

GUEST EDITORIAL

How Useful Is Anthropology?

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(This Guest Editorial first appeared in 1987)

At a time when the social sciences and the humanities are under attack or financial constraint in the United States and Great Britain, people are asking: Anthropology may be interesting to a few specialists, but what good is it to the nation and the world, and why should public money be spent on hiring professors to teach it? And why should young people spend their time and taxpayers' money learning an arcane subject that does not give them the skills for productive employment?

Such questions strike those who are involved with the study of anthropology as harsh and often philistine. Yet to dismiss them as pronouncements of the ignorant and not worth answering would be bigoted too. To some extent the answer an anthropologist would give would be the answer given by any scholar in the humanities. Thus, it is through art, history, literature, and philosophy that we reflect on the world. This method is normally more effective than diatribe, for these disciplines influence through their equivocation rather than through their assertions. They are the essence of debate rather than dogma. They allow for response as well as statement.

Anthropology—and I speak specifically for cultural anthropology—is in an even more equivocal position. On the one hand, it can pose as a social science. In this role it sometimes attempts to grapple with Third World problems of a developmental nature, or it may even address so-called social breakdowns in communities at home, as it continues to produce abstract theories of how society works. On the other hand, like art and the other humanities, anthropology is a discipline that reflects on the many human presentations of self that we call different cultures. Like the other humanities, anthropology does not seek to solve problems; it seeks to understand other possible ways of thinking, believing, and acting. This is unashamedly intellectual interest for its own sake. Yet because we can come to understand ourselves more by contemplating the differences found in other peoples, it is difficult to regard such activity as useless. Is it useless to discover that there is a comprehensible and even elegant logic in the apparently bizarre activities of peoples in other cultures? Such a discovery should reassure us that people everywhere strive for rationality in their own distinctive ways. Of course, all peoples are also capable of what both they and we would regard as irrational behavior, but this is one of the “imperfections” that make us human.

The knowledge that people everywhere are capable of both rational and irrational acts should reduce us all to a common recognition of our frailties and make for better communication. One telling criticism of the social sciences is their tendency, though now rare, to talk down to the people who are the subject of their study, as if the social sciences possessed the one and only

solution to a problem. The humanities, because they can criticize through a kind of dialogue—between, say, artist and consumer—have managed to escape this accusation on the whole. Anthropology was justly questioned about its alleged role as handmaiden of imperialist and later neocolonial domination, yet it has also often been seen as defender of threatened minorities and of indigenous customs and traditions that those minorities want to preserve in the face of change.

Thus, just as anthropology ambivalently straddles the social sciences and humanities, so it attracts both criticism and approbation for the ways it reports on other peoples' customs. It may be true that we unwillingly distort the picture of other cultures by imposing our own Western assumptions on them, but by recognizing this perhaps inevitable problem of cultural translation, we are in a position to compare the different cultural assumptions, "theirs" and "ours," and to see the similarities between them as well as the differences. I do not, in other words, support a relativist position in anthropology. Nor do I think that anthropologists seek only universals in human thought and culture. We can assume, rather, that different cultures share some things in common and are apart in others, but that in making comparisons we discover new human potentialities or reevaluate old judgments. Because this is a constant process, it offers no promise of final conclusions. I would even say that the dichotomy of relativism and universalism has created more confusion than anything else in anthropology. No two human languages or cultures are ever so totally different that they cannot mutually communicate, and so it is absurd to relativize whole societies. Conversely, a belief in the total universality of certain human values is either too banal to be interesting (for, of course, all people have some basic wants and means of expressing them) or imposes *a priori* notions on our understanding of other cultures.

Cultural translation, like translation from one language to another, never produces a rendering that is semantically and stylistically an exact replica of the original. That much we accept. What is not often recognized, perhaps not even by the translators themselves, is that the very act of having to decide how to phrase an event, sentiment, or human character engages the translator in an act of creation. The translator does not simply re-present a picture made by an author. He or she creates a new version, and perhaps in some respects a new picture—a matter that is often of some great debate.

So it is with anthropologists. But while this act of creation in reporting on "the other" may reasonably be regarded as a self-sustaining pleasure, it is also an entry into the pitfalls and traps of language use itself. One of the most interesting new fields in anthropology is the study of the relationship between language and human knowledge, both among ourselves as professional anthropologists and laypeople, and among peoples of other cultures. The study is at once both reflexive and critical.

The hidden influences at work in language use attract the most interest. For example, systems of greetings have many built-in elaborations that differentiate subtly between those who are old and young, male and female, rich and poor, and powerful and powerless. When physicians discuss a patient in his or her presence and refer to the patient in the third-person singular, they are in effect defining the patient as a passive object unable to enter into the discussion. When anthropologists present elegant accounts of "their" people that fit the demands of a convincing theory admirably, do they not also leave out of the description any consideration of the informants' own fears and feelings? Or do we go too far in making such claims, and is it often

the anthropologist who is indulged by the people, who give him or her the data they think is sought, either in exchange for something they want or simply because it pleases them to do so? If the latter, how did the anthropologist's account miss this critical part of the dialogue?

Anthropology is useful to the world in that it is the one discipline that aims to discover, question, and criticize human aims and actions across a spectrum of cultural possibilities. It can claim to be the bedrock on which all other forms of dialogue rest, including those of politicians, economists, and even Western analytic philosophers, each of whom draws the examples making up grandiose schema from the particular instances of everyday life, both home and abroad, on which anthropologists report.