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Anthropology in the South and the Southern Anthropological Society

by James Peacock
(President, American Anthropological Association and former President, Southern Anthropological Society)

It is truly an honor and a pleasure to address the SAS. SAS and I got started about the same time, and I have many warm memories of meetings, friends, places and happenings over the years. Especially I honor the memory of John and Irma Honigmann, founding leaders of SAS, and of John Peterson; John and I grew up together as children, his death is an untimely and great loss, and I am glad to see in the program that a publication is dedicated to him. Another untimely and great loss is Frank Manning—a faithful attender of SAS meetings, even from Canada. You will remember other leaders and supporters of SAS who cannot be here.

But we can be glad that some founding figures are still with us: Miles Richardson and Carole Hill, for example, who just now were sitting outside reconstructing the history of SAS. Some of us will recall Miles’ classic talk, at one of our early meetings in Dallas, I believe, comparing Jesus Christ and Gilgamesh as models for anthropology: Gilgamesh fitted better, Miles argued; he came within reach of the prize, but before grasping it, he fell asleep.

I apologize for nostalgia; I am so impressed with what SAS continues to do. SAS continues to be dynamic yet warm, hosting excellent sessions without pretense, publishing superb proceedings, and providing leadership and community for anthropology in the south. Congratulations are to Kate Young for this fine program, to Tim Wallace for his work, and to your incoming President Hans Baer.

I will first ask about the future of anthropology generally, nationally and internationally, and then comment on special opportunities in the South and for SAS.

In discussing the future of anthropology, I want to emphasize these points: 1) The future priorities of American and the world, such as internationalism, could advantage anthropology as an discipline, but demands such as cost-effectiveness could disadvantage it, as it is small and marginal. 2) Despite contributions to research and service, overall the most obvious contribution of anthropology is undergraduate liberal arts teaching, 3) Although active and diverse in contributions, anthropology still lacks visibility and identity, both in academia and society, 4) Anthropologists participate in a variety of interdisciplinary areas, yet often fail to lead these, 5) anthropology could develop its contributions in a number of areas.

(A Keynote speech delivered at the SAS meetings, Raleigh, April 1995)
ranging from natural science and natural history to creative writing and public debate and policy. 6) AAA (the American Anthropological Association) and other societies can be the mechanisms to draw on anthropology’s resources in shaping policy and public understanding.

What about the future of anthropology in the South? What about SAS?

The past

Before the future, a word about the past. As with everything from highways to economics, the development of anthropology in the South since World War II, especially in the past 30 years, has been phenomenal, compared to pre-World War II. Before World War II, as we know, there were the classic Northeastern, midwestern, and West Coast universities and anthropology departments. The South had a few pioneers, ranging from Joffre Coe to Zora Neale Hurston; for most southerners, anthropology, if it meant anything, was archeology. Locales and leadership were outside the South. They still tend to be, but note that the current President of the Society for Applied Anthropology, Anthony Paredes, is in Florida, I’m in North Carolina, and the President of the International Congress for Anthropological and Ethnological Science, Vincent Sutliffe, is at William and Mary, in Virginia. The 1998 Congress, last held in Mexico City, will be in Williamsburg, Virginia. Last fall’s AAA meetings were in Atlanta.

In the wider scheme of things, all of this may not amount to much; so what if Anthropology benefits from the general shift of population and development to the Sun Belt and the South? To those of us who grew up in the more isolated South prior to the Sixties, the new locations signify much.

The present

Unfortunately, we are vulnerable to other developments that are nation-wide but also southern; a new kind of isolationism and conservatism that reflects the conversion of the South from democrat to republican—partly a result of this same prosperity and of migration to the South. Rightist extremists sometimes surface in the conservative climate. For example, an incident happened yesterday. Johnetta Cole is our commencement speaker at UNC-Chapel Hill. She is the first black woman, and the first anthropologist ever to speak. A student op-ed piece in the newspaper, the Daily Tarheel, called her a Communist and asked parents and students to boycott the Commencement ceremony. (Note: In fact, Johnetta did speak, brilliantly, and was heard enthu-
siastically by one of the largest audiences ever to attend our commencement.) The outcry evoked memories here of a notorious Speaker Ban law, proposed a quarter century before by legislators objecting to an allegedly Communist speaker on campus; that law is due for repeal this week.

Southern politics plays out interestingly, however, and old timey conservatism does not necessarily disadvantage education. A state like Georgia where old master Democrat speaker of the House Tom Murphy is still in control is treating the universities better than those where new republicans gain control. Zell Miller, Governor of Georgia, promises 6% raises for four years to University of Georgia faculty and free tuition for qualified graduate students for example, compared to severe cuts proposed for our state and others, spearheaded by new conservatism in the House.

So there's variation. But one stream is certainly the Republican, new conservative stream. The Democratic and liberal reformist stream is by no means dead, but in the South as nationally, it is on the defensive.

What might this new conservatism mean for anthropology in the South? Obviously the question is complex, because there are so many varieties of anthropology which can respond to so many varieties of milieu. One can only speculate.

The future
Our antiquarian side might flourish more than ever, our activist and social criticism side less so. With boosterist reconstruction of historical districts, archaeology should find new support. Civil war enactments are popular, and so are associated historical reconstructions, for instance, Margaret Mitchell's house—now to be renovated by Daimler-Benz under the direction of Mary Rose Taylor. The 1996 Olympics, with a cultural program on the South to be overseen by folklorist George Holt, is at once tied to commerce and new society in Atlanta, yet it ought to be open for anthropological input affirming folklore, history and perhaps more holistic visions.

Social criticism may be less acceptable. I wrote an op-ed piece to link human rights to the history of Atlanta, submitted it to the Atlanta Constitution during our meetings there and did not receive even the courtesy of a reply. Maybe the piece wasn't any good, or the paper wasn't the right one. But columnists like Molly Irvins seem to be less frequent these days than more conservative ones, in the South as nationally. As always, anthropologists and other academics who want to comment on public issues must learn ways more ingenious than simple protest or criticism. I'm just fishing for a sense of how anthropology plays in the new new South; I would welcome hearing your impressions. [how about sending them to the SA?—Ed]

Futures for the SAS
What about SAS? To use a non-PC parallel: If AAA has sometimes operated like McColland, or in its better times, Grant, SAS has been more like Nathan Bedford Forrest: lean and mean, economical, flexible, taking advantage of environments, and sometimes getting there the
‘fustest with the mostest.’ SAS had sense enough to secede from the union before it joined it, which may have been a smart move for its situation (I refer to the decision of SAS not to join AAA). SAS has been first with the most in a variety of issues; it was one of the first to highlight urban anthropology, for example, in one of its early volumes, and it has produced useful symposia proceedings over the years on Southern topics—ethnicity (red, white and black); ecology; cinema; and recently, religion. SAS has one of the few proceedings series to sell widely.

SAS is obviously changing but also remaining the same in some ways. It began with the usual white males; now we’re nearly dead; and SAS is diversifying ethnically, in gender, and intellectually in accord with the nation, while also sustaining some regional foci.

Opportunities for SAS include:

There is an abiding interest in Southern topics; the Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, a joint product of UNC Press and the Mississippi Center for the Study of Southern Culture, is approaching 100,000 volumes sold. Studies of the South are dominated by historians and a few others; anthropologists are marginal, but they could contribute more, especially in offering comparative perspectives and dealing with increased diversities in the South. One example is the institute for the South in Comparative Perspective I’ve been running for the last three years. SAS sustains this interest in the South, seen comparatively and in its diversity: note Session 14 in these meetings, on the ethnography of the American South, where Pat Beaver focuses on Jews and African American identities in Appalachia.

Practicing Anthropology is flourishing in the South; note the Key Symposium to these meetings. This pragmatic emphasis differs from the cultural criticism tone that is perhaps more salient in urban, northern, especially New York City anthropology. SAS projects a sense of “Just do it!”

The Olympics in Atlanta in 1996 and the Anthropological Congress in Williamsburg in 1998 remind us that the world is coming to the South! Southern anthropology has had more experience with the wider world than most fields in the South; SAS can, as it has long done, serve as a vehicle to link the South and the world, through anthropology.

Doris Betts tells about a kind of tree in Eastern North Carolina. What use it is? Ain’t got no use. Just HOLDS TO WORLD TOGETHER.

An apt image for anthropology, especially in the South. What use is it? JUST HOLDS THE WORLD TOGETHER.

We can do that!