

(editor's note: click [here](#) to learn more about the AAA's decision from a partial but enlightening point of view)

The Board of the American Anthropological Association has recently adopted a new "mission statement" that omits any reference to "science" in its characterization of anthropology. The previous mission statement contained such a reference.

A number of US anthropologists have protested the new mission statement. I paste below a recent post from Professor Eric C. Thompson of the National University of Singapore. I find Professor Thompson's post especially interesting because it summarizes some of the data that he and his associates collected from graduate students in several leading US anthropology programs. The student respondents gave their opinions as to which anthropologists they regard as having been most influential on the development of anthropology during the last two decades. Professor Thompson has given me permission to reproduce his post here, along with relevant contact information. Those of you who may want to read his preliminary survey are invited to contact him directly.

Thompson's e-mail:

I'm writing in response to this valuable discussion of dropping the term "science" from the AAA mission statement. I was trained and worked (dissertation, c.1990s) largely in an "interpretive" tradition... with "postmodern" influences - scaremarks and all, haha. But I've followed and signed on to the SASci because I've never agreed with the anti-science ideologues and am not keen on an anthropology that excludes the modern scientific tradition.

In collaboration with students in a graduate seminar on anthropology and anthropological theory just completed here at the National University of Singapore, we queried graduate students in cultural anthropology at six leading anthropology departments in the United States (Chicago, Columbia, Duke, Harvard, UCLA, U of Washington) as to the most influential anthropologists of the past two decades. This was a very informal 'survey' but yielded some interesting results; which bear on the discussion here.

I can't send the report as an attachment through this list, but email me and I'll be happy to send it. We got 51 responses listing a total of 202 scholars (small response rate and very informal methodology). Lots to qualify, but nevertheless the following are the scholars listed by more than 3 students from 3 or more graduate programs:

Name (#students/#schools)

Arjun Appadurai (11/3)

Jean Comaroff (9/4)

John Comaroff (9/4)

Anna Tsing (8/3)

James Ferguson (7/5)

Talal Asad (7/4)

Michael Tausig (7/4)

Akhil Gupta (6/3)

David Harvey (5/4)

Pierre Bourdieu (5/3)

Bruno Latour (5/3)

Aihwa Ong (5/3)

Benedict Anderson (4/4)

Veena Das (4/4)

Michel Foucault (4/3)

Web Keane (4/3)

Sherry Ortner (4/3)

Nancy Scheper-Hughes (4/3)

Mikhail Bakhtin (3/3)

Philippe Bourgeois (3/3)

Clifford Geertz (3/3)

George Marcus (3/3)

Edward Said (3/3)

I'm sending it as it reflects the trends mentioned in this list - particularly, I think the influence of the "postmodern turn" (for want of a better term) in anthropology around the 1980s. I'm working on a further write up of this with more discussion of the theoretical developments that the list of influential figures here have been at the center of. I'd be interested in any comments; can email me directly at the address below.

The whole discussion on this list reminds me of a strange remark by a newly hired faculty c.1992 when I was a grad student. She remarked dismissively and with much disdain of a more senior colleague in the department "he still believes in science." I still wonder - as opposed to what? Good old-fashioned nihilism?

Finally, I would second the comments by Victor, too often "science" is far too narrowly reduced to "confirmatory hypothesis testing" (e.g. through questionnaires and surveys); both by "pro-science" proponents and "anti-science" opponents. IMHO, anthropologist would be best served by both

maintaining "science" as a core epistemology and by pushing for a more expansive rather than reductionist understanding of what we mean by science.

Best,
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(*FYI - Anthropology here in Singapore is generally construed as a sub-field of sociology; long story!)