Public Anthropology

Enduring Whims and Public Anthropology

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“You might come here Sunday on a whim.” —Richard Hugo, Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg

Anthropology shares with poetry a range of styles that reach from stunning commentary on themes of the times to esoteric, obscure, and barely accessible reflections on itself. Long before a wing of anthropology turned introspective, poetry stumbled through a phase of talking more about what poetry was than addressing with moving verse a deeply human capacity for appreciating, assessing, portraying, and understanding one’s surroundings and relationships. It was primarily less self-indulgent poets like Elizabeth Bishop and James Wright who were able to develop the staple literary themes of illness, abuse, dysfunctional relationships, and coming of age by enhancing them with imagery from social justice, structural violence, historical knowledge, collective memory, and other subjects familiar to anthropologists.

Amid this self-indulgent phase, Richard Hugo told his students about an essay he had published comparing his work as a professor poet to his work at Seattle’s Boeing plant as a service writer, translating mechanics’ needs for engineers. Like Alan Dugan and Philip Levine, Hugo spent time outside of academics, working in a factory, before his poetry earned him enough recognition to attract the attention of the University of Montana’s English department. Among the issues Hugo raised in his essay were the supposed disconnectedness and isolation of the ivory tower and the supposed cutthroat world of business at a company like Boeing. Neither of these stereotypes struck a chord with his experience. He found Boeing a pleasant enough place to work, where thoughtful coworkers purchased dozens of copies of the literary magazine in which his essay appeared, and in the academic community he joined were some people just punching their departments’ time clocks, inching to and from office and class, others working with Missoula to do something about the awful bald mountain peering down on the town, and still others wondering, with lovely verse, what happened to a city you might visit on a whim.

Public anthropology occupies different points, with different weight, along just these sorts of continua—from the isolated to the engaged anthropologist, from the penetrating expressions of the academy to the impenetrable interior offices of defense contractors, from the university to the town. At times, anthropologists writing for the public often seek to maintain a fiction of writing outside of the academy, engaging in a kind of journalism designed to detach itself from the theoretical or disciplinary conversations that cannot help but influence what we write. When Alabama’s lawmakers passed their 2011 anti-immigration law, making it illegal for anyone, in any way, to assist an undocumented immigrant, they assumed that they could sever the multiple network ties connecting neighborhoods to schools and work sites, or the temporary connections that made accomplices of clerks at Wal-Mart to recent arrivals buying inexpensive shoes, or the relationships that coursed through the state’s economy so densely that even purchasing a piece of fruit picked by an immigrant could be construed as a crime. Ripping apart the social fabric to such an extent was and is, of course, impossible.

In soliciting items for this section on public anthropology, we are not asking that anthropologists attempt to cut ties to the academy, crossing some fictional institutional border without their disciplinary documents. Nor do we conflate public anthropology with the collaboration with nonacademics typical of engaged, practicing, or applied anthropology, however much the four may overlap. We would like to hear about how anthropologists have translated their theoretical work in ways that engage themes of the times and themes that transcend the times, writing about issues as seemingly mundane yet profound as foods and beverages or as disquieting and tragic as human trafficking with the clarity that the public usually expects.

Public anthropology is not a field of anthropology but a form of anthropological expression, a mechanism for connecting people like those working at Boeing, at city hall, or at Wal-Mart to work that, typically, is most often read by other anthropologists. It moves beyond the proliferation of terms (applied, activist, feminist, engaged, critical medical, community archaeology) to lift up the best of each, dealing with social problems and issues of interest to a broader public or to our nonacademic collaborators yet still relevant to academic discourse and debate. As such, we would like to continue the tradition of the editorial team from which we inherit this section, considering all of those forms of communication that are not typically reviewed elsewhere.
in the journal: “blogs, websites, online videos, other forms of new media, policy papers, expert reports, other forms of ‘gray literature,’” treaties, public testimony, journalism, op-eds, public educational materials, participatory research, conferences, art, theater, multimedia presentations, and much more” (Checker et al. 2010:5–6).

By saying this, we do not mean to confine ourselves to reviews. We found the recent forum on happiness, organized by the associate editor for public anthropology, particularly refreshing (Johnston et al. 2012). And much public anthropology happens in small, subtle, but important actions during meetings, in conversations, in memos or letters-to-the-editor of local newspapers, or in moments of networking in which we communicate something about anthropology and its application to a public issue; for reasons we might never have been able to predict, such communications can have an impact. This public anthropological work often sails below the radar of more established and recognized work, in and out of public anthropology, that appears in reports, publications, talks, and other formal venues. How do we recognize, value, and share this very informal and constant public anthropology?

One method of recognition lies in the realization that the public we hope to reach is global; although the journal is limited by language, our long tradition of anthropological work outside of the United States—much of it, now, spearheaded by non–U.S. anthropologists—positions us to engage issues and debates that may be unlikely to rise to public consciousness in the West. The spread of social media certainly facilitates this, as does our desire to use this section as a forum for telling one another how to reach many audiences with many voices through diverse formats yet utterly, always, with clarity. If we were to solicit work, for example, about foods or beverages, we would be much more likely to consider for review and publication, say, William Roseberry’s (1996) work on coffee than, say, Dafna Hirsch’s (2011) on hummus, at least in light of the following passages:

As I visit the gourmet shop, it might be a bit disconcerting to know that I have been so clearly targeted as a member of a class and generation, that burlap bags or minibarrels, the styles and flavors of coffee, the offer of a “gourmet of the day,” have been designed to appeal to me and others in my market niche. But such are the circumstances surrounding my freedom of choice.

[Roseberry 1996:771]

A group’s preference for certain foods is related not only to income and gendered division of labor but also to embodied dispositions and habitus. In this sense, the Israeli manner of eating hummus (referred to in Hebrew as “wiping,” distinct from Palestinian “dipping”), the entire bodily hexis involved in its consumption, and also its amenability to being shared, eaten from a common plate, manifest the main qualities that Israelis like to associate with “Israeliness”: informality to the point of rudeness but also sociability. [Hirsch 2011:619]

We cannot, of course, nor would we want to, dictate content. We have always believed anthropologists to be particularly adept at making creative connections where few would consider connections could exist, a character trait they share with poets. In a recent essay, Kelly Grey Carlisle (2012:35) spoke of perceiving DNA’s double helix in the chains of roses and vines in Westminster Abbey above the tombs of Newton and Darwin, drawing a connection between the “symbol of Mary, Christ’s humanity” and the evolutionary bond that connects all things human. Just so anthropologists can find connections by thinking, for example, of accumulation by dispossession as illness, AIDS as abuse, guestworker programs as dysfunctional relationships, coming of age in Samoa, or turtles in the discipline’s collective memory. Whether you write about human rights or rites of passage, about harbor seals or Navy seals, about oysters or pearls, we are open to you teaching us, open to you speaking to us as if we were—but of course we are—members of the public.

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Review Essay

Protest Anthropology in a Moment of Global Unrest

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ABSTRACT In this review essay, I explore today’s protest anthropology, the high-stakes domain of professional and political practice in which anthropologists are not just aligned with protest movements, revolts, and uprisings but are also full-fledged participants in them. Focusing on examples from the Occupy Movement, I discuss the promises and perils of taking a protest stance. I argue that, despite the risks, protest
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Because numerous anthropologists have become enthralled by the global cycle of protest and revolt that began in 2011, it may be useful to consider, once again, what role anthropologists might play in protest movements. This is not a new issue, of course. Scores of anthropologists have been involved in historic and contemporary protest movements, including anticolonial struggles, civil rights, feminism, gay liberation, global justice, and AIDS activism, and some have even been at the forefront of these movements. For example, Marshall Sahlins famously invented campus “teach-ins” against the Vietnam War, and Eric Wolf was one of the first to hold them on U.S. college campuses (Jorgensen and Wolf 1970).

Today’s anthropologists who are visibly active in protest movements, revolts, and uprisings seek not just to raise their public voices in support of protestors or to repackage disciplinary knowledge to make it more useful for grassroots activists. They seek also to participate directly as activists themselves. In what ways do these activities push the boundaries of what it means to be an anthropologist? What challenges do “protest anthropologists” face professionally and politically?

In this review essay, I explore today’s protest anthropology, the high-stakes domain of professional and political practice in which anthropologists are not just aligned with protest movements, revolts, and uprisings but are also full-fledged participants in them. By full-fledged, I mean they play a central role in movement building—by organizing and planning actions and by devising new modes of protest and ways to challenge the status quo. And their commitment to their political work is at least as strong, if not stronger, than their commitment to their professional work as anthropologists.

Protest anthropology is especially important today in this context of global unrest. As we face a prolonged global economic crisis, imminent environmental catastrophe, and widespread political instability and civil strife, it is crucial to recognize the limited capacities of mainstream political, governmental, and civil society organizations such as NGOs, philanthropic foundations, political parties, think tanks, labor organizations, community oversight panels, and civil rights groups. In the United States, the neoliberalization of the academy, right-wing populism, and cultural warfare have weakened the public position of the academic left just at the moment when it is needed most. Under these circumstances, the work of protest anthropologists is vitally important. They are taking enormous professional and political risks by involving themselves in movements whose power, influence, and endpoints are still very much unclear. And their work has the power to unsettle many of the current-day knowledge-producing practices in the discipline, much like the reinvented and decolonizing anthropologies of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s changed the discipline in their time.

I focus here only on the contributions of a few anthropologists who participated in the Occupy Movement in 2011 to open up a conversation about the promises and perils of taking a protest stance. Obviously a comprehensive account of the participation by anthropologists in recent uprisings across the globe would move the discipline forward in important ways. For now, my aims are more modest, and I apologize for the omissions I make.

Inspired in part by uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, and Wisconsin, the Occupy Movement famously took over New York City’s Zuccotti Park on September 17, 2011, and quickly spread to other cities in the United States and across the world. The movement stands out for its unique (if not altogether unprecedented) political strategies and tactics, which combine mass nonviolent occupations of urban public spaces, snazzy political slogans protesting wealth inequality (the 1 vs. 99 percent), and radical “direct democracy,” a leaderless mode of decision making via group-consensus building. As a nonhierarchical mass movement that expresses concern for jobs, equality, and economic fairness, the Occupy Movement (hereafter, “Occupy”) provides a powerful Left alternative to the right-wing populism and austerity policies that have gripped the United States and Europe since the global economic crisis of 2008. Unsurprisingly, Occupy draws on many sources for inspiration, from radical parts of the Civil Rights Movement to AIDS activism and the global justice movement. (For early anthropological takes on Occupy as an emerging protest movement, see Juris and Raza [2012].)

One aspect of Occupy on which anthropologists have left a powerful imprint is the mode of democratic practice that has become its hallmark and that has, accordingly, generated a great deal of controversy. For example, David Graeber is perhaps the quintessential Occupy protest anthropologist. Mainstream media outlets such as Rolling Stone, Bloomberg Businessweek, and The Atlantic acknowledge Graeber as a leading instigator of the movement and give him credit, in particular, for encouraging the movement’s horizontal, leaderless mode of decision making at an early, critical moment in its formation. Graeber explicitly conjoins anthropology and anarchism in both his political and academic work as evidenced in his timely book Debt: The First 5,000 Years (Graeber 2011a) and in Direct Action: An Ethnography (Graeber 2009). His views in this regard are also perhaps most explicitly articulated in a pamphlet-sized book published in 2004, Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology (Graeber 2004). In it, he draws on a broad range of intellectual sources—from Marcel Mauss to Piaroa, Tiv, and Malagasy societies—to inspire an anarchist anthropology that forges an alliance with the global elite and instead commits itself to the radical reimagining of a more equal and democratic world. Graeber’s anarchist anthropological perspective is in tune with, and has in fact become a cornerstone of, Occupy’s emerging form of democratic practice. There is nothing coincidental about
this. Obviously he is a seasoned and talented activist—or, as one pundit put it, an “anti-leader” (Sharlet 2011). And his on-the-ground efforts and numerous online publications on popular websites such as the Guardian, the Huffington Post, and Naked Capitalism have inspired many young rebels.

Whether or not one agrees with his views, Graeber’s willingness to link anarchism so explicitly to the anthropological project is brave and noteworthy. This is particularly so given recent trends in U.S. anthropology. In response to growing concern about the insufficiencies of anthropology’s public voice, scholars have pursued several strategies—activist anthropology, public anthropology, engaged anthropology, and militant anthropology, to name a few—to repackage disciplinary knowledge in more media-savvy, morally righteous, publicly consumable, and grassroots-oriented directions. Yet as Catherine Lutz points out, “The concept of engagement can easily lose its critical edge and simply become synonymous with ‘relating to’ or with ‘working for’ anyone or any institution” (Lutz 2010:216). Moreover, engaged scholars sometimes avoid naming explicitly the political ideologies or philosophies that influence them. Graeber’s unabashed promotion of an anarchist anthropology rubric is more in line, in fact, with the ways that proponents of Marxist, feminist, antiracist, and queer anthropology established their political and intellectual bona fides. And, like these approaches, anarchist anthropology is uniquely capable of advancing political debates inside and outside of the discipline and of pushing anthropologists to elaborate more clearly what they think the ideal relationship between scholarship and politics should be.

Graeber also stands out for bringing his particular brand of public intellectualism to the movement. Few responses to mainstream—and even some left-wing—contempt for Occupy’s purported “disorganization” and for its failure to issue demands were more persuasive and more widely disseminated than Graeber’s. For example, in an opinion piece published by the Guardian newspaper, in November of 2011, Graeber describes Occupy’s democratic civil disobedience as an exercise in “true democracy” that gained popular support because of widespread recognition of “the enormous gap between what those ruling America mean by ‘democracy,’ and what that word means to almost anyone else” (Graeber 2011b). He also argues persuasively in this piece and in numerous print and video interviews that the refusal to issue demands and to elect leaders were strengths, not weaknesses; they were refusals, essential to Occupy’s political positioning, that questioned the legitimacy of the existing political and legal authorities and that challenged the corrupting influence of hierarchical political organizations and actually existing representative democracy in the United States.

Other anthropologists have also made important interventions into Occupy’s practice of direct democracy. A few have taken on the delicate yet essential task of thinking and writing about how Occupy deals with internal inequalities and uneven power relationships within the movement itself. For example, CUNY graduate student Manissa Maharawal is a committed Occupy participant who first became involved in September of 2011. She is also conducting her dissertation research on the young rebels in the movement. Maharawal has written widely and critically about what the term occupying actually means in the everyday lives of protestors and about the ways that inequalities rooted in race, class, gender, and sexuality are produced and reproduced in Occupy’s “radically inclusive” spaces (see, e.g., Maharawal 2011, 2012). This is obviously tricky business for someone straddling the divide between protestor and ethnographer. The circulation of her work, in academic and nonacademic venues, shows the extent to which Occupy is itself capable of withstanding critique and is open to addressing the difficult challenge of making direct democracy inclusive in not just name alone.

Of course, Occupy anthropologists face a number of challenges from inside and outside of the academy. One has to do with the obvious tensions between professional and political goals. The moment when anthropologists’ involvement in Occupy becomes tantamount to committing professional suicide has, happily, not yet come to pass, and we can hope that it never does. But punishment for participation in radical movements is not unprecedented in the discipline or in the wider academy. For instance, graduate students who are active in Occupy may also be penalized if their advisors see their political commitments as “distractions” from their academic work. Moreover, it is possible to view the fact that Graeber has not secured a permanent academic position in the United States after his controversial departure from Yale University as evidence of U.S. anthropology’s intolerance of political outspokenness. European universities are in some respects becoming a refuge for protest anthropologists from the United States like Graeber. Is this because these institutions are more open to radical ideas and opinions? Or is it a fortuitous byproduct of European anti-Americanism? Or both?

Protest anthropologists may also make political claims that are difficult for some anthropologists to square with their own ways of viewing the world. For example, some may view Graeber’s claim that “direct democracy” is “true” or “real,” unlike actually existing representative democracy, as unscholarly (Graeber 2011b). Claims such as this can be seen as implicated in the truth regimes and knowledge systems from which many anthropologists seek to remain detached.

Another issue that places protest anthropologists in a tenuous position is the instability and newness of Occupy itself. The risks of studying emerging political movements are well known—and many a graduate student has intended to study a movement that disappears too quickly to give it the sustained attention that fieldwork typically requires. With respect to Occupy, some worry that the police crackdowns that displaced activists from Zuccotti Park and from other urban public spaces across the country starting in
December of 2011 have put the movement on the defensive. They worry that Occupy will be unable to carry on without public spaces to occupy. If this turns out to be the case, it will be a huge political disappointment to many a protest anthropologist and to other activists and supporters of the movement. But it also has the potential to delegitimize the research efforts of the protest anthropologists who spent their time enacting and researching it. Indeed, the discipline at large churns through political causes and topics of interest very rapidly these days. It will be hard to imagine that a dissertation or book about direct democracy in Occupy will be of any interest to anthropologists unless the movement demonstrates some major staying power.

Yet, movement success may actually pose other, more serious dilemmas for anthropologists. It is already clear from what little has been published that many anthropologists who embrace a protest stance are reimagining anthropology at the same time that they reimagine the world through their protest efforts. For example, in their recent article, Maple Razsa and Andrej Kurnik (2012) adopt a more participatory, democratic, and collaborative approach to ethnographic knowledge production than is typical in the discipline. Although hardly a new idea, full consideration of the tenets of direct democracy may encourage a further rethinking of anthropological ethics and of the practice of ethnographic research and writing. How, for example, might anthropologists apply the principles of horizontalism and nonhierarchical decision making to the relationships they establish in the field and, ultimately, to other phases in the production of scholarly work? In the end, ethnographies of direct action may look significantly different from current scholarship on social movements, and the participatory democratic ethos of Occupy may undermine ethnographic authority in new and unexpected ways.

It is precisely because of dilemmas such as these that we cannot do without protest anthropology. Protest anthropology is a high-risk occupation; it is often enacted in compromised, messy, and unstable sites where the boundaries between anthropology and protest break down. That in itself is a reason to endorse and pursue it—to see what happens next.

Kim Hopper’s Regrets

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For years, Kim Hopper has worked as a public anthropologist who studies, works with, and fights for homeless people. He has collaborated with doctors, lawyers, social workers, and advocates. He has published many of his articles through the Community Service Society of New York and contributed countless essays and research reports respecting no disciplinary boundaries. He has sojourned in mental hospitals and combed the streets trying to count who is living there. He helped found and run the National Coalition for the Homeless. He exposes the heartlessness of public agencies. And he will break your heart.

Hopper’s career has coincided with the rise of homelessness as a visible and urgent problem. He (2003:3) describes
his distress on arriving in New York in the early 1970s to find that public suffering on the streets had become routine. He has carefully historicized experiences, responses to, and perceptions of homelessness in New York City and has also shaped our understandings of homelessness as a modern problem. For years, he has collaborated—and when necessary tussled with—people from complementary fields, urging them to look at contexts like the built environment of a mental ward that might shape psychiatric practice or the polarization of the city that fuels homelessness. He has never shirked fieldwork and the aching details of his work on the street humanize without exoticizing.

Hopper has long urged anthropologists to take part in public debates, to translate ethnographic findings into policy proposals. He has pioneered the use of ethnography for expert testimony and prizes the opportunity that courts provide to shape discourse and claim rights to material resources. In 1981, his Private Lives/Public Spaces (coauthored with Ellen Baxter [Baxter and Hopper 1981]) served as prominent evidence for the landmark Callahan v. Carey class-action lawsuit that forced New York City and New York State to abide by a “right-to-shelter” rule and open many more shelters. After the publication of Hardship in the Heartland (Salerno et al. 1984), Hopper sought a similar federal right to shelter law and inspired congressional hearings on the subject. He is clear about the pitfalls of relying on the courts as a last resort and understands that laws and rights must be tediously negotiated and monitored with rules, standards, and institutions (Hopper 2003).

Hopper worries that U.S. citizens have warped views of homeless people, and he often asks why. He has argued forcefully that the homeless are not simply the wandering insane or the carriers of bad culture. He tries to counter public stereotypes by choosing just the right words to capture the problem—words that push people to see things differently. For example, in “Not Just Passing Strange: Homelessness and Mental Illness in New York City” (1988), Hopper questions accounts that the scandalous deinstitutionalization of mental patients in the 1970s had propelled them onto the streets, where they drew attention through their florid and unusual behaviors. Hopper doubts the simple cause-and-effect explanation and notes a significant gap between when mental hospitals closed and when mentally ill people emerged on the streets. He observes that during this time lag, work and housing in New York City had grown increasingly polarized. As inequality rose, poor people suffered life stresses that eventually forced a kind of reshuffling in which poor families cast out problematic kin who had exhausted emotions and resources. Contrary to the conventional narrative, Hopper, who is widely respected in mental health circles, argues that mental illness did not make people homeless. He has made versions of this argument over and over to his colleagues in mental health, advocacy, and anthropology: homeless men bear the brunt of social changes that batter the nearly homeless as well. When their families can no longer provide the care that government should, families have to triage. Homelessness is less a personal journey, he argues, than a social slot for redundant people.

In 2003, Hopper gathered some of his key essays into the aptly titled Reckoning with Homelessness, which was welcomed in many disciplines and reviewed in several languages. This collection offers readers a convenient place to catch up with his voluminous writing and advocacy. He includes ethnographic examples of homelessness in the airport, details methods, and interrogates the ethics of a homeless census count. In the book, he traces the arc of homelessness over 30 years and courageously questions his own and others’ research and advocacy. He worries that he and his allies have created a special class of pet poor people by ignoring the nearly homeless—the desperately poor families and communities from which they have come. Similarly, he asks if in focusing on a category—the homeless—he did a disservice to race, missing the chance to ask why in the 1980s young African American men accounted for a disproportionate share of homelessness. Treating the problem systemically (rather than as personal crisis), he argues that while African Americans’ robust extended families historically buffered trouble, contemporary black homelessness stems from deindustrialization, the diversion of resources to the suburbs, lingering racial discrimination, and the secondary disadvantages that an absence of work lets loose on a neighborhood.

Hopper also asks if the small victories have been worth all the trouble and compromise, if he and other advocates failed to build broader alliances and ask bigger questions, if somehow homelessness has been domesticated as an aberration rather than seen as a window on deeper, less exotic poverty. In this vein, he raises the awkward question of success: Is it an unambiguous good that there are many more shelters than at the outset of his career and that in their own modest way they seem to “work”—albeit as temporary refugee camps for the poor? Have he and other advocates and service providers been performing a kind of “system maintenance,” he asks (Hopper 2003:24, 210)? So too, Hopper worries about the justice he did not seek for the people who were once able to care for their difficult relatives and for his insisting on immediate and targeted solutions while perhaps squandering opportunities for more lasting change. He fears that advocacy has institutionalized an unacceptable status quo.

Rarely have I known an anthropologist to be so inspiring in his public work and at the same time so hard on himself. A model for all of us in his dedication to collaboration, systematic research, and careful writing, Kim Hopper is unflinching in the hard, self-reflexive questions he poses about his own work. He knows that simply bearing witness is not enough: one must also be engaged in making change. And throughout his work, he has called for real change, questioning, for example, job-training programs that fail to
offer a whole range of social services and supports or do not take account of job availability. He calls for real change that addresses inequality and the harsh polarization of jobs and homes. He calls for a massive commitment to affordable housing that includes antidisplacement laws, inclusionary zoning by which developers must abide, a moratorium on condominium conversions, and better job training and job placement. Hopper also argues for advocacy that is less bounded by attention to one class of people and more effective in its translation of ethnography into policy. Drawing on his own mistakes to reshape our public work, he is his own best critic.

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