



Correspondence

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Bite-Size Anthropology Ahead?

What about the future of anthropology? In this century we have gone from an unsophisticated view of heritability of "intelligence" and other good things to the opposite: that culture is all and biological variation virtually irrelevant. Now the pendulum has been swinging back. The archaeologists have been perceiving a "sapiens explosion," shorthand for the rather sudden appearance of decorative art, denser occupations and perhaps spirituality, before 35,000 BP, possibly well before, since it reached to Australia. In any case such phenomena—including religious compulsiveness, social organization and behavior, and linguistic prefigurations—have to be seen as products of human evolution and thus involving genetic variation in living individuals, though we do not at present have any real means of measuring these biological components. It is only that their existence is persuasive.

Will there ever be a Grand Unified Theory of anthropology? This would imply a drawing together of the several fields, against the trend, so often mentioned, to diverge and separate. I seem to see some signs, in course descriptions and professional interests, of attempts at overview. On the other hand, with the suddenly huge numbers in the profession and in departments, a scrutiny of courses offered and of projects funded, suggests rather that individuals are looking for tiny turf and dealing in bite-size anthropology. Is this a distraction or a long-term trend? I am not in a position to see the emergence of any major theorist with the stature to provide such a structure as I envisage. We cannot have an anthropological Einstein without an ether of mathematics and astrophysics to work in, but perhaps a Darwin. I think we were closer to such in our earlier days, with people like Kroeber, than today, when there are actually some biologists who turn purple at the idea of sociobiology. But I would love to be able to see our science in another 50 or 100 years.

W W Howells
Kittery Point, ME

Response to Hammel

E A Hammel's Commentary, "Meeting the Minotaur" (April 1994 AN, p 48) received a varied and lively response from readers. Their comments are printed as a collection in this issue.

Relativity of War Rape

Hammel asks, "Is the utility of cultural relativism established by its political convenience?" to which the answer must be

given: "No." Its utility must be established by its veracity.

Hammel then asks, "By what principle short of imperialism do we insist on the application of civil or human rights in societies that have not come to these ideas through their own histories?"

He seems to imply that war rape, taken in context, must, by the rules of cultural relativism, be accepted since it is accepted within the context of the Croat/Bosnian conflict. It is this reductio ad absurdum that I would like to dispute. I affirm and agree that moral relativism is correct; moral judgment only occurs within a cultural universe of discourse. It has no existence or evaluative charge outside that universe. It only seems to have moral value when we think about other universes because when we think about them, we usually do so as if they were within our own universe. I venture that war rape is about as morally reprehensible to both Croats and Bosnians as it is to Hammel and me because we are all—Croats, Bosnians, Hammel and I—in the same universe of discourse in this respect. Indeed, I suspect that they do it because it is morally reprehensible as well as hurtful.

The political convenience of moral indignation depends on the fact that both the speaker and hearer share the same values, otherwise how could the appeal have any appeal. If I accuse another of dishonesty it is serious because both of us take it seriously. If I am accused of being a cultural relativist, that does not bother or hurt me, since I think being a cultural relativist is a "good thing," even if Hammel doesn't.

David M Schneider
Santa Cruz

Hypocrisy & Justice

Contrary to Hammel's assertion, the moral conflict that most needs to concern us as Westerners, anthropologists and human beings, is not between "cultural relativism" and an "imperialistic imposition of a rigid moral standard." The conflict is between self-serving hypocrisy and a commitment to social justice when it is convenient and when it is not.

If Westerners and Western anthropologists lack a basis for conveying convincing moral judgments, it's not for want of a legitimate "tradition," but because we continue to make our livings within a political-economic system that is exploitative of human beings and destructive of the environment upon which we all depend. As long as we continue to deny or minimize the reality of our own social-political-economic arrangements we will be singularly unable to convince anyone of the sincerity of our human rights concerns, less of their morality, or even their utility.

On the social justice side of the equation, Westerners are actually party to a decent and universalizing human rights tradition with a history that long predates any "legal tradition coming out of the Enlightenment." I refer, to the tradition of those obscure Palestinian texts called the Christian Gospels and the Jewish Talmud, in which, sages known as Jesus and Hillel respectively are reputed to have said: "Do unto others as you want them to do unto you," and, "Don't do unto others as you don't want them to do unto you."

Being contentful such injunctions are undeniably culture-specific, but they seem to require the acceptance of only two anxious: (1) all human beings possess, more or less, the same sensory and intellectual

apparatus for discovering their wants; and (2) it is possible, desirable and necessary for human beings to become aware of what they do and don't want.

It's an interesting feature of inegalitarian societies that it is the powerful and wealthy who most vigorously deny a human identity with the exploited, and who most strenuously oppose people coming into awareness of their wants. In that case, there just might be a "principle short of imperialism," by which we could "insist" (not in the sense of force or coerce, but in the sense of advocate with persistence), for "civil or human rights in societies that have not come to those ideas through their own histories."

Hammel confuses the problem of how it might be possible to advocate for universal human rights by a spurious reference to the "long experience with the export of the worship of Jesus Christ to other cultures [italics added]." Export, like what: wheat, corn, oats? More like whiskey, opium, or most recently, cigarettes. The West did not exactly offer Christianity for trade so much as cram it down people's throats, and demand in exchange their identities, resources, labor, taxes, lands and lives.

Nathaniel Wander
Consultation for Change, Portland, OR

Cultural vs Ethical Relativism

When I read Hammel's commentary, I wondered why he did not distinguish between cultural and ethical relativism. Does relativism require us to accept atrocities based on "their" history or culture? Whose? The raped women's history or culture?

I don't know writers who espouse such views as Hammel's, but I imagine them based on my own history and culture. Such people are probably not Croat or Bosnian by ethnicity, but some of their best friends are. They've never been raped. They've never been really afraid that large numbers of people could or would want to kill them because of their ethnicity. Speaking about these matters has never made them feel professionally or personally vulnerable. They're tenured and unused to being called emotional or biased. They've lost no close relatives during the Holocaust but may have gone to see "Schindler's List." They probably did not leave the theater talking about cultural relativism and issues of collaborative silence. Such academics write from a position of power and may not know what it is to be either professionally or personally vulnerable.

Kathleen Zuanich Young
Western Washington University

Consider the Whole Species

I share Hammel's concern for the challenge ethnonationalism has made to our professional commitment to cultural relativism. But I think that our response should begin with an analysis of the contexts in which our commitment to cultural relativism developed. Briefly, I suggest that the global context has shifted in a way that necessitates a shift in our commitment from the survival of particular cultures to a species ethic. This means that unless we have a species ethic, we cannot hope to

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