

The Responsibility of the Anthropologist

Harry L. Shapiro

American Museum of Natural History, New York City

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO the number of professional anthropologists in this country was so small that the Anthropological Association at its 1922 meeting at Cambridge was comfortably seated in its entirety, along with guests and undergraduates, in one of the classrooms of the Peabody Museum.

In those antediluvian days, anthropology in the academic hierarchy was rated an exotic and marginal subject and at Harvard, at any rate, where I was doing my graduate work, it was relegated with the Semitic Museum and the Divinity School to the fringes of the University. Lacrosse and fencing occupied somewhat the same place in athletics—that is, they were considered nice extras to attract the few nonconforming spirits that did not find the more important football or track to their taste. Anthropology was not expected to pay its way, but also it was not permitted to place a noticeable strain on the university budget.

The literate public was, of course, no better acquainted with the subject. All of us had our hands full trying to explain to our friends and relatives just what anthropology meant. I remember my mother reporting with much amusement a conversation with a friend of hers who had politely inquired concerning my activities. My mother told her I was studying anthropology. “How nice,” the friend commented, and, after a pause, “Just what is anthropology?” Those were the days when an ethnologist studied primitive cultures and personality was something you wished you had.

We were few and neglected, beggars for crumbs at the foundational banquets where the seated guests were physicists, chemists, biologists and economists and all the other anointed. We pursued our tasks in obscurity and our lines were heard only by our fellow anthropologists. Under these circumstances the problem of social responsibility was not very pressing. We could manipulate our data, elaborate theories, and speculate to even fantastic limits, without, as we thought, serious consequences. Since the general public was hardly aware of us except as purveyors of bizarre and exotic items about remote peoples on the verge of extinction, the accuracy of our reportage was never questioned. In those days we were not

trouble shooters for the government, so that our ideas survived unharmed by use. Nor were we then tempted, even bedeviled, with huge sums to test the power of our peculiar methods to unlock the secrets of why our allies and our enemies behave the way they do. This was, in Edith Wharton’s phrase, anthropology’s “Age of Innocence.” We had, moreover, a curiously ambivalent attitude toward society. We felt emancipated from the forms and restrictions of our own culture, delighting in exposing their irrationality. It did not, for example, seem inconsistent for us to reject the rites and ceremonies of the Christian churches and to have little or no understanding of those who remained faithful to their traditions, and at the same time be able to enter sympathetically into every minutia of a tribal ritual and theorize on its functional necessity in a social organization. I suspect that basically we were playing intellectually with data and lacked any real appreciation that ideas as such can be powerful forces in the world, both for good and for evil. We had neither the responsibility that comes from dealing with ideas in action nor the caution engendered by experimental procedures.

Although at the time we were scarcely conscious of it, we had, nevertheless, been toying with dynamite. As I think back to some of the technical lectures and writings on race professional anthropologists made at that time, I am appalled. Most anthropologists who then and earlier busied themselves with racial problems regarded their activities, I am sure, as interesting but of no major concern to the course of nations or the welfare of millions of people. I am not accusing anthropologists of directly fathering Nazi doctrine, but there can nevertheless be no doubt that anthropological generalizations on race underlay the racist notions that mushroomed in the 1930’s. Anthropologists had unwittingly prepared the way for the Huston Stewart Chamberlains, the H. F. K. Gunthers, and the Madison Grants. If these writers were not entirely approved of, neither were their doctrines altogether discarded. After the damage was done and the Frankenstein monster was abroad in the world, anthropologists did their small best to make amends—but it was too late. Only Boas saw early and clearly the horrible consequences of the popular adoption of these racist speculations—innocuous in

the academic hall, but murderous in the market place. Before the evil became widely apparent, Boas' reaction was looked on as rather emotional and alarmist. Perhaps because of his European experience, he was extra sensitive to the stirring of a doctrine which meant little to most Americans. I cite this not to attach blame but to illustrate the state of mind that quite generally failed to grasp the possible consequences of current anthropological ideas in terms of social and political action.

The picture I have drawn of anthropology a generation ago has changed profoundly. Now, anthropology, if not at the head of the table, has at least a place not too far from the salt. This enlarged academic prestige can in part be measured both by the extraordinary growth of the older departments and the great increase in newer ones that are springing up all over the land. Within the generation I am describing the membership of the American Anthropological Association has increased about sixfold and the number of professionals in it from about 82 to nearly 500. If the professional standards were as liberal now as they were when I joined as a college senior our fellowship might well number a thousand.

But more significant than numbers is the quality of interest that anthropology is now able to arouse both in the general public and among professional students in other disciplines. I think the anthropologist can be permitted a pardonable satisfaction in the change of status that has lifted him from a position uncomfortably close to that of a poor relation to the more respectable place of someone with at least expectations. His stock in trade has at last begun to have value for the sociologist, the psychologist, the psychiatrist, the philosopher, and various other students of human activities.

This recent growth is only partially the result of the efforts of the anthropologists themselves. The past generation has seen a phenomenal growth in graduate study throughout the United States, resulting from the steady elevation of the national average in attained schooling. Enrollments in colleges and universities have increased far beyond the normal expectation in an increasing population. Along with other sections of the educational system, the graduate school has also flourished. And the voice of the Ph.D., like the turtle's, is now heard in our land.

Anthropology, it must be admitted, owes some of its growth to this general expansion of the graduate field, but not all of it by any means. As one of the social sciences, it is also enjoying a share of the attention that a troubled world is directing toward these sciences. Faced with catastrophic dangers, sharpened by the technological advances of modern times, gov-

ernment, institutions, foundations, and thoughtful individuals are being forced to acknowledge that the role of the social sciences must be made a determinative one if our world is to survive. Unquestionably the pressure of events has thus created a more receptive attitude toward these fields of study and has disposed those who dispense research money and academic preferment to look more favorably on anthropological ventures than they did in the past.

Anthropology, however, has not been supinely carried on the crest of a wave of expanding graduate study. Nor, to change the figure, has it effortlessly ridden the coattails of the social sciences. Some of the credit for the present position is due to its own accomplishments and to the promise it holds for still greater achievements.

In retrospect, then, we see a combination of favorable circumstances conspiring in the past generation to advance the intellectual prestige and the academic status of anthropology. These are:

- (1) The general demand for an increased standard of education, which has been a progressive one for a long time but which has recently taken on a marked acceleration and has carried unprecedented numbers to the graduate schools.

- (2) The widespread concern of people over the state of the world, and their growing conviction that social sciences may solve the problems created by technological developments in physics and chemistry. One can, I think, also detect a rising segment of opinion that looks to a religious revival and a moral regeneration as the way to save mankind. Nevertheless, the characteristic faith of our age in science has sharpened interest in the social sciences and has turned support to this relatively neglected field. The last report of the Carnegie Foundation points out that currently 73% of the funds voted for this year went to the social sciences. It is also significant that these grants were overwhelmingly concerned with projects "designed to bridge the gap between the universities and the world of affairs." In his report for 1947, Raymond Fosdick, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, lists a greater contribution to the social sciences than to any other of the fields in which the Rockefeller Foundation is interested. This is the culmination of a trend in that foundation's giving and reflects Mr. Fosdick's repeatedly expressed concern for the necessary development of the social sciences in the world of today. The same conviction finds expression in Mr. Conant's reports on Harvard developments.

- (3) The success of anthropology in establishing the concept of culture and a methodology for dealing with it; but more particularly the timeliness of this

concept and methodology in respect to developments in other social sciences. Establishment of the cultural concept has had important consequences. It has on the one hand furnished social scientists and philosophers with a corpus of knowledge of great significance to them, thereby consolidating the value of anthropological investigation. And on the other hand anthropology has been encouraged by the nature of its problems to assume both a synthesizing role, in which various other sciences are drawn upon for methods and insights, and a cross-disciplinary function, in exploring the ramifications of the cultural concepts it elaborates. An example of its cross-disciplinary function is the wide interest in personality and culture which has grown out of the more and more refined study of cultural dynamics and which requires for its pursuit the collaboration of the various psychological sciences. Such a collaboration would have been impossible 30 years ago.

Armed with methods and insights derived from a century of investigation among primitive people, anthropology has only in this generation acquired the confidence to project itself into the complexities of modern civilizations. How much of this development was the inevitable evolution of our science it is difficult to say. There are some who still regret this trend and insist that classical ethnology should be confined to the study of primitive peoples and should remain our primary interest. I recall among my contemporaries in my own student days, however, an impatience with the conventional problems that seemed remote from the realities of our world and an eagerness to try our anthropological teeth on the richer fare of our own society. Perhaps this was a reflection of a *zeitgeist*, or the effect of inspired teaching or a response to the stimuli in the productions of cognate subjects. It would be interesting to know how far this eagerness was especially characteristic of American anthropology. In any event, it has led anthropology in this country to the very centers of our social conflicts and to the sources of national as well as individual behavior. Since we have insisted on having our say in these matters and on offering suggestions toward the solution of social problems, we must inevitably expect to shoulder the open responsibility that goes with this office. For whether we like it or not, we cannot escape the consequences of the role we are adopting. As professors of a science outgrowing its short pants (perhaps prematurely, as is the present fashion for boys) we have, I believe, a duty to assume a maturity consistent with anthropology's development. The days when we might act as if our theories were of little consequence to others are gone. For even if we retreat to the refuge of

a pure science concerned only with abstractions and general principles, we should have learned from our recent past that some responsibility is inherent in our activities. I do not mean to imply that we either claim infallibility or that the public accords anthropological dicta an unprecedented prestige. We are still received with varying degrees of hospitality but more than ever we are listened to and what we enunciate as anthropological truth is carried far and wide.

Those of us who have seen this change in the fortunes of anthropology are also those whose recollections go back to the Wall Street bubble and the Florida boom, and we might be pardoned in the light of that experience for being at least mildly troubled about anything that looks like a boom. In our lexicon bust follows boom, and burst comes after bubble. I do not, however, speak as a prophet of gloom, for I happen to think that anthropology's future is bright if—and that “if” is what concerns me now.

As I have tried to point out, anthropology has at last arrived at a position where perhaps for the first time, at least in this country, its voice carries some weight both in academic circles and with the public at large. Its prestige within academic circles, of course, is of the utmost importance in providing careers, in the training of personnel and in the institutional sponsorship without which anthropological work might virtually cease. The concrete professional consequence may be seen in the rapidly growing number of anthropological departments in American universities—from a handful a generation ago to 90 recognized departments, by Erminie Voegelin's count, and to between 200 and 300 where anthropology is represented in curricular offerings. To maintain this development and to expand it further, anthropology must retain the confidence of its academic colleagues in the soundness of its research goals and methods.

Its standing with the public at large is equally necessary in preserving its academic status and particularly in attracting the intellectual and financial support that we require in our system. But more than this, our authority in the mind of the public carries with it a social responsibility. If what we give out as anthropological dogma is received as tested truth and eventually influences public attitudes, we cannot divest ourselves of the responsibility of our pronouncements. *Caveat emptor* is not a good rule in science. If by our disregard for this fundamental charge we encourage the public to beware of our offerings, we shall soon lack both a public and a science.

If I have overdrawn the picture, it is, nevertheless, valid. Far too often the anthropologist fails to make explicit to the people what may be sufficiently clear to the profession, namely that some of his generaliza-

tions are far from being the final blueprint they appear to be. It may or may not make much difference in dealing with fossil man, but there can be little doubt that it makes a vast difference when current social attitudes are involved. This, of course, is a problem in the public relations of all the social sciences and most, if not all of them have been guilty of this failure to distinguish the varying degrees of certainty or probability that characterize the theoretical structures they release to the public. No doubt competitive struggle for attention for one's ideas may motivate the form in which they are presented, and unquestionably many of us in our zeal may speak with honest if unwarranted conviction; but this does not excuse anthropology or anthropologists from the consequences of what we permit to stand as anthropological gospel.

I am not, by this statement of the position of the social sciences in general and of anthropology in particular, implying that what is needed is a board of censorship to protect the fame of these sciences from their own protagonists. Nothing could be more disastrous. Fortunately there is a simpler and healthier mechanism for achieving the kind of clarification for which I am appealing. This is in the development of a rigorously critical attitude toward the speculations and developments embodied in anthropological writing. This is all the more essential since anthropology, as well as the other social sciences, lacks the experimental procedures that exert a profoundly salutary control on the growth of the experimental sciences. Among them, a claim can be immediately checked under similar controls in hundreds of laboratories. And every serious claim is indeed subjected to the rigors of such justification before it becomes acceptable as part of the tested corpus of the discipline.

On the contrary, our investigations do not lend themselves readily to this kind of testing. In fact even repeat studies in the anthropological literature are quite exceptional. It is for this reason that I regard it as essential for the continued health of anthropology that we be severely critical in appraising the theories and investigations that are issued as representative of anthropology and which come within our competence. There is, of course, no lack of critical rigor in assessing work that falls into conventional patterns, for which standards and well-tried precedents of reliability are available. And certainly the older theories have with time been subjected eventually to a variety of critical appraisals. But one also notices an amazing failure to examine the fundamental assumptions and premises of new lines of investigation which, like a new fashion in women's wear, appear to exercise a kind of tyranny that no one dares question.

I do suggest that such critiques are desirable and I do know that a number of anthropologists do not hesitate privately or in their classrooms to offer critical comments—yet they are strangely silent in print. If we maintain such a silence, others can only assume that these developments are without blemish and unequivocally represent the best that we can produce. For a long time American anthropologists used to be accused of lacking a facility in theory and of being excessively conservative. I think that charge must certainly be withdrawn now. And I for one am glad to see the new interest in exploring possibilities of the anthropological approach. But anthropology can become healthy and remain so only in the presence of a strongly skeptical and critical spirit which, to be satisfied, requires the best.

[Presidential Address, delivered at the 47th Annual Meeting of The American Anthropological Association in Toronto, December, 1948.]

