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Comment on Hodges, 'History's Impasse'

In an important early contribution to the historical turn in anthropology, Eric Wolf (1982) demonstrated that many putatively isolated societies had already been affected by the global system of commerce before the first anthropologists reached them. His book succeeded in locating them within “our” (Western, post-Enlightenment, historicist) matrix of events and chronology, and revealing their social and economic interconnections with societies conventionally recognized as having history. His title, *Europe and the People without History*, poked fun at the idea that peripheral societies might be considered to be squatting outside the world. Wolf, however, left unconsidered how non-Western societies might be outside history for a different reason: their independence from historicism, the set of procedures that define “history”. This question of the various precepts and practices by which societies may construe the past – their historicities – has been gaining anthropological interest and Matt Hodges’ essay makes an original and thought-provoking contribution to this discussion.

Hodges shows that it is one thing to give people history according to the standards of historicism (e.g. in a book), but quite another to present that history to them in person and expect them to fall into line behind it. His study is all the more striking for its focus on people in the heartland of the West who diverge from the protocols of historicism and who are thus “without history” in the sense neglected by Wolf. They establish relationships to the past

through absorbing tales of local figures (excluded from the domain of history as “legends” by historians), through family genealogy, or reference to the landscape. The French villagers’ interests in the past are governed, furthermore, by presentism: their current livelihood; their memories of the recent past; and mobilized affectively by sentiments such as nostalgia, chauvinism, autarky, and the multiple senses activated in communal practices such as making wine, or hunting for Roman pottery (Hodges 2013). In this last example, even though the villagers were alerted to the significance of the pottery by a trained historian, they created their own indigenous archaeological practice that turned historicist methodology upside down in what Hodges termed a “reverse historiography” (2013: 492). In the Larzac case which he analyzes here, the locals did not appropriate and transform historicism, rather, they made some attempt to collaborate with historians, before gradually giving up. Historicism enjoins a contextualized and coordinated view of the past – a view from nowhere. Local historicity could not abandon its parochial frame of interests, not to mention the obstacle that long working hours posed to local farmers’ engagement in historical research and discussion.

The collision between historicism and the local historicities of Larzac can be considered a “conjuncture” (Sahlins 1985) that stimulated new departures in people’s history and public history, but also Mitterrand’s initiative to improve the school history curriculum. I interpreted this as a renewed attempt to bring rural people into historicism so that the frictions of Larzac would not recur and subvert leftist projects in the future. The question of school history curricula and their reception in rural France deserves its own extended study, although the classroom may not have been as decisive in inculcating the tenets of historicism as television and other media. In any case, this relationship between historicism and alternative historicities bears comparison with colonialism. Where Wolf’s “people without history” came under Western rule and educational structures their ways of relating to the past were routinely

relegated to categories such as poetry, ritual, or plain error. Western historicism was taught as the proper way to understand the past. Postcolonial scholars such as Chakrabarty (2000) were among the first to recognize historicism as a particular European arrangement, and to call for the appreciation and perhaps the restoration of local approaches to the past in a decolonizing move. Hodges' article shows that the West is still trying to eradicate non-historicist pockets in its population through internal colonialism.

According to the historian J.G.A. Pocock (1962), we can expect to find multiple relationships to the past associated with various social groups. In the late middle ages, the past posed different problems for humanists, jurists and religious specialists respectively. Modern history arose in the process of adjudicating divergent approaches to matters such as the validity of Roman vs. customary law. Mediating that particular disagreement contributed to the rise of a more complex idea of history that recognized both continuity and change as well as the importance of interpretation (Pocock 1962: 232). Hodges' research reveals two main types of past-relationship (historicist and nonhistoricist) in the French social field. They may misconstrue, or occasionally inspire one another, but historicism has not been able to eradicate nonhistoricism, or form into a stable synthesis with it. They co-exist in the situation of transversality and impossibility that he describes, rather than in the progressive syntheses envisioned by Pocock. A recent example might be the nostalgic relationship to the past shared by voters for Brexit or Trump, and their imperviousness to historicist criticism by other segments of the population (labelled "elites" or "experts"). If espousing historicism indexes modernity, this contribution by Hodges reminds us that we are not as modern as we thought we were; a realization that opens history to new ethnographic research into the ecology of historicities in a given society.

References

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