



SPEAKING ABOUT ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

Lee D. Baker

Anthropology as a social science has always articulated an authoritative discourse regarding race, racism, and culture; as well, politicians, philanthropists, and activists have always called upon anthropology to help support particular projects. Sometimes anthropology has been used to advance equality and achieve justice, while other times it has been called to defend segregation and maintain oppression. Anthropology is always in dialogue and within a dialectal relationship with race, language, and culture. As both discourse and discipline, it has shaped the subject with which it holds authority; at the same time, it has achieved authority because it resonated with people's world view within powerful institutions. Of equal import, however, the science of race and culture itself has been shaped by changes in race relations and shifting ideas regarding culture. The production of anthropological knowledge is always tethered to the society in which that knowledge is produced, and like all social sciences, it has neither been an objective nor a disinterested science.

Anthropological theory is never produced in a context-less sterile laboratory, ivy-covered

college, or granite-blocked museum. For the most part, anthropological theory has been produced by affluent white men who were studying black and brown people who were often viewed as out of the way and remote. Often, these scientists had personal stakes in the subjects whom they were studying and partisan-like perspectives on the way their research should be read and interpreted.

I study the history of anthropology in the United States, and I pay particular attention to the way anthropology is appropriated within public policy, popular culture, and the law. Anthropology is part of history and history is part of anthropology. Although understanding the history of ideas is important, understanding how and why those ideas shaped history is even more exciting because this enables us to understand both the limits of anthropology as well as the opportunities anthropology can provide to make a better, more just world.

By evaluating anthropological theory and the role anthropology has played in history, we can also understand the role it can and does play today. Anthropology today is an important but somewhat marginal social science when compared to psychology, economics, and

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sociology. An important question is, why? In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthropology was one of the most powerful and important social sciences, but after World War II, it became an unreliable narrator in the story of white supremacy, imperial desires, and colonial exploits; at the same time, as it became less scientific and more literary, anthropology became a more reliable partner in the quest for civil and human rights. The legacy and history of

anthropological theory is much more than a collection of abstruse writings by a bunch of dead white guys; it is the foundation of anthropology today. One of the more popular Adinkra symbols of the Akan of Ghana is the image of the Sankofa bird, which looks backwards with an egg in her bill. It is used to inform people that in order to move forward wisely in the future, one must understand the past. The same holds true about the history of anthropological theory.

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