

ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF POWER*

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It has become fashionable for some anthropologists to trace the history of the discipline from two episodes of Western European history -- the Renaissance and the Enlightenment -- suggesting somehow that anthropology partakes of the humanistic purposes and visions associated with these two periods.

It did not take long, however, before the dark side of anthropology was revealed during the relentless self-criticism that has been taking place in the discipline since the 1960's. What is revealed by this self-criticism? We see an anthropology as social knowledge used in the conquest of one part of mankind by another. From "a child of European Enlightenment," as Stanley Diamond would put it, modern anthropology was unmasked in the now-familiar words of Kathleen Gough as "a child of imperialism" -- a most embarrassing kind of unmasking indeed!

From then on, anthropology has been rethought, revolutionized, decolonized, re-invented, radicalized, and lately indigenized. In this world-wide assault on the fundamental aims, achievements and future goals of anthropology, it is noteworthy to remind ourselves of the collective participation of Filipino anthropologists.

Having assessed the status of anthropology in the Philippines in 1978, we, of UGAT, tried to test its power to alter events, or to cause events to change, which is one definition of power. The opportunity came during the 2nd conference in 1979 when we held a dialogue among government representatives, community leaders, and academicians to discuss the now infamous Chico River Basin Development Project, the case of the invasion of Abra by Cellophil Resources Corporation as well as related issues. Another opportunity for testing was the Man-Environment Relations Conference in 1980 where we concluded that the Filipino people and the Philippine environment are being victimized by "national developmentalism."

Having demonstrated its power to analyze structures and processes as well as its power to cause people to re-consider their decisions and course of action, we now feel that anthropology must address itself to the

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question of power itself to find out how best to understand it and use it towards realizing more fully man's creative capabilities.

A cursory review of the anthropological literature shows that the objects of study have been for the most part societies or sectors of society that have been reduced to powerlessness. It appears, then, that the anthropology of power has been hitherto the study of the powerless.

One meaning of this is that anthropologists, wittingly or unwittingly, have tried to understand the dynamics of power from the standpoint of the powerful. Translated into action, only the already powerful could understand the powerless thus contributing to the preservation of a system of domination beneficial only to the powerful and their allies. Weren't anthropologists used against the peoples of Asia, Africa and America as researchers and consultants in counter-revolutionary projects?

Indeed, there is truth to the accusation that anthropologists have served the powerful as secret agents reducing anthropology to nothing more than a "species of military intelligence."

The time has come, I think, to reverse the standpoint: to study the dynamics of power from the perspective of the powerless who constitute most of mankind so that they may be empowered to change life-conditions and processes in their favor.

Now, one may ask: what kind of anthropology is that? The simple answer is: it is an anthropology that explicitly rejects the neutrality of power studies and, for that matter, the neutrality of the social sciences. For already we have come to realize that in spite of our fondest dreams of knowledge as power available to one and all, it has become power only to those who already have power.

But why, this time, only for the powerless? Are we not merely changing the actors, but not the rules, in the power game? Why not, then, for all of humanity? As an answer, I can only paraphrase a Swedish anthropologist: Theoretically, our commitment as anthropologists and social scientists committed to the study of man, society and culture must be to all of humanity. But in the real world of conflicting interests between and among ethnolinguistic groups, socio-economic classes and nation-states, we can only take sides. And when we do, it must be on the side of the powerless, the exploited and the oppressed, whom we have studied and about whom we are most competent.

This taking sides, translated into a practico-intellectual project, may not be easy for anthropologists. Traditionally, anthropologists have dealt with small-scale societies and as two Indian anthropologists have pointed out in the case of India and I suspect, elsewhere, anthropologists have not tried to bridge the gap between micro-level political behavior studies and the study of the forces and processes involved in nation building. Moreover,

as also pointed out by another Indian anthropologist, S. C. Dube, anthropologists have engaged themselves too long in the study of equilibrium and stability models that they do not find it easy to handle the social ferment taking place in the Third World.

For these reasons, anthropologists need to forge stronger alliances with the other disciplines like political science and history for them to acquire complementary investigative skills.

In fairness to other practitioners of anthropology, however, mention ought to be made of the more recent attempts to move into this direction. Already, anthropologists talk about social anthropology of the nation-state as well as of the supranational organization of production. In terms of paradigms, an increasing number, discontented with functionalist and structuralist paradigms and trapped in the cul-de-sac of orthodox anthropological theory, are turning to the seminal ideas of Morgan, Marx, and Engels. Some of them now discuss "Marxist perspectives in anthropology" as well as publish in a new journal called *Dialectical Anthropology*. Moreover, political anthropology has been formalized as a subdiscipline. Indeed no longer do anthropologists deal with *Homo sapiens sapiens*, with *Homo faber*, with *Homo ludens*, with *Homo economicus*, with *Homo hierarchichus* but also with *Homo politicus*.

Still and all, we ought to remind ourselves, in keeping with our tradition of holistic studies that we deal with man as a phenomenon as totally as we can as we restore the unity of theory and practice.

Accepting these premises, therefore, will clear the way for the convergence of political anthropology, general anthropology, and theoretical applied anthropology, which in the context of today's interdependent but conflicting ethnolinguistic groups, social-classes and nation-states, may be called, in the words of Roger Bastide, "a communal praxis of national autonomy and freedom."

Engagement in this communal praxis will ultimately be a difficult personal decision for anthropologists to make, for as Myrdal has pointed out, "it is much easier to be a conformist than a competent rebel." Or as one American anthropologist observed, there will always be progressive and conservative anthropologists displaying as they do the human propensity to variation.

But whether anthropologists will prove themselves equal to the challenge of today's crisis is a question that must be asked. In the mixed metaphor of Darwinian evolutionism and Greek mythology, will the anthropologist survive by perishing phoenix-like to reappear in a revitalized form? Or will he repeat the fate of his ancient predecessors whose remains are either entombed in some ancient savannah, or encased in some museum, or footnoted in some anthropological textbook?

By your presence here, I am optimistic that he will survive — as one of the fittest — to participate even more creatively in a new stage of disciplinal as well as social evolution.

More power to us all! Thank you.