Inside historical anthropology: scale-reduction and context

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The terms of the debate

The 'unwaged debate', as phrased for the current discussion, is based on the premise that two paradigms typify the growing nexus between history and anthropology. One paradigm, which typifies historiography, is 'a movement away from social history, and towards a new cultural history'. In its concern with epochs, mentalities and collective representations, it uses anthropology as a 'repository' for concepts, methods and empirical data which historians can raid. The other paradigm, which typifies 'historical anthropology', is the one through which anthropologists operate in order to do history, using a central method of 'scale reduction' and exploring a concern with 'autonomy, deviance, protest' and social change.

A problem with constructing the terms of the debate in this way is that a basic division within historical anthropology itself is ignored. Interestingly, it is a division which in part mirrors the above-mentioned debate. However, as it informs anthropological approaches to the past, the division is manifested in two genres: historical ethnography and the anthropology of history.

Historical ethnography analyses a past era of a particular locality using archival sources and, when possible, local oral history. Very commonly, historical ethnographers try to link the past with the present, chronologically and processually, in order to explain the present by understanding the past. The concern here, then, is not only to record the past for its own sake but to show how things came to be the way they are now.[1] This is an orientation rarely shared with historians.

Historical ethnographies may also be produced for periods which are entirely in the past and for which only archival data can be used. Such work is, of course, a more straightforward invasion of the historian's field. It is also a departure from conventional anthropological concerns with the present-day. Because of this, such ethnographies are uncommon, although their numbers have increased in recent years.[2] Such studies may be synchronic or diachronic. The former are less common in anthropology than in history be-

cause the general anthropological concern with social dynamics and change and with individual decision-making and strategizing make synchronic studies, of the past as well as of the present, unattractive.

Historical ethnographies assume a recoverable past. They are analytical histories which are outsiders' constructions. Although, in using oral history, such studies do not ignore native points of view or insiders' ideas of the past, archival research is a key method of the genre. Historical ethnographies, in other words, are anthropological constructions of the past. They contrast with those anthropological studies which deliberately focus on the ways and cultural rationales by which a particular people envision, create and recreate their own past and relate it to their perceived present. This we call the *anthropology of history*. It aims to record insiders' views and perceptions and to carry out analyses in the insiders' own socio-cultural terms. Little attempt is made to produce an 'objective' history. Instead, the concern is with what people know and remember about their past, how and why, how people make sense of the past and relate it to the present, and how people's perceptions and understandings of their past are a retrospective product of their present. Often, this form of historical anthropology is linked to a reflexive approach, with the anthropologist's experiences woven into the narrative to become an intrinsic part of the published ethnography.[3]

In this genre, the anthropologist is concerned to explore a people's own version of their own past, linking it to their present-day cultural conceptions and social arrangements. Thus, insofar as people explain the past to themselves as, consciously and unconsciously, they explain and justify their present, history is conceptualized in this genre as ideology and, therefore, it can be formed and reformed even as people believe it to be 'true'. It is the study of such transformation(s) that attracts the anthropologist of history. In this genre too, history can be conceived of as tradition, and its invention the object of study. Or the aim may be to analyze collective memory and the construction of identities (national, ethnic, local) through the use of historical symbols, meanings, narratives and events. Thus, the genre will often discern several different histories in a given locale, related to gender, age, class or other significant categories. In this genre then, the past as a contingent cultural construction is the object of anthropological study.

It may appear that the division within historical anthropology, as manifested in how history and historicity are integrated, follows an older and general divide between cultural and social anthropology. The former is concerned mainly with meanings and symbols and the latter with social relations and processes. However, historical anthropologists in fact cut across these older divisions. Nevertheless, we suggest that essential elements of this divide are surfacing within historical anthropology. Such division concerns what should be privileged in analysis: the material or the symbolic, the action or the belief. The debate, in turn, rests on the fact that no anthropological construction of the relation between what people do and what they believe has ever been universally accepted.

Points of convergence: the small-scale and the context

The division within anthropology and the privileging of particular conceptual elements has never meant a total neglect of the other elements, nor has it ever produced a complete break. Rather, there has been a persisting concern for the reciprocal ties between action and belief, material relations and cultural meanings. This concern necessarily enters historical anthropology. So although particular anthropological studies of the past fall more or less into one or another of our two historical genres, aspects which inform the other are seldom neglected.

In part, this stems from the anthropological concern with holism - the notion that all aspects of social and cultural life are in some

way interrelated. In part too, it stems from empirical concerns which are common to both genres: exploitation and dominance, however phrased, are central. So, too, are the subjects through which these are explored: class formation, colonialism, the state, protest and resistance. Convergence also occurs because key concepts, although they may vary, derive from a shared history of changing paradigms within the discipline itself. Ultimately, commonalities emerge out of two other anthropological concerns: the notion of the local-level, small-scale or scale reduction, and the efforts made to contextualize this.

In the social sciences, various levels of human activity are perceived. These may be crudely designated as local, regional, national and international. Disciplinary specializations on one or another of these levels produce different kinds of data, analyses, and understandings. It is anthropologists, however, who have long specialized in working at the small scale or local level; and those who do historical anthropology most commonly continue that tradition. In noting this, however, it is important to state that this does not mean that anthropologists assume that the smaller represents the wider society or culture - the larger scale. Nor does it imply that the small-scale unit is seen as somehow typical of other small-scale units which share some of its features. What then does scale reduction mean? What is it that historical anthropologists can do, and are doing, in their continued concentration on the small scale?

To begin with, every locality (however defined) within the same region, nation or state has in some degree experienced different conditions - ecological, economic, demographic, political, cultural; and these have made for somewhat different histories as the reactions and choices of the inhabitants, with respect to local problems as well as to external opportunities and impositions, resonated through time and space.[4] Contrary to assumptions often made by those who study at more macro-levels, the experiences of people at different local levels, in varying places, are seldom identical. At the very least, the nature of historical homogeneity is a matter for enquiry. It is more useful, though, to accept that anthropological findings have long thrown great doubt on the existence of local uniformity even in the face of similar external pressures. This is, of course, because people seldom react uniformly to such stimuli. Only in exceptional historical circumstances are they mere pawns.

There is, then, great value in scale reduction in the sense of examining how major, large-scale processes - the so-called 'important questions' of historiography - have played out at the small-scale levels where people live and interact and where they experience both change and continuity, trying to make sense of what they encounter and deciding what to do. For example, major processes may be identified at the macro level: the emergence of capitalism or its consolidation, state formation, the decline of religious authority, the growth of xenophobic ethnicity, technological revolution. A more intensive and reliable understanding of such processes, though, can only be obtained by exploring these at the local level where cognition, beliefs and social interaction are actualized. The question then becomes how the so-called macro-process actually worked amongst people as they lived their lives, engaged hopes and fears, experienced successes and failures, and dealt with intractable problems.

Complementing such insight into major transformative processes via scale reduction, and perhaps under its influence, other changes, perhaps less important from a macro viewpoint, may be highlighted and, when explored at the local level, may illuminate the larger scale. For example, the geographical range of marriage choices, the nature of neighborly cooperation, and the class origins of artisans or shopkeepers, are the kind of issues that escape attention at macro levels but which directly underlie such large-scale processes as class formation and economic change. As well, conclusions and generalizations derived at a macro level can, and indeed must, be tested at small-scale levels. How far do they hold good? Do they need to be

modified, held in abeyance or even rejected? After all, it is at the local level that people communicate, express opinion and make decisions, cooperate, quarrel and exploit. For example, demographic statistics may show a trend to, say, earlier marriage or fewer children; but it is at the local level that people choose (consciously or not) and express their ideas and motivations. Demographic statistics, in other words, are only generalizations of the results of choices made by people in their own localities. As another example, the origin, nature and reproduction of the bourgeoisie may be conceptualized at macro-levels, but it is at the level of actual life that capital, both finance and cultural, is appropriated and accumulated and both power and privilege are exercised.

Scale reduction, in other words, allows and promotes better understanding of both particular and general processes. This is because there are variations in action and reaction, perception and ideas at different local levels, and because scale reduction allows an exploration of the contingent factors. Anthropologists, therefore, find confusing the ways that historians and others working at non-local levels seek locally-derived, apt illustrations of the conditions and processes which they are studying. The latter may take an illustration from one locality for one point while an illustration of another may come from a different locality in the same region or, even, from the far side of the country. A third feature may be illustrated from another locality. This analytical sleight of hand disregards the probability that pertinent conditions likely vary significantly in each of the localities and that the illustrations may very well have been affected by those differences. Quite apart from the fact that such casual illustrations cannot prove anything - although too often they are taken to clinch an argument - they may in reality be misleading because of small-scale variability.[5] The historical anthropologist, on the other hand, usually feels obliged (often with some frustration) by the disciplinary notion of holism and its research methodology to examine and report on a set of social-cultural features as they have been actualized simultaneously and interconnected within the same milieu, among the same people. Scale reduction, in other words, encourages contextualization; and contextualization gives a validity to anthropological understanding.

A final aspect of scale reduction which must be emphasized is that regional or national histories - and the data and analyses by which they have been constructed - are in large part comprised of facts, events, ideas and processes which occurred in a myriad of local places. There should be, therefore, a dialectical relation between a set of local histories and a macro-history. To understand the dynamics of that dialectic, historical anthropologists provide an essential perspective which, unfortunately, is too often neglected by historians and macro-theorists.

In all these ways, 'scale reduction and scope expansion go hand in hand' in historical anthropology, and although historical anthropology may be divided by empirical foci, centralizing concepts and, ultimately, genre, the fact of scale reduction is key. Indeed, it is the ways in which and reasons why scale reduction occurs that differentiates historical anthropology from the historians' use of anthropology.[6]

What also distinguishes historical anthropology is its concern with context. It is a truism in socio-cultural anthropology today to say that the small-scale (local places, meanings and social relations) is enmeshed in 'wider arenas' or contexts and that this must form part of any study. However, how the wider context is conceptualized leads to the variations in methods, concepts and theories which now permeate historical anthropology, regardless of genre. Three common contextual strategies can be highlighted: that local realities are enmeshed in a world (capitalist) system; that they are integral parts of ideological, cultural and/or material systems of power, domination and/or hegemonic processes; and that they are spatially incorporated in larger geographical units.[7]

These three ways of conceptualizing context are not, of course, mutually exclusive.

However, an emphasis on one does tend to orient and affect historical understandings. This is because the varying ways of constructing context reflect, in part, the long-standing anthropological way of dividing societies and cultures into economic, political, ideational and social systems. Thus, it is fair to say that context defined as a world capitalist system typified an economistic approach which, in the 1980s, privileged the analyses of social relations as these were manifested in production and which, in the 1990s, is privileging the analysis of those social relations, as well as the ideologies, that are enmeshed in exchange and commoditization. Similarly, context defined as domination, power or hegemony reflects the more recent concern with ideational systems and, importantly, the resurfacing of the political domain after a decade of neglect because of the primacy given to economic concerns.

Context constructed as a socio-spatial dimension in anthropology, however, has tended to cross-cut social relations, economy, polity and ideology. This is because it had a different origin and history within the discipline. It reflects the move from studying bounded units (e.g. bands, tribes, villages, etc.) in the earlier years of anthropology to a current recognition of the contingency of local, socio-cultural life. In this sense, space as context serves to structure our historical understandings in a fashion which complements the other two approaches.

All this is not to suggest that the construction of context is always a deliberate act. Very often, the nature of the context emerges seamlessly out of conceptual choices and the research problem. Moreover, although the specification of context has a methodological dimension in that it tends to emerge out of the kinds of data encountered in the field, context is more often seen by anthropologists as an outgrowth of the theoretical premises which underlie the study. Thus, the construction of context complements, in a theoretical way, the choice of small-scale locale which is seen, in contrast, as a heuristic or methodological, and not a theoretical, device.

What all this suggests is that historical anthropology, however defined, reflects the flavor, trends and biases of the discipline at large. To that extent, we suggest that historical anthropology is not a field or sub-discipline. It is simply one way of doing anthropology. It is not, at least not yet, specifically linked to any particular paradigm or theoretical orientation.

Scale reduction: an empirical exploration

To illustrate the nature and value of scale reduction in historical anthropology, and as an example of historical ethnography, we take the case of a seminal moment in Irish history - the so-called Great Famine of 1845-49. Its story has long been told through a well-developed, Irish historiographic tradition which was formulated in the later nineteenth century as part of an indigenous land reform and nationalist movement. It is a story which all Irish people 'know' - regardless of class, age or locality. What they know, briefly, is the following.

In an overpopulated country of poor tenant farmers and rapacious, absentee landlords, people lived on potatoes and sold all their other produce to pay rents. A series of potato failures after 1845 caused massive starvation and fever which the British state, with its *laissez-faire* policy, failed to alleviate. Minimal government efforts included some public works projects in the early years to provide employment so that people could buy food, then soup kitchens and, finally, a total reliance on the harsh and hated poor law and workhouse. Given the unconcern of landlords alongside the state's ideology, financial austerity, and racism, the Irish starved.

Until today, this story is common sense in Ireland, having been disseminated through school texts, political rallies and church for over a century. Revisionist historiographic work in the last few decades has moderated the story somewhat.[8] Analyses of counties

have shown that famine was unevenly distributed and that the west was worst affected. Demographic analyses also have shown that the poor (laborers and smallholders) were, by far, the worst afflicted. Nevertheless, contemporary historiographic work still takes its research agenda from the nationalist version. It is therefore concerned mainly with two issues: the way in which the structure of the pre-Famine economy contributed to the Famine and the trajectory of the Famine itself (mortality rates, British policy, etc.). In this macro approach, the experiences of small localities are ignored, except for apt illustration, in favor of statistical modelling and national, or sometimes regional, patternings. Qualitative data, when used, are taken from the west where famine was most dramatically experienced.

In our own archival and field research during the 1980s in a parish in southeast Ireland (Thomastown, southern county Kilkenny), we explicitly sought data on the Famine in the locality and region. However, newspapers, government reports, parliamentary sources, and local stories yielded only meager information. Did this mean that we could say nothing about this major historical event? Was scale reduction so narrow in its focus that such a great event could not be addressed? Could we not do 'real' history because of our concern with the local level? Was the only way to do history the way of the historian - with events and memories from a diverse multitude of places amalgamated into synthetic, homogenized versions?

We collected what we could at the time. It was only recently, though, that we tried to write a paper on the Famine. We scoured our files for our few references. We also began to look more consciously at what was missing, such as reports of potato yields, of deaths, and of extensive admissions to the workhouse. We also looked at what had been happening in the locality in the decades prior to the Famine - not only in its economy, but in its political and ideological life, and in the everyday relations between landlords, tenant farmers and laborers. What emerged was a story that was different from the nationalist or revisionist one, and this was because different topics and issues necessarily formed its framework.

In this story, very briefly, we argue that a 'culture of crisis and distress' had underwritten relations between the gentry and the poor in the decades prior to the Famine. At times of severe and exceptional distress, the 'deserving poor' were temporarily relieved, amidst public fanfare, by the moral and material generosity of a benevolent gentry comprised of locally-resident landlords and notables. Such public crisis-relief worked, for example, in the post-Napoleonic depressions of 1816 and 1820, high unemployment in 1830, and virtual famine in 1840. Not surprisingly, the first potato failure in 1845 elicited no response. Local gentry saw it as a minor problem which would be dealt with as usual if conditions worsened.

During the same pre-Famine decades, our data also showed that, despite a *laissez-faire* ideology in economic matters, the English state had been dramatically expanding its control over two key areas: the means of violence and of administration. By exploring these, we found that the Famine story could be re-framed through a particular local perspective.

Pre-famine Ireland was reputed for its violence (agrarian outrages, homicide, arson, threats, banditry). Yet, in Thomastown and its region, the violence was always sporadic in time and space. Nevertheless, a growing sense of crisis was created as Insurrection Acts (1814, 1822), a new police force (1822), an expanded military (1820s), and growing media concern throughout the 1820s convinced the locally-resident gentry that all Ireland was aflame and that increased state coercion was essential. The resulting collusion of the gentry with the state in turn convinced state agents that ever greater coercion was both necessary and welcomed. In response, violence did escalate, culminating in the Tithe War in southern county Kilkenny in 1830. By 1835, however, the state had quashed it; and except for later, minor outbreaks, violence never came back to southern Kilkenny.

Meanwhile, the colonial state was expanding its administrative interventions: its agents and rules were everywhere visible. New courts imposed the law; regulations on weights and measures came to control an expanding retail trade; public works (bridges, canals) established new transport routes; Thomastown's town government was abolished and its functions given to gentry who now sat on new boards established by the new poor law; laws regulating imports affected the local milling industry; state-organized Loan Funds undercut local usurers; and state valuators were in the locality in 1845 collecting data for a national tax system. In other words, the pre-Famine period in southern county Kilkenny was one in which an expanding state administration underwrote a growing coercion. The state was everywhere visible; and many local people approved.

With the potato crop failures after 1845, the locally-based culture of crisis and distress quickly collapsed under the weight of bureaucratic regulation which accompanied state intervention in famine relief. In the early years, the gentry were ordered by the state to provide proposals for public works, to form relief committees, and to set local taxes. They did so. For southern county Kilkenny, there were virtually no reports of independent, gentry relief measures which would have typified a subsistence crisis prior to 1845. Instead, in expectation and action, the gentry quickly gave way to the state, as was not uncommon; and the state, in managing famine relief with gentry collusion, furthered the expansionary process which had begun decades before.[9]

The process was aided, and state relief effective in southern Kilkenny, in part because the Famine was not as severe as in western areas of the country. We say this in the face of the absence as well as the presence of data. For example, the local newspapers at the time reported on famine elsewhere in Ireland, and Europe, rather than in county Kilkenny itself. County newspapers also gave few details on the state of potato crops, distress or death. The absence of data, in other words, suggested that famine conditions were not excessively harsh. The occasional positive piece enhanced that conclusion. For example, one report noted that only 100 Thomastown people, with its population of over 7,000 in 1841, had entered the workhouse during the height of the Famine. Another report cited a farmer who told of other foodstuffs which his family ate instead of potatoes. Most important though, were the reports on building the railway from Kilkenny to Waterford, through Thomastown, between 1846 and 1850. Over £300,000 in public and private capital was expended and hundreds of workers were continuously employed. Working people in the locality, in other words, had been able to afford alternate foods.

One hundred and forty years later, in Thomastown in the 1980s, there were virtually no Famine stories, even from old people whose grandparents had lived through it. They remembered only that a particular road had been built and a soup kitchen had operated. In contrast, everyone we asked could tell us a detailed story of the Famine as they had learned it in school. However, in reviewing our data, we came across a letter to a local newspaper in 1937 written by a Thomastown laborer. He complained of working conditions on a government building site and compared them to what "old people often refer to [as] that unhappy period of our history known as 'the time of public works'". In this, for us, was finally crystallized and encapsulated both the folk and factual views of the Great Famine in Thomastown and southern county Kilkenny which we had been struggling to understand for over a decade. It was indeed a time of public works - of soup kitchens, roads and railways. It was a time of extensive penetration of public and private capital and of state consolidation. It was a time when the local culture of crisis and distress failed to hold up under the pressures of state formation.

Conclusion

Through a particular, local perspective and

(1987), Parman (1990), Adams (1994), Gulliver & Silverman (1995).
2. Some examples are Dening (1980), Netting (1981), Wolf (1982), Silverblatt (1987), Hastrup (1990), Sabean (1990), Sahlins (1985).
3. Some examples are Sharp & Hanks (1978), Parmentier (1987), Hoskins (1987), Tonkin et al (1989), Ohnuki-Tierney (1990).
4. A good example of such local variations was given for Alpine Italy in Cole & Wolf (1974).
5. Examples by Irish historians are Donnelly (1975), Hoppen (1984), Kevin O'Neill (1984). See also Tilly (1984).
6. This is discussed at length in Silverman & Gulliver (1992) and Rogers (1992).
7. See, for example, Vincent (1982), Roseberry (1983), Smith (1985), Comaroff (1985), Trouillot (1988).
8. Historical revisionism in Ireland is commonly taken to have begun with Edwards & Williams (1957). Brief discussions were given by Foster (1986) and Fanning (1988). See also Mokyr (1983) and O'Grada (1988).
9. In 1948, the Kilkenny Poor Law Board, comprising local gentry and notables, was summarily dissolved and state appointed, paid officials took over.

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