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Action anthropology

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Science has two basic aspects; the first is the so-called pure or basic science, the other being its application or applied science. The majority of anthropological work is of the former nature, though there is a growing trend in its application. "The science itself (supplies) the problems out of its own unfinished business." (Keesing 1964:7)

Applied anthropology has been expanding rapidly in recent years. In the field of applied anthropology the problem concerns itself with practical or utilitarian need; the application of the scientific method is, or perhaps should be, the applied anthropologist's tool of communication. The range in which an applied anthropologist may concern himself encompasses a vast area; from the military to the medical, from the political to the economic. "The most extensively applied field is that of social anthropology, especially when predictions of human behavior are called for." (Keesing 1964: 7 & 8)

According to Raymond Firth, the student of primitive man may be of use in the development of "backward" communities.

Firth states:

There is a bridge to be built between the savage and the civilization that is forced upon him; and the anthropologist can play his part in this social engineering. (Firth 1950: 379)

The philosophical basis of action anthropology is not simply applied anthropology in the sense of being apart from "pure" research. On the contrary, action anthropology is derived from pure research, and it is this pure research that must compliment its practical application. Neither is given priority and both must be mutually compatible. Increasing knowledge yields constructive action. The job of the action anthropologist is to take this knowledge and apply it in a manner which is in accordance with the value structure of the people involved. It is his job to show facts - facts rooted in the scientific method, not facts arising out of his own personal-moral judgment, and to explain how these facts might improve the conditions in which a given "primitive" people find themselves.

As opposed to being predictive, action anthropology is clinical. No attempt is made to apply general anthropological principles directly to the body of observed data existing at any fixed time. Rather than a fixed "blueprint" of what must be accomplished, it is more a design of "if : then" statements derived by the anthropologist. Nothing is force fed; the people themselves make all the decisions which might influence their future.

Action anthropology requires the "intellectual and the political independence that one associates with the pure researcher; it depends on university and foundation connections for support rather than those of a client or government." (Tax 1964: 257) It also requires the anthropologist to take

his objectivity, which may be founded in his ivory tower, and let some world of affairs be his temporary field laboratory. The biologist can rationalize losing an occasional frog, the psychologist, an occasional rat; but like the medical doctor, anthropologists deal with human lives. The action anthropologist must be equipped to face unusual demands and risks. He must accept the problems of a community as his own; he may never be completely successful, "he must be prepared for disappointments and frustrations, without even the satisfaction of blaming others besides himself." (Tax 1964: 257)

It is no wonder that this method of research has not become common, or indeed fully accepted as legitimate. The stakes are high and the game dangerous; but action anthropology is nevertheless, quite in the tradition and spirit of general anthropology, and promises to provide the best demonstration of its meaning and its use. (Tax 1964:257)

Many examples of action anthropology could be listed. The Fox project, initiated by Sol Tax, at the University of Chicago, is perhaps the most popular manifestation of action anthropology in the United States to date. In 1948 this field-training situation commenced in Tama, Iowa; its function being under the category of "pure" rather than applied science. The Fox Indians were to be studied. As the work advanced, the students became interested in the current problems of the Fox (or Mesquakie) Indians, and became attracted to them as a people. From this arose a desire to help the Fox face their practical difficulties; thus resulting in a formula designed to help these people to achieve their goals.

The Fox have traditionally considered themselves as

failures whenever the white population has interfered with their style of life. They feel that they cannot be whites; and because of the whites, they can never be Indian again.

In our value system, we feel that one's life career should be marked by a constant effort to make the real self, reflected in actual behavior, coincide with the ideal self. The Fox do not see this "to thine own self be true" theme as we do. They formulate no "ideal self", however, they are content to accept themselves as they are. They are only motivated by external factors; they are not concerned with internal moral sanctions. They seek public approval; they fear condemnation. Gearing states:

The effects of this contrast are great. White individuals, if psychologically healthy and not self-consciously marginal, can engage in a sustained effort in a single direction over a long period of time, and—here—is the crux — they can do so more or less independent of their group. In contrast, a Fox is guided almost exclusively by his moment-to-moment relations to others; he bridles under long-term rigid work schedules; he becomes listless in situations requiring isolated self-direction. (Gearing 1960: 295-297)

This affliction, as seen by White Eyes, is laziness. Thusly, our "hard work" American tradition looks down on the Fox; the Fox feel guilty, consider themselves as complete failures, and simply do not know which way to turn. The hardworking Iowan taxpayer finds it difficult to sleep at night, knowing that he is, in part, supporting this "lazy" Indian. This same taxpayer feels that soon the Fox will assimilate and cease to be a burden.

Two major attempts were made by action anthropologists to break this destructive cycle. The first attempt was via

"informal adult education" of the White population, ranging from newspaper articles to formal correspondence with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This attempt was made to help the Whites understand the problems of the Fox Indians. The second result was obtained by helping the Fox to help themselves. The total acceptance by the Fox was obtained by voluntary decision. The action anthropologist, by nature, must let the people make the final decisions.

This adumbrates the most significant distinction between action anthropology and applied anthropology as ordinarily conceived. It emphasizes the right of Fox self-determination, or as Sol Tax bluntly puts it, the freedom to make mistakes. The Fox are faced with the need of making decisions relevant to their future. The function of the anthropologist is not to impose his own decisions, much less those of administrators and other whites. His function is to act as a catalyst, to help clarify issues for the Fox and to make available to them possibilities of choice which may not have occurred to them, or which might not have been available to them apart from the programme of action anthropology. (Piddington 1960:205)

If the Fox reach a final decision, it is the right decision. The action anthropologist must not interfere, if and when his suggestions are not carried out. This policy works. "Thus, factionalism in Fox society has rendered abortive many attempts by whites to improve their condition." (Piddington 1960:205) Factionalism is hardly significant when the Fox are dealing with their own problems in their own way.

With the example of the Fox Indians, we can see how pure research has given birth to action anthropology. According to Sol Tax, the two most important aspects of action anthropology that have come directly from the Fox project are: (1) that in

fact pure research is the starting point, and (2) that the action anthropologist must be prepared to abandon any concepts found undesirable by the people in question.

Other examples of action anthropology are many and varied; unless one sticks to a completely non-governmental definition. The government, which has excellent means by which to obtain funds, I feel, should not be completely foreign to action anthropology. In this sense, I disagree with Sol Tax and others who feel that government funds must mean government control. I should hope that this will not always be the case. I see no reason why action anthropologists cannot become part of the government, and be the controlling mechanism by which much of these funds are regulated. If action anthropologists had more influence in the Peace Corps, for example, there would be little question regarding the effectiveness of this government agency.

In the case of the hurricane stricken Tikopia, for example, Raymond Firth, in 1952, was successful in obtaining government food supplies and regulating their distribution. Here again, the Tikopia made the final decisions, the government control that Tax speaks of, was unquestionably handed over to this action anthropologist.

The study of any such community requires helping the people of a given community to firstly discover their goals and then to try and help them in their achievement. There will always be competing goals and wants and forces in the society, this cannot be solved by simply educating the people. Here the

anthropologist must assume the part of both actor and observer.

(Tax 1964, 256)

It is possible for a people to live in a civilized society and at the same time retain their cultural heritage, if these principles are not threatened.

The results are proving themselves in an understanding of the problems of new nations, of North American cities, even of the organization of universities. Indeed, the unique community of anthropologists of the world that I mentioned as being now in existence was helped into being directly by what was learned from American Indians. The same understanding may some day help the peoples of the world to achieve the common goal of peace.
(Tax 1964, 257)

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