ANTHROPOLOGY FOR WHOSE PUBLIC INTEREST?

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The beginning of anthropology as a discipline in the United States included a concern for public policy. After World War II and the trend toward professionalization, applied anthropology has taken a "back seat" to "genuine" anthropology--a stepchild, at best, with considerably less prestige. This was apparent in the late 1960's when the American Anthropological Association had to be pressured into accepting public and practical issues as legitimate concerns for anthropologists. Such a position of noninvolvement seemed very odd indeed for a discipline that traces its intellectual and human- ist heritage to the Enlightenment, which stressed the ideals of human dignity, self-direction and freedom and was committed to actively enhancing the quality of human life.

In more recent years, the academic job market has diminished and our "license to practice the irrelevant" (Burke 1969) has been revoked by emerging nations. It is no small coincidence that the stepchild of anthropology has now been let out of the closet. Every edition of the Anthropology Newsletter reminds us of the new-found legitimacy of practicing anthropology outside of academic institu- tions. Sanday (1976), for example, points to the evidence of an increasing demand for anthropologists in the public sector, at both national and international levels. There is also a small, but growing, demand for anthropologists in international agencies and multinational corporations.

Putting the question of motivation aside, as applied anthropol- ogy is once again a sanctioned endeavor, it is critical that we revive the issues first put before us by Boas and Kroeber, and more recently by Gerald Berreman, Kathleen Gough, Joseph Jorgensen, Thomas Weaver and others: namely, the issues of social responsibil- ity, ethics, and moral accountability. It is simply not enough to be more accepting of applied anthropology because we need jobs, and to teach students the necessary technical skills to be more market- able. We must also teach the ability to make sound judgments in the interest of humane public policy. To teach skills and not an ethos of ethical and moral awareness is to invite misapplication. There is more to action-oriented anthropology than indiscriminate activity and the orderly assembly of social technicians. Entering the arena of the "policy sciences" we must guard against becoming a discipline of human control (Wolfe 1974).

The question is no longer, "Should we engage in public-oriented anthropology?" but rather, "What will it be?" or, "An anthropology

for whose public interest?" It is no longer a question of getting
policy makers to listen, but how the information will be used
(Wallace 1976). As currently taught and practiced, anthropology may
be in danger of creating both domestic (Brown 1977) and international
"think tanks" that will do little more than provide ideological sup-
port for the status quo and alternative strategies for manipulating
the powerless. An anthropology for the public interest should serve
the needs of society and science (Sanday 1976), but we need to ask
whose needs are being served. There is no political neutrality in
today's world, nor was there in the past. Traditionally, anthropol-
ogists have provided information about the powerless to the powerful.
To continue to do so and to ignore global social, political and
economic realities jeopardizes those who permit us the privilege of
participating and sharing in their daily lives.

The question of whose interests will be served by anthropolo-
gists is becoming an urgent one for those of us involved in the
modernization process of the so-called less developed countries.
What we see is a world order based on economic exploitation by
multinational corporations and powerful nations. What we see is
social and political oppression. With increasing hunger and starva-
tion due to artificial food shortages, the spread of disease due to
high technology, and the increasing disparity between the "haves"
and the "have nots," there is no longer room for vague suggestions
and fence-sitting. Until recently, we have documented the problem-
atic consequences of development but have stopped short of revealing
their underlying causes.

As advisors to assistance programs we have made the medicine of
progress more palatable to indigenous people. Historically, our
role has been one of promoting the process of westernization and
thereby assisting in the spread of industrial society. Frequently,
we have adopted the position that the process is inevitable, as if
it were part of the natural order--a product of biological evolution
that cannot be disrupted. Indeed, some view the developing world as
an ideal laboratory for the study of culture change--seeing people
only as "objects" for study--unconcerned that they actually experi-
ence the events and conditions we carefully document and analyze.
We are faced with the contradiction of easing the pain of moderniza-
tion while criticizing the loss of traditional ways of life (Deloria
1969).

One rationale for the support of current development strategies
is that we should allow the people themselves to decide if they want
the benefits of modernization. It is suggested that we have no
right to deny anyone access to the things that have "improved" our
society. At face value, this appears to be a valid point. However,
when we sell our various development packages, we do not reveal that
by adopting inappropriate forms of technology, emerging nations will
become more dependent on the superpowers, paving the way for new
forms of colonialism and imperialism. Nor do we reveal the hazards
that will accompany the supposed benefits. We have only to look at
South America, where cash/mono-cropping causes previously well-fed

peasants to go hungry when prices fall; where imported grasses planted to support beef cattle for export secrete enzymes that kill indigenous vegetation and poison rivers. We have only to look at Africa, where dams constructed for hydro-electric power displace thousands and increase the habitats for the vectors of liver flukes and river blindness. We have only to look at Asia where the lumber industry rapes the forests, increasing an already critical firewood shortage and leaving the soil with no future source of nutrients.

Far from a part of the natural world, the concept of development is itself a cultural construct. Although supposedly based on one of the more objective of the social sciences (economics), Myrdal (1965, 1968) has aptly demonstrated the sociopolitical premises and value orientation underlying the origin and growth of development theory and practice. Nonetheless, development has emerged as another form of determinism--a necessary precondition for the spread of civilization as we know it. And yet, there is little evidence that a relationship exists between high technology and the improvement of the quality of life (Nader and Beckerman 1978). It is our faith in the notion of progress, rather than empirical evidence that provides justification for the massive effort to bring civilization to the hinterlands of the world. Thus, Illich (1969:20) comments: "So pervasive is the power of the institutions we have created that they shape not only our preferences, but actually our sense of possibilities."

In order to accurately assess and evaluate current development schemes, we must examine the history and ideological currents that underlie Western development. We must study not only those being "developed," but also the "developers." We must examine carefully the assumptions that have been acted upon as truths. For example-- is it over-population alone or inequitable distribution that is responsible for the food shortage? We must openly reveal the failures and devastation of current social and economic programs, such as many international family planning programs and the Green Revolution. We must recognize that social inequality is not alleviated under any of the current ideological systems espoused by the powerful nations, including our own.

According to Kathleen Gough (1968) our weakness in working in the developing world is our failure to evaluate the world social system and the distribution of political and economic power. We cannot alter the realities of global politics and economic systems, but we can at least be informed about them. Developing countries are now having to perform a magical act--the illusion of change to benefit the many, while maintaining the existing system for the few. The promises of current development policy cannot be fulfilled without fundamental alterations in existing social institutions and economic structures. As the competition for scarce resources and privileges intensifies, the facades will be more difficult to maintain.

Existing and pervasive systems of social stratification are generally aggravated by high technology. As a rule, development schemes have enhanced the power and autonomy of developed countries and Third World elites (Berreman 1979), while the poor get poorer. It seems likely that the wheels of modernization will not turn quickly enough to compensate for the intolerable living conditions of most of the world's population (Diamond 1974). The potential for peasant unrest and revolution is a subject of grave concern to unstable bureaucratic elite governments. As these governments are confronted with local obstacles to nationalism and political integration, our research among tribal and peasant peoples will be of greater value and potential misuse as a source of power and control.

Mills (1959:81) warned us long ago that there would be ". . . an increasing demand for ideological justification as worldviews collide and the unfulfilled promises of economic development and the Westernization process are revealed as empty." In a situation of clear-cut conflict of interest and values, our "facts" can have both immediate and enduring consequences. There would seem to be only two choices: (1) to provide the justification, or (2) to speak out and risk losing our employment or future access to a country. Perhaps there is a third alternative--that is, to make it clear that social science has a role in legitimation. Knowledge is a source of power (Mills 1974) and it should be used to increase the accountability of agencies, multinationals and governments. We must not only reveal our findings, but also withhold our sanction of their policies and practices when they are detrimental to humankind. It is our responsibility to make politicians and policy makers aware of the consequences of their actions (Pool 1962).

Little, if anything, occurs in the Third World that is not politically and economically motivated. It is therefore impossible for us to conduct any type of research that is without potential consequences. In the emerging sociopolitical climate, our task becomes even more difficult. We must become advocates of a new social order that transcends nationalist ideologies. Industrial society, no matter of which ideological persuasion, is becoming the homogenizing mechanism of cultural diversity. It is imperative that we speak out of what we know and understand of the viability of diversity and the certain extinction of societies produced as clones.

Ogden Nash said of progress that it was once a good thing, but it lasted too long. Perhaps it is time for us to reconsider, to display our creativity and to exercise Mills' (1959) sociological imagination by supplying alternatives to the unrestrained spread of industrial society. This is not a plea to return to the past or an argument against all change or technological development. As Colson (1971:3) argues, such a perspective would be "folly": the error is in allowing technology to determine policy. It is not that technology is inherently destructive, but rather the cultural context in which it is used (Berreman 1979).

It is clearly false that tropical countries of this age can follow the developmental sequence of temperate countries which experienced industrialization over a 300 year period without the burden of beginning in a legacy of prolonged colonialism and high population to resource ratios. There is growing and convincing evidence that industrialization and development, as currently conceived, are not the answer to the problems of Third World countries --it is both immoral and unethical for us not to say so. In the name of "progress" we are witness to ethnocide, genocide and the destruction of entire ecosystems.

Throughout evolution, extinction has been the rule, not the exception. As a discipline unashamed of its humanitarian concerns, our own extinction is imminent. A group wearing the label of "anthropologists" may survive, and while it busily practices "real, uninvolved science," it can document with meticulous care the demise of our species as well. Anthropologists can take some comfort, however, in knowing they were scientific, used the proper methods, and maintained the appropriate objectivity. I would join with Donald Grayson (1969) in suggesting that anthropologists should realize that it is far more important to attempt to save life than to record its passing. In this regard, Gouldner (1964) has asked the most pertinent question of all: will we have the courage to say and use what we know? To this I would add the question: will we support the indiscriminate spread of industrial society over the needs of people?

It is foolhardy to assume that human society has simply fallen on another series of bad times. A new age has emerged where the potential for destruction and exploitation has reached awesome and possibly irreversible proportions. Of all of the social sciences, it is most incumbent upon anthropology ". . . to give us a glimpse of another human possibility" (Diamond 1974:xvi). Our task then is to demystify the notion of progress, prevent the erosion and degradation of other social and cultural alternatives and to serve in the creation of new possibilities. No less than our species' being is at stake.

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