

REVIEW ARTICLE

HISTORY AND KINSHIP: TWO RECENT BOOKS

JACK GOODY, *The development of the family and marriage in Europe*, Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press 1983. xii, 221pp., Maps, Figures, Tables, Appendixes, Bibliography, Index. £25.00.

ANDREJS PLAKANS, *Kinship in the Past: An Anthropology of European Family Life 1500-1900*, Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell 1984. x, 262pp., Figures, Tables, Bibliography, Index. £24.50.

Evans-Pritchard regarded 'social anthropology as being closer to certain kinds of history than to the natural sciences'¹ and thus distanced himself firmly from the anti-historicism of the functionalists. Indeed, the lecture in which this then iconoclastic view was expressed also recorded the increasing acceptability of history to post-functionalist British anthropologists in particular, though it certainly did not precipitate it, for as Evans-Pritchard himself made clear, the trend was already under way. But there was still a long way to go before there would be a true meeting of minds from the two disciplines; despite sharing the overall aim of evaluating the nature of human society, their differing methods and the particular themes on which they focused their attention still served to keep them apart.

These two recent books are, on the face of it, admirably suited to assess how far that situation has improved in the quarter of a century since Evans-Pritchard delivered his lecture. Both deal with themes in the history of European kinship, and in that sense they unite the two areas that have traditionally been at the heart of these respective disciplines. The first is an imaginative attempt to fuse the two scholarly traditions in a way that, on the whole, Evans-Pritchard would probably have approved; the second, however, leaves the impression that we are left with the same old log-jam. Let us examine them in a little more detail.

¹ 'Anthropology and History', in his *Essays in Social Anthropology*, London: Faber and Faber, 1962 p. 46.

Goody's book examines the influence of the Christian Church on the ideas and practices of kinship in European history. His thesis essentially is that from the early Middle Ages on, the Church was instrumental in weakening the hold of local kin groups over their members and in encouraging individual control, especially over the disposal of property. This was to the Church's advantage, since as a consequence much of this property was left to it, and this in turn enabled it to grow in strength and influence by supporting its monastic, pastoral and charitable activities. In order to achieve this, the use of wills and other written legal devices such as bookland were encouraged, and prohibitions were imposed upon marriages with close kin, as well as on adoption, concubinage and divorce. The effect of the latter group of prohibitions was to rule out virtually entirely any means whereby those left childless by a first marriage could obtain an heir; and this, together with fear for the fate of a person's soul and supported by written documents, allowed the Church to become the heir of many properties in the face of kin group opposition. Finally, the kin group was weakened still further by the extra limitations imposed by the redefinition of the degrees of kinship in the eleventh century. As a result, 'one could no longer marry anyone from whom one could have formerly inherited, i.e. kinsfolk' (p.136).

Goody admits that such policies were not necessarily designed just to bring property into the Church, but that in some cases supported its authority generally, or had doctrinal advantages: 'The rejection of adoption attacked the worship of the ancestors, since the provision of an heir and the provision of a worshipper were inextricably woven together' (p. 42). But often the Church was acting not only against custom and Roman legal tradition but against scriptural authority also. For example, the Gospels enjoined poverty: but the eventual recruitment of the wealthy into the Church forced a redefinition of scriptural authority on it, which in its turn was to provoke sectarian reaction such as that of the Cathars.

This is a novel thesis, and much of it relies on assertion rather than evidence. At the start, Goody relies more heavily on minimising the contrasts between the Arab lands and Europe than some might feel wise, choosing the side of those who support the view that close marriages and bilateral inheritance alongside basically patrilineal descent occurred uniformly throughout these areas until late antiquity. While not wholly rejecting the opposite view, the distinctions he finds are not areal ones, but those between urban and rural situations right around the Mediterranean and in Northern Europe. Also, the attribution of true descent groups to many parts of pre-Christian Europe cannot be at all certain: Goody himself mentions vassalage as well as descent as a possible mode of recruitment into Scottish clans (p. 216). Finally, he has little to say about the Orthodox areas of Europe, despite the fact that, being under the control of a Church independent of Roman authority, they might have provided instructive contrasts with which to test his theories.

Nonetheless, there are a number of points in their favour. The reforms detailed above are pretty well attested, and the

Church's concern for its property can also be invoked to explain its ban on the marriage of all clergy (not just the higher clergy) from the fourth century onwards, a reform which put a brake on the tendency to divert such property to the children of the clergy generally. There is also the eventual restoration of parental authority over marriage in much of Protestant Europe as part of the general reaction against the Catholic Church from the sixteenth century onwards. Finally, even in the Middle Ages, at the height of the Church's influence, there were reactions to its policy - not only from the Cathars and other poverty-advocating sects, but also from secular governments alarmed at the Church's acquisition of property (on which their own power equally depended); and popular evasion and such strategies as wife-sales as a way round the ban on divorce constituted other reactions, less explicit and combative in character, but nonetheless real.

What of the implications of the book for other theories and scholarly debates? One German scholar has already invoked Goody's thesis in support of his search for evidence of prescription in German and English kin terms - in particular, the discussion of changes in European kin terms, in which Goody sets out to show that the present-day pattern of P ≠ PG has evolved from one in which P ≠ PssG ≠ PosG (Appendix 3).² Secondly, there is further support for Dumont's examination of the connection between Christianity and the rise of individualism in the West. Thirdly, the tendency towards close marriages which Goody claims for pre-Christian Europe contradicts, like that in the Arab lands, Lévi-Strauss's doctrine of the universal importance of the principle of exchange as the foundation of marriage alliance and, by extension, of human society generally (p. 43).

Finally, it is clear that, despite the fact that the increasing secularisation of recent centuries has greatly diminished the Church's control over kinship and property, the momentum of change has been maintained and even increased. There has been no overall return to what Goody claims were the close marriages of times before that control was imposed - quite the reverse, with a marked if often exaggerated trend away from marriage and the raising of families in many parts of Europe and North America, the increased social acceptability of unmarried motherhood, less social pressure to get and stay married, and the imaginable but as yet unclear impact of recent medical advances concerning human reproduction. Contrary to this, one could certainly argue that divorce has received increased legal approbation, though a recent paper shows the supposed prior difficulty of divorce in England to have been exaggerated, at least for the period since the start of the eighteenth century.³ Nonetheless, Goody's book might still provide

² Georg Pfeffer, 'Symmetrische Präskription in germanischen Verwandtschaftsterminologien', *Sociologus*, Vol. XXXV no.1, 1985, pp. 53-73; a similar paper on English kin terms by the same author is to appear shortly in *L'Homme* (personal communication).

³ Sybil Wolfram, 'Divorce in England 1700-1857', *Oxford Journal*

further ammunition for those trying to remove the Church's remaining control over divorce in countries such as Ireland and Italy. Moreover, despite secularisation, our modern conceptions of incest still tend to correspond to the Church's precepts, at least as far as the law is concerned; and if these really were innovatory in themselves, then recent suggestions and occasional instances of allowing marriages between close cousins, half-siblings, in-laws, etc., in Britain, Scandinavia, the United States, etc., would seem less radical and could derive an additional argument from this book. Whether it will be invoked in this way only time will tell, but it is certainly one of those rare anthropological works that should appeal to a wider, non-specialist readership.

From Goody, an anthropologist looking at a problem located in history, we turn to Plakans, a historian approaching ordinary historical sources with a view to anthropological results. His book is in fact an exhaustive methodology intended to introduce two later substantive volumes, one on the kinship of the Russian Baltic provinces in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, the other on the kinship of the Schwalm district of Hesse in West Germany in the earlier part of the mid-nineteenth century. Most of it is concerned to discuss the possibility of using the sorts of data familiar to social historians - censuses, wills, marriage documents, etc., both singly and in combination - for the task of reconstructing historical kinship systems.

One immediately obvious limitation of his discussion is that he concentrates much more on descent than on marriage. Even on the former, many will feel that his reliance on functionalist notions - especially Radcliffe-Brown, Nadel and Fortes - and on the Banton-Nadel role model in his discussion of what constitutes 'significant' kinship are outmoded, not to mention his confident assertion that 'most of the systematic correlations of various social traits have shown societies to have a considerable degree of correspondence between such traits as terminology, rules of residence, rules of descent and forms of marriage' (p.116). But at least the problem of deciding what was emphasised at a popular level out of the welter of kindred and other kin ties and descent lines traceable in the documents is realised and faced, and Plakans is clearly aware of the drawbacks of relying just on genealogies to establish indigenous conceptions of kinship (pp. 74-5). Indeed, the difficulty of obtaining information as to the ideational component of kinship from such material is seen as their major drawback, possibly irresolvable: not even the codes of the legislators give a dependable guide as to the ideas of the people for whom they were legislating, and only by inference as to their actual practice; and unlike the field anthropologist, the historian cannot simply go and ask further questions about his data from the nearest suitable informant. But this does not exhaust the problems presented by this sort of evidence. Since the historian is stuck with evidence which provides only a limited set of perspectives, he may be restricted as to the sort of substantive conclusions he can arrive

of Legal Studies, Vol. V no.2, 1985, pp. 155-86.

at: e.g. household lists may give good information about co-residence, but little about the wider genealogical links of those involved.

There is also the converse problem, although it is one that can be corrected by the researcher's vigilance, namely that he may wrongly come to regard the data as useful at one level of analysis only - e.g. concentrating on lineage links to the unnecessary exclusion of those of smaller family units (pp. 192-3). Correcting this may, however, mean going many times over the same body of data, which is likely to be enormous in the first place. Indeed, it is the sheer volume of data involved that makes such endeavours so daunting. And although one would have thought the computer ready-made for such work, Plakans rejects this (p. 243), putting his faith instead in network analysis (pp. 131-2, chapter 10), a method suitable for behaviour rather than ideas. The field anthropologist is not faced with these problems, since not only can he circumvent them by asking further questions, but he also finds it easier to move sideways into new perspectives in relation to the data that interests him. The social historian's sources are only likely to be increased by obtaining more of the same, in a sort of arithmetical progression, again useful for judging behaviour, but which no amount of computing or network analysis or inferential cogitation can turn into conceptions of ideal or actual kinship. Statistics and ideologies form essentially contrasting bodies of data: they can be juxtaposed in a complementary fashion but ultimately they apply to different levels of analysis.

Plakans suggests in his final chapter that historians have done more than anthropologists to bridge the gap between the two disciplines. On the face of it he is right. The functionalists, of course, rejected history, not as bad in itself, but as irrecoverable in most cases in any form of use to anthropologists, this being one of their fundamental objections to the evolutionist and diffusionist schools they sought to replace. And long after the rest of their intellectual inheritance has been discarded, the general suspicion, not to say hostility, that commonly greets anything today smacking of evolutionism remains as their legacy. Even most structuralists regard history as a purely contingent matter, useful in that it may have a bearing on, for example, the study of tradition and its place in contemporary societies, or simply on the way things have come to be as they are, but not in explaining why they should remain of value at the present day.

Plakans clearly regards method rather than concepts as the basic problem. Anthropologists may find data in history of confirmatory value to their own work, and the list is long of those who have incorporated the great literary civilisations of the past in large-scale comparative work on the basis of historical research (e.g. Frazer, Hocart, Eliade, most of the *Année Sociologique* school). But although increasingly prepared to examine the past of whichever people they are studying, anthropologists treat this as just another source of data, not as an end in itself, and they invariably prefer to leave the nuts and bolts of historical reconstruction to historians, preferring where at all possible to concentrate on what they can ask informants directly about. Con-

versely, historians generally find their data too limited and piecemeal to provide a true anthropological picture, even though they may sometimes find inspiration in anthropological concepts; the latter are almost invariably treated uncritically and in order to provide confirmatory support, whereas anthropologists cite their colleagues' work at least as often to modify or contradict it as to confirm or approve it, and thus are more likely to carry the subject forward. The circumspection, even diffidence, of historians inhibits them when faced with anthropological ideas, and as a result their work tends to remain social history rather than anthropology. Contrary to what Plakans suggests, therefore, it would seem that anthropologists have done at least as much, perhaps more, to bridge this gap, despite a certain tendency to reduce history to the status of merely one more source of data to be set alongside their own fieldwork and their colleagues' ethnography.

Yet in fact the contrast between the two disciplines is not confined to methodology or the nature of their respective sources; it is also a matter of perspective. While there have been many historians of ideas, history has tended to concentrate on the narration and analysis of events or the description and analysis of social trends - in a word, on behaviour. Conversely, while aspects of behaviour have always been of interest to anthropologists - indeed some schools, like the transactionalists, are almost obsessed by it - it is indigenous ideologies that they have increasingly made the object of their attention. Secondly, whereas historians emphasise, even dramatize change, anthropologists (except, perhaps, those specifically interested in social change) tend to see continuity of tradition through and despite such changes. Finally, while the overall aim of understanding human nature may be shared (and not only by these two disciplines, of course), the end product is very different. History has not managed to create much in the way of an identifiable body of theory beyond grand designs in the manner of Toynbee or Spengler, some speculations as to the inevitability of history, 'interpretations' such as those of Macaulay or Pieter Geyl, and a general interest in the mechanism of cause and effect - with individual works fairly compartmentalised and discontinuous, one from another. The scope for comparison seems to be quite limited, unlike that in anthropology, which as a result has always generated as much theory as fact, despite a continuous process of revision which has left little intact from generation to generation (perhaps this simply means that historians are more honest). Indeed, it is the command of theory that brings influence in anthropology: only a very few have achieved positions of eminence on the basis of fieldwork alone, despite the great emphasis placed on its importance.

Thus unlike philosophy or linguistics or (in previous eras) the natural sciences, history has not been able to contribute much in the way of conceptual tools or models to anthropology, and its impact seems to have been restricted to that of providing some raw data, often incomplete, and of helping to preserve (not unaided) a diachronic awareness among anthropologists. As a result, the latter have long been used to treading different paths, while at the

same time freely exploiting historical material where appropriate. Goody's book, though bound to be controversial, shows just what can be achieved by an anthropologist using purely historical data to cast light upon an area of research central to anthropology rather than to history. It will be interesting to see whether Plakans' future projects are as successful, given the sources he intends to use and the very different methodological and academic tradition in which he is accustomed to work.

R.J. PARKIN