

OBAMA AND ANTHROPOLOGY: Anthropology in an Increasingly Global World

by James Peacock



[Editors' Note: In 1997 the *AnthroNotes* editors invited James Peacock, then President of the American Anthropological Association, to contribute the lead article for *AnthroNotes*' 20th Anniversary Issue. The article, "Anthropology and the Issues of our Day," appeared Spring 1998. In anticipation of *AnthroNotes*' 30th anniversary, we returned to Professor Peacock and asked if he would once again give us his observations on anthropology in this time of such enormous change—in anthropology, society and our world.]

A decade ago, I wrote an essay for *AnthroNotes* based on a speech I had given as then-president of the American Anthropological Association. Now I am invited to reflect on that essay in light of the current time. I will briefly revisit that essay, recount some activities I and other anthropologists have been doing that follow up on the admonitions I offered in that first essay, and finally conclude with some of the challenges and opportunities that face us in the era of Obama.

The Nineties: "Public or Perish"

This slogan, which I appropriated from museum anthropologists, summarizes the message of my speech that I gave to my fellow anthropologists in 1997. I called for anthropologists to address more effectively issues of the wider society, that is, the public. *AnthroNotes* cleverly summarized my message of three possible futures for anthropology with a cartoon by the late Robert Humphrey showing "Anthro-man," flying like Superman to rescue society. The speech/essay helped stimulate the creation of a sub-field sometimes termed "public anthropology." A website and book series edited by Rob Borofsky, as well as a program in "public interest anthropology" led by Peggy Sanday at the University of Pennsylvania, exemplify this direction. Coincidentally, this was the Clinton era—a time of prosperity in the USA and the rise of globalization.

Early 21st Century: Efforts to Walk the Walk and Talk the Talk

Following my call to "go public," I found an opportunity to act in my own locale. Back in 1993, the University of North Carolina (UNC) had celebrated its bicentennial. UNC was the first state university and Bill Clinton spoke at its bicentennial, signifying its movement from a state and regional to a national focus. However, UNC was not very global in its identity at that time, even though it had wel-



came its first international student (from Japan) in 1893. However, in 1993 Craig Calhoun, now President of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), had created a University Center for International Studies (UCIS), which I directed from 1996 to 2003. Fortunately, this small center, which received little funding from the University, became an engine to internationalize the university, state, and even region while reaching out globally. (These regional/global efforts are recounted in my book, *Grounded Globalism*.)

I defined nine steps to internationalize UNC, including three key ones: defining international work as a top priority and identity of the institution, appointing a central administration official to support this work, and building a space in which to work. During my seven years as director, our center accomplished all nine steps. Both the sixteen-campus system and the Chapel Hill campus agreed on international work as one of six priorities, an Associate Provost for international affairs was appointed, and an 82,000 square foot building was erected (financed by a state-wide bond) to accommodate rapidly growing activities, which were then housed in nooks and crannies. Following is a brief description of one activity: World View.

World View Program

World View (www.unc.edu/world) was established ten years ago by lawyer Robert Phay to help schools and colleges prepare students to succeed in an interconnected world. The Program's mission is to help educators internationalize schools and integrate a global perspective into every subject area of the curriculum and at every grade level, helping educators respond to rapid ethnic and cultural changes and promoting foreign language training and international travel. Phay remains director while I chair the board. During these years we have worked with almost 13,000 K-12 and community college teachers and administrators in 95 of North Carolina's 100 counties. Our main work, however, is conducting workshops with teachers and administrators of K-12 schools and community colleges. These culminate in action-plans that help guide the numerous school and college programs throughout the state.

World View exemplifies a kind of work that educators, including some (but not nearly enough) anthropologists, have been doing in the past decade. These globally-oriented educational activities have flourished in response to the rise of global forces, positive and negative, and the need to address them in K-12 education. It is important

that this work continue and evolve—a challenge—given current economic pressures that, among other things, lead legislators and K-12 administrators to cut out “non-essentials.”

Courageous and wise legislators and administrators see, however, that global education is increasingly important as our own society grows increasingly global. For this reason, our state legislature has provided an appropriation for World View, enabling school administrators and teachers to attend our workshops. Unfortunately academic departments, including anthropology, have not been particularly interested in or supportive of such “outreach” activity. This reflects the academic reward system that primarily rewards research—an artifact of the graduate school/research model imported from Germany in the late nineteenth century that is gradually shifting, perhaps, to a twenty-first century synergy between research, teaching, and “engagement” or application.

What is the relation of these activities to public anthropology? The work of World View certainly connects to public issues, whether those include the impact of immigration on schools (our state has one of our country's highest percentage of increase of Latino immigrants) or the need to grasp global issues as part of education. Anthropology is one of many disciplines involved; in this effort, a broad interdisciplinary paradigm has proven more effective than any single discipline, but certainly anthropological concepts are pertinent.

Looking Toward the Obama Era

Unfortunately, as we anticipate the inauguration of a new President, our era looms as one of a terrible mess threatening awful suffering by many while also promising a vision for a new world led by a visionary. Wall Street is destroying main street and vast lands beyond by irresponsible practices reflected in the illusory profits rewarded by excessive bonuses. The USA and global economies are spinning down and out of control. Nations—from Zimbabwe to the Congo—are destroying themselves by tyranny and violence. Iraq is only one of an estimated forty conflict zones. Famine and obesity vie with AIDS and stroke as killers of epidemic proportions.

Calmly poised as a visionary New Deal rescuer is Barack Obama. Prior to his inauguration he has already appointed his cabinet—working deliberately but very quickly to bring on board highly capable, largely centrist

experts—in economics, health care, labor, environment, and international affairs. Not surprisingly, these cabinet appointees come from fields outside anthropology; several are, however, distinguished academics—in economics, physics, and biology, for example. Obama himself is presumably influenced in some way by anthropology inasmuch as his mother was an anthropologist, working on microcredit organizations in Indonesia and elsewhere. Certainly, he is influenced by his global experience, living in Indonesia while attending elementary school. However, his training is in law and his experience is in U.S. government and politics.

Should anthropology shape the Obama administration in any way, that shaping must come from outside the central government—trickle up, so to speak, from the grass roots/communities/academies/schools where we do our work. What situation might we as anthropologists address? Our forte, traditionally, has been a holistic view and perspective. If we take a holistic look at our society's situation right now, what do we see?

Quantitative over Qualitative

The importance of the quantitative over the qualitative (i.e. the quality of life) is one pervasive theme today. We cannot, of course, ignore or negate numbers: population growth, destruction of rain forests, immigration demographics, and economic downturns—all important indicators. However, we must go beyond measurements and try to put them together with other evidence in order to take a more holistic picture. Anthropologists tend to favor and see balances and systematic interplay among economics, politics, religion, and social forces. Our writings and research plot interrelations among such forces as fundamentalism and terrorism; relations to poverty, diversity, oppression; and the complex connections to environment, ecology, and identity (as in gender identity and sexual orientation, among many which also include regional, ethnic, class, and religious or political identities, all grounded in broader social and cultural contexts (Peacock 2007a.). The general lesson of seeing how pieces fit together in a way missed by specialists is pertinent when imagining how anthropologists might contribute understanding of broader contours of the USA and world societies.

Turning to specific issues and the ways to address them, consider the specialties represented in the more than thirty sections of the American Anthropological Association. Human rights, environment, gender, diversity, eco-



nomics, law, politics, culture, psychology, education, biology, archaeology are among the specialty groups in AAA, and many of these have applied and activist as well as academic foci. The human rights committee, for example, directly treats human rights issues that arise as part of the work of anthropologists, and anthropologists work in every corner of the world at grass roots and community levels hardly visible to UN officials or others who associate primarily with heads of state and official bodies.

What we know and what we do are crucially relevant to policies and practices up and down the hierarchies of the state department. Similarly, the AAA committee on relations between anthropology and the military or intelligence communities is in dialogue with anthropologists actually working with such communities.

Another example of where anthropology might prove helpful is Obama's proposal to convene Muslims of the world to discuss terrorism and other issues. Lambasted by some Islamic scholars as artificially separating Muslims from everyone else, such a proposal can usefully be evaluated by anthropologists of religion (another section of AAA) who are accustomed to seeing religion in context. Beyond AAA, thousands of anthropologists do applied work within the contexts of many institutions and organizations, for example, the Society of Applied Anthropology; WAPA, the Washington Association of Practicing Anthropologists; and the Center for Integrating Research and Action, an effort at UNC to coordinate aca-



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demics and communities in such projects as nutrition. I believe that much of this work can inform efforts at re-shaping our society in the age of Obama.

Let us all draw on anthropology together with other wisdoms to enrich the work of this era. We can do this in our teaching, in our communities, and perhaps, by “trickle up” means, helping to shape the policies and practices of our government and the wider society.

Further Reading

Sanday, Peggy R. 1976. *Anthropology and the Public Interest: Fieldwork and Theory*. Academic Press.

Borofsky, Robert, and Naomi Schneider. *Public Anthropology Series*. University of California Press 2001-. <http://www.publicanthropology.org/Bookseries/Ucseries.htm>

Peacock, James, Patricia Thornton, and Patrick Inman. 2007a. *Identity Matters: Ethnic and Sectarian Conflict*. Berghahn Press.

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