

"EITHER HE'S DEAD OR MY WATCH STOPPED"\*

THE PLIGHT OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE SMALL COLLEGES

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Anthropologists are a strange lot. So maybe it is a good thing that there are so few professionals. The American Anthropological Association's Guide to Departments lists approximately 4,500 academic anthropologists spread unevenly among 380 departments. Most of these individuals are clustered in a limited number of PhD granting programs. Many anthropologists work in museums. Otherwise the anthropologist finds employment in very small or combined departments. Anthropologists teach with sociologists, geographers, social workers, and nurses; or even in business, education, or medical schools. Many colleges do not have anthropologists on their faculties at all. In numbers we are very small compared with history, sociology, psychology or English. Still our calling is a large one. Anthropologists are the self-appointed investigators of human species. We consider everything related to humans to be within our rightful purview.

In order to achieve some understanding of humanity anthropologists are usually specialists in one of four disciplinary subspecialties or quadrants: archaeology (the study of culture through the remains of past human behavior); physical anthropology (the study of human origins, human biology, and the relationship between biology and culture); cultural anthropology (the study of contemporary human culture); and linguistics (the study of human language and culture). The methodology and interests vary a good deal across the quadrants, but each and every anthropologist desires to understand that phenomenon which makes the human species unique: culture. Culture is the term we use to describe the shared expectations held by humans. These shared understandings are in the mind and are made manifest in the myriad ways humans have come to endure one another and scavenge a living. The approach for study is

\*Groucho Marx checking the pulse of an unconscious Harpo

usually holistic; that is, anthropologists understand the importance of interrelationships between the manifestations of these shared expectations. Hence whether the point of study is politics, art, folklore, biological adaptations, subsistence, economics, religions, or bar behavior; it is all anthropological as long as the investigator is interested in the people's shared understanding of their way of life. In the past the anthropologist has typically worked outside of his or her native country. This is no longer true. Scratch a subculture in the U.S. and you will find an interested anthropologist lurking nearby.

Such a responsibility can lead to a certain arrogance (or so, on occasion, I have been told). The anthropologist is often a "spoiler", countering a colleague's postulated universal of human behavior with a statement like: "Ah, but it is done a bit differently in Africa." As an academic minority this arrogance may be a healthy and necessary adaptation. The twin problems of low numbers and low social status combined with the huge and self-inflicted responsibility for teaching all of human culture, creates an especially acute and serious challenge for anthropologists in small colleges. We who toil in the dense foliage of academe's small groves and kitchen gardens must make our own way; without native guides, or very good maps. At least this has been my experience and the experience of peers who are similarly situated. The problems we have while attempting to serve the students and fulfill our professional responsibilities are enlightening for both the mess anthropology has gotten itself into as well as the mess small colleges find themselves in.

Today a good anthropology department is like a small college. The department is unified by its focus upon humans and human culture through time and over space; but it is separated by a large variety of methods and particular objects of study. For instance, the natural sciences are represented by studies in such areas as human biology, population genetics, computer simulation, and human ecology. The social sciences are represented by studies in comparative religions, economics, politics, and prehistory. When anthropological studies of art, literature, folklore, and philosophy are added, even the house of humanities finds an anthropologist knocking on its door. At a large school this is fine and faculty members can indulge themselves in truly wonderful specializations. At small schools the anthropologist can't indulge in such single-mindedness. Instead the lonely anthropologist must become adept at presenting the discipline in all of its aspects and quadrants as best as can be done.

To give some idea of where anthropology has come since the days of the 1920's and 1930's, one need only attend to some recent dissertation topics. Here is a brief listing of topics considered quite kosher anthropology (all originated as studies in the same graduate department): the role of women in Tunisia; the sub-culture of mental health outpatients in a mid-western city; the music of Buddhists in Switzerland and Nepal; the physiology of Macaque locomotion; minority dialects in the southern U.S.; pre-conquest farming techniques in Ecuador; time perception in rural and urban Yugoslavia; twins and tooth decay; the relationship of gastropods to prehistoric climate. . . enough. Anthropology is everything. So it is that the anthropologist (perhaps with arrogance) looks at how college discipline has staked out territories in the forest of human knowledge, and comes to conclude that anthropology is the forest.

Although specialization is important and expected, anthropology is lucky in that there still exists a strong strain of generalism. Many students are drawn to anthropology because it not only allows a generalist outlook, but expects it. Many anthropologists are truly Renaissance Men and Women. Most graduate schools still demand that their students understand something of all four quadrants. Most graduate students, I think, wouldn't have it any other way, and are proud of their facility in a number of different areas.

While the erstwhile anthropologist is in graduate school accumulating degrees, he or she is intensely involved with sophisticated materials and interests. Coming into the "real world" from those rites of passage, we get a shock. Nobody has noticed what has happened to anthropology. "The watch has stopped." There are stereotypes galore.

The archaeologist digs up dead people. The cultural anthropologist studies savages in the jungle. The physical anthropologist (if a he) looks for fossils; or (if a she) lives with chimpanzees. The linguist is a polygot with facility in dozens of languages. Most everybody is prone to wear pith helmets. Anthropologists tend to spend a good deal of time in melancholy musings of Neanderthals and flowers. These are shadows upon the walls of the cave. The anthropologist lifts his torch to dispell them, but they come flitting back.

Where do these images come from: Unfortunately, I think that many anthropologists wittingly and unwittingly have created and maintained them. The more glamorous

aspects of anthropology show up regularly on television and in the newspapers and magazines. Such attention is very satisfying personally, and aids in the funding of further research. I also have come to believe that many anthropologists are unpardonable hams. Nevertheless, the romantic images are there and are conjured up in the public and Collegiate mind when anthropology is mentioned.

The professional anthropologist in the small college has inherited many problems due to this image. In order to best serve the undergraduate interested in anthropology as a mode of thought and corpus of knowledge there should be a good range of course offerings made available. Usually there is already some other department on campus whose interests lie in similar areas as a proposed course. For instance, a course in political anthropology may appear to infringe upon areas best left to political science. This problem of acceptance is exacerbated by the myths of what anthropology is. These myths need to be dispelled and anthropologists, at least, know how difficult it is to dispell a myth.

Adding new courses to form an anthropology program at a small college brings these problems to the fore. Usually anthropology is included among the social sciences. This division is viewed by many as a half-way house between the humanities and natural sciences. As I have tried to make clear, anthropologists study people, their conduct, their creation, and their creations. We use methods which run the gamut from quantification and deduction to insight and induction. In the traditional world-view of the college and its curricula, anthropology is a very bad boy. For instance, what kind of distributional credit can be awarded a student completing a course in non-Western ("primitive") art? What kind of requirement is fulfilled by a student successfully completing a laboratory course in human biology? One course considers Homo faber, using examples taken from human prehistory and history as well as contemporary peoples all over the planet. The methodology is sometimes quite similar to the formal approaches utilized in art history. The second course considers Homo sapiens sapiens, our relatives and ancestors. Methodology is most similar to ethology and biology. Yet both courses are valid, pure and simple anthropology. One is a humanity, and the other is a natural science and both are anthropology.

Now the anthropologist may have (and usually does have) a rather laissez faire attitude toward credit hours and the artificial categories into which the other disciplines have

gotten themselves, but this is hardly a popular attitude among the natives of the grove. We live in a time when "FTE", "retrenchment," lowering enrollments" and such-like phrases can and do cause departmental Godfathers "to go to the (intellectual) mattresses." Retrenchment is resulting in entrenchment. Anthropology's plea for holistic approaches and cross-disciplinary credit is met with a "Get away, kid" attitude, and definitely suspicious glances.

Although my colleagues have no problems understanding and communicating (at tedious lengths sometimes) the complexity of their field of study; they seem temperamentally incapable of granting anthropology a similar maturity. The stereotypes will out. This inability is, perhaps not surprisingly, most adamant when the object or method of anthropological research overlaps with their own interests. Hence the Curriculum and Instruction Committee at General Retrenchment College greets anthropology with high suspicion. Its members (none of whom, you can bet, have ever had a course in anthropology) fall back upon some comfortable stereotypes and proceed to inform the anthropologist of what anthropology is, and what it teaches. Meanwhile at Old Retrenchment's New Core Curriculum Committee we find a juggling act of credits, categories and crude power plays. Anthropology, a core discipline for the study of humanity, if ever there were one, is being relegated to "permanent elective status." We could settle for that (happy that we were remembered at all), except that so many core requirements are being imposed that no student will have the time or energy to take an elective. We should have expected this; as the most undisciplined of the disciplines, anthropology have never seen fit to ally itself with any of the academic superpowers.

The anthropologist at the small college has a choice. Satisfaction can be found in teaching general courses in anthropology. These are safe, unprovoking, and certainly demanding enough. An attempt can be made to serve students at another level, however, and this demands even more work and much risk. Topical and areal courses in anthropology teach the variety (and fundamental unity) of human experience better than do any other academic courses. They are necessary for the liberal arts education claiming to aid in the creation of the rational person who would critically examine self and society. The study of our own culture as a part of Western civilization is obviously important, but by itself it lacks an all important perspective - that a Western culture is only one culture among many; and that the history of Western Civilization is the history of societies

and institutions which never realized this. The latter form of action brings the anthropologist into conflict with other denizens of the academic jungle. The field work here is every bit as dangerous as fieldwork among the murderous Thuggi of India. And the natives are already restless.

The small college has a choice, too. Few small colleges (any less than large ones) lack lofty motivations and high credos concerning liberal arts education and its goals. Ironic it is then, that so few colleges have hired anthropologists to teach what they know of human culture and human nature. The small college can continue to limit the scope (and presence) of anthropology on its campus, or it can allow anthropology to open student eyes and minds to a world much larger than the one about which they would otherwise learn. This outside world will be encroaching upon their adult lives to a greater and greater extent, and it is a world about which they are taught practically nothing.

Attempting to make anthropology a self-evident and intrinsic part of the college and a liberal arts education is a very difficult task. For our part I think it is important to keep trying. We are not dead, it's just that many watches have stopped and we have never done much to get them going again. Anthropology is neither anecdotal, trivial, nor helmeted in pith. It is an important and unique perspective on human behavior. It is an organized attempt to bring together as much knowledge of humans and human culture as is humanly possible. As such colleges ignore anthropology at the risk of undergraduate ignorance as great and dark as any before in the history of Western Civilization.