

GUEST EDITORIAL

Anthropology 2000

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(This Guest Editorial first appeared in 1987)

The basic premise of modern American anthropology is that fundamental cultural differences exist and that this is a good thing. Anthropology has devoted its scientific energies to documenting and explaining this diversity. Its ethical impact is the affirmation of pluralism.

The best of American anthropology has opposed what Clifford Geertz has labeled the Enlightenment “all the world’s a stage” view. This universalist stance holds that all people have basically the same underlying needs, desires, and thoughts, that we all play the same script, only in different costumes. Like Geertz I think this view is wrong. First, it is empty and shallow to say, for example, that because young men become mature males in all cultures one can equate fraternity parties with the taking of heads among the Ilongot of the Philippines. This view is also potentially dangerous. To say that all societies are competitive and to equate the display and expenditure of goods in a Kwakiutl potlatch with national competition at Europe’s world fairs is nonsense. At these fairs, the West was, among other things, collecting and exhibiting the world’s peoples as curiosities. The economic and political forces building behind the fairs was leading us into a century of world war. To equate this with the potlatch muddles scientific insight, covers over power relations, and violates the center of American anthropology’s ethics: the respect for difference. The staging of difference as all ultimately the same is a continuation of our culture’s imperial practices (everything out there is either like us or for us).

But if universalists submerge and destroy difference, the denial of commonality (solidarity) is fraught with equal scientific, political, and ethical dangers. Without a common ethical frame posited as a given, there is only difference. In the modern world at least, difference, untempered by tolerance and understanding, has led to immense horror. Modern American anthropology, from Franz Boas forward, has set itself the task of combating the xenophobias, localisms, racisms, ethnocides, and genocides that human beings have been practicing so creatively. The myth of isolated, whole, authentic, pure cultures (not to mention races, peoples, and nations) is one that is worth rethinking.

The fates of all people are intertwined, but this does not mean they are the same. The task for anthropology in the years to come is to learn how to think about this situation to promote survival, solidarity, and diversity. The world is not becoming homogenized; new differences are everywhere. We must learn to think about all of them and to strengthen some of them.

What we share as a condition of existence, heightened today by our ability and at times eagerness to obliterate one another, is an always specific givenness of cultural and historical

place, how-ever complex and contestable it might be, and a worldwide macrodependency that goes beyond any particularity. Borrowing a term that is applied at various times (both positively and negatively) to Christians, aristocrats, merchants, Jews, and intellectuals, I call the acceptance of these twin values “cosmopolitanism.” Let us define cosmopolitanism as an ethos of macrodependencies with an acute consciousness (often forced on people) of the inescapabilities and particularities of place, character, history, and fate. Although we are all cosmopolitans, humankind has done poorly with interpreting this condition. We seem to have trouble with the balancing act, preferring to reify local identities or to construct universal ones. We live in between. Cosmopolitanism rejects innate difference and emphasizes historical contingency, power relations, and worlds of meaning while refusing universals that obscure real and valuable differences between us. As French poet René Char put it, “Human history is a long succession of synonyms for the same word. To contradict this is a duty.” In other words, how is it possible to think and to act within a framework of commonality with an ethic of difference?