

5. Does activism have a place in anthropological practice?

Yes.

In this essay, I will explain why in my opinion, the answer to this question is quite straightforward and simple. I will try to prove why I believe that anthropology is a discipline that is very closely linked to activism. As a starting point let us look at the definition of activism: "The use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). This definition says that activism includes actions taken for political or social change as well and actually allows for many things to be considered as activism as it is quite an open definition. The first argument I will bring forward, which might be the most obvious one, is that anthropologists often give a voice to people who usually aren't heard and by doing so, participate in, at least an attempt of, social change. I will continue with questioning the aims of anthropology and especially questioning objectivity and cultural relativism. Finally, and most importantly I will attempt to show that anthropology is a forward-moving discipline, bringing new ideas and new possibilities, all of which I think are very political. Anthropology by exploring ways of "corresponding" with the world (Ingold, 2013:7), promotes solidarity, understanding, respect, and ultimately peace. Not only do anthropologists 'promote' these values but they also practice them in their work, through "long-term and open-ended commitment; generous attentiveness, relational depth and sensitivity to context" (Ingold, 2014:384).

I believe one of the most commonly repeated aims of anthropology, is to help people from one culture understand people from a different culture. In that sense, anthropologists are a sort of bridge between cultures and promote cultural relativism. For example, Ong (1998) calls out on a hegemonic ideology around biomedicine in Malaysia. She writes about her ethnographic fieldwork in a factory in a free trade zone in Malaysia employing mostly single Malay women coming from rural areas. She writes about these factory workers experiencing spirit possession and about the tension between two different perspectives on spirit possessions and two different ways of dealing with the issue. She finishes her article by saying that in Malaysia "medicine has become part of a hegemonic discourse" (Ong, 1998:40), where there is a hierarchy of cultures. Ong, as an anthropologist, is, in this case, trying to understand and show 'both sides'. At the same time, there is clearly a dominant perspective, and power relations in place. That is why she is trying to, especially think about the worker's positions because their culture is being belittled, dismissed, or even discriminated by the managers and employers of the factory. Whether she actually manages to really make the worker's cultural perspective be heard is another question, nonetheless, the intent to call out on a discriminatory system is there, and I would qualify that as activism. This idea of using anthropology to 'help' unheard and misunderstood cultures be more respected might be problematic in that there is a risk to paternalize peoples, recreating the very same culture hierarchy that one is trying to combat in the first place. What's more, this 'aim' of anthropology could be considered quite recent. The beginning of the discipline is actually probably one of the things that created these power dynamics between different cultures. Anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard (1976) who, with his work, was helping the British Sudanese colonialist government (Douglas, 1982), or Chagnon (1938), and Lizot (1985), are all examples of an anthropology that created certain dynamics between cultures. Some of them might have contributed to theories or written famous ethnographies. Nevertheless, in a way or another, the way they practiced anthropology was based on a strong 'us' versus 'them'. Though the

focus of this essay is not about the mistakes of the past, it is always important too look back and try to learn from our common past as humans.

One of the lessons anthropology could learn from the past is the reminder that anthropologists always come with their own culture. They cannot, in any case, be the neutral, objective, 'white helmets' of any social situation. And I would also add, that they shouldn't be. Scheper-Hughes poses the question: "What makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and even a political) stand on the working out of historical events as we are privileged to witness them?" (1959:411). Here, she calls on a "human responsibility" which is 'above' everything else. The dilemmas that she encountered as an anthropologist in Brazil and South Africa, that she writes about in her article, are what made up her mind about how anthropologists should work. She faced situations where she clearly could not stay neutral. In a Cape squatter camp, South Africa, for example, she brought a young man, Micheal, who had endured a punishment for stealing, (50 strokes and some times in isolation) to the hospital because she considered that he needed antibiotics to survive (Scheper-Hughes, 1959:412). This is an act that could be criticized by more 'traditional' anthropologists who would consider that an anthropologist should have no effect on the communities that she is working with. By referring to a "human responsibility" though, the life of this man, in that moment, in that context and situation was more important than the anthropologist trying to be neutral in order to create 'good' anthropological data. So, she as a human being and an anthropologist took the decision to bring Micheal to the hospital.

In the same article, she shares the transition she went through from thinking that she should be an "objective anthropologist" to becoming a "politically and morally engaged *companheira*" (Scheper-Hughes, 1959:410). In this case, it is the women of the shantytown where she was conducting her anthropological work who told her they did not want her there, with that type of "objective" anthropologist behavior. They told her that if she wanted to ever come back, it would be on their terms and she would need to be participating actively as a *companheira* (Scheper-Hughes, 1959:411). This shows, in my opinion, that no matter how hard anthropologists try to go into the field as objective observers, they will fail to do that, simply because they are human beings interacting with other human beings. Through both of these examples, Scheper-Hughes tells us that anthropologists can not only be observers. The participation in participant observation is as important. Furthermore, she advocates for a more engaged anthropology, where cultural relativism is not replaced by moral relativism. The strong, clear distinction between the home and the field, too often allow for cultural relativism to be used as an excuse to look away from moral questions. Another way of looking at it is Kleinman's perspective that ethical, more abstract universalities are usually privileged over "local moral concerns" (Kleinman, 1999:72). Even though Kleinman talks about bioethics in this case, I think that the tension between universalist ethics and context-dependent morals can be found everywhere and is a regular encounter in anthropology. Because of this very tension, I think anthropologists should embrace their subjectivity instead of trying so hard to be objective. Being an active participant in fighting oppressive systems and dynamics, in other words being an activist, is not something to hide or suppress, it is something to be proud of.

Finally, last but not least, I would like to express the idea that anthropology is also the practice of a more 'subtle' activism. Usually, when the word activism is used it is linked to the image of practical 'hands-on' activism, people protesting, signing petitions, lobbying politicians, etc. The sort of activism I would like to talk about here is different though. Anthropology is a discipline that is very self-reflective. There is a clear acknowledgment

today, of anthropology's past, based on colonialist and racist relations. This self-criticism and reflexivity is, I believe, a proof that anthropologists question themselves and try to move forward, explore new possibilities. In an interview about the Occupy Wallstreet Movement David Graeber, an anthropologist and activist explains that most people would agree that there is something wrong with how society works. "What is really hard to convince them of" he says, "is the idea that anything else would be possible" (Graeber in Schreijäg, 2013). Here, Graeber refers to what we could call the society in the "Global North", obviously these words are based on generalizations and in the case of this short interview what he means with people and society is not defined very precisely. However, the idea I would like to take from this is that what is necessary is not only criticism about *what is* but ideas about *what can be*. I believe that this is exactly what anthropology can do, and it is where its value lies. Obviously, anthropologists play a major role in 'criticizing' people and ways of doing, but the value and activism of anthropology is actually, I would argue, not only in the criticism but in the possibilities it brings. Anthropology shows how to live with others and in the world attentionally (Ingold 2014:398). Living attentionally allows to be sensitive to the "happenings [of the world] with interventions, questions and responses of our own"(ibid.), and it allows us, as human beings, to explore these different relations or correspondences as Ingold would call them. So, considering what Graeber said and using Ingold's view on what anthropology is (or should be), exploring and showing people new and different ways of corresponding with the world is definitely a way of doing activism. By doing that, anthropology also questions certain ways of thinking about the world. Barad mentions our "Cartesian habit of mind" (Barad, 2003:807), she is one of the main figures to try and break away from representationalist ways of conceiving the world. Ingold is also trying to bring anthropology towards a less 'dualistic' ontology. Though I prefer, however, to think of this in terms of 'onto-epistem-ology' (2003:829), as Barad defines her theory of Agential Realism because one of the dichotomies that need changing is the division between knowing and being. Such ways of thinking, that Ingold advocates for and especially embracing Agential Realism is, in my opinion, a big act of resistance and protest.

These ideas have a value not only for their theoretical and academic 'rigueur', but because they are actually being 'practiced' by anthropologists in their work. Values and skills, such as listening, being attentive, solidarity, empathy, understanding, questioning, respect, reflexivity, are what anthropologists practice every day in their fieldwork. So they not only show and write about different ways of corresponding with the world but they also practice them through anthropology. In their article *From Car to House* (1995), Gudeman and Rivera break down the "myth [...]of the lone, solitary fieldworker" (1995:245). They explain how by working together as a team and really learning *with* the people, is what taught them and shaped their anthropological practice. They compare the practice of anthropology to the practice of a craft and the anthropologist to a craftsperson. Just like a craftsperson, anthropologists cannot work isolated, even more so, because the very material that they are working with, culture, is created and sustained by communities. So instead of going alone to observe a community, they chose to be part of one. They actually refer to their partnership as the forming of a community that they qualify as "equalitarian and democratic" where "no discourse can be hegemonic" (Gudeman and Rivera, 1995:248). For that very reason, this practice is "a moral act because it is founded on trust and a political act because it implies the willingness to be persuaded by others" (ibid.).

Here, you can also find another example of Anthropology's reflexivity. Gudeman and Rivera criticize the way anthropology is often practice and the effects (or the causes) of such practices. Namely, the practice of anthropology as a mere collection and analysis of data or "a passive reading of a social text" (1995:249), this reinforces dichotomies

between different 'types' of knowledge, the practical and the theoretical one, and dichotomies between the observed and the observer. The list of these dichotomies could go on with the separation between participation and observation, ethnography and ethnology, object and subject, being and knowing, etc. This brings me back to one of my previous points about Agential Realism. I am aware that Barad is not an anthropologist, however, I think that her theory questioning representationalism is extremely relevant for anthropology. And Agential Realism is something that I think some anthropologists at least, like Gudeman and Rivera or Ingold, are trying to 'practice', 'live' and incorporate in their work. So, ideas and values in anthropology are not only written in books and essays, they are implemented in people's lives, they are practiced and lived. That is how one can find the flaws and the mistakes by actually 'trying it out', so that there is a constant process of change and improvement, an ongoing process of becoming (Ingold, 2013:25 and Barad, 2003:803). The theories, as well as the 'practicing' of the theories, is what makes anthropologists activists because they use "direct, noticeable action to achieve a result" that is political or social (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019).

To conclude, in this essay I hope I have shown that anthropology is or can be an engaged discipline that does not shy away from ethically and morally complex situations. As Van Maanen said, "neutrality in fieldwork is an illusion" (1991:39), I would add that neutrality in anthropology is an illusion. No matter how hard one tries it is impossible to stop being a human being with a culture, a past, opinions, and subjectivities. I hope to have shown with the examples of ethnographies and anthropologists I used, that it is possible and maybe even necessary to embrace our subjectivity as anthropologists. As a last example, I would like to mention Jackson who very clearly states his intentions as an anthropologist. In his book *At home in the World* where he recounts his time with the Warlpiri people in Australia, he wants "to convey crucial Warlpiri concerns to those of [his] own culture who remain oblivious or indifferent to the struggle of tribal peoples in modern nation states" (Jackson, 1995: ix). Which is what I mentioned at the beginning of this essay as giving a voice to those who are usually 'unheard'. And he also adds that he wants to give an example, a proof "that human beings can coexist in an atmosphere of tolerant solidarity" (ibid.). This sums up the values that anthropology promotes as well as the fact that anthropologists (in general) try to live by these values instead of just preaching them. So, instead of following anthropology's past with the idea of the 'solitary fieldworker' like Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard's "Translation problem" (Beidelman, 1971) or Geertz' ethnography focused anthropology as an interpretive search of meaning (Geertz, 1973:5), which is so deeply embedded in a representationalist view of the world, creating an 'us' and a 'them', that, probably, is responsible for a lot of harm happening in the world today and in the past. I decide to acknowledge anthropology's past and keep it in mind as a reminder, but I decide to move forward. That is why I look up to the anthropologists I have mentioned in my essay, such as Scheper-Hughes, Ingold, Gudeman and Rivera, Jackson and others as well. Because they show an example of personal engagement, honesty, care, creativity in their work that is inspiring, both as anthropologists and as activists.

References:

Barad, K. (2003) 'Post-humanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), pp.801-83.
DOI: 0097-9740/2003/2803-0006\$10.00

Beidelman, T.O. (1971), *The translation of culture: essays to E.E. Evans-Pritchard*, London: Tavistock Publications.

Cambridge University Press, (2019), Cambridge Dictionary.
Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/activism> (Accessed: 5th March 2019).

Chagnon, N., A. (1938), *Yanomamö: the firece people*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Douglas, H. J. (1982), 'Evans-Pritchard, the Nuer, and the Sudan political service', *African Affairs*, April, 81(323), pp.231-246.

Geertz, C. (1973), *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*, New York: Basic Books Publishers.

Gudeman, S. And Rivera, A. (1995), 'From Car to House (Del coche a la casa)', *American Anthropologist*, June, 97(2), pp.242-250.

Ingold, T. (2013), *Making Anthropology, archeology, art and architecture*, Oxon: Routledge.

Ingold, T. (2014), 'That's enough about ethnography!', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 4(1), pp. 383–395.

Jackson, M. (1995), *At home in the world*, London: Duke University Press.

Kleinman, A. (1999), 'Moral Experience and Ethical Reflection: Can Ethnography Reconcile Them? A Quandaryfor "The New Bioethics"', *Daedalus*, 128(4), pp.69-97.

Lizot, J. (1985), *Tales of the Yanomami : daily life in the Venezuelan forest*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ong, A. (1988), 'The Production of Possession: Spirits and the Multinational Corporation in Malaysia', *American Ethnologist* ,15(1), pp.28-42.

Pritchard, E.E. (1976), *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Scheper-Hughes, N. (1959), "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology", *Current Anthropology*, 1 June, 36(3), pp.409-440.

Schreijäg, J. (2013) *Interview with David Graeber - Occupy Wallstreet Movement* [video].
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oT6VCbQPkaU> (Accessed: 6th March 2019).

Van Maanen, J. (1991). Playing Back the Tape- Early days in the Field. In Shaffir, W. And Stebbins, R., ed., *Experiencing Fieldwork an Inside View of Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE Publications.