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EVOLUTION FOR ANTHROPOLOGY: SETTING OUR HOUSE IN ORDER

by

Dennis Toom

Gerald D. Berreman, "Bringing It All Back Home" In Reinventing Anthropology, ed. D. Hymes. New York: Vintage Books. 1974.

In Berreman's article, as in most of the other articles in Reinventing Anthropology, the main topic of discussion is that, once again, the need for change has presented itself in the discipline: anthropology needs to be reinvented. The changes called for have to do with relevance, responsibility, receptivity and the like. None of the authors offers much in the way of suggestions for accomplishing this ideological overhaul for anthropology; they only acknowledge the need for it. Processes of change are characteristically disruptive, producing harmful and negative effects during the transition, and change in anthropology is no different.

As Berreman so aptly illustrates, the need for change and attempts at change have produced an air of antagonism within the discipline. He speaks of "agnostic" and "atheistic" students, established professionals with "devilish doubts", and the troubles within anthropology that:

"threaten to tear us away from each other and from any possibility of realizing the hope that many of us have cherished for a viable, responsible, and useful study of man". (p. 84)

These troubles, according to Berreman, have caused promising students to abandon the discipline and have frustrated and aggravated those who have remained.

Anthropology is in a state of flux, a limbo, from which it needs to be rescued or become lost to us as a science of man. Anthropology is in a unique position to effect this rescue, since the answers to the problems of change lie in anthropological theory itself. Anthropology has the ability to save itself through its own theory and methods. The first task that applied anthropology should tackle is a critical analysis of the discipline itself, aimed at providing insight into the phenomenon of change and mitigating the negative effects of that phenomenon. What we need is a working ethnology of anthropology; one that will show us the nature of our discipline so that we may better achieve the goals of our research. Such an ethnology is beyond the scope of this paper; however, an explanation of change within the discipline and its benefits is not.

The phenomenon of change within anthropology is best explained by the principles of cultural evolution. The principles demonstrated in *Evolution and Culture* by Sahlins and Service (1960) are most appropriate to understanding the ills of a changing anthropology. The "Law of Cultural Dominance" states in part that:

Every cultural system once all the potentialities inherent in its level of organization have reached a limit and it has achieved a satisfactory adaptation to its environment, will tend to become stabilized. (p. 87)

This is the "...limiting factor inherent in specific evolution ...the Principle of Stabilization, and it occurs as an end product of adaptation." (p. 95).

The "Law of Evolutionary Potential" states that:

The more specialized and adapted a form in a given evolutionary stage, the smaller its potential for passing on to the next stage. (p. 97)

Coupled with the "Law of Evolutionary Potential" is the "potentiality or privilege of backwardness" which means that underdeveloped cultures have a greater potential for surpassing the stabilized developed cultures since they may appropriate on the best (most adaptive) things from them disregarding the rest, giving them a greater potential for advancing to the next stage (pp. 99-102).

Substituting "anthropology" for "culture" in the foregoing discussion makes the implications of these evolutionary principles to anthropology most apparent. Today's established anthropology has developed in an intellectual environment of pure science; it has reached its limits and potentials in the environment and it has become specialized to that environment and stabilized within it. The intellectual environment is currently changing to one of applied science, reacting to the recent demands for relevancy. Established anthropology, with its specific adaptation and stabilization within pure science lacks the ability to respond to this change and pass on to the next stage.

The young undeveloped anthropology, however, having the "privilege of backwardness", is unspecialized and unstabilized within a particular environment and is able to "...appropriate only the more fruitful and progressive of the older generations accomplishments, disregarding as useless debris much of the work that went on before them". (p. 104) This allows the young anthropologists to pass on to the new stage by adapting their version of anthropology to the new environment, which they are fully capable of operating in.

This evolutionary discussion amounts to a rather simple explanation of progress and change in intellectual thought. The unfortunate aspect of this evolution is the conflict and resulting unproductive disruption it creates during the transition period between stages. The key to understanding this conflict and thereby eliminating it and its undesirable effects lies in the nonlinear, discontinuous nature of the evolutionary process (Sahlins and Service 1960).

In anthropology this discontinuity is most apparent in the struggle for dominance between the old who are trying to hold on to their ideals, careers, and professional standings by resisting change and the young who are trying to build theirs by advocating change. It almost seems (and is implied in the evolutionary principles discussed) that the young must take over anthropology and mold it in the way they want it, at the expense of established anthropology and its accomplishments. The transition period is so disruptive that terms such as "revolutionary" and "radical" are applied to it. When the need for change presents itself, anthropologists split into opposing camps of those who vehemently oppose change and those who passionately advocate it. The discipline itself is caught in the middle and suffers accordingly.

The really unfortunate aspect of this phenomenon is its accelerating, cyclical nature. Sahlins and Service (1960:104) state that: "...the faster a science or civilization or whatever kind of system is evolving the more discontinuous will be the character of the advance." Considering the speed at which our culture, and hence, our discipline, is evolving, we may soon reach a point, if we have not already reached it, when disruption and conflict between generations of anthropologists will be constant. Such a state would surely end anthropology as a viable discipline; nothing could be accomplished. There is hope, however.

Now that the problem has been identified, explained, and understood, it may be successfully eliminated. All we need to do is change the present evolutionary tendency toward nonlinear, discontinuous change to one of linear, continuous change. What we must do is mediate between the two opposing factions with understanding and cooperation. This may best be accomplished by a comprehensive working ethnology of anthropology which, in the words of Scholte (1972), is both "self-critical" and "self-reflexive". By providing a structure in which all anthropologists, both young and old, may work together, producing a smooth continuous evolution and succession for the discipline, we can build a successively stronger, increasingly more viable science of man. To ignore the disruptive and discontinuous nature of change in anthropology will be to abandon ourselves to chaos.

The title of my paper implies that, if anthropologists cannot understand the cultural processes and the problems they create with in their own discipline, they can never hope to create the relevancy within it that so many desire. Before anthropology can be-

come the altruistic, humanitarian, and utopian force that Berreman and others wish it to be, it must first set its own house in order. This the classic case of practicing what we preach: we must make anthropology a stable, utopian intellectual system of cultural study before we can attempt to project the same image onto world cultures and attempt to solve world problems. Berreman entitled his paper "Bringing It All Back Home", referring to a return to relevancy in anthropology. I say that we should be "setting Our House in Order", so that we will have something to bring it all back to.

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