Anthropology and the Contemporary World: Some Thoughts on Change and Continuity

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Whatever the changing image of anthropology, the reality, too, has changed. Where anthropologists once worked mainly in distant places among little known tribal groups and remote villagers, we now find that the people we study read our books and some of their children attend our classes. Also, as some have put it, anthropology "has come home". For example, there is now a thriving field of medical anthropology, some of whose practitioners work in this country: they concern themselves with a variety of problems, ranging from cultural limitations on the effective utilization of medical resources by various minority and immigrant groups, to research into the structure and operations of our medical institutions. Similarly, educational anthropologists study schools in this and other societies to gain an understanding of their operations, and to discover what the content and practice of schooling reveal about the structure and functioning of the society. There are both basic theoretical questions to be asked about the working of human societies and cultures, and issues of potential application to be dealt with. And it is sometimes the very study of a remote group and of apparently esoteric problems that may yield knowledge of immediate relevance to some practical problems.

...Contrary to what it may seem to the reader of individual descriptive accounts, -- however interesting these accounts may be -- description of individual societies and cultures is never an aim in itself. Such individual studies represent only a first step in the broader, comparative enterprise. And this is one central point of emphasis within anthropology that has not changed, and is not likely to change....

Suppose we discover, as Margaret Mead thought she did, a society that produces less stress in young people, less turmoil and confusion. Can we, as she seemed to suggest, "learn from them"? How detachable, as it were, are the various parts of our social and cultural system? Are these systems constructed like trains, in which individual cars can be unhooked and others inserted in their place? Or like the human body in the image of the bionic man or woman in which the whole consists of a series of independent replaceable parts, where the functioning of any one does not alter or modify the workings of the whole? What we have learned, indeed, is the very opposite: that cultures and societies are systems, that they consist of interdependent and interacting parts or sub-systems. These we may isolate for purposes of analysis, but we must not indulge in the fantasy that they have some independent, autonomous existence of their own, that we can change one or another at will and leave the system intact. Or that we can pick and choose an attractive array of behavior patterns or institutions here and there, from a sort of cross-
cultural smorgasbord, and then end up with a smoothly running whole.

So far, we have seen that various aspects of culture are inter-related, so that change in one area -- such as, the introduction of automobile production, or the absence of men in a community and the presence of remittances -- are likely to have profound effects throughout the system. Other examples frequently cited are the introduction of steel axes to a group of stone tool using Australian aborigines, or snowmobiles to Eskimo hunters or Lapp reindeer herders. Generally the repercussions of an innovation, as we have seen, are surprising because they are unexpected. From the standpoint of the anthropological observer, they are important because they reveal the linkages in the system and indeed the operation of the system, much as the operation of the human circulatory system is revealed by the injection of a dye. To avoid surprises, it clearly would be advantageous to study the linkages of the system in advance of the addition of a new element, so that its effects can be predicted, at least within reason.

We may be surprised, as I have just said, because we have not anticipated changes. Sometimes, however, we are surprised because the changes we have anticipated, in fact, that we intended as secondary results -- if not primary ones -- do not take place. That is, we expect certain linkages to exist which turn out not to be there. We expect certain linkages among elements to exist of necessity, because we are familiar with what we take to be such an association in our own society....

When we see the consequences of innovation we may discover that there are indeed systematic linkages, but what the linkages are cannot simply be assumed on the basis of our own naive or ethnocentric expectations but must be discovered by careful investigation. Indeed, to introduce a somber note, significant aspects of the current African food crisis are not unrelated to modernization attempts that have ignored the traditional role of women in African subsistence agriculture.

So far, the emphasis in this discussion has been on change. Let us now take a look at continuity, the second aspect of my topic. Here is an example: Many American observers of contemporary China have been struck by an absence of dating and public shows of affection between men and women. They have tended to link this to government policy: both to what is perceived to be Communist puritanism, and to the current vigorous family planning program, which is supported by a late marriage rule. A backward look, however, will show that the Communists did not invent or impose a prohibition on public association between young men and women.

The Chinese-born anthropologist, Francis Hsu, in his study of a Chinese town in the pre-Communist period, describes the severe penalties imposed on young couples for any public display of affection, such as holding hands. It is their lack of a sense of shame for which they are punished. Shame should be felt if behavior appropriate in the private sphere of life is carried on
in public.

Such a look backward allows us to compare the picture of the present with that of the past, so that we can distinguish what is new from what has been there all along. And to see how the new elements, here the population policy of the current government, builds on existing, traditional attitudes. By taking only a snapshot, as it were, without such a long-term perspective, we not only fail to understand the contemporary reality -- worse, we distort it.

Actually, if we reconsider our earlier examples of change, we find that they also contain elements of continuity, and that these may, in fact, be as important, if not more important, than the changes we are so much impressed by.... The proposition that there are core values that persist in the face of change, even in the face of some dramatic transformations, has implications for very urgent contemporary questions of development and modernization of less developed countries.... [T]he peoples of the world, whose traditional ways are undergoing very rapid transformations, have become acutely aware of their own cultures. They have become aware of their own way of life by seeing and often enough experiencing the differences between it and new ways being introduced to them, and often, too, by seeing the ways of strangers. The result may be that people take a rather proprietary attitude toward their own culture and traditions.... People from North America to Malaysia and New Guinea are saying to us: our way of life is ours, it is our inheritance, our tradition and our treasure. It is for us to decide what to do with it.... In that way anthropologists -- at least some anthropologists, in some places, have acquired a new role, a new legitimacy, a new relationship to the people they study, for whom they are fulfilling a need....

In the meantime we must be aware of the ethical as well as the practical and political problems involved in studying the cultures and societies of the world's peoples. Indeed, such questions have come to the fore as they never have in the past, although in some rudimentary forms they have been there all along. The rate of change has increased dramatically, and continues to do so, and many problems, such as those of certain Third World economies, have reached in some instances crisis proportions. The questions that are now before many of the peoples of the world are questions of cultural -- and -- indeed -- often -- of physical survival. Many will not make it. As the number of different ways of life is reduced, all of us will be the poorer, for each distinct culture represents a particular way of dealing with universal problems of human existence -- a particular instance of human inventiveness and ingenuity.

One task of the anthropologist is -- indeed -- to chronicle vanishing customs and traditions. Another task -- and one that I have stressed here tonight -- is to understand how social and cultural systems work. To seek such an understanding is not an aesthetic or academic exercise in a narrow sense of the word. It is an enterprise that is at the heart of our ability to control our destiny, as a species.