alliance system.²¹ Note the grammatically awkward tense shift from historical past to ethnographic present: It recapitulates the methodologically uneasy move from data to generalization, event to structure, history to form.

Judiciously and imaginatively used, this kind of history may be suggestive. More often than not, however, statistical appearances, particularly when read across cultural registers, are misleading. Not only do they invite us to reify institutions, thus endowing a slippery abstraction with false concreteness, but they also erect counterfeit signposts toward causal explanations. In the Southern Tswana chiefdoms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, senior sons typically inherited their

fathers' property and position. But they did not necessarily do so because of the principle of primogeniture, as has often been said.²² By virtue of the manner in which succession struggles were culturally constructed, men *made* themselves into senior sons in the course of these processes (J. L. Comaroff 1978); the rules of rank might have provided the rhetorical terms in which claims were argued, but they simply could not decide matters one way or the other. As this implies, it was the logic of practice, not a set of ascriptive norms, that gave form to such struggles (Bourdieu 1977:19f). Likewise, for reasons having to do with the politics of affinity here, the close and ambiguous kinship ties that often linked spouses before marriage were commonly (re)negotiated during their lives together (see Chapter 4). Consequently, numerically based generalizations about Tswana succession and marriage may do worse than tell us nothing. They may manufacture misinformation.

Indeed, given that accounts of this kind come in a highly persuasive form, they have the capacity to render soft facts into hard fictions;²³ statistical statement,²⁴ as we said, is the mode of enchantment that, in our culture, makes truth "empirical." But, most distressing of all, these methods deflect our attention away from the problematic quality of habitual practices, hiding their historicity by mystifying their meaningful construction and the bases of their empowerment. For normal sociology there may be enduring appeal in ignoring cultural ambiguity, in sacrificing polyphony to the quest for certainty, in reducing messy "native" categories to measurably "scientific" ones. So be it. That is not the object of our historical anthropology.

The third mode of historiography in contemporary British anthropology, to which we find ourselves much closer in spirit, also provides a useful critical lesson. Anything but statistical or inductive, it was based on the axiom that *all* social orders exist in time; that all are inherently unstable and generically dynamic; that there are no prehistoric "anthropological societies," to recall Cancian's (1976) extraordinary term; and that, as Dumont (1957:21) once put it, "history is the movement by which a society reveals itself as what it is." Perhaps most representative of this position was Leach's remarkable *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954), a study sometimes said to have anticipated by many years (1) the move in anthropology toward practice theory (Fuller and Parry 1989:13), (2) the call to situate local systems in the wider political and social worlds of which they are part (Ortner 1984:142), and (3) the recognition that all human communities are shaped by an interplay between internal forms and external conditions (Leach 1954: 212). It also resonated with Bakhtin's (1981:270) insistence that the holism of (linguistic) systems is posited, not given, and that it is acted upon to ensure intelligibility in the face of fragmentary realities (see following discussion).

For Leach (1954:4), "every real society is a process in time": Internal change—either transformation within an existing order or the alteration of its structure (p. 5)—is perennial, ongoing, inevitable. What is more, social reality never "forms a coherent whole." It is, by nature, fragmentary and inconsistent (p. 8). "System," therefore, is always a fiction, an "as if" model of the world, for actor and analyst alike. But, Leach added, it is a necessary analytic fiction, because it affords a means by which otherwise invisible connections between social phenomena may be traced out and explained. Many are familiar with his ethnographic case: In Highland Burma, we are told, Kachin groups were caught up in a dynamic pattern of movement between two polar types, two idealized representations of political order. One was the highly centralized, hierarchical, autocratic Shan state; the other, the decentralized, egalitarian, "democratic" *gumlao* polity. Most communities, however, fell somewhere between, in so-called *gumsa* formations. But the latter were not static: They were constantly moving in the direction of either the Shan or the *gumlao* "type." As they did so, the internal inconsistencies (i.e., contradictions) of that "type" would manifest themselves, encouraging a countermovement—itsself impelled by the self-interested actions of individuals who, appealing to diverse values, abetted the process of structural change by pursuing their own ends (p. 8). The net effect over the long run, some 150 years, was a pattern of oscillating equilibrium.

Political Systems of Highland Burma certainly has its shortcomings. Leach has been taken to task for (1) relying on crass utilitarianism, a universalist cliché, to account for human motives, thereby separating culture from society and reducing it to the "outer dress" of social action; (2) resorting, nonetheless, to vulgar idealism in order to rationalize the behavior of *homo economicus* in the Kachin Hills; (3) describing *gumsa*, *gumlao*, and Shan as ideal "types"—without subjecting them to historical analysis—and then treating them as factual realities; (4) failing to locate Highland Burmese communities in continental and global context or within linear processes of the long run; and, finally, (5) reducing history to a repetitive pattern of (bipolar) social equilibrium.

We are not concerned here with evaluating these criticisms. Whether or not they are justified (see Fuller and Parry 1989:12–13), each stands as a *general* admonition, something that any historical anthropology would want to avoid; hence they are to be added to our negative checklist. But that, too, is only part of the story. There are also three constructive lessons, or rather challenges, to be drawn from this worthy effort to give expression to the assertion—often made, rarely made good on—that societies are "processes in time."

The first concerns the fluid, fragmentary character of social reality and the question of order. Leach would have scorned any postmodern sugges-

tion that, because the world is experienced as ambiguous and incoherent, it must therefore lack all systematicity; that, because social life seems episodic and inconsistent, it can have no regularity; that, because we do not see its invisible forms, society is formless; that nothing lies behind its broken, multifaceted surfaces. The very idea would probably have struck him as a lamentable failure of the analytic imagination. *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, remember, set out to disinter the dynamic structure underlying a diverse (dis?)array of social arrangements and representations, values and events; to show that, if our models are supple enough, they should make sense of even the most chaotic and shifting social environment. Again, whatever the merits of Leach's account, the implication is clear. We require good grounds for claiming the *nonexistence* of a system or a structure—the fact that we are unable to discern one at first blush is hardly proof that it is not there. Here, then, is a preemptive counterchallenge to the deconstructive impulse of the 1990s: Absence and disconnection, incoherence and disorder, have actually to be demonstrated. They can neither be presumed nor posited by negative induction.

The second lesson of *Political Systems of Highland Burma*²⁵ applies to the historical anthropology of the modern world order, in particular, to the currently fashionable concern with the encounter between international and parochial systems, universal and local cultures. Good intentions notwithstanding, it is impossible to restore history to peoples allegedly without it by appealing to historical models of global processes, especially processes in Western political economy, while sustaining ahistorical models of non-European “social formations”—whether these be described in the language of Levi-Strauss, Marx, or Max Weber. For, as has been said *ad nauseam*, “peripheral” populations do not acquire history only when they are impelled along its paths by the machinations of merchants, missionaries, military men, manufacturers, or ministers of state. Bluntly put, a truly historical anthropology is only possible to the extent that it is capable of illuminating the *endogenous* historicity of all social worlds.

This may seem old hat. Coquery-Vidrovitch (1976:91) said fifteen years ago that “no one doubts any longer that precolonial societies had a history.” Still, it is one thing to recognize the undeniable, another to give account of it. Models of noncapitalist orders abound, yet few demonstrate their internal capacity for transformation (cf. Sahlins 1981), stressing rather the (*a priori*) mechanics of their reproduction. Terminological niceties aside, how much have we *really* advanced on our old conception of “traditional” societies, “cold” cultures? Of local worlds trapped in repetitive cycles of structural time (Gluckman 1965:285f)—until, to cite Meillassoux's (1972:101) startling revision of genesis, they suffer “historical accidents, usually due to contacts with foreign formations”? Even recent efforts to reconceptualize “precapitalist systems” (see, e.g., Guy 1987) treat them as

resolutely prehistorical. So do some notable attempts to resituate them within World History (e.g., Wolf 1982), most of which merely show that they have been enmeshed in global connections for longer than previously thought; not that they were inherently, internally dynamic—if in their own particular ways—all along.

This is not to denigrate the insights that have come from looking anew at worlds other than our own through the eyes of, say, feminist anthropology (see, e.g., Collier and Yanagisako 1987) or, for that matter, Meillassoux's Marxism, Wolf's world system, Sahlins's structuralism, and Bourdieu's embodied practice. We *have* learned much from them. But we have not ended up with any generally accepted theories or models of the historicity of non-Western societies.²⁶ Perhaps that, in itself, is no bad thing. And yet, without some way, however provisional, of grasping those historicities—note, again, the shift to the plural, the recognition of differences—anthropology will continue to cast “other cultures” in the timeless shadows of its own dominant narratives. It will also leave intact the disabling opposition between historiography and ethnography.

The last lesson to be taken from *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, and from the arguments that followed in its wake, has to do with “units of analysis”: the terms, that is, by which social science breathes life into data, thence to arrange them into expository narratives. Leach's analysis raises the difficult question of whether historical anthropology is forever compelled to share the two fundamental tropes of Western historiography, the individual and the event. Note that the master motif of the Kachin past, as he tells it, was oscillating equilibrium, a great epochal movement realized in a cumulative series of incidents animated by (universal) human motives and (rational) modes of action. In offering his methodological individualist account of structural drift, Leach falls back on a classical, and classically ethnocentric, conception of social history. Of course, he is not alone in finding it hard to escape the liberal modernism of his own European culture. Structuralism has long obsessed over the individual and the event,²⁷ never quite laying down their ghosts once and for all. The situation of structural functionalism is similar: For all its ostensible concern with the nomothetic, it came increasingly to rest, as we said earlier, on an empirical scaffolding of life histories, case studies, social dramas of interpersonal conflict, and the like. Indeed, albeit often unobserved, biography—the optic that fuses individual and event into both a worldview and a narrative genre—lies at the methodological core of much ethnography and history.

But there is danger here. Biography is anything but innocent.²⁸ Its most articulate textual vehicles in our own society are the private diary, the journal, and the memoir, which find their way into much, often methodologically naïve, historical writing; in the ethnographer's notebook it typi-

cally appears in the guise of the life history, a singular dialogic contrivance of observer and subject. Yet the diary and the life history are culturally specific, patently ideological modes of inscription. The former is strongly associated with the rise, in the eighteenth century, of bourgeois personhood; Barker (1984), among others, traces its roots back to the Cartesian "I," an image of a *self*-conscious being freed from the webs of enchantment and possessed of the capacity to gaze out at, and measure, the world. As a medium of (self-) representation, more generally, life-histories bespeak a notion of the human career as an ordered progression of acts and events; of biography as history personified, history as biography aggregated; of the "biographical illusion," Bourdieu (1987) calls it, a modernist fantasy about society and selfhood according to which everyone is, potentially, in control of his or her destiny in a world made by the actions of autonomous "agents." It is this fantasy that leads historians to seek social causes in individual action and social action in individual causes; to find order in events by putting events in order.

Inasmuch as it records such actions and events, then, the "life story" is an instrument of bourgeois history-in-the-making, one strand in the process whereby private thoughts and deeds are woven into the collective narratives of epochs and civilizations. Nor is it a passive, impartial instrument. Gusdorf (1980:29), noting that autobiography is peculiar to the Western sensibility of selfhood, argues that it "has been of good use in the systematic conquest of the universe." Anthropologists, as we well know, are alleged accessories in all this: By translating the experience of others into our own measures of being-in-time (cf. Fabian 1983), we are said to have laid down the terms in which they may be represented—and, in both senses of the word, made into subjects.

Gusdorf may or may not be correct about the "systematic conquest of the universe." Our more immediate worry, at this point, is that for the most part social science persists in treating biography as a neutral, transparent window into history. In so doing, it serves to perpetuate the "biographical illusion": to regard persons and performances in the Promethean mode, to find the motors of the past and present in rational individualism, and to pay little heed to the social and cultural forms that silently shape and constrain human action. It is a short step from this to a vision of History and Society as the dramaturgy of intersecting lives: a theater in which, as the narrative spotlight narrows ever more sharply on actors and their scripts, text—a sad proxy for life—becomes all. And context dissolves away into so many shadows.

If historical anthropology is to avoid recapitulating the eccentricities and ethnocentricities of the West, the individual and the event have everywhere to be treated as problematic. Just how are they constituted, culturally and historically? What determines, or renders indeterminate, the

actions of human beings in the world? What decides whether, in the first place, the bounded individual is even a salient unit of subjectivity? What is it in any social context that constructs utilities and rationalities, "private" motives and collective consciousness, dominant worldviews and polyvalent symbols, consensual signs and contested images? Precisely how are meaningful atoms of human action and interaction contrived? The lessons we draw from *Political Systems of Highland Burma*—and, more generally, from the early rapprochement of history and anthropology—converge in these questions. Indeed, considered in light of our dialogue with *L'histoire des mentalités*, they pose three challenges to any historical anthropology: (1) to address the equations of structure and indeterminacy, of form and incoherence, involved in tracking the movement of societies and peoples through time; (2) to disinter the endogenous historicity of local worlds, both perceptual and practical, in order to understand better their place within the world historical processes of which they are part; and (3) to rupture the basic tropes of Western historiography—biography and event—by situating being and action, comparatively, within their diverse cultural contexts.

At this point a shift in voice is appropriate. Having set the scene for our historical anthropology in a critical key, we should say something of its positive conceptual foundations. We began to lay these out in *Of Revelation and Revolution* (1991). Here, consequently, we offer the briefest synopsis; in any case, as we stressed earlier, we wish to allow the essays to speak for themselves.

Clearly, the place to begin is with the idea of culture itself. Still the anthropological keyword par excellence, if anything it is enhanced, not threatened, by recent developments in cultural studies and "cultural poetics" (Greenblatt 1990:3). For reasons detailed elsewhere (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:13f), we take culture to be the semantic space, the field of signs and practices, in which human beings construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories. It is not merely an abstract order of signs, or relations among signs. Nor is it just the sum of habitual practices. Neither pure langue nor pure parole, it never constitutes a closed, entirely coherent system. Quite the contrary: Culture always contains within it polyvalent, potentially contestable messages, images, and actions. It is, in short, a historically situated, historically unfolding ensemble of signifiers-in-action, signifiers at once material and symbolic, social and aesthetic. Some of these, at any moment in time, will be woven into more or less tightly integrated, relatively explicit worldviews; others may be heavily contested, the stuff of counterideologies and "subcultures"; yet others may become more or less unfixed, relatively freefloating, and indeterminate in their value and meaning.

It has been widely argued in recent years that the concept of culture, in itself, is incapable of grasping the meaningful bases of economy and society, of inhabited history and imagined worlds. "Power," we are told, has to be added into the equation, since it determines why some signs are dominant, others not; why some practices seem to be consensual, others disputed—even when they are backed by the technology of terror. The general point is well taken, albeit with a cautionary amendment: Power is itself not above, nor outside of, culture and history, but it is directly implicated in their constitution and determination. It cannot, therefore, be "added" to them in such a way as to solve the great conundrums of history and society.

This, we would argue, is where hegemony and ideology, the terrible twins of much recent social theory, become salient. Although we regret the often unspecific, devalued use of these terms, they do, if carefully deployed, offer a cogent way of speaking about the force of meaning and the meaning of force—the inseparability, that is, of power and culture. They also serve to reframe the idea of culture itself in such a way as to embrace, at once, its systemic and indeterminate features: the fact that it appears, on the one hand, as an orderly worldview and, on the other, as a heterodox, even chaotic, repertoire of polyvalent images and practices.

Power, then, is an intrinsic quality of the social and the cultural; in short, their determining capacity. Sometimes it appears as the (relative) ability of human beings to shape the lives of others by exerting control over the production, circulation, and consumption of signs and objects, over the making of both subjectivities and realities. This is power in the *agentive* mode. But it also immerses itself in the forms of everyday life, forms that direct human perceptions and practices along conventional pathways. Being "natural" and "ineffable," such forms seem to be beyond human agency, notwithstanding the fact that the interests they serve may be all too human. This kind of *nonagentive* power saturates such things as aesthetics and ethics, built form and bodily representation, medical knowledge and material production. And its effects are internalized—in their negative guise, as constraints; in their neutral guise, as conventions; in their positive guise, as values.

This distinction between modalities of power and agency, we suggest, underlies the differences, and the relationship, between ideology and hegemony—which may fruitfully be regarded as the two empowered dimensions of any culture.

Let us elaborate. We take hegemony to refer to that order of signs and material practices, drawn from a specific cultural field, that come to be taken for granted as the natural, universal, and true shape of social being—although its infusion into local worlds, always liable to challenge by the logic of prevailing cultural forms, is never automatic. It consists of things that go without saying: things that, being axiomatic, are not normally the

subject of explication or argument (cf. Bourdieu 1977:94, 167). This is why its power seems to be independent of human agency, to lie in what it silences, what it puts beyond the limits of the thinkable. It follows that it is seldom contested openly. Indeed, the moment that any set of values, meanings, and material forms comes to be explicitly negotiable, its hegemony is threatened; at that moment it becomes the subject of ideology or counterideology.

As this implies, ideology describes "an articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs of a kind that can be abstracted as [the] 'worldview'" of any social grouping (Williams 1977:109). Carried in everyday practice and self-conscious texts, in spontaneous images and popular styles, this worldview may be more or less internally systematic, more or less consistent in its outward forms. Still, as long as it exists, it provides an organizing scheme, a master narrative, for collective symbolic production. Obviously, to invoke Marx and Engels (1970), the regnant ideology of any period or place will be that of the dominant group, although the degree of its preeminence may vary a good deal; so, also, will the extent to which it is empowered by the instrumental force of the state. But other, subordinate populations also have ideologies. And, insofar as they try to assert themselves, to gain some control over the terms in which the world is ordered, they too will call actively upon them—even if only to clash their symbols.

Here, then, is the basic difference between hegemony and ideology. Hegemony consists of constructs and conventional practices that have come to permeate a political community; ideology originates in the assertions of a particular social group. Hegemony is beyond direct argument; ideology is more likely to be perceived as a matter of inimical opinion and interest and hence is more open to contestation. Hegemony, at its most effective, is mute; ideology invites argument.

Hegemony, then, is that part of a dominant ideology that has been naturalized and, having contrived a tangible world in its image, does not appear to be ideological at all. Conversely, the ideologies of the subordinate may express hitherto voiceless experience, often sparked by contradictions that a prevailing culture no longer hides. The manner in which a sectarian worldview actually comes to naturalize structures of inequality—or, conversely, the commonplace comes to be questioned—is always a historically specific issue. Typically, however, it involves the assertion of control over various modes of production, both symbolic and material—control that, as Foucault understood, must be sustained in such a way as to become invisible. For it is only through repetition that things cease to be perceived or remarked, that they become so habituated as no longer to be noticed. At the same time, however, no hegemony is ever total (Williams 1977:109); it constantly has to be made and, by the same token, may be unmade. That is why it has been described as a process rather than a thing, a process to

which all ruling regimes have to pay heed. The more successful any regime, the more of its ideology will disappear into the domain of hegemonic practice; the less successful, the more its unspoken conventions will be opened to contest. This, self-evidently, is most likely to occur when the gap between the world-as-represented and the world-as-experienced becomes both palpable and insupportable.

In *Of Revelation and Revolution* we take this analytic scheme further, using it to explore consciousness and representation, historical agency and social practice, domination and resistance, global and local social orders, and the politics and culture of colonialism. Here we seek to make a more general point: that it is possible for anthropology to live easily with the concept of culture and to defend it cogently against its critics. But this requires that we treat culture as a shifting semantic field, a field of symbolic production and material practice empowered in complex ways.

In sum, far from being reducible to a closed system of signs and relations, the meaningful world is always fluid and ambiguous, a partially integrated mosaic of narratives, images, and signifying practices. Its forms—which are indivisibly semantic and material, social and symbolic—appear, paradoxically, to be at the same time (and certainly over time) coherent yet chaotic, authoritative yet arguable, highly systemic yet unpredictable, consensual yet internally contradictory. The paradox, of course, is illusory. In its hegemonic dimensions, any culture *does* present itself as relatively coherent, systemic, consensual, authoritative. After all, whatever forms are powered by the force of habit are naturalized and uncontested; they do seem eternal and universal—at least for the continuing present, however long that turns out to be. But alongside them there are always countervailing forces: dialects that diverge, styles that do not conform, alternative moralities and world-maps. Sometimes these are implicated in open power struggles, sometimes they erupt in parody, sometimes they express themselves in mundane activity of indeterminate intention and consequence. Whatever. But the conclusion is clear: With a sufficiently supple view of culture, we may begin to understand *why* social life everywhere appears dualistic, simultaneously ordered and disorderly.

In the great confrontation between modernist and postmodern perspectives on the world, each of which emphasizes one side of the dualism, we are asked to make a choice. To do so is to be misled, however. The world *is* everywhere dualistic—this being one of those realities for which we ought to have respect. Note that we say *everywhere*. If a neomodern anthropology is to work creatively at the frontiers of ethnography and the historical imagination, it must be founded on a conception of culture and society that takes us beyond our traditional stamping grounds—one that travels easily to a newer generation of field sites, among them the metro-

poles, mentalities, and mass media of Europe and America. And this, finally, brings us back to the question of method.

IV

How, then, do we *do* an ethnography of the historical imagination? How do we contextualize the fragments of human worlds, redeeming them without losing their fragile uniqueness and ambiguity? To repeat: for us the answer lies in a historical anthropology that is dedicated to exploring the processes that make and transform particular worlds—processes that reciprocally shape subjects and contexts, that allow certain things to be said and done. Over time, all social fields are swept by contrary waves of unity and diversity: by forces that diffuse power and meaning and by counterforces that concentrate and fix them. The premise of unification, of some limitation to the “chaos of variety” (Holquist in Bakhtin 1981:xix), is essential to collective life—and, hence, to the very idea of society and culture. But so is the inevitability of proliferation, polyphony, and plurality. Situating our fragments is thus a challenging task, for the systems to which we relate them are systems of a complex sort. Yet, we insist, they are systems nonetheless. We should not deny them coherence merely because they refuse to reduce readily to simple structures.

We are not alone in urging that anthropology shift its concentration away from simple structures and local systems, at least as traditionally defined. This shift, however, has practical consequences. Above all, it deprives us of our conventional, all-too-easy means of bounding analytic fields, forcing us to enter rarified realms of floating texts and macro-structures, where the connective tissues—the processes and pathways of face-to-face sodalities—seem to dissolve into thin air. In the past, our strategy for studying “complex” situations was either to turn to the sociology of networks and symbolic interaction—to a methodological individualism, that is, without a generic theory of society and culture—or to find enclaves within the alienating world of modernity. We looked for “subcultures,” informal economies, and marginal minorities, for ritual and resistance to capitalism; all neatly circumscribed phenomena, for us still thick with meaning. Until very recently, we have felt ill equipped to broach, in their own ethnographic right, such things as electronic media, “high” culture, the discourses of science, or the semantics of commodities. At best, these have been regarded as forces eroding traditional orders or as “significant causes of our modern difficulties” (McCracken 1988:xi).²⁹ And so we have remained largely in the countryside, on ethnic islands and culturally distinct archipelagoes.

We are the first to acknowledge that it is not easy to forge units of analysis in unbounded social fields. But it would be false to assume that an ethnography of the nation-state, of empire, or of a diaspora presents problems unprecedented in earlier studies of, say, domestic production, possession rites, or lineage relations. That assumption appears true only as long as we pretend that such "local" phenomena are visible in the round and are separable for heuristic purposes from anything beyond their immediate environs; as long as we sustain the primitivist fiction that traditional orders are natural and self-perpetuating—and radically different from the unruly, unbounded, even unnatural worlds of "modernity" or "capitalism." But few, surely, would wish to condemn anthropology to such pastoral archaism; what should define us is a unique analytic stance, less our locus than our focus. Whether our topic be headhunting in the Amazon or headshrinking in America (or is it vice versa?), voodoo exorcism in the Caribbean or voodoo economics on Capitol Hill, we should approach it from the same perspective: as meaningful practice, produced in the interplay of subject and object, of the contingent and the contextual.

It is precisely here that anthropology has shown a failure of imagination, however, and here that we return to our opening theme. Many of us continue to be hampered, in conceiving open systems, by the dualisms of an enduring evolutionism. We are still prompted to deal in a priori contrasts—between stasis and change, gifts and commodities, theodicy and theory, and so on—that assume the meaning and telos of social phenomena. The Naparama and their kind remain *primitive* rebels, not Promethean heroes or universal soldiers. And this impedes us as we try to dissolve the great analytic divide between tradition and modernity, to confront global issues in more inventive, less pejorative terms. Nor, as we suggested, is the problem resolved by upgrading mechanical models of local systems, grafting them onto universalist theories of society and history; or by literary critical methods that make ethnographic fragments into exemplary texts without adequately relating them to the wider worlds that produce them.

Ethnography does not have to respect a binary world-map, let alone the axes of typological difference. As a mode of observation, it need not be tied either to face-to-face scenes or to a specific sort of social subject. True, we have classically set our sights on particular persons and palpable processes, and this has determined our point of entry into any cultural field. But we are not, for that reason, limited to the writing of microsociologies or histories. The phenomena we observe may be grounded in everyday human activity; yet such activity, even when rural or peripheral, is always involved in the making of wider structures and social movements. Nor ought we to confine ourselves to history's outstations. Even macro-historical processes—the building of states, the making of revolutions, the

extension of global capitalism—have their feet on the ground. Being rooted in the meaningful practices of people great and small, they are, in short, suitable cases for anthropological treatment. Indeed, whether or not we choose to write about them directly, they must always be present in our accounts (cf. Davis 1990:32).

The methodological implications of all this are best explored by way of a specific instance. Several of the essays that follow address the anthropology of empire, in particular the nineteenth-century encounter between British Nonconformist missionaries and peoples of the South African interior. The former were footsoldiers of colonialism, the humble agents of a global movement. The latter, who would come to be known as "the" Tswana, inhabited a world with its own history, a history of great political communities built and broken. But the African past would become subservient to the European present, made into the timeless sign of the "traditional" periphery. In order to grasp this process, we had first to characterize each party as a complex collectivity, each endowed with its own historicity. And then we had to retrace the (often barely visible) minutiae of their interactions. For it is in the gradual articulation of such alien worlds that local and universal realities come to define each other—and that markers like "ethnicity" and "culture," "regionalism" and "nationalism," take on their meaning.

Elsewhere (1991:35ff) we have discussed the general problem of recovering the histories of peoples like the Tswana from evangelical and official records, a topic now receiving long overdue attention (Amin 1984; Guha 1983). Here we are more specifically concerned with the question of how to do a historical anthropology of dominant, world-transforming processes (cf. Cohn 1987; Cooper and Stoler 1989). Clearly, colonial evangelism must be understood both as a cultural project in itself and as the metonym of a global movement; its participants certainly saw themselves as an integral part of the grand imperial design. This, then, is an appropriate site for an imaginative sociology, a context in which anthropologists might recognize their kinship with cultural historians and embark on an ethnography of the archives. In our own work, the point of entry was obvious enough: We began with the conventional chronicles of the Nonconformist missions. But, in trying to make sense of the churchmen's various writings, as well as the wealth of reported speech about them, we soon learned not to rely on any preconstituted "documentary record." Rather, we had to pursue what Greenblatt (1990:14) terms the "textual traces" of the period, traces found in newspapers and official publications as well as in novels, tracts, popular songs, even in drawings and children's games.

Instead of a clear-cut chain of events, or a discernible perspective, the colonial archives revealed a set of arguments. They were dialogic in

Bakhtin's (1981:272f) sense; that is, they partook of diverse genres, of cultural and historical heteroglossia that gave voice to complex patterns of social stratification. If the colonizers formed a single block, it was one fractured by internal difference—and by diverging images of empire locked in “socio-ideological” struggle (p. 273). The latter expressed itself in disputes about such things as abolition, evangelism, and the way to rule and save savages. But, at root, it involved a contest over both the shape and meaning of “natural facts” and the major constituents of modern knowledge: its constructs of person, agency, and work, of Africa and Europe, wildness and civilization. It was only by reconstructing this field of argument—and, going perhaps beyond Bakhtin, by redeeming its politics—that we began to understand the cultural revolution entailed in both the rise of European capitalism and the imperial gesture. Here, amidst all the contradictions of the age, were forged the precepts and projects of a new hegemony, a new bourgeois modernism with universalist horizons and global ambitions. These, of course, included the Christian overseas mission.

A historical ethnography, then, must begin by constructing its own archive. It cannot content itself with established canons of documentary evidence, because these are themselves part of the culture of global modernism—as much the subject as the means of inquiry. As anthropologists, therefore, we must work both in and outside the official record, both with and beyond the guardians of memory in the societies we study (Cohn 1987:47f). In order to reconstruct the annals of a cultural imagination, moreover, we have to operate with a working theory not merely of the social world, but also of the role of inscriptions of various kinds in the making of ideology and argument. For only then can we situate individual expressions and signifying practices within a wider field of representation. After all, locating our fragments requires a sense of the way in which they ride the crosscurrents of division and unity at any moment; of how the autonomous creative urge runs up against cultural constraint. Sahlins (1990:47) notes that, although persons and collectivities “somehow determine” each other, they cannot, by that token, be reduced to one another. But our methods should tell us something of the way in which personal acts become social facts. In the case of colonial evangelism, we had to address the matter by locating a flood of rapportage from the imperial frontier in the complex textual field wrought by the industrial revolution, the consequences of so-called print capitalism (Anderson 1983). But this is just a specific instance of the general problem of reading social processes from exemplary representations: If texts are to be more than literary topoi, scattered shards from which we presume worlds, they have to be anchored in the processes of their production, in the orbits of connection and influence that give them life and force.

The writings of the South African evangelists are especially interesting in this regard. They differed a good deal in their intent and formality: The ambiguities, agonies, and self-doubts aired in letters to kin were not exposed to morally vigilant mission overseers, for example; nor to philanthropists, who were more responsive to evocative accounts of savagery; nor to the churchgoing masses, with their strong taste for Christian heroics. Not only was similar material carefully contrived for diverse audiences, revealing the range of purposes and constraints at work in the civilizing quest, but the historical role of these writings varied likewise. Once addressed to the mission societies, correspondence was political property, to be liberally edited and recycled for campaigns in parliament and the public domain. Letters became pamphlets. And pamphlets became books, eyewitness epics of “labors and scenes” beyond the frontiers of civilization. Thus were layers of texts produced—indeed, an entire stratigraphy. By excavating the career of a particular document it is possible to follow the editor's pen as it refigured authorial statements, rationalizing them into publishable forms that framed the doctrine of humane imperialism. And so an ethnography of this archive begins to disinter the processes by which disparate, even divisive, discourses were fused into a consistent ideology, by which coherence was distilled out of the often chaotic, episodic stream of missionary experience (cf. Bakhtin 1981:272f).

We would insist, though, that a historical ethnography must always go beyond literary traces, beyond explicit narrative, exegesis, even argument. For the poetics of history lie also in mute meanings transacted through goods and practices, through icons and images dispersed in the landscape of the everyday (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987; Cohn 1987:49). Again, this is as true of world historical movements as it is of the most local processes. Just as the Reverend John Philip saw that any effort to re-form “the” Tswana supposed “[bringing about] a revolution in their habits” (see Chapter 10), so Corrigan and Sayer (1985) hold that the making of the modern British state was a cultural revolution borne in large measure by the humdrum rituals and routines that shaped the lives of subjects. Certainly, the great empires of the past established themselves as much in a welter of domestic detail and small-scale civilities as by assertive political and economic means. Such are the tools that build hegemonies, that work thoroughgoing social transformations behind the back of a declarative, heroic history.

This implicit dimension—the study of symbolic practice—is a crucial contribution of ethnography to history, since it brings a nuanced understanding of the role of meaning and motivation to social processes. At its best, anthropology has never been content to equate meaning merely with explicit consciousness. In fact, the relationship of individual experience to the collective, often unconscious logic of sociocultural categories and

designs has long been our stock-in-trade. We may have come to distrust formal, overly coherent notions of culture, but we ought not to jettison the subtle semantic models that so enhance our sensitivity to the power of signs in the world.³⁰ For, however open ended, systems of meaning have determinations of their own. They do not just bend to the will of those who wish to know and act upon them; to the contrary, they play a significant part in shaping subjectivity. The "motivation" of social practice, in other words, always exists at two distinct, if related, levels: first, the (culturally configured) needs and desires of human beings; and, second, the pulse of collective forces that, empowered in complex ways, work through them.

This distinction informs the analysis of all historical processes, but its significance has been underlined by the humanist turn in social science, which has led to calls for a greater concern with agency. Its salience becomes particularly visible when we examine epochal movements like European colonialism, in which purposive, "heroic" action was a central motif, even a driving impulse. Yet, from our perspective, that impulse is not enough to account for the determination of the processes involved—or even to tell very much of the story. Witness, once again, the imperial mission, an initiative moved by contradictory forces whose consequences differed radically from the stated motives of those involved. Although they were eminently effective in transforming local lives, the evangelists failed precisely where they most hoped to succeed, namely, in implanting an orthodox Protestant peasantry on African soil.

Here, then, was a paradox of motivation, a paradox that ran to the heart of the colonial encounter. While the mission spoke of itself and its intentions in the language of Christian conversion, its practice proclaimed something else. Motivated, silent and unseen, by the very situation of the evangelists in the European scheme of things, this narrative told of the reconstruction of a living culture by the infusion of alien signs and commodities into every domain of Tswana life. Methodologically, it commanded us to pursue the colonizing gesture beyond audible ideologies and visible institutions into the realm of such unspoken forms as bodies, buildings, magic, and merchandise. And this, in turn, took us back to our archives—to letters, lists, illustrations, and photographs—albeit now less for what they declared than for what they disclosed as maps of the mundane. It also prompted a cultural archaeology of the sites of earlier evangelical activity: for example, the windswept ruins of Tiger Kloof, a mission school built for Southern Tswana early this century, where it was possible to disinter, from the sediments of a dead community, aspects of colonial pedagogy invisible in the written accounts.

The scattered signs retrieved in this quest all pointed to wider social transformations borne *unwittingly* by the missionaries. In many respects, these actually ran counter to their own desires and motives. For the

churchmen were themselves contradictory products of a contradictory bourgeois world. Although they wished to recreate, in Africa, the British yeomanry of yore, their tools and tropes also carried the imprint of the industrial marketplace and its commodity culture. And their actions played a major role in processes of proletarianization, the likes of which they had decried back home. This is where the relationship between the two dimensions of colonial evangelism—itsself a highly specific encounter of the "local" and the "global"—took on its real complexity. At one level, it involved an odyssey, a highly purposive journey aimed at converting "savages" into pious peasants and citizens of Christendom. At another, it participated in seeding a pervasive new order that would, along with other colonizing forces, make Africans into impoverished, subordinated subjects of empire. At times, these two levels reinforced one another, at times they produced nightmarish disjunctions and discontinuities. We have argued elsewhere (n.d.[b]), in fact, that it was in the space between the liberal worldview of the mission and the racist world of settler society that modern black nationalist consciousness was to take root. In the longer run, as this suggests, the implications of evangelical imperialism were to be fixed by the wider context in which it was embedded, just as they were to be mediated by the responses of the Tswana themselves (see Part 3).

And the general methodological point? There are several. The first is that our current conceptual obsession with agency, subjectivity, and consciousness can be addressed only in *ethnographic* terms, and thereby rescued from rapid theoreticism, under a pair of conditions: that (1) we treat as problematic the manner in which persons are formed and action determined and (2) we insist that individual action is never entirely reducible to social forces, nor social forces to the sum of unique acts (above, p. 25). Second, because it is multiply motivated, social history, as we have stressed, will always be both predictable yet subject to the innovative and the unforeseen. Hence our historical ethnographies must be capable of capturing the simultaneous unity and diversity of social processes, the incessant convergence and divergence of prevailing forms of power and meaning. But they must do so without falling into the trap of typifying history in general—or histories in particular—as an expression of the radical contrast between modern (or postmodern) worlds and their "traditional" antecedents. Or between commoditized societies and natural economies.

It follows from all this, third, that our methodological concern is less with events than with meaningful practices—which, perhaps, remains one of the principle distinctions between historical anthropology and social history.³¹ Like most anthropologists, we are more preoccupied with ambiguous processes than with contained acts or isolable incidents that, in themselves, can be said to make a difference. To us, social life is continuous activity—activity that, because it is always a product of complex experience

and contradictory conditions, simultaneously reproduces *and* transforms the world. It will be evident, too, that we take meaning to be largely, if not entirely, implicit in practice; we do not see it to reside in abstract schemes or in categories that endure or change in all-or-none fashion. From this perspective, history involves a sedimentation of micropractices into macroprocesses, a prosaic rather than a portentous affair in which events mark rather than make the flow of existence (cf. Cohn 1987:45). This is not to deny the importance of extraordinary human agency. Some acts do have more consequence than others and, in certain contexts, actors can become metonyms of history or, more accurately, of heroic-history-in-the-making (Sahlins 1985:35f). But it is this metonymy, some would even say fetishism, that we have to explain. How is it that particular persons and events seem, in their own worlds, to embody and motivate processes whose origins we, from our standpoint, ascribe to more dispersed causes? Heroes are born not of gods, but of social forces. Their charisma camouflages complex conditions of possibility, just as it personifies ambiguously authored action.

In the "newer social history," says Davis (1990:28), events serve less as motors of change than to exemplify the mingling of the prescribed and the contingent³² and/or to reveal the effect of cultural form upon social processes. This approach does not so much "nullify" the event—as did an earlier structuralist history (cf. Sahlins 1990:39; also above)—as resituate it in an unfolding sequence of action. It also democratizes human agency by shifting attention from the subjectivity of big men to the force of communal projects and cultural practices. This entails a move, to cite Davis (1990:28) again, from such major episodes as wars and revolutions to processes of domination, representation, and resistance. Recall our earlier discussion: in particular, Samuel's plea for the significance of the Married Women's Property Act over the Battle of Trafalgar in shaping nineteenth-century Britain. The former has been neglected because it was the product of diffuse conflict and long-term collective action; it is not reducible, except in the most banal sense, to an event. Yet, although the impact of the Act—the changing nature of property, womanhood, and marriage—calls for a processual perspective, its history remains rich with agency, some of it even "heroic."

Much the same may be said of the revolution that occurred when the forces of European imperialism sought to insinuate themselves into the non-European world, giving rise to the double context—the global stage and the local *mise en scène*—in which all "Third World" ethnographies would later be done. Colonial history does not lack for heroes or events. But neither is it reducible to a series of fortuitous encounters or fateful actions. As pilgrims to the South African "wilderness," the Nonconformist evangelists were moved by humanitarian ideals and imperial dreams at

home, ideals and dreams especially compelling to those at the margins of the rising bourgeoisie. And their reception by the often bemused Africans was determined, in large part, by the predicament of these peoples in a fraught, rapidly transforming political arena.

The incorporation of "the" Tswana into the colonial world, as we have pointed out, was a drawn-out process involving two dynamic social systems, two historical orders, each with its own indeterminacies and internal contradictions. The players in this theater of the ordinary changed one another by means of humble acts within the terrain they came to share—although their behavior also moved, increasingly and in ways barely realized, to the beat of global imperatives. The pulse of these processes may be discerned, as we show in Chapter 9, in everyday struggles over such things as agricultural technique, language and speech, the use of land and water, and modes of healing, each small thing summoning up a hinterland of signs and practices. The plough, for instance, seemed an innocent enough instrument. In this context, however, it bore within it the whole culture of commodity production and turned out to have enormously complex social consequences. It is not that the historical encounter between the evangelists and the Africans was un-event-ful. There *were* many notable episodes: epic first meetings, dramatic demonstrations of "miraculous" technology, acrimonious public arguments. Clearly, these made a difference. But they did not make *the* difference. Nor, in themselves, did they occasion moments of great rupture, cataclysms that led to the reconstruction of otherwise unchanging social systems. They were, rather, significant icons of—and elements in—an unfolding, multileveled engagement between worlds.

Insofar as global systems and epochal movements always root themselves somewhere in the quotidian, then, they are accessible to historical ethnography. In Africa, as elsewhere, the colonial "state" was both a political structure *and* a condition of being; hence the former (its institutional order of governance) might be interrogated through the latter (the routines and habits oriented toward it). Similarly, the body politic and the body personal are everywhere intimately related—so much so that their connection has become almost a truism. Yet, we would suggest, the human body—or, more precisely, its analytic use and abuse—provides a nice commentary on the interpretive methodology of which we speak.

While the body has long been an important construct in Western social thought (Durkheim 1947:115–116; Mauss 1973), it has recently gained extraordinary prominence in the discourse of the human sciences. Perhaps because critical postmodernism has challenged fixed notions of power and meaning, it has assumed a unique concreteness; it is, to be sure, something on which we can always lay hands. For that reason, it has been treated as one of the only permanent points in a shifting world, especially by Foucault

and his followers. The human body, in short, has been fetishized. And, like all fetishes, it is given credit for animating social life, yet it is strangely elusive—notably so in recent writing on the topic. Often no more than an alibi, a site, for equally elusive constructs like the “person,” “the subject,” and “social experience,” it is named only to be dismissed; thus we perpetuate what Corrigan (1988:371) terms the “Great Erasure of the Body,” long characteristic of Western scholarly discourse. (How different this is from the frank sensuality with which some creative writers, from D. H. Lawrence to Toni Morrison, have expressed their opposition to established conventions!) A notable instance of this absent presence occurs in Bryan Turner’s *The Body and Society* (1984), which uses corporality as the ostensible focus for “explorations in social theory.” In his journey through issues of selfhood, sexuality, and social order, Turner seldom confronts physicality at all (see T. Turner 1986). Displaced by the text, by a concern with representation severed from material being, the body actually loses all social relevance.

None of this is new. Admittedly, in the great dialectic of the “social” and the “natural,” a classical concern of social theory, the body has long been seen as quintessential raw material for collective representation (see Chapter 3; Durkheim 1947:115f). Still, in striving to demonstrate the sui generis quality of society and culture, scholars have repeatedly treated the human physique as a tabula rasa, plastic material to be formed by arbitrary semantic categories (cf. van Gennep 1960; Douglas 1970; Bourdieu 1977). Poststructuralist and deconstructionist writers have perpetuated this form of idealism. Outside of discourse or the splintering subject or the floating sign there is, for them, no enduring object world. Rejecting all traffic with reality as brute “positivism”—as a matter of physical properties imposing themselves on passive subjects (T. Turner 1990:10)—they are unreceptive to the idea that material facts have any role at all in human experience.

Yet there is undeniable evidence that biological contingencies constrain human perception and social practice, albeit in ways mediated by cultural forms (see Sahlins 1976b; Chapter 3). And this is the point: Precisely because history is a synthesis of the heterogeneous, we cannot ignore the role in it of such culturally mediated materialities. These, in turn, find their prime instance in the body, the physical object that also becomes a social subject (T. Turner 1990:1). It is here, where physical facts meet social values, that collective modes of being emerge as dispositions or motives. That is why movements of social reform, whatever they do at the level of collective institutions, tend also to work on the body as *fons et origo* of the world (below, Chapter 3). Hegemony, at least in the cultural sense we give it, has its natural habitat in the human frame. As a result, that frame can never be a struggle-free zone, least of all when major historical shifts are under way.

We might anticipate, then, that those who seek to forge empires, or to remake existing worlds, will try to impress themselves upon the physiques of their would-be subjects. States old and new have built their esprit de corps by shaving, clothing, vaccinating, and counting their citizens, just as rising classes, ethnic groups, religious movements, and political associations tend to wear their self-awareness on their skin. For their part, conquerors and colonizers seem typically to feel a need to reverse prior corporeal signs, often making bodies into realms of contest. The ancient English subdued recalcitrant Scottish highlanders by cutting their hair and banning their kilts (Brain 1979:150); their descendants in Africa would attempt to force Tswana converts into the dress of Christian decency.

Such tangible processes are eminently susceptible to the kind of ethnographic scrutiny that may divulge the hidden hand of history. Take our colonial evangelists once again: While they talked of spiritual verities that disparaged the flesh and condemned Africans for their “carnal” ways, their actions displayed an intense interest in corporeal politics. The black body was seldom far from their thoughts or deeds, disrupting their rhetoric when least expected. As our encounter with Foucault, Derrida, and Ginzburg would lead us to expect, these disruptions yield vital clues. A close reading of the churchmen’s diaries and records proves that body work—the effort to retune the physical registers of dark persons through grooming, dress, and comportment—was a crucial mode of colonial production. This was one of the basic methods implicit in the mission, an unremarked means by which the Christians hoped to create a new moral empire. By deciphering the small print of letters, requisitions, and reports from the field, as well as the inventories of local merchants, we were able to trace the paths of diverse goods and practices converging on the African anatomy. Again, this is an instance of a universal process (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:19f): No technique was too trivial, no mannerism too meaningless to be drawn up into the sweep of history-in-the-making.

In their campaign to domesticate the black body, moreover, the colonizers intervened in “native” cooking, hygiene, sexuality, and work. Wherever they could, they set about breaking the “communitistic” interdependence of African persons and productive processes, thereby to create a world of “free” individuals; free, that is, to consume and be consumed by European commodities. We discern this process most clearly in the expanding stock of objects (pots, fabrics, soap, tools, clocks, locks, and so on) that the whites saw as essential implements of modernity and progress. These objects moved along the prosaic pathways that bore the traffic of global capitalism and its culture to Southern Africa—and carried their recipients toward material dependency. Abroad, as at home (see Chapter 10), civilizing goods ushered in new orders of relations—relations both symbolic and substantial—that bound local consumers to an expanding

world order. Such were the fragments of which novel totalities were being constructed. The mundane practices to which they gave rise speak coherently to us from the ethnographic record. Together they weave compelling narratives of a world historical movement and its many local variants, each different in critical respects.

Such symbolic processes, we stress, are not limited to colonizing moments. The making of what we term modernity in Europe can be read as much in the evolution of table manners, sanitation, or the passport photograph (Elias 1978; Jephson 1907; Fussell 1980) as in the development of formal state institutions. Body work also had its parallels in the realm of architecture and domestic space: Rybczynski (1986), for example, finds a hidden history of the bourgeoisie in the rise of the modern European sense of "home." And the relentless social engineering of twentieth-century totalitarian states, whether they be in Eastern Europe or Southern Africa, is nowhere more clearly revealed than in their oppressively uniform public housing.

We ourselves draw on these insights in Chapter 10. There we explore the remarkable similarity between, on the one hand, efforts of colonizers to reshape the habits and habitations of nineteenth-century Africans and, on the other, the apparently unrelated attempt back home to "improve" the domestic lives of the urban underclass. Evangelists in Britain and Bechuanaland expressed the same conviction: that "uncouth" populations could be tamed through the orderly deployment of windows and walls, soap and sanitation, locks and lamps. How are we to interpret this coincidence? Was it a co-incidence? The answer, once more, lay in drawing fragments together and situating them within a wider historical field, thus to make sense of the embracing totality of which they were part. By tracing out the imaginative linkages among disparate texts and tropes, we were able to see that these seemingly independent instances of domestic reform were complementary sides of one process; indeed, that colonialism was as much a movement of re-formation *within* British society as it was a global gesture; that each site, the sickening England slum and the bestial African bush, became a model of and for the "other"; that this whole process was the political expression of a universalizing hegemony, a push to rebuild "savage life" on both continents to the specifications of bourgeois enlightenment.

In both contexts the process would succeed, above all else, in standardizing an aesthetics of class distinction; an architecture of othering for the metropole as well as the colony. Such discourse—and the philanthropic practice it empowered—stressed the morality of properly inhabited space: In a world driven by property and propriety, the home was heavily invested with elemental values, framing middle-class images of personhood, production, sexuality, and gender. Bodies, houses, and everyday routines bore

the capillaries of a full-blooded imperialism, capillaries that ran from the palace gates to the "mud huts" on the colonial frontier. In the late nineteenth century, evangelical effort was increasingly superseded by the work of civic-minded professionals (like the engineers and doctors of the Domestic Sanitation Movement; Adams 1991) and by the rise of state schooling. Ultimately, any anthropology of the bourgeois revolution will have to explore how homemade hegemonies played into such national (and nationalist) projects. But that is a topic for another place (Comaroff and Comaroff n.d.[a]: Chaps. 4, 5).

More immediately, as we have remarked, the effort to colonize bodies and buildings did not go unchallenged. In South Africa, indigenous rulers at first resisted the Nonconformists' gentle persuasion. They seemed alive to the fact that the white men's designs on their people were anything but trivial. Later, many Tswana would rework those designs into provocative patterns, giving free reign to an independent, often subversive imagination. In London likewise, Cockney costermongers, poor street traders, ignored middle-class moralism and fashioned flamboyant life-styles of their own (Mayhew 1851,1). We should learn from them. For costers, chiefs, and churchmen alike appear to have sensed that it is things like clothing that make subjects—again, in both senses of the term. The Tswana "style wars," in which local leaders tried to fight off Western dress and architecture, were as much the site of colonial politics as were formal confrontations with government personnel or settler statesmen. In the fantastic fashions that flourished on the frontier we catch a glimpse of the consciousness of ordinary Africans, those who left little other imprint on the historical record. Here, along the line that divided the increasingly marked domains, the ideological spaces, of "tradition" and "modernity" they made new identities by retooling old values, redeploying the very signs that the colonizers imprinted on the supple surfaces of their lives.

Reading these poetic practices is by no means straightforward. Because bodies and domestic space were vital terrains of colonization, the struggles that occurred around them exhibited all the complexities of the colonial process itself—all the multiple motivations, the indeterminacies, and internal contradictions of complex historical conjunctures everywhere. Great social movements seem always to achieve both more and less than intended. For, even as would-be subject populations take issue with the manifest messages and overtures that intrude upon them, they often internalize alien cultural *forms* along the way—without either knowing or meaning to do so. That, as we show in Chapter 9, is why new hegemonies may take root amidst ideological argument, why people may be deeply affected by the media that bear the messages they reject, why such processes are never reducible to a simple calculus of accommodation or resistance. Thus even those Tswana who most strenuously refused the dress of baptism, prefer-

ring to pick and choose what they fancied from the mission, were profoundly changed by the world of commodities admitted with these innocent objects.

By the end of the nineteenth century, black identities in South Africa were being shaped less by either indigenous or mission intentions than by the gathering forces of the colonial state. Whatever were their local meanings, bodies, dress, and "life-style" were made over into signs of gross difference; into the distinctions of race, gender, and culture by which Africans were being incorporated into the lowest reaches of a rising industrial society. There is a general point here, and a concluding one. Far from being primordial, "ethnicity," "tribalism," and other forms of identity reside in tangible practices—as, of course, does "modernity." They are the social and ideological products of particular processes, of the very conjunctures that set the terms of, and relations between, "local" and "global" worlds. Such phenomena, we have argued, are not to be treated as received categories or analytic objects conjured up as universals from our own folk sociology. They are both polymorphous and perverse. Our task is to establish *how* collective identities are constructed and take on their particular cultural content; *how* they are made real, essential, embodied qualities for those who live them; *how* they become the natural atoms of social existence. Only then will the diverse forms of the modern world—indeed, the very terms of modernity itself—become the subjects of an ethnography of the historical imagination.

V

And so we conclude our voyage into method. The journey began with the Naparama—or, at least, their representation in the Western mass media. It was they who confronted us with the paradoxes and ironies that propel this essay: that, for all our obsession with the effect of anthropology on the "other," the discipline has had very limited impact on our own culture; that, for all the efforts of generations of ethnographers, the radical opposition between prehistorical "tradition" and capitalist "modernity" survives in the discourses of our age, popular and professional alike. Indeed, in directing much of our attention to peoples on the other side of the great rift, do we not still foster a lurking primitivism? And, with it, all the myths of our own disenchantment? The Naparama, in short, are a powerful metonym of our scholarly predicament, a mirror in which we see ourselves divided. They reveal our tendency, as a caustic critic once put it, to see people as everywhere the same except where they are different—and as everywhere different except where they are the same. In sum, the "mystic

warriors" of Mozambique compel us to consider our wanton ambivalences, and so to reflect upon the way in which we ourselves reflect on others.

Such reflections persuade us that the conundrum of similarity and difference is only to be resolved by turning anthropology on itself, by treating modernity (and postmodernity) as a problem in historical ethnography. For the malignancy of primitivism—and its most notable symptom, exoticism—should disappear when we estrange our own culture, treating its signs and practices as we would theirs. This is not a call for rewriting all anthropology as "We the Nacirema" (Miner 1956) or for making all the world into an imaginary village. The purpose of estrangement, rather, is to remind ourselves that the West and the rest, long locked in historical embrace, cannot but be interrogated together. This, then, is our challenge. It is to explain the great conjunctures, the processes and practices through which have been fashioned the significant social phenomena of our times, both global and local.

These are issues of broad concern within the discipline at present; historical anthropology, patently, is more than a Chicago-cult. In order to address them we have appealed to a neomodernist method that takes seriously the message of critical postmodernism yet does not lose the possibility of social science; that takes to heart the lessons of cultural Marxism, seeking a conception of culture that recognizes the reality of power, yet does not reduce meaning to either utility or domination; that builds on the techniques of cultural history, pursuing the dialectic of fragment and totality without succumbing to brute empiricism; that, above all, proceeds, as it must, by grappling with the contradictions of its own legacy, seeking to transcend them—if only provisionally and for the moment.

Notes

1. *Chicago Tribune*, Sunday, 9 December 1990, Section 1, p. 1.
2. There is widespread evidence that this ideological opposition has continuing salience in our culture. Take just one example, a token of a very common type: In a review of the successful, well-intentioned film *Dances With Wolves* (1990; director, Kevin Costner), Dorris (1991:17) notes that, even today, "Indians embody the concept of 'the other'—a foreign, exotic, even cartoonish panorama against which modern (that is, white) men can measure and test themselves, and eventually . . . be dubbed as natural leaders."
3. Note, however, that the move has not been without criticism, even in apparently receptive fields; see, for example, Johnson (1983). We return to this issue later.
4. There are exceptions to this, especially in modern American anthropology. But they are restricted to such relatively marginal areas as mathematical anthropology, cultural ecology, and highly specialized forms of network analysis and economic anthropology.

5. Once more, the exceptions prove the general rule here. Although approaches like ethnoscience and mathematical and cognitive anthropology have called for new methods and theories, they have made little lasting impact on the practices of the discipline as a whole.
6. For an insightful exploration of the tropes that ethnographic writing shares with the earlier genre of travel writing, see Pratt (1986).
7. The evidence for this is everywhere at hand, from Evans-Pritchard's curt reminder that his facts were selected in light of his theories (1940:261), through Leach's (1954:5f) insistence that ethnographic accounts of social systems, like native models, are merely "as if" constructions of the world, to Geertz's (1973:29) allegorical suggestion that cultural analysis is a matter of "turtles all the way down."
8. Marcus (1986:190-191) adds that "experimental" ethnographers "perhaps do not even recognize the priority or privileged validity of such abstractly represented realities [as statistics]." Yet, in sustaining the opposition between "evocation" and "representation," he himself perpetuates a straw man: a "realist ethnography," whose "holistic commitments" defy the "open-ended mystery" of experience, and ostensibly the possibility of "alternative explanation."
9. Nonanthropologists might wish to know that Raymond Firth was a senior professor of social anthropology at the London School of Economics, then about to retire. A very distinguished scholar, he did much of his ethnographic research on the island of Tikopia in Polynesia.
10. For an especially clear example, see Marcus (1986:191).
11. See, for example, J. L. Comaroff (1982:143f), from which the quote is drawn.
12. The phrase is from Ginzburg's (1980:xx-xxi) brief but acid comment on those historians who, like François Furet, have found panaceas for large-scale problems in demographic sociology.
13. Darnton (1985:3) points out that there is no standard English translation of *l'histoire des mentalités*, until recently a predominantly French historiographical movement (see, e.g., Vovelle 1990). Darnton himself suggests that "it might simply be called cultural history." It is difficult not to agree; as Ginzburg (1980: xiv-xv, xxii-xxiv) indicates, the final object of a history of mentalities is an account of a particular ("popular") culture.
14. Hartley's original phrasing, in the first sentence of the prologue to *The Go-Between* (1956), was "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."
15. There is an irony lurking here. As Derrida (1978:35) notes, Foucault (1967) himself speaks much of silence in his *History*, especially when he situates madness within the trap of Western reason (not to mention the repressive language of psychiatry). Indeed, concludes Derrida, "[Foucault's] history of madness itself is . . . the archeology of a silence."
16. The comment is made in the specific context of his discussion of Febvre's treatment of Rabelais.
17. Croce ([1921] 1959:51) contrasts chronicle with history, treating them as different "spiritual attitudes. History is living chronicle, chronicle is dead history; . . . history is principally an act of thought, chronicle an act of will." It is this last phrase—the image of an act of will—that we seek to emphasize here.
18. We pass glancingly over this terrain in Chapter 4.
19. Some might say that there was also a fourth, exemplified by Cunnison (1959; cf. also Barnes 1951), which explored "what [people] made of their history" in the course of their social lives. However, such studies tended to limit themselves to the role of ethnic historical consciousness in repetitive social processes; most were produced within the "custom and conflict" approach of the Manchester School. As a result, their methodological bases were no different from those we will discuss. In this respect, too, we do not dignify as history an old practice of British structural functionalism: the appending of residual chapters on "social

- change" to otherwise synchronic ethnographies. These, typically, were no more than narrative dumping grounds for everything that escaped the deadening vision of the descriptive present.
20. A few years later Smith (1960) published the more ambitious, more theoretically sophisticated *Government in Zazzau*, which covered a span of 150 years. In contrast to Barnes (1954), his object was less to disclose the logic of stasis than to arrive at the causes of change. In historiographic terms, however, Smith's procedure remained aggregative in spirit. Events and relations were distilled into a generalized account of a political system that persisted, as if in equilibrium, until ruptured (by one of the forces specified in a set of abstract "laws"; Smith 1960:Chap. 8).
21. Our irony will be clear to those familiar with the distinctly ahistorical debates during the 1950s and 1960s over prescriptive marriage systems and, more generally, over alliance theory. For a sample of the issues involved, in the words of the protagonists, see Needham (1962), Leach (1951), Homans and Schneider (1955), and Levi-Strauss (1969, especially the preface to the second edition).
22. The notion that Tswana inheritance and succession are governed by the ascriptive principle of primogeniture goes back to missionary ethnographies, although it is often attributed to the classic writings of Schapera (e.g., 1938). Social scientists have reiterated it, usually without question, ever since. The most recent to do so are Crowder, Parson, and Parsons (1990:12f), who take issue with our early work on the topic. This is not the place to rebut their argument—which is based partly on a misrepresentation of our analysis and partly on a curiously ethnocentric, culturally barren interpretation of the historical record (see also J. L. Comaroff 1990:561, n.14 for brief comment). Indeed, theirs is the kind of account that makes it clear why history needs anthropology every bit as much as anthropology needs history.
23. The same general point has been made in a number of discourses on the human sciences—most memorably, perhaps, in McCloskey's (1985) study of the rhetoric of economics.
24. It should be clear that we do not use the term "statistical" here in its narrow, purely numerical sense. We mean it to refer, generically, to any inference of prevailing pattern or probability derived from past rates of occurrence.
25. Leach does not phrase the implications of his analysis in the terms that follow. However, they flow from his comments on the nature of social change and history (see, e.g., 1954:212, 228ff).
26. This has not been for want of trying, of course. Sahlins (1985), for one, has argued cogently for a structuralist historical anthropology. But his exertions have not gone unchallenged.
27. See, most notably, Sahlins (1990). However, it is not only cultural structuralism that continues to struggle with the individual and the event. Structural Marxism has had similar problems. Recall, for example, the debates surrounding Althusser's portrayal of history as "a process without a subject" or, in anthropology, Hindess and Hirst's (1975:45f, 78) claim that Meillassoux's (1964; 1972) accounts of Gnro political economy owe less to Marx than to methodological individualism.
28. This passage on biography and the diary is excerpted, in amended form, from J. L. Comaroff (1990).
29. Recent writings suggest that such conventions might be shifting at last; for some diverse examples, see Martin (1987); Lave (1988); McCracken (1988); Spitulnik (1991). This has been a result, in part, of the influence of cultural studies, a relatively new discipline that has challenged us by applying some of our own concepts and methods to Western phenomena (see, e.g., Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts 1976; Willis 1977; Hebdige 1979, 1988). But it has also been helped along by a more general erosion of the boundaries between the human sciences.

30. These models, many of them originating in linguistics, come from a variety of sources, ranging from orthodox structuralism to Jakobsonian pragmatics and Bakhtinian dialogics. Whereas the first implied a static conception of culture—a conception now heavily under attack—both the second and third inform current concerns with the practical, political, ambiguous, and transformative qualities of meaning.

31. See Comaroff and Comaroff (1991:34f). This difference is often not acknowledged by social historians, who sometimes fault historical anthropologists for not writing “real” histories; that is, detailed chronicles of events (see, e.g., Shillington 1987).

32. This is what Sahlins (1990:47), after Ricœur, terms a “synthesis of the heterogeneous.”

2

Of Totemism and Ethnicity

THERE IS A SOCRATIC PARABLE, well-known in some quarters, about a teacher who gives his students two magnifying glasses and invites them to look at the one through the other. When each has told of all he has learned, the sage delivers his lesson in the form of a question, a *coup de grace*:

“Of what have you told me,” he asks, “the thing you have seen or the thing through which you have seen it?”

The same conundrum lurks, usually unremarked, behind the study of ethnicity. Is the latter an object of analysis, something to be explained? Or is it an explanatory principle capable of illuminating significant aspects of human existence? Does it really refer to “idols of the tribe” (Isaacs 1975), or is it in fact an idol of the scribe (Mafeje 1971)? It certainly has been treated in both ways, sometimes simultaneously. As a result, there is still a notable lack of agreement on even the most fundamental of issues: What is ethnicity? Is it a monothetic or a polythetic class of phenomena, one thing or many? Has it the capacity to determine social activity, or is it a product of other forces and structures? Do its roots lie in so-called primordial consciousness or in a reaction to particular historical circumstance? And how is it related to race, class, and nationalism? In addressing these questions, we shall use a wide-angle lens rather than a magnifying glass, and shall focus it, somewhat eclectically, on various African contexts. In so doing, moreover, we seek deliberately to turn the sage’s moral on its head. For we are concerned to examine, at once, *both* an analytic object and its conceptual subject: on one hand, those processes involving the rise of ethnic consciousness in Africa and elsewhere, and, on the other, the theoretical terms by means of which ethnicity may itself be comprehended.

Contrary to the usual canons of scholarly enquiry, we proceed not by situating our discussion within the relevant literature, but by stating five propositions about the nature of ethnicity. These propositions, though, are