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CA☆ FORUM ON
ANTHROPOLOGY IN PUBLIC

Representations of Race and Racism in American Anthropology¹

by Eugenia Shanklin²

After a panel on racism at the International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Williamsburg, Va., in July 1998, a South African colleague remarked to me that American anthropologists had not yet assumed the lead in elucidating techniques for combating racism—an initiative awaited by the international community of professional anthropologists. That remark was part of the impetus for this paper. American anthropology, currently one of the country's least-integrated or "whitest" professions (Cross 1998, Huber 1998), has apparently failed to come to a consensus on what race means in American society and on how to deal with racism.³ Among the consequences of this failure are that American anthropologists deliver inchoate messages about anthropological understandings of race and racism, especially in introductory textbooks, and that they do not participate actively in public discussions of race and racism. I will present some evidence of this from a study of the renderings of race and racism in contemporary American sociocultural anthropology textbooks and discuss the images of anthropology or anthropologists that appear in the public discourse on these topics in the United States. I will go on to discuss some new approaches to teaching race and racism that I believe we should consider if we are to communicate, first, to our

1. This paper is an amalgam of several papers, one of which was given at the ICAES in Williamsburg, Va., in July 1998 and titled "The Status of Race as Seen from the Teaching Hinterlands." Another was presented at the meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Philadelphia on December 5, 1998, in a panel (chaired by Leonard Lieberman and me) called "Subverting Racism."

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3. Questions about the anthropological consensus on what race means in American society and how to deal with racism were first raised by Yolanda Moses and Carol Mukhopadaya as part of their introduction to a session at the American Anthropological Association meetings in 1997.

students, that we have significant understandings of race and racism as these concepts operate in American society and, second, to the media, that anthropologists have important contributions to make to the debates that drive American society and its public policies.

Teaching about Race and Racism

My research on sociocultural anthropology textbooks is modeled on Leonard Lieberman's work on the history of shifts in the presentation of race in American physical anthropology texts (Lieberman 1968, 1997; Lieberman, Stevenson, and Reynolds 1989; Lieberman et al. 1992; Lieberman and Jackson 1995. Littlefield, Lieberman, and Reynolds 1982). I have examined physical and cultural anthropology (and some sociology) texts in different ways and published the results elsewhere (Shanklin 1994, 1998). Here I assess another sample, of 15 sociocultural anthropology textbooks or collections of readings: Annual Editions (1998), Bailey and Peoples (1999), Bates and Plog (1990), Crapo (1990), Ferraro (1992), Harris (1991), Haviland (1987), Howard (1996), Kottak (1987), Nanda (1984), Peoples (1988), Rosman and Rubel (1995), Schultz and Lavenda (1987), Scupin and DeCorse (1998), and Whitten and Hunter (1993).

In contrast to Littlefield, Lieberman, and Reynolds (1982), I went through these texts without student assistance, beginning with Lieberman's categories ("no race," "race," and "no mention") and later creating three new categories to distinguish books that discussed both race and racism, books that defined one or the other but did not go much beyond these definitions, and books that mentioned neither. I included two collections of readings, and I noted both the treatment of ethnicity with respect to race and explanations of inequality with respect to racism. My reading of the texts was informed by Audrey Smedley's (1993) descriptions of viewpoints about race and racism.

Of the 15 books examined, 5 offered what I think of as good discussions of both race and racism: Harris (1991), Kottak (1987), Nanda (1984), Peoples (1988), and Whitten and Hunter (1993). All of these pointed to recent studies that refute racist claims and explanations for poverty or inequality based on skin color and unequal abilities. For example, Harris (1991) attributes the rise of the "New Racism" in the 1980s in part to "the fact that Ronald Reagan's administrations devalued civil rights, encouraged resentment against affirmative action, and fostered racial polarization by cutting back on critical social programs" and goes on to explore a deeper level of sociocultural causation, that of the "marked deterioration in the economic prospects of the white majority" (p. 373). He also scatters comments on race and racism throughout the text, a technique that offers several opportunities to discuss racism's consequences in context and allows these subjects to be raised more than once in classroom discussion and debate. Three of the other books

in this category (all but the collection) followed a similar format in their treatments of both race and racism.

Of the other ten books, however, four (Bailey and Peoples 1999, Crapo 1990, Haviland 1987, and Scupin and DeCorse 1998) did not discuss race or racism at all, and the others simply denied the existence of race as a valid biological category or gave pointless or confusing examples. In some of these “ethnicity” was used instead of “race” without being very clear what was meant by either. For example, Bates and Plog (1990) in their index entry “Race” referred the reader to “Ethnicity” and later explained that “references to race, as in ‘racial equality’ or ‘racial discrimination,’ are in fact usually references to ethnicity” (pp. 329–30). But “ethnicity” was not much better defined than “race,” and there was little discussion of the social consequences of either racial or ethnic divisions. Other books gave old-fashioned or faulty definitions of race, for example, “A race refers to a group of people who share a greater statistical frequency of genes and physical traits with one another than they do with people outside the group” (Ferraro 1992:5). This book, subtitled *An Applied Perspective*, never mentioned racism as a contemporary problem. Rosman and Rubel (1995:302–4) offered a brief definition of race as “a cultural construction whose definition and form differs from one society to another” and then—outstandingly, in my opinion—went on to give the example of Brazil as a society in which racial designations are not bipolar as America’s tend to be. They continued with discussions of ethnicity without discussing racism. Schultz and Lavenda (1987) defined race but omitted racism.

Some of the books had changed positions about race and racism from one edition to the next. Crapo’s 1987 *Cultural Anthropology*, for example, had had a good discussion of race and racism, but in the second edition (1990) that section (most of a chapter, in fact) was omitted. When I called the publisher to ask why, I was told that it was “an oversight.” Similarly, whereas People’s book (1988) had included a discussion of racism, that of Bailey and Peoples (1999) did not even mention the term. If this new text had been confined to the small groups that anthropologists study in various parts of the world this would not matter, but it was not. Further, there was an implicit status quo argument in the book’s presentation of the “Distribution of Family Annual Income in the United States, 1995” (table 10.1, p. 181), where the authors observed that “the United States serves as an example of the extent of economic inequality that sometimes develops in stratified societies,” and they proceeded to what I consider a startling conclusion (p. 266):

Indigenous peoples provide us with alternative cultural models that should reduce our anxieties about the likelihood of eventual decline in our material living standards. The diversity of the human species shows that we can live meaningful and wholly satisfying lives in the future without the technologies

and huge quantities of consumer goods we now consider necessary to our economic welfare.

Scupin and DeCorse’s (1998) *Anthropology* had sections on physical anthropology, race, and racism and good definitions of all—but these were all in the physical anthropology sections of the book, with no discussion of race as a sociocultural concept or of racism in contemporary societies in the sociocultural anthropology sections. Again, inequality was described, not explained, in the section on archaeology (p. 182):

Early states are typically characterized by a high degree of social inequality. The power of the rulers was often expressed in sumptuous palaces, monumental architecture, and a luxuriant lifestyle. Mastery was primarily based on the control of agricultural surpluses, often administered by a complex administrative system. . . . The opulent lifestyle of the leaders could be contrasted with that of the other classes. It was in early states that slavery and the state-sanctioned use of force to enforce laws became common.

Finally, the kind of notion that Smedley (1993:23) calls “primordialist”—the idea that humans have “always” distinguished between themselves and other on “racial” grounds—was expressed in Howard’s text (1996:236):

Categorization of humans according to physical or racial characteristics took place among very early human societies [on the basis of] observed or presumed biological differences The concept of *race*, or categorization according to physical traits, is virtually universal. But so also is the mistaken belief that the physical features chosen for purposes of categorization reflect differences in behavior or intelligence.

In other words, belief in “race” was presented as a universal mistake, but there was no suggestion that steps might be taken to understand or correct it.

As of the seventies, Lieberman and colleagues say, the no-race view began to dominate physical anthropology textbooks. The speculate that this may have been due to the rapid expansion of American anthropology since the sixties, the shifts in minority composition of faculties, and the extension of anthropology teaching to more and more nonelite institutions. Smedley (1993:3) suggests that this view may be overoptimistic and notes that the correlation may be either coincidental or a consequence of changes in the wider U.S. society in the direction of liberalization and egalitarian views. Now, she points out, the pendulum has begun to swing back. I believe, with Lieberman, that most physical anthropology textbooks do a reasonable job of summarizing anthropological knowledge about “race” and its fallacious applications in contemporary societies, but I do not know how to summarize the information about discussion of race in introductory sociocultural anthropological

texts. It is clear that there is no anthropological consensus about how or whether to present anthropological ideas about race and racism. Is there simply confusion about what race is and whether anthropologists should talk about racism?⁴ One possibility is that race and racism are not being taught to this generation of anthropologists in the way they were taught to my generation—that with the widespread abandonment of the “four-field” approach these matters are no longer of concern.

Although the contributing factors may not be clear, the direction surely seems to be—few sociocultural anthropology texts now include discussions of race and/or racism. Furthermore, most of the five textbooks that have adequate discussions of race and racism were originally published in the eighties and most of the others in the nineties. If the point is that “race” is really just “ethnicity,” then I doubt that we are doing our students any favor by telling them just that and then dropping the subject.

In sum, the treatment of race and racism in two out of three of the introductory textbooks or collections of readings by sociocultural anthropologists examined here makes our profession look ignorant, backward, deluded, or uncaring. Worse, this profession of ignorance is taking place at a time when the rest of American society, as well as the rest of the world, *is* concerned about these matters—when hate crimes on American campuses are at an all-time high, when students may need guidance about appropriate responses to the ethnic slurs they hear, when “ethnic cleansing” is both a buzzword and a reality. Given these societal distress signals, it seems to me a shame that anthropologists are opting out of an important, perhaps critical, dialogue.

In spite of a fine start by Franz Boas in combating racism in the first four decades of this century (Boas 1969) and the continuation of that mission by Boas’s students through the sixties and seventies, American anthropologists today seem to have lost their sense of mission about combating racism. At least from representations in introductory textbooks, many are failing to engage students in critical dialogue about American society and its goals. Further, many also seem to be ignoring Boas’s example of participating in ongoing intellectual debates on the nature of race and racism.

Anthropology in Public Discourse

If our American textbooks tell us how anthropology represents itself to students about the issues of race and racism, newspapers and other sources may tell us how we are represented in and by the media. In order to gauge the part played by anthropology and anthropologists in (largely American) public discourse, I examined NEXIS

4. That anthropology is one of the “whitest” professions may have something to do with this apparent determination to write “race” and “racism” out of sociocultural anthropology textbooks.

references⁵ to anthropology and race or racism. Here, too, anthropologists seem not to be doing as well as we might in representing ourselves to the public. References to “anthropology” and (within 25 words) “race” or “racism” (3,175) were far less frequent than for psychology (16,691), political science (8,241), and sociology (7,773).⁶ I decided to pick up only the references to “anthropolog! w/25 rac!” for 1998 as of December 15, 1998, and that gave me a total of 460 items. The main finding of this research was that just over one-fifth of these references were the sort of representations I was hoping to find—instances of American anthropologists’ standing up for what they believe in. Scholars such as C. Loring Brace, Alan Goodman, Jon Marks, Yolanda Moses, and Roger Sanjek were quoted about contemporary notions of race as it occurs in the societies in which we live, and there were discussion of groups of anthropology students who have undertaken the task of piecing together histories of racist acts such as lynching in particular locales or speaking out against racism. However, when just 21% of our part of the public discourse represents us as having something serious to say about one of the most urgent problems of our time, it seems to me that we need to reexamine our professional priorities.

In the category I called “race and racism” there were 97 articles, 56 of which discussed race and racism as the (now penultimate) American Anthropological Association (hereafter AAA) statement sets them out, while 14 were hostile in tone or intent toward anthropology and its “racist” views. There was a suggestion in some of these latter that anthropology had contributed to (or was responsible for) much of the racism that now exists. A radio interviewer of Lani Guinier, for example, spoke of “liberal racists who go anthropological on you” when confronted with certain facts. That remark was a casual aside, but there were others (e.g., Cross 1998) that attacked anthropology as a racist profession throughout:

As the study of anthropology began to organize as an academic discipline in the late nineteenth century, a major thrust of inquiry was directed at proving substandard traits of black people. . . . Despite an official repudiation of the position of the racist academics in the field, the study of anthropology has been severely tainted by the racist papers of a number of highly vocal professors.

The terms “anthropology” and “race” or “racism” are often combined in ways that would not have occurred to me. The category “racist anthropology” is used to refer to the 19th-century school of racist “anthropolo-

5. It is my impression that major news magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time* do not appear often in these categories, nor do the leading “intellectual” publications such as the *New York Review of Books* or the *Times Literary Supplement*.

6. On October 18, 1998, I began researching 2,625 items that appeared on NEXIS as listing both anthropol! and, within 25 words, rac! The NEXIS categories mentioned here are from searches conducted on December 29, 1998, eliminating those items dated after December 15.

gists"—Gobineau, Herbert Spencer, and others—in a recent book about them, and the term seems to be becoming almost commonplace in the literature. Students who have read in their textbooks that anthropology “has always been” the objective study of humanity may be surprised by this. “Racial anthropology” refers most often to forensic anthropology, especially to Kennewick Man. In fact, “forensic” and “Kennewick” account for 9.4% of all the mentions of anthropology and race or racism. Part of the reason may lie in the coincidence between the nature of forensic anthropologists’ work and the interest of the press in corpses—the “if it bleeds, it leads” philosophy. Jim Chatters, the anthropologist who first described Kennewick Man as “Caucasoid-like,” is quoted in one article (*Seattle Times*, June 10, 1998) as follows:

Now that I know what people are so upset about with the word Caucasoid, I’d probably use it a lot less. . . . It’s very hard to describe the whole set of characteristics in a single word without a word. . . . So it’s unfortunate there are so many political connotations to so many of our words now. But we don’t have other words to take their place. It’s made the process much more difficult.

This is a clear-cut case in which we cannot substitute “ethnicity” or “ethnic background” for race, but we could substitute physical description without automatically adding a “racial” designation such as Caucasoid or Negroid. What would have happened if Chatters had said “modern European-like” instead of “Caucasoid-like”? Granted, “European-like” has its own complications, but, as Chatters points out, to describe someone as “Middle Eastern” is also meaningless because of the time span: “We’re talking too long ago. We’re talking about before present-day . . . constellations of physical traits existed. I mean you take people from 10,000 years ago in the Middle East. They don’t fit any modern human group at all” (*Seattle Times*, June 10, 1998). Most often the Kennewick Man episode is invoked to make anthropologists and Americans appear obsessed with race. Whatever happens seems to be at our expense, and no matter who is doing the writing there is not much discussion. This is an appalling state of affairs, and instead of simply condemning this usage it seems to me that we are obliged to help the forensic anthropologists come up with terminology that is readily understandable, non-racist, qualifiable, and flexible, since racist language changes all the time.

Often our messages get turned upside down. For example, a book reviewer asserts that “race on the census form has become more of a sociopolitical construct than an anthropological one.” Here we are being misunderstood about what we do and our meaning is inverted. In another instance, Sherman Alexie, the director of the film *Smoke Signals*, says, “If race is not real, explain sickle cell anemia” (*Washington Post*, July 3, 1998). This perversion of Livingstone’s work (1958), one of the most thorough scientific attacks on the notion of race, is dis-

mayng. Even more dismaying, however, than this man’s odd and (presumably) racist view is that the interviewer admits that he can’t explain sickle cell anemia or what it has (or has not) to do with race. This is what anthropologists *can* do, and do better, I think, than sociologists or political scientists or psychologists, but we don’t seem to be doing enough of it at the moment. There were no letters to the editor on this that might have explained the issue at least to the interviewer and his audience.

We anthropologists have a lot of work to do to repair and strengthen our image—as critics of race and racism—in the press. There are not enough accurate representations of anthropology and its practitioners to counter some of the bad press that we have attracted, especially from the extreme right. The bad reviews of *Krippendorf’s Tribe*, a movie about an anthropologist who invents a tribe and makes a videotape about them in his backyard with his children playing the major roles, suggest to me that some people in the media understand what anthropologists are supposed to be doing and can recognize a truly bad parody for what it is.

Summary and Conclusions: Subverting Racism

Anthropological writing about race and racism in introductory American textbooks seems to be moving in the direction of no discussion. I think that this is a mistake and that anthropologists should be trying to communicate their message on these subjects not only to our own students but also to students at every level. Nearly all introductory textbooks need to be rewritten to take into account a new anthropological approach to race/racism. My critique here is intended as constructive.

Furthermore, anthropologists have largely bypassed what Barkan calls the “intellectual function of anthropology”—“to participate in public and political discourse” (1992:77–78), at least so far as owning up to our own mixed history with respect to race and racism is concerned. The way anthropologists present themselves to the media needs a good deal more support. Just as law has its critical race theorists, who point out the consequences of legislation to do with race (Lake 1998), and science teachers have an association that challenges creationist textbooks (Christensen 1998), the AAA could form an electronic “watchdog” group to monitor press representations of anthropological positions on race and racism and racial issues that concern us. I do not believe that the press has written us off entirely in these matters, but I do think we have to try harder to make our presence known and get our message across. Deborah Tannen, in *The Argument Culture* (1998), makes the point that the (American) media divide every issue into two camps and see their responsibility as representing the two sides rather than searching for a compromise between them. While I am not sure I entirely agree with Tannen’s characterization, I do think that anthropologists have to search for that middle ground and make it our own “turf”

and that we are in a better position than many social sciences to provide sensible discussions of complex issues.

Finally, I think that anthropologists in classrooms ought to be engaged in deconstructing American notions of whiteness and blackness, considering racism as “the American disease,” and examining how it came to be and what it means for American society and for those societies to which we are exporting it. It disturbs me that our profession has looked on indifferently as the American “racial world view,” as Smedley terms it, has been exported to the rest of the world, but I think that anthropology could make a serious effort at subverting racism by taking on this binary opposition and exposing its contradictions and its consequences. Along these lines, Tiger Woods was a recent example, and Thomas Jefferson’s illegitimate children and the current discussion of Native American ancestry and casino privileges also make excellent classroom discussion topics. I also agree with G. A. Clark (*Arizona Republic*, April 5, 1998) that we have to “make a concerted effort to publicly confront, challenge, and defeat prescientific notions of race and ethnicity” and that we could begin by helping to teach “modern scientific views of race and ethnicity in the public schools, and from kindergarten on up.” I hope, in other words, that it is not too late for us to turn back to Boas’s mandate and revive our attempts to subvert racism. Despite current failures and misrepresentations, our profession had one of the proudest intellectual histories in America both in attempting to undermine spurious notions of “race” and in combating racist thinking. I would like to believe that our contemporary lapse is only a brief stammer in an otherwise carefully considered and impeccably delivered message.

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