Interpretation and the Canadian Exploratory Narrative[1]

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RÉSUMÉ

Une étude de la vie aborigène dans la région subarctique au début des explorations européennes doit nécessairement s'appuyer sur des textes. On a consulté un de ces textes en particulier: le récit d'exploration. Le genre « récit » cependant n'est plus compris comme il se doit. Il a été traité comme un réservoir de 1) différents faits sur la vie aborigène; 2) dont le sens est déterminé indépendamment de la forme cognitive et linguistique dans laquelle les faits ont été coulés. Les études actuelles ne réussissent pas à comprendre 1) comment le sens des événements et des activités est structuré dans les textes, ni 2) comment l'histoire peut être interprétée. Pour éviter ces incompréhensions, on doit adopter une perspective adaptée à l'époque historique étudiée. L'histoire, croit-on, exige qu'on prenne d'abord le point de vue de celui qui l'a produite.

History is purveyed in texts. A study of native life in the Canadian sub-arctic during the period of early European exploration depends largely on the use of texts. One text in particular – the exploratory narrative – has received frequent use; however, the genre

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of the narrative has been corrupted.[2] It has been treated as a reservoir of (1) discrete facts about events and activities in native life, (2) the meanings of which have been determined independently of the cognitive and linguistic form into which the facts were cast. The adequacy of explanations has been judged on the basis of this indiscriminate ascription of meaning to fact; adequacy has not been assessed in terms of an analysis of the structure by which facts are articulated in the narrative or of the logic by which the facts are connected in the scholar's interpretation. Quite clearly, little attention has been paid to the question of the analysis to be given of how fact and meaning are related. In short, it is argued that current studies fail to understand (1) how the meaning of events and activities is structured in texts, and thus (2) how history can be interpreted.

Correction of both misunderstandings requires, as a first step, that the scholar adopt a perspective suitable to history. The paper is concerned with this perspective. History, it is believed requires preliminary viewing from the standpoint of the one who produced it.

THE PROBLEM

The anthropologist's interest in native life centres on the process by which the native responds to a world of exigent and contingent events. The anthropologist, therefore, studies contingency and change. More particularly, the anthropologist studies changes in the relation between the individual native or native group and the demographic, ecological and economic conditions of the society in which either the individual or group is located. It is within the definition of this relationship that peculiar social or cultural arrangements are discussed (D. Smith 1975; Crook 1973).

[2] The phrase 'exploratory narrative' has been taken from Maurice Hodgson's (1967) discussion of the early Canadian exploration journal. I refer, in particular, to Samuel Hearne's narrative "A Journey to the Northern Ocean" (Glover, 1958). This is the most commonly used narrative by historians and anthropologists alike; although other narratives of travels in northern Canada, such as that of Alexander MacKenzie, are also cited. The range of uses to which Hearne's work has been put is extremely broad; arguments (1) are sometimes built entirely upon his statements (Gillespie 1975), (2) often depend upon his observations for supporting evidence (Yerbury 1976; Smith 1975), and, (3) invariably resort to his account for at least partial corroboration (Ray 1974; Rich 1967).

The study of change requires a focus on time. And since time is conveyed to us by that which is its document, namely the past, we appeal to the records and annals of the past to gain a view of time and a perspective on change. It is for this reason that anthropologists have directed their attention to history: the record of past events.

With a few exceptions, studies of native life in the Canadian sub-arctic are a study of native life over time (Bishop 1974; Gillespie 1974; J. Smith 1975; Yerbury 1976). History is used by these scholars for one purpose: to extend the dimension of time. This orientation departs from traditional approaches. Whereas traditional studies approached native life within the confines of a very short span of time, recent studies have extended their view of native life to a long time span. Native life is viewed in terms of its existence over time. The adoption of this view implies that something more can be had from studies of native life that are not confined to brief and solitary moments of the latter's existence. And that something is, of course, an understanding of change. A study of native life over stretches of time reveals life in transition; it draws on information pertinent to how a people survived and withstood change.

Such studies however have not achieved much success. The reason for this is clear. The logic with which anthropologists proceed lacks an explanatory framework fitting to the exercise at hand. The results are paradoxical. Although anthropologists proceed to sample history for evidence of change, their models of native life lack a suitable framework into which this evidence for change can be integrated. The problem is twofold: the first is a problem in theory, the second is a problem in methodology[3] (Hughes 1976).

In the first place, the models are impoverished with a transposition of the perspective which characterized traditional ethnographic approaches. As Michael Smith recognized it (1962: 77), models of this sort commit the ethnographer's pathetic "fallacy of the ethnographic present". Traditional approaches confined their study of native institutions to brief periods of time. The reason for this was because ethnographers believed that such a time period was sufficient to understand native life. Since the institutions of most native societies geared the responses of individual natives to maintaining

[3] In other words there is a problem with the model used to explain change as well as with the logic by which the scholar proceeds to verify the explanation.

their continued existence, it was felt that a brief study would yield the same information as a study extending over a long time period. Indeed, since studies of this sort were principally concerned with the different types of social action vis-à-vis the roles set by institutions, and thus how action participated in maintaining the system of institutional ties, it was extremely difficult to reconcile any sort of human behaviour outside this arrangement. From viewing the functional interdependence of all facets of a given society at any time, the conclusion is drawn that the function of native life is geared to the preservation of the system of institutions, roles and standards by which the society is thought to owe its existence and stability. Of course, the corollary is that this structured interdependence remains constant over time. That it became *impossible* to model the behaviour of individuals in terms of particular institutional roles, over time, was a predicament neatly side-stepped. History could therefore be consulted for evidence of external factors of change; but internal changes were not possible. Native life could therefore be pictured as a staccato type of existence; the balance of its institutions – economic, kinship, etc. – punctuated periodically by external abruptions. The same scene is sketched by models of past sub-arctic native life. Change is not an internal characteristic because the models map all behaviour into what is assumed to be a fixed and functionally united system.

In the second place, arguments are oblivious to the nature of the text. Questions as to how history is formed and whether this formation gave rise to a meaning recovered only by recourse to its process of construction are bypassed. History is viewed as offering a delectable assortment of facts about life. The problem lies not in their meaning, but their selection. The strategy is to sample and order according to the argument which the facts best fitted. The facts of history – statements of actions and events – are abstracted from their historical context and judged independently of this context; they are evaluated and arranged by a system of direct reference to the present (Butterfield 1950). The question of how past events drew their significance and arrangement in texts raises little concern. Furthermore, that 'it' was a European who imprinted their meaning, and gave events their history has never received much attention.

The purpose of most explanations of events and action in history is to resolve a quandary of some kind. In order to do so, the analysis

embodying the explanation must examine the events and actions of history in a framework which is instructive of their meaning; that is, the way the events and actions are informative of their relationships in time and space, causality, identity, etc. Now the problem to date is that this is exactly the sort of meaning which has not been examined. Instead, events and actions have been examined in terms of everything but the relations of text and context. The general problem is, as Butterfield points out, one of 'fact extraction' rather than 'meaning extraction'. The particular problem is, as Smith points out, one of a search for 'function specifics' rather than 'structure specifics'.

Both problems arise from erroneous assumptions about history. The assumptions are about what history is and therefore how history renders meaning. But the root of the problem lies in one assumption; we might call this assumption, after Dudley Shapere, a presupposition. The pre-supposition is about human nature and the connections that scholars infer between cognition and behaviour. In other words, the root of the problem lies in the assumption scholars hold about how people behave based on a notion of how they think. Regardless of whether it is providing reasons for the actions of an agent in an historical drama, imputing motive to the writer of the narrative, or assigning a kind of logic to the argument of an historian. Historians and anthropologists alike fail to examine the process by which cognition and action really work. Put another way, we might say that they are working from their idea of how an agent reasons his actions or how an historian articulates his argument, two things which in their view are entirely different processes, rather than the actual operations (i.e. actions in thought) of cognition which are universal to all human beings – agent and historian included. So the failure to examine the events and actions of history in a framework which is instructive of their meaning is grounded in a much grosser failure to pay any attention to the process by which this meaning was initially arrived at; that is the cognitive process. They fail to examine (1) the logical principles by which cognition organizes information, (2) the operations which gear behaviour, and (3) the interplay between cognition and action. And in doing so, they are thus unable to penetrate through to the links between the structure of knowing and the structure of narrative form; in other words the similarity in form between the language base of the narrative and the way the events and actions transcribed into the narrative were initially structured (i.e. given meaning) in the cognition of the narrator.

This failure can be corrected. Although it is a failing characteristic not only of the approach to narrative but also of the explanatory models created by scholars to interpret history, a readjustment can be made by focusing on the way texts are structured. This serves a dual purpose. First, it enables the scholar to become acquainted with the correspondence between the way actions and events are structured in the text and the cognitive process which gave rise to their initial meaning before any translation into language or writing occurred. It provides therefore a view from which to look at all cognitive operations or analyses, whether they are explanations of how things came to pass in the narrative, or whether they are explanations of how things came to pass in the scholar's own account.

Second, since a personal understanding of how cognition works will be broadened, then explanations will begin to follow the methodology by which recovery of this working in the narrative is made possible. Simultaneously the logic from which explanations spring will be reassessed in terms of the process by which a personal cognition, embodying this logic, is seen to work.

This can be said another way. What I have done elsewhere is shown why current explanations are inadequate (Stephens n.d.)[4]. There it was reasoned that this inadequacy stems from the inability of scholars to come to grips with both the process and the logical principles by which their own cognition works. The failings both of models of human behaviour and assumptions about what history is stem from this inability. Strangely enough, it can be corrected by analysing the very material upon which the models depend for information – the narrative itself. The narrative is the end result of the cognitive process by which information about direct experience is first encoded by the European and then translated into linguistic and written form. And understanding of this process – and therefore the process by which cognition works – could be obtained through a structural analysis of the narrative; in other words, an analysis of the logical rules and principles by means of which the narrative makes

[4] The argument in Stephens (n.d.) deals with the problem of using history to explain actions and events in the past. It contains an extended critique of two attempts to explain native events (Gillespie 1975, 1976) and European actions (Hodgson 1967, 1968) during the eighteenth century in sub-arctic Canada. It also demonstrates the needs for an analysis of narrative that deals with both inherent structure and meaning.

sense. At the same time, viewing the narrative in terms of the structure by which its statements yield the meaning with which it was originally embued, is tantamount to viewing it from the perspective of the individual who underwent the experiences and interpreted the circumstances described within its lines. This is, as I argue below, the most appropriate position from which to understand history and advance explanations about its course.

THE SOLUTION

The trouble with the current anthropological approach to history lies in the assumptions held about its nature. Historical texts are interpreted in terms of current theory and practice, they are not viewed in terms of their inherent structure. This has a debilitating consequence. Anthropologists miss the key to recovering the meaning of events; the key is that events derive their meaning from the way statements of their occurrence are structured. The meaning of events is coded within the text; it is a distinct arrangement of words and it is a meaning translated into words by an individual who observed the event's occurrence. Before *a* meaning is abstracted, *the* meaning must be decoded. Only then is it possible to ascertain the context and relations of an event.

With reference to the history of the Canadian sub-arctic and the native life of the past, events drew their significance and thus their meaning from the Europeans, and the English in particular, who gave them history in written words.[5] So the meaning of the events is structured by the process through which they were initially interpreted by the European and later translated into the everyday discourse.

History is seldom revealed to the anthropologist other than in written form. So the question as to what significance can be attached to events of the past, the observation of which has already been made and thus interpreted, is a crucial one. Since the anthropologist's use of these texts supplements this initial interpretation with another,

[5] I refer to the records and journals of the Hudson's Bay Company, a British enterprise, as well as to the correspondence of their employees whilst resident in North America. Accounts of occasional travellers and visiting ships captains can be added to this list.

namely the anthropologist's own, a quandary is posed: either the facts of history are dealt with independently of the text or the arrangement from which facts derive their meaning is unravelled.

The problem therefore, set in more general terms, is how to explain either the actions of individuals or the events arising from particular circumstances in history. And we can resolve this problem and that of the quandary by recalling two characteristics of explanations. For the resolution lies in the way these characteristics are explored. Lest we forget, explanation has to do not only with the models by which scholars first generalize about and then deduce the particular actions and events of history. It also has to do with the assumptions underlying these explanatory models. One such assumption concerns the way the meaning of events is thought to be arranged in the texts of history. As Carl Becker (1969) reminds us, there are two views: we choose to see facts with a meaning either independent *or* dependent upon the linguistic and writing structure which carry their meaning. In other words, either facts offer particular information or meaning regardless of the process by which meaning about these facts was initially arrived at and later reproduced on paper; or, the meaning of the statements about actions or events from which facts emerge is arranged according to this process. And a recovery of this meaning depends upon an understanding of this process.

So explanation, by my reasoning, is concerned with two elements: (1) the interpretation of the facts of history *and* (2) the analysis to be given of how the facts about events and actions have been arranged, or set down in the historical text. I emphasize 'by my reasoning' and the 'two part' explanation because it is this sort of explanation which I believe that scholars have failed to produce. To interpret the facts of history, it is necessary that these facts – the statements about events and actions – be analyzed in terms of the way that their meaning came to be constructed. In other words, we must come to understand the process by which the meaning about the facts pertaining to particular events and actions was initially arrived at by the observer and that which was meaningful to the observer later translated into the written word. Meaning, in other words, is the way observations of events and actions were interpreted and then set down onto paper for later reading.

It is just this sort of explanation with which anthropologists, especially those using history to study Canadian native life, have not

concerned themselves. And it is here that I will show that this lack of concern has deprived them of the rewards of history.

The arguments coined by anthropologists to explain their use of history have already been covered. Several anthropologists (M. Smith 1962; Lewis 1968; Burton and Lowental 1973; Bishop and Ray 1976) urge the use of historical texts to study change in indigenous life. Regardless of the drawbacks inherent in the models into which such information may be incorporated to explain 'change', there is the question of how the facts of history should be used. If it is the aim of anthropology in the sub-arctic to study the course of native life in the face of environmental and economic vicissitudes (Bishop and Ray 1976) then it makes no sense to exclude the character of the texts which, at the least, impose a structure on the meaning of the facts.

The reason for this exclusion is rooted in the anthropologist's perspective on history itself. Anthropologists possess the assumption, rarely made explicit, of an 'objectivity peculiar to history'. Indeed, they hold expectations about the connections between and the nature of past events viewed through historical texts. Anthropology it would seem with its interest in change expects history to make the past of human societies attain an objective distinction. In other words, the working out, the putting in order and the interrogation of the texts of history is seen by anthropologists as the means by which the past then becomes understood. The anthropologist believes that whatever the role – observer, cataloguer, historian – and whoever the individual – explorer, clerk, ship captain – the work and participation in the ordering of past events has resulted in the presentation of an objective history. And to believe that this objectivity is actually attained, that the facts of history really are true and have independent meaning, the anthropologist expects the individual making or interpreting the history to possess a certain quality of subjectivity; a position which enables the past to be viewed with a perspective suitable to a complete understanding of this past. By this argument then, a consideration of the character of the historical texts is unwarranted. The facts of history need no further consideration, they have already been distinguished objectively.

Having disposed of this problem, another related feature of history which anthropologists face is also sidestepped. This other feature has to do with the origin of the historical texts. Although

anthropologists are interested in studying native life, the documents upon which they depend for facts about this life are written by non-natives. The only history of past events is a European or English history. Nevertheless, this has posed no problem to anthropology. Using the above argument, if history gives the past of human societies an objective distinction, there are no parties to objectivity. What is objective remains so regardless of the history, or the people to whom the facts may refer.

Summed up, we may say that anthropologists disregard the texts of history on the basis of two assumptions about the nature of history. They believe that the European origin of the texts has nothing to do with the events described. Events are interpretable independently of how they came to be inscribed in the written word. The facts are equally imputable in meaning to either native or European. This overlies a more fundamental assumption: they suppose that these texts follow a line of reasoning which is unique in revealing an objective history.

This view is perverted for no other reason that it omits from consideration the nature of the material from which it draws its information. If it is held as, for example, do Charles Bishop and Arthur Ray (1976: 121) that history tells us about both the early periods of native life and the way this life changed, then it makes no sense to treat history without treating the structure of the texts and the underlying structure of the European's cognition, which at the very least impose limiting factors upon the history "doing the telling" (for an argument close to this see Cove and Laughlin 1977). Put more directly, the events which anthropologists consider indicative of the change occurring in native life, accrue significance through the interpretation of those who initially observed their occurrence. Unless a means is adopted which would enable the scholar to assess the way events are structured in texts and thus the way an observer understood the event, then attempts to "wring the evidence from history" will be considered both inadequate *and* inaccurate.

Some will argue that this is an impossible task. The position from which the anthropologist may view the past, a view appropriate to the comprehension of this past, would appear to them to be inaccessible. What is required they believe is both an understanding of the text in terms of the way it is put together and *then* an extraction of the facts. But there is no assurance they retort that

understanding a text's structure is sufficient for the extraction of its real facts! Put in this way, the task is impossible. But the argument is confused. Facts do not exist apart from their meaning established within the relations structured by the text. The question is not whether one can view the events and actions of the past divorced from the texts which give witness to their occurrence, but how one can understand the significance of these events and actions in terms of their meaning to the observer (Ricœur 1965).[6] Therein lies the solution: an objectivity proper to history. Emphasis is laid upon "proper" because history requires that a particular perspective be adopted; that is, the perspective of the individual who created the history, who put the products of individual cognition into words. The very historical texts which anthropologists consult yield the key to this objectivity. The character and order of ingredients – events and actions – in these records flow from the way the European – trader, missionary, explorer, traveller – rectifies the pragmatic experiences of an individual past. Should an understanding of the consequences of the interaction between native and European on the former's way of life be desired, then nothing could serve the anthropologist better than coming to terms with the attitude fostered by, and meaning derived from, the individual's encounter with natives – the events and actions linked with both native and surroundings. It is this attitude, the meaning of the events or actions to the European, which influenced the outcome of the encounters and confrontations between European and native. Statements about events in historical texts are scrutinized therefore for their meanings in terms of those for whom the event was significant.

For the sceptics, this may not be enough. Surely this is insufficient, they argue, to permit an explication of that change in native life which they envisage. We do not quibble with this point. That is another step, as is constructing a model and logical procedure appropriate to the recovery of the text's meaning. But no argument to this effect has been made. It has been suggested only that the current anthropological use of history to study the change which native life underwent in response to European economic exploration and trade (see for example Bishop 1974; Ray 1974; Gillespie 1975;

[6] This portion of the argument owes far more to the work of Paul Ricoeur than that which is readily apparent. I am also aware that this does him an injustice; his recent work is far better testimony to the cogency of the reasoning.

J. Smith 1975) ignores the nature of the history itself. It ignores the character of the historical texts in which information about particular events and actions in conveyed. And by doing so usually (but not always, see Heindenreich and Ray 1973) it commits several errors, one of which is assigning whatever meaning may be derived from the facts of history to the native experience. Whatever the facts of history may mean, they are revealed in a text written by Europeans. Their manner of characterization was decided on the basis of meaning to the European. Understanding this meaning is the key to unlocking the frame of reference by which Europeans acted in North America towards native people. Only in terms of this frame of reference is it possible to set native life and the responses of native groups. Questions concerning the native experience and the native response cannot however be answered on this basis alone; they must be couched in an analytical model that also includes independent propositions concerning native cognition, behaviour, and adaptation. And that is the stuff of another study.

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