

A PROPOSAL FOR AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND ETHNOLOGICAL CONFERENCE ON PROBLEMS CONCERNING HUMAN RIGHTS AND EPISTEMOLOGY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES*

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General Outline

Below follows a proposal for an anthropological conference on the fundamental problems of Human Rights. This conference may lead to a proposal to the United Nations on activities concerning the problem involved. These may come under the label of a « Year of Anthropology » or a « Year of Ethnic Minority Groups » or a « Human Rights Year » (once again) — or they may result in a proposal for other types of universal activities, all depending on the scholarly outcome of the conference.

As a scientific discipline anthropology draws its knowledge both from its own compilation of data and from neighbouring disciplines. Its theoretical baggage is diverse and heavy, and it must often carry what other disciplines have created (or perhaps sometimes even rejected).

Its advantage — if any — is that it is in a sense more multi-dimensional than other scientific fields, and that it has always seen it as one of its goals to make these dimensions meet somehow

* *In occasione del X Congresso Internazionale delle Scienze Antropologiche et Etnologiche (New Delhi, 10-21 dicembre 1978), il prof. Torben Monberg del Museo Nazionale di Copenhagen, nella sua qualità di presidente del World Anthropological Year Committee (WAY) in seno all'IUAES, ha sottoposto ai membri del Comitato stesso — tra cui è il direttore de l'Uomo — il documento che segue.*

Tale documento si rifà ad argomenti discussi in occasione dell'ultimo convegno del Comitato Permanente dell'IUAES (Roma 1976) e propone l'organizzazione di un Convegno Internazionale a Copenhagen per discutere « problemi riguardanti i diritti umani e l'epistemologia nelle scienze sociali », da sottoporre formalmente alla discussione e all'approvazione del Comitato nel corso del Congresso.

La proposta è per la nostra professione di così vivo interesse umano, oltre che scientifico, e di così alto valore deontologico, che la redazione ritiene opportuno presentare ai lettori, con l'assenso dell'autore, il testo integrale della proposta Monberg. [N.d.Red.]

and somewhere. (Needless to say, not all anthropologists agree as to how this should be done or which priority should be given to its varied fields).

One of the hallmarks of anthropology is its alleged universality. It attempts to 'understand' what the world looks like, through the eyes other than those of the anthropologists' own culture. Yet it admits that this is more an ideal than a goal which can be reached. One reason for this is obviously that the anthropologist's task is to translate other cultures into the language of people of a culture foreign to that which is described and analysed. In this translation process much is — as in other processes of translation such as for example the linguistic one — slightly slanted or distorted. Nevertheless a deep understanding of other ways of thought is a *goal*, whether completely achievable or not, and the transmission of such an understanding one of the *musts* of the discipline.

By claiming that a deeper understanding of the ways of thought of other cultures than our own is a must, we obviously imply that working towards this goal may form an important contribution to a life in Harmony between the peoples of different cultures in this world.

So far, one of the boldest attempts to create a life of harmony for all human beings has been the United Nations Human Rights declaration.

One of the most tragic experiences has been to see the ways in which this declaration has been handled and also mis-handled.

One of the *least* surprising experiences has, to the anthropologist, been to watch that this happened as it did!

We shall not, in this brief exposition, attempt to wave a series of « we-knew-better » statements, but merely present some questions which may show how the field of anthropology comes into a discussion of the fate of the Declaration of Human Rights.

In time and space, and thus also in different cultures, a declaration such as the one that « all men are born equal » is nonsensical as a common denominator. The fact that Western culture has created a standardized system for weighing and measuring both objects (kilograms, kilometers, cubic centimeters, minutes and hours) and non-tangible items (the Ten Commandments, national laws, etc.) does not qualify us to assume that such universal standards exist in all cultures. Everyone of us knows of cultures where measuring is relativistic to other vectors or variables, not general and standardized. Consequently even such a basic con-

cept as 'Equality' may among some social groups be relativistic rather than general.

From this follows that a declaration of Human Rights, as formulated by people of the Western World of Standardization, *must* necessarily impose some kind of unwanted social forces or sanctions upon at least some social systems of this world.

From this also follows that any attempt to formulate universalistic declarations must be considered a form of ethnocentrism. (*Whose* ethnocentrism is the leading force is usually a question of the structure of the political world order at any given time).

Note that by statement we do not, at this premature stage, refute such declarations or consider them unwanted or unnecessary. We merely want to draw attention to the fact that the entire problem is anthropologically analysable.

We do not mind, however, to declare it our opinion already now, that the question of how much room should be left for other cultures' ways of handling life and for exerting their wills should not be ignored when it comes to a discussion of Human Rights, of equality, etc. Our reason for stating this is that we do believe that cultural diversity cannot be forbidden or abandoned overnight. In a sense the answer would be a yes if we were naïve enough to believe that a Declaration of Human Rights formulated by people of a Western or Westernized world can always be followed to the last iota by peoples of all cultures.

If we were to agree that it might be desirable to acknowledge and accept cultural diversity and at the same time vote for the institution of a general world order, we might have presented the accepted ideological diversity of world cultures in an analogous diagram ranging for example from the legitimacy of cannibalism at one end to Government Meat Control at the other, and drawing a line across showing which of our social institutions are universally abandoned, and which are universally acknowledged. Similar lines and diagrams could be drawn for most existing social institutions, for example, as one ranging from slavery to equality in wages and in social opportunities.

We are, as said, not attempting to offer solutions here, but merely to point to problems worthy of discussion under the title of: What is the relationship between anthropology and the Declaration of Human Rights?

To put it in another way:

Because ways of counting and measuring both individual and

social actions, and also values and ideologies themselves, are different in different societies, the crucial question is how we can ever reach a common denominator — at least without in-depth studies of all sociological problems involved?

As we take the Human Being as the focus of our whole attention, and here especially the Human Being as a social animal, its varied social systems should also be a starting point for a discussion of Human Rights. We believe it impossible to reach any common denominator (provided that this be our aim) without studies in depth both on the level of further studies of value systems in different cultures and finally at the comparative level.

Such studies should be concerned with — and we are only giving a few examples — how the concepts of 'welfare' and of 'qualities of life' are conceived of by different cultures and different social groups (or individuals for that matter) within these cultures. Again, such studies should be made in depth, hopefully with the outcome that we can present a table or formula showing where ends might meet in the various systems, or out in utopia, or where such ends — or some of them — might meet at a universal level.

Obviously a question is: Is there such a point? And if not, how should politicians go about reevaluating the problems surrounding a universal declaration of human rights?

One conclusion to this would be that the Fathers of the Declaration of the Human Rights might have expressed themselves differently, had they at an early stage lent ear to, and drawn knowledge from, the social science, particularly anthropology.

As it stands now, the Declaration of Human Rights appears an impressive ideological promontory of Western ideology, and not as a beacon indicating what unites and divides human beings, their societies and cultures.

At this time when both nations and individuals have emphasized the necessity of a reevaluation, and perhaps a reformulation, of the Declaration of Human Rights, it seems imperative that it be based, not merely on Western concepts with their strong foundation in Christian ethics, but that the entire work of reevaluating the Declaration begins with a cashing in on the universal knowledge of the human sciences concerning cultures and/or ethnic groups other than those of the world's most powerful nations.

Not only will it be necessary to draw a universal map of hu-

man ethics and human rights, but, even before we get so far, to define, locate, and document distinctive cultural heritages; to analyse the interrelations and the conditions of the populations which carry them; and to elucidate the methods by which the human sciences study and understand those phenomena.

All this can be done best by those who have devoted themselves to the scientific field of anthropology, perhaps in close cooperation with individuals of the legal profession and with politicians, and obviously also with the members of the different cultures themselves.

To promote such work, and to emphasise its extreme importance to people of all cultures and all nations, we anthropologists therefore suggest that The International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences takes the necessary steps towards the arrangement of a conference in the foreseeable future on the problems concerning a Declaration on Human Rights.

During such a conference, social scientists and others would be enabled to lay the cornerstone for a reformulation of a Declaration of Human Rights which could do justice not only to members of powerful nations but also to peoples who today consider themselves dominated and enslaved.

Today we all subscribe to the existing declaration of human rights. Taking this declaration seriously we should therefore also devote most of our attention to for example those among us who themselves feel that they are born less free than others.

This conference will permit anthropologists and others, through documentation and analysis, to do the things which this discipline can do best. To discuss ways and means of mapping, in writing and perhaps in film, the cultures of the world, historically, descriptively, and comparatively. It will also make it possible for us to work with others in describing the social, economic, and political problems facing subordinated peoples in the changing world. Furthermore it will — perhaps as its most important goal — make room for a deep analysis and final definition of ideological terms and concepts of the world's different cultures. This entire work would obviously include problems concerning both methods and education in the human sciences.

It is our firm belief that no discussion of a reevaluation of the Human Rights Declaration could begin with anything less than a conference planning such studies, and also that a reevaluation should strongly emphasise the problems of those cultures which have hitherto felt themselves to be dominated and enslaved.

A final word of warning is that it would naturally become a great disappointment if our studies and deliberations end with the conclusion that the only existing problems may be presented as a banal list of Malinowskian *basic human needs*. To us it is obvious that our studies should begin where these end, exactly because this is where the entire complex of statements of universal human rights becomes problematic. In a sense we could go on with this type of exercise if we put such a statement as that claiming that all men are born free under our microscopes. We believe that the examples presented above will suffice to show how crucial the role of anthropology is in the entire discussion and (re-)evaluation of the problems concerning Human Rights, and also that a conference on Human Rights is a step necessary to be taken in the near future.

Draft for a plan of action

Many organizations and individuals within our discipline have taken part in debates on the problems raised above.

One example may be that an invitation (dated November 28, 1977) by l'Université Laval for the Anthropology and Ethnology Congress in 1983 contains a conceptual *preamble* which seems in complete accord with the general proposal presented above by the WAY Committee. It is suggested that the proposal of the WAY Committee, possibly the Laval proposal, and other proposals with a similar aim are combined under the headline of conferences on '*the ethics of the social sciences*'.

A. It is suggested that two conferences be held

A preliminary conference (A) would take place in Copenhagen, hopefully in 1980 or 1981, and Conference B as decided by the Union.

The purpose of Conference A would be:

- 1) To plan an 'Ethics conference' in 1983, structurally and organizationally.
- 2) To hold seminars, plenum discussions, and lectures which may point to problems and issues relevant for a 1983 conference.

B. Topics may include

- a) Human rights and relative cultural ethics. (Social universality and/or social relativity).

- b) Ethical codes for the social sciences in data collection and publication.
- c) Ethical codes in relationships between cultural majority groups and cultural minority groups.
- d) Problems concerning 'repatriation' of the social sciences, including problems on the locations of 'ethnographical artifacts'.

All the subjects proposed focus on problems of ethics and epistemology and are obviously replete with predicaments of extremely varied kinds. Some colleagues may even find them dangerous or perhaps futile to discuss. Even this latter is of importance and a necessary subject for debate.

It is exactly for this reason that we find it necessary to hold a preliminary conference in which problems may certainly not be solved but rather sorted out and arranged in such a fashion that there be hopes that the participants in a conference in 1983 may find at least some common epistemological denominators for the social sciences, and hopefully on a larger number of issues.

C. *The format of Conference B (1983)*

Would, as mentioned above, be the subject of the preliminary conference.

D. *Organization, invitations, formulations of final agenda for the preliminary conference*

It is suggested that the WAY Committee of the IUAES, or Committee on Human Rights and Epistemology in Anthropology, together with others selected by the IUAES Executive Committee, be appointed as a new Committee for the organization of the 1981 conference in Copenhagen, selecting members to be invited, and formulating the final Agenda for the preliminary conference (A).

The National Museum of Denmark's Department of Ethnography will be willing to provide the facilities necessary for this conference.

E. *Financing of Conference A*

The Chairman of the Committee will, as soon as a budget can be prepared, apply to the Danish Government (The Danida bureau under the Ministry of Education) for contributions to the financing of the Copenhagen Conference.

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