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ANTHROPOLOGY: THE BRIDGING DISCIPLINE.

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In what way may Anthropology, as a discipline, be called a bridge or a link? What gaps does it bridge, what is it that it links? The gap, to be sure, is that between C.P. Snow’s "two cultures": the sciences and the humanities, or, more fully, that between the natural and the social sciences, the humanities and the arts. And this linkage, this bridging of gaps, occurs both within the discipline of anthropology and without, in its relationship to other disciplines, where anthropological concepts and methods are increasingly found to be heuristic, catalytic or just plain useful. But, of course, the relationship is often a reciprocal one.

Anthropology, as the comprehensive study of our species, considers its subject matter from a variety of perspectives; the biological dimension, in physical anthropology; the social and cultural dimension in cultural or sociocultural anthropology; and, given an added time dimension, to study the lives of past peoples who have left no written records, prehistoric archaeology. And finally, last but surely not least, the study of that key feature of our species, language, in the form of anthropological linguistics. Some people would nowadays add applied anthropology as a fifth field.

How is it that these diverse perspectives, with their specialized concerns and research methods, have come together to form a single discipline, and what continues to hold them together? And, moreover, why is it that anthropology, in this comprehensive sense, is a uniquely American discipline? To be sure, the various topics are studies in other countries, but not in the same unitary framework and the same academic organization. Indeed, while
anthropologists in this country share training in all four fields, this is hardly ever the case elsewhere. How is this to be explained, and what are the consequences of the bridging, the linking nature of our discipline?

The best way to look at this - and this reveals a bias of my own, one which I share with some but not all of my colleagues - is to consider the question in historical terms. How did American anthropology get to be what it is? In this country, anthropology as a formal discipline developed at the end of the last century and the beginning of the present, but it did so on the basis of what we might call a prehistory. It built on the work of amateur anthropologists, who had been active for much of the previous hundred years. The central problem that occupied these pioneers - and then continued to occupy academic anthropologists for many years - involved the American Indian. Indeed, many of the significant questions were asked by Thomas Jefferson, in preparing his instructions for Lewis and Clark. Jefferson himself had excavated a mound and had collected some forty Indian vocabularies. Who were the Indians? Who had built the mounds? How were the Indians related to the other peoples of the world? Could their languages tell us? Could their customs and beliefs? Could they, in the future, be integrated into American society? Or, in the language of the period, could they be "civilized"? Modern descriptive linguistics grew out of the study of American Indian languages, which turned out to be highly diverse, and very different from the languages of the Old World. The study of Indian cultural remains became American prehistoric archaeology - prehistory here being often only a century or two away, for history starts with written records, and Native Americans North of Mexico did not possess a system of writing. Physical anthropologists studies the bodily form of the Indians,
and the skeletal remains found in burial sites. The study of Indian cultures, and often the reconstruction of vanished, or greatly altered, life ways became an important focus of research. In time, of course, anthropology expanded from the multifaceted study of the American Indian and came to concern itself with other groups, traditional and modern - potentially, at least, with all human populations, past and present, here and elsewhere. Here, then, is one bridge or link: The American Indian, as a focus of study, brought together into a single discipline researchers who specializations are scattered in European universities among a number of different administrative units, divisions or institutes: physical anthropology in institutes of anatomy, schools of medicine, centers specializing in forensic medicine or paleontology; anthropological linguistics grouped with other types of language study; and sociocultural anthropology and prehistoric archaeology separated from these fields and from each other.

Academic organizations have both practical and intellectual consequences and the peculiar American form of academic organization has had important implications for the development of anthropology in this country. The diverse fields of anthropology have held together and to a significant extent have developed a common outlook, even after the centrality of the Indian as a subject of research faded. Rather than a single research focus or a central topic I would like to argue that anthropology shares two related central concepts, the concept of evolution and the concept of culture, and one central methodological orientation, that of the comparative approach.

One practical consequence of our academic organization involves the training of anthropologists, another involves the formulation of research problems, which results from
the broad exposure of our students to the ideas and methods of the several fields, whether in the classroom or the conference. In the days when being an anthropologist in this country was virtually synonymous with being an Americanist, research meant becoming the expert on one’s "people", and many anthropologists contributed to linguistics and folklore as well as to cultural anthropology, and some were involved in both prehistory and physical anthropology. The reason is easy to understand. If one was to carry out field work among Native Americans, at a time when many of the older people spoke only limited English, among people whose language as well as whose culture was little known, one needed to record linguistic materials - by hand, in those far away days before portable recording equipment. One needed to record texts, to collect information on religion, mythology, genealogies, and so forth. This produced materials for linguistic analysis as well as for the tracing of family lines, which in turn could be used together with the discovery of marriage rules, for a study of genetics and microevolution.

If the American Indian was our first bridge, training in the four fields equipped us to do the multifaceted research required. This diversified training, then, became the second bridge. Certainly an understanding of the development of Indian cultures, in the absence of written sources, required the techniques of all the various fields - the study of the distribution of physical types, of the dispersion of languages, of the prehistoric remains, both cultural and physical, and of the cultural adaptations of the recent past as well as the present. The same multidisciplinary approach is, of course, required, for the understanding of diachronic problems in all areas where writing and record keeping is not a feature of the traditional culture.
I have noted the centrality of the concepts of culture and of evolution. The two are related for culture, as a distinctively human mode of adaption, is a product of evolution. We now study evolution not only through the skeletal evidence, but also through the evidence, observed or inferred, of behavioral evolution. Some of this is garnered from the observation of primates in the wild, and this is one area where comparison is significant. Comparison is also of key importance in dealing with the shared and the distinctive cultural features of human groups, for the aim of anthropology is not merely to describe human diversity, and discovery explanations for this, but also, through large-scale observations, to seek to arrive at generalizations about the human species, and culture as its mode of adaptation. The concept of culture and of cultural holism is intimately linked to the experience of fieldwork. Anthropologists have carried on their research primarily through spending time among the people whom they wish to study. For the most part, this has meant people at distant locations, speaking an unfamiliar, often an unrecorded, language, and living in ways and on the basis of customs and rules the anthropologist has not previously encountered. Sometimes the research is conducted among a sector of the anthropologist's home society previously unfamiliar to the researcher. (Research in one's own social milieu, too, is practiced, and involves somewhat different but equally difficult problems). Going into a society, a community, about which you know little, or nothing, entering a community as a stranger, the first order of business is to get accepted, to get people to talk to you. What they will tell you, and who will talk to you, will depend on who you are, or better, on how they perceive you. There is a famous story of Gerald Berreman who worked in India and used an interpreter, who happened to be a Brahmin. He collected interesting information with his
help. Then, one day, the Brahmin fell ill and Berreman had to find another interpreter. This one was a low caste individual. And, lo and behold, the information gathered with his help, some of it from the same people, turned out to be quite different. After all, there are some things that you can't say to, or in front of, a Brahmin but are more than willing to discuss in the presence of a low caste person. Questions have in recent years been raised about the difference that it might make whether the anthropologist is a man or a woman. The effect of the investigator's gender on research results has been spoken of as male bias or sex bias. There is material to suggest that males tend to evaluate the status of women in the societies they study as lower than do their female colleagues.

Who is the anthropologist, and how does this identity, or perceived identity, affect the information that is accessible? This raises questions with regard to "objective" scientific research. Closely related to the first question, however, is this: to what extent is the anthropologist in the field aware of the way in which his or her perceived identity skews the information? Is this only discovered back home, when there is time for analysis, or when a person of a different perceived identity brings back a very different report? So the second part of this issue has to do with awareness, awareness of the self as the anthropologist's principal research instrument. I have cited the obvious aspect of this: the perceived identity of the researcher. There is another aspect to this: the ability to follow up leads, to pursue opportunities, to formulate questions in ways that make sense to the native, and this requires a bit of on the spot interpretation, some of which the anthropologist may not be fully able to articulate, but which requires "thinking as a native", if only to a minimal extent. I recall that in Haiti, while I was living in a hamlet in the middle of a sugar plantation, I heard, one
night, a neighbor who seemed to be speaking in his sleep. I recall wondering whether sleep speech would be interpreted as the voice of spirits. And sure enough, so it was. Yet, while on the one hand, living among strangers requires a degree of flexibility, adaptation and imagination, it may also lead to a dulling of the research instrument. By this I mean, that one may take as unimportant and simply part of the cultural landscape aspects that at first may have been sticking, but that one no longer bothers with enough to ask about. In that sense, the old adage that familiarity breeds contempt holds true- at least as amended to mean that familiarity blunts curiosity. For example, the British anthropologist, Raymond Firth, tells of lying on his back in a native hut on the island of Tikopia, looking up at the roof beams and noticing red stains on them. Refusing to dismiss this observation as of no importance, he asked about the stains, and was led directly into a large domain of ritual involving the roles of chiefs and the power of their ancestors. Potentially, then, nothing is insignificant, and no observation, however idle it might seem, should be neglected. And this leads to the concept that has been at the heart of anthropological field research: the concept of holism. This ultimately means that culture, the more or less shared rules of behavior, the meanings and symbols that construct the world we live in - each cultural group in its own world - is a system, a more or less integrated whole. It is not enough to understand, or seek to understand, some fragment of the whole, without discovering its relationship to the rest. Human beings, in short, do not live in an objective world of reality, but in a culturally constituted behavioral environment. And it is this behavioral environment, which structures the actions of people - and their interpretation of those actions - the meanings they assign to them. The spirits that may speak through the mouth of a sleeper are part of the behavioral
environment of the Haitian peasant. They are not part of mine, but I was able to learn of their reality for them.

There is one more complicating factor in the experience of fieldwork, and that is the fact that the presence of the outsider in some way, however subtle, changes the local society and culture. Unable to know how the people behave without an outsider among them, the anthropologist cannot measure, in any significant way, the impact of his or her presence, which modifies that which is being studied. There may then be an analogy here to Quantum physics and Heisenberg’s principle of indeterminacy. The outsider’s presence may alter the local belief system, for the anthropologist asks questions that have not been raised before and so may prove to be the cause for the examination of traditional ideas, or may become a model, however unwittingly, of different ways of doing things. Or even - and you may consider this trivial - tell stories that are then incorporated into the traditional corpus of tales and are passed on to the next investigator. Alice Marriott recounted, many years ago - in a piece in the New Yorker, if I am not mistaken - how she read a version of Beowulf among the tales collected by a young colleague among an Indian group. He was puzzled at the presence of the Beowulf theme and speculated on how it might have reached these Indians. Marriott, however, knew: she had told it to her Indian hosts in exchange for tales they had told her. And so it goes - or may go.

There is not only an issue of scholarship here, but also an issue of ethics, one not faced by the physicist: Is it wrong to tell tales that might become part of the local folklore? Do you become an agent of chance? Do you distribute medicines, if you can? Do you become an agent of cultural conservatism?
Thinking of culture as an integrated whole is, indeed, a product of fieldwork, at least in part because such a conception corresponds to the experience of the anthropologist in the field. Fieldwork demonstrates culture as a living totality, where separate institutions or scholarly topics do not present themselves in neat isolation. Explanation, in a fieldwork-based theory of culture, consists of establishing linkages between observed elements, of establishing as much contextualization of belief and behavior as possible. This is quite in contrast to the laboratory-based approach of the psychologist, for example, who seeks to separate behavior from context, to control for the potentially interfering influences of context. This concern for explanation through contextualization has found a significant echo among historians in recent years, once they turned their attention to the behavior of ordinary people. An excellent example of the bridge created between history and anthropology is seen in the work of Robert Darnton in his analysis of various events in French history. Notably in the Great Cat Massacre he makes behavior that initially appears bizarre entirely meaningful and comprehensible by tying it to its social, cultural, and economic context.

The concept of culture, as the shared beliefs and meanings of a group, as revealed in patterns of behavior, has also found a receptive audience in other disciplines, notably in education - where we hear of the "culture of the classroom" and the "ethnography" - that is the observational study - of the classroom. In business, often in popularized accounts, there is talk of the "culture of the corporation" or the "culture of the office". The concept of culture, in a variety of different interpretations, has become an important bridge or link between anthropology and numerous other fields of study.
The ways in which anthropology is the bridging or linking discipline are many and
diverse and I have here been able to touch on only a few. On the one hand, anthropology
brings together people who look for crucial help in their work - as in the dating of the
remains they discover, for example in human paleontology or prehistoric archaeology - to
nuclear physics or geology, and on the other, people who are concerned with the
interpretation of the field experience and with an interpretive approach to their data, and who
have given up what they consider to be the mirage of cultural anthropology as a hard
science.

Anthropology provides a terrain for the common concerns of historians, educationists
and others, who are interested in the study of the culture of a specific group. It provides in
its fieldwork some analogies to the problems faced by quantum physics and shares with
humanists interests in the comparative study of folklore, music and the arts. We have only
scratched the surface here, but I hope to have convinced you of the value of probing below
this surface.