

The Public Value of Anthropology: Engaging Critical Social Issues Through Ethnography

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Table of Contents

A Lively and Musing Discipline: The Public Contribution of Anthropology Through Education and Engagement <i>Elisabeth Tauber, Dorothy Zinn</i>	1
Anthropology and Asylum Procedures and Policies in Italy <i>Barbara Sorgoni</i>	31
“My dad has fifteen wives and eight ancestors to care for”: Conveying Anthropological Knowledge to Children and Adolescents <i>Sabine Klocke-Daffa</i>	61
Begging—Between Charity and Profession: Reflections on Romanian Roma’s Begging Activities in Italy <i>Cătălina Tesăr</i>	83
Crafting Fair Trade Tourism: Gender, Race, and Development in Peru <i>Jane Henrici</i>	111
Expert Translations of Torture and Trauma: A Multisited Ethnography <i>Monika Weissensteiner</i>	143
Authors	173

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A Lively and Musing Discipline: The Public Contribution of Anthropology Through Education and Engagement

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Ich habe mich in die Lehre
versenkt wie vielleicht sonst kaum jemand,
damit die mir anvertrauten StudentInnen
mit mir den Weg des
neuartigen Erkennens der Welt gingen.

Perhaps more than almost anyone else,
I have engrossed myself in my teaching
in such a way that the students entrusted to me
have traveled with me along a path
to a new cognition of the world.

Claudia von Werlhof (2012, trans. by the authors)

1. Introduction

When we simultaneously started our positions in October 2011 at the Faculty of Education of a small and quite young university as the first full-time anthropologists on the staff, we quickly discovered that virtually none of our colleagues from other disciplines had a reasonably well-defined idea or sense of what social-cultural anthropology is all about. Although both of us have conducted our research exclusively in European countries, sometimes

even with some of the same populations or general issues that have been of interest to our non-anthropologist colleagues, it soon became clear that very few people around us had a clue as to the peculiar approach that we, as anthropologists, bring to our research and how we actually go about doing it.¹ We found this to be true even of many of scholars close to us who regularly employ qualitative research methods in their own work. For this reason, we decided to organize a first initiative of a lecture series with the idea of making social-cultural anthropology better known, to introduce a veritable culture of knowledge to students and colleagues from other disciplines. With a similar aim, we have subsequently developed this volume out of that initial effort, in order to make anthropological thinking and the construction of knowledge from ethnography accessible to other disciplines; at the same time, we have no doubt that the contributions presented here will offer insights for other anthropologists. But quite aside from trying to explain ourselves to our non-anthropologist colleagues, another fundamental goal we have in mind is that of reaching our students: despite a wide availability of introductory textbooks, we have assembled five studies that have a particular relevance for our students in social work, education and communications, all of whose programs have a strong focus on the local society.

We have asked our authors to present work based on their original ethnographic experiences, allowing the reader an insight into the ethnographic process and providing examples of a “thick” exploration of single social issues². The idea of thickness is a core concern of anthropology: it means looking behind quick data, going beyond the surface. For us, this translates into bringing to light a deeper endowment of meaning in the study of social questions and capturing the dynamics of power in specific contexts. It is a culture of knowledge that takes insiders’ categories—what we anthropolo-

1 Our university’s trilingual instruction framework favors an encounter of German, Italian, and English-language academic traditions. For this reason, throughout the discussion that follows we will mention relevant features and examples of social-cultural anthropology by drawing from these three broad scholarly contexts.

2 It was Clifford Geertz’s landmark book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) that popularized the notion of “thick description” as the ethnographic approach par excellence. Over forty years after its publication, this is arguably the best-known volume of anthropology among non-anthropologist scholars.

gists term “emic” perspectives—very seriously, and at the same time, it builds on a body of disciplinary work that has looked at humans across many different cultures.³ We see this as a specific contribution we can add to reflections in other fellow disciplines that might be directly involved in working with people of various categories.

We should add a few words here about ethnography as anthropology’s primary methodology, a way of going about gathering and constructing scientific knowledge. In trying to address questions of how and why in social life, the anthropologist builds her knowledge together with the people with whom she is working as they share their own lives and knowledge with her. Ethnography means being with people, experiencing their lives together and getting close to them, attempting to capture emic forms of social knowledge that are often very implicit. Indeed, there are aspects of knowledge that people cannot or will not necessarily express if we simply ask them, and ethnography is quite often as slow as it is thick, taking the time to try to let such elements emerge. We should also keep in mind that, as canonized by Bronislaw Malinowski early in the twentieth century, ethnography is a scientific endeavor that seeks to respond to scientific questions. This distinguishes it from journalism or travel writing (one thinks of authors like Bruce Chatwin or Tiziano Terzani, or in the German-speaking world, Christoph Ransmayr), where the writer may have gained some insights, albeit valuable ones, by spending a period of time hanging out with some group of people. As a research methodology in social science, ethnography has indeed gained popularity in various disciplines outside of its original disciplinary base in anthropology. No matter who is performing it, ethnography is a means of gathering empirical data from which the scientist then works to build theory, and in this sense it features commonalities with the notion of “grounded theory.” Grounded theory has come into prominence since the late 1960s, but anthropologists were already doing ethnography in the nineteenth century, with the pioneering fieldwork of Louis Henry Morgan among the Iroquois,

3 Drawing from the work of linguist Kenneth Pike (1947), anthropologists speak of “emic” and “etic” perspectives to capture a distinction that we can describe as insider (or subjective) versus outsider (or objective).

followed by Frank Cushing's work with the Zuni⁴. Even so, the anthropologist doing ethnography tends to emphasize certain features of the knowledge-building process that are not always shared by other people who carry out ethnography or other forms of qualitative research resembling it. First, engaging the emic perspective deeply and seriously also means taking on an awareness of the researcher's own position. This is what we refer to in anthropology as reflexivity. That is, it is fundamental to be aware that we as researchers are also human beings with our own perspectives, frameworks, categories and values, and these shape our perceptions and interpretations, often in subtle ways. Not to mention the fact that, whether we like it or not, we inevitably bring with us our own personal and group histories and a physical and social being that also shape our interaction with the people with whom we work, as they react to us. Especially if we are conducting our research in our own society, we need to be attuned to the possible risks of overestimating how much of our perspective is shared by those with whom we are working. But above and beyond this, we need to recognize that even what we might be shared between the researcher and the people studied is only one among the many human possibilities for experiencing, being and acting in the world. In this sense, unlike other social sciences, anthropology brings a comparative perspective to the study of cultures and societies (cf. Gingrich, 2013). Having a disciplinary tradition that has accumulated knowledge about human populations from around the world for about a century and a half, we have observed what is often recurrent, if not actually universal, in being human.⁵

4 But it was only really with Malinowski's work in the early twentieth century that ethnography developed certain conventions and gained widespread popularity.

5 Anthropologists have a perspective that considers both what is culturally specific (the "ideographic") and what is universal (the "nomothetic").

2. The place of the discipline

Social-cultural anthropology has dealt with mankind from so many different angles and with such a variety of approaches that it is understandably difficult to get a handle on what exactly an anthropologist does. Certainly, in its early years the field was associated above all with research carried out in villages in Africa, Asia, and Oceania, or among native peoples in the Americas⁶. Nowadays anthropology goes everywhere where people are acting and making sense of these actions. If any human grouping is fair game for anthropological study, this of course multiplies the possible fields and questions for study to an infinite degree. An unavoidable consequence of the growth of any discipline is that we find some fragmentation, with scholars divided according to schools, research issues, geographic areas of specialization, theoretical orientations. With all of this riotous diversity, as anthropological insiders we somehow—and not without difficulty—identify a common thread in the discipline in its status as *the* science of culture. But if we ask many people in the general public or even within the university what their image of an anthropologist is, we may well expect that their replies would refer to (archaeologists) Indiana Jones or Lara Croft, with thrilling adventures in exotic places among wild natives: at least this would be a small step closer to the truth than the reply of others who would venture that an anthropologist studies dinosaurs, confusing us with paleontologists.⁷ This is probably the case for most, but perhaps not all, national traditions of the discipline, despite all of the differences in their development.⁸ The fact that anthropology is not widely taught as a discipline in the standard high school curricula in most countries adds to the aura of mystery and misperception among the general public.

6 We mean “field” here as both the discipline, but also the place where anthropological research—fieldwork—is carried out.

7 Cf. Paredes (1999) for how anthropology is represented in media and not recognized by other disciplines.

8 On the struggle to make Ethnology understandable to non-specialized audience, cf. Klocke-Daffa, 2004. In Norway, however, anthropologists have succeeded in establishing themselves as well-known public intellectuals (cf. Eriksen, 2006; Howell, 2010).

The romanticized, stereotyped image of the khaki-clad anthropologist in the tropics among the naked (perhaps even cannibalistic) “savages” is clearly due in part to the legacy of a disciplinary history in which a certain academic division of labor arose in the nineteenth century. Especially through the ethnographic method, anthropology created tools for studying and understanding the seemingly strange actions and conceptions of Other peoples—that is, non-Western ones. The study of such Others thus had an obvious objective, but the idea of applying the same tools to studying us was not so self-evident, because our way of thinking and doing was taken for granted, as we were presumably developed, advanced and rational. This ethnocentric perspective—which we may well deem “Eurocentrism”—has constituted an obstacle to extending an anthropological approach to Western society itself. But this did not mean that Western populations were not themselves an object of investigation: that was what sociology was supposed to do. As the social sciences emerged, sociology took on the role of studying the so-called complex Western societies, while social-cultural anthropology as a field primarily studied non-Western peoples, especially those who were then under Western colonial domination.⁹ Sociology arose as part of Auguste Comte’s post-Enlightenment project for studying ways to improve society in a period of rapid urbanization and industrialization in Europe and North America, with all of the social ills entailed in this transformation. Despite the fact that some anthropologists from very early on were actively promoting social critique and change in their own societies¹⁰, the most common image of social-cultural anthropology has primarily been related to the study of the bizarre customs and rituals of colorful, faraway peoples (whom many people of European descent would describe as “people of color”). As Anthony Paredes (1999) has commented:

9 We should note, however, that there have also been scholars—especially in the French tradition, such as Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, or more recent thinkers like Pierre Bourdieu—who have straddled these boundaries in their work and whose writings are fundamental reference points for both sociologists and anthropologists.

10 In the U.S., for instance, Frank Cushing and Franz Boas criticized how Native Americans were treated. But activism in anthropology has not been uncontroversial: Alfred Kroeber advised his students not to become involved with governmental issues (Steward, 1973) and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1946) declared that any form of engagement would not be scientific (cf. Heinen, 1984, p. 79).

What we have to say is just too far removed from Western “indigenous knowledge systems” to be acceptable, unlike the more conventional forms of unconventional wisdom pouring out on the op-end pages from economists, historians, sociologists, humanity scholars, and other mainstream pundits on everything from the myth of the 1950s’ Ozzie and Harriett family to the cultural significance of Halloween. (Paredes, 1999, pp. 186f)

In the world of academic social science, then, anthropology has often seemed to take on a decorative role of adding color and spice¹¹, and in this sense it may have appeared to be preoccupied with trivial or irrelevant questions and situations. Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino offers an exemplary comment on the seeming irrelevance of such research. Discussing Spencer and Gillen’s book on the Aranda of Australia, he writes: “[H]aving read the study, the Aranda themselves remain in the reader’s mind as a fortuitous humanity, a monstrous item of gossip in mankind’s history, whose ciphered strangeness does not compensate for their futility” (de Martino, 2005 [1961], p. 1).

It is true that much of the work of social-cultural anthropologists has been perceived by a wider public as purveying such “monstrous gossip” from one end of the global village—the one dominated by Western societies—to another, for the benefit of audiences in the West. Even so, as many scholars have pointed out, there has been a long tradition of anthropologists working “at home”, even in the early days of the discipline, and they have often aimed to improve society through their work¹². At the same time, as anthropology developed in the Anglo-American tradition, power dynamics

11 Michel-Rolph Trouillot has used the expression “the savage slot” in denouncing this view of anthropology’s role in human science (Trouillot, 1991).

12 It is true that the public role of anthropology has changed only since World War II: in the pre-War period, anthropologists invested their energy in a culture war that fought against ethnocentric supremacy and against biological determinism (the belief that people’s physical and mental features are shaped almost entirely by their genetic endowment; on the history of engagement in this direction, cf. Erikson, 2006). To cite only a very few examples here, de Martino himself was very taken up with North-South disparities within Italy and was also quite militant politically; in the U.S., Franz Boas was actively fighting racism in the early twentieth century, and Margaret Mead critiqued numerous aspects of U.S. society, including gender roles.

within the academy itself did not always allow for an adequate recognition of at-home research themes and engagement. Italian ethnology gradually grew out of both a colonial experience in East Africa and folkloristics at home, but the latter was not always oriented to addressing social conditions. Ernesto de Martino (1908–1965) was among the few twentieth-century ethnologists who actively addressed social problems in Italy, and much of his research dealt with the oppressive conditions of Southern Italian peasants; at the same time, however, he experienced extensive professional marginalization. Compared with the U.S., in Italy there is a much stronger tradition of academic intellectuals commenting publicly on social issues, but the voice of anthropologists is still relatively underrepresented.¹³

As for Germany, even if German ethnology has been inspired by Anglo-American public anthropology and the Scandinavian tradition (in particular Norway's) of "going public", German ethnologists are still reluctant to share anthropological knowledge with the public for reasons that range from the experience of public misuses (Antweiler, 1998), to the analytical difficulty of cultural translations due to dualistic Western categorizations (Platenkamp, 2004). Another factor has been the division between academic ethnology and museum ethnology (Schlee, 2005), in which museums have been viewed as the ideal place where anthropological knowledge could be shared with a broader audience. Finally, the public presence of anthropological thinking in Germany is also related to the fact that the market for anthropological books (academic and popular science) is very small (cf. Schönuth, 2004, p. 88).¹⁴

13 Among those Italian anthropologists with a more visible public presence and who are often called upon for comments on pressing social questions, we should mention Annamaria Rivera—a regular contributor to *MicroMega* and *Manifesto*—and Amalia Signorelli.

14 The German association ESE e.V. (Ethnologie in Schule und Erwachsenenbildung) has mainly focused on creating bridges from anthropology to school and adult education, adapting the Third-Culture Perspective developed by Gudykunst, Wiseman & Hammer, (1977) in the field of intercultural communication. The Third-Culture Perspective is an approach in which learners first gain knowledge about cultures which are distant from their own; they are trained interculturally to avoid an immediate reaction based on stereotypes and/or prejudices (Bertels, Baumann, Dinkel & Hellmann, 2004; cf. also Klocke-Daffa in this volume).