

SOCIETY FOR HUMANISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

What is Humanistic Anthropology?

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At the 1974 meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Mexico City, two symposia were held on the subjects of anthropology and humanism. Both were convened to discuss the common feeling or need for a humanistic orientation to anthropological research and understanding. As might be expected, no earth shattering conclusions or manifestoes were arrived at, except perhaps the consensus that our discussion was worthwhile and that the debate should be continued. At the 1975 meetings of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco an open organizational meeting was held and from the interest and response of those attending, it was decided to formalize and extend our efforts in the form of a newsletter, and to establish a society on anthropology and humanism.

Approaching SHA's 40th Anniversary

At the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings in Mexico City in 1974, a group of rogue anthropologists organized two sessions on what they called *humanistic anthropology*.

The following year in San Francisco, an open organizational meeting was held, and the anthropologists in attendance elected to formalize their interests by establishing a new scholarly society: The Society on Anthropology and Humanism. The first *Anthropology and Humanism Newsletter* was published in April 1976.

The newsletter (which later became a journal) was a space for debating and defining the concept of humanism within anthropology, and more importantly, the relationship between humanism and science. Reading this newsletter today, I find myself transported back to a time when anthropology was defined by positivism, and many anthropologists emphasized their identities as social *scientists*. This was also the time of the Vietnam War, and anthropologists were feeling dissatisfied with the neutral objectivity supposedly required of scholars. While many AAA members opposed American intervention in Southeast Asia, others provided cultural intelligence to the US government through the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) project. Furthermore, the rigid rules of acceptable anthropological knowledge production grew too confining to scholars interested in larger spiritual and ideological questions.

With hindsight, the first *Anthropology and Humanism Newsletter* can be read as a document steeped in both Cold War and professional politics. [Bruce Grindal \(1940-2012\)](#), a co-founder of the Society of Humanistic Anthropology and founding editor of *Anthropology and Humanism*, was troubled by the proscribed apathetic scientism of his discipline. In 1976, he wrote:

The continued presence of poverty and human inequality and the possibility of ecological catastrophe has led to a questioning of the previous value of social scientific research and understanding.... The world has become exceedingly complex, and along with it anthropology has grown both in the direction of greater specialization and toward diminishing agreement as to what is the purpose of inquiry. What is needed, therefore, is some guiding value by which to define meaningful research and to assess its human consequences...

The authors of the three inaugural articles—Bruce Grindal, Toni Flores Fratto and Jon Wagner—were responding to disciplinary bogeymen that have long been slain by the postmodern and historical turns in anthropology. Very few anthropologists today would openly claim to be producing objective truths about the world, and the subjective nature of ethnographic fieldwork and writing has been discussed ad infinitum.

But in other ways, the articles in the early newsletters still seem relevant today. As the president-elect of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology, I have often found myself challenged to describe what humanistic anthropology actually is, a challenge that was similarly and often posed to the founders of our society. Indeed, the early newsletters contain numerous reflections on what it meant to pair *anthropology* with *humanism*. In the first 1976 newsletter, [Toni Flores Fratto \(1942-1997\)](#) ventured:

The central *focus*, as we see it, of humanistic anthropology is the individual human being. *Not* culture, be it noted, and not society, which are vital and indispensable concepts but, after all, ultimately mediating factors. No, the focus is on the individual and, more specifically, on the individual's striving for freedom and creativity within the confines and opportunities of nature, culture, and society.

Although humanistic anthropology celebrated the individual human, the founders of the new society were staunchly opposed to cultural relativism and concerned themselves with finding the basic commonalities of human existence. Rather than just celebrating subjectivities, the founders of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology wanted to explore, understand, and celebrate the cultural universalisms. Reflecting back on the first two decades of SHA's history, Bruce Grindal wrote in 1993:

felt life of ourselves and, hopefully, those whose lives we have entered and about whom we have chosen to write. We must never lose this quality, for it lies at the heart of humanistic anthropology. It is what distinguishes us from the countless other subfields that are hell-bent to create ever-increasing piles of formalistic, useless, and often dangerous knowledge. We must be primarily concerned with human life and experience and continue to affect a voice that allows us to communicate those experiences that, although born of specific cultural circumstances, nonetheless transcend culture and thereby enhance our sensibility and awareness of the human condition.

Today, most anthropologists know the Society of Humanistic Anthropology as the AAA section that awards the Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing, as well as prizes for ethnographic fiction and poetry. But SHA was once about much more than just creative writing; it had a vested interest in what we now call public anthropology and a deep commitment to making anthropological research widely accessible to those outside of the discipline. In its celebration of common humanity, it was also an engaged anthropology that challenged both the aggression born of cultural imperialism and the apathy born of cultural relativism. Finally, the current Deleuzian turn in anthropology owes much to the traditions of humanistic anthropology, for it was in these first Anthropology and Humanism newsletter than the founders wondered if their discipline could be a social art more than just a social science.

Over the next year as SHA prepares to celebrate its 40th year anniversary in 2015, I am hoping to both write and curate columns and commentary discussing the evolving meanings of “humanistic anthropology” within anthropology today. Stay tuned!

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