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INTRODUCTION

MISSIONS AT THE CROSSROADS

It has by now become a cliché to lament, or to celebrate, the current state of the art in the social sciences as one where all that once was solid has melted into the air. After the so-called reflexive and historic turns in the social sciences, particularly since the paradigm shifts of the mid-1980s and 1990s (sometimes referred to as the “postmodern revolution”), social scientists are only too aware of the charges leveled at their disciplines by their internal as well as external critics. The resulting conundrums about mission, purpose, and method stand out to us most strikingly in the fields of anthropology and history. This may be a consequence of our being anthropologists whose training emphasized recognizing the importance

of history and historicism in any anthropological project. But even so, this does not preclude the possibility that there is something particularly rich—and vexing—about two disciplines that make their way along the not always parallel epistemological paths of a heritage of “science” and a heritage of “humanism.” This productivity—and vexation—has become more complex with interrogations, typically attributed to “postmodernist” reflexivity, concerning the exoticization of non-Western peoples and subaltern populations and their silencing or marginalization from history, as well as charges of rhetorically imprisoning them in arbitrarily conceived localities, reifying their forms of sociality, and making anthropology and historiography unwittingly or naively complicit in colonial and neo-colonial projects (or, at least, refusing to acknowledge the bearing of such projects on our own).

As far as anthropology is concerned, it may be fair to say that from its very inception as an institutionalized branch of academic knowledge production, it has always addressed the relation between a self-consciously modernizing “West” and its various and changing “others.” By the same token, and probably not coincidentally, anthropology arguably has been particularly self-reflexive about its fraught history. As a spate of publications beginning, perhaps, with Kathleen Gough’s (1968) indictment of anthropology as a “child of imperialism” made clear, even anthropologists not working in formally colonized field sites (such as Native North America) were nonetheless—to use Wendy James’s (1970) phrase—operating as “reluctant imperialists.” The probing of anthropology’s relationship to imperialism has recently also taken interesting turns that offer a different order of critique, for example, Don Kulick’s (2006) reflections on the psychoanalytic dimensions of anthropology’s identification with powerless people.¹

Anthropologists have long joined an interdisciplinary discourse that speaks of traditions as invented, communities as imagined, and races as socially constructed.² In methodological terms, this has led anthropologists to question cultural or sociological “holism” as “totalization,” to view ethnographies as scholarly allegories grounded in carefully cultivated fictions of unmediated empirical authority, to “deterritorialize” definitions of field sites, to approach identities as produced by processes of subjectification, to denaturalize notions of difference, to rethink kinship and its relation to social structure with investigations of “flexible” or “fluid” modes of relationality and belonging, to eschew generalization in favor of situated anecdotal evidence, and to strive for novel modes of representa-

tion (montage, pastiche, ethnographic fiction, dialogical or autobiographical writing).³

Yet having identified and dismantled the false certainties of a bygone era does not mean that we have effectively superseded them. Indeed, as Brightman (1995), Mintz (1996, 1998), Roseberry (1996), Sahlins (1999, 2000), Pina Cabral (2006), and Kapferer (2007), for example, have pointed out, the discoveries of epistemological skeletons in the closet of our discipline made in the past quarter century or so may well derive from highly selective forms of structural amnesia. This myopia and misrecognition, as anthropologists often understand full well in contexts not so close to home, are critical to the reproduction of institutionalized ways of knowing. Irrespective of the genuine necessity of questioning the epistemological foundations of our discipline, part of what is at work here are often enough systemic patterns of forgetting that enable permanent forms of ostensibly novel self-critique at the expense of genuinely historical insight into the formation of the discursive fields of which such critiques are necessarily part.⁴ Even when not resulting in forms of amnesia, disciplined ways of knowing can institutionalize frameworks and emphases that represent a holistic approach when they are in fact partial—in both senses of the word.

The sense of crisis that characterizes anthropology today has affected historians as well, though perhaps in a less dramatic way. Past decades have seen inquiries into the historical constructions of categories, reflections on the power relations involved in the production of documentary evidence, the acknowledgment of the slippery nature of linguistic mediation, questions concerning traditional approaches to motivation, consciousness, and experience, and even doubts cast on historical narration itself as a supposedly unambiguous and transparent representational idiom. Steven Feierman (1993), for example, notes that the epistemic shifts induced by the growth of knowledge about non-Western histories (or dominated segments of Western societies, for that matter) have rendered the Enlightenment project of historical synthesis increasingly untenable, if not outright implausible. Instead Feierman (1993: 167) urges his colleagues to resist unicentric narratives and explore “fragmentation and chaos.” In a somewhat different fashion, other historians have argued that the universalist assumptions of academic historiography, in fact, betray rampant Western parochialisms. Denise Riley (1988), Joan W. Scott (1988, 1991, 2001), and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) thus not only point toward the distortions effected by a supposedly gender-neutral his-

toriological tradition, but also question the seemingly “recuperative” labor of women’s history as an enterprise built on unstable, epistemologically questionable, or blatantly Eurocentric categorical foundations. In a similar vein, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) has argued that no matter to what degree non-Western history has blossomed in recent decades, “Europe” has remained its silent subject all along; and while what Etienne Balibar (1991) calls the “nation form” has constituted the key unit of historical description and comparison since the nineteenth century, Prasenjit Duara (1995) now urges his colleagues to “rescue history from the nation.” Furthermore, while historians associated with the subaltern studies school have cast critical light on postcolonial historical scholarship and questioned our capacity to authentically capture the perspective and “voice” of dominated groups (rather than merely ventriloquizing them in a presentist fashion), philosophers of history such as Arthur Danto (1965), Paul Ricoeur (1984), or Hayden White (1978, 1987) have identified modern historical narrative as a fundamentally “moralizing,” and so inevitably political, genre of discourse (cf. Novick 1988). As in anthropology, while these critiques have given rise to more nuanced and sophisticated scholarship, the debate between self-declared “practicing historians” and more theoretically oriented members of that discipline has hardly reached a point of conclusion.

It is our position that despite, or perhaps because of, the calls over the past two decades for greater interdisciplinary dialogue, and the dismantling or diffusing of disciplinary boundaries and gospels that successful dialogue requires, the “real” that contradicts this ideal is that some boundaries and gospels have become strengthened and others dismissed—and always within a hierarchy of unequal power relations. That is, true interdisciplinarity is still easier to talk about than to execute. Our aim in bringing forth this volume is not simply to add more voices to the debate over the dangers, drawbacks, or desirability of a particular—by now almost wearisomely familiar—set of cherished precepts. At this point, most anthropologists and historians have their own preferred stances. These stances certainly deserve (many would say require) continuing and close examination. However, we feel that an equally productive, and far less trod, direction to pursue is to draw rigorous attention to a key feature common to both anthropology and history; an aspect that is shared in terms of their epistemological foundations and missions, and in terms of their current disciplinary responses to the most recent major paradigm shifts of the past two or three decades. This key commonality is the problematic of empiricism, which has been at the heart of anthropology and

history as disciplines, and also been a key, perhaps *the* key, object of scrutiny and intradisciplinary introspection in the “postmodernist” turn of the late twentieth century.

The *raison d'être* for this volume, then, is that while it is true that anthropological and historical epistemologies have been dramatically unsettled in the early moment of “revolution,” the issues at stake have hardly been resolved. In fact, this irresolution represents nothing less than a crisis in anthropology and history—much in the same sense as earlier observers, in one way or another, identified it as such (Wolf 1990; Sangren 1988; Evans 2000; Appleby, Jacob, and Hunt 1994; Ahmad 1992). Far from being anachronistic, our present concern is that what began as a most promising turn in scholarship devolved into, and largely remains, the ritualized eschewing of positivism and has yet to yield a decisive new synthesis. Whereas we acknowledge that the “boon or bane?” debates about postmodernism are reductive and well rehearsed, and a precise synthesis may ultimately not be possible, we perceive the deeper and more complex question—claimed in some fashion by virtually all academic exercises in anthropology and history today—about how to craft our understandings of relations of power and their shaping of lived experience, is merely glossed by reductive rehearsals and thus remains an imperative element of the academic agenda. In fact, we see this crisis in anthropology and history as tenacious: recognition of a dilemma, or set of debates, does not equal their resolution. Hence our concern to tackle the problematic of crossroads: how can we look back on productive provocations and critiques in order to move forward *with* them, and what kind of intellectual guideposts might this call for?

IMPERATIVES OF EMPIRICISM

In thinking about this challenge, the three of us find ourselves returning repeatedly to one scholar in particular, Sidney W. Mintz. Mintz's oeuvre represents both exemplary creativity in crossing disciplinary boundaries—long before it was fashionable to do so—and more than a half century's steadfast commitment to empirical research. Conducted in creative ways that have not only been widely emulated but have also generated further scholarship that builds on without necessarily replicating it, Mintz's work clearly was ahead of its time. In our view, it continues to provide productive building blocks for the future of ethnography, whether as the template for anthropological research or woven into historiography. Our view is shared by the eight anthropologists and historians who have contributed

to this volume. Like us, they remain deeply respectful of Mintz's sense of mission, yet also have advanced it in their own ways. Mintz's preference for an epistemologically sophisticated inductivism, favoring empirical illustration when addressing theoretical questions, underscores that rather than engage in prolonged discussion of abstractions, we must grapple with the ways theories work by means of historical analysis.

Building on the work of Sidney Mintz—the most distinguished living representative of a historically informed anthropology that anticipated “globalization studies” by a half century—*Empirical Futures* rethinks the continuities among antecedents and revisionist work, toward possible future directions of research and analysis. Beginning in the 1950s, Sidney Mintz broke new interdisciplinary ground by integrating ethnographic and historical methods in harnessing them to the question of how to theorize power. Crucially, Mintz's work, along with that of his contemporary, Eric Wolf, shifted the then-predominant focus of anthropology on isolated communities to redirected theoretical concern with fields of power relations, connections among local, national, regional, and global movements of people, commodities, and capital. Engaging Mintz's contributions from a variety of disciplinary and regional angles, this volume builds on anthropology's and history's methods for studying everyday life among local groups and communities, nation-states, regions, and interconnections among these. It explores how local lifeworlds are—and have long been—implicated in multiple, shifting, and spatially layered networks of power. At the same time, it problematizes both what these relationships consist of and by what means they are best studied. In doing so, it offers a new contribution to the analysis of the “patterns of local initiative and local response,” as Mintz (1977) once put it, that ultimately constituted the historical forces operative in the protracted making of our “modern,” “globalized” world.

A word here on “globalization.” In recent years, this term has come to designate a core concern in policy making and public discourse in most Western nation-states. Governments and financial institutions in the United States and Europe have found a seemingly unprecedented consensus in asserting that globalization represents a new and overwhelming force that has brought the world into tighter economic connections that demand, among other things, decreasing regulation of markets and the retreat of the state from its post–World War II role as provider of services to its citizens (Blyth 2002). Images evoked in legitimizing the implementation of policy shifts along such lines tend to configure flows of capital, people,

goods, and information across the globe as neutral economic and political forces in their own right—forces that seem to be making older international agreements, ideas of sovereignty and governance, as well as state-driven economic policies increasingly obsolete. Used to justify unpopular reforms such as the scaling back of the welfare state in western European countries, the dismantling of the industrial sector in the United States, the weakening of local economies on the periphery through free trade agreements, and often harsh structural adjustments in the Global South, the language of globalization now no longer appears to designate an analytical construct (if it ever really did). Instead, it increasingly references the reified product of what, effectively, represents a globalizing folk theory of neoliberal political economy—and so the “facts” to which economic and political actors in the West tend to recur (see Cooper, this volume).

What is more surprising is that anthropologists and historians have, on the whole, ratified the belief that globalization represents a causal force in its own right; one that becomes visible in its “effects,” such as the gutting of the welfare state or rapid deindustrialization in core countries of the West, and the enforcement of austerity measures—often at high social and environmental costs—in the Global South (e.g., Ferguson 2006, Tsing 2003). Instead of critically assessing the complex changes in governance, production, and commerce, many of us remain mesmerized, or mystified, by what passes for newness and novelty as we marvel at the speed at which capital, commodities, and people are moving around the world, and by the levels of global “sociocultural integration” these movements seem to express and engender.

We use the latter phrase—nowadays likely to be misunderstood as yet another recent neologism—in the sense Mintz’s academic sponsor (though not necessarily intellectual mentor) Julian Steward deployed it, as early as 1950, in a Social Science Research Council memoir inspired both by the new research imperatives seemingly demanded by the Cold War and by the intellectual openings the funding opportunities generated in the United States in response to this global political constellation. “The contemporary world,” wrote Steward (1950: 84–85), “has become an integrated whole, that is, one area, or ‘one world’ to the extent that events in each region, nation, or area affect and are affected by events in many other places.” Yet it was not that Steward simply pronounced such—nowadays unassailable—verities almost two generations before they attained that status in the Western public sphere. What follows upon these lines has not altogether lost its contemporary salience either:

A study of pan-Islamism cannot be separated from British colonialism or from nationalism in India, and the developments in India deeply affect England's external economic and political developments. If one studies Chinese peasants instead of pan-Islamism with its socioreligious focus, the subject would also have international ramifications: the meaning of Chinese communism and nationalism to the peasant population; the locus of political power; how communism and nationalism are related to internal factors of demography, food supply, social structure, governmental forms, and processes of revolution; and to external factors of foreign trade, infiltration of political ideologies, military power, and international policies.

Some of this sounds quaint in this day and age, written as it was in the immediate context of India's decolonization and partition, or the aftermath of the Chinese Communist Revolution—and certainly not without Cold War policy goals in mind. Likewise, Steward did not envision precisely how factors “internal” and “external” to the analytical units in question (modern nation-states) might be conceptualized and calibrated in relation to each other (Roseberry 1978; Wolf 1978; Mintz 2001). Indeed, his very choice of terminology—“internal” and “external”—largely obscures what we, nowadays, might perceive as the central analytical task: not just delineating “the work of Britain in India,” as Marx's famous canard has it, or, for that matter, the “work of India in Britain” (given the importance, economic as well as cultural, of the Raj in Victorian Britain), but empirically tracing out the structural relationality that renders both “cases” part and parcel of a historically expanding social field—a world to which we have become heirs.

Here, a question arises that many of us may be quite reluctant to engage: in our rush to gain analytical purchase on a seemingly new level of global economic and cultural interconnectedness, and the changes this state of affairs has ostensibly wrought upon local social arrangements, distributions of wealth, and forms of domination, may we not unwittingly have lost track of the possibility that globalization discourse itself represents a symbolic system that underwrites and naturalizes historically specific changes in the structure of capital? As Marshall Sahlins (1976: 211) provocatively argued quite some time ago, “in Western culture the economy is the main site of symbolic production,” and the West's uniqueness in comparison to, for example, kinship-based social formations consists “not in the fact that the economic system escapes symbolic determination, but that the economic symbolism is structurally determining.” If Sahlins is

right, then our task as anthropologists and historians cannot be to simply describe or chronicle the changes of something called “globalization”—a collective representation in a perfectly Durkheimian sense—is presumably wreaking upon our world. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) has argued that analysis must distinguish material processes from their representation: if indeed “Europe became Europe by severing itself from what lay south of the Mediterranean, but in part also through a Westward move that made the Atlantic the center of the first planetary empires” (29), then this process was only belatedly rationalized through what Trouillot calls “North Atlantic Universals” that “project the North Atlantic experience on a universal scale”—a scale these very concepts “themselves have helped create” (35). Long in the making in a material sense, the movement of capital, goods, and people that “the narratives of globalization” aim to capture in all their “euphoria, outrage and confusion” (7) has not so much reached a novel stage in our day and age: it has entered into a newly minted configuration of an economy of representation and rationalization, itself centuries in the making.⁵

MINTZIAN LEGACIES

Part of the challenge, then, consists in a systematic critique of such rationalizations: in the case at hand, the abstractions, economic or other, by which historically contingent forms of structural inequality and violence are occluded, represented as unfortunate but inevitable aspects of “human progress,” or simply mystified as imponderable “externalities” of otherwise ideally transparent market operations. Doing so, in part, demands of anthropologists and historians a renewed critical stance toward their own conceptual vocabulary so as to avoid complicity in, and to effectively counteract, the “social production of indifference” (Herzfeld 1992).⁶ Yet indispensable as it is, metadiscursive reflexivity cannot be the only game in town. If we can speak of the “violence of abstraction” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), then our move to counter the tropes of neoliberal discourse cannot well be to devise further (presumably critical) abstractions.

As historian Barbara Weinstein (2008) productively reminds us, the turn to scrutinizing regimes of representation has had the consequence of ceding “the economy” as an object of study to a cohort of economic historians still invested in statistical analysis, or to social sciences of a more positivistic bent, whose output largely—and often rightly so—goes unread by those of us who dismiss it as insufficiently attentive to the his-