Introduction

History as a Resource in Postmodern Societies

MÁIRÉAD NIC CRAITH and MICHAELA FENSKE

How do people use history to shape their lives, places and ‘worlds’? Which kind of history do they use, and in what ways? What are the functions of history in this context? How do people interact with places and spaces by constructing history, and what are the implications of these constructions for a sense of place? These are some of the questions explored in this special issue of the *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* on history and place-making.

In a previous issue of *AJEC*, Christian Giordano (2012: 20) argued that anthropologists and historians have different conceptions of history: ‘While for history time is concrete, objective and exogenous to human beings, for anthropology it is characterised by its being condensed, collectively subjective and endogenous’. Anthropologists and historians are ‘coming at’ history from different timeframes. The historian delves into history in order to establish the factual past, but the anthropologist is more concerned with the impact of history on present everyday lives. In other words, the anthropologist is ‘present-centred’, whereas the historian could be said to be ‘past-centred’.

Anthropologists have rarely considered the relevance of history in the societies they were studying, although Giordano points to exceptions such as Edward Evans-Pritchard, Eric Wolf and Marshall Sahlins. In her contribution to this issue, Cornish refers to the ‘historical turn’ in anthropology which occurred in the late 1980s, and draws our attention to anthropologists who have explored the impact of history on everyday lives. But the concept of history itself is not necessarily clear. Nic Craith (this issue) mentions the commonly accepted dichotomy between Western ‘linear’ history which begins in the distant past and culminates in the contemporary. She contrasts this with the sense of time enjoyed by indigenous people who intuit memory in a circular fashion – beginning and ending in the present time. However, Cornish points out that Western history is not as simple as is commonly assumed.

While the distinction between myth and history is fairly obvious, Cornish argues that the Western concept of history is far from simple

but is constantly re-shaped. Cornish discusses her role as an anthropologist in exploring the past, which is different from that of a historian. She is not so much interested in determining the facts as in establishing the story; how that narrative has changed over time and why it was repositioned and reshaped. Her case study of the fighting woman of Bodmin illustrates the shifting re-negotiation and representation of one specific narrative in different ways. Her case study of the display and burial of the skeleton of Joan Wytte provides a lens to examine how the past is used to help shape senses of meaning and identity in the world through materiality, place and narrative. This is similar to the case study of Columba/Colmcille presented by Nic Craith, which illustrates how the tradition of oral history is constantly embellished and refreshed over time. Perhaps then, any distinction between linear and circular history reflects boundaries between written and oral historical narratives rather than between Western and indigenous peoples.

Every narrative is multi-faceted and Gouriévidis's contribution to this volume explores different strands of the memorialisation of the Highland Clearances in Scotland which had an impact at local, regional and international levels. Gouriévidis's essay surveys the role of Scottish museums in the separation and presentation of different strands of memory of one of the most painful and controversial themes in modern Scottish history. Nic Craith points to other agents in the re-presentation of memory. In the case of Columba/Colmcille, the narrative has been reshaped by different secular and religious actors according to local circumstances and power struggles. Nic Craith's contribution explores the power of oral history to generate tension and controversy among rival groups. As various actors come to the fore, a particular version of the narrative gains legitimacy. In many instances, the renegotiation of memory arose in the context of sometimes political, sometimes religious power struggles.

Power struggles feature frequently in this volume and oral history can generate empathy or outrage with certain initiatives in the past. François's essay on the commemorative culture of 'Waterloo' in the first half of the nineteenth century points to the symbolism of the battlefield as a representation of the power of the British Empire. Holtorf argues that zoos are also based on an imperial model, since exotic animals were only maintained by the wealthier classes. Zoos illustrate the Western claim to domination of cultures of the world in time and space. This links the management of zoos with colonial nation-states.

Cornish illustrates the use of oral history to assert authority and legitimacy over witches. These formidable creatures who could heal

or curse in an instant were more feared than admired and aroused contradictory emotions in the wider society. Changing versions of the story of the Fairy Woman of Bodmin reflected power struggles between these extraordinarily talented women and society at large. Sometimes the narratives themselves are designed to lend legitimacy to certain episodes in the past, as in Gouriévidis's example of the 'national narrative' of the Highland Clearances. This is designed to lend legitimacy and authority to state expulsions of ordinary peasants in favour of sheep-keeping and more profitable forms of activity.

However, power is multi-directional. In Fenske's contribution, we witness the movement of power from the centre to the periphery. Her essay features an annual Biedermeier market in Werben, one of the smallest towns in Germany. For a few days each year, Werben becomes the centre of activity, and the focus shifts from centre to periphery as well as from present to past. Fenske's exploration of the market suggests a strong effort on behalf of the local population to provide an 'authentic experience' of oral history for the tourist. Only 'historically faithful' salespersons, artists and artisans are allowed to offer products during market days. The occupations represented at the market are historical and include soap boilers, painters, potters and other traditional activities. No gas or electricity is allowed. The organisers dress up in 'authentic' clothing. The demand for authenticity is a field for permanent discussion. And yet, as Fenske notes, one is really talking about the 'fiction of authenticity' since the boundary between authentic and inauthentic is blurred.

François also explores the pursuit of authenticity by visitors to the battlefield of Waterloo, which was at odds with their longing for a familiar experience on site. François argues that these two forces are in continuous tension and require ongoing negotiation in new and creative ways. Nineteenth-century British travellers to the battlefield of Waterloo were often frustrated by their lack of an authentic experience. The battlefield was empty of meaningful markers. There was no tangible link to well-known narratives of the battle. Ultimately visitors were relying on the tourist infrastructure to mediate the battlefield experience. However the pursuit of authenticity may be a useless quest since, as Bendix (1997) points out, the dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic is not necessarily obvious and any experience of authenticity/inauthenticity is usually blended.

In his analysis of the Berlin *Zoologischer Garten*, Holtorf points to another example of the blending of elements of authenticity and the inauthentic. Zoos in principle are hardly authentic since the animals

are not really wild but have been raised in safe, restricted environments. The basis of their authenticity is their natural genetic inheritance – a heritage which is then explained to visitors in text format. However, zoo animals also contribute to our experience of authenticity by removing us from our everyday reality and confronting us with strange places, distant and exciting times. Having consumed the exotic, we can then return to the familiar. The entire zoo experience is planned to satisfy our need for the exotic, and the format of the zoo itself is determined by visitor expectations. The buildings and architecture are designed to appeal to visitors. The zoo restaurant, the availability of cuddly toys and the ‘adoption’ of zoo animals enhance our ‘feeling of authenticity’ as well as generating valuable income for the institution itself.

History has become an economic resource in places such as Werben, and the narratives represented are often shaped by tourist expectations. In the case of the Highland Clearances, for example, an emphasis on the international/emigration strand of the narrative is designed to appeal to the diaspora as the potential consumers of and contributors to the local economy. His-tourism is the term given by François to highlight the commercialisation of nineteenth-century visits to the battlefield of Waterloo. Sale of relics and other memorabilia were commonplace. Tourists were usually offered the services of guides. Accommodation and food were available at local hostels. Although prices were often exorbitant, visitors still bought memorabilia in order to enhance their experience.

But if our experience of history is constantly mediated by factors such as museums, political actors or the visitor experience – how do we come to ‘know’ the narratives? How can we establish the basis for authenticity – if ever? Is society constantly buying into a form of social capital that ‘may be modified, invented or even imagined by people or groups with the skills or the power to manipulate and exploit them’ (Giordano 2012: 32)? Essays in this special issue point to rituals such as becoming involved in reconstructions, enjoying pageants, visiting museums and walking the battlefield as ways in which we come to know history, but the version of the past that we consume does not necessarily align with that of the historian. Our acquired epistemology is not necessarily knowledge of facts. Instead it ‘may be likened to a pliable substance made of myths, symbols and social constructions needed for domination strategies and resistance practices or employed as objects of identification, elements of social cohesion or triggers of conflicts between groups’ (Giordano 2012: 32).

This is a form of social knowledge which reinforces our sense of self and sense of place. As a result of these experiences, we have an enhanced sense of place – be that our local place, diaspora or colonial spaces etc. The zoo experience (as outlined by Holtorf) allows us to visit a different place with exotic animals and then return to our own place and the relative safety of our own homes. The Biedermeier market in Werben offers an opportunity to visit a ‘foreign place’ – a historical place. Some visitors are delighted with a chance ‘to go back to the East’. It is also an opportunity to visit a rural, calm place. Even the journey to Werben is a step backwards in time. One is engaging in time travel, and the experience of getting there involves ‘slowing down’, since Werben doesn’t have the transport infrastructure of the big city. Time travel to the Battlefield of Waterloo can strengthen a sense of Britishness for British tourists since Waterloo has been regarded as ‘little Britain’ on the Continent. This is due to a perception of ‘shared (British) values’ such as an attachment to liberalism. There is also a clear connection between the British and Belgian royal families. In visiting the battlefield, British tourists were taking part in the success of Britain and strengthening their links to the British imagined community.

Although visitors to Werben or the battlefield of Waterloo or to Scottish or Cornish museums may be going back in time, the historical dimension is not of primary significance in itself. It is the impact of this time travel on contemporary society that concerns them and us as anthropologists – and in particular, the issue of how history shapes our current perceptions of self and of place. It is questions such as these that prompted the establishment of the SIEF (*Société Internationale d’Ethnologie et de Folklore*) working group ‘Historical Approaches in Cultural Analysis’, which aims to explore how people refer to history to shape their lives and places, using different methods and approaches to understand the construction, production and function of history and histories in pre-modern, modern and postmodern societies. In 2011, a panel on this theme was presented at the SIEF conference at the University of Lisbon. The convenors for that original workshop were Michaela Fenske (co-editor of this volume) and Hester Dibbits. Some of the papers in this volume were originally presented at the conference. However, the editors have also invited other contributions that explore the significance of oral history for anthropologists.

The case studies presented here argue for the ongoing significance of oral history – even at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They endorse the view that folk history continues to be significant – even

in an age of technology (Bausinger 1990). They point to ongoing differences in methodology and epistemology between historians and anthropology. While historians primarily work in linear time going from the past to the present, we would argue that anthropologists work in circular time, continually going back and forwards from the present to the past.

References

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