I

Eleven years ago, in 1985, *Focaal* was founded in the backyard of a student house in the university town of Nijmegen. It was the first of two anthropology journals in the Netherlands to be started by students and to subsequently become a prime outlet for anthropological writing in this country (the other is *Etnofoor*). This issue is meant to celebrate its first decade, to testify to its current vitality, and to set signposts for the next years.

The present issue could not be devoted to anything but anthropology and history. This is easy to explain. The conjunction of anthropology and history was the principal intellectual thread that tied its supporters together during this demanding decade of institutional stagnation and enforced ‘mobility’ for younger researchers (downwards quite often, sideways more often than not, but upwards also). Its editors were initially based in Nijmegen, where under the direction of Anton Blok a strong historical and indeed interdisciplinary orientation had developed. In later years, many of the journal’s editors were connected to the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, where historical anthropology had found a fertile, eclectic, and ‘anti-disciplinary’ institutional soil. Throughout these years the journal featured several issues covering themes in anthropology and history. But the reasons for a more pointed and sustained theoretical discussion were clearly accumulating.

We decided that our tenth anniversary was a good opportunity to reflect and discuss deeper on the basic theoretical and methodological issues within this interdisciplinary conjunction. In more prosaic and existential terms: What have we been doing? What are the ways to do it? What are the prizes possibly to be won, the pleasures to be hoped for? What are the setbacks to be faced?

*Focaal’s* decade, however modest, coincided with an older and wider current of scholarly attention for anthropology and history. In the Netherlands this period started with Anton Blok’s and Jojada Verrips’ studies of respectively the mafia in Sicily and the role of religion in the political development of a Dutch farming community (Blok 1974, Verrips...
1978). This early Dutch work was part of an international movement among anthropologists to study both temporal change, the role of culture therein, and the importance of wider spatial networks and power-relationships. Arguably, the combination of these three elements formed a basic rationale behind the work of such eminent authors as Eric Wolf, Sidney Mintz, and Marshall Sahlins (Mintz 1974, 1985, Sahlins 1985, 1995, Wolf 1968, 1982). We do not intend to recount the recent history of this anthropology (see for example Gulliver and Silverman 1992, Comaroff and Comaroff 1992), but it is important here to recall that the development of historical anthropology along these lines was motivated by an explicit critique on structural functionalism and culturalism in much contemporary anthropology, aimed at its static, isolationist, and idealist presumptions. This is well summarized by Don Handelman’s effective remark that “unlike historians, anthropologists need analytical reasons for doing history” (this issue).

It is well known that the anthropological turn to history was matched by an increasing interest in anthropology among historians. This movement, however, was less of a piece than the opposite current among anthropologists. It seems hard to detect a common concern or motivation beyond the general attraction of anthropology’s humanism, its ear for the ‘native’s point of view’, and its narrative style. These anthropological devices were used for two general purposes: firstly, as an alternative for a purportedly reigning positivism and structuralism in the historical trade, especially in social history, and secondly as a more or less explicitly postmodernist, solution for what was held to be the exhaustion of the ‘grand narratives’ of modernity and modernization. In this conjuncture, anthropology came to stand in a very general way for a search for authentic human experience in history. It functioned as one of the rallying cries for Lawrence Stone’s ‘revival of narrative’ (Stone 1979) or Lynn Hunt’s ‘new cultural history’ (Hunt 1989), rather than as a specific theoretical or methodological program with an explicit set of key questions, concepts, and strategies. The attraction clearly sprang from its conventional style and approach. Consequently, the balance between historians and anthropologists was highly uneven. While the former generally sought inspiration for what Charles Tilly (Tilly 1984) has called ‘retrospective ethnography’ (‘anthropological history’ in our terms), the latter looked for means precisely to overcome the limits of such classic ethnography.

It is fair to say that some streams within the larger historical current toward anthropology had clearly more affinity with the emerging critical historical anthropology program. The movements of Anglosaxon ‘people’s history’ and ‘history from below’, Italian ‘micro-history’, and German ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ are good examples. Their theoretical import, particularly in the non-populist versions of Italian micro-history and German everyday-life history, differed substantially from, and is much more specific than, the great anthropologizing examples such as Le Roy Ladurie’s Montaillou (1975), Peter Burke’s cultural histories (1978, 1987), or the work of Natalie Davis (Davis 1975, 1983; see Levi 1991 on micro-history; Sharpe 1991 on history from below; Lüdtke 1989 on Alltagsgeschichte).

The conjunction of anthropology and history, we figured, resulted therefore in minimally two clearly discernable problematics: historical anthropology and anthropological history. We decided to put this claim before the academic forum by way of a position paper and an invitation to respond. Although we were aware of the merits of an open interdisciplinary field of research as against the rigidities of a disciplined normal science, we believed that it was becoming increasingly productive to identify central programmatic differences and disputes within the encounter of anthropology and history than seek the illusory comfort of a vague alliance. Our aim was to raise the self-consciousness of authors in the field and to help sharpen their tools.
Here is the position paper which we sent to almost seventy authors in January 1995. As a starting point we chose to concentrate on the methodology of the micro-perspective, which is generally seen as one of the defining characteristics of the anthropological approach. This is what we wrote:

A famous oneliner by Clifford Geertz is in the center of a major but unrealized debate within the conjunction of anthropology and history. Geertz wrote “Anthropologists don’t study villages ...; they study in villages”. Professor Frijhoff, a Dutch promoter of historical anthropology and leader of a recent large-scale project on ‘Culture and society in the Netherlands, 1500-1850’ explicitly wishes to part way with Geertz’s methodological dictum because historians, in contrast to anthropologists, should treat the village as their material object, he says, and not merely as a methodological device for scale reduction. Another participant in the movement of historical anthropology, however, Giovanni Levi, recently summoned Geertz’s dictum again in support of small-scale study. Scale reduction, he argues, is a method with particular humanistic merits, and not a goal in itself.

We believe that behind this superficially futile disagreement lies a key methodological debate; a debate that touches at the heart of historical anthropological method.

In his recent discussion of historical approaches and methodologies, Christopher Lloyd has highlighted the centrality of anthropological research methods for solving the perennial human science dilemma’s of structure-action, description-explanation, nomothesis-ideography (Lloyd 1993). He exposes Geertz’s method of ‘thick description’ to convince social scientists that anthropologists have realized in empirical study what scholars as Antony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu have tried to spell out by developing theoretical neologisms such as ‘structuration’ and ‘habitus’, that is, the necessity to dynamize static polarities that weaken our ability to construct persuasive insights in society and history. The attractiveness of anthropological method, Lloyd indicates, is precisely accomplished by wedding a dynamic interest in culture to the historical study of evolving social organization by way of scale reduction. Large questions are posed to intimate settings. Scale reduction and scope expansion may go hand in hand.

Considering the centrality of anthropological methods for the advancement of historical social science as underlined by Lloyd, the disagreement between Levi and Frijhoff loses the appearance of an incident. The methodology of scale reduction may well turn out to be a major divide within the movement of historical anthropology.

It is our contention that historical anthropology approaches increasingly fall into one of two paradigms. There is what we could call the anthropological history paradigm, where anthropology is used as a repository of hermeneutic methods derived from the work of authors such as Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, Arnold Van Gennep, and Emile Durkheim. Anthropology here functions as a vehicle for the movement away from social history and historical sociology, and towards a new cultural history. The goal seems to be to write cultural histories of epochs, but increasingly also of groups and subgroups. The work of Peter Burke can count as a good example, like that of Le Goff, Le Roy Ladurie, and Frijhoff. Anthropology here becomes subservient to a historiography of mentalities by offering tools to decode col-
lective representations.

The other paradigm is that of historical anthropology. Here anthropology offers the method of scale reduction to overcome, à la Lloyd, social science polarities of structure and action. The questions asked are not limited to the group or locality under study, but pertain to larger issues such as the nature of power, the direction of historical change, typical patterns of social relationship and dependency, household formation, the function of religion et cetera. Studies here rather address the social science traditions of Marx, Weber, Elias, and do not negate their affinities with social history and historical sociology. The goal is to refine concepts of social change, domination, action, consciousness. Instead of establishing the nature of collective representations and mentalities, research in this vein hopes to elucidate the space of autonomy, deviance, protest or *Eigensinn*. Good examples are Gerald Sider, Carlo Ginzburg, Hans Medick, Eric Wolf, Alf Lüdtke, Giovanni Levi.

We realize that it may be unfruitful or premature to attribute divergent theoretical orientations and research strategies to an outright conflict of paradigms. One cannot create a simple polarity from the dynamic hybrid of an evolving scientific field. Nevertheless, we believe that it might be clarifying to start a discussion with a clear statement. Positions can then be modified, distinctions can be introduced, and conditions specified.

Can you respond to the following questions:

1) To what extent do you acknowledge a conflict of paradigms, or at least a methodological divide, within the field of historical anthropology? Is there an unwaged debate, and is our representation of it valid?

2) Could you review work in your (sub)field that either seems to underline the idea of a division/opposition as we have represented it, or on the contrary transgresses our lines of demarcation?

3) What is the specific function of scale reduction in your own work? What is its purpose? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

If you wish you can react to one or more of the following theses:

The method of scale reduction necessarily discovers human diversity. It is essential to conceive of human difference not simply as a natural product of history tout court, but as the consequence of the interplay of local life and global change.

Historical anthropologists commonly hold that ‘small facts speak to large issues’. However, if that is the case, we ought to be much more specific about the status and merits of diverse genres of generalization and comparison.

History is real, but construed. This implies that historical researchers evaluate sources in the light of wider power relationships, as well as design ways to give those people a voice who had little to vote.
In January 1995 we invited some seventy authors from Canada, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Scandinavia, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States to respond. Reactions to this initiative were remarkably positive. Almost thirty authors initially planned to submit an article. We are now able to present nineteen relevant contributions. These contributions are unevenly spread over the two disciplines. From the historical trade we publish five reactions (Burke, Cohen, Medick, Rebel, Van den Brink), while the other fourteen are from anthropologists. This is certainly due to the nature of our network, since we invited only sixteen professional historians. The overwhelming majority of those who declined found the initiative welcome and the terms of debate useful. Many of them apologized for not having time. Some of those who had the intention to write, in the end failed to submit because of pressure from other commitments or due to a lack of inspiration.

Of those who declined three deserve special mention, not only because they are leading authors in the field but also because of their telling explications. Marshall Sahlins wrote that we were apparently not familiar with his work since we reproduced dichotomies that he had been trying to go beyond (he was, moreover, recovering from back-surgery). Eric Wolf and James Scott gave other arguments. Wolf found the discussion “too complex” for him: “I tend to approach such questions from a wholly pragmatic point of view. It seems to me that what kind of history (or sociology or anthropology or economics or political science) you need should depend on what you want to do with it”. Scott, likewise, argued that he had always been trying to do theory and research together, and that he did not see the point of a presumably abstract debate. Wolf’s and Scott’s positions certainly reflect a much wider pragmatic habit in the field. Many anthropologists and historians (this is where they become absolutely unified) are somehow allergic to explicit theoretical or methodological argument. Paradoxically, neither Wolf nor Scott can be accused of any such ‘fetishism of the field’ (or of the archive).

As we have seen, historians and anthropologists had different agenda’s when they started their interdisciplinary exchange, and these agenda’s were in fact anchored in the internal dynamics of their disciplines and to their respective responses to wider societal change. We have tried to summarize these different projects under three rubrics which might help to order and interpret the individual contributions. Of course we are aware that different classifications can be made and that the allocation of articles to a section can be disputed. Nevertheless we think that our grid, as well as our allocative decisions, are justifiable and helpful in the light of the present discussion.

We have called our sections: (1) ‘Finding culture (and anthropology)’; (2) ‘Pluralizing culture (and history)’; and (3) ‘Dynamizing culture (and power)’. These labels obviously draw on the three main intellectual moments within the conjunction of anthropology and history as sketched above. That is, category (1) expresses the attraction of ethnography and the anthropological culture concept for historical researchers dissatisfied with positivism and structuralism; category (2) refers to the critique on the eurocentric ‘master narratives’ of modernity and modernization and postulates the simultaneity of multidirectional processes as well as the heterogeneity and multi-vocality of human cultures; section (3), finally, captures the turn of cultural analysts to methodologies that seek to clarify power by explicitly conceptualizing the parameters of temporal process and spatial interlinkage and incorporation, and how these become appropriated in cultural practice and expressed in cultural logics.

It is not accidental that four out of five contributions from professional historians appear in section 1 and 2. Apart from Rebel, section 3 on the other hand wholly consists of reactions from anthropologists. Moreover, anthropologists presenting ‘rubric 1 arguments’ seem
most heavily and institutionally engaged with
the new cultural history (De Blécourt and
Boholm), with working class history (Skarin
Frykman) or with contemporary debates in
cultural sociology and cultural history
(Löfgren). These are the interdisciplinary
‘exporters’ who work on a field largely domi-
nated by others.

‘Section 2 arguments’ address, more than
other contributions, questions and concepts
that are associated with contemporary discus-
sions of postmodernism, and again this is not
surprising. Perhaps one could say that section
2 is the arena where historians and anthropolo-
gists cooperate on most equal terms. Here, the
interdisciplinary exchange may at present be
most intense.

The terms of discussion in both the sections
3 and 1, finally, appear to be dominated on
the whole by internal developments in anthro-
pology and historiography respectively.
Between them we can find the most pro-
nounced programmatic divide. This has im-
portant consequences for the style and intel-
lectual space of historical anthropology au-
thors. Note for instance the contrast in tone
between Skarin Frykman, who feels related
with ‘section 3 arguments’ but is active on a
terrain dominated by historians, and authors
such as Gulliver and Silverman, Handelman,
and Sider. Where the former appears rather
defensive, the latter articulate highly sover-
eign positions. Carbonella, on the other hand,
draws his own interest in historical working-
class–culture studies fully into the domain of
historical anthropology. Further, compared
with Skarin Frykman, both Boholm and
Löfgren seem to have found a niche of their
own from where they can argue (and compete)
successfully with rival approaches. Rebel is
the most explicit migrant from among the
professional historians. He identifies strongly
with the historical anthropological position,
in incorporates it fully into his own historical
analysis, and turns it into a pointed and
sustained criticism of historical studies in the
subfields he is working in.

To return to our starting point, it is not sur-
prising to find authors in section 3 all agree-
ing more or less wholeheartedly with our dis-
tinction between historical anthropology and
anthropological history. Authors in section 1
generally seem indifferent and eclectic, with
the exceptions of De Blécourt (whom we do
little justice with our categories), and Skarin
Frykman, whose position is not fully clear.
Remarkable is Van den Brink’s position who
inverts our paradigmatic argument by not
appearing to recognize the existence of work
as featured in section 3. He reproduces the old
Lévi-Straussian distinction between history as
concerned with time and change and
anthropology as dedicated to synchronic or-
der. Authors in section 2 are not very likely to
agree with our paradigmatic distinction.
Dahles, Driessen, Eidson, Giordano and Olwig
tend to dispute either its correctness,
comprehensiveness, usefulness, or relevance.
De Wolf simply ignores it. Eidson seems by
far the most generous of this group, and his
argument comes close to the concepts and
concerns of section 3, in particular to Sider.
Olwig and Giordano operate in a domain, and
from a theoretical background, where our
paradigmatic distinction loses its pertinence.
Medick somehow appears to agree to the pro-
posed programmatic divide, but in the end
apparently judges it wise to play it down some-
what. Cohen warns sharply against unneces-
sary disciplinary separatism and border-
patrols. He believes the free interdisciplinary
exchange in an open intellectual field will on
all accounts be more productive than a
regulated encounter.

IV

The success of a scientific debate, as John
Eidson (this issue), referring to Johan Huiz-
inga, memorizes, should not be measured by
the attainment of any final agreement, but
rather by the refinement of categories avail-
able. The propounded programmatic distinc-
tion between anthropological history and his-
torical anthropology seems compelling enough
to inspire to seminal deliberations, and this
includes the pointing out of shortcomings and silences in our position paper. There are several strands of criticism and elaboration to be found. At this point in the introduction we want to explicitly acknowledge two of these lines, as they seem most pertinent to our argument and to the question of scale-reduction and micro-research.

What we have inexcusably lost sight off in describing the historical anthropology paradigm is the obvious fact that the goal of anthropological knowledge cannot simply be the construction of general theories or general concepts of human history and society. Rather, what historical anthropologists seek to reveal are the properties of particular and delineated human histories and experiences by means of theories and concepts with more universalist pretensions, and, vice versa, the refinement, elaboration, and limitation of general theories and abstract notions by close-up study. We do not study people in general, society in general, or history in general, although we do usually entertain certain universalist and generalist notions. Anthropologists not only have a “compelling sense of place”, as Gulliver and Silverman have noted (1992), they also have a compelling sense of ‘real people’ and ‘real histories’, which we think are generally to be found in particularist versions. Where anthropological historians (and historians generally) easily pick out ‘apt’ but random illustrations from a loosely delineated and often wide spatial and temporal context (see Gulliver and Silverman 1992, and in this issue; Handelman in this issue; Tilly 1984), which they mostly conceive of as a symbolic universe, historical anthropologists maintain a strict notion of the people, place, and time under study. Their micro-perspective is not a trick for the enrichment of their narrative, but a theoretical and methodological act of belief. It is a conscious design for contextualization and embeddedness (Gulliver and Silverman in this issue), as well as for natural experimentation and discovery (Levi 1992).

While the status and merits of the micro-perspective as such are little disputed within historical anthropology, there might well be more systematic attention to genres of generalization and abstraction. Our position paper remained silent on this score, but several contributions, for instance Boholm, Carbonella, Gulliver and Silverman, Handelman, Sider, and Rebel, are helpful in this regard. ‘Scope expansion’, as we claimed, may well be a result of small-scale research, but it is never necessarily so. Small-scale data must be made to speak to large-scale or abstract and conceptual issues. They will not do so by themselves.

What is still little questioned, moreover, is the more basic issue whether it makes sense at all to start small-scale research without any serious thoughts about the general, abstract, or large-scale questions to be addressed. Historical anthropologists remain much more liberal in selecting the temporal and spatial coordinates of their research settings than for instance historical sociologists. To paraphrase Don Handelman (this issue): Unlike anthropologists, historical sociologists need analytical reasons for doing micro-research. They therefore tend to be much more explicit about the general and abstract properties of the units under observation than anthropologists. Indeed, they generally start with studying and defining these properties in abstracto or in general, and only then proceed to select a setting. Anthropologists, of course, tend to see themselves as regional specialists, and they mostly remain firmly entrenched in a region after graduation. But the possible theoretical loss of this self-image is rarely reflected upon. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt about the theoretical power of historical sociology taken as a whole versus the descriptive seductions of much of anthropology. There exists a tension between thick description and explicit theorizing that cannot simply be neutralized by the notion of ‘grounded theory’.

What we particularly welcome in relation to the possibilities and problems of the micro-perspective is the conscious emphasis on space and spatial networks in the contributions of Carbonella and Rebel. The divide between anthropological history and historical anthropology here almost becomes synony-
mous with the contrast between ‘closed and open systems’ approaches. Both authors take a firm stand against the illusion of closed, self-contained, and implicitly isolated ‘communities’ (or symbolic universes) inherent in some of the genres of local historical research and anthropological history. They thus recapture the initial historical anthropology concern, best developed in the work of Eric Wolf, but also in the Dutch examples of Blok and Verrips, with spatial networks and spatial linkages, and their consequences for cultural processes and power relationships (see also Schneider and Rapp 1995).

This vital ‘spatial moment’ of the initial impulse toward studying and conceptualizing temporal process within anthropology seems to have been neglected somehow in the recent years of interdisciplinary exchange. Nevertheless, it might well become a key element of a more self-conscious historical anthropology. It may also form a bridge between the postmodernist stress on the multiplicity of histories and the multi-vocality of cultural processes and ‘actualized history’ of the authors in section two, and the concern with power of those in section three. Indeed, it is one thing to establish the fact of different visions of the connections between past, present, and future. But it is another to analyze how such visions are elaborated and promoted by different sets of people, with dissimilar statuses, resources, interests, and experiences. And more importantly, these sets of people as well as the visions they support, tend to interact, interlink, and articulate within determinate networks of space and time. It is also in the particular interplay of such spatial and temporal networks that basic social mechanisms become both, defined, and at the same time repressed, replaced, and sometimes reclaimed in public discourse, as Rebel powerfully shows and Carbonella and Sider point out. To be more specific about the patterning and trajectories of such temporal and spatial human networks, to relate them more carefully to the relevant ‘master-processes’ of social change that are realized within them, and to identify more clearly the central social and cultural mechanisms that people in these particular conditions tend to uphold, live up to, and sometimes resist, is still a very worthwhile task for a modest anti-discipline.

Notes

1. See the issues on interpretive anthropology (no. 1), national character (no. 2/3), folk-culture (no. 4), travel literature (no. 5), elite studies (no. 8), the animal world (no. 13), professionalization (no. 14), power and culture (no. 17/18), interpretations of class (no. 19), the medical market (no. 20), common property (no. 21), imaginary worlds (no. 24) and war and peace (no. 25).
2. See for instance the special issues on respectively anthropology and ‘language’ of The Journal of Interdisciplinary History (1981) and History Workshop (1980).

References

Christiansen, Palle Ove 1984. Interdisciplinary studies and conceptual eclecticism. On historical anthropology, the history of everyday life and


