



Finding a New Public Face for Anthropology

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Finding a new public face for anthropology

Early in September this year, an email addressed to Louise Lamphere, president of the American Anthropological Association, found its way to the mailbox of almost every anthropologist. Its authors, Terry Turner and Leslie Sponsel, are well known both for their anthropological work on South America and for their political activism. The email said that they had read the manuscript of the book *Darkness in El Dorado: How scientists and journalists devastated the Amazon*, written by Patrick Tierney, an anthropologist turned human rights activist turned journalist. It made serious charges against a famous anthropologist, Napoleon Chagnon, and the geneticist James Neel, who headed a multidisciplinary team from the University of Michigan which worked among the Yanomami from 1966 onwards. The principal charge was that these researchers collaborated with Neel in an experiment to test eugenicist theories that would constitute a crime against humanity.

The affair raises several important issues. First, what were the threats to Yanomami well-being as the result of measles epidemics, questionable fieldwork methods, and the 'fierce' image in terms of which they have been described. Second, how should our discipline conduct and regulate itself so that such threats are minimized in future. Third, there is the media representation of the whole controversy, the damage this is doing to anthropology as a discipline, and how anthropologists should deal with this. While the first two issues are evidently of great concern, they cannot be successfully addressed until the full facts of the case are known. Here I would like to focus on the latter aspect.

The public evolution of the crisis is by now well-known. In Britain, the *Guardian* of 23 September devoted a full page to the emerging controversy, which was also covered in the *New York Times* and other US newspapers. In view of the sensationalist nature of the charges, the AAA issued a statement to flag its continued efforts to raise ethical standards in research, and announced a forum to debate the issues at its Annual Meeting on 16 November. The RAI and ASA also began to discuss a response to what was now a publicly aired scandal in the UK. But these initial responses were inevitably cautious.

Publication of the book was delayed until several drafts had circulated. Although Neel was no longer alive to defend his reputation, Chagnon was soon mounting a counter-offensive on the website of his former department at University of California-Santa Barbara. His efforts were reinforced by an anonymous internal committee of investigation at Michigan, as well as by many individual commentators.

On 6 October, the *New Yorker* published an article by Tierney, entitled 'The fierce anthropologist'. By this stage, rebuttals of the case against Neel were already multiplying, and it looked even thinner by the time of the AAA November panels on the controversy. Chagnon's supporters have not, however, silenced continuing discussion of more banal forms of unethical conduct. They also seem unwilling to engage with the criticisms of Chagnon made in the 1970s by Bruce Albert and Alcida Ramos, or with the analyses of Brian Ferguson (1995) and Neil Whitehead (2000). Whitehead contests Chagnon's neo-Darwinian analysis by reconceptualizing the Yanomami as a post-colonial social formation, while Ferguson's historicized explanation for the intensification of violence also suggests that Chagnon's use of trade goods to buy himself into communities made him part of the problems faced by the Yanomami after 1950. But whatever final judgment may be passed on Chagnon, Tierney's attack has clearly had a negative impact on a discipline that has a low media profile,

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Anthropology*.

The AAA Statement
concerning the allegations
made in *Darkness in El
Dorado* may be found on
page 13 of this issue.

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and may hamper the efforts of those who wish to work with
the Yanomami in a different way.

For even if everything that Tierney claims can be shown
to be unfounded, our vulnerability to suspicion remains.
There are substantiated past instances of anthropologists
abusing the trust of the people they study by serving the
national security apparatus of their countries of origin (e.g.
see *Identities*, Vol 4 (3 & 4), 1998). The powerful external
forces impinging on the lives of the Yanomami and so many
other groups inhabiting tropical regions rich in biological
and mineral resources have, of course, prompted a good deal
of critical anthropological research and analysis. But they
may also invoke the collaboration of persons trained as
anthropologists in a variety of ways, some of which may be
entirely principled and ethical, but some of which may not. It
will never be possible to ensure that research is always con-
ducted in an ethical manner, but it is not really the continuing
difficulties of policing our ethical codes that is the root of our
problem. That lies in our continuing failure to project a more
appropriate post-colonial image of the mission of anthro-
pology into the public sphere, and to be clear about the poli-
tics of the knowledge we should be aiming to produce.

Let us begin by considering the scope of anthropological
knowledge today. Globally anthropology is institutional-
ized in various ways, but it is a global subject. Many of my
postgraduate students do 'anthropology at home', but their
home is not the UK. Multiculturalism is now written into the
constitutions of many Latin American countries, and nation-
alist ideologies advocating assimilation (which local anthro-
pologist once helped to construct) have lost ground. In
contemporary Britain, the language of multiculturalism
coexists uneasily with a political rhetoric that still sees cul-
tural assimilation as desirable and also stigmatizes refugees
and asylum seekers. Nevertheless, global inequalities and
geopolitics, metropolitan discrimination and the reproduc-
tion of transnational ties all militate against what was once
assumed to be a destiny of universal conscription to
'Western values'.

Such changes are clearly only a beginning, and do not, in
themselves, deliver rights, greater prosperity or freedom
from everyday discrimination. But their impact on anthro-
pologists is immediate – we now find ourselves navigating
the uncomfortable waters of the politics of identity and dif-
ference in most contexts in which we work. As Di Leonardo
(1998:61) has argued, an anthropology that focuses on the
study of 'cultural difference' divorced from a history of
power relations can only impede such navigation. When
anthropologists reproduce ideas about bounded and homo-
geneous 'ethnic communities' (that were equally illusory
away from 'home') within North Atlantic societies, they fall
straight into the traps set by political constructions of
'national cultures', the historical invention of the 'white
race' and a political language of 'model minorities' versus
'undeserving poor'. In this respect, to invoke an issue such
as the way poverty is politicized should reveal an obvious
opportunity for anthropology. Current neo-liberal models of
poverty, in both their conservative and social democrat
'Third Way' variants, invite anthropological reflections on
the individualistic core of 'Western cultures'. This is an area
where the cross-cultural comparative perspective that I
would argue is the real core of the anthropological project
can combine with our preference for extended ethnographic
research in a way that replaces social class bias, stereotyping
and prejudice with deeper understanding. And, of course,
such research is being done. But the problem at the root of
our current dilemma is that this research simply does not
figure prominently in *public perceptions* of what anthro-
pology is about.

And this is where we come to the crunch. We will fail to
meet that challenge if we continue to talk only to each other
(and concern ourselves more with the fate of our profes-

sional selves than the fate of Yanomami). And yet we con-
tinue to do so.

There are many areas where anthropology does convinc-
ingly speak to a wide variety of public concerns. These
include the new biological and information technologies,
and a variety of manifest public discontents with managerial
styles of governance, the reduction of social value to con-
sumption and the death of 'community' – discontents that
do not necessarily correspond to traditional right-left politi-
cal alignments. At the same time, studies such as those of
Reno (1995) and Richards (1996) offer substantial historical
and contemporary lessons about the problems now facing
intervention forces in Sierra Leone, for example. Yet while
they might have some influence in policy-related decision-
making, their analyses do not receive full page spreads in
the *Guardian*, despite the fact that the paper regularly
reports on the unfolding situation. Nor did anthropologists
figure in the paper's reporting of the attempts to evict
peasant colonists from the Montes Azules biosphere reserve
in Chiapas – a situation with obvious parallels to the
Yanomami case. This is symptomatic of our dilemma.
There are now many areas where it is possible to convince
other academics and policy makers of the value of an
anthropological perspective. In the case of the British gov-
ernment's Department for International Development,
anthropology graduates have even managed to achieve con-
siderable institutional clout. But the big message about the
potential of anthropology is not getting through into the
public domain – which would undoubtedly increase our
clout. And as we have seen in the past few months, this
leaves us wide open to the kind of attack represented by
Tierney's book.

The 'publics' of academic anthropology vary from
country to country in ways that reflect the discipline's dif-
fering social histories, and differing relationships with the
state. For example, there is no British equivalent to the
Boasian movement in the United States, with its strong
public stance against racism and anti-immigrant sentiment.
British social anthropology had its committed activists
(even if they were subject to persecution by some of the pro-
fession's leaders). But by settling for a relatively elitist insti-
tutional position, and rejecting calls for a more proselytizing
approach in schools, the profession in Britain weakened its
position relative to sociology in the longer term (Mills
2000). It also finds itself less well equipped to capitalize on
a growing interest in anthropology among a more socially
diverse range of students (Coleman and Simpson 1999). As
the institutional environment in which academics work
increasingly aims to produce self-regulating subjects
focused on demonstrating their ability to satisfy manageri-
ally prescribed performance indicators (Shore and Wright
2000), our times may not seem conducive to risk-taking.
Yet it is evident that 'keeping our heads down' in the face of
things is a losing strategy.

At a moment when talk about 'inter-disciplinary collabo-
ration' may prove a synonym for greater subservience to a
narrow (ethnocentric and national policy-related) vision of
the goals of social science, anthropology needs to show that
its perspectives are more important than ever *for society as
a whole*. We need to be circumspect about throwing our-
selves into various kinds of activism in fieldwork and,
against Scheper-Hughes (1995), about the difficulties of
adopting a partisan stance in complex situations. Anthro-
pologists do not now exercise the same kind of control
over their field situations as they did in the colonial era.
In many contexts, negotiation of the terms of research access
and even the nature of the research may be inevitable today.
Whatever its final outcome, the Yanomami affair is likely to
have a further influence on that trend. But partisanship and
advocacy are not the central issues in the kind of politiciza-
tion I am talking about here. Rather, this requires a more pro-

the rain forest: War, youth and resources in Sierra Leone. Oxford and Portsmouth, New Hampshire: The International African Institute, in association with James Currey and Heinemann.

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found politicization of our subject (Gledhill 2000), that engages with the public domain *through our own writing*.

It is up to us to convince doubters that anthropology offers distinct perspectives on the larger social dilemmas and fields of national and transnational power in which the fate of particular groups of human beings are entangled. Of course we can tell more complete and satisfactory stories about people asserting (or reasserting) their identities as 'native peoples' in regions such as Amazonia and Chiapas if we understand these in a wider context that acknowledges both their (often equally victimised) neighbours and all the historical forces that bear on their situations. Of course we can explain that some of these forces, notably 'the state', are both experienced (as soldiers with guns and bureaucrats behind desks) and constructed in the imagination on the basis of that experience, in a sense that is important for understanding what people actually do and feel. It is to understand this that we do ethnography – this is where anthropology goes beyond investigative journalism. But there is little point to anthropology if we are not prepared to take our knowledge outside the classrooms. We need the courage to argue for and against alternatives, to challenge ethnocentrism and media stereotypes – which is sometimes a matter of revealing what is positive in the situations we study – and to contest the claims of vested interests and the politically powerful (where these claims are demonstrably false). It is a matter of denouncing prejudice, discrimination, cynicism and hypocrisy more loudly and effectively than we can do through academic publishing alone.

I do not pretend that a more politicized and accessible anthropology is easy. Anthropologists playing the role of officially recognized gatekeepers in the contemporary politics of identity and difference, for example, are faced with serious dilemmas. Real people may be unimpressed by arguments that their identities are constructions, that others can truly 'understand' them, or that anything is to be gained from subscribing to the kind of liberal values that privilege 'understanding'. Explaining how structural factors promote a proliferation of 'difference' to the detriment of, for example, a class or other inter-ethnic solidarity that would have practical benefits can be frustrating. But the point is that this remains knowledge that can be used to make arguments within societies and promote debate between actors and movements. In allowing ourselves the luxury of a decade of introspection, and tolerating the kind of relativism that makes evidence irrelevant (Reyna 1998), we have clearly sown the seeds of this current crisis. But it is through acquiescing in the increasing specialization of our principal means of contact with the outside world, our own writing, that we have finally made ourselves vulnerable to the side-effects of publications such as Tierney's. And as globalization produces a new spate of voices, eager to celebrate a triumph of the West, ironically this occurs at the very historical moment when what we might stand for is more important than ever. □

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Let them eat cake

Indigenous knowledge, science and the 'poorest of the poor'

PAUL SILLITOE

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Chula jalenī – 'no fire in the oven' – is a frequently heard saying among the poor in Bangladesh. People utter it when they have nothing to eat, no reason to kindle a fire to cook a meal. Chronically poor families struggle to feed themselves, and sometimes fail, going without food. One ruse, when children cry with hunger, is for a mother to fetch some water and put it on to boil, to trick them into thinking that she is starting to prepare a meal, and then to rock them off to sleep in anticipation of something to eat.

Development agencies – be they multilateral, bilateral or NGOs – draw on such harrowing images of poverty to justify their work. For over fifty years the so-called advanced economies have invested enormous sums of money in 'development' to promote growth in poorer countries, with the express aim of reducing poverty. Yet the statistics show that during the same period the number of desperately poor people has increased relentlessly.¹ Something is clearly wrong somewhere, as many commentators point out.

What's wrong with development?

The present British government's Department for International Development (DFID) has put this question at the top of the agenda, pledging in a White Paper to halve the number of persons living in extreme poverty by 2015. Some commentators may dismiss this upbeat policy as hyperbole, doubting the veracity of the statistics on which it is founded – such as those contained in the 1997 UN Development Programme's *Human Development Report*, which maintains that the previous 25 years have witnessed a reduction in poverty worldwide and that there is potential for this to continue.² But they cannot deny that some

of those in power are facing up to some hard questions about development's apparent inability to follow through on its rhetoric.

Explanations for the paradoxical failure of development include the following: conspiracy theories that suggest 'development' is all a multi-national capitalist scheme to enslave the world, saddling many Third World countries today with international debts crippling economic growth; donors misusing overseas assistance for flagrant strategic political ends, notably during the Cold War to support and reward allies, but continuing up to present times by tying aid to trade; the neo-Malthusian argument that relentless population growth is wiping out any technological gains, despite the fact that yield statistics demonstrate that the world produces enough food to feed us all.

Whatever the validity of these arguments, it is now widely agreed that the 'top-down' approach which many agencies previously took to development was partly to blame. The assumption that experts, notably economists, can diagnose problems and devise plans for governments to implement to improve peoples' lives is questioned. Many of these plans rivalled French queen Marie Antoinette's reputed response to reports of starving peasants – 'Let them eat cake' – in their inappropriateness. The arrogance, the ignorance of the needs and aspirations of the poor, did great damage. Agencies now accept that they need to consult more closely with their 'target beneficiaries', that is, involve the poor themselves in problem identification and decision-making processes, rather than trying to impose outsider-devised interventions on them. The so-called participatory approach to development has come of age.