

Chapter 19

Lauriston Sharp:

Innovator of Applied Anthropology Programs

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Lauriston Sharp received the Society for Applied Anthropology's Malinowski Award in 1989, but his acceptance speech was not published and there is no known copy.¹ Sharp was a founding member of the Society for Applied Anthropology. Foremost in his applied work was his role in developing an applied anthropology program at Cornell University and his long-term interest in culture change. His publications "Steel Axes for Stone Age Australians" (1952) and "Continuities and Discontinuities in Southeast Asia" (1962) quickly attained the status of classics in anthropology. In the former, Sharp demonstrated how the replacement of a single material item had repercussions throughout the society, supporting the importance of a holistic model to understand introduced change. In the second article, a "must read" for specialists in Southeast Asia, Sharp criticized the concept of culture and demonstrated that it was insufficient for establishing boundaries in a region impacted by an expanding Chinese civilization since it is an artifact of Western classification systems (Freedman 1974:302). In addition to teaching, research, and publishing, Sharp's participation in various governmental boards and committees allowed him to have a voice in matters that impacted people in the U.S. and Southeast Asia and affected anthropology.

Lauriston Sharp (1907–1993) was born and raised in Wisconsin and attended the University of Wisconsin. While a senior in high school he met Clyde Kluckhohn, who was in college at the time, and with other friends they formed a discussion club. After graduating from college in 1929, Sharp accompanied Kluckhohn and J. J. Hanks on two summer reconnaissance trips to the Kaiparowitz Plateau, an experience that changed his major interest from philosophy to anthropology. He served a year as freshmen dean at the University of Wisconsin, during which time he attended lectures by Ralph Linton. He joined an expedition to the Berbers in North Africa, accompanied by Sol Tax (also a Malinowski Award winner; see Tax 1997) and John Gillin. This experience concretized his interest in anthropology.

Upon the advice of Robert Lowie, Sharp enrolled at the University of Vienna to study South Asian cultures with Robert Heine-Geldern in 1931. Linton advised him to attend Harvard where he studied with Alfred Tozzer, Earnest Hooton, Talcott Parsons, and Roland Dixon. In 1932 he accompanied Sol Tax, who was working with the Fox Indians on his doctoral dissertation. Sharp received a master's degree from Harvard for this work. Recommended by W. Lloyd Warner to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Sharp went on to do fieldwork in northern Australia with the Yir Yiront from 1932 to 1935 (Sharp 1952). After making brief visits to New Guinea,

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China, and Southeast Asia, he returned to Harvard where he received a Ph.D. in 1937 for a dissertation entitled “The Social Anthropology of a Totemic System in North Queensland, Australia” (Smith 1974:7–10).

World War II had a profound impact on Sharp. On his return from service in the State Department as assistant chief of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs, he developed innovative programs at Cornell in applied anthropology that examined the impact of change and modernization on tribal and peasant societies. Morris Opler, Allan Holmberg and John Adair were invited to join the department. Supported by the Carnegie Corporation, linked projects were commenced in North India (directed by Opler), Thailand (Sharp), Peru (Holmberg), and the Navajo Reservation (Adair). Alexander Leighton (also a Malinowski Award winner; see Leighton 1984) became involved with the Navajo project and associated his work on health in Nova Scotia, Canada, with the Cornell program.

The interdisciplinary program thus established was known as the Cornell University Studies in Culture and Applied Anthropology. The projects under this program trained many applied anthropologists and social scientists of the 1950s and 1960s. The Holmberg Vicos project in Peru became one of the most famous applied endeavors in the discipline, partially because of the number of specialists in Latin American anthropology it produced, but also because of the ramifications of the changes effected there, planned and directed by the Indians themselves (Smith 1974:11–13). The Cornell program’s production in publications was extensive; the Cornell Thailand project alone consisted of over 450 items, including 50 doctoral dissertations. (See, for example, Sharp and Hanks 1978.) The Department of Anthropology at Cornell was also the headquarters for the Society for Applied Anthropology, with its journal *Human Organization* published there until 1965.

Although he had visiting professorships at various universities, including the University of Sydney, Yale University, Haverford College, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of London, and Bangkok University, the locus of Sharp’s teaching career was Cornell University. There his most important contributions were in the development of programs and the encouragement of students, especially minority students from the U.S. and abroad. In addition to the aforementioned Cornell Program for Studies in Culture and Applied Anthropology, Sharp was involved in the development of the Southeast Asia Program and the Center for International Studies. He served as chair of the combined Sociology and Anthropology Department and later of the Anthropology Department for many years. Sharp was a consultant to the Department of State, the United States Agency for International Development, and the Social Science Research Council, and he sat on various governmental boards and committees. He also served on many professional boards including that of the American Anthropological Association and the Pacific Science Board of the National Research Council, and he was president of the Association for Asian Studies.

Sharp received Guggenheim, Ford, Fulbright, and National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships and was a Distinguished Lecturer at Haverford College. He was a fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a foreign fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute and of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, and a life member of the Siam Society (Smith 1974:14–15). His students established a Lauriston Sharp Essay Prize in 1967 and a Lauriston Sharp Scholarship Fund for the study of Thailand; they also published two books in his honor (Smith 1974, Skinner and Kirsch 1975).

Notes

¹This annual award is given to a senior colleague in recognition of efforts to understand and serve the needs of the world through social science. See Thomas Weaver's "The Malinowski Award and the History of Applied Anthropology" (2002b) for a brief history of the award and an overview of the recipients and their work, and Weaver's "Malinowski as Applied Anthropologist" (2002a) for an introduction to Bronislaw Malinowski and his work.

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