

The Spirit of Your Resolution, or, Political Culture and the AAA

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Anthropology as a profession is committed to the promotion and protection of the right of people and peoples everywhere to the full realization of their humanity, which is to say their capacity for culture.

—1999 AAA Declaration on Anthropology and Human Rights

As I write in November, 15,000 US Marines and soldiers are destroying the city of Fallujah. Their aim is to kill or capture fighters who threaten Iraq's projected elections. Twelve hundred American soldiers and between 15,000 and 100,000 Iraqis have been killed in the conflict since March 2003. Meanwhile, in San Francisco hotel workers are locked out of work resulting from a strike over a number of issues, including increased health care premiums. The AAA Executive Board decided in October to react to the latter situation by moving the annual meeting, resulting in overload work for the professional staff and material and professional harm to thousands of anthropologists, without material harm to the Hilton. The board decided the previous May, however, not to react

even verbally to the US invasion and military occupation of Iraq, an invasion the UN Secretary-General has called illegal.

Complexity and Resolutions

"Political resolutions" have been a divisive issue in the AAA's history. In 1967 David Aberle's resolution condemning the use of napalm and agent orange in Vietnam was ruled out of order at the business meeting. To Margaret Mead's vociferous argument that political resolutions are not in the professional interests of anthropologists, Michael Harner is reported to have replied that genocide is not in the professional interest of anthropologists, either. The resolution passed, but hard feelings persisted on both sides. At the 1971 business meeting, a committee chaired by Mead was hissed by the audience for condemning Eric Wolf and Joseph

Jorgensen, who had called public attention to the involvement of American anthropologists in counterinsurgency programs in Thailand. Mead's notoriously tense and

jealous reaction to any activism other than her own still stands as a commentary on the complexity of anthropological identity and loyalties. We still don't agree on what our business really is.

At the 2003 annual meeting of the AAA, members present at the business

meeting approved overwhelmingly four resolutions submitted by members of the Middle East Section and others: 1) condemning the US invasion of Iraq; 2) calling on the

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AAA to help counter threats to academic freedom in the wartime public sphere; 3) deploring the destruction of Palestinian and Israeli lives and calling on the AAA to speak up in favor of human rights and self-determination as guaranteed by international law; and 4) supporting the civil rights of Arabs, South Asians and Muslims in the US, whose communities have been targets of legal persecution since September 11. Because the meeting lacked the necessary quorum of 250 members, the resolutions became advisory to the AAA Executive Board.

The board approved the resolution on academic freedom. In July sponsors of the Iraq resolution received a message that "while [the board] agrees that Iraq is an issue of critical importance, the board decided that many of the specific issues raised in this motion are no longer relevant, given the passage of time and current events." Sponsors of the resolution on Israel/Palestine were told: "The board voted not to take action. While . . . all citizens should be concerned about civil liberties in the aftermath of September 11, the statement itself was not crafted in a way to gain authority." (This response is clearly addressed to a different motion, and thus of questionable authority itself.) Sponsors of the Arab/Muslim civil rights motion heard, "The board favored the entire spirit of your resolution, and they

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Political Resolutions

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share your concerns about the targeting of specific groups. However, they believe that it is important for us as anthropologists to narrow the focus of this motion to that of anthropological interest and expertise." Each message was accompanied by a set of guidelines crafted by the board in its May 2004 meeting, six months after the motions were submitted to the board and favored at the November business meeting. All but the Israel/Palestine motion contained suggestions that parts of them might be more narrowly redrafted by the president.

Statements and Their Implications

The guidelines specify that the board should be strategic in its public statements, addressing matters of common professional interest or matters about which anthropologists have special expertise. Statements should present anthropological findings or recommendations, specify their audience and the action requested, and contribute to better public understanding. The AAA website shows that the association applies its members' expertise through a number of commissions, reports and statements, largely focused on Americanist issues (for example, indigenous rights in Guatemala, Colombia and Brazil; race and gay marriage in the US). With respect to the Middle East, the AAA has worked actively against the looting of Iraqi museums and archaeological sites, generated a letter calling for the reinstatement of Swiss Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan's visa to teach at Notre Dame, and issued some press releases (concerning, for example, forensic anthropology and the exhumation of mass graves in Iraq). President Elizabeth Brumfiel also forwarded to the Middle East Section an important plea from Israeli anthropologists to intervene on behalf of a population of 2,000 cave-dwelling pastoralists in Hebron whose way of life is being threatened by Israeli settlers.

Leaving aside the issue of whether the new guidelines should apply retroactively, there are troubling implications in the board's rejection of the three Middle East-related

motions in concert with its precipitous action on the San Francisco labor lockout. The first is the implication that American anthropologists have special expertise or professional interest in hotel labor relations, but that we do not have special expertise in the fields of war, dislocation or ethnic harassment, which lie outside the range of issues on which anthropologists can authoritatively comment through their professional association. The second is the implication that the suffering of Arab and Muslim populations is less worthy of anthropological concern than the suffering of the Yanomami, the Maya or the Witoto, and that the Israeli/Palestinian land dispute is less germane than the Navajo-Hopi land dispute of the 1980s. As Laura Nader has pointed out, US military interest and US public ignorance about the Middle East are structural in nature and mutually reinforcing. Their relevance is undiminished by the passage of time.

The third implication is that something about the complex structure of our association creates the possibility that, in the end, a picket line appears more significant than war. This is not merely an issue of picking battles on the basis of probable effectiveness. In any organization, public statements inform internal constituencies as well as external audiences. While the AAA statements on gay marriage or race, or signing onto the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women may not turn out to have much effect in the real world, they do function to communicate anthropological values of pluralism and equality to and about anthropologists. Within the organization a welter of competing interest groups, personal connections, legal requirements and professional judgments produce outcomes that appear from the outside to issue from a black box. Some are contradictory, and few are likely to please everyone. I am not proposing that the executive board subject particular cases to some impossible calculus of misery in which dying Iraqis, uprooted olive groves or immigrant schoolchildren beaten bloody are balanced against Bay Area hotel workers paying more for health coverage. I am simply proposing that our professional interests extend beyond academic freedom, the endangerment of our field sites abroad, or the living standard of

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field, who were probably the members harmed most by moving the 2004 meeting. By spending resources on an unrelated labor dispute the board has made it harder to envision doing this in the near future, even though supporting the professional interests of our members, as opposed to those of other organizations, is a primary part of the AAA mission.

The ethics and legality of corporate governance require that the assets of the AAA be utilized primarily to accomplish what the association was founded to do: to advance anthropology as the science that studies humankind in all its aspects and to further the professional interests of American anthropologists. The AAA has pursued these goals by sponsoring our major journals, organizing our meetings and other activities—will anthropologists, or anthropology, be aided by the decreased financial capability of the AAA to do these things?

The real questions are thus whether, why and to what extent

men and women who serve us while we play at our annual convention.

It is also in our professional interest to think about the meaning of the Declaration on Anthropology and Human Rights quoted above. Because one communication the AAA has sent to its members is a perverse one that confuses narrow professional focus (read "culture" or "forensics") for humanity. It says that the people of the Middle East, unlike the people of the Americas, rate official attention only when they are, like Tariq Ramadan, scholars like us; when they fit into a romantic model of exotic primitivism like the Hebron cave-dwellers; or when, like the restless souls in Saddam's mass graves or the makers of Sumerian cylinder seals, they are already dead. ■

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we the members are willing to jeopardize the ability of the AAA to advance anthropology and the professional interests of anthropologists in order to support worthy causes by non-related groups, and how the decision to do so would be reached.

In moving the 2004 meetings, the board put the interests of the labor union ahead of those of the association. The result has impeded the AAA's ability to accomplish its mission and has injured the professional and economic interests of the members. The damages caused to the AAA by the board's primary goal of supporting the union exemplify why the ethical and legal duties of corporate officers forbid sacrificing the interests of the organization and its members to benefit primarily third parties, even in worthy causes. Whatever is done in response to the 2004 meeting fiasco should be grounded on these standard principles of ethics and legal responsibility. ■

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has well informed lawyers and staff who stand ready to help. Isn't that preferential toward the union? No, being open to all views instead of just one is not preferential.

We don't need to do this because it's ethically, morally or politically correct, because it's democratic or because it puts us on the side of the people. We need to do it because it benefits us. It is the *only* way we can avoid the train wreck that happened this year and continue to provide the services for which our members pay their dues. The alternative is that they will leave AAA. Then they lose, AAA loses and the hotels lose.

You don't have to be a prophet to see that. Any anthropologist can figure it out. ■

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