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RESPONSIBILITY IN ANTHROPOLOGY

by

Prudence Sadler

E. N. Anderson, Jr. The Life and Culture of Ecotopia. In Reinventing Anthropology, Dell Hymes, ed. New York: Vintage Books/ Random House, 1974, pp. 264-283.

A great deal of discussion in recent anthropological literature has been directed toward "relevance in anthropology". The issues which are confronted under the concept of relevance in anthropology would be perhaps more correctly labeled "responsibility in anthropology".

Relevance is defined as pertinence and social applicability, in other words, the ability to satisfy a need. The concept of responsibility encompasses this social applicability but also includes moral and rational accountability for one's conduct and obligations. Not only is it the ability to satisfy a need but the accountability for the actions taken to satisfy the need and the repercussions which follow.

Just as it is true that each anthropologist must reinvent anthropology for himself or herself, each anthropologist must be held accountable and responsible for his or her research. This is not merely a matter of professional ethics and the responsibility of producing accurate and valid research. It also includes the responsibility for uses that are made of the anthropologist's work and the entire range of repercussions which pertain to these uses. This is a tremendous responsibility and one which increases the amount of planning and preparation occurring in connection with research. But it is an ethical problem not peculiar to anthropolog or even the social sciences. Almost every profession is beginning to feel demands for accountability and responsibility.

A very important part of making anthropology more responsible must be the education and training of anthropology students. Responsibility must be taught to each student during his or her education. This leads to what I feel is probably the most useful aspect of the Anderson article - his point of altering the education and training of anthropology students to produce "apprentices" rather than "victims". The concept of a student as an apprentice who participates in his or her own education and training is a step toward making each student more responsible for this education. This responsibility would dictate that each student reinvent anthro pology for himself or herself. It may be that as each student or apprentice begins to reinvent anthropology, he or she will find

that the traditional boundaries of anthropology are no longer valid or useful. Responsibility in anthropology must also include the recognition that much of traditional anthropology which is taught to the student as victim may be of less use than areas which are covered traditionally by economics, political science, geography, biology and a host of other disciplines. Involving the student in planning, research and teaching is certain to be one of the best ways to cross disciplinary boundaries.

Freeing the student from the bureaucratic university structure must also be a part of responsibility in anthropology. To require that a student have X number of credit hours in a major and minor field of study, with x number of credits in other, predetermined, areas and to divide disciplines into colleges between which credits cannot be transferred only encourages a system which treats the student as a victim. A student as apprentice may find that the solution to a problem may be found by combining knowledge gained from several traditionally unrelated disciplines.

The "tragedy of the commons" to which Anderson alludes, is an example of a problem which must be dealt with in a corss-disciplinary manner. The example of the commons disaster is as follows:

In preindustrial times, each community in England had a common area of grass which was owned by all the inhabitants of the community and on which each could graze his flock of sheep. The problems arose when a shepherd considered adding a sheep to his flock. He knew that this would be an economic gain for him in the form of sheep to sell at the market. He also knew that it would put a strain on the common pasture. After consideration, he came to see that the negative aspect would be shared by all while he alone would benefit from the positive aspect. And so, he added a sheep to his flock. His neighbors noticed that he had added a sheep to his flock and through the same reasoning, concluded that they would each need one more sheep to keep even. Soon the commons was overgrazed and of no value to anyone and had to be converted to private property.

The solutions to the commons problem are obviously not in traditional anthropology or economics or biology. If the tragedy of the commons is taken as a simplification of the environmental situation, then solutions obviously will not come from the traditional disciplines.

The student as apprentice, however, would approach the problem with no preconceptions as to where solutions might or might not be found. He or she would, as Hymes states in the introduction to the volume in which the Anderson article is found, be unfettered by "the pretense of official coherence

within anthropology (which) acts as a barrier to the coherence that minds free to inquire into problems might actually find" (Hymes, p. 44). Thus, responsibility in anthropology would create a problem-solving discipline. The dreaded "That's not anthropology" would no longer be applied without a careful assessment of the problem or issue under consideration. Anthropology would become that synthesis of knowledge which would enable the student or anthropologist to achieve his or her goal or solution. Clearly, it would not be the same synthesis for each individual nor would it remain static. The student as apprentice would be the one to decide which synthesis would be useful and which disciplines would provide the necessary knowledge or taining. And the student as apprentice would be responsible for the research and any applications made.

The apprentice approach to educating anthropologists seems to be a productive method of increasing responsibility in anthropology. To have each student reinvent anthropology will surely lead to much cross-disciplinary research and at the same time, aid in the increase of both relevance and responsibility in anthropology.

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