

Encounters with, and Prospects for, the Discipline of Anthropology

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INTRODUCTION

Whether divisions into social, physical, linguistics or archaeology or other classifications are used, anthropology has been perhaps best described as “the study of human kind”. From a personal perspective, my formative encounters with the discipline took place through my university education, then secondary encounters took place through various fieldwork and life/situational experiences, coupled finally with more recent reflections and memories. Today, anthropology along with every other discipline, and indeed, all of us, face “interesting times” to say the least. Given a wide range of serious global problems that are multiplying rather than diminishing, a die-off of humankind is highly likely and most probably, is imminent. If there is to be a future for anthropology and humankind, the contemporary focus on details and long term research must narrow to address key issues of survival and must include research, teaching, and most of all, direct action in “changing the system”. The role of anthropology could be highly significant in this work.

PERSONAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

In starting off to be a chemical engineer, I dreamed of a future where life could be made better through chemistry. Fortunately, my mathematical skills were lacking, and so I began a switch to other disciplines. When I found anthropology, the decision was quickly made, for the lure of travel to unknown places, living with people different from myself, and research in academic settings beckoned. I have selected ten special memories of events now long past to illustrate my enchantment and education with and in the field of anthropology, some insights that are peculiar to anthropologists, and the potential value of the field to the future.

1. “Pass this piece of tapa cloth from the South Pacific around for each to feel and see,” commented Lauriston Sharp at Cornell’s Department of Anthropology in 1957 or so. I

felt the cloth and commented, “this is a real alternative to paper or clothing.” Dr. Sharp added, “yes, this is a very different form of paper or cloth. It was produced in ways quite different from Western production processes too. But go beyond that to understand: the whole world has many different cultures, many different technologies, and many different ways to live. The more you can learn about, the more skills and resources and bodies of knowledge you have, the greater the likelihood you can survive and live well.” Sharp was the author of the often reprinted and classic article, “Steel axes for stone age savages” about the introduction of steel to the Australian Aborigine culture and the impact this technological revolution had on social structures, lifestyles, and people. The message I gained from him in my very first anthropology course was that if you could see beyond your own culture, beyond the matrix in which you grew up, you had an enormous advantage over those who could not.

2. “The trick is not just to know about another culture, but to engage with the people to bring about changes,” claimed Alan Holmberg, also at Cornell University in the 1950’s. In describing his Vicos, Peru project to those of us in his undergraduate class on applied anthropology, he encouraged us to go far beyond “butterfly collecting” or gaining and developing static displays of information about other cultures. Change was a constant, and for anthropologists, the important thing was to engage actively and personally with the people of a locale or place different from one’s own, to create better ways for all to live and to take to heart the knowledge of how to create changes so as to make the world different.
3. “Suppose you are trying to establish stronger links to a local tribe and the leaders invite you to accompany them to the brothel and partake? What do you do?” The ethics involved in anthropology were brilliantly presented to our graduate class on Latin America by William

Mangin, then (about 1966) involved both at Syracuse University's Maxwell School and Department of Anthropology and the Peace Corps. Even though we did not know about the dubious nature of Project Camelot or other similar military/industrial complex inspired projects back then, we students wrestled with the implications of the anthropological enterprise and debated how, when, where, and why interventions were justified and why some were not. Ethical dimensions, according to Dr. Mangin, were and are part and parcel of anthropology, and must be a central theme, particularly since corporations, politicians, and even religious leaders have all too often made a mockery of morality and ethics.

4. "The future depends on asking the big questions, and while details are important, details are not where the important issues lie. That is why I asked your department chair here, to have a session with just graduate and advanced undergraduate students and herself," Margaret Mead stated in a matter of fact manner. "You as students may have realized already that your teachers, the academic anthropologists in each and every department in almost every university are for the most part, detail people, dwelling on the unimportant, while ignoring the big juicy issues that affect all of humanity. My message to each of you is to go back to the classics, study the big questions (the bigger the better), look at the society, politics, and beliefs we have today, and use anthropology to explore those things that really matter," she added. As a postdoctoral scholar in Psychiatry and hanger on in anthropology as a Research Associate, I was able to sit in with the graduate students at Duke in a private seminar held as Dr. Mead toured universities not long before she died.
5. "Have you ever thought about how anthropology can influence the decision makers and the population at large?" Ernestine Friedl asked me when I became a Research Associate, with my own federal research grant in the Duke Department of Anthropology. She had a vision far larger than most, and was quite concerned about the gap or distance between academia and society. I remember that I replied, "what about greater use of movies from the field, documentaries, and television as a teaching medium? The rich experiences of anthropologists could be used

to educate the masses about diversity, alternative ways of doing things, and about the common goals of all humankind." I thought then that the media could serve as a conduit for information and enlightenment. Unfortunately the media has become a veritable sewer of mis-information and disinformation along with low quality entertainment and commercial advertising. Truly, the rise of corporate power to ensure that crappy and wasteful products are sold to unsuspecting and ignorant consumers reduced any possible opportunity to teach, enlighten, or wake up humankind. The message I took home was that great anthropologists, visionaries, real leaders, have been squeezed out of the roles that could have played an important part of educating the population with media technologies.

6. "The most important experiences I had in anthropology were actually not in anthropology," claimed Weston LaBarre, Professor Emeritus at Duke's Department of Anthropology in 1975. "Three times I have been involved in personal psychoanalysis, and that has given me more insight into myself, my work, my relationships, and the field of anthropology," he added. "Working on the self is an essential aspect of being able to work with others, particularly others who have different values, lifestyles, ways of thinking, and ways of feeling," he argued. As my mentor, Dr. LaBarre was gifted in advocating greater insight, wisdom, and self study, as compared with others who ignored the essential role of their own self in their anthropological studies.
7. Given my backgrounds in psychology and anthropology, when I uncovered Ruth Benedict's classic article, "Anthropology and the Abnormal" in the *Journal of General Psychology*, I was entranced. Combining anthropology and psychiatry/psychology is rare, but the insights available from that link are many and often, are deep. Benedict wrote about those individuals honored in one culture who may be derided in another, conversely those "dissed" in one place might well be the leaders or honored and respected persons in a different setting. What is "normal" and what indeed, is "abnormal" in various cultures? I have thought about her insights frequently, particularly given the emergence of top level leaders in different cultures, corporations and nations. Many of

these men and women are abnormal in their own cultures, indeed, they may well be abnormal in most cultures, yet they gain and use power while better qualified, more rational, more intelligent, and far more competent individuals are marginalized, suppressed and ignored. Further, why are some cultures able to flourish, when others, offering a more sane, ecologically harmonious, and pleasant lifestyle, are suppressed?

8. "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," stated a member of my board of directors, colleague, mentor, and friend, Professor John Gregory Peck, anthropologist at NC State University in North Carolina. "That simple statement is something I learned from fieldwork with the Lumbee Indians, and it underlies my philosophy of life. If you aren't enjoying anthropology, or whatever you are doing, get the hell out and do something different. You don't need to feel constrained, restrained, and blocked, 'cause you surely don't gain from a bad situation. Nor does anyone or anything else!" Greg regarded people, and treated work and life, as a grand adventure, each moment filled with bursting with potential and fun, each minute valuable and important and vital. Living and savoring life completely even in the face of implacable odds and adversity, led him to retire from academia early, to ignore boundaries, and to enjoy himself, his many friends, and the world.
9. Love him or hate him, the visionary anthropologist Carlos Castenada blazed a new trail for a generation of anthropologists in the 1960's and 1970's. Stretching fiction into fact, and facts into remarkable and dramatic stories, Castenada enabled anthropology students to "see" and to search for power and enlightenment. Reading his books, and absorbing his ideas, enabled me to imagine myself as "warrior" and as well, to reach and teach my students in new far more intriguing ways. Some regard him as a literary figure and not an anthropologist, but I found him visionary, articulate, and wise, certainly not one of the "detail" people.
10. "Bob, what is organization?" my chief informant, colleague, and friend in the old New Hebrides asked me one day during the last month or so of active fieldwork. "I was listening last night on the radio you gave me, and they said something about organization

and something about civilization. I want to know what those words mean," he added. Although I worked hard at learning the difficult language in our highland area, the local people grasped English so much quicker and more easily that there was no contest. And the many questions asked by my friend were profound and insightful, and made me think deeply about my own background, search for understanding, and limits. Like most anthropologists, I learned more from my informants than elsewhere, whether university, library, or fellow anthropologists. Corporations are not the only forms of organization, and Western is certainly not the only type of "civilization."

My education in anthropology led me to realize that power structures worked well for those at the top, but very badly for those larger numbers lower in the "food chain" or at the bottom and the marginalized. Further, I came to understand that alternative views and cultures are not only respectable, but admirable. From a marginalized, outsider perspective (that is, the anthropological view), one can call into question the elites, the power brokers, and the greedy who act much like the biggest pigs in a trough. Further, the anthropological view can include a look at big pictures, and not just the "details", the ethics and morality of individuals and cultures, and a mandate to get personally involved in change agent roles.

Experience

After growing up in an upstate New York farming community, I had the opportunity to gain an education, and then explore a wide range of places, disciplines, ideas, activities, and more, both before and after gaining an understanding and appreciation of the lens provided by the concept of culture. Through my life, I became acquainted with similarities and differences in work settings, ranging from a dairy farm, a gray iron foundry, a glass manufacturer, a dairy, an ice cream and soda bar, a civil service based employment service, a mental health center, to numerous academic settings. Further through career activities, I visited prisons, talked with people involved in cults, joined up with police working in the streets, lawyers and judges in court rooms, clerks and administrators in offices, salespeople in shops, workers in retail and wholesale settings, and all sorts of people in

factories. Through the military, I learned about the infantry, advanced infantry, medics and MASH hospitals, artillery, air force, and still other groupings. Through friendships and acquaintances as well as dating, I met and befriended German, Irish, Jewish, Polish, Afro-American, Ukrainian, Mexican, Native American, Italian, Indian, Chinese, French, and other people and their families and networks. Through disciplines studied and practice, I have been alternatively an anthropologist, rehabilitation counselor, psychologist, educator, administrator, and others. I have worked closely with people with disability, including physical, emotional, intellectual, and sensory limitations, and also with people in prisons and jails and in diverse rehabilitation settings. I have had the opportunity to engage with junkies, speed freaks, hippies, drug dealers, and alcoholics of all levels. Through changing locations, I have come to appreciate large and small cities, suburbia, and rural areas, and to live in New York, North Carolina, West Virginia, Ohio, the New Hebrides, and New Zealand. I have traveled to and through Fiji, Samoa, Western Samoa, the New Hebrides, Tahiti, Mexico, Canada, Beijing, Bangkok, and most US cities. Through reading, I have encountered tribes, peasants, solitary individuals, clubs, organizations, corporations, military units, and so on from all over the globe. My experiences are not that different from those of other people, but I had the advantage of “seeing” as an anthropologist, and the further advantage and luxury of reflecting on what I saw and felt. The diversity of life experiences available today given inexpensive travel, the near constant movement of people from place to place, and the Internet, is truly remarkable, a paradise for anthropologists open to encounters. Coupling education as an anthropologist with life experiences, and having some decades to think about things, yields an appreciation of the discipline, and, if one is awake, a sense of urgency.

Present Conditions

The briefest glance at news of the day reveals a plethora of urgent problems facing humanity. The slightest glimmer of awareness of the soothing news portrayed by corrupted media outlets indicates a far greater range of extreme problems that spell out the likelihood of a massive die-off of humanity. Among these problems are overpopulation, pollution of air, water, and land,

climate change and global warming, inequities of wealth and resources, and the presence of dangerous technologies such as nuclear, biological, and chemical. In addition, other problems include ongoing waste of valuable resources on military forces and corporations that support the military, economic declines along with fiat money that is essentially worthless, and misinformation galore. Still other key issues include the risks of genetic modification and genetic engineering, terrorism, the decline of cheap energy, rapid immigration or migration, loss of bio-diversity and ever present natural disasters. The dangers of the true believers and religious extremists, and the influences wielded by people who work for secret agencies on behalf of the elite intent on enriching only themselves, are also worth mentioning. The corruption of those who would be leaders is nearly complete, whether one looks at politics, economics, religion, or any other endeavor.

One could easily list a broad series of such potentially catastrophic issues, and then inquire about the awareness of various populations or the amount of accurate information they have about each. Most people of course are in no political, social, or economic position to have any effect whatsoever on these issues, and most have taken no actions, either personally or publically to address such concerns. One could rate such issues in terms of their seriousness, their scale now and potential for harm, and the likely outcomes if left unaddressed. But, even a casual observer will quickly agree that each of these problems could contribute to the crashing of the human population on planet earth. The collection or assemblage of such problems, especially when the contemporary leadership is ignoring, denying, minimizing their import, or taking advantage of the situations to gain politically or financially, spells out that humankind is to put it mildly, living in “interesting times.”

Education enables individuals to see their life experiences for what they are, and to view the crumbling global “civilization” for what it is. An anthropological education wipes away many of the myths that others maintain, enabling anthropologists to see beyond their limited views.

Future

As our planet appears to be spinning out of control, with a range of enormous issues going unsolved, denied, ignored and avoided by leaders

and followers alike, we have an opportunity to use anthropological information and insights. Although some have claimed that “the ultimate justification for studying anthropology does not lie . . . in the solution of this or that practical problem” (Peacock, 1986), times and conditions have changed, and not for the better. We can and we must seek greater awareness, more penetrating research, better analysis of what we know, wiser directions, and a more gentle life style. We must educate others, the non-anthropologists, with what we know and understand.

The alternative is death and destruction on a scale never before achieved. We as anthropologists can help the global elite in making their upcoming decisions about whether survival for a few in intentional communities is possible, or whether a quick and fast crash allowing a few survivors to carry on the human tradition, or a slow gradual decline offers better opportunities. It seems to be naive to hope for an eventual Phoenix like revival. Any such revival will of course not have the luxuries of cheap energy sources, nor unpolluted environments, nor myths and beliefs to help order or re-order, chaos. It is highly likely that the myths and beliefs will disintegrate, when the societies disintegrate.

We can advise decision makers and those who hold power about past civilizations, about why some died out and how the sequence of events took place, and most of all, about choices that are still available. We can also educate those who are not decision makers, in the hope that they will in turn hold the people with power accountable and responsible for making decisions that benefit not just themselves, but rather, all of humankind. Perhaps we can suggest reasons why we came to dwell in the terrible situation we now find ourselves. For the few anthropologists aware and prepared, they can and need to make the most of the time and energy they have to help educate young people. With luck, a few may actually survive in the coming die-off and help create new communities in what will undoubtedly be, a less than optimal environment.

Anthropologists have sought information about how various human groups managed to survive, and why. They have studied groups who died out and left records in archaeological dig sites or in other physical evidence. Anthropo-

logists have good ideas and wise speculations about the course of pre-history and history, and about the potential for various outcomes in the future. Anthropologists have reflected on their own education and experiences, and taught students how to think and feel about the prospects for humankind.

Tracing the emergence of “big man” political activities in Melanesia, or kingdoms in ancient Egypt or Polynesia, or peasant politics in Latin America or South Asia leads to clues about the rise of corporations, nation states, and the global hierarchy that now makes decisions about the future. Anthropological knowledge can give us specific and concrete examples upon which we can reflect and understand, as well as principles and guidelines, at least those of us who are awake and aware of the seriousness of our global situation.

CONCLUSION

Anthropology is not the only discipline or approach to the future, but anthropology does offer valuable insights that no other discipline can. Some would agree with Margaret Thatcher and other members of the elite that “there is no alternative” to the past and present social and political arrangements. Unfortunately this is always the cry of the authoritarian leaders and the followers who dare not look to other, alternative ways to live. They fear alternative styles of arranging communities, different values, and anthropological vision for they might lose their commanding positions. Of course they want no changes to their own lives, for they have succeeded and now profit personally. Unfortunately, their way of life, whether capitalism, communism, military/industrial complex, religiosity, fundamentalism, possessor of high technologies, arrogance and hubris have led humankind and the entire world into what looks increasingly to be, an impossible situation. We must change the systems and anthropology is ideally situated to do just that.

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ABSTRACT Anthropology grew during colonialism, enabling the powers that be in a few nations to better understand the many and diverse cultures of humankind. Unfortunately these powers sought to rule and control the peoples of the globe without understanding their own paths and limitations. As a result of their failure to lead towards positive directions, the leaders (and everyone else) are facing a gathering storm of unsolved and probably unsolvable global problems. Time to address and deal with these situations is short. The discipline of anthropology could help address at least some of these issues, focusing on the decision makers few remaining choices, the scarce opportunities for the peoples and cultures of the world to survive, and the processes by which positive solutions are either consciously sought, or by which “solutions” such as die-off, occur happenstance.

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