



## Why Anthropological History?

*Dr Carmel Cassar*

MANY PEOPLE LIVE under a misapprehension of what history is all about. It is widely believed, for instance, that the main requirement for the study of history is a good memory so that one can remember all those facts (especially dates). Many cannot be blamed for this misconception since they assume that history deals mainly with political achievements, fundamental government developments, and foreign relations. But few lay persons realize that history deals with all aspects of human existence - not just politics, government, religion and interstate relations, but even the economy, culture, social life, gender relations, the realm of ideas, the human psyche, or the environment. Thus History links well with a number of other disciplines - especially Philosophy, Politics, Anthropology, Sociology, Languages, Economics, Geography, Journalism, Law and Divinity.

Many would recall their only experience in the study of history at junior or middle school when it was considered boring because it involved too much learning of dry facts. In reality one is often reminded that history is about the past - and we need to be concentrating our attention on the present and the future. Courses in History are not considered to be of much value when it comes to applying for jobs. But this is where many are mistaken. History is not just about the past. It may help us to understand ourselves better by examining some of the forces that have shaped our lives. The study of History pulls it all together and helps us place all other academic disciplines in context and perspective. History allows us to get the big picture. It helps people to think creatively, show initiative, investigate, analyze and interpret the world around them. It changes everyday, so one needs to know how to keep fresh. History provides all those skills!

Personally, I must admit that in my lifelong interest in History, I was never driven by the wish to find any easy answers to modern questions of the past, to apply the right formula for a particular political agenda, or to learn clear lessons from my research. History has served me above all, through the perspective it gives, through the vantage points from which one can begin to understand the present, through the wisdom, or the patience, that it provides. I was always fascinated by cultural and social issues and the way these interacted with the masses of the population. In order to study History through this rather unorthodox method I knew that I had to find ways how to clear the high walls of traditional academia which kept each separate discipline of the arts, and the social sciences, apart. And it took me some time to overcome this obstacle.

The answer to my query came in the late 1970s when as an undergraduate I discovered the *Annales* historiographical method. It was a revelation. The journal *Annales* was first published in Strasbourg in 1929. The journal sought to create a new and more open approach to history in a provocatively colloquial style, an approach defined mostly by its search for “a larger and a more human history” (Marc Bloch), by its denial of all historical barriers and by its rejection of the traditional history of politics and government in favour of a deeper analysis of social and economic forces. The editors Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch were so successful that within a few years *Annales* became one of the boldest and imaginative journals of historical sociology in the world. It proposed the study of *histoire totale* – as the *Annales* method calls ‘total history’. In 1937 Lucien Febvre met Fernand Braudel

on the return trip to France from a lecture tour in Buenos Aires. Braudel was travelling home from Brazil. During the two-week voyage the two became close friends and from this time on Febvre became Braudel's friend, intellectual adviser, and confidant. After World War II the journal was taken over by Fernand Braudel.<sup>1</sup>

In my late teens and early twenties I identified with the heroes of the *Annales* movement, particularly Fernand Braudel, and their struggle against the dominance of a more traditional history - an identification assisted by the fact that the kind of history against which Bloch and Febvre had rebelled - was still dominant in historical circles at the time. I thought vaguely about going to study at the *École des Hautes Études* in Paris, and began to study French. But when the opportunity to study Social Anthropology at Cambridge, combined with a full scholarship from the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust, turned up in 1988, I felt it was too tempting to turn down the offer.<sup>2</sup> My idea was to write history in the *Annales* manner and I was convinced that the Cambridge M.Phil taught course could help me achieve my aim. This is because Social Anthropology has a potential to serve as a stimulus to historical imagination. Social Anthropology could greatly enlarge the historian's agenda. It could help historians to dethrone politics and give a more central place to social history, reinforced by all the social sciences. It could probably sharpen up historians' views of such terms as 'feudalism', 'social class' and 'revolution' and help historians to make more self-conscious and rigorous statements. Historical research would therefore advance, not through individual work, carried out in the *prima donna* fashion, but through cooperation among scholars and organized research, supported by seminars, workshops and graduate programmes.

Of course the Braudelian idea of total history, as developed in Braudel's great book on the Mediterranean, was a permanent inspiration for me, even a kind of obsession, in my student years at Cambridge. I tried to do this in my Ph.D dissertation, guided by Professor Peter Burke, probably one of the major admirers of the *Annales* movement in Cambridge, and possibly one of its major exponents in Britain.<sup>3</sup> But it is obviously impossible to achieve such an ideal in a single project. Furthermore the more I became exposed to the new historiography, the more conscious I became of the need to move away from the original pattern of the master whose second edition was published in 1966! Thus in my doctoral dissertation published as *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta* in 2000, I attempted to combine traditional and social history with a cultural approach. The book had originally been submitted to the History Faculty of the University of Cambridge over a decade ago and in my more recent work I have tried to explore different views of what one might call 'varieties of historical experience'. This

---

<sup>1</sup> The journal *Annales* moved from Strasbourg to Paris in the 1930s, and took the name, *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, in 1946. *Annales* became a school when it was institutionally affiliated with the Sixth Section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* after World War II. Fernand Braudel provided a sense of unity and continuity by both presiding over the Sixth Section and directing the *Annales* in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1970s the prestige of the School was international.

<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s Cambridge developed close ties with Paris, probably thanks to the activities of professors like Jack Goody, who worked closely with French historians like the medievalist Georges Duby, and whose interests in cultural studies range from funerary rituals in Africa; to literacy and oral culture; Christianity and kinship patterns in Europe; cooking and cuisine; and the culture of flowers in Asia and Europe. At the time Cambridge University Press co-published with the Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme of Paris. In my time anthropologist and historian Professor Alan Macfarlane, author of a famous book on witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England, though not my official supervisor, guided me in the writing phase of my M.Phil thesis on witchcraft practices in seventeenth century Malta.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Burke, presently Emeritus Professor of Cultural History at Cambridge, is recognised as a world leading historian.

was perhaps due to an interest in ‘new history’ which turned away from the factual certainties of economic and descriptive social history, and explored instead the ‘history of mentalities’.

Yet in more recent years I have especially been interested in ‘micro-history’ whose purpose is to reveal the human dimensions of the past through the intense study of a particular individual community or event. Micro-historians argue rather convincingly that the historical world was created out of perceptions, not out of events, and in order to evaluate the past we need to recognize that the whole of history was a construct of human impressions. Micro-history evolved primarily in Italy during the late 1970s and 1980s among a group of historians associated with the journal *Quaderni Storici* and were originally inspired largely by the *Annales* movement of France. However they moved away from the *longue durée* which had characterized the *Annales* School of historiography. Micro-historians return to interpreting utterances and beliefs and to describing brief dramatic events, depicting a past that is formed more by abrupt changes than by deep structural continuities. It is a history of ordinary people who inhabited the past – peasants; mothers; minority groups; those belonging to specific social groups, like the witches or the heretics – who faced real, sometimes personal, disastrous circumstances.

Some traditional historians used to *histoire événementielle* may argue that writing micro-history is an easy matter, but this is definitely not the case. Micro-history is not just a question of finding an interesting story and telling it. A good micro-history requires details, evidence, and the ambition of *histoire totale*. Naturally anthropology plays an important role in the writing of micro-history. This method of historiography can benefit greatly from anthropological theory by the way it tackles specific issues like marriage rules; customs; social perceptions and values. However it is not possible for historians to make full use of anthropological methods. One of the advantages of anthropologists is that they are trained to observe people and talk to them directly. A good anthropologist must also observe performances which may reveal how things are actually experienced and acted in real life circumstances. This is where history and anthropology must part. Unlike the anthropologist, the historian depends on documents, or manuscripts, or paintings, or diaries, or some other traces from the past. In brief, historians study the past and they cannot theorize on issues that do not show up in the documents they consult.

Most of the historical data on everyday life perceptions is elicited from court records often gleaned as snippets of information. This method has been used successfully particularly over the last couple of decades by European and American historians, as indeed in other parts of the world. It owes its success partly to the appeal it has on the general public, and partly on the ability of the historians themselves to interpret historical data, with anthropological and psychological analysis. The approach is often mixed with art appreciation, literature, philosophy, and other related subjects, all of which may help the reader to understand better a particular situation the writer wishes to convey.

When I began to be interested in anthropology, and in gender history, I also began to look at the role of the Catholic Church in a new light. It was the anthropological approach to religion and the study of many more forms of religion that opened up my horizons. It made me interested in Catholicism not so much as a system but as an actor in social, cultural, and administrative affairs.

The study of witchcraft accusations, for example, provides us with a unique insight into the beliefs and fears of the people. The period I am mostly interested in – the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries – was the great age of witchcraft trials. In Malta it was a time of great insecurity: the island was beset with economic problems, harvest failures, decimated by the plague in the 1590s. There was the pervasive fear of a Muslim invasion, and besides the Ottoman Siege, of which we are most conscious, slave raids were a common occurrence of the Maltese countryside and Gozo, as anywhere else in the Mediterranean. While relying heavily on their apparent power, Church and society were afraid of witches whom they also saw as a source of evil. In Malta we are lucky that the Inquisition records have survived almost intact and provide a clear picture of this state of affairs. Society at the time believed healing came from the supernatural: that the evil eye made people ill and that mad people were afflicted by the evil eye and the devil, so witches made use of prayers in their healing practices. Even priests went to healers and made use of magic potions. Doctors, who were practically all male at the time, were often very ill-informed about healing and used similar potions to healers without claiming for themselves supernatural intercessions. The Holy Office, as the Roman Inquisition called itself, especially after the Reformation and Counter Reformation, was particularly alarmed by love magic, which it saw as sorcery and inspired by the devil, and it came down heavily on all practitioners. Court documents include a large number of witchcraft trials for the period starting in the 1590s to the end of the eighteenth century. In turn the study of witchcraft led me to the study of women in the period, because women healers and concocters of love potions dominated the craft. In my recent book *Daughters of Eve* (2002) I had to devote a chapter to witchcraft accusations simply because women were continually being accused of witchcraft and brought to trial. Of course a few men were also accused. They could be men who meddled with magic for the love of a woman, to look for hidden treasure, to become invisible at some point, feel less pain when under torture, to learn about weather conditions and similar daily preoccupations. Then there were the Muslim slaves who were often convicted for divination, the preparation of love potions - for women preoccupied that their husbands had left them, or healing potions for their sick children. One may add that most often the repertoire of the medical physicians was not much different from that of the popular healers. Many could not afford to pay the high fees of licensed medical practitioners. Then there were, of course, women witches accused of similar practices. A group, which was particularly prone to accusations of witchcraft at the turn of the seventeenth century, were midwives.

In reality the study of witchcraft trials induced me to study the role of women in past societies. But I prefer to look at gender history rather than just women's history simply because women's history often tends to look at women as victims and this approach fails to appreciate the many occasions in which women act in collaboration with men. Naturally women's history, as it was being written in its heyday - in the 1970s - had the merit of highlighting the exceptional women of the seventeenth, eighteenth or the nineteenth century. But things have changed and a wider perspective that considers the range of relationships and connections that women find themselves in is now being taken into account; otherwise one runs the risk of taking a one-sided view of things without seeing how they were placed.

Human lives have several systems going through them, and one must bear their existence in mind in order to see the whole picture. Personally I believe in cultural mixture projects where close relations across boundaries are often considered. Naturally such an approach cannot be discussed without describing co-operation across these lines. But in order to achieve a proper understanding of such open-ended themes, we need to appreciate the cross-fertilization of ideas coming from people of different ages, genders and cultural backgrounds. There are many conditions in which ideas can get interlaced in the study of so many different aspects of learning in general and in the wide-ranging

view of history. For this reason I do not think it is a good idea for a historian to write only micro-history or any other one kind of history. Ideally, an individual historian should try at some point to work in different modes as a way to see what the stakes are, the relations between the local and the general frame. I can say with confidence that I have never stopped experimenting with different methods and approaches of research.

#### **Bibliography:**

- Bonomo, G.: *Caccia alle streghe: La credenza nelle streghe dal secolo xiii al secolo xix con particolare riferimento all'Italia*. (Palermo, 1959).
- Braudel, F.: *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2 vols. Eng trans. (London, 1972-1973).
- Cassar, C.: 'The Reformation and sixteenth century Malta'. *Melita Historica*. vol.x, no.1 (1988), pp.51-68.
- 'Witchcraft beliefs and social control in seventeenth century Malta'. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*. vol.3, no.2 (1993), pp.316-34.
  - *Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition. A Study of Cultural Values in Early Modern Malta*. (Malta, 1996).
  - *Sex, Magic and the Periwinkle*. (Malta, 2000).
  - *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta*. (Malta, 2000).
  - *Daughters of Eve. Women, Gender Roles, and the Impact of the Council of Trent in Catholic Malta*. (Malta, 2002).
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E.: *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. (Oxford, 1937).
- Goody, J. 'Inheritance, property and women: some comparative considerations'. Goody, J., Thirsk, J. and Thompson, E.P. (eds), *Family and Inheritance. Rural Society in Western Europe 1200-1800*. (Cambridge, 1976).
- Goody, J.: *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*. (Cambridge, 1983).
- Harley, D.: 'Historians as demonologists: the myth of the mid-wife witch', *Social History of Medicine*. vol.iii (1990), pp.1-26.
- Horsley, R.: 'Who were the witches? The social role of the accused in the European witch trials', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*. vol.ix, (1979), pp.689-715.
- Hufton, O.: *The Prospect Before Her. A History of Women in Western Europe*. vol.i 1500-1800. (London, 1995).
- Monter, W.: 'Women and the Italian Inquisitors'. Rose, M.B. (ed), *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. (Syracuse, 1986).
- O'Neil, M.: "'Sacerdote ovvero strione". Ecclesiastical and superstitious remedies in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy'. Kaplan, S.L. (ed), *Understanding Popular Culture. Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*. (New York, 1984).

---

DR CARMEL CASSAR has published extensively on Maltese and Mediterranean culture and history. His books include: *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta* (2000); *A Concise History of Malta* (2000, 2002); *Daughters of Eve. Women, Gender Roles, and the Impact of the Council of Trent in Catholic Malta* (2002); *Honour & Shame in the Mediterranean* (2003) -translated and published in Spanish (2004) and Italian (2002), French and Arabic (2005); *Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition* (1996); *Sex, Magic and the Periwinkle* (2000); *Fenkata. An Emblem of Maltese Peasant Resistance?* (1994). He was awarded an ODA (full) Scholarship by the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust to read Anthropology, a Holland Rose Scholarship from the Faculty of History (Cambridge), and several other studentships and bursaries by Cambridge institutions. Cassar was Visiting post-doctoral Fellow at the University of Durham; a University of Wales Visiting Research Fellow, and a Mary Aylwin Cotton Foundation Fellow (Channel Islands), besides receiving other post-doctoral awards. He was also responsible for the development of an Ethnography Section within the Malta Museums Department. His publications have appeared in learned journals in Italy, Britain, France, Spain, the USA and Malta. At present he serves as Senior Lecturer at the University of Malta Junior College.