

## On the Counterfactual History of Anthropology

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In his presidential address at the 2021 meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Akhil Gupta asked the audience to conceive "what would have become of our discipline if it had been constituted as a decolonizing project?" He gives an imposing list of tasks, but we are not asked to consider what would have been lost had this imaginary discipline actually existed. It is not clear that an audience of younger scholars recalls what American anthropology was all about in earlier eras, perhaps having been misled by the slogans "savage slot," "salvage," and "settler-colonialism" with their sibilant power to cloud the mind. These days the representation of the history of Boasian-- and especially post Boasian anthropology-- is unrecognizable. Recent sloganeering rather than a serious historical reading of what our forebears actually said diverts attention from the pivotal role of anthropology in undermining the idea that race is destiny at a time when every other discipline in the sciences and humanities promoted racism and miseducated millions.

American anthropology, with its four-field approach, was conceived of as the most comprehensive scholarly study of all the peoples of the world, all humanity, from its origins through today--wherever and whenever found. That was a rather tall order, but there was an old-fashioned belief that all peoples should be represented, if possible, and that open-minded understanding of all types of peoples and cultures would be a reproach to ethnocentrism. In the course of such study modern anthropologists rejected racial and biological determinism, and it was believed that **non**-invidious comparison of the ways of humankind could teach us about what it is and can be to be human. It could expand human consciousness about what makes us both the same and different from our neighbors. But the key was to do research on all peoples. This has been satirized as the male gaze, the white European gaze, a bad thing--studying others. But any number could play. The ideal was to have everyone studying everyone! Get multiple perspectives. The goal was to check our own ethnocentric biases that inevitably result from seeing only through one's own culture's lenses. At best, this idea seems to have been forgotten by today's students of anthropology; at worst, it has been made to seem shameful and injurious.

Like most recent critiques, the presidential address lacked specificity about the "harm" of anthropology-the subject at the heart of next year's AAA meetings. The only anthropologists of earlier days to appear in the rogue's gallery in the power-point were dead white men whose careers began around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Two of them (Putnam and Brinton) were born well before Franz Boas, and Brinton is singled out for his racist statement in his presidential address to the AAAS in 1895-a year after Boas' anti-racist address to the same group. (It seems that Boas' message hadn't sunk in yet.) As for the other early anthropologists who were hanged on the wall-Lowie, Kroeber, Sapir, Speck-if they hadn't pursued the sort of anthropology they did, the record of the languages, oral literatures, and cultures of the Arapaho, Yurok, Mohave, Mohegan, Penobscot, Hopi, Crow, Paiute, Nuu'chah-nulth, Yana, Seneca, and countless others would be almost nil! Demeaned as "salvage" anthropology, that record is truly the archive of the languages people spoke, the stories they told, their beliefs, rituals, and spiritual meanings. It contains accounts of their social structures, their activities, their arts, their ways of getting food and keeping warm in winter, their ways of fighting and so on. Some anthropologists even recorded individual life histories. This is a durable and crucial historical record, and yet for some reason the AAA has just issued an apology for the way it was "extracted." Have the authors of the apology considered that those people might have valued having someone record their stories, songs, languages, and wonder about their lives, rather than kill them, ignore them, or try to force them to change?

But modern anthropology was so much more than these early activities . It covered the world as it was, wherever people were found, in their current lives-as they were in 1930s and beyond. Anthropologists did research on unwritten histories and we usually did not exoticize other peoples. American anthropologists studied social and cultural change and very often tried to help, and work with, the peoples whose languages they learned, whose ways they studied, and with whom they often identified-just as today. We tried to understand a wider range of psychology than the psychologists, more ways of economizing than the economists, more forms of political life and organization than the political scientists, and tried to record the histories of those ignored by the historians. Furthermore, many accounts actually do speak of genocide, massacres, forced migrations, poverty, discrimination, corrupt governments, and other ills.

Current critics ignore, or possibly are ignorant of, the work of thousands of anthropologists over the better part of a century. They are censoring the intellectual record of attempts at understanding human life and invaluable records of human thought, creativity, activity, and struggle. They tend to do this without actually reading the works, considering their times and contexts, and demonstrating the actual balance of harm vs. good. Given the theme of the 2022 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, devoted to the "historical and current harms" of anthropology, it is clearly time for a more historically informed and understanding look at the role of anthropology and the works of actual anthropologists.

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The following anthropologists have asked to have their name attached to this response:

Najwa Adra  
Peter S. Allen  
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Stanley H. Brandes  
Sebastian F. Braun  
Peter J. Brown  
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Amy Catlin  
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Regna Darnell  
Victor C. de Munck  
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E. Paul Durrenberger  
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Dale Eickelman  
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David Feingold

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Jack Glazier  
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Sergei A. Kan  
Alice Beck Kehoe  
Laurel Kendall  
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