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The relevance of anthropology

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According to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary the word relevance means "bearing upon, or applying to, the case in hand; pertinent. Relevant implies a traceable and significant connection." With this definition in mind I feel that I can discuss more intelligently the proposition of the relevance or significance of anthropology.

Anthropology, as the study of human society, should be in a position to aid in the problems of the 20th century. Problems of cultural diversity, lack of understanding, and the most basic of all problems, that of effective communications, are all within the range of anthropology. This is not to say that anthropologists alone have all the answers to the problems of our world, but they at least understand the necessity of knowing the cultural values of interacting parties.

How does the above relate to the practices of cultural and biological genocide that is being practiced by various political bodies of the world? First, the conflicts that exist must be understood. Second, understanding and cooperation must be introduced into the areas of the greatest social priorities, those that allow or help each to maintain their strengths while seeking resolution to their common problems. One, however, must acknowledge that to do this an impartial cultural inventory of the participants and analysis of the needs must take place. The dominant set of values must not in this case override or be permitted to dominate the investigation of the whole.

Rarely, however, does the dominant power allow an unbiased investigation, for the investigation does not define the position of the MOST FAVORED STATE, that position used by major powers for continuation of their dominance.

Atlas, January 1970, described, complete with photographs, the practice of genocide being used by the Brazilian Government and many other "interested persons". How was this disclosure treated by the major Western powers? In most instances, it was not treated at all. There was an official U.S. protest, according to this article. But there was no official sanction taken against Brazil. Why not? The real reason is that the U.S. and other major powers of the West, Great Britain and France, are guilty of the same types of transgressions. Further, it would not have been in the interests of these powers to chastise Brazil, as they might lose part of the economic market they have in Latin America.

Anthropologists do not, traditionally, take a stand or involve themselves in "ethical" or "moral" issues. Is this because they are merely recorders of facts about various cultures? Do they lack sensitivity, or are they trained so that they can take in stride the constant barrage of antihumanitarian acts without so much as a raised eye-brow. Are these acts so unimportant that they do not find their way into the field notes of these same observers?

In November, 1968, a copy of the open letter of protest that was sent to the president of Brazil was printed in Current Anthropology. Reaction seemed to be minimal. The United States

made their symbolic protest, and the government of Brazil made a minor investigation. But nothing happened as a response. There is another point of interest. What about the anthropologists who have been working in Brazil in recent years? Why have we not heard from them? Are their hot-house cultures so important that they cannot see what is happening to them and, further, to their "special" people. Or is it that they are more interested in their own esoteric investigations?

A close parallel to the above situation is found in the recent incident at My Lai, as described in Transaction, March, 1970. Yet this case is not the same. Public opinion in the U.S. does not see U.S. involvement as being the same cultural and biological genocide as that occurring in Brazil. I personally view them as being the same. However, one does not have to look halfway around the world to find these practices. Consider the Native Americans and the Blacks!

Problems stated without considerations for solutions are of no value today. We have enough problems, and an excess of rhetoric to accompany these problems. But rhetoric is not enough.

I frankly believe most contemporary anthropologists desire nothing more than their academic "ivory towers" and their "classroom rhetoric". This allows them to be more "objective" because of their lessened involvement. This is not to say that these anthropologists or their works are less significant or relevant. Webster's definition of relevance was "something that is pertinent or a traceable and significant connection."

So any aspect, regardless of how remote or esoteric, falls within the range or scope of "relevant" anthropology. This includes all, from archaeology to contemporary social anthropology.

I have no argument with the fore-stated position, but I feel personally and professionally that this is just the beginning or the basis for a much broader interpretation and participation in human culture. The archaeologist and all other varieties of anthropologists have a responsibility to a wider involvement than to just their own particular specialities, or their individual allegiances.

So we have a responsibility to help protect, and inform the rest of the world when we find programs of genocide or complete extermination. We must tell the world when we find abuse of other human beings, regardless of the oppressors. Nor can we stand in the way of change. For human museums are as abhorrent as is programmed destruction. We are not Gods, and we should not control other human lives. We must contribute to the state of peaceful interaction in this world.

Tomorrow will come even if anthropology ceases to exist altogether. But I do not want to live in a world devoid of the ameliorating effects of anthropology. Presently the possibilities of a universal ethic do not, in my opinion, exist. Should one ever be possible, I feel that it will be in response to the contributions made by anthropology. With this view of the world I believe that anthropology is extremely important to the future of the world. Yes, it is relevant.