Introduction: making early medieval societies

Conrad Leyser

As a title, 'Making early medieval societies' is, at best, oxymoronic: to many, it will just seem like wishful thinking. In the default view, 'the Middle Ages' is when societies fell apart (at least in the Latin West, which is the focus of this book). Medieval times begin with the fall of Rome; they end with the chaos of the Italian Wars, or, more locally, the Wars of the Roses. In between, order is occasionally and temporarily restored, as in the Empire of Charlemagne – but disintegration is never far away. The Carolingian Empire collapsed after three generations, and, according to a highly influential school of thought, civil society was cut back to the bone at the hands of feuding warlords. Seen in this light, the whole medieval period stands introduced by Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who died in 430 with barbarians at the gates of his city. In the *City of God*, Augustine cast an apparently bleak eye on what held the social order together. Two people who did not speak the same language had less in common with each other, he opined than a man and his dog: only through the massive exercise of force had the Roman Empire been able to bring 'peace' to the world. The State, Augustine famously asserted, was robbery on a grand scale.[1] What price, then, 'making early medieval societies'?

While most twenty-first century medievalists would object loudly to this stereotyped view of their period, tacitly, we consent. Of course we know that the very idea of the 'Middle Ages' is no more than a messy set of polemical claims disseminated by various interest groups in Western Europe from the self-styled 'Renaissance' onwards;[2] and that the standard periodization of European history (ancient-medieval-early modern) has been disrupted by the emergence of 'Late Antiquity' in the second half of the twentieth

---

[1] Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XIX. 7 on peace; IV. 4 on the State as robbery. My thanks to the contributors for their several suggestions; none of them should be held responsible for the shortcomings of what follows.

[2] See P. Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London, 1969); and now I. Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013).

1

century.[3] The rise of global history may help us to see still more clearly
the parochialism of the whole schema.[4] For all that, 'medievalism' is still
pervasive, and nowhere more so than where the early Middle Ages are
concerned. Few historians celebrate their arrival. Indeed, the past ten
years have witnessed a pulse of energy in asserting that the end of the
ancient world was a violent catastrophe.[5] Those who dissent cast the
process in terms of 'downsizing' or 'abatement' – but even this more
neutral language colludes in the notion that the Middle Ages were in
some way second best. In the absence of the State (whether Roman or
Carolingian), early medieval societies in the West are seen to have
coped more or less well. 'Degradations' from imperial order might
even be 'possibilities', but that is about as far as most early medievalists
are prepared to go.[6] The mood here is post-imperial, perhaps in Britain
especially: we are after empire, so were they.[7]

The problem is, we have not weaned ourselves away from a conception
of history where the State is central, the source of all meaning and good-
ness. In the nineteenth century, when medievalists pioneered the estab-
lishment of History as a discipline for the training of citizens, this worked
to the advantage of the Middle Ages. The fall of ancient Rome was seen in
terms of progress towards the modern nation-state. However rough and
ready, the barbarian kingdoms were seen as an advance on imperial
tyranny. It was not long, however, before traditional prejudices reasserted
themselves. In most conventional histories of the State, the Middle Ages

---

[3] See M. Vessey, 'The Demise of the Christian Writer and the Remaking of "Late
Antiquity": From H.-I. Marrou's St Augustine (1938) to Peter Brown's Holy Man
(1983)', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 6 (1998), pp. 377–41; cf. also the hostile
discussion of A. Giardina, 'Esplosione di tardoantico', *Studi Storici*, 40 (1999), 157–80;
the (less hostile) A. Cameron, 'The "Long" Late Antiquity: a Late Twentieth-Century
Model', in T. P. Wiseman (ed.), *Classics in Progress: Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome*
(Oxford, 2002), pp. 165–91; and W. Liebeschuetz, 'The Birth of Late Antiquity',
Antiquité Tardive, 12 (2004), 253–61.

[4] A new periodization is proposed by G. Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad: the First
Millennium Refocussed* (Princeton, NJ, 2014). R. I. Moore, 'Medieval Europe in World
History', in C. Lansing and E. English (eds.), *A Companion to the Medieval World*
(Chichester, 2009), pp. 563–80 argues for the utility of the Middle Ages on a world history
scale. Both agree that the eleventh century is a turning point.

[5] See in particular P. Heather, *The Fall of Rome: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*
(London, 2005), and B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*
(Oxford, 2005).

[6] C. J. Wickham, 'The Other Transition: From the Ancient World to Feudalism', *Past &
Present*, 103 (1984), 3–36, at 36.

[7] As a glance at the titles of recent British discussions might suggest: J. Smith, *Europe After
Rome: A New Cultural History, 500–1000* (Oxford, 2005); C.J. Wickham, *The Inheritance of
Rome: A New History of Europe 400–1000* (London, 2009); P. Booth, *Crisis of Empire:
Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA, 2014). On 'optimistic'
American functionalism, see Stephen. D. White in this volume, below pp. 226–7.

come off badly: the epoch is defined as the period in which public justice falls into private hands. 'Feudal anarchy' reigns, as predatory lords roam the continent. This story of the privatization of justice shores up, in a very basic way, our sense of modernity.

The fable of privatization, if we may call it that, can be invoked whenever one chooses to initiate 'a medieval period'. Two junctures are most commonplace: the fifth century, after the fall of Rome, and the tenth century, after the end of the Carolingians.[8] Fashion veers one way, then the other, as to which juncture is more popular. In the past generation or so, scholars have run from one side of the boat to the other, as it were. The renewed vigour of the 'Fall of Rome' debate coincides precisely with the draining away of energy from the debate over the 'Feudal Mutation' around the Year 1000. Holding both periods in the same field of vision, so as to compare the plausibility of the privatization fable, seems to be beyond us: the attempt to do so is one of the key impulses behind this book.[9]

To query this fable is not to pretend that imperial and post-imperial Europe were the same as each other – but it is to insist that the State, whether Roman or Carolingian, looked a lot bigger when it was no longer there. The whole notion of a 'medieval privatization of power', whenever it is deployed, trades on a fantastical image of imperial public majesty, a fantasy that took hold *after* the formal collapse of empire, and that has lasted ever since.[10]

We should adjust for this distortion in any discussion of public and private spheres. In the ancient and medieval world, after all, the sphere of 'the private' was greater than even the wildest contemporary right-wing scenario. Thus family, economic, and religious life were 'private' enterprises. They fell into the domain of the household. 'The public' was strictly and narrowly defined as that which pertained to official business of State. Government in this period was a crude, lean mechanism

[8] For critique of the privatization model for the Year 1000, see Stephen D. White, 'Tenth Century Courts at Mâcon and the Perils of Structuralist History: Re-reading Burgundian Judicial Institutions', in W. C. Brown and P. Górecki (eds.), *Conflict in Medieval Europe: Changing Perspectives on Society and Culture* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 37–68 and F. L. Cheyette, 'Some Reflections on Violence, Reconciliation, and the "Feudal Revolution"', in the same volume, pp. 243–64. See also T. Reuter's contribution to 'Debate: the "Feudal Revolution"', *Past & Present*, 155 (1997), 176–95.

[9] See, for example, Cheyette, 'Some Reflections'; and M. Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: the Middle Rhine Valley, 400–1000* (Cambridge, 2000). Both offer a critique of the Year 1000 debate, but in both accounts, 'privatization' in the earlier period is taken as unproblematic: 'medieval society' is seen to take shape in the sixth and seventh centuries, after the fall of Rome and with the seizure of public power by incoming Germanic elites.

[10] See, for example, J. L. Nelson, Review of *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France Around the Year 1000*, ed. T. Head, R. Landes (Ithaca, NY, 1992), *Speculum*, 60 (1994), 163–9.

designed to maximize the benefits of surplus extraction, and to minimize
the amount of 'governing' involved. When the Roman State in the West
ceased to function, it makes little sense to describe this as a 'privatization'
of power, because most power in this world was already 'private': the
Roman father's word was absolute.[11]

In this book, then, our starting point is not governmental power, but
the prior and basic question of social order. What was it that held societies
together? How did these social bonds change? To ask and to answer these
basic questions, we turn for inspiration to social anthropology; that said,
readers should be warned at once that we are working with a minimally
theorized notion of 'the social'. We are more interested in the language of
our sources than in constructing our own taxonomies, and accordingly
have taken a broad, unfussy view as to what constitutes a 'social bond'. As
one similarly minded scholar puts it, 'Between coercion and chance lie the
associations that are to some extent chosen'.[12] These do include family
relations, to the making and remaking of which people in this period
devoted much of their energies; these also, emphatically, include religious
ties. Indeed, given the etymology of *religio*, the element of 'bonding' in
religious association would have been obvious to Latinate contempor-
aries, in a way that modern audiences still struggle to recapture.

All of this lands us necessarily squarely in the domain of 'the private' as
defined before the eighteenth century. We do not, however, look entirely
to collapse 'the public' or 'the institutional' as categories into a notional
pre-modern world of exclusively personal conflicts and exchanges.[13] Both
the family and religion had coercive, public, and hence political and
institutional dimensions. The State, necessarily, enters into the discus-
sion. What we need to make possible is a history where the rise and fall of
systems of government is the symptom, not the cause of wider shifts in
social order.

Is this to reinvent the wheel? At least two kinds of account have long put
the social order ahead of the State: one, the weaker version, comes
broadly speaking out of varieties of social and economic history, the

---

[11] See K. Cooper, 'Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure and Private Power in
the Roman *Domus*', *Past & Present*, 197 (2007), 3–33; and below in this volume. Work in
progress by Hannah Probert (Sheffield) will follow the development of *pater potestas* into
the early Middle Ages.

[12] R. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (rev. edn., London,
2001), p. 5.

[13] See W. Pohl, 'Staat und Herrschaft im Frühmittelalter: Überlegungen zum
Forschungstand', in S. Airlie, W. Pohl, and H. Reimitz (eds.), *Staat im frühen
Mittelalter* (Vienna, 2006), pp. 9–38, esp. 13–15. A warning is here issued about the
dangers of 'primitivizing' medieval forms of political association – aimed in part at Anglo-
American admirers of the work of Otto Brunner (on whom, see Stephen D. White's
contribution, below pp. 231–8).

other stronger version out of cultural history. In the weaker version of the story, what happens in our period is that the State withers away, while the ruling elite continue, their pattern of life largely uninterrupted. This view can take different forms. A classic version is the Pirenne thesis, which views the fall of the Roman State in the fifth and sixth centuries as a non-event. Ancient networks of exchange across the Mediterranean, Pirenne insisted, were not disrupted by the political changes in the western half of the Empire.[14]

A different application of the same basic idea is to be found in close studies of elites. John Matthews' *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court*, for example, in particular as read by one medievalist, conjured a view of aristocratic power stretching back to the Roman Republic and forward into the medieval centuries.[15] On this account, the real motor of history is not political power, but the social, cultural, and economic power of what may be a very ancient regime.

Pirenne and Matthews share the conviction that late ancient/early medieval society is impervious to the epiphenomenon of political change: thus the weaker version. The stronger view is that the creation of different forms of social relationship actually overpowers the State. The classic example of this is Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon, notoriously, went so far as to argue that Christian superstition – a form of fanaticism or hypocrisy – corroded the entire fabric of the Roman social order, so that the State in the West stood no chance of surviving.

The great modern exponent of this tradition is Peter Brown. In his first collection of essays composed in the 1960s, *Religion and Society in the Age of St Augustine*, Brown looks to render vivid to readers '[t]he sudden flooding of the inner life into social forms'. 'This', he continues, 'is what distinguishes the Late Antique period, of the third century onwards, from the classical world'.[16] Christianity here does not consume the Empire: where Gibbon decries superstitious otherworldliness, Brown sees 'the holy', a force strong enough to supplement, or indeed create, institutions

---

[14] H. Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, tr. B. Miall (New York, 1939); Pirenne of course also argued that the Carolingian Empire made little difference to the social order of the Latin West: only the rise of towns after the first millennium created a new network of exchange. See his *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*, tr. F. D. Halsey (Princeton, 1925); and for comment, J. Dhondt, 'Henri Pirenne: historien des institutions urbaines', *Annali della fondazione italiana per la storia amministrativa* 3 (1966), 81–129.

[15] J. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, 360–425* (Oxford, 1975); reviewed by P. Wormald, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 66 (1976), 217–26.

[16] P. R. L. Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of St Augustine* (London, 1972), p. 13.

in this world.[17] But Brown shares absolutely with Gibbon the determination that religion is a social phenomenon, independent of the State.

These are all highly familiar directions of travel – and yet medievalists have not followed them through. Our suspicion is that an overturning of basic assumptions is within reach. Stereotypically, the Middle Ages witnessed a contraction of the social, a move away from a cosmopolitan world of strangers into the 'face-to-face' association of people who know each other. We ask whether the picture can be inverted. Throwing off the Roman State, new forms of association, newly extended trans-regional bonds, flourished in the Latin West. The same may be true in the post-Carolingian context. As a student of upper Lotharingia and Champagne has recently remarked, the end of empire 'was more likely to be a consequence not a cause' of changes in the nature of social relations on the ground.[18] With a degree of reluctance, we offer the slogan, 'The Middle Ages: Thin State – Big Society'.[19]

Conflict, cohesion, and the anthropological turn

'Big Society' in our period was replete with conflict. We make no attempt to efface this. On the contrary, our focus is on the function of conflict in the forging of new social bonds. This a fundamental feature of modern sociological discussion. Georg Simmel argued consistently that society depended for its existence on conflict.[20] We take our own cue from Max

[17] P. R. L. Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 (1971), 80–101; a theme developed in his *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Late Antiquity* (London, 1982), and subsequently *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, 200–1000* (2nd edn. Oxford, 2002; rev. edn 2013).

[18] C. West, *Reframing the Feudal Revolution: Political and Social Transformation Between Marne and Moselle, c.800–c.1100* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 168.

[19] For the benefit of some possibly bewildered readers: 'Big Society' was an election slogan of the Conservative Party in the UK elections of 2010. On the one hand it signalled a retreat from the extreme position of Mrs Thatcher that 'There is no such thing as Society'. On the other, it served to rebrand the familiar Conservative nostrum that the State should scale back in the provision of public services. 'Big Society' was thus a euphemism for 'privatization'. The phrase went on to acquire a degree of academic notoriety, as the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council was seen to have encouraged research into 'Big Society'. See www.thebigsociety.co.uk; and www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/bob-brecher/ahrc-and-big-society-reflections-on-neo-liberal-takeover-of-academy. My thanks to Caroline Humfress and Tom Lambert for helpful discussions here.

[20] G. Simmel, 'The Sociology of Conflict: I', *American Journal of Sociology*, 9 (1903), 490–515. Cited by, for example, P. J. Geary in 'Vivre en conflit dans une France sans état: typologie des méchanismes de règlement des conflits, 1050–1200', *Annales E.S.C.* (1986), pp. 1107–33, trans. and repr. as 'Living with Conflicts in Stateless France: a Typology of Conflict Management Mechanisms, 1050–1200', in Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 116–24, with the discussion in Brown and Górecki, *Conflict in Medieval Europe*, at pp. 17–18.

Gluckman's classic study, 'The Peace in the Feud', published in the opening issue of *Past & Present*, and then again the same year in Gluckman's *Custom and Conflict in Africa*.[21] Gluckman's message, which drew on the research of Evans Pritchard, was one of reassurance. African 'tribal society' might seem to be riven with conflict and liable to self-destruction in an endless cycle of violence between feuding families. Such conflicts, Gluckman showed, far from being random or relentless, had their own carefully modulated rhythm: custom ensured that conflicts were self-limiting, and even generative of social cohesion.

Gluckman's insights, and those of the 'Manchester School', have themselves been generative of a half century of discussion by students of the early medieval feud and of violence in general (as Stephen D. White surveys with brio below). In 1959, his colleague in History at Manchester, Michael Wallace-Hadrill, published a study, 'The Blood-Feud of the Franks', in which he adduced Gluckman's study to argue that there was an element of restraint in the apparently untrammelled savagery of the Merovingians, as narrated by Gregory of Tours.[22] The extent to which Wallace-Hadrill actually drew inspiration from direct collegial contact with Gluckman is debated.[23] Two things are clear, however. First, Gluckman actively hoped that medievalists, with whom he will have studied prior to becoming an Africanist, would take notice of his observations;[24] and second that Wallace-Hadrill's essay, however casually, did just that. Medievalists went on to produce specific studies of feud among the peoples of early medieval Europe;[25] more broadly in the 1980s, they took a now well-observed anthropological turn, in land-mark volumes on dispute settlement and on community formation.[26]

[21] M. Gluckman, 'The Peace in the Feud', *Past & Present*, 8 (1955), 1–14; Gluckman, 'The Peace in the Feud', in Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford, 1955), chap. 1 (pp. 1–26).

[22] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Blood-Feud of the Franks', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, Manchester*, 41 (1958–9), 459–87; repr. in Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings and Other Studies in Frankish History* (London, 1962), pp. 121–47.

[23] I. Wood, '"The Blood-Feud of the Franks": A Historiographical Legend', *Early Medieval Europe*, 12 (2006), 489–504. See also B. Rosenwein, 'Francia and Polynesia: Rethinking Anthropological Approaches', in G. Algazi, V. Groebner, and B. Jussen (eds.), *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-modern Figurations of Exchange* (Göttingen, 1991), pp. 361–79.

[24] Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa*, p. 4.

[25] See, for example, K. Leyser, *Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society: Ottonian Saxony* (London, 1979), esp. p. 102.

[26] S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300* (Oxford, 1984); W. Davies and P. Fouracre (eds.), *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1986); followed by the same editors', *Property and Power in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1996); and *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2010), in which J. L. Nelson's 'Introduction' reflects on the group's engagement with anthropology (pp. 1–17).

Charting the whole relationship between History and Social Anthropology in the past two or three generations is beyond our remit.[27] A synoptic view would be that we have been through at least two stages of the romance comedy plot: the couple meet, there are complications . . . While we await the resolution, we can spell out some of the costs and the benefits of a social anthropological approach as we see them.

A first danger is that the anthropological turn will serve only to reinforce stereotypes of the Middle Ages by lending an exotic primitivism to the period. We may appeal to, say, the Nuer of the Sudan to help us imagine medieval Europe as an alien social world, but when we posit that medieval allegiances were 'tribal', all we have done is to create an inverted image of what we perceive modern society to be. There is an ideological investment here of which we should beware, and medievalists have been highly alert to this.[28]

Some scholars, indeed, have gone further in identifying a full circularity of argument in the use by medievalists of social anthropology. In one view, anthropological theories of ritual are derived, ultimately, from the ritual specialists of the medieval Church: these 'theories' can never attain analytical perspective on the period from which they descend.[29] Sometimes the circularity is patent. Anthropologists (especially, it seems, of Africa) come to their material with an explicit sense of medieval Europe as a useful point of reference for understanding their material.[30] This exported European cultural baggage is then re-imported by medievalists as a form of 'external' perspective. What Richard Rathbone has called 'The Analogy' between tribal Africa and medieval Europe can be an object lesson in false glamour.[31]

A third, perennial, danger is that historians in the thrall of anthropology lose track of time. In our envy of the anthropologist's participant observer status, our 'ethnographies' of medieval societies, while 'richly textured',

---

[27] For the United States, see further Brown and Górecki, *Conflict in Medieval Europe*, pp. 6–10.

[28] See Pohl, 'Staat und Herrschaft'; Davies and Fouracre (eds.), *The Languages of Gift*, pp. 259–60. On the same tendency within anthropology, see A. Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London, 1988).

[29] P. Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, NJ, 2001).

[30] Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict*, p. 45. Also J.-L. Amselle, *Mestizo Logics: Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere* (Stanford, CA, 1998), p. 74, appealing to Jacques Le Goff, *L'Imaginaire medieval* (Paris, 1985), p. 341. Amselle is in turn invoked in Airlie, Pohl, and Reimitz (eds.), *Staat im frühen Mittelalter*, p. 197. See also P. Geary, 'Gift Exchange and Social Science Modelling: the Limitations of a Construct', in Algazi et al. (eds.), *Negotiating the Gift*, pp. 129–40.

[31] Richard Rathbone, in discussion at 'The Peace in the Feud: History and Anthropology, 1955–2005', Conference at the University of Manchester, 2005.

can fail to include any account of change, or indeed any analytical component. Ironically, the most stringent warning here has been issued by an anthropologist. Empirical observation, Paul Dresch cautions, avails us nothing unless we also notice the cultural frames that give meaning to any of the social dramas we see unfolding. Dresch takes medievalists to task for their fascination both with Gluckman, and with Pierre Bourdieu. Gluckman, in his view, was driven by an unexamined set of 'common sense' assumptions; by contrast, Bourdieu, while methodologically more articulate, nonetheless sustains an equally unreflective account of humans as self-interested strategists. This view of agency leaches culturally and historically specific content when it is applied.[32]

All of that said, there are some real benefits to the History–Anthropology encounter (as Dresch would not dispute). Social anthropology decentres the State, and refocuses attention on the family and religion. These were topics expressly excluded from the purview of History at the moment of its professional inception in the nineteenth century – not coincidentally, the zenith of the European nation-state across the world. By contrast, the disciplinary origins of Anthropology reside in the era of imperial 'abatement' in the mid- twentieth century.[33] In Britain, the first Departments of Anthropology were established after the Second World War, when the failings of the European nation- state were all too clear, not least to governments themselves. Max Gluckman and his colleagues had the explicit brief from the British government to answer the question, whether it was safe to move to 'indirect rule' of the colonies. This required the applied study of kinship groups in segmented warrior societies. 'There is no such thing as the power of the State', Radcliffe-Brown announced, as his colleagues set about devising a new typology of political life.[34]

Meanwhile, French ethnographers, above all Claude Levi-Strauss, also started with kinship, albeit from a different perspective. The French tradition focussed on exchange rather than conflict. 'Society' for

---

[32] P. Dresch, 'Legalism, Anthropology, and History: a View from Part of Anthropology', in Dresch and H. Skoda (eds.), *Legalism: Anthropology and History* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 1–39, esp. pp. 5–15. For a sympathetic anthropology of Bourdieu and his work, see T. Jenkins, *The Life of Property: House, Family, and Inheritance in Béarn, South-West France* (New York, 2010), esp. pp. 81–2 (on strategy), and pp. 129–58. On strategy, see also Brown and Górecki, *Conflict*, ix–x.

[33] See A. Kuper, *Anthropology and Anthropologists: the Modern British School* (3rd edn. London, 1996); J. Goody, *The Expansive Moment: the Rise of Social Anthropology in Britain and Africa, 1918–1970* (Cambridge, 1995).

[34] M. Fortes and E. E. Evans Pritchard (eds.), *African Political Systems* (Oxford, 1940) signals in their Editor's Note (p. vii): 'We hope this book will be of interest and use to those who have the task of administering African peoples'. There follows A. R. Radcliffe Brown's preface, with its refusal of State power as a useful category (p. xxiii).

Levi-Strauss began with the incest taboo.[35] The prohibition on marriage
within kin groups led to the exchange of women between different
families. 'Social', as opposed to 'natural', relations developed from
here. This distinction between nature and culture of course had its
problems. Notoriously, two different schools for the anthropology of
kinship developed: while the French approach remained centred on
alliances between families, the English anthropology of kinship insisted
that the family line and its maintenance was the key locus of meaning.[36] In
the event, after a generation of intensive discussion, anthropologists
abandoned 'kinship' as a useful category of analysis: it was no longer
seen to hold the key to social organization. Only recently, with fieldwork
conducted not only in former colonies, but in IVF clinics in Britain and
the United States, has kinship returned to the anthropological table.[37]
Historians have been slow to respond to these vicissitudes – but any
discussion of kinship has the enduring merit of taking us into the tissue
of social relations, and away from the State as the starting point.[38]

Engagement with anthropology has also lent energy to the history of
religion. Before the era of professionalization, historians had discussed
religion as a matter of course – witness, however hostile, Edward
Gibbon – but a consequence of History's conscription by the nation-
state was to inhibit this. Religion fell foul of 'the omission [from historical
study] of those parts of human experience which are not related to public
affairs', and this was still an issue at the turn of the 1960s.[39] Victorian
History's loss was Anthropology's gain: since the late nineteenth century,
the study of religion had been integral to the analysis of the social orga-
nization of 'primitive' peoples. This was expressly theorized in the French
tradition founded by Emile Durkheim, and even the more pragmatic
Anglo-Saxon tradition did not beg to differ. Thus Gluckman's *Custom
and Conflict in Africa* led readers from Evans Pritchard's work on feud

---

[35] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris, 1949).

[36] For a survey, see Kuper, *Anthropology and Anthropologists*, pp. 159–75. R. Fox, *Kinship
and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, 1967) sought to resolve the
'descent' vs 'alliance' approaches.

[37] Recent work departs from M. Strathern, *Reproducing the Future: Essays on Anthropology,
Kinship, and the New Reproductive Technologies* (Manchester, 1992); and C. Thompson,
Making Parents: the Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies (Cambridge,
MA, 2005). J. Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge, 2004) is a helpful overview.

[38] See, for example, R. le Jan, *Famille et pouvoir dans le monde franc (viiᵉ-xᵉ siècle). Essai
d'anthropologie sociale* (2003); or the refreshingly ambitious D. W. Sabean, S. Teuscher,
J. Mathieu (eds.), *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Development (1300–1900)*
(New York, 2007); neither refers to current anthropology of kinship.

[39] R. W. Southern, 'The Shape and Substance of Academic History: An Inaugural Lecture
delivered before the University of Oxford, 2 November 1961', in R. Bartlett (ed.), *History
and Historians: the Selected Papers of R. W. Southern* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 87–119, at p. 99.