

Savage Minds Occasional Papers No. 7

Anthropology and the Humanities

By Ruth Benedict

Edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub

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Introduction

This number of the Savage Minds Occasional Paper Series features Ruth Benedict's "anthropology and the humanities." This piece is the published version of the lecture Benedict delivered for her presidential address at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 1947. In this piece, one of the last she wrote before she passed away, she argues that anthropologists can benefit from drawing on the methods of the humanities in addition to scientific methods. Benedict's argument is worth examining in its own terms, but it is also worth reading between the lines of her essay. In making her case for the humanities, Benedict implicitly describes anthropology's core values. This piece is valuable, then, not only for its argument about the humanities, but because it gives us a summary of what one of our foundational figures considered the essence of anthropology to be.

This piece is typical Benedict, especially in its sparkling lucidity. Like Kroeber, Benedict draws on a notion of the 'human sciences' developed by Dilthey. This notion emphasizes that the humanities have a unique subject matter, the human mind or spirit. This is quite different from the neokantian approach of Sapir and Boas, who saw anthropology as a 'historical science' of the particular. The argument is also typical, even emblematic, of Benedict's own personal position regarding what anthropology is or should be. Typically, Benedict saw anthropology in both 'tender' and 'tough' minded terms - a discipline that was both rigorous and objective, yet simultaneously subjective and sensitive to the emotions of others. She believed the goal of anthropology was to "arrive at objective, theoretical, generalized descriptions of reality." But at the same time, she believed anthropology required a deeply subjective experience: "an intense cross-cultural experience" which allows one to "move intellectually in a culture different from the one in which he had been reared."

Benedict argues that good methods involve "surrender to the text itself" and "sensitivities" to "the quality of men's minds and emotions." This openness to others requires one to "engage in conversation," literally, with the people you study. Montaigne, for instance, "used an informant and compared cultures without weighing his argument in favor of his own ethnocentric attitudes". But at the same time she argues for "methods of impartial inquiry" and "command of vast details" of ethnographic facts, being "holistic and always taking account of context".

Is Benedict's version of anthropology impossibly ambitious, a contradiction in terms, a summary of our discipline's deepest held commitments... or a mixture of all of the above? As you can see, this piece is worth reading because it forces us to ask these important questions.

Throughout this piece Benedict is careful to insist that one can appreciate humanism without giving up on science. To me, this feels a bit strained. Does Benedict, famously ridiculed by Marvin Harris as having abandoned explanation as an analytic goal, really endorse the pursuit of hypotheses and generalizations?

Putting her talk in context helps us answer this question. In the late forties, Benedict was facing several challenges. Her presidency of the AAAs was an honorary post with little institutional power. Indeed, in some ways it was a bit of a consolation prize. Benedict had not achieved her goal of succeeding Boas at Columbia. That honor fell to Ralph Linton, whose chairmanship was emblematic of the rise of a generation of male anglo-protestant anthropologists interested in Doing Science. The early Boasian interest in experimenting with what anthropology was or could be, and in cultivating a diverse body of anthropologists to do it,

was in decline. Only a few anthropologists of the next generation, such as Sidney Mintz, would continue to insist that Benedict was an important theorist.

Given these facts, there is something elegiac about Benedict's speech. Her vision of anthropology and the humanities was at the end of its life, not its beginning. The days when Kroeber or Weber could end an essay with a quote from Goethe were gone, replaced by what Kroeber called the 'dismal air of social science'.

Humanistic anthropology would have its day in the future, as dissatisfaction with 'scientific' anthropology grew in the 1960s. But this is a future which Benedict, who died in 1948, would not see. Today, Benedict's version of anthropology has become mainstream and it is the advocates of 'anthropological science' who see themselves as beleaguered defenders of an honorable cause. As these debates continue in the present, then, it behooves us to remember their origin in the past.



This version of "Anthropology and the Humanities" has been cut to down to 3900 words, six hundred words shorter than the original 4500. It is not pleasant to cut such an excellent writer and I'd urge anyone interested in reading the entire essay to download the full version, which is linked to on the third page of this document. Cuts have been made to reduce redundant phrasing, and in a few cases paragraphs have been removed. My goal has been, first, to create a document that can be taught in a single session alongside another, longer piece by Benedict; and secondly, to draw attention to the original document.

I hope that this paper, like the others in this series, will help present early anthropological theory in a form that is accessible to everyone. There is today a tremendous amount of material which is open access, but it is difficult to find, inconvenient to read, and many people do not know where to start looking for it. By curating a selection of important open access work, I hope to make open access resources better known and to raise awareness of the actual history of anthropological theory.

-R
20 Dec 2013
Honolulu

Anthropology and the Humanities

By Ruth Benedict

Anthropology belongs among the sciences in far more senses than the obvious one that it sits on the National Research Council and on the Social Science Research Council. From its professional beginnings about a hundred years ago it has phrased the problems it investigated according to patterns which belong to the scientific tradition. It borrowed some of its early concepts, such as that of evolution, directly from phylogenetic concepts of biology, and it has attempted to arrive at objective, theoretical, generalized descriptions of reality. The situation is quite different in regard to anthropology and the humanities. They are so far apart that it is still quite possible to ignore even the fact that they deal with the same subject matter -- man and his works and his ideas and his history. To my mind the very nature of the problems posed in the humanities is closer, chapter by chapter, to those in anthropology than are the investigations carried on in most of the social sciences. This is a heretical statement and to justify it I must turn back to the great days of the humanities.

From the Renaissance down to a hundred years ago, the humanities, not the sciences, were the intellectual food of western civilization. *Humanitas* meant then, as it meant to Cicero, the knowledge of what man is -- his powers, his relations to his fellows and to nature, and the knowledge of the limits of these human powers and of man's responsibility. It was in this field of the Study of Man that, after the Renaissance, methods of impartial inquiry were developed. One has only to read some of Montaigne's essays to realize their kinship to modern anthropology. Montaigne, the humanist, in his accounts of his conversations with his Tupinamba servant, could discuss the economics of daily life and the torture and eating of captives in this great South American tribe from the point of view of his "boy" who had grown up there; like any modern anthropological fieldworker, he used an informant and compared cultures without weighting his argument in favor of his own ethnocentric attitudes. However slight the attempt he made in the primitive field, it belongs in the modern anthropological tradition.

This general statement of the common subject matter of the humanities and of anthropology still does not do justice to their likenesses. The humanities provided Europeans with experience in cultures other than their own. Because Greece and Rome were the prime inspiration of the Renaissance, learning tended to be justified by the freedom it gave the scholar to move intellectually in a culture different from the one in which he had been reared. The humanities, in consequence, were an intense cross-cultural experience, and their aims were often couched in the same phrases as those of modern anthropological investigation of an alien culture. Mill put his pleas for the study of the humanities in exactly these terms.

Without knowing some people other than ourselves, we remain, to the hour of our death, with our intellects only half expanded; we cannot divest ourselves of preconceived notions. There is no means of eliminating their influence but by frequently using the differently colored glasses of other people; and those of other nations, as the most different, are the best.

It was in the humanities that great men for centuries got their cross-cultural insights. It liberated them, it taught them discipline of mind. It dominated the intellectual life of the period. Then about the middle of the last century the sciences began to take leadership out of the hands of the humanists. Professional anthropology had its beginnings during the[se] years. The excitement of phrasing the study of man in terms of scientific generalizations was basic in the whole discipline of anthropology. There were great gains. But, looking back at it now, there were also losses. Such great prescientific compilation as that done by Sahagun among the Aztecs was not duplicated by professional anthropologists of the age of Ratzel and Tylor. Instead Spencer collected his huge scrapbooks of meager travelers' items, and Morgan found it possible to classify his kinship terminologies without ethnological investigation of the significance of the actual relation to forms of marriage or of residence of kin. Professional anthropologists of this period did not engage in conversations such as those of Montaigne with his Tupinamba boy; they studied marriage or religion or magic in the British Museum without benefit of any informant. William James reports that when he asked Frazer about natives he had known, Frazer exclaimed, "But Heaven forbid!"

With all this in mind, it is tempting to imagine what struggles need never have occurred in later anthropological work and theory if anthropology had originally become a professional study before sciences came to dominate the field of intellectual inquiry. It is easy to imagine that anthropology might have stemmed from and continued the methods and insights of the humanities. No one is more convinced than I am that anthropology has profited by being born within the scientific tradition. The humanist tradition did not construct hypotheses about man's cultural life which it then proceeded to test by cross-cultural study. My conviction is simply that today the scientific and humanist traditions are not mutually exclusive. They are supplementary, and modern anthropology handicaps itself in method and insight by neglecting the work of the great humanists.

In the early days of anthropology a great gulf divided it from the humanities. As a young scientific discipline anthropology sought to formulate generalizations about social evolution which would parallel biology's phylogenetic tree, or about the psychic unity of man and the vast repetitiousness of his behavior. The basic assumption was that human culture could be reduced to order by the same kind of concepts which had proved useful in the non-human world. This was a reasonable expectation, and those who sought to realize it had good reason to leave out of account any consideration of human emotion, ethics, rational insight and purpose which had come into being within man's social life. They abstracted, instead, categories of institutions, and discussed them as if they were species in the world of nature. They lifted items of human magic and kinship like blocks out of the cultural edifices where these materials had been relevant in native life, and classified them as a botanist of the time classified the flowers. Even today, when most anthropologists define culture so that it includes human attitudes and behavior, there are some who still exclude the mind and purposes of man, and, indeed, a "science of culturology" and certain kinds of historical reconstruction and of cultural cycles are at present only possible if this exclusion has been made.

The great majority of present-day American anthropologists, however, include the mind of man within their definition of culture -- man's emotions, his rationalizations, his symbolic

structures. Such anthropologists' theoretical interests have moved in the direction of trying to understand the relation of man himself to his cultural constructs. They have moved in this direction as a consequence of the vivid material available in anthropological field work, and they have often not considered sufficiently the difference in training which genuine progress in this field requires. For if anthropology studies the mind of man, along with his institutions, our greatest resource is the humanities.

The great tradition of the humanities is distinguished by command of vast detail about men's thinking and acting in different periods and places, and the sensitivities it has consequently fostered to the quality of men's minds and emotions. History, as a humanitarian art, left out vital economic and political analyses, but it did try to show the deeds and aims of men in a certain period and what the consequences of these were; it pictured man as responsible for his successes and his failures. Literary criticism might raise the problem of the spirit of the age or confine itself to the character of one hero; in either case, it was concerned to show that, given certain specific kinds of emotion or of thought, people would act in given ways and the denouement would be of a given sort. The humanities have based their work on the premise of man's creativity and of the consequences of his acts and thoughts in his own world. Their methods of study have been consistent with their premises.

Both method and premise differ from those of natural science. There the student has to analyze the world of nature, which can be described by determinate laws. He has only to find out the law of a falling body and he can apply the formula in any context. He can even make large generalizations about animals, since they are not biologically specialized to learn and invent. But man is a species which can create his way of life, his culture. His social life has developed, for good or evil, within a framework of purposes which he has himself invented and espoused. Man is a creature with such freedom of action and of imagination that he can, for instance, by not accepting a trait, prevent the occurrence of diffusion, or he can at any stage of technological development create his gods in the most diverse form. Even granted that many correlations, such as that between technological stage and the character of supernatural beings, have high probability, it is only to the degree that we know concrete and detailed facts about any people -- their contacts with other tribes, their location in a cultural area -- that we can assume the correlations to hold.

The gradual recognition of these facts has led anthropologists to include the mind of man within their definition of culture. It is my thesis that we can analyze cultural attitudes and behavior more cogently if we know Santayana's *Three Philosophical Poets* and Lovejoy's *Great Chain of Being* and the great works of Shakespearian criticism. I shall assume that we might better learn from the great masters than from the lesser and I shall try to illustrate what I believe they have to offer.

Santayana, certainly one of the greatest of living humanists, has written in almost all the fields of cultural anthropology. He has not dealt with primitive material, but whether his subject is Greek or Hebrew civilization, he has dealt with the ways of life men have embodied in their cultures, the institutions in which they have expressed them and the kinds of emotion and of ideas which have taken root in men so reared. He has constantly illustrated from the side of the

humanities and out of his own cultivated sensitivity the truth about culture which he has phrased in one of his books:

Any world, any society, any language, satisfies and encourages the spirit which it creates. It fits the imagination because it has kindled and moulded it, and it satisfies its resident passions because these are such, and such only, as could take root and become habitual in precisely that world. This natural harmony between the spirit and its conditions is the only actual one; it is the source of every ideal and the sole justification of any hope. Imperfect and shifting as this harmony must be, it is sufficient to support the spirit of man.

This fine summary of the interdependence of man's cultural institutions and of the personalities of those who live within their influence is one of Santayana's great themes. He brought all his learning and philosophy to bear against the position that a fundamental opposition existed between society and the individual, and that to show man's debt to his cultural tradition was to minimize his claim to originality and free will. Whether Santayana was discussing great artists or great religious masters, his thesis was the same: only those "can show great originality [who] are trained in distinct and established schools; for originality and genius must be largely fed and raised on the shoulders of some old tradition." The worst conditions for cross-cultural understanding, according to Santayana, are present among those who throw over all they regard as established tradition; the best, among those who respect their own canons and dogmas. When the modern anthropologist says that in any cross-cultural work it is better for the student to be sure of his own ethnic and national position and loyalties, he is echoing Santayana's point, and he can profit by his wisdom.

Santayana's volumes also deal with the subject[s] of anthropology: social organization, religion, art and speculative thought. He saw all these arts of man as rooted in the culture of a given time and place. His analysis of Greece and that of the Hebrews, and of the growth of Christianity in Europe, was a part of his *Reason in Religion* which was published in 1905. It is still indispensable to any anthropologist who is studying religion, and there is no better illustration of the deeper insight the methods of the humanities had achieved than a comparison of *Reason in Religion* with Tylor's *Primitive Culture*. Tylor performed well the task he set himself, but the humanist's approach to his problem, being holistic and always taking account of context in the mind of man, allows him to investigate problems which have not yet been adequately treated from anthropological material.

I have stressed Santayana's humanistic studies of culture, but the humanities do not necessarily deal with culture. Shakespearian criticism is a case in point, and it has nevertheless been most valuable to me as an anthropologist. Long before I knew anything at all about anthropology, I had learned from Shakespearian criticism habits of mind which at length made me an anthropologist. I had learned, for example, from Furness' great Variorum editions, how drastically men's values and judgments are culturally conditioned. The stage versions of Shakespeare's plays rewritten in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflected the temper of the age of Queen Anne, of the Georges and of the Victorian era. Even the questions critics had asked about the characters were documentation of the age in which they were writing; for nearly two centuries after Hamlet became a favorite play on the London stage it did not occur to any one of them that there was anything particularly interesting in Hamlet's character. With the rise

of romanticism this became the central interest of all commentators, and the most bizarre “explanations” were offered.

It was A. C. Bradley who, in his *Shakespearian Tragedy*, cut his way through this underbrush and emphasized valid humanistic standards of criticism as applied not only to the character of Hamlet, but of Iago and Macbeth and King Lear. The core of his method was the critic’s surrender to the text itself; he ruled out those “explanations” which sounded plausible only so long as one did not remember the text. Shakespeare was, for Bradley, a dramatist able to set forth his characters with sufficient truth and completeness so that they would reveal themselves to the student who weighed carefully both what was said and what was not said, what was done and what was not done. In the worlds which Shakespeare portrayed, Bradley said, “We watch what is, seeing that so it happened and must have happened.” Bradley’s canons of good Shakespearian criticism, and his practice of it, are as good examples of fruitful methods and high standards as a student of culture can desire. The anthropologist will, of course, use these canons for the study of a cultural ethos, and not for the elucidation of a single character, but he, like Bradley, knows that he will succeed in his work if he takes into account whatever is said and done, discarding nothing he sees to be relevant; if he tries to understand the interrelations of discrete bits; if he surrenders himself to his data and uses all the insights of which he is capable.

The anthropologist has still more to learn from such literary criticism as that of Bradley. For more than a decade anthropologists have agreed upon the value of the life history. Very little, however, has been done with those which are published, and field workers who collected them have most often merely extracted in their topical monographs bits about marriage or ceremonies or livelihood. The nature of the life-history material made this largely inevitable, for 80% to 95% of most of them are straight ethnographic reporting of culture. It is a time-consuming way of obtaining straight ethnography, and if that is all they are to be used for, any field worker knows how to obtain such data more economically. The unique value of life histories lies in that fraction of the material which shows what repercussions the experiences of a man’s life -- either shared or idiosyncratic -- have upon him as a human being moulded in that environment. Such information tests out a culture by showing its workings in the life of a carrier of that culture; we can watch in an individual case, in Bradley’s words, “what is, seeing that so it happened and must have happened.” But if we are to make our collected life histories count in anthropological theory and understanding, we have only one recourse: we must be willing and able to study them according to the best tradition of the humanities. None of the social sciences, not even psychology, has adequate models for such studies. The humanities have.

Shakespearian criticism has pressed on in recent years in several new directions which are instructive to the anthropologist. Bradley wrote before the days of modern detailed research into Elizabethan beliefs, events and stage practices. This is true cultural study in the humanitarian tradition, and all such knowledge is essential for an understanding of Shakespeare’s plays. Such research compares, for instance, pirated texts in the early quartos with the texts of the folio collected edition; it studies the diaries and papers of a great Elizabethan theater owner in order to reconstruct the conditions under which the plays were produced. More than all, it describes the current ideas of Shakespearian times in science, history, morals and religion, both those accepted by the “groundlings” and those aired among the elite. As Dover Wilson has shown in his critical

edition of Hamlet, such a cultural study is crucial. Only with a knowledge of what the current ideas were about ghosts and their communications with their descendants can one judge what Shakespeare was saying in Hamlet; one can understand Hamlet's relations with his mother only with an acquaintance with what incest was in Elizabethan times, and what it meant to contract an "o'erhasty marriage" where "the funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables." Carolyn Spurgeon's and Dr. Armstrong's examination of Shakespeare's imagery is another kind of study from which an anthropologist can learn a technique useful in the study of comparative cultures. It can reveal symbolisms and free associations which fall into patterns and show processes congenial to the human mind in different cultures.

In all that I have said, I have emphasized the common ground which is shared by the humanities and by anthropology so soon as it includes the mind and behavior of men in its definition of culture. Let me emphasize again that the humanities provide only some of the answers to our problems in cultural studies; there are problems in the comparative study of societies with which they do not deal. Because anthropology, as a social science, organized its work to arrive at certain generalized, theoretical statements about culture, it has been able to make and document certain points in the Study of Man which the humanities did not make. My point is that, once anthropologists include the mind of man in their subject matter, the methods of science and the methods of the humanities complement each other. Any commitment to methods which exclude either approach is self-defeating. The humanists criticize the social sciences because they belabor the obvious and are arid; the social scientists criticize the humanities because they are subjective. It is not necessary for the anthropologist to be afraid of either criticism. The anthropologist can use both approaches. The adequate study of culture, our own and those on the opposite side of the globe, can press on to fulfillment only as we learn today from the humanities as well as from the sciences.