

FATEFUL LEGACIES AND THE BURDENS OF ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: UK ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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There are significant national differences between the public profiles of anthropology in different countries and regions of the world today. The obvious way to account for them is to apply sociological analysis to the development of the discipline in different contexts, and at the same time consider the differences between the contexts themselves. In the case of British social anthropology, much, if not all, of what we need to know to diagnose the roots of the problem has already been published. Key texts include Jonathan Spencer's incisive implementation of Edmund Leach's suggestion that: 'the sociology of the environment of social anthropologists has a bearing on the history of social anthropology', in an article published in *Annual Review of Anthropology* in 2000 (Spencer 2000: 21). David Mills has recently been exploring the history of the discipline in a whole range of incisive articles, with a major book on the way. One very accessible example that illustrates the way David makes history ask searching practical questions about the future is his *Anthropology Today* piece on the history of the two UK associations, ASA and RAI, and the implications of their continuing separation (Mills 2003). Adam Kuper's celebrated and thrice updated contribution to the intellectual and social history of 'The Modern British School' remains a rich and indispensable reference (Kuper 1996), even if Spencer's article also makes the important point that we need to continue thinking about what, if anything, makes British anthropology distinctive today. There is much more out there on the historical front, but these examples are sufficient to demonstrate the point that if we have a problem in Britain, it is not due to a lack of analysis and self-reflection.

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Some of those reflections are very explicitly addressed not simply to understanding, but to action for change. Another key text in this regard is the collection *Popularizing Anthropology*, edited by Jeremy MacClancy and Chris MacDonaugh (1996), which adopts a valuable comparative focus by comparing and contrasting the histories of 'public anthropology' in the UK, USA and France. The fact that the text is now ten years old but seems to have lost none of its original relevance is perhaps a little disconcerting, as is the fact that things have gone downhill somewhat in France since it was published. But the fact that we still have a problem is not because we have lost interest in the issues. Minds continue to be focused in Britain by repeated problems with the media representation of our work and vocation, and with our apparent incapacity to project our voices into public debates in which many of us would like to be present. Another concern is the sense that weak public presence is an increasing threat even to the academic reproduction of the discipline, one of WCAA's motivations for seeking to foster international debate on these issues at this time. There is, however, an obvious difference between a concern with public presence motivated by considerations of professional self-preservation and one that is motivated by a passionately felt desire to break out of the ivory tower for intellectual, moral and/or political reasons. This latter objective is very much at the heart of the important contribution made recently by one of today's panellists, Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2005). Eriksen's book not only explores why anthropology has not done as much as many of its practitioners hoped to do in terms of 'changing the world' in many countries, including Britain. He also offers many incisive practical suggestions about how to do better, with the authority of someone who undeniably *has* done better than most of us in engaging with serious public issues and taking the flack that such engagement inevitably entails. Even if Norway has offered a more favourable context than Britain for such endeavours in recent years, I doubt any British reader could work through the book and reject Adam Kuper's assessment (in his endorsement on the back cover) that Eriksen has shown that it is at least partly our own fault that our voices are so seldom heard. The question is simply whether, as Adam hopes, we can finally 'raise our game'.

All I want to do here is, firstly, to recapitulate some of the reasons for the British difficulties, and then to say something about how I think they might be overcome. In broaching the second question, I am going to try to combine a dash of realism with a considerable amount of attitude. Let me begin with the first and easier bit.

As all our historical studies show, British anthropology used to have a lot more impact, at least with a relatively educated public. Malinowski sold books and he sold himself, even the gap between promise and substance in his 'sell it with sex' strategy would have violated today's consumer protection laws. Yet as soon as social anthropology consolidated itself in the academy, it immediately turned inward, led by figures such as Evans-Pritchard, turning its nose up at the efforts at popularization that continued to be made beyond the margins of the academic establishment that so grotesquely defended its exclusiveness as a club by limiting access to the Association that I now chair. Although the Colonial Research Council provided the departments with assured funding, the fact that the anthropologists effectively controlled it made 'relevance' *less* rather than more necessary (MacClancy 1996: 14). Anthropologists were prepared to chat to academic colleagues from other disciplines, but the majority legitimated a position that made teaching the subject to undergraduates, let alone school students, inconceivable: anthropology was complex, theoretical and required mature minds. What flew in the popular market was ethnology and popular work on human evolution: to a considerable extent, a desire for simple (and preferably exotic) answers to such questions that have something to do with sex is still a media obsession in the UK. As Jonathan Spencer points out, this culture of intellectual complexity and exclusiveness was reproduced through a key institution, the weekly seminar, which displayed striking ritual regularities across differences of departmental culture, in a context in which the intellectual life of the discipline was in practice dominated by a handful of core departments (Spencer 2000: 18–19).

One of the fateful consequences of the discipline's trajectory up to the 1970s was that it failed to benefit greatly from the post-war expansion of the university sector, even though new departments were founded in innovative new universities such as Sussex. Although anthropologists did slowly embrace the possibilities of doing research in and on the UK, even those like Gluckman who often called the subject 'sociology' and supported such developments still thought that the really important theoretical stuff lay elsewhere, and were not afraid to talk about 'primitive societies' (Mills 2005). Sociology boomed as a separate academic discipline whose tenuous links with social anthropology have tended to impede the functioning of joint departments and led to the complete extinction of quite a number. It is true that there were also certain advantages in this strategy. Anthropology was spared much of the active aggression manifest towards sociology

by neo-conservatives, even if it was deemed useless (for studying 'the pre-nuptial practices of the inhabitants of the Upper Volta', as Norman Tebbit, Margaret Thatcher's chief bull-dog, put it); it achieved a reputation for grounded intellectual rigour and sophistication that did make dialogue with anthropologists interesting to some other academics; we did carve out our own niches in the world of policy and practice; and we have always come out very well in evaluations of research quality, as benefits a small subject largely confined to elite institutions in which competition for jobs is strong, and not restricted to UK citizens, given our international academic profile. A Manchester Vice-Chancellor once described my own department as a 'jewel' in the institution's portfolio (and it has been consistently supported financially as such). But the strategy probably brought more disadvantages than advantages for those of us who want to be at the centre of the social sciences and humanities rather than on the periphery.

Whatever anthropologists actually worked on in the now post-colonial world, and it is worth remembering that issues of urbanisation and migration were already firmly on the agenda of many colonial anthropologists, this abandonment of potential fields to sociology, together with a continuing popular enthusiasm for posing issues in an evolutionary frame, not only did not help the profession transcend the 'savage slot' but kept the 'savages' firmly savage in the public imagination. These problems do not go away, despite the public impact of the sensitive ethnographic documentaries produced by Granada television in its famous *Disappearing Worlds* series, which were generally firmly contextualising in a world of change and not restricted to so-called 'tribal cultures'. Indeed, if the popularity of the ongoing BBC series *Tribe* is anything to go by, they are deepened by current genres of 'edutainment': we get to know 'tribes' by watching an ex-soldier doing boy's stuff with the natives in exotic locations and the natives do not get much chance to speak for themselves (Caplan 2005). Although *Tribe* does have its defenders as a vehicle for public anthropology (Fish and Evershed 2006), and indeed, recruiting anthropology students, as Pat Caplan points out, it is both ironic and important that TV documentaries that actually stand in a more or less unbroken line of descent from *Disappearing Worlds* are generally not seen as having anything to do with anthropology at all because their subject-matter does not fit a stereotypic view of what anthropologists do and how they do it.

Some British social anthropologists with impeccable academic credentials, notably Edmund Leach, did successfully function as

public intellectuals in what Eriksen (2005) defines as the 'slower' sectors of the electronic media of their day, particularly quality radio, and Leach also wrote for quality weeklies such as *The Listener*. Yet the fact that the latter is long defunct signals the importance of transformations of the media themselves. Leach also played an important role in fostering the efforts of the RAI to bring anthropology to a wider public marked by Jonathan Benthall's appointment as Director in 1973. These efforts remain ongoing and cumulative, despite the Institute's limited resources, and they are now transcending some of the shibboleths of the past, such as keeping the subject away from schools. Yet even a fine publication like *Anthropology Today*, unafraid of courting controversy and fostering debate, is not a newsstand item, but largely read by other anthropologists. This reflects economic realities in the market for 'slower' print media in the UK. Ernest Gellner's prominent public intellectual role reflected the fact that he had established a strong reputation as a philosopher. Furthermore, and not a little ironically, what Gellner stood for as a philosopher² was sharply opposed to the postmodernist brand of relativism to which an increasing number of British anthropologists subscribed during the last ten years of his life (Hickox and Moore 2006). So when one speaks of the decline of anthropologists as public intellectuals in Britain, it is necessary to be restrained in evaluating the impact that UK academic anthropologists ever had in the broader public sphere during the postwar period, although even today, we can perhaps point to a more mediated influence effected through our dialogues with other disciplines and practitioners of various kinds. Indeed, one of the important conclusions of this year's international benchmarking review of British anthropological research is that British anthropologists actually underestimate their impact, relative, say, to anthropologists in the USA, in this

2 Like Richard Rorty, Gellner was anti-foundationalist, but his brand of universalism could be equally uncomfortable to many anthropologists in the certainties it still embodied, despite a degree of respect for difference, about the beneficence of North Atlantic power, knowledge and moral reasoning. But as someone trained in, and frustrated by, Oxford analytical philosophy, I confess to having found Gellner (and Isaiah Berlin) profoundly congenial in other respects. Nevertheless, my generation was more likely to flee from Ryle or Wittgenstein into the arms of Hegel and Marx... and thence to the early Foucault. Although Elizabeth Anscombe's willingness to stand up and be counted against war crimes was a plus, her Catholic convictions on other questions detracted from that engagement.

kind of 'knowledge transfer' and opinion shaping, and should do more to shout about it (ESRC 2006).

It is undeniable, however, that the problems that British anthropologists faced in engaging the public sphere were exacerbated by the transformations of British Higher Education from the late 1970s onwards and the impact this had on the cosy world of those who constructed the post-war subject in academia. Funding cuts, loss of exclusive disciplinary control over research funding, the merging of former polytechnics into a unified tertiary sector accompanied by unfunded expansion of student numbers and remorseless 'efficiency savings', along with many other developments carefully documented in the analyses of Jonathan Spencer and others, all transformed the institutional environment. Transformations have also continued remorselessly in areas such as publishing, in which an anthropology ill-adapted to the 'trade' market of high volume sales now finds its even academic niche markets squeezed by rising costs and shrinking sales, at least in the print sector. But the development that has most marked the transformation of the university institution in Britain is our intense and pervasive adoption of neoliberal audit culture and systems of micro-management and evaluation. At one level, anthropologists in the UK have responded to these transformations with unusual vigour: UK anthropologists have led the way globally in developing critical analyses of the logic and perverse consequences of these very systems (Shore and Wright 1999; Strathern 2000). Yet there could be no better illustration of the principle that being able to do a fine academic job on the world is not sufficient to stop it having profound effects on the very subjects formulating the critique, state-dependent proletarians as we are.

Being tight-knit and organised has enabled us to win a few skirmishes in the battle with intervention, but it has not enabled us to prevent the culture of evaluation putting 'research performance' and academic publications at a premium for individuals who have also faced rising everyday burdens of teaching and administration. Furthermore, the game changes endlessly, with the latest threat being a shift from peer review to funding and bibliographic 'metrics' in future forms of assessment, developments justified in the spurious name of 'transparency' by a government eager to reduce the cost of turning the screws of managerialism even tighter. Although we are told that communication with the public and 'research users' is of paramount importance, the latest revisions of the criteria for ranking our 'outputs' place an even greater premium on 'impact' in the academic field itself, with a

‘natural science’ model increasingly to the fore. Within the peer review based systems, there is at least still some scope for the reviewers to exercise judgement over what constitutes an excellent and valuable contribution to the subject. Our subject sub-panel for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise continues to resist the imposition of crass measures of grant income accumulated and pecking orders of journals and publishers. But there is still little positive incentive for individuals to dedicate more of their time to public anthropology. Many people hardly have time for their families these days given the intensity of the pressures placed upon them by this neoliberal apparatus.

Audit culture is widely seen as promoting a general culture of professionalisation and academic self-enclosure. Nevertheless, it clearly has not spelled the complete death of the public intellectual to date, and we must look for specific explanations of anthropology’s relative weakness in this regard. These are, I suggest, to be found in our early adoption of an excessively professionalised ethos, and a fear of seeing the erosion and dilution of our tradition of problematising and ‘complexifying’ common sense views of the world through ethnographically grounded and analytically sophisticated sceptical questioning of the apparently obvious. Because our questions now tend to depart from those that instantly fascinate the public, our answers often run against the grain of what most other ‘experts’ have to say about the world, and we are relatively inclined to answer a straight question by deconstructing it, we are neither media-friendly beyond exotic tales of travelling off the beaten track, nor as able, say, as historians, to tell a tale that makes immediate sense. And to make matters worse, we even turned at the end of the twentieth century to deconstructing our own knowledge claims with a frenzy that left us fragmented and often confusing, even to our own students.

I am certainly enough of a paid-up member of the guild not to want to sacrifice the critical commitment to understanding human life’s complexities and contradictions that we have made our hallmark, and I agree that one of the purposes of cross-cultural analysis is to unsettle what we think we know, even if alterity can also be fetishised and exaggerated methodologically. These considerations are certainly far from purely ‘academic’: anthropologists often, for example, show that we need to understand particular conflict situations in non-stereotypic and more complex ways, in order to discourage interventions that will make bad situations worse. On occasion, such advice is acted upon, though seldom through a direct impact on public opinion,

as the relative lack of success of a 1990s UK initiative to bring anthropological knowledge into the centre of public understanding of so-called 'ethnic violence' in which I was involved in the early 1990s demonstrated. Nevertheless, I do agree with Eriksen that our way of thinking and focusing on talking to each other has produced an unnecessary introversion of language, and an incapacity to accept that there generally is a heart of the matter that we should not have to read to the end of every book to discover, if we ever really do.

There are things we can do about that, but they cannot be done within the world of academic publishing alone, and what it is possible to do within print media in general is variable between countries. This is not an argument against trying to find a greater voice in the established commercial media, but it does suggest that in Britain at least, great energy and coordination will be necessary to transform a situation that is not currently very encouraging. In the brave new world of blogs and web-based independent media, these constraints may be less critical to effective self-expression. Indeed blogging and emailed comments to media websites offer opportunities for anthropologists to intervene in public debates in the mainstream media that are far more extensive than the old 'letter to the editor' columns. The problem with the independent media approach is that the sheer volume of information out there makes having an impact on people who do not share your views more difficult than it might seem. If we are going to go down that road, we are going to have to do it really well and powerfully.

So now for the attitude part. As chair of the ASA, I guess that I should be mindful of the good advice implicitly offered by Jonathan Benthall, in a typically self-effacing commentary on the limits of what he felt he had been able to accomplish at the RAI through the launching of RAIN and its successor, *Anthropology Today*:

If the Institute had had as its Director a more flamboyant personality than myself, that person might have been able to attract the massive support which anthropology certainly deserves. But a temperament of that kind would probably have alienated the numerous anthropologists who expect *their* Institute ... should serve them and the discipline, rather than legitimating some cult of personality (Benthall 1996: 136).

I am certainly not anxious to follow some of the friends whose engagement I otherwise most admire, such as Nancy Scheper-

Hughes, into an occasional excess of foregrounding the self, and I am not totally antagonistic to Eriksen's asking 'what is wrong with a laugh?' in the context of Micaela di Leonardo's swingeing denunciation of some of the ways in which anthropologists still find their way into the media in the twenty-first century (Eriksen 2005: 35). But di Leonardo's critique is not focused on 'trivialisation' but on the far from trivial silences and obfuscations that some kinds of 'anthropological gambits' induce when they work with, rather than against, the grain of the power relations that structure contemporary US society (di Leonardo 1998). By all means let's have a laugh from time to time, including at ourselves. But let's make sure first that we know what's harmless entertainment and when it might be more appropriate to make humour the blacker, more ironic and often downright 'tasteless' sort that we so frequently encounter in poor and powerless people (Goldstein 2003). Entertainment may have its place in anthropology's public profile, but we must be sure we know how to handle it. As anyone who has experience of trying to deal with the contemporary media must know (and di Leonardo amply documents from her own experience), even the most streetwise can easily live to regret the day they stayed on the phone or went down to the studio. There is a fundamental difference, on the one hand, between making the discipline more 'popular' in the sense of getting more people to read or listen to professional anthropologists and, on the other hand, making anthropology make a significant difference to public culture on the kinds of issues that Eriksen wants us to engage.

The first objective has often been accomplished by work that has caused considerable angst, not only to other anthropologists but also to the people it is about, as exemplified by Turnbull's bestselling caricature of the Ik (MacClancy 1996: 43). We clearly simply cannot let ourselves offer what 'the market' might find attractive unselectively, even if we can and should do more to make anything we have to say intelligible and readable. The second involves high levels of risk. There is the risk of saying something we might live to regret in the arena of 'fast media' (Eriksen 2005: 77). I agree with Eriksen that blaming the shallowness of the contemporary media while doing nothing to resist that shallowness is not much of a position (*ibid*: 90), but resistance is not simply about trying to introduce a tad bit more complexity through slightly 'slower' channels of communication. It is about caring enough to risk saying things that are not consensual within one's academic discipline and in some cases, living with controversy that may have effects beyond abusive letters and emails.

Not everything that anthropologists might usefully have to say to their societies has that quality, of course. But if *none* of it does, this might be a cause for concern, and if we avoid those issues or try to euphemise their presentation simply to avoid risk, this is definitely a cause for concern.

At the risk of sounding too serious for words, let me quote a famous passage from Gramsci's writings that is both a diagnosis of the problems posed by the separation of the Italian intellectuals of his day from the life worlds of the masses and a defence of the 'higher knowledge' of science versus 'common sense' as a *political* necessity. In some ways Gramsci the Communist and Marxist – as distinct from the Gramsci 'lite' that sometimes figures in anthropological accounts – is shocking to some contemporary sensibilities: one reason it is shocking is that it takes the debate away from the opt-out that normative stances are a purely individual matter of conscience when it comes to changing society and asserts the responsibility of intellectuals to struggle, collectively, for hegemony:

The popular element 'feels' but does not always know or understand; the intellectual element 'knows' but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel ... the intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned (not only for knowledge in itself but also for the object of knowledge; in other words that the intellectual can be an intellectual (and not a pure pedant) if distinct and separate from the people-nation, that is without feeling the elementary passions of the people, understanding them and therefore justifying and explaining them in the particular historical situation and connecting them dialectically to the laws of history and to a superior conception of the world, scientifically and coherently elaborated – i.e. knowledge. One cannot make politico-history without this passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation (cited in Crehan 2002: 130).

Anthropologists really ought to be able to say something about how their research subjects 'feel', even if, when reading Gramsci on the southern Italian peasantry, we might conclude that his accounts of 'elementary passions' missed quite a lot about subaltern consciousness (and political rationality). Yet much of

what we have to say as intellectuals in an era in which knee-jerk cultural relativism has largely been replaced by more power-laden accounts, is based on claims to offer a 'superior conception of the world' (relative to 'native models' and a multitude of external understandings alike). Our problem is with the other side of the 'feeling' bit. Professionalisation and the container of the modern university as neoliberal knowledge-factory manned by self-regulating helots of audit culture constitute powerful machineries for the suppression of passion. They may also still be spaces for the free expression of criticism and dissent (anti-terror laws and Patriot Acts notwithstanding), but this in itself does not make an intellectual of the kind Gramsci wanted. We have to find ways of making our complicated stories not simply stories that do have a clear conclusion, but we also have to *want* to make those stories the basis for a 'superior conception of the world' that changes it.

This is not a call for anthropologists to advocate 'God-like' policies of social engineering of the kind whose drawbacks Benthall noted in his paper, nor is it as ambitious as the Gramscian call for the theoretical work needed to advance practical steps towards building the proletarian society and culture of the future. Much of what we might want to say in the public sphere is likely to be quite modest in its scope and implications. In Britain at least, a bit more opposition precisely to the kind of God-like stance adopted by Tony Blair might actually be a good place to start. Nor do we all have to work within a single normative consensus. But we do, I think, have to match the increasing normativity of other public discourses with our own, hopefully more humanistic alternatives, with greater conviction and firmness. This does mean translating the complexity we value into an unambiguous position. It may also mean putting the message before the enhancement of the public impact of the discipline of anthropology and not waiting until someone else comes up with a question that they think is relevant to anthropology. If the messages have sufficient power and relevance then they will eventually be linked back to anthropology as the source of knowledge and inspiration.

That might also be the best way of recapturing a public image of anthropology as a truly wide-ranging and universal project for the study of what it means to be human everywhere, a vision that was lost along the road to academic professionalisation and the carving out of an exclusive niche for British social anthropology in the academy. There was always an alternative, and it is not too late to revive it, in a world still blighted by ethnocentrism and the

cynicism and barbarism of North Atlantic defence of a declining global hegemony.

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