



Comments on the Statement on Human Rights

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BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

COMMENTS ON THE STATEMENT ON HUMAN RIGHTS¹

When the Executive Board was instructed to draft a "Statement on Human Rights," it was, I believe, generally understood that any political stand or value judgment should be avoided. The Board has obviously made every effort to limit the Statement to scientifically supportable assertions, but it seems clear now that it was asked to do the impossible. I am led to this conclusion not only by my own thinking, but by discussions which I have heard.

If the plea that cultural values be respected means merely that the primitive peoples, who are on the receiving end of civilizing influences, be treated with greater understanding and tolerance, there can be little objection to it. To be universally valid, however, the Statement must apply equally to the cultural values which underlie the internal policies and motivate the foreign affairs of the civilized nations. I should doubt that, in urging that values be respected because "man is free only when he lives as his society defines freedom," we really mean to approve the social caste system of India, the racial caste system of the United States, or many of the other varieties of social discrimination in the world. I should question that we intend to condone the exploitation of primitive peoples through the Euro-American system of economic imperialism, while merely asking for more understanding treatment of them: or, on the other hand, that we are prepared to take a stand against the values in our own culture which underly such imperialism.

As "respect for cultural differences" certainly does not advocate tolerance of the values in Nazi Germany, where the "individual . . . [realized] his personality" through the Youth movement, a qualification is introduced (p. 543) that seems to contradict the basic premise and to be incompatible with anthropological thinking. "Even where political systems exist that deny citizens the right of participation in their government, or seek to conquer weaker peoples, underlying cultural values may be called on to bring the peoples of such states to a realization of the consequences of the acts of their governments, and thus enforce a brake upon discrimination and conquest." This may have been a loophole to exclude Germany from the advocated tolerance, but it looks to me like the fatal breach in the dyke. Either we tolerate everything, and keep hands off, or we fight intolerance and conquest—political and economic as well as military—in all their forms. Where shall the line be drawn? As human beings, we unanimously opposed the brutal treatment of Jews in Hitler Germany, but what stand shall be taken on the thousands of other kinds of racial and cultural discrimination, unfair practices, and inconsiderate attitudes found throughout the world?

What are these "underlying cultural values" that can be used to suppress intolerance and promote political freedom in cultures which lack economic or social freedom, or that can be used to halt conquest in a competitive world? Even if there were agreement on objectives, it would take some pretty fancy handling to revamp the portions of cultures which are disapproved. I had thought that anthropologists, of all people, stressed the interrelatedness of cultural values and patterns.

Without committing itself to particulars, the Statement is a value judgment any way it is taken. If it does not advocate tolerance for *all* cultural values, no matter how

¹ *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 49, pp. 539-543, 1947.

repugnant some of them may be to us as individuals, then it must imply disapproval of *some* cultural values, though it also says that we have no scientific basis for making any value judgments.

The conclusion seems inescapable that we have gotten out of our scientific role and are struggling with contradictions. During the war, we gladly used our professional techniques and knowledge to advance a cause, but I hope that no one believes that he had a scientific justification for doing so. As individual citizens, members of the Association have every right to pass value judgments, and there are some pretty obvious things that we would all agree on. As a scientific organization, the Association has no business dealing with the rights of man. I am sure that we shall serve science better, and I daresay we shall eventually serve humanity better, if we stick to our purpose. Even now, a declaration about human rights can come perilously close to advocacy of American ideological imperialism.

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ON SCIENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

In a recent issue of the *Anthropologist*¹ there appeared a copy of the "Statement on Human Rights" authored by the Executive Board of the Anthropological Association and submitted to one of the commissions of the United Nations. In taking this action the Board has exhibited initiative of the sort that was contemplated when the question of the reorganization of the Association was first conceived and discussed. It is to be commended for its energy and alertness, and for accepting the responsibility of forwarding the interests of the Association. It is unfortunate, however, that the first major commitment of the Association should take the form that it has. The document submitted to the United Nations is likely to have an effect the opposite of that which was intended; and, in any event, it places the Association on record in a way that embarrasses its position as a scientific organization. It would be regrettable if it were to establish a precedent.

The import of the Statement is that anthropologists, as trained students of human relations who maintain a disciplined attitude toward their materials, have something scientific to say about the requirements for a charter of human rights. Unfortunately this is not so; and the reason is as obvious as it is well known; namely, that there is no scientific approach to the question of human rights, nor to any other problem that calls for an appraisal of human relations in terms of some absolute value system.

Any right, even the "right" to live, is such only by definition. It is contingent upon some presupposition, no matter how vaguely or precisely this may be appreciated, nor how restricted or universal is its application. Within the areas of their acceptance such presuppositions are regarded as absolutes by the people who adhere to them. They define the good, the true, and the proper; and individual behavior is measured, i.e., valued, in terms of the ultimates that they set up. It is the business of the social scientist to record the existence of these value systems, and to study them in all possible ways. It is not his business, *as a scientist*, to adopt the point of view of the

¹ *American Anthropologist*, n.s., 49, pp. 539-543, 1947.