

Many Sides to Relevance

By Jane Adams (Southern Illinois U, Carbondale)

"Relevance," that clarion call of the sixties, has multiple meanings. In the early 1960s students demanded that courses be "relevant." This meant, as I understood it, that scholarship should help us understand the world as it was, so that we could act effectively in it. The Academy should not be an "ivory tower" divorced from the chaos of everyday life; rather, it should help to comprehend that chaos. Relevance entailed engagement with politics—with the distributions of power that installed social orders responsible for enabling or undermining moral relationships. It entailed creating coherence from incoherence, making the world meaningful in such a way that more people could engage more fully as significant social actors.

But relevance also meant using expert knowledge to improve the human condition. It meant not only providing tools with which people could understand—and therefore solve—aspects of their daily lives that they perceived as problems, but also defining and diagnosing problems and providing solutions. This is the way that "practitioners" came to be defined within academic disciplines, including anthropology. As such, it is necessarily harnessed to a particular politics. And this politics furthers the "modernizing project" central to the institutions in which most anthropologists—academics or otherwise—are embedded. Relevance is necessarily linked with the interests of the institutions within which practitioners practice. And these interests may or may not coincide with those of the anthropologist or of the people affected.

Gayatri Spivak writes about the question of representation, which is inextricably linked with relevance. One "represents" others as "re-representation," as in portraiture or philosophy; one also "represents" others as in "speaking for" (Can the Subaltern Speak? in C Nelson and L Grossberg, eds, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 1988). The two aspects are analytically, if not practically, separable. Relevance, like representation, necessarily entails both the formation of meanings and the conscious implementation of these meanings.

Relevant Commitment

My major work has been with Euro-American farmers, one county removed from the farm where I was born and raised. From the beginning I rejected the distinction between (modern/elite) Self and (pre-modern/subaltern) Other that has so deeply inscribed our discipline. My status as a native studying my own history confers a privileged position from which to address some aspects of relevance. In the context of rural southern Illinois, I am less elite than many of those who are "my subjects." I do not command disproportionate cultural and social authority to represent my subjects to existing power, unlike many anthropologists who work with non-literate, marginalized peoples.

My research has sought to understand how a relatively marginalized rural region became transformed from one that was agriculturally based to one in which agriculture contributes very little to local income, despite the continuing importance of farming and the rural in local consciousness. This aspect of my work is relevant in the sense that I attempt to create meaningful analyses and interpretations of inchoate reality.

My interest is not innocent. I share with many rural North Americans a complicated nostalgia for a romanticized, pre-World War II past and have a deep concern for the environment which underlies a strong critique of contemporary industrialized agriculture. I would like to eat foods that have not been subjected to heroic chemical treatments, and have been a long-standing critic of Western-led agricultural development projects in the Third World. I also have a lifetime commitment to social justice, a concept I find increasingly complicated but nonetheless centrally important in my life work. My research interests are, therefore, shaped by moral, political and aesthetic, as well as scientific, commitments. It is obvious that these commitments are not shared by all those who live in rural southern Illinois. It is also true that most people in the region want to know more about their locale, to better realize their many and varied projects.

Relevant Formation

One of my primary ethical responsibilities as a scholar is to make my research available to those studied. This is rooted in the notion of "relevance" I demanded of the Academy in the 1960s: to help us make sense of the world in which we live. I chose to situate myself in my narratives as a member of the community, rather than as an authoritative "expert." In this way, I hoped, my audience would be able to translate my interpretations to their own projects and concerns. I intended to create a space for dialogue that would be mutually informative. This had an instrumental dimension—I could check the accuracy of my data and my interpretations. But on a deeper level, I sought to mediate the legitimate authority achieved through deep scholarship with respect for my audience's many and varied individual and organizational interests. In practice, this meant speaking to any community group that asked, creating public programs (museum shows, articles in local newspapers), and writing much of my scholarship in a way that was accessible to interested members of the community. It meant making the subjects of my research one of my legitimate audiences.

Relevant Activism

Another way I have made my scholarly interests "relevant" has been to participate as a social activist in promoting sustainable agriculture. During my dissertation research I worked with a public interest group that dealt with the farm crisis of the mid-1980s. Not only did this deepen understanding of how federal policies and the larger economy affected rural communities



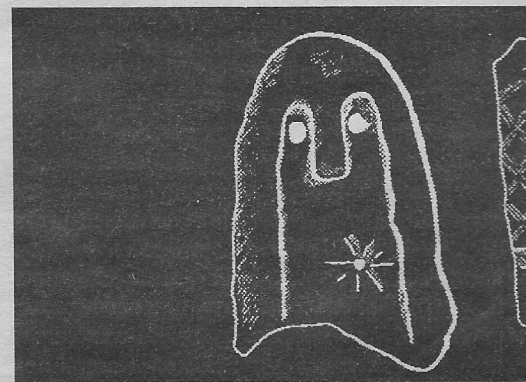
Jane Adams and her brother Jim, seated on an old wooden bench in a rural setting in southern Illinois, ca 1947. The one-room school house is visible in the background.

and individual farmers, it allowed me to apply my intellectual training to "the real world." After joining a university faculty, I was invited to serve on the board of directors of the organization. I also served on the board of directors of a Migrant Head Start program in the county where I did my research. In both organizations I situated myself as an activist and citizen, since there seemed to be no congenial way to combine this work with what the academy defined as scholarship. It appears on my CV as "service," yet it is rooted in and deeply informed by my anthropological training and scholarly research. An interdisciplinary team at my university has just received a major grant from the US Department of Agriculture to address issues of watershed management. As a member of that team, I expect to make my (expert) anthropological knowledge "relevant" in a manner more conventionally recognized by the discipline as applied anthropology.

Relevant Participation

A rarely mentioned aspect of relevance concerns work in academic disciplines. Intellectuals and our organizations, like people in other organized groups, inevitably shape the course of history, however modestly. We shape our own disciplinary practice; in fact, the degree to which individuals affect their discipline measures their professional success. We also, through our disciplines, shape the larger contours of our culture, sometimes in significant ways. With this in mind, I have been a contributing member of a number of academy-based associations that cross disciplinary boundaries.

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I am troubled by the tendency to restrict "relevance" to addressing "problems." While virtually anything

can be defined as a problem, to do so excessively restricts understanding the conditions of our lives. It narrows the scope of meaningful knowledge to the immediately instrumental. This utilitarian reduction is congenial to modernity and to science as it tends to be understood, but it does considerable violence to our efforts to create a holistic, human science.

Relevant Ethics

As scholars and intellectuals, we create representations—portraits, more-or-less coherent descriptions—of our subjects. By this process, we necessarily represent them in an interested way within a larger polity; we speak for our subjects. Our work, by definition, inevitably has a degree of relevance. The question is, what should we do with that relevance? How do we, as scholars and intellectuals, with specialized, expert knowledge, deploy that knowledge in an ethical manner? How do we come to terms with the contradictions between the interests and projects of our employers, ourselves and the people we study, who are themselves embedded in institutions and life projects that entail contradictory and often conflicting interests and projects?

There are, of course, no recipes for resolution of this difficult and often fraught necessity. But we should begin by defining "relevance" as enhancing meaningful understanding as well as furthering instrumental goals.

[Jane Adams is associate professor of anthropology at Southern Illinois U, Carbondale. She is the author of *The Transformation of Rural Life: Southern Illinois 1890-1990* (1994) and editor of "All Anybody Ever Wanted of Me Was to Work": The Memoir of Edith Bradley Rendleman (1996). She is currently working on a book on agricultural policy.] ■

