Is Anthropology Alive?
Social Responsibility in Social Anthropology

by Gerald D. Berreman

"The old formula for successful counterinsurgency used to be 10 troops for every guerrilla," one American specialist [in Thailand] remarked. "Now the formula is ten anthropologists for each guerrilla" (Braestrud 1967).

I

The notion that contemporary world events are irrelevant to the professional concerns of anthropologists was laid neatly to rest when, at the meeting of Fellows of the American Anthropological Association in Pittsburgh in November, 1966, Michael Harner rose to challenge the ruling of the president-elect that a resolution introduced by David and Kathleen Gough Aberle condemning the United States' role in the war in Vietnam was out of order because it did not "advance the science of anthropology," or "further the professional interests of anthropologists." Harner suggested that "genocide is not in the professional interests of anthropologists." With that, the chair was voted down and the resolution was presented, amended, and passed (cf. Fellow Newsletter 1966, Nelson 1966, Raymont 1966).

The dogma that public issues are beyond the interests or competence of those who study and teach about man is myopic and sterile professionalism and a fear of commitment which is both irresponsible and irrelevant. Its result is to dehumanize the most humanist of the sciences as Eric Voel has called our discipline; to betray utterly the opportunity and obligation which he has claimed for anthropology, namely: "the creation of an image of man that will be adequate to the experience of our time" (Voel 1964:94).

It forsakes the insights of generations of social scientists, social philosophers, and other men of knowledge who, since the Enlightenment, have been cast in the role of social critics (cf. Becker 1967).

That neutrality in science is illusory is a point which has been made often and well. Telling statements by social scientists in recent times have followed Robert Lynd's Knowledge for What!, published in 1939. That work is by now a classic, as are the writings of C. Wright Mills on the issue, most notably his articles, "The Social Role of the Intellectual" (1964a) and "On Knowledge and Power" (1964b) and his book, The Sociological Imagination (1961). A series of recent essays on the topic appear in a volume...
and has meaning in that culture. As Ivlonon Fried (1967) has said, and as Robert Lynd said before him, science has no responsibility, but scientists do. Scientists are people. They cannot escape values in the choices they make nor in the effects of their acts.

If we choose to collect our data and make our analyses without regard to their use—leaving that choice to others—we may believe that we are adhering to the most rigorous scientific canons (and hence the most highly valued canons—note the word) by not intervening in society. But to say nothing is not to be neutral. To say nothing is as much a significant act as to say something. Douglas Dowd has noted (1964:63):

the alternatives are not "neutrality" and "advocacy." To be uncommitted is not to be neutral, but to be committed—consciously or not—to the status quo; it is, in Mills' phrase, "to celebrate the present."

Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1966) referred to this fact when he wrote of what he called "conservative thought in applied anthropology" and its pervasiveness as a premise of our work.2 "The questions of human value," Lynd (1939:184) pointed out, "are inescapable, and those who banish them at the front door admit them unavowedly and therefore uncritically at the back door."

Our silence permits others in the society less reticent, perhaps less scrupulous, almost certainly less informed, to make their own use of the material presented. It leaves to politicians and journalists, to entrepreneurs, scoundrels, and madmen, as well as to statesmen and benefactors—but especially to the powerful—the interpretation and manipulation of matters about which they frequently know little, and nearly always know far less than those who collected the material or made the analyses. Baran notes in this regard (1965:8):

It should be obvious that society's "elections" [or choices] do not come about by miracles, but that society is guided into some "elections" by the ideology generated by the social order existing at any given time, and is cajoled, frightened, and forced into other "elections" by the interests which are in a position to do the cajoling, the frightening and the forcing. The intellect worker's withdrawal from seeking to influence the outcome of these "elections" is far from leaving a vacuum in the area of "value" formation.

It is therefore wishful thinking to assume that our work can be put before the public without context or interpretation, there to be judged freely and intelligently on its merits without prejudice or manipulation and acted upon accordingly. To assume that is to contribute to misuse born of ignorance or worse. We cannot divorce ourselves from the consequences of our scientific acts any more than we can from those of any other of our acts as human beings. This is a fact of existence in human society, and it is a tenet of democracy.

II

Science—even social science—has finally arrived in our society. The rewards to be obtained for supplying social science data and social science interpretations of the right kinds and in the right places are generous in the U.S. To paraphrase Kenneth Wintrout (1964:156), the intellectual today can join the hired myth-makers and harsh

1 Cf. O'Brien (1966). These two articles should be required reading for anthropologists and especially those with applied interests.
announce not only his knowledge, but its implications and consequences.

### III

Winetrout (1964:160) evinces the indecorum, the passionate commitment, which offends some of his colleagues in the closing paragraph of his essay honoring the courageous Mills:

In our present-day world it is not enough to be scholarly; one must be concerned and angry enough to shout. It is not enough to understand the world; one must seek to change it.

The world is going to change in any case, I would argue, and our knowledge will contribute to the change whether we want it to or not. What we have a responsibility to do is see that our knowledge is used for humane changes, as we define humaneness.

Alfred Schutz (1964:134) suggested that "it is the duty and the privilege of the well-informed citizen in a democratic society to make his private opinion prevail over the public opinion of the man in the street." This is done not by force, but by reason. I do not advocate special powers (beyond those which come to reasoned statement) for the well-informed, but I decree special restrictions on them, whether externally imposed or self-imposed. The late Robert Oppenheimer is quoted (Stewart 1964:442) as having spoken before the National Academy of Sciences in 1963, "on the difficult matter of how and when scientists should speak on 'common and public questions.' " He said,

If I doubt whether professionally we have special qualification on these common questions, I doubt even more that our professional practices should disqualify us, or that we should lose interest and heart in preoccupations which have ennobled and purified men throughout history, and for which the world has great need today.

Lynd (1939:186) maintained that

either the social sciences know more than do . . . de facto leaders of the culture as to what the findings of research mean, as to the options the institutional system presents, as to what human personalities want, why they want them, and how desirable changes can be effected, or the vast current industry of social science is an empty façade.

And Kathleen Gough Aberle (1967) has asked "who is to evaluate and suggest guidelines for human society, if not those who study it?" Our professional obligation is to present what we know and the inferences we draw from our knowledge as clearly, thoughtfully, and responsibly as we can. This is a value position with practical and humane consequences and with scientific legitimacy.

Chomsky (1967:16) holds that the responsibility of intellectuals is "to speak the truth and to expose lies," and he documents brilliantly the fact that this seeming truism is not manifest in the contributions of Establishment intellectuals (primarily social scientists and historians) to current and recent U.S. foreign policy.

C. Wright Mills insisted upon the application of reason and knowledge to practical problems and decried the "divorce of knowledge from power" (1944:604). Mills said (1944:611):

As a type of social man, the intellectual does not have any one political direction, but the work of any man of knowledge, if he

is the genuine article, does have a distinct kind of political relevance: his politics, in the first instance, are the politics of truth, for his job is the maintenance of an adequate definition of reality. In so far as he is politically adroit, the main tenet of his politics is to find out as much of the truth as he can, and to tell it to the right people, at the right time, and in the right way. Or, stated negatively: to deny publicly what he knows to be false, whenever it appears in the assertions of no matter whom; and whether it be a direct lie or a lie by omission, whether it be by virtue of official secret or an honest error. The intellectual ought to be the moral conscience of his society, at least with reference to the value of truth, for in the defining instance, that is his politics. And he ought also to be a man absorbed in the attempt to know what is real and what is unreal.

I know of no statement which speaks to the responsibility of social scientists in our time as cogently as does that one.

Douglas Dowd says that the current American crisis is "the chasm between reality and ideal" (1967:198), and he identifies the key fact for those who oppose the status quo as hypocrisy. In this regard, as scientists and as teachers, we have a paramount responsibility: to speak the truth, to provide "an adequate definition of reality." Candor is a major precondition for trust and for rational action, and this is what is lacking or threatened in our society—in foreign policy; in race relations; in poverty programs; in support of scholarship and research; in university administration; in virtually every sphere of our national life.

The reaction of many of us is to say and do nothing about the problems of the day; to retreat into our research, our administration, or our teaching, lulled by activity into a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and virtue, and to hope that things will somehow work out. Do we need Edmund Burke to remind us that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men [and, I might add, informed men] to do nothing"? We, as anthropologists, have not lacked outspoken champions of truth—about race, about poverty, about professional ethics, about the heavy hands of government and private capital in formulating our research, about war, and especially about the current war in Vietnam. Probably we have more of them in proportion to our numbers than any other academic discipline. So far, however, we have failed to emphasize and value their contributions, and we must do this if we want to counteract the powerful and irresponsible professionalism which belittles or condemns them in favor of the mindless and trivial successes obtained under the illusion of freedom from responsibility for one's self and one's work.

In a world where anything we learn is likely to be put to immediate and effective use for ends beyond our control and antithetical to our values, we must choose our research undertakings with an eye to their implications. We must demand the right to have a hand or at least a say in the use of what we do as a condition for doing it. That demand may most often fall short of realization even when it is granted, but unless it is a minimal condition of our work we may become instruments for inhumanity in the guise of humane scientists.

We must seek to apply our knowledge and skills to real problems, defined by us and not simply accepted from the sources which provide our funds. We must ask questions which address the problems of our time rather than merely those which minimize or obscure them. This is the acceptance of Wolf's challenge to create an image of man
adequate to our time. This is the acceptance of the responsibility of the social scientist, identified by Lynd (1939:250) as the responsibility to keep everlasting challenges present with the question: “But what is it that we human beings want, and what things have to be done, in what ways and in what sequence, in order to change the present so as to achieve it?”

This question is as scientific as any question we might pose. Nor do the incompleteness of our knowledge disqualify us scientifically, rationally, or morally from asserting what we know. Mills (1964a:302) pointed out 20 years ago that if one half of the relevant knowledge which we now possess were really put into the service of the ideals which leaders mouth; these ideals could be realized in short order. The view that all that is needed is knowledge ignores the nub of the problem as the social scientist confronts it: he has little or no power to act politically and his chance to communicate in a politically effective manner is very limited.

Gouldner (1964:205) has followed logically with the statement:

the issue . . . is not whether we know enough; the real questions are whether we have the courage to say and use what we know and whether anyone knows more.

This is why we must not be timid in asserting ourselves individually and collectively wherever we can. This is why our professional associations should not now be reluctant to express views on matters of public policy, as they have done in the past (cf. Executive Board 1947, 1956; Fellow Newsletter 1961a, 1961b, 1966, 1967; Beals et al. 1967) and as other professional groups do. For students of human behavior to decline comment on human behavior is irresponsible in a democracy, no matter how controversial the issues.

Most of us are teachers. As such our most immediate responsibility is to our students. We must show them by our example that, as Robert Lekachman has observed, honesty, not neutrality, is the prerequisite for good teaching and for good scholarship; that knowledge legitimately leads to informed opinion as well as fact, to understanding of consequences as well as causes, to commitment to act as well as to consider. We must show them that humanity is not incompatible with science; that science without humanity is a monster and social science without humanity a contradiction in terms as well; that we are proud to join Robert Redfield (1957:141) in placing ourselves squarely on the side of mankind, unashamed to wish mankind well; and that we will not sell our souls for money or professional advantage to the anti-human forces in society. It is not merely alarmist to take seriously the reminder (Gouldner 1964:216) that if today we concern ourselves exclusively with the technical proficiency of our students and reject all responsibility for their moral sense, or lack of it, then we may someday be compelled to accept responsibility for having trained a generation willing to serve in a future Auschwitz.

That day appears to be much closer now—if indeed it has not already arrived—than it was when those words were first spoken in 1961.
knowledge, or our students to the war, even if only indirectly.

Each of us, in these circumstances, will choose to act differently, but I think the crucial thing is that we act as human beings and as social scientists according to our consciences and our knowledge—for the two are inseparable—and that we not be scared off by the myth of value-freedom. Our acts can have direct effect and can serve as examples to others. If we do not act, our science will die as it did in Germany in the 1930's and 1940's, and with it truth, reason, humanity, and ultimately ourselves.

James Agee's assessment of the atomic bomb written at the end of World War II has new and timely relevance. He said (quoted in Matthews 1966:23),

... man's fate has forever been shaped between the hands of reason and spirit, now in collaboration, again in conflict. Now reason and spirit meet on final ground. If either or anything is to survive, they must find a way to create an indissoluble partnership.

We are finding, I think, that passion is not incompatible with reason; that, in fact, reason goes hand-in-hand with passion, and both with courage. The spokesmen for our current national policies are not reasonable, and few of them are impassioned; most of the dissenters from that policy are both. True, the former are currently more powerful than the latter; but power is not truth, nor, as history shows, is it even durable, while reason is.

Future history, if there is one, will bear out the reasonable men and women of our country and of the world today, and it will honor those who act on their reason, if only by bitterly regretting their lack of power. It is our duty as scientists and as human beings to be among them. This I hope we can understand and communicate to our students, our colleagues, and whatever other audiences we may reach.

I am aware that this discussion is unconventional anthropology; but these are unconventional times. We are all involved in unconventional and portentous military and political events in this country, perhaps more directly than many of us have realized until recently. These events have world-wide consequences. It is time that we accepted some unconventional responsibility for our acts, be they acts of commission or of omission.