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ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE ISSUES OF OUR DAY

by James L. Peacock

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[Editors' Note: The *AnthroNotes* editors asked James Peacock, President of the American Anthropological Association (1993–95) what he sees as the future for anthropology as we approach a new millennium.]

In the presidential address to the American Anthropological Association in 1995, I sketched three possible scenarios for anthropology in the 21st century:

1. Death, extinction.

2. Living death. Anthropology as an enclave: irrelevant, cherishing ideas once avant garde, and now quaint. In this vision, anthropology consists of disorganized, slightly intriguing and amusing nay-saying eccentrics who relish vaguely-recalled avant-garde ideas from the 20th century but who are merely a curiosity in the 21st.

20th Anniversary Issue

3. Life. Anthropology remains intriguing and creatively diverse, iconoclastic, and breathtaking in breadth and perception, profound in scholarship but integral and even leading in addressing the complex challenges of a transnational yet grounded humanity.

In this third scenario, anthropology builds on its strengths (e.g., undergraduate teaching) and diminishes its weaknesses (its marginality despite its scope, and its presence everywhere yet nowhere in academia and society).

The community of K-12 teachers is one of the two or three most crucial arenas in which to broaden the dialogue between anthropology and our wider society. I am delighted, therefore, to join that dialogue through this invited article honoring the 20th anniversary of *AnthroNotes*.

This article is written in the hope that more anthropologists and teachers will find ways to help our discipline achieve the third scenario by addressing and helping to solve the great issues of our day.

I speak from both inside and outside anthropology. I am an unrepentant, undeconstructed anthropologist. During the past seven years, I have spent as much time outside the discipline as inside. Various elected posts, including chair of faculty at my university, have brought more interdisciplinary than disciplinary work, allowing me to see enormous opportunities for the discipline of anthropology.

The mutual engagement of anthropologists and academics with teachers and others (such as legislators) in community settings (such as town meetings or conferences) addressing issues of concern to all is worth considering. This could be an alternative to the hierarchical and unidirectional model of the anthropologist or other academic as "expert," conveying wisdom to others such as teachers or students.

Trends in Anthropology

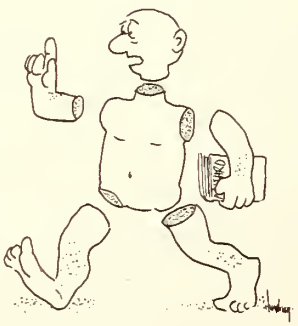
The history of anthropology over the last one hundred years can be divided into three phases or orientations: past, present, and future. Beginning in the late

nineteenth century, anthropology focused on the past: human origins and evolution. Edward Tylor, holding at Oxford the first academic appointment in anthropology, signifies this focus (*Primitive Cultures,* 1871). In the early twentieth century, anthropology began to focus on the present: ethnography, describing contemporary living peoples. Malinowski's fieldwork during World War I (*Argonauts of the Western Pacific,* 1922) signaled the advent of this phase. Then in the beginning of the mid-twentieth century, after World War II, anthropology was oriented more toward the future through concern with change, "practice" (how people use cultural rules to negotiate their lives), and shaping the future. Sir Edmund Leach, a pupil of Malinowski, inaugurated this phase with his 1954 publication, *Political Systems of Highland Burma.*

NAVEL-GAZING

This analysis does not say that focusing on the past or present is obsolete. On the contrary, the tracing of human origins and evolution remains our bread and describing living peoples (ethnography) our butter. Understanding where we come from and who we are are still the fundamental questions of anthropology. Nor is it to say that anthropology is or should become only future oriented, in the manner of authors Alvin Toffler (*Future Shock,* 1970) or Peter Drucker (*Post Capitalist Society,* 1993). However, I do believe there is and should be an emerging emphasis on dynamism and activism—grasping and shaping the future. Hence my two slogans: (1) the future of anthropology is the future and (2) the future of our mastery is the mastery of our future.

The most recent epoch has been a troubled one, marked by two complementary trends: turning inward and turning outward. The inward turning is exemplified by the notorious reflexive or postmodernist navel-gazing: the anthropologist, like many other academics, reflecting on his- or herself and discipline and questioning/deconstructing both.



DECONSTRUCTION

The outward turning is exemplified by the growth in applied anthropology, the practice of anthropology in the world at large. Half the anthropologists with new doctorates now take jobs outside the academy. Thus my third slogan: you get the most out of anthropology by getting out of it provided, of course, you carry its wisdom with you as you go out to work in the world. It is these ambassadors who often have the opportunity to be engaged in the issues of our day.

Anthropology's Contributions

What should emerge from anthropology's engagement with human issues? How can we get better at doing it constructively and publicly?

Margaret Mead is a good example of one who publicly addressed issues of society, promoting anthropology as a useful perspective. Some of anthropology's current intellectual leaders waste valuable public opportunities by airing arcane debates internal to the discipline and tedious to those outside— not to mention some of us inside the discipline.

Anthropology has a distinctive and difficult intellectual task. Carrying it out, anthropologists perform miracles. What is this task? Another slogan "backwards and in high heels" sums it up. When Ginger Rogers asked what it was like to dance with Fred Astaire, she replied, "I do everything he does, backwards and in high heels." Anthropologists do that so to speak, compared to other thinkers. They engage the categories of our society, such as democracy or capitalism, then throw our own anthropological concepts into the dialogue with exotic ones—a dance if you like—thus forcing us to rethink our own categories and our own society. We are to most intellectuals as Ginger was to Fred.

A basic contribution of anthropology is to honor and understand local knowledge. "Local" is sometimes far away, sometimes close by, but always localized, immediate, and thus subordinated to the so-called global—to turn that local wisdom back on our own taken-for-granted categories of wisdom and morality.

I affirm and applaud the miraculous achievements of anthropologists today and over the past hun-

dred years who are the real heroes and heroines, putting themselves at risk in every way—physically, psychologically, culturally, professionally—to do what nobody else does: to reach out into incredibly remote or different or challenging situations and make sense of them—brilliantly. Anthropologists really do miracles.

But somehow we need to do more miracles and within the public sphere. Thus, public or perish. By public I mean not publicity but engaging serious public issues, sometimes publicly, deploying our special strengths, our miracles, in so doing—in forums ranging from schools to town meetings.

Issues to Embrace

What kinds of issues should we engage?

The gamut—from human rights to environmental destruction to creating viable national or international culture, to poverty, homelessness, and the 45 million refugees in the world today. We anthropologists already contribute importantly to such issues but vastly less than we could and should.

One general issue bears directly on the future of our discipline and to which our discipline offers special wisdom—the issue of globalism.

One aspect of globalism is often identified by two terms: the information revolution and the management revolution. The information revolution pertains to the growth of the computer technology in every sphere, from banking to teaching. The management revolution pertains to the growth of management in a corporate or business model in every sphere, from health delivery to education. Both so-called revolutions are driven by globalistic capitalism, where the ultimate goal and value is the bottom line. To maximize profit, human values are subordinate to this one value.

Thus, in health care, some HMOs may subordinate the Hippocratic oath to economics; in education, downsizing replaces humanistic ideals of education with a piecework model, so that temporary employees replace the classic academic community, which united scholarship, mentoring, governance, and public service as a full-time, life-long calling. The result is that for short-time savings, schools or the academy sometimes resemble sweat shops.

We anthropologists must force the "real world" leaders to think hard about the long-term consequences of undermining the educational endeavor and other societal processes by the information and management revolutions.

A counter to this trend of profit-making is suggested by the modifying adjective: global. Globalization bears a relationship to particularized groundings: to local identities, region, kin, community, and to the ground itself—nature, the environment. Globalization works in many ways to destroy these groundings; perhaps in other ways it can affirm them. Anthropology is the discipline perhaps best equipped to grasp at once the global and local/particularized and to probe the ways these seemingly opposed trends relate and could relate. I call this relationship GLOB GRO—global and ground.

Hence, the management revolution and the information revolution should engage anthropological analysis; they are both global and "cross-cultural."

Globalism or the broader relationship of "globgro" takes anthropology far beyond the stones and bones that are its staple. Engagement with globalism as an issue brings anthropology into the classroom and into the community in a way that deploys the discipline's full spectrum from evolution to ethnography.

The Teaching of Anthropology

What abides and what should abide in the teaching of anthropology?

First, I would nominate, especially, telling the human story—prehistory and history—our most solid and publicly recognized contribution. Second, I would incorporate new twists such as gender and ideology into ethnography and comparison and continue the study of the sustaining institutions, such as religion and the family (kinship). The most exciting work combines history or prehistory and ethnography; for example, Charles Hudson's work on DeSoto and the Spanish era in American history (*Hernando de Soto and the Indians of Florida,* 1993), offers a fine tie-in between ethnography and early American history. Ecological frameworks also provide excellent ways to join the so-called four fields (and more), in pushing issues of the environment, both natural and cultural.

How can we encourage anthropology departments to engage more with the issues of our day and departments to work more with local school systems?

I caution my colleagues to sustain the basics; nobody else will. But think flexibly about these; the four fields are better conceived, I think, as force fields—as dynamic tensions among biological and cultural, theory and practice, positivism and interpretivism, past and present orientations—rather than as fixed sub-disciplines. Second, consider mustering support for selected ways to help anthropology reach out:

◆ Offer fellowships or prizes for public anthropology; that is, for anthropologists, here or overseas, who develop cogent ways of engaging public issues. University news bureaus can offer editorial assistance and contacts to help researchers turn findings into commentaries on public issues, which could appear in forums ranging from "Weekly Reader" for pupils to the *Atlanta Constitution, Washington Post,* or *New York Times* op-ed pieces.

◆ Offer fellowships that combine research and teaching. Worldteach is my name for a program that would offer doctoral candidates two-years support: funding for a year of international fieldwork and a year of writing, provided the student returns, in that second year, to teach what is learned in fieldwork to undergraduates or K-12 students. In short, share the miracle—the truly astounding insights and experiences of fieldwork, which are fresh when you return.

◆ Define some societal issues that can be a focus for analysis and public communication. Work with local schools to organize forums that engage teachers, students, and parents around those issues.

◆ Organize an educational experience around a local issue, for example, the Nike course. Nike shoes gives $11 million to our university's athletic program. Students and faculty protest because of the sellout to commerce and specifically to Nike with its sweatshops in Southeast Asia. As a forum for students, faculty, and others to explore this issue, three of us, including our current faculty chair, are offering a course on Nike, including all the contexts and issues. Nike people have come, critics will come, and Nike has offered to pay for trips to SE Asia to see the factories. We read scholarly works and do field trips to local textile mills for comparative purposes. Students, thereby, gain in-depth exposure to a societal issue, part of globalization, in which they are engaged.

Conclusion

I encourage teachers to approach anthropologists in their communities about getting involved in K-12 education. Taking the initiative might in turn stimulate anthropologists to reach out and form collaborative efforts.

Anthropology departments or individual anthropologists, who decide to collaborate on issues with K-12 classrooms or schools, can receive some help from

the AAA's long-range plan, which has as one major objective "engagement of the discipline with societal issues."

Many of the 400 departments and programs of anthropology are already doing outstanding outreach to their communities, including schools and teachers. More might do so if approached by the schools in the 3,000 counties where the 400 programs are distributed. Some may fear that this outreach will cause anthropology to lose its moorings as a learned discipline and turn it into just another servant of our globalizing, downsizing, greed-driven, exploitative society, stripping us of our scholarly, scientific capacity that can also back up a critical capacity. That would be tragic. However, I contend that outreach can spur inreach: scholarly revitalization through engagement.

Anthropology's special perspective is precious. It is time to engage better, to deploy our wisdom creatively outward. If we do it right, we can revitalize our scholarly and scientific endeavors by fueling them with wider dialogue and bigger work.

James Peacock is the Kenan Professor of Anthropology, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and past President of the American Anthropological Association.

Postscript: Some publications that may be useful to educators wishing to explore collaborative programs are:

AAA Guide. Lists academic anthropology departments and programs, museums, research firms, and government agencies. Available from the American Anthropological Association, 4350 North Fairfax Dr., Suite 640, Arlington, VA 22203-1620; (703) 528–1902 ext. 3032; E-mail: http://www.ameranthassn.org. $40 for AAA members; $55 for non-members.

Why Belong? A conversation about cultural anthropology with James Peacock by Carol Ball Ryan (Chandler and Sharp, 1975) discusses possible links between anthropology and schools. Some of these ideas are in *The Anthropological Lens.* Cambridge University Press, 1986, reprinted 1996.