

THE PLACE AND CHALLENGES OF CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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Summary

Since anthropology was established as a profession and academic discipline in the 19th century, it has taken many new directions. These shifts have reflected the need to adapt to changes in the global political economy and create new paradigms and actions that adequately fit each day and age. In this chapter, the author reflects on some key junctures in anthropology's history and places these in the context of the current century (21st) to focus on the challenges the profession has had to embrace in a fast-changing world. Anthropologists carry a unique tool kit for engaging with and interpreting social phenomena while also cross-fertilizing with other professions. Anthropology's ground truth approach to engaging with its research communities puts it in a unique position in the production and dissemination of knowledge. One of the ongoing challenges in this role has been interfacing with research subjects and embracing their voice in the generation of knowledge. New voices reconstruct paradigms and correct unequal power balances to make the discipline more relevant, inclusive and ethical. Moreover, in a fast-paced world steeped in many cross currents anthropologists seek to understand how local and global issues are inextricably linked. Identity politics, environmental damage, climate change, and migration are but a few of the issues anthropologists now encounter in fine-tuning theories and developing action-oriented policies. Role conflicts have also been a challenge to anthropologists, as we attempt to straddle stakeholder interests and contractual obligations. Additionally, anthropologists often stand alone among specialists and policy-makers in challenging policies that compromise the well-being of the environment and stakeholders. Dealing with powerful interests poses challenges for anthropologists as corporations and governments are parties whose actions

anthropologies document and to whom they may be accountable, not to mention articulating and unifying the voices of different anthropological traditions.

1. Introduction

Ever since anthropology was instituted as a discipline in the late 19th century it has taken on many new directions and embraced a global and comparative perspective of the world. While different anthropological traditions vary in their approach they nevertheless converge on a number of fronts that are germane to our understanding of the discipline and humanity. As we embark on the 21st century a host of new issues has come under anthropology's purview, helping redefine and fine tune its goals and objectives. Since the 1940s, anthropology has steadily embraced a public and applied approach, but even more so as we engage with contemporary human problems, departing from an ensconced position within ivory towers. As anthropology seeks to redefine itself in the 21st century, it faces a number of challenges both within the discipline and beyond. As former president of the Brazilian Anthropological Association, Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (2004: 6), once observed:

“...anthropology is a phoenix whose death, or drawn-out agony, has been pronounced several times, at least since the 1920s when Malinowski urged anthropologists to conduct more ethnographic fieldwork in face of a vanishing native world. Anthropology's many deaths and rebirths indicate the discipline's ability to transform itself over the past century and project its critique onto itself, magnifying and redefining its attributes and interests”.

In these terms, anthropology often finds itself at a number of crossroads, taking new directions, but still reengaging with its commitment to advocate for human rights and the wellbeing of the often poor and marginalized subjects it studies. Much naïveté has been lost since the mid 20th century of anthropological thought and practice and the discipline's ethical commitments are now considered an essential component of its approach to contemporary human problems. Since embracing a more engaged stance, anthropologists have blended academics with advocacy and brought their cultural subjects to center stage. In this chapter, the author discusses some of the challenges, roles and engagements that anthropology faces in this new millennium. Whether anthropology takes on description and analysis and/or activism (cf. Venkatesan, 2015: 911) the discipline is constantly challenged to reinvent itself and adapt to new issues. As such, we discuss the position and practices anthropologists have embraced, citing examples from the present author's own work in the Brazilian Amazon, but also drawing on examples from anthropologists working on a variety of issues in areas around the world. In this framework, we also discuss the inter-subjective roles that anthropologists have with stakeholder communities, also discussing the partnerships of these engagements and the directions anthropology can anticipate in the unfolding of this millennium.

North American anthropology in particular has taken on many approaches to studying humanity, ever since Franz Boas established a four-field engagement within the discipline, from which a fifth subfield, applied anthropology, soon also emerged. The latter takes the knowledge of the traditional subfields of archaeology, linguistics, sociocultural and physical anthropology (the last of these subfields often termed “biological anthropology”) and applies it to contemporary human problems. While

archaeology has more conventionally dealt with reconstructing the life-ways of prehistoric peoples, recently it has expanded to studying current and historical time periods. Moreover, archaeologists have incorporated their interlocutors in their research agendas to embrace an ethno-archaeology that includes the voices of the cultures under study as active participants and counterparts. This approach adds depth to the archaeological endeavor by including voices that have been traditionally excluded in decisions and interpretations regarding the past and present. The establishment of NAGPRA (*Native American Graves and Repatriation Act*), for example, helped redefine issues of cultural heritage, and respect for human remains.

For its part, linguistic anthropology studies the origins and diversity of human languages, providing a unique anthropological vision on how language shapes worldviews and how culture and language mutually influence each other. With over 6,000 languages spoken in today's world, anthropological linguists are anxiously engaged in an attempt to document all of them. In the case of unwritten languages there is a need to properly document them for posterity. In addition to recording phonology, grammar and syntax, anthropological linguists also deal with the sociology of language, historical linguistics, and work in language maintenance programs to preserve languages that face the threat of extinction as well as those that are marginalized by mainstream society.

Physical, or biological anthropology, examines human origins and variation and recently has joined efforts with anthropology's other sub-disciplines, such as linguistics, to determine migration routes, population histories, and human admixtures. In this regard, physical anthropology has been instrumental in deconstructing racialized thinking and has lobbied for eliminating the concept of race, a concept that has created many wrong-headed notions about human diversity. This subfield has also been engaged in forensics and collaborates with legal professionals and law enforcement to solve crimes. The number of television series depicting forensic anthropologists engaged in murder mysteries has proliferated in recent years and may be responsible for a stepped-up lay interest in anthropology as a profession. While popular media can be misleading in characterizing the profession of anthropology it has drawn attention to one of anthropology's many contributions.

Finally, cultural anthropology provides a direct engagement with its study populations and established one of the mainstays of anthropology's methodology, namely, participant observation and extended fieldwork, a legacy that persists since Franz Boas established the profession in the U.S. in the early 20th century, coalescing in the work of Malinowski (1922) who first labeled this approach.

Not the least of these, of course, is Applied Anthropology, also termed Engaged or Public Anthropology. This field articulates with all of anthropology's subfields to tackle contemporary human problems and overlaps with Advocacy Anthropology. As will be discussed later, some anthropological traditions embrace a more action-oriented approach that goes beyond pure academics and takes on committed engagements with research communities, political lobbying and other endeavors.

Anthropological and ethnographic works by Europeans have been traditionally steeped in the legacy of social studies that encompasses folk-life, religion and cultural history. For their part, anthropological studies in other countries have also taken on an applied stance and it is in this area of applied research that we encounter a convergence of different anthropologies worldwide. In the U.S. there are more anthropologists working outside of the academy while in other global arenas anthropologists are actually consulted as public intellectuals to comment on topics ranging from climate change to immigration (Eriksen, 2006).

In this chapter, we take a broad-brush approach to the contributions anthropology can make in examining and assessing contemporary human issues, focusing on its engaged nature and how it can illuminate current trends pertinent to the human condition. As the world becomes more connected and interlinked, anthropology's theory and methodology examines the human experience, past and present, in its qualitative and quantitative dimensions, and helps contextualize human adaptation in its natural and social milieu from a cross-cultural perspective, relativizing each experience and drawing comparisons and contrasts.

Of particular importance today is humanity's expanding population and how living in nation states is impacting natural resources and the environment on a global level. We also see a rise in social inequality and a disproportionately skewed distribution of wealth. Climate change exacerbates social problems and frequently anthropologists are called in to comment and act on these situations. As nation states and corporate interests expand, we are also witness to a further subordination of peasant and indigenous peoples to an ever-demanding world economy that links the remotest of villages to the dynamics and unpredictable fluctuations of global capital.

To illustrate these points and the role that anthropology can play in addressing them the author provides a number of ethnographic examples drawn from the author's own experiences in Brazil, intercalating these with other case studies and situations, to draw a comparative view of the contribution that anthropologists can offer.

2. Anthropological Engagements in Brazil and Beyond

From its start, anthropology in Brazil had an implicit applied focus, after Brazil transitioned from a Monarchy to a Republic. In addition to its academic concerns and engagement with emerging theoretical paradigms, Brazilian anthropology embraced an applied approach, particularly in regard to indigenist policy. As the Brazilian nation state began its march toward the west to populate its hinterlands and establish sovereignty, many indigenous groups were impacted by the moving frontier. In support of this policy, officials of Brazil's then fledgling Indian Service (*Serviço de Proteção ao Índio - SPI*) made it a point to refrain from aggression and remove Indians from harm's way. In spite of the SPI creed of "die if you must, but never kill" (see Hemming, 2003) indigenous peoples were still suffering from land grabs, aggression, disease and removal. In these terms, indigenous ethnology became emblematic of Brazilian anthropology as ethnographers such as Curt Nimuendajú documented abuses and others were called into the scene to deal with these issues (Souza Lima, 2004). Their contribution was critical in managing indigenous affairs, even though the control and

administration of the Indian Service was squarely in government hands. Yet their advice was vital in establishing indigenous reserves and in formulating agendas that would help shape Indian policy. In addition to their academic contributions of teaching and publishing, anthropologists such as Darcy Ribeiro engaged in practical actions by helping contact isolated groups of indigenous peoples and ushering them into areas that would shield them from the ravages of frontier culture. Ribeiro was later instrumental in establishing one of Brazil's largest indigenous reserves, Parque Indígena do Xingu. At a later date, he would enter politics and through this medium create new measures to safeguard the autonomy of indigenous peoples.

As a politician, Darcy Ribeiro transformed himself into a public intellectual advocating for the rights of indigenous and disenfranchised peoples. In this regard, he expanded his influence beyond the academy and successfully lobbied for the establishment of social programs and indigenous rights. Earlier, he had also helped establish a public university, the University of Brasilia, in an effort to promote an all-inclusive education for Brazilians.

Ribeiro's engagement, however, was not without its problems. Along with other intellectuals he was forced into exile during the period of Brazil's military regime, which lasted from 1964 until 1985. During this time period, a number of anthropologists were silenced even though the Brazilian government commissioned anthropologists to work with indigenous populations in its effort to establish sovereignty over the Amazon region. As addressed later, whether working in authoritarian or democratic regimes, anthropologists are still challenged by state agendas that do not coincide with ethical standards that anthropologists strive to adhere to in their endeavors.

Although few anthropologists enjoyed Ribeiro's high profile, most, nevertheless, committed themselves to public work beyond the academy, through NGOs, lobbying efforts, and as expert witnesses. In a number of countries, anthropologists are called on as public intellectuals to comment on a number of social issues such as inequality, global warming, and sustainable development (see Eriksen, 2006.). As the world becomes more tightly linked through the global communication network all of these issues are brought to the fore and anthropologists have traditionally focused on these topics, while also providing analyses of unfamiliar and exotic cultural practices. As anthropologists take a ground-truth approach to these issues, their contribution becomes more valuable since their up-close experience provides valuable insight to create workable solutions to problems that are often understood from a macro perspective by governments and developers. This fine-grained perspective provided by anthropologists helps provide a better set of diagnostics in terms of policy formulation and the establishment of new political, theoretical and action-oriented paradigms than one defined purely by global or macro indicators. Thus, an anthropologist's up-close view of social realities fleshes out the nature of each ethnographic encounter, providing outsiders with a much-needed, closer glimpse of the day-to-day experiences of their research communities.

While some gains have been made in terms of public engagement, there are still a number of challenges to be resolved in the area of Brazilian anthropology and beyond. Firstly, not all scholars are in theoretical agreement. Theoretical divergences can

undermine efforts to establish viable programs in the area of applied anthropology, and not all anthropologists will agree on the scope, method, or degree of their engagement. Thus, some anthropologists prefer not to involve themselves in activist issues as this involvement implies taking political positions, risks, and long-term commitments. In anthropology's early days, fieldwork often did not entail a long-term commitment to study communities. A number of anthropologists gained entry into communities but frequently did not establish enduring ties with their interlocutors. In the 1960s this backfired as many Native Americans and former European colonies rejected anthropology and anthropologists, forcing a thinking of the profession's *raison d'être* (Messerschmidt, 1981).

Redefining anthropology's task was particularly challenging in the 1960s, as a number of world events and social movements converged to make the profession square with reality. Anthropology often prides itself with being privy to the "ground truth" of study communities and relativizing cultural practices, an approach acquired from the Boasian tradition, but often was oblivious to its own role in colonial enterprises and the hegemonic practices of first-world nations.

One turning point was the Vietnam War, which led anthropologists to reconsider their role in such conflicts, leading to a series of studies that endeavored to unearth the causes and consequences of aggression and violence, not to mention research in the area of peace studies (Fry, 2007). Margaret Mead (Mandler, 2013) sang praises to the counterculture movement started by American youth in its effort to deconstruct American ideals of exceptionalism and world leadership, and anthropology found itself taking new directions. A number of former colonies gained independence, often turning anthropologists aside, and a number of social movements such as the Feminist and Black movements, urged anthropology to become more inclusive. As will be addressed later, this effort is far from complete in the new millennium yet this incipient start of the 1960s was a watershed moment in terms creating collaborative partnerships with otherwise subaltern people.

As noted previously, the primary method for eliciting ethnographic knowledge has been participant observation. Ever since Bronislaw Malinowski coined this term in 1922, setting an agenda for anthropologists to engage with their host communities, fieldwork has comprised the mainstay of cultural anthropology. This lived experience gave anthropologists a leading edge over other social sciences in grasping local realities and conveying them to academic institutions, while raising public awareness about other cultures. Other disciplines, such as Rural Sociology and Political Science, took the cue from anthropology to embrace fieldwork and defer to their study communities by extending an active voice to their members. Yet no other discipline had the in-depth engagement that long-term fieldwork provides, enabling anthropologists to learn local languages, participate in rituals and ceremonies, and broker for their study communities. Thus, the knowledge acquired by anthropologists is almost "instinctual" and our experience and training help us focus on the more nuanced aspects of cultural differences and predict behavior more adequately than outside observers or people with an untrained eye.

Notwithstanding this fine-tuned vision, anthropology was challenged to engage in ethical commitments and go beyond a strictly academic and self-serving approach to fieldwork and publishing. More native ethnographies were encouraged to take the necessary lead by people who were studied by anthropologists. Mutual engagements between anthropologists and their communities became necessary for anthropologists to continue their work. This compelled anthropologists to create collaborative partnerships that extended to their interlocutors intellectual property rights and a higher visibility in the production of anthropological knowledge (see Bernard and Salinas, 1989).

There are a number of national anthropological schools or traditions. While they converge on a number of issues, such as the importance of fieldwork, and the dissemination of knowledge, they continue to manifest significant differences. For one, as Johan Galtung (1986) had observed earlier, the Anglo-American tradition has more affinities with empiricism than theory, and also profits from the global preeminence of English as the language of scholarship, commerce, and diplomacy. The implications of this bias have repercussions in many areas, notably in scholarly publications. The linguistic hegemony of English means that a number of non-English intellectual traditions have been compelled to express themselves in a linguistic medium that obscures their own perspective. Non-English peoples additionally may need English to argue for their legal rights. Even in countries such as France and Germany, scholars are urged to publish in English to gain recognition in the global world of academe. While anthropology prides itself for looking at each culture in its own terms, the predominance of English as the world's main language contradicts this position.

We will return to this point later, but first turn to the anthropological construction of knowledge and some of the adjustments the profession of anthropology needed to make in order to become relevant in the 21st century.

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Biographical Sketch

Louis Forline is a Brazilian-American anthropologist and grew up in the U.S., Panama, Libya, and Brazil. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Florida in 1997 and is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Nevada, Reno, where he has taught since 2004. He also taught anthropology at the Universidade Federal do Pará in Belém, Brazil, and was a postdoctoral researcher at the Goeldi Museum of Belém. His research interests include indigenous ethnology, ecological anthropology, indigenous knowledge, sustainable development, race and identity, primarily in the Brazilian Amazon. He has worked among the Awá-Guajá of Maranhão state, Brazil, since 1990, examining their use of natural resources and the causes and consequences of engagement with Brazilian mainstream society. Dr. Forline also conducted Environmental Impact Assessments on the Curuauna and Belo Monte hydroelectric dams of Pará state, Brazil and consulted for Brazil's Indian Service (FUNAI) to establish heritage sites for the urban Indians of Altamira. He also did consulting work for the Juruna Indians of the middle Xingu to assist in revising the limits of their land. Earlier, he worked on an interdisciplinary team to examine mother-infant feeding practices among peasant and indigenous communities of Pará state, in addition to working in a coastal fishing community in northeastern Brazil examining health and dietary taboos. Currently, he is co-editor of the journal *Hunter Gatherer Research* with Graeme Warren of Univ. College Dublin and serves as the book and film review editor for *Tipiti*, the journal of the Society of Anthropology for Lowland South America (SALSA).