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ADVOCACY V. CULTURAL RELATIVISM: THE PARADOX OF OBJECTIVITY

Cindy Hull

In 1902, the American Anthropological Association was formed for the purpose of promoting anthropology as science. This primary goal is still evident in the most recent bylaws of the AAA, which read: "The purpose of the Association shall be to advance anthropology as the science that studies humankind in all its aspects" (1983, in *AN* Oct. 1993, p. 1). The paradox of objectivity is implicit in this section of the bylaws in that anthropology purports to be a science, but one which has as its subject matter human beings and the cultures which they create.

But the dilemma is even more complex than the bylaws state, since the anthropologist often works within two social contexts: that of one's native country/culture and that of the people with whom one works. Although objectivity is the goal, the anthropologist works within a milieu of values and is often pressured by financial or political means to validate the cultural values of one at the expense of the other. This paper examines the role of advocacy as it pertains to anthropology, looking at it in an historical context, exploring how nations have used anthropology to promote their own interests and the ways in which anthropologists have attempted to advocate for the people with whom they live.

The goal of objectivity is a problematic one in all sciences, since the biases, values, and historical and social contexts of the observer/researcher are not easily separated from the phenomena being observed. While this is an issue whether one is researching fruitflies or chemical compounds, it is more evident when the subject is humankind, and it is complicated still further by the fact that anthropologists traditionally study societies that are far removed from European values, history, and social context.

In anthropology, objectivity has been linked with the concept of cultural relativism, the often misunderstood idea that the values, customs, and beliefs of a foreign culture must be understood within the cultural context of the society being studied. As such, anthropologists have struggled with the dilemma of moral/ethical relativism as they observe or hear of such practices as clitoridectomy in East Africa, bride burnings in India, and infanticide in a number of cultures.

However, issues in objectivity in anthropology go beyond the understanding of exotic or abhorrent customs. Anthropology inherently carries the hazard of becoming a political entity. In 1919, Franz Boas, the Father of American Anthropology, was expelled from the Anthropological Society of Washington for publicly accusing four colleagues of working covertly for the government during World War I. The AAA never investigated the accuracy of the accusations (Cassell 1991: 17).

During World War II, several of Boas' students answered the call of the

government to support the war effort (Fluehr-Lobban 1991: 19-20). Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson wrote *Principles of Morale Building* (1941) and, with Ruth Benedict and others, they prepared "Suggested Materials for Training of Regional Specialists, Army Program" (1943). Ruth Benedict conducted psychological research on Thailand, Burma, and Japan, thus formulating her "national character" approach. Her work was sponsored by the Office of War Information. Although her work and that of Bateson and Mead (1941) did not threaten the well-being of individual groups, it reinforced the stereotypical and racist attitudes flourishing during this era. This type of research also compromised the explicit goal of anthropology, stressed by their own teacher and mentor, of cultural relativism and objectivity.

After World War II, the United States followed the historical pattern of its European counterparts and used anthropology as a tool in structuring colonial administrations. After World War II, the United States gained control of the Micronesian Islands, which had been owned by Japan. The United States held the islands as a Trust Territory under the United Nations with the mandate to improve quality of life, promote economic development, and ultimately provide political autonomy to the island nations.

To this end, the government assigned anthropologists to each of the major islands. The anthropological mission was to learn the local culture and language and to act as intermediaries between the traditional leaders and the government. The issues which were most important to both the government and the islanders were inheritance and land ownership. In both of these related issues, the anthropologists were to explain the traditional system (which had already been altered by previous German and Japanese occupations) to the government officials and to make the new land tenure laws palatable to the native leaders. The anthropologists often found themselves sympathizing with the islanders, yet having to support government rules, thereby becoming marginal to both groups.

While there were few outcries against these government sponsored projects, the beginning of the Cold War and the Vietnam era cast the role of anthropology once again into the spotlight. Project Camelot, an aborted government program to use social scientists to conduct research on internal conflict among indigenous groups in Chile, shook the academic community. The disclosure of this government sponsored project served as an impetus to all social scientists to reevaluate their role in political and government missions (Fluehr-Lobban 1991), and again to question the ability of an anthropologist in the employ of the government to be objective in her/his research. How do the needs of the employer bias the questions asked, the data obtained and the results of the final analysis?

Even though the newly formed Society for Applied Anthropology had devised a Code of Ethics as early as 1948, the AAA did not formulate a formal code of research ethics until 1967. At this time, the relationship of the anthropologist to those studied was not stated explicitly. Rather the emphasis was to discourage involvement in government projects unless the results were open and available to the public (Fluehr-Lobban 1991: pp. 25-26).

In the August 1968 issue of the *American Anthropologist* an advertisement

appeared recruiting anthropologists to work with the Psychological Operations Headquarters in Vietnam. The AAA Committee on Ethics, chaired by Eric Wolf and Joseph Jorgensen, argued that the Association, by carrying the ad, was violating its own code of ethics (ibid: pp. 27-28).

In 1970, when Wolf and Jorgensen learned that several anthropologists had been involved in clandestine research in Thailand, many in the anthropological community were appalled. Yet, as with Boas before them, the messengers were censured for allowing the report to become public, and the anthropologists involved have never been named.

As a result of the growing concerns of anthropologists, formal Principles of Professional Responsibility were finally prepared in 1971 (revised in 1983 and 1990). The special responsibility of the anthropologist to his/her subjects was finally specified as stated in Section I: "In research, the anthropologist's paramount responsibility is to those he studies. When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals must come first. The anthropologist must do everything within his power to protect their physical, social and psychological welfare and to honor their dignity and privacy." (from Fluer-Lobban, 1991, p. 29).

The last sentence in Section I underscores what has been a growing trend in anthropology, that of advocacy on behalf of indigenous people. While most anthropologists have always seen their role as one of protecting and promoting the people they study, the current global political landscape is changing so rapidly that anthropologists, as well as other advocates, notably liberation theologians, have felt the need to empower the indigenous people with whom they have worked. Terms such as "protection" and "guidance" are seen as condescending and paternalistic. How can one protect the Yanomamo from miners and why does the researcher have the right to dictate what the people might want for themselves?

The desire to empower indigenous people is controversial one, and critics can rightly question the alternative agendas for those involved in advocacy. According to Joan Cassall (AA 82:1:1980 pp. 36-37), the researcher needs to ask herself whether her subjects are a "means" to the anthropologist's ends (ie, the means to a PhD, proof of a theory, national recognition) or the "end" in themselves? Are the goals of the program or movement those of the indigenous people? Or have goals been imposed upon them by the outsider? This controversy interlocks with the issue of objectivity. In advocating for a group, can one be truly objective? Can one know what the indigenous people want or need? How does the anthropologist balance the people's desires against what he/she thinks they should have or need? The risk of bias in favor of government goals has thus been replaced with the risk of bias in favor of the researcher's goals.

In recent years, anthropologists have advocated for indigenous people in a variety of contexts. John and Lorna Marshall have helped to organize the Kalahari Development Program for the Nyae Nyae! Kung in Namibia. Norman Chance has worked for many years on behalf of the Inupiat of Canada. Anthropologists have lined up on both sides of the Navaho-Hopi dispute, which has raged for many years and ravaged long standing peace between these two peoples. Since the 1980's,

anthropologists such as Ward Goodenough have testified in front of senate committees on behalf of the Micronesian Island nations struggling for free association with the United States as the Trust Territory mandate is completed.

In South America, anthropologists have also become advocates for various indigenous groups residing in the Amazon basin. Terence Turner has intervened on behalf of the Pataxo in Brazil (*AN* May 1983, p. 17) as well as for the Yanomamo of Brazil and Venezuela. The Amazon basin has become the destination for hordes of outsiders seeking their fortunes in tin and other mining ventures. Other immigrants, with the blessing of Brazilian and Venezuelan governments, have established ranches and farms in the region. These activities have not only tragically affected the Amazon environment, but resulted in disease and violent confrontations with the indigenous populations.

In 1991, President Fernando Collor de Mello of Brazil established a 68,000 square mile reserve for the Yanomamo adjacent to a similar reserve in Venezuela (Overbey *AN* February 1992, p. 1). This allows the Yanomami to move back and forth on historical territory, unaffected by national boundaries. This reserve was advocated for very strongly by such anthropologists as Turner and Napoleon Chagnon. But the reserve has not been without its problems. Within the past year, miners have infiltrated the boundaries of the reserve. In July and August 1993, miners massacred at least 18 villagers, mutilated women and children, and scattered nearly 100 Yanomami from their homes.

The question remains as to whether anthropologists who strive for objectivity can be effective advocates. In a recent case in British Columbia, a judge argued just this point as he ruled against two indigenous groups who were litigating against the British Columbian Province for control of ancestral land. Arguing for the indigenous groups was a team of three anthropologists, including Hugh Brody, who has done extensive fieldwork among Arctic groups. The judge ruled that, since anthropologists are obligated by Section 1 of the PPR, as quoted above, to protect and defend their subjects, their testimony is biased and cannot be regarded as expert (i.e. objective) testimony (*AN* Nov 93 p.1, 6).

The judge in this case did not question the objectivity of the witnesses or the attorneys for the provincial government. According to two of the anthropologists involved in this case, Daly and Mills (*ibid.* p. 6), anthropologists are aware of the problems of objectivity and bias. Outsiders, like the judge, consider themselves unbiased because their findings are based on law and legal reasoning. That these laws are based on the values of dominant culture is not the concern of those in power.

Nevertheless, the judge's criticism may be valid. Perhaps anthropologists need to question the validity of the principle of objectivity and moral relativity. The shortcomings of extreme relativism are clearly visible today as they were in the past when social scientists and politicians watched Hitler march through Europe, spreading his poisonous form of racism. Today we feel helpless amidst televised visions of ethnic cleansing and apartheid, and the temptation is to say that there is nothing that we can do—or should do—for it is their problem, not ours. This position

is virtually impossible for the anthropologist who has spent many years with a group of people, watched their children grow and become parents, attended their weddings and their funerals. How does one remove oneself emotionally from these people and their problems? How does one objectify them?

Susan Skomal, in a recent essay in the *Anthropology Newsletter*, summarizes the debate: "To many researchers, ethics in scholarship has become inseparable from issues in human rights. To others, the ethical practice of anthropology should not confuse the task of analysis with the act of judgment" (Oct 1993, p. 1).

The Principles of Professional Responsibility reflect the social context within which anthropologists work. That clandestine operations are no longer of interest and not included in the Code illustrate this. That new guidelines reinforce the need to protect the subject and give guidance to those anthropologists who work in business reflects the changes that are occurring in the discipline. Yet the code does not mandate behavior, nor does it eliminate the debate regarding advocacy. Increasingly, many anthropologists wonder if the question to be asked is not, "Is it ethical to interfere on behalf of indigenous people?" but rather, "Is it ethical not to interfere on their behalf?"

Perhaps a more balanced, less emotionally charged guideline should be followed. Rosalie Wax in her book *Doing Fieldwork* (1971, in *AN* Oct. 93, p. 6: Susan Skomal "The Ethics of Fieldwork") states that: "The wise and well-balanced field-worker strives to maintain a consciousness and respect for what he is and a consciousness and respect for what his hosts are."

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