

Building A New American Academic Anthropology

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Opening Up and Reemphasizing Fieldwork

In 1843 Sir Richard Burton, the famous British scholar, explorer and linguist, disguised himself as a Pathan from Afghanistan, and went on a pilgrimage to Medina and Mecca. *Pilgrimage to EL-Medinah and Mecca*, the book which Burton wrote about his adventure, is an ethnographic classic. It gives a moving, richly detailed portrayal of the ritual activities, participants, and atmosphere of the pilgrimage; and, further, contains insightful descriptions of Islam and Arabian society.

In 1933, George Orwell wrote *Down and Out in Paris and London*, an account of life with tramps and hobos. Just as Burton had lived as an Arab, during his pilgrimage to Medina and Mecca, so too did Orwell live as a hobo; spending nights in shelters for the homeless, working the most menial of jobs (when he could find them) and forming close relationships with other tramps. In *Down and Out in Paris and London* Orwell vividly describes his tramping experiences and, at the end of the book, gives a remarkably objective and insightful discussion on the

consequences of destitution, and an itinerant lifestyle for the individuals involved. It is this discussion, and the accompanying descriptions, which give *Down and Out in Paris and London* both great sociological and literary value.

In 1973 Clifford Geertz, a well-known anthropologist, wrote an article entitled *From the Native's Point of view: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding*, in which he argued that good ethnography was a matter of a rather detached, analytical understanding of the symbolic structures through which natives interpret the world, rather than intense immersion into their lives. I agree with Geertz that good ethnography is not just a matter of going native. However, I also think that intense immersion into native life is not necessarily incompatible with social scientific objectivity, and, indeed, as the work of both Burton and Orwell show, may even facilitate the collection of ethnographic data.

Geertz's approach to ethnography has had the unfortunate consequence of deemphasizing the importance of fieldwork and, more specifically, participant observation, to anthropology. As a result, in many ethnographies that were written in the 1970's and early 1980's, the ethnographic data is fairly thin; and theoretically fancy language is used to fill in the resulting holes. These "ethnographies" stand in sharp contrast to some earlier accounts, like Evans-Pritchard's *Oracles, Witchcraft and Magic Among the Azande*, where theoretically important conclusions never move very far from the ethnographic data.

The mid-1980's saw a minor resurgence of accounts where theoretically important conclusions come right out of a rich ethnographic data base. *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self* by Fred Myers and *Fluid Signs* by Valentine Daniels are especially important books in this regard. Another quality which these books share, is that they—like the earlier classics written by Evans-Pritchard, Burton and Orwell,—also show the processes through which beliefs and values are interpreted and negotiated.

Despite this minor resurgence, however, many American academic anthropologists have continued to deemphasize the importance of fieldwork and participant observation, and, consequently, continue to write narrow, ethnographically impoverished accounts, where the native's culture is chopped apart, stuffed under artificial headings and depicted in esoteric, reified, academic language.

Many of these accounts do not have nearly the same anthropological value as the ethnographically authoritative ones written by Burton, Orwell and other non-academic figures. And this raises a serious problem, that being that Burton, Orwell and other non-academic "ethnographers", are largely ignored by most American academic anthropologists. One major reason for this is that many American academic anthropologists seek to create a mystique, which dictates that the only people who can do "professional" anthropology are Ph.D.-holding academics.

To formally recognize the ethnographic contributions of largely "untrained" scholars, like Burton and Orwell, would be to break down this mystique. Indeed, advancement (i. e. receiving tenure and recognition) in American academic anthropology, depends upon (among many other things) supporting the mystique, on writing articles in esoteric academic language; publishing them in academic journals and only recognizing those scholars who do the same. The system, and accompanying attitudes, are self-perpetuating.

This perpetuation of the "academic mystique" needs to be done away with. American academic anthropologists need to open up, recognize, and be willing to learn from, people working outside academia.

This opening up must be complemented by a greater emphasis on participant observation, linguistic skills and more extended fieldwork. For only through these three things can a more genuine, ethnographically sound anthropology be deve-

loped. The time has long since passed for the Geertzian spell to be broken. If there is not an "opening up," and a new emphasis on fieldwork, academic anthropology will continue to stagnate, and the future of anthropology, the really important work, will be done by people outside academia.

The Need to Publicize Anthropology

Academics in many disciplines have gone out of their way to publicize their findings to a public, non-academic audience. In biology, for example, Stephen J. Gould and George Schaller, both very prominent scientists, have published many popular accounts of their work, specifically for the non-academic public. These accounts have done much to generate interest in biology, and thus attract more money and talent to the field.

American academic anthropologists, on the other hand, have made absolutely no effort to publicize the contributions that their discipline has made (to our understanding of humanity) to a non-academic audience. Why? One major reason is that American academic anthropologists are overly sensitive about being labelled as dilettantes. They are worried that if they wrote for the public they would not be regarded as serious, professional scholars. And, once again, advancement in the academic system depends on upholding this view.

Biologists and academics from other fields, do not seem to have this problem. George Schaller and Stephen J. Gould, have not had their reputations tarnished by writing popular accounts of their work.

These days many American academic anthropologists are complaining about the lack of money in their field, and an inability to attract talented graduate students. And yet the academics really have nobody but themselves to blame. Until they start taking a more active role in promoting their discipline to the public, the dearth of money and talent is likely to continue.