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Anthropology Book Forum

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Herbert S. Lewis 2025. *Correcting The Record: Essays on the History of American Anthropology*. NY: Berghahn.

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Herbert Lewis, the emeritus professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, began to study anthropology as an undergraduate in the early 1950s and got his PhD at Columbia in 1963. His new book, *Correcting the Record*, basically takes exception to the whole direction that cultural anthropology has taken since then. The lepers in Leviticus shouted “Impure, impure!” about themselves to warn their community. Now, generations of moral purists in the discipline have been shouting something similar about their sinful ancestors whose values and practices they claim to have been complicit with colonialism.

Correcting the Record collates new and previously published essays, obituaries and book reviews written since the turn of the century (a helpful epigraph that opens each one explains a bit of its original context and concludes with rich footnotes and thorough bibliographies). Taken as a whole, the book amounts to a wholesale defense of American anthropology against charges that its founding generations built a white man’s discipline that muted and erased Indigenous voices, relegated them to categories of ‘other’ and ‘primitive’ which promoted and endorsed western superiority.

Lewis spells out his main argument in the introduction: the “discourse of anthropology’s harmful past” is not based in reality but in an “invented dread” (p.2). Contempt for anthropology arose from an original crime, namely, colonial complicity. Their acrimony got exacerbated as “decades of indignation” went by, and students “stopped paying attention to what work we actually did” (p.14) and only cited a limited range of sanctioned authors (Gough 1968, Asad 1973, Said 1979, Fabian 1983) who, Lewis observed, made little or no effort to seriously engage with specific ethnographies. This gap turned their critique into what he calls a kind of Hamlet without the prince of the Danes.

The rest of the book goes on to develop this argument episodically. For example, an initial chapter takes issue with the infamous Gupta and Stoolman 2021 Presidential Address at the 2021 AAA meetings (received by a standing ovation). Lewis repudiates the demand that American anthropology be “decolonized,” (p. 4) and rejects the charge that it was obsessed with the “savage slot” (Trouillot 1991) as an “exercise in counterfactual history” (p. 40). He notes that early 20th century Boasian anthropologists were committed to the holistic study of all peoples and cites Melville Herskovits not only for leading decolonization initiatives in Africa for twenty years beginning in the 1940s but also for promoting the establishment of African Studies at Northwestern University.

The second chapter moves on to evaluate the background of this critique in more detail. It began with Kathleen Gough's charge (1968) that the discipline was a "child of imperialism." Lewis quickly points out that very few American anthropologists actually worked in colonial contexts and when they did "they were usually not engaged in aiding the governments in control of their peoples" (p. 56), so to the extent that Gough's claim may be seen as true, it seems mainly to apply to British anthropology. Moreover, the countless volumes American anthropologists wrote about North American cultures "provide the best argument against ethnography's complicity with colonialism" (p. 66). And who was responsible for this output? Boas and such students as Paul Radin, Ruth Bunzel and A.L. Kroeber, among others, whose work was meant to defend Indigenous voices against "erasure" and to record them for future generations.

The book's third chapter focuses on the infamous 2021 incident when Kroeber Hall, the building which housed the Anthropology Department Kroeber founded at UC Berkeley, was renamed. The critics who "refused to educate themselves" (p. 92) accused Kroeber of stealing sacred funerary objects and other dehumanizing practices dishonored his name, the Anthropology Department at UC Berkeley and American Anthropology. Kroeber did extensive research with Native American groups all over California which he saw as a "sacred task" (p. 83). He served as a principal witness on behalf of Native Americans against the US Department of Justice's land claims—and won. What is more, contemporary Native American youth rely on his work to revive and relearn what was lost.

Two discussions on Cold War American anthropology follow. Asad returns as having been wrong to belittle the discipline as politically timid for failing to develop "subversive forms of understanding" because of its obligations to the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations which funded it (p. 102). On the contrary, the prevailing attitude Lewis recalls encountering as a youth was left/liberal and anti-state. While many anthropologists were anti-communist and pro-modernization, they not anti-socialist and did not fear political reprisal for using Marxist theory.

In a companion chapter, Lewis turns to the US Army's "Project Camelot" plan to use anthropology and sociology to back the development of counterinsurgency tactics against uprisings in Latin America and to staunch communism in the USSR and East Asia. It was supposed to produce "country handbooks" and sponsor conferences. Although the project apparently never got off the ground, and no "anthropologists have been reported to have been involved in the stillborn project" (p. 120), rumors about it nevertheless inspired a sense of the discipline's wickedness among many young anthropologists.

Brief essays then trace the careers of Philleo Nash, Scudder McKeel and Walter Goldschmidt who are meant as exemplars of the political commitments of American anthropology to public service, self-determination for indigenous peoples and the civil rights of minorities. And then in the book's final chapters, Lewis defends "salvage anthropology" from criticism that it resulted in the theft of information as well as sacred objects (Redman 2021). He attacks an edited volume (Segal and Yanagisako 2005) which targeted the "four field" construction of American anthropology departments as supporting an evolutionary concept of the "civilizational self and a backward other" as an undocumented "travesty" of the history of Boasian anthropology (p. 179). Lastly, he shrugs off criticism of Kroeber's alleged mistreatment of Ishi, the last surviving Yahi Indian (Starn 2004) as a "living exhibit" and for failing to prevent the removal of his brain after his death. Ishi, Lewis points out, worked eagerly with Kroeber and rather than being locked up "like a zoo animal" in the anthropology museum where he had a room, he had the run of the city.

The book's conclusion reiterates Lewis' main point: "The field of anthropology in the third decade of the twenty-first century is profoundly different from the discipline that developed in the United States from 1900 and 1965" (p. 190). Critics on one side of this faultline, who have defamed our ancestors, have been motivated by "anger and alienation, ... a 'theory' of a dark and anti-humanist past and ... ignorance of the past" (p. 190-91). On the side to which Lewis adheres, our ancestors were and remain moral heroes. But one final thing must be made clear. He wants to see the early generations as prophetic rather than sinners—which is to say, he would have us see them progenitors of a single moral genealogy that stands for an egalitarian, non-exploitative and culturally relativist worldview, rather than one morally divided against itself. I think that Lewis' book makes a persuasive and energetic case for this revised view of our discipline.

Author bio

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