

### Activism in Anthropology – One and the Same?

There is a debate to be had in anthropology for whether or not ‘activism’ should be part and parcel of the whole ethnographic process. Does the anthropologist have a duty of care to the people and cultures they study? Or is it an inescapable aspect of modern-day anthropological practice as culturally homogenous globalisation puts pressure on the distinct characteristics of individual groups.



[Above, one of the first images to show up in google for ‘activism’ depicting a very stereotypical placard and sign-based protest. Source (Daniels, 2019)]

I want to put forth to you, my dear reader that the 21<sup>st</sup> century realm of anthropology has no distinct barrier from activism. While as entities they may be separate as a practice they are one.

Technological advancement has brought about this homogenisation of culture; it can now be transmitted in a matter of seconds from Jane Doe in England to Anders Andersen in Denmark (Fun fact I just googled: Anders Andersen is the Danish equivalent of John Doe. You’re welcome.) The point is, where as pre-internet culture would often be attached to the physical and the tangible it is now moving away from the intangible; facebook today is barely recognisable to facebook, 13 years ago when it opened to all members of the public with an email address who claimed to be over 13.



[Left, Oxford street, London, 2016 (Source: Oast House Archive) Right, ariel view of the British Museum, London 2015 (Source <https://www.flickr.com/photos/134898965@N04/19780295540/> Accessed 14.3.19)

However, Oxford street, for example or say the British Museum in London – both of which are places which hold culture in multiple ways in that they are agents of enforcing culture (the way you behave and dress, for example) to being the displayers of cultural objects in one way or another (the british museum holds artefacts, oxford street is home to displays belonging to the Lumiere festival and other cultural phenomena throughout the year)



[The temporary installation at Oxford circus in January 2016 as part of the Lumiere festival (Source: Janet Echelman).]

Donna Harroway, love her or hate her is of the school of thought that as we become more reliant on technology, we are less human as our survival is dependent on the electronic and therefore, we are becoming 'cyborgs' as it were.

Anyway, I digress. My point is socially we can transmit culture thought technology now and in doing this can transmit norms and values (remember when that "WHAT ARE THOSE" vine in which one man makes a point of a US police officer's shoes went viral?) in a way that means that instead of

norms and values being distinct to a region, it is multiregional, or even purely linguistic. Basically, that instead of a cultural rule being bound within a city or county or country or even continent, it is bound only by the thing that can truly restrict it – language. So, many countries that were once culturally distinct become homogenous because thanks to the internet and shared language, they have been able to communicate norms and values in a matter of seconds. Even language is not a barrier, as I have witnessed non-English speaking Italian children and teens mimicking catchphrases or words to songs despite having no understanding of what the words directly mean, or of the words themselves (Think, if they are mimicking: “WHAT ARE THOSE” (Media, J., 2019) then what might be said would be “Wha-y yahr Shoshe”) because a vague indication is understood. Funnily enough, if you were to go to a shop in Cagliari, as is in many European towns and cities, it is not uncommon to hear the explicit versions of popular radio songs that have radio versions devoid of swearwords because very few next to no people will understand them, or care. But that is very off topic.

You’re probably wondering what on earth this has to do with activism and its place in anthropology. Well, a lot. Focus on that word homogenous – it basically means the same or same relation. When culture becomes as a gradual process homogenous, it shuts and restricts non-homogenous culture as a result.

This can leave groups fighting for the rights. So, if you are an anthropologist and you want to understand these people and their culture – you must become complicit in their actions and their activism by default. Think about yourself, all your habits that when you put a spotlight on, might seem strange or unreasonable. Would you give this information to someone who is against you, who is doing the exact opposite of helping?



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[Obligatory stock photo of some spaghetti bolognese with break in the back ground. Spoiler alert because I am no fun, italian pasta would never look like this, because you cook the pasta, the sauce and then you put the pasta in the sauce and give it a cheeky stir on heat and then serve, but hey ho. (Source: Alamy.com)]

For example, I am Italian and in my part of Italy (and I have been told other Mediterranean countries) if you are at home eating pasta with sauce, you may wipe the remaining sauce on the plate with bread after all the pasta is eaten. If you are in public you cannot do it, as it is rude and uncouth.

It is not uncouth to do it in front of your family. It is perfectly acceptable. If Someone had come to document my culture, and my family were fighting for a cause we would be wary of someone who wanted to know the intimate details of everyday life that make up ethnography but were ambivalent or apathetic to the issues that worried us.



[Above, anthropologist and dapper hat man, Alan Ereira (Source: 1earth-institute.net)]

There are many examples of ethnographies where access to groups hinges on the relationship of the anthropologist and the people. Take for example the Kogi and Alan Ereira – they trusted him to carry a message that conveyed their stance on climate change and their worry for the state of the earth.

The Kogi, a traditionally secluded group, had built a relationship of trust and understanding with Ereira and if they felt he did not care for their cause, they would not have chosen him to carry their message.

Activism is not just about taking action and advocacy; it is a state of mind which bridges the gap between cultures of fundamentally different values without crushing those cultures into one homogenous way of being. You cannot be an anthropologist who causes no or little negative impact to the culture they visit and not be in some way an activist.

To leave you with this one final convoluted analogy as to why 21<sup>st</sup> century anthropology and activism are one and the same, in medicine when you have an operation and a complication arises corrective surgery is often the accepted route to wellness. In anthropology, the issues prospective host-groups may face may be the consequences of being host groups in colonial eras (Native Americans, anyone?). 21<sup>st</sup> anthropologists need to understand and accept the role of the second surgeon; they won't be able to set things to right as if the first surgeon never caused damage, but they can certainly make life easier and more bearable.

Daniels, E. (2019). *Activism in Youth: It's a Good Thing*. [online] UVA Today. Available at: <https://news.virginia.edu/content/activism-youth-its-good-thing> [Accessed 14 Mar. 2019].

Media, J. (2019). *Know Your Meme: What Are Those?*. [online] Available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/what-are-those> [Accessed 15 Mar. 2019].

