American Anthropology: A Personal View
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The nature and identity of anthropology is a much-debated topic these days. In many university departments the traditional so-called "four fields" approach is more honored in the breach than in practice; where several fields are taught, the integration is, often enough, left to the student. In the context of this discussion it might be worthwhile to look at its origins and benefits once more.

The idea that physical and cultural anthropology, prehistoric archaeology and some aspects of linguistics form a single discipline has long been an American hallmark. Although most of us, I believe, have had some training in all these areas, probably no one since Boas has contributed to all four of the fields.

Franz Boas, like other American anthropologists before him, was a student of the peoples of North America. As the historian of anthropology, George Stocking (1974), pointed out, his work in physics and geography endowed Boas with a special perspective, a mixture of what might be called the "hard sciences" and the more humanistic approach of the human geography of the times. Among his students, and sometimes between Boas himself and some of his students, this led, at times, to debates over the place of science and history in anthropology. That tension between those who see anthropology as "science" and those who see it as part of the humanities is again, or still, with us. This has implications for the kind of research we do, for the methods utilized, for analytic or interpretive procedures advocated even for questions of where anthropology belongs in the structure of the university.

Before Boas and for Boas himself, the essence and primary task of American anthropology was the study of the American Indian. Indeed, that is where its origins lay. Who were these people and how did they get here? Were they the original inhabitants of the continent or had there been others before them? For example, was there a race of giants who had built the massive earthworks of the Lower Mississippi Valley, of Ohio, Illinois and Wisconsin? When Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark on their great exploration of the West in 1804, he gave them a list of questions. They were to find out as much as they could about the Indians they would meet on their route, all the way out to the Pacific Ocean.

How can questions of the origins and the true nature of the Indians be answered? By the study of the physical types of the people, their archeological remains, their languages and their customs: the four fields of anthropology. It may now be hard to remember that there were few anthropologists until the 1950s. From 1890 on, when the Indians had all been defeated and settled on reservations, it was widely felt that their distinctiveness would quickly disappear. Anthropology was a salvage operation, and any one anthropologist had to be equipped to study as many aspects of the Indians' culture and life, their language and their physical characteristics as humanly possible. Until World War II and the subsequent great expansion of American anthropology, most anthropologists were Americanists.

The historic influence of the study of the American Indian on American anthropology cannot be overemphasized. Indians were highly diversified populations, with many different cultures, languages and physical types. Because they were easily accessible it was possible for an anthropologist simply to drive to a reservation and spend some months there every summer; the difference between the field anthropologist and the armchair theorist never became an issue, as it
did in Europe. The possibility of frequent inexpensive fieldtrips also supported the turn of Boas and his students toward detailed empirical studies, away from high-level theories and speculative historic reconstruction. How we do fieldwork affects our methods and our theories.

It is important to contrast this work situation and its context for American anthropologists with those of their European colleagues, who were working mostly in colonial situations, often supported directly by the Colonial Offices of their countries, or associated with public universities and museums so that they were, in fact, public servants. American anthropology never used the language of colonialism. It was therefore possible for anthropologists to see themselves as being on the side of the Indian, often against government intervention. For example, Boas protested the banning by the Canadian government of the feasting tradition of the potlatch among the Northwest Coast peoples among whom he worked. Universities were independent of the national government and anthropologists were not government agents.

The presence of the Indian had important effects on anthropological theory as well as practice. For example, given the great diversity of the Indian populations, physical type (then called "race"), language, and culture could easily be seen to be independent variables, separate from each other. As any student knows, among the Pueblo peoples of the Southwest, for example, we see neighboring populations who share major aspects of culture, but speak totally unrelated languages.

Because the original aim of American anthropology was to study the native peoples and to reconstruct as much as possible of their ancient ways from the memories of the old people still living, the great diversity of the peoples of North America became a major focus of interest. In the concept of "culture areas" and especially the establishment of culture areas in relationship to "natural," that is to say ecological, areas by A.L. Kroeber (1939), a lot more recent work was anticipated. Moreover, it was not the purpose of the anthropologists to help in the transformation of the Indians, but often instead to assist them to remember and appreciate the old ways. The characteristic American cultural relativism was born directly out of the contact between the anthropologists and the Indian peoples and their ways. Again, as Stocking (1974) has pointed out, much of the anthropology of the present—and this applies to the 1990s as well as the 1970s—can be seen to have its roots in questions raised by Boas in the early years of the 20th century and by his students after him.

If the four-fields approach started with the study of the native peoples of the Americas, why does this approach remain central to American anthropology—as I believe it still is—at a time when most of us are no longer students of the Indian? And when few people work in more than one or at most two of the fields? Because of traditional conservatism? Perhaps. Because some of our graduate students are going to teach in institutions where there may be only a single person to cover the field as a whole in introductory courses? That, too, must be considered. But there is another, less pragmatic and more fundamental reason: the four-field approach offers an interdisciplinary perspective, a fundamental organizing point of view. Consider some examples:

In his classic 1958 paper, the physical anthropologist Frank B. Livingstone sought to account for the distribution of the sickle cell gene in West Africa. As we know, in heterozygotes, this gene provides protection from the severest forms of malaria. To gather evidence of ancient and more recent migrations, he studied the distribution of language groups and reviewed relevant archeological findings. Clearing the land for agriculture was made possible by the use of iron tools. Agriculture in turn permitted the development of larger populations. However, in contrast to uncleared jungle land, agriculture created favorable conditions for the breeding of the anopheles mosquito, which carries the malaria parasite. In other words, culture change (specifically, iron tools, migration and agriculture) led to ecological changes (clearing of the
land) that favored the malaria carrier. This in turn led to an evolutionary change in humans, namely the establishment of the sickle cell gene, which had survival value for heterozygous carriers of that gene. Culture affects biology: a very important finding. From a methodological perspective, the physical anthropologist, to answer biological questions—in this case regarding evolutionary developments in human populations—may have to be able to synthesize data from linguistics, archaeology and ethnography.

Another example: My colleague Paul Sciulli (1992) found that in the prehistoric Indian populations he studied, a significant reduction in size of molars accompanied the shift from a hunter-gatherer subsistence economy to one of initial plant domestication. A second, later shift to maize horticulture was accompanied by a lesser reduction. Change in technology, skills, knowledge, all involved in a change of subsistence economy, led to a measurable biological change of an evolutionary nature. Culture affects biology.

Another example: altered (or alternate) states of consciousness represent very widespread phenomena of interest to anthropologists because they cry out for an interdisciplinary approach. Since they are found throughout human societies, we may want to ask about their sources in human evolution and mammalian biology (Bourguignon 1991). Also, it has often been noted that women are the principal participants, as both patients and healers, in possession trance cults (Lewis 1971, Bourguignon 1984). Raybeck et al. (1989) developed a complex model relating the problems encountered by individual women on the sociocultural level on the one hand to existing supernatural beliefs, such as the belief in possessing spirits, and stress and anxiety on the psychological level on the other. On the basis of extensive physiological studies, the authors show that women's calcium metabolism differs from that of men, making them vulnerable to a significant reduction of serum calcium levels in situations of stress. The resulting physical and psychological symptoms (tremors, convulsions, dizziness, dissociation) are then interpreted, now again on the socio-cultural level, as spirit possession both by the women themselves and by members of their communities. This complex model, which still needs to be tested, sees the individual human being as a complex biopsychological/sociocultural system.

There are at present two competing definitions of anthropology. One says: "anthropology is the study of particular cultures" (Schneider 1984:196), and omits reference to the three other fields. The other, older one, sees anthropology as the science that studies humankind. The first is linked to a strongly relativistic approach that argues for the virtually complete uniqueness of each culture, the second defends the claims of anthropology to being a generalizing science. It is, of course not a science that deals with atoms or molecules, and its methods must be appropriate to its subject matter. It is and can be science because it formulates and tests propositions and hypotheses, derived from observation, and seeks to find relationship among variables whether by the comparative, holocultural method, by statistical analysis or by other methods. Its ultimate aim is the development of generalizations based on comparisons.

The relativist position that focuses on a single culture and its uniqueness has given up on science, on cross-cultural generalizations and empirical validation, and also on the four fields approach. It ignores the evolutionary, biological dimension. It sees anthropology, and the social sciences in general, as interpretive and hermeneutic. This position, which takes a variety of forms, comes to American anthropology by way of French and German philosophy and literary studies. In one of its versions, it prefers to speak of culture as "text" and utilizes methods of textual analysis for the study of culture. The great merit of this, in the eyes of its practitioners, is that there are many ways of reading a text and no reading, not even that of the author, has ultimate authority.

The present-day relativists go far beyond Boas and his students. They not only say that cultures must be judged on their own terms but also that logic, knowledge, emotions are all culturally
relative. That, indeed, people who live according to cultures other than our own are incomprehensible; they are the "other." The universalists, to the contrary, argue that we can indeed identify a common core and certain common characteristics of societies and cultures by virtue of our common humanity and the functional requirements for the existence and operation of society.

The relativism of the Boasians was strongly linked to their commitment to science. When cultural differences are argued to be virtual absolutes, however, any claim to science is relinquished.

What, then, is the role of the anthropologist, if not that of the scientist? For some (e.g. Geertz 1986) the answer is to be a writer, the author of books, a teller of tales about faraway places and strange peoples. This position is given some justification by the observation that different generations of anthropologists and other observers have described the same people in very different terms, depending largely on their own intellectual positions and the changes that had taken place in their home communities.

If the observer is not trustworthy, what, then, is the solution? One response has been to let the voices of the "natives" be heard—an approach that has been greatly facilitated by the technology of the tape recorder, but also by the greater control the people we study exercise over our work. To understand what we do and write we must understand the social and cultural, economic and political context in which we work.

Of course, the use of multiple voices is a technique that was not invented by anthropologists. It abounds in contemporary fiction. Nor is it new, as shown by Sapir's (1938) famous reference to Dorsey's "Omaha Sociology" and his provocative sentence "Two Crows denies this."

American anthropology today then is characterized by a debate between those who see our field as science and those who see it as an interpretive enterprise. This debate parallels that between those who focus on common human (and primate) dimensions and those who talk about incommensurability and the ultimate uniqueness of each culture. It is important to realize that such a debate exists in other disciplines and in other parts of the world. It may have to do with the fragmentation of contemporary societies and the demands of various minority and interest groups to be heard. To understand the present situation we must, I think, consider it in terms of anthropology's special history as well as in terms of the current intellectual and political context. And that states my own position: a given phenomenon can be understood only through an analysis of its context rendered as fully as possible, and "understanding" requires more than mere contemplation or appreciation.

References


