Thinking Inside the Box: A Historian Among the Anthropologists

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Anthropologists have long sought to establish a relationship to the discipline of history. In the United States, this effort may be traced at least as far back as the work of A. L. Kroeber (1966). However, with the explosion of interest in colonialism that gripped the U.S. academy in the 1980s and 1990s, it received especially influential articulations in the work of Bernard Cohn (1990) and John and Jean Comaroff (1992).[1]

For both Cohn and the Comaroffs (very explicitly for the latter), the need for anthropology to establish a relationship to history was part of the effort to rehabilitate anthropology after the anticolonial critiques the discipline sustained in the 1970s and 1980s. Following these critiques, anthropologists were told to shed their colonial baggage as scholars interested in "others" rendered distinguishable from "ourselves" principally by their absence of history and by their immobilization in "cultures" understood as ahistorical frameworks. At the same time, anthropologists were exhorted to shed their naïve epistemological assumption that a meaningful account of their subjects could be based upon nothing more than "presence" in the midst of their subjects. The proffered solution was a trip to the archives.

But if a trip to the archives was to save anthropology, what was to prevent anthropologists from becoming nothing more than historians? It is here that anthropologists from Kroeber to Cohn to the Comaroffs revealed—not altogether without truth and often humorously—their pitying disdain for historians. In their renderings, there were many differences between historians and anthropologists, most of them redounding to the advantage of the

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[1] For a reprise of some of Cohn's and the Comaroffs' arguments, see Dirks (1996).

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latter. Thus, historians were supposedly naively interested in events rather than practices; they were either theoretically unsophisticated or wedded to empiricist bourgeois categories such as the individual, biography, causality, and so on, and they often wrote in a distinctly nonspecialist, indeed *bellelettrist*, idiom.

But the foundational difference between historians and anthropologists, we were told, inhered in the ways the two disciplines constructed a relationship to their sources. Thus, Cohn stated:

> In loose terms, research in history is based on finding data; research in anthropology is based on creating data. Obviously the historian has to find the sources on which to base his research. If he cannot find them, then no matter how good his ideas are or how well thought through the problem is on which he wants to work, he cannot do the research. My suspicion is that most historical research is done because there is a known body of source material available. The anthropologist, on the other hand, often is interested in a problem, descriptive or theoretical, and the question is then one of deciding what types of materials he will need for pursuing the problem. (1990:6)

This is a marvelous rendering of why—in the eyes of at least one influential practitioner of historical anthropology—historians and anthropologists are different. But in what sense is it meaningful to say that historians find data/are motivated by existing data, whereas anthropologists create data/are motivated by intellectual problems?

I submit that Cohn's account of the difference between historians and anthropologists might be productively grasped if one sees disciplinary practices and styles in history and anthropology as emanating from different disciplinary fantasies about the finitude/infinitude of sources. I believe that these different disciplinary fantasies are widely subscribed to by historians and anthropologists (although historians will, of course, balk at the negative spin that anthropologists have put on their disciplinary style and practice).

The historians' fantasy is that the sources are finite. They believe as a result that it is at least theoretically possible to go through them all. In my view, this is true even for historians who work in areas—for example, twentieth-century U.S. history—where the available materials are absolutely overwhelming. For Cohn, who grasps this historian's fantasy perfectly, the consequence is historians' document fetishism and their corresponding theoretical naïveté. In other words, simply bringing to light the sources—the "ideal type" being dusty boxes of slowly disintegrating documents—becomes enough. Precisely because the uncovering of the sources adds to the "fund" of knowledge about the past—i.e.,

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represents an inching toward the ultimate cataloguing of all dusty boxes—it sanctions a relatively unmediated treatment of what the boxes contain.

For anthropologists, by contrast, the fantasy is that the sources are infinite. Indeed, the sources do not even have the character of discrete "sources" that can be lined up next to each other as boxes can. As a result, the question of cataloguing "everything" never arises. Beginning with a sense of the infinitude of sources makes the anthropologist focus first on his or her own purposes and then decide which of an inexhaustible supply of sources essentially inseparable from each other—the festival, the botched ritual, the village squabble—serves those purposes. For Cohn, the exhilarating open-endedness of the "field"—the anthropologist's term for the infinitude of sources that emerges from "presence" amidst his or her subjects—accounts for the anthropologist's relative theoretical sophistication.

But of course, as I have pointed out earlier, the anticolonial critique of anthropology that led anthropologists to the boxes in the archives was precisely that the allegedly open-ended "field," at least as traditionally configured within the discipline, had turned out to be something of a box after all, to the extent that it was sharply bounded in space and time. For a complex of reasons, research based upon "presence" in the "field" had ended up denying the anthropologist's subjects history altogether.

If anthropologists have sought to surmount the anticolonial critique by turning to the boxes in the archives, however, they have been unwilling to shed the fantasy of open-endedness associated with presence in the field. Instead, they have sought to transform the archives—those collections of dusty boxes—into a field imagined as being every bit as open-ended as presence amidst subjects was ever imagined to be. For the Comaroffs, it is this open-endedness—which they do *not* problematize as a disciplinary fantasy—that will ultimately distinguish historical ethnography from social history:

> *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. (1992:34, emphasis added)

From now on, in other words, even though anthropologists and historians will both work on the same dusty boxes in the archives, the anthropologist will allegedly not be limited by and to them, while the historian will allegedly be thus limited.

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My object here is not to rehabilitate history as an academic discipline in the eyes of anthropologists. Nothing could be further from my purposes. My object is rather to evaluate anthropology's claims about its own historical method, specifically to examine whether its fantasy about the open-endedness of its sources can be sustained during the plunge into the dusty boxes in the archives. In other words, how successfully can boxes be rendered into "fields"? As an exemplar of the approach of historical anthropology, Sally Merry's award-winning book, *Colonizing Hawai'i: The Cultural Power of Law*, affords one site for such examination.

Before proceeding to that examination, however, let me turn briefly to Merry's work in terms of its contribution to the historiography of U.S. imperialism. We have known for some time now that imperialism is the great absent presence in the historiography of the United States.[2] For a long time, American historians tended to write the history of U.S. imperialism as a history of diplomacy and foreign relations. The American empire was described as a brief aberrant episode attending the Spanish-American War of 1898, following which the United States carelessly acquired and then divested itself of a few overseas territorial possessions (or somehow assimilated them). At all events, the American empire was seen as marginal to the larger thrust of American history.

Over the past decade or so, however, U.S. social and cultural historians, literary scholars, and others have worked hard to change this image, working at the level of colony-metropole relations as well as intra-imperial politics to present a fuller picture of the importance of empire to the constitution of the United States and its colonies. Much of this work centers on U.S. involvement in Cuba, Hawai'i, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico.[3] In an attempt to do for the United States what Edward Said did for nineteenth-century Europe in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Amy Kaplan's recent work also tries to show how the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American empire lies at the heart of hegemonic U.S. *national* cultural identity (Kaplan 2002).

While this new literature on U.S. imperialism is a useful corrective to the aggressively nation-centered thrust of an older U.S. historiography, there is also sometimes the danger that it might constitute a mere extension to the United States of the conceptual frameworks developed in the context of the study of the nineteenth-century European empires in Asia and Africa. We should be wary of attempting uncritically to do postcolonial studies "for" the United States without asking whether its conceptual frameworks are adequate to the study of U.S. imperialism. In this regard, one

[2] See, for example, Kaplan (1993).

[3] For an introduction to the literature and many relevant citations, see Kramer (2001).

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might well ask why the new literature on U.S. imperialism tends to focus so heavily upon America's late-nineteenth-century formal overseas territorial possessions, rather than concentrating upon the settlement and incorporation of Illinois, on the one hand, or American machinations in 1950s Iran, on the other hand.[4] If the focus is to be Illinois or Iran, would the conceptual frameworks of postcolonial studies be adequate?

Merry's work is part of the attempt to do postcolonial studies "for" the United States insofar as she focuses upon a classic nineteenth-century overseas territorial possession that, for various contingent reasons, followed a path different from Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. However, precisely because of its emphasis on the role of law in the U.S. involvement in Hawai'i, Merry's work constitutes an important addition to the new literature on U.S. imperialism.

Merry's account of U.S. imperialism as a colonialism rhetorically grounded in the spread of a law intended to assimilate and incorporate, rather than to segregate and cordon off (as she suggests was the case with the dual legal systems imposed by the British[5]), constitutes a crucial step in coming to terms with what is to my mind the most important phase of U.S. imperialism, namely the post–World War II period. American historians have yet to develop a rich and conceptually adequate literature on the imperialism of the second half of the twentieth century, a continuing—indeed newly revitalized—imperialism grounded in the "indirect rule" of a complex of multilateral institutions, mutual defense pacts, overseas military bases, corrupt and brutal client governments, foreign theatres of delimited armed conflict, and, perhaps most seductive, the rhetoric of the "rule of law." At a time when the United States has crowned itself the new master of Mesopotamia, even progressive U.S. intellectuals have a hard time shedding their unshakeable faith in the "rule of law" as a prescription for the ills of the non-Western world.[6] In describing the multiple agendas and unanticipated, occasionally devastating, consequences attending the imposition of a *soi-disant* egalitarian, universalistic, assimilative, and civilizing "rule of law" upon the residents of the Hawaiian islands, Sally Merry's work affords scholars with a sharply etched historical model of a distinctively "American" rhetoric and style of imperialism.

[4] To be sure, scholars of British North America have developed the theme of colonialism quite explicitly. See, for example, Christopher Tomlins, "Law's Wilderness: The Discourse of English Colonizing, the Violence of Intrusion, and the Failures of American History" (unpublished manuscript, on file with author).

[5] This image of the British colonial legal project must be complicated. For my effort to begin this discussion in the context of colonial India, see Parker (2001).

[6] See the exchange between John Borneman and myself in *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* (Borneman 2003; Parker 2003).

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In this regard, I am curious as to how the Hawaiian experience spoke back, if at all, to legal thought and practice in the United States. Merry doesn't tell us—admittedly, doing so would exceed the goals she has set herself. In nineteenth-century Britain, for example, the fact of empire was central to the jurisprudential thought of Bentham, the Mills, Macaulay, Henry Maine, and James Fitzjames Stephen, to name only the best known.[7] Indeed, through the writings of a figure such as Maine, the British empire exercised an influence upon Western legal thought in general and upon American historicist legal thought in particular (I have in mind here the writings of Henry Adams and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. in the 1870s).[8] Does it make sense to ask whether America's own contemporaneous colonial experiences influenced mainstream American legal thinkers and practitioners?

Having flagged *Colonizing Hawai'i*'s place in the literature on U.S. imperialism, let me return, then, to the task I have set myself, namely that of examining *Colonizing Hawai'i* as an attempt at historical anthropology.

I was rather intrigued to learn that *Colonizing Hawai'i* had its genesis in the serendipitous discovery of a set of court records. Merry's account of her own delight and fascination with this discovery is one to which many professional historians will be able to relate. I quote at length from her introduction:

> This project began in the late 1980s when Harry Ball, professor of sociology at the University of Hawai'i, told me that he had rescued sixty years of minute books from the Hilo District Court that were headed for destruction. They were now safely ensconced in the Hawai'i State Archives in Honolulu. Intrigued, I looked at these books, fascinated by the detailed descriptions they included that were written laboriously in longhand, sometimes in Hawaiian, more often in English. They were an intimate slice of everyday life. . . . But these records, although tantalizing in their detail and their stories, were also very opaque. Who were these people? How did these cases fit into the larger context of the social organization of the town? How were they part of larger economic, social, and legal changes? What did they reveal about the legal consciousness of ordinary people? To what extent did the courts support the structure of power relations in town and to what extent were they autonomous from that structure?
>
> Understanding these cases became the core project of this book. As I studied them, I had to constantly expand the context I considered. I began by looking at the texts of the cases themselves, then at the patterns of cases over time. Then I explored

[7] One could cite many different sources here. A classic is Burrow (1966).

[8] For an argument about Maine's impact upon Western legal thought in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Grossi (1977).

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> the social organization of the town, focusing in particular on the judges and attorneys and their relationships with each other. This led to an analysis of the economic and social transformations of the region during the period and of the conceptions of race and difference that underlay the plantation system itself. Although I had hoped that this was a wide enough context, it soon became clear that I had to ask still broader questions: How did this legal system come to Hawai'i in the first place? And how was it different from the legal system that governed Native Hawaiians before this law arrived? Those questions are at the heart of the analysis of colonialism. (pp. 9–10)

The structure of *Colonizing Hawai'i* maps this research trajectory but reverses its order—the first section provides the "context" that Merry builds up to understand the cases that she had stumbled upon, while the second section of the book, which is its real core, explores the "text," namely the serendipitously discovered cases themselves.

The reader will quite easily anticipate what I am about to say. Merry's own account of her initial encounter with her documents, and the way her book is founded upon these documents, is somewhat at odds with the espoused methodology of historical anthropology in which the anthropologist is expected very self-consciously to spurn the coherence of the documentary archive as it presents itself to him or her and to re-create for himself or herself the experience of the open-ended "field." One could, perhaps, accuse *Colonizing Hawai'i* of being a bad example of the method of historical anthropology, but that is not what I want to do here.

Merry herself is laconic, and not especially illuminating, about her archival experience. What I have characterized as historical anthropology's pretension to transform boxes into "fields" shows up as the anthropologist's (by now thoroughly routinized) expression of disappointment about the limitations of written documents vis-à-vis the plenitude of an ethnographic method grounded in "presence":

> As an ethnographer making her first foray into archival work, I found the archives both fascinating and frustrating. I finally felt able to ask questions about change over time and to get some sense of historical processes. . . . On the other hand, this is a slow and fragmentary way of doing ethnography. I wanted to observe, to ask questions, to find ways to fill in the gaps. My archival work has been very substantially supplemented by ethnographic research in Hawai'i, mostly in Hilo, over the last ten years. (p. 10)

However, what intrigues me in Merry's account of her initial encounter with her documents is the way in which she is *compelled* by a sense of their finitude. The documents' physicality—an undeniable aspect of a sense of their finitude—draws Merry in ("Intrigued, I looked at these books, fascinated by the detailed descriptions they

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included that were written laboriously in longhand, sometimes in Hawaiian, more often in English.") The documents' arbitrary truncated-ness—they represent a sixty-year fragment of a much longer chain of documents that has vanished forever and have themselves miraculously escaped destruction—renders them precious. We are told that Dr. Harry Ball, a sociologist at the University of Hawai'i, has "rescued them." They are now "safely ensconced" in the State Archives in Honolulu. Through a shared sense of their finitude, they come to be the object of discussion, curiosity, fascination, solicitude. One can imagine the excited conversations, stretching from Hawai'i to Massachusetts, through which Merry came upon them (of course, I have no idea how everything actually transpired).

It is, above all, a sense of the documents' finitude that determines the manner in which Merry will approach them. Merry sees them as a finite source (an "intimate slice") that contains within itself something much larger and amorphous ("everyday life"). She reveals here the particular pleasure, always accompanied by a sense of risk and precariousness (and therefore richly productive of scholarly debate), that comes from making and grounding larger claims on the basis of something that is approached as "given" (and hence not freely chosen, infinitely expandable, and so on). Here, one could say, far removed from incessant and tiresome debates about objectivity and truth, lies the core of the professional historian's method.

Even when professional historians are making up their own archives, reading selectively, making arbitrary research decisions and so on, I would submit, they often work from a sense of the given that is very different from the anthropologist's point of departure, which is a fantasy of the open-ended. The sense that one's sources are finite—given—entails a certain aesthetic of intellectual practice. Unlike Cohn's and the Comaroffs' anthropologist, the scholar working from a sense of the finitude of sources—no matter how practically inexhaustible that finitude—is drawn somehow to exhaust their finitude in some way. This can take a variety of forms, and historians are masters of several of them. One is finding a "representative" case or sample or figure or event; another is limiting the scope of one's study to discrete sets of records; yet another is to comb disparate sources for references to a single word, theme, name, event, or class of person; and so on. Merry mixes up different historians' approaches to exhausting the finitude of sources: her cases are put forth as "representative" of a larger finite whole, they constitute a discrete set of records that she covers thoroughly, and she mines them for specific kinds of information such as the identity of litigants. Indeed, she appears to have practiced the most rigorous form of social history-type inductive research: "I began by

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looking at the text of the cases themselves, then at the patterns of the cases over time. Then I explored . . . " (p. 10). One recognizes clearly here the seduction of finitude—Merry follows several methodological paths leading straight out from a sense of finitude.

To describe the historical enterprise as proceeding from a sense of the "given" or the finite is not, of course, to endorse it. Cohn's and the Comaroffs' critique that the historian's document fetishism results in theoretical naïveté is occasionally valid, but the dangers are greater yet. Accompanying a sense of the finitude of sources and the impulse to exhaust that finitude is often—but not necessarily—a sense of the equivalence of sources. Where the goal becomes one of going through *all* the dusty boxes, every box might begin to look like every other box in its "boxness" (which does not mean that some boxes might not look more exciting, representative, or important than others). Indeed, the mutual equivalence of the boxes of sources may be another version of the mutual equivalence of every unit of historical time (after all, the boxes stand for time, and vice versa). In its resolute cataloguing of the boxes, I submit, *Colonizing Hawai'i* is too heavily wedded to the "homogeneous, empty time" of history (Benjamin 1969), and not sufficiently cognizant that historical time itself is an artifice for situating everything "in" time (witness the book's heavy reliance upon charts organized by decade or by year). Different temporalities are absent when the "cultural logics"—Merry's term—of natives and colonizers brush up against each other. In this regard, *Colonizing Hawai'i* is, of course, no different from a work of professional history today. But Merry's anthropological training would place her in a unique position, one imagines, to reveal such different temporalities. How would that complicate the "history" she tells?[9]

The account offered above suggests that exponents of the method of historical anthropology should, at the very least, be cognizant of the risks of a trip to the archives (I use the term *risks* ironically). Much as they might try to replace the historian's imagined finitude of the archives with the anthropologist's imagined open-endedness of the "field," they might, like Merry, end up being seduced by the sense of finitude through which the archive presents itself to us and end up following a methodological path that leads out from that sense of finitude. Inevitably, as anthropologists imbued with the fantasy of the open-endedness of the "field," they will as a result experience archival work—exactly as Merry does—as "fascinating and frustrating." And they might seek, as Merry does, to "supplement" their archival work through more conventional ethnographic practices. But they might succumb to the risks nevertheless.

[9] For a historian's attempt to work through these issues, see Chakraborty (2000).

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I will conclude by dodging what for many, including myself, is the really interesting question. I have spoken of the seductions of the boxes in the archives. But what accounts for these seductions? There is a range of answers one might supply from philosophical, historical, anthropological, psychological, and other perspectives. No single perspective—nor all of them taken together—can tell us. One highly entertaining attempt by a practicing historian is Arlette Farge's book, *Le goût de l'archive* (1989). But we need more work, across the disciplines, that grapples with this question. Perhaps Merry herself might afford us an anthropologist's "take."

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