7 Anthropological Methodology in the European Context

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Bernard S. Cohn, in a seriocomic look at the relationship between what he termed 'anthropologyland' and 'historyland', raises many profound questions that are particularly germane to the anthropological enterprise conducted within the European peasant village context. Cohn (as have others) notes that anthropology emerged as a function of European colonial expansion, particularly during the early twentieth century and the subsequent spread of American political hegemony in the aftermath of the Second World War (Cohn 1980: 202–5).

Clearly, for the first half of this century, the discipline was pervaded with a sense of urgency and mission. Most of the world's primitive and tribal peoples were, to a greater or lesser degree, endangered species. No corner of the globe was immune from the juggernaut of modern influences and there seemed to be no antidote capable of insulating the 'victims' from the pernicious side-effects. If unique cultures were not to pass into oblivion unrecorded it was essential that they be studied immediately. Although colonial administrations could see the value of understanding local cultures in order to govern them better, and during the Second World War the national defence effort placed a premium upon understanding the cultural values of one's adversary, generally speaking, anthropological research received a low priority within governmental and academic circles. Consequently, the anthropological fraternity remained few in numbers, concentrated at selected universities, partly compromised by the need to conduct contract research, and frustrated by the enormity of the task of documenting the world's rapidly disappearing cultural diversity.

Under such conditions it was necessary to budget one's energies with extreme caution and parsimony. Given the enormous

lacunae in the world ethnographic record it was tantamount to a professional responsibility for the anthropologist to target an hitherto unstudied people who, ideally, were representative of an unexamined complex of related cultures. Hence it was felt to be more desirable, even imperative, to illuminate (if but faintly) the darkness shrouding the unknown with a single study than it was to cluster two or more studies within a single micro-region in order to effect tightly-controlled comparison and thereby spotlight sub-regional complexities and subtle variations on a common cultural theme. Implicit was the notion that the more 'exotic' (i.e. further removed from the investigator's Western background) the subject the better, since the main purpose of the anthropological exercise *in toto* was to determine the range and the outer parameters of human cultural diversity. Given the foregoing realities it is scarcely surprising that anthropologists have only come of late to the study of European rural societies.

By the 1960s anthropology as an academic industry was booming, particularly, but not exclusively, in the United States. During that decade, as the postwar generation rejected materialism, militarism, and their attendant technological evils, the emphasis within higher education shifted from the natural sciences, engineering and business to the social sciences and humanities. Anthropology, which by definition purported to study the human condition in all of its manifestations, appeared to effect the perfect marriage between a growing social awareness and thirst for humanism. It seemed as though every college required at least a token anthropologist and every university worthy of the name had to establish an undergraduate department. Demand for anthropologists far outstripped the supply and graduate departments expanded at a dizzying pace as university administrations and funding agencies provided the financial support for an enterprise that was deemed to be not only necessary but downright fashionable.

It is perhaps ironic that, just as anthropology seemed to have triumphed to a degree that would have made it possible for its practitioners to complete the world ethnographic record, other factors prevented their doing so. The discipline's colonialist legacy made it suspect in emerging, independent Third World countries. Officials of many new nations were leery of the kind of probing and prying that is germane to anthropological participant observation. National pride demanded forward-looking imagery in which the symbols were the national airline and major projects designed to modernise the economy and society. The anthropologists' concern with the more traditional and 'backward' segments of the new nation could, at the very least, lead to embarrassing stereotypes in the grand arena of international public relations. It also held the danger of creating domestic and international opposition to development plans that adversely affected one or more of the new nation's endangered cultural groups. Consequently, over the past two decades there has been notable closure of broad areas of the non-western world to Western anthropologists.

Denied access to much of its former field of operation, not surprisingly, the discipline turned inward and began to target as subjects cultural sub-groups within the Western experience. In the case of America this meant the study of Native Americans on the one hand and the nation's ethnic diversity as created by its unprecedented immigrant heritage on the other. Of course, the American Indians had been studied extensively by anthropologists during the earlier formative years of the discipline, but now the emphasis shifted notably. Rather than studying Indian groups as an exercise in salvage ethnography, they were to be treated as ethnics. In the era of the civil rights movement, American Indians, along with Blacks, Hispanics, Asians and even many European immigrant groups, were classified as minorities and studied from the standpoint of social discrimination and economic deprivation.

The new enterprise was beset by several methodological and conceptual problems. The target groups were embedded within the quintessential example of the modern nation and the degree to which any existed as a bounded social enclave was problematic. The Indian reservation or urban ethnic ghetto might approximate some of the definitional requisites for holistically-orientated participant observation, but neither qualified as fully as did the African village or Pacific Island societies upon which the method was first developed. Indeed, there is a sense in which in the new context participant observation was more tantamount to 'hanging around' with a few members of the ethnic group and attending a few ethnic functions while employing such devices as survey research and network analysis.

Nor has access to all groups been easy or automatic. The budding interest of anthropologists in American minority groups coincided with the 'roots' phenomenon wherein the emphasis was upon a renewal of ethnic awareness. In a manner reminiscent of the concern for imagery characteristic of the leaders of new nations, the ethnic elites engaged in impression management. To the extent that a history of social discrimination and economic deprivation could translate into political claims the group's minority status was invoked, but the main thrust of the exercise was to celebrate the group's historical cultural distinctiveness and transfer it into a rallying-point of ethnic pride for its membership in the contemporary world. In short, the emphasis was more upon selective myth-making than objective historical research or portrayal of social reality. The anthropologist's concern with the latter was potentially both inconvenient and threatening. Indeed, the very presence of the anthropologist, traditionally identified with the study of primitive and 'backward' cultures, could itself be demeaning. It has therefore become increasingly difficult for anthropologists to gain access to many American ethnic groups.

The foregoing, of course, oversimplifies the considerably more complex twentieth-century history of anthropological field research. Even so it may appear to be an excessively lengthy and digressive introduction to the subject at hand, i.e. the role of anthropological participant observation in the study of European rural society. However, I would argue that it provides the necessary backdrop against which to review the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology when applied in the European context. For there is a sense in which the European peasant village, unlike the American ethnic group, manifests many of the conditions (for instance, small scale and relative boundedness) that have facilitated the holistic approach to the traditional village study in Third World contexts. It is at one and the same time the repository of traditional values, a somewhat bounded social unit and is inhabited by a sector of the national population that constitutes if not an oppressed minority then at least an ignored one. Therefore, it is in the European peasant context that anthropologists could seemingly employ participant observation in order to conduct (a) salvage ethnography by selecting the most remote villages as objects of study

and attempting to hold twentieth-century influences constant or (b) studies of social change by viewing the 'traditional' culture as a baseline against which to measure twentieth-century developments.

Thus, if in the United States after the Second World War Native Americans and immigrant ethnic minorities increasingly became the surrogate subjects of the anthropological enterprise, in Europe it was the peasant sector of the various nation-states that came under social anthropological scrutiny.

There are, however, certain dangers inherent in viewing the European peasant village as analogous to its African or Pacific Island counterpart. Cohn notes that participant observation was but one element of a triangulated methodology which also entailed a comparative framework derived from a reading of the ethnographic record as well as inferential comparison whereby the investigator discerned cultural difference by contrasting the subject society with his own (p. 217). In attempting to apply this methodology in the European context, several difficulties become apparent.

First, there is the issue of *boundedness*. Clearly, the degree of social isolation of even the remotest European peasant villages is relative compared with that of village communities in much of the Third World (even when dealing with Third World peasant rather than primitive societies). This is true despite attempts to treat the peasant sectors of European societies as the products and victims of internal colonialisation within nation-states (Hechter 1975) or as marginated backwaters within the emerging modern world system (Wallerstein 1974). The reality is that European peasant societies have never been truly insulated from the forces that shaped Western culture, and the peasant sector provided much of the manpower for Europe's overseas colonial enterprise, the urbanisation and industrialisation of the European continent and the massive transatlantic transfer of population through international migration. It is illusory to view the European peasant village as a hidebound repository from which population and resources were subtracted in a unidirectional fashion without substantially modifying the 'traditional' society and culture. Rather, for at least five centuries there has been a complex dialectic between the sending peasant villages and the remainder of their respective

nations on the one hand and overseas destinations on the other. Therefore, no European village has been effectively insulated from a complex feedback of people, money and ideas.

Second, a *comparative framework* for the analysis of European rural society derived exclusively from a reading of the ethnographic record is informative only up to a point, and can even become downright obfuscating and counter-productive. Most monographs in the ethnographic record are ahistorical to an extreme and rely, if not exclusively then mainly, upon the author's own observations and interviewing. In most Third World contexts studied by anthropologists the investigator's account may be the first systematic description of life in a particular community or even region. In the case of Europe, however, anthropologists are latecomers to the scene and therefore are not operating within an intellectual void. Here the anthropologist is faced with a rich tradition of folkloric, ethnographic and local historical studies. Rather than constructing an historical baseline by interviewing a few village elders, he must accommodate the fact that there is likely to be documentation in local, regional and national archives that embrace several centuries of the history of his target community.

Finally, there is a sense in which the western anthropologist studying the European peasant village is engaged in *self-study* – that is, in the analysis of his own roots – for European rural society is both a crucible and reflection of Western traditions. Some might regard the consequences of this fact as too subtle to be consequential. I would argue, however, that when ignored, this is potentially the biggest pitfall for the participant observer in the European context. Conducting field research in a truly exotic setting is a little like reverting to one's infancy while retaining adult faculties. The investigator, like the child, must learn the language as well as all the other cultural 'grammars' operative within the society. There is a dialectic established within the investigator between sorting out unfamiliar semantic domains in the language-learning process and discerning broader cultural patterns and themes. The barometer of progress is the participant observer's increasing capacity to get through a day without surprises and puzzlement. Frustration decreases as comprehension grows and the anthropologist becomes more of a participant and less of an observer. When

he leaves the field and begins to analyse his data he must seek to establish a dialectic between the overall understanding of the society and culture that he has acquired and the particular paradoxes encountered as punctuated by the thorny interrogatives sprinkled throughout his field notes. In order to communicate the study group's cultural distinctiveness, the investigator must recapture the sense of confusion and subsequent discovery experienced at critical junctures in the field research. This process of formulating penetrating questions by probing a world-view remote from one's own is the essence of participant observation.

Now, in the case of Europe, the anthropologist is more likely than not to arrive in the field conversant in the relevant language (save its local dialectical variation) and will be surrounded by a variety of influences that are so familiar as to be almost commonplace. Like his study population he is a consumer of the available media (television, radio, magazines, newspapers, cinema). He is even likely to find 'soul-mates', i.e. students, professionals, priests, local history buffs, and others with whom he can play chess or discuss literature. In short, the Western investigator immersed in a European peasant setting will enjoy a large measure of initial personal comfort and sense of orientation. Rather than reverting to an infantile state as part of the study process he may instead only revisit adolescence. In this respect there is a danger of missing the sense of wonderment and discovery characteristic of childhood. The problem is, of course, exacerbated when the investigator targets his own culture or even his natal community. Conversely, it would be fascinating to have the results of studies conducted in rural European contexts by non-western investigators. Would they tell us marvellous new things about ourselves? When they discerned 'deep structures' would they cause us to nod in admiring agreement or raise our eyebrows in disbelief?

In short, the anthropological study of Europe must be both retrospective and introspective if it is not to become trivial. At the same time it must accommodate other realities such as the self-aware sophistication of the informants themselves (many of whom potentially have had some exposure to published local prehistory, history, ethnography and even social theory) and the existence of well-developed literatures in sister disciplines

(e.g. European ethnography, folklore, rural sociology and history) which have targeted the anthropologist's own or related subject matter.

The question remains, however, of the appropriateness of the community study approach in Europe employing the traditional anthropological method of participant observation. One anthropologist, Thomas Crump, views this as the crucial issue of significance. An Italianist, he notes,

> Now when it comes to Italy too many scholars appear to assume that the canons of *anthropological science* are satisfied by forcing the Italian population through a sort of sieve to leave only a residue of relatively isolated, partly illiterate, technically retarded, rural communities, sometimes with a non-Italian local dialect (Crump 1975: 20).

Crump concludes that this little-community approach 'is in a sort of no-man's land between anthropology on one side, and Italian studies on the other. It is marginal in the *history* of either discipline' (p. 18). Eschewing the little-community focus as a ploy that oversimplifies cultural reality by reducing it to manageable terms, Crump calls for macro-level studies that reflect more faithfully the historical and contemporary problems of European society (pp. 18–19). Jeremy Boissevain seemingly concurs when he states with respect to Europe,

> Nor is the traditional anthropological research technique of participant observer alone any longer sufficient. New concepts and research methods are called for, yet these are only partly being provided. The high degree of centralisation, the interrelation between various levels of integration, the impact of multiple long-term processes, the sweep of change that can be documented across centuries still overwhelm many anthropologists. Consequently many have sought refuge in villages, which they proceed to treat as isolated entities. They have tribalised Europe (Boissevain, 1975: 11).

To my mind such calls for a broadening of anthropological perspective, while seemingly a clarion for open-mindedness, contain their own narrowness of vision. Is it really necessary to frame the problem in either/or terms? That is, can we not sustain both micro-level and macro-level approaches to the social anthropological study of Europe without the necessity of

elevating either to the status of *the* anthropology of the continent? Wouldn't the results of each inform and complement the other? Framed in this fashion the crucial question is no longer whether the little-community approach is relevant but rather whether it is being done well. Crump, after concluding that macro-level studies should supplant the community focus in Italian social anthropology, goes on to note the requisite skills of the practitioner of the approach:

> He must have not only a considerable command over the methods and techniques of his own discipline, but also be expert in history, literature, human geography and economy of Italy – and this means searching through a wealth of material, largely in Italian, and often only accessible in Italy itself (p. 24).

I would concur completely with this statement, but would also insist that it is equally applicable to the conduct of a good community study in the Italian context. In this respect participant observation may be regarded as only one of the methodological ploys that the anthropologist must bring to bear in the social anthropological study of Europe, It stands to reason that if it is combined with the other approaches suggested or demanded by the nature of the European data, the end-product should actually be superior to that obtainable in little-community studies in Third World settings.

It is therefore difficult to conclude that participant observation is an intrinsically flawed methodology when applied judiciously in the European context. Indeed, it provides a unique opportunity to establish a dialectic between the present and the past. The historian can juxtapose events, personages, etc. and infer meaning and relationships. He cannot, of course, ever experience them directly. Given this fact, historical sources are of a recalcitrant nature (Plakans 1984: 243–8). Conversely, the participant observer is immersed in the contemporary situation and is therefore well-situated to elicit cultural meanings and perceive social behaviour. However, lacking a historical perspective, he cannot place them in a wider temporal context. Without the latter it is impossible to determine whether the particular behaviour he is observing is an *ad hoc* (albeit culturally conditioned) response to recent developments or a longstanding pattern within the society and culture. In the

absence of an ability to measure continuity and discontinuity it is all but impossible to measure change. As Cohn notes, 'The reason an anthropologist studies history is that it is only in retrospect, after observing the structure and its transformation, that it is possible to know the nature of the structure' (p. 219).

Might we then predict an ultimate convergence of anthropology and history into a single discipline? I doubt it. Despite the cross-fertilisation in recent years in the work of *Annales* historians and some social anthropologists (as well as new archaeologists and historical demographers) it seems unlikely that the fields are headed for unification in an absolute sense. Rather than becoming subsumed into a kind of social science history we are likely to feel the need to distinguish between *historical anthropology* (i.e. archival research conducted with historical methodology informed by theoretical considerations derived from reading social anthropology) and *anthropological history* (i.e. social anthropological participant observation field-research and survey techniques informed by supplementary archival investigation and a reading of relevant published secondary sources). Consequently, while both will seek to establish a dialectic between past and present social realities the questions asked and the answers elicited are likely to differ as clearly distinguishable variations on a common theme.