

Does activism have a place in anthropological practice?

When understanding whether or not activism has a place in anthropological practice first one must establish what is meant by 'activism' and 'anthropological practice'.

Activism (Dictionary.cambridge.org, 2019) can be understood as acting in a direct way to bring about political and or social change. Anthropological practice in this context is probably referring to the field of ethnography. Ethnography in a sterile sense of the word is the study and description of people groups and culture. More broadly, it can be understood as the practice within the field of not just documenting but understanding people and culture as the two are intrinsically linked. This often includes getting involved with the people and cultures in question; adopting their ways of life ways of thinking and being, perhaps changing the name they call themselves and the clothes they wear as well as the food they eat and even adopting new families while they are 'in the field' as it were so as to get as close as possible to documenting the people and culture as if they originated from that group (Discoveranthropology.org.uk, 2019).

In this essay I hope to establish the place of activism within anthropological practice.

It can be argued that activism very much has a place in anthropology, and this can be explained through an analogy with the medical profession. In the medical profession when an error occurs in an operation; if an item is left in or the surgeon makes an error, it is referred to as a 'never event' (because it never should have happened) (NHS Improvement, 2018). This is also applied in hindsight to procedures that are later determined to be of little or no benefit. In modern day medicine before a procedure can be done on humans there is a system of checks and balances to ensure the benefits outweigh the risks. When an individual undergoes a procedure that ends up being a 'never event' they will undergo further medical treatment (one would assume by a different professional) to correct the error. To link this back to anthropology, historically anthropology has played its role in such events in time as colonialism. There are times when anthropologist's role within a group has come into question. How their intervention within a group has played a role in the events that have happened since. This is the anthropological equivalent to a never event – events that should never happen within anthropology include the depravation of human connection and culture through the separation of families in an effort to eradicate cultures considered 'inferior' to politically dominating cultures. An example of this would be the practice in the US of separating Native American children and putting them in boarding schools in an effort to alienate them from their culture which included such acts as cutting their hair and forcing them to adopt Christian names. The hindsight, reparative action of anthropology (in medicine, the second treatment to fix any damage) to help document and validate cultures while connecting them with organisations to help with specific issues groups may face could be seen as intrinsic and intertwined with the act of ethnography its self.

However, one could argue that activism does not always have a place in anthropology, and the suggestion that it is necessary can undermine the agency and ability of the group in question. This statement and opinion can be particularly illustrated by the case of the indigenous group – the Kayapo (The Kayapo - Out of the Forest, 1989) – of Brazil who reside mainly in the Amazon rainforest. It is the fact that they reside in the Amazon rainforest that has exposed them to the effects of globalisation as it has been the site of deforestation, the Kayapo settlements have been on land which would prove profitable for gold mining. Through self-negotiation the Kayapo were able to negotiate a percentage of the profits for themselves (though it is worth noting that it has been documented that this has caused disagreements within the Kayapo and as portrayed in one documentary, they had split into two settlements; one which received the profits off of the land to which they had rights given to them by the Brazilian government, and one that did not, the group of Kayapo that received the money could be seen to have a far more western influence from

everything to wearing western clothing to the way they set out their housing. The 'other' group in comparison did not and were seen to be disgruntled by the prosperity of the other group and displayed a distinct notion of betrayal on their part.) Additionally, through negotiating the Kayapo were able to get an audience to listen to their stance on a proposed dam (Douglas, 2016), that meant they faced resettlement from their native grounds as well as environmental consequences the dam could cause. It is worth noting that in the specific case of the dam the Kayapo were one of many groups contesting this action. The Kayapo do not refer to themselves as such – it is the name given to them by surrounding groups. They are identified specifically here for the documentation of the issue within the group due to the deforestation and mining, and their history with the Brazilian government. They are also known by the name Mebêngôkre nation – of which the Kayapo is seen as a sub-group under this name, which means 'people from the water's source' as the groups under this category live along the Xingu River.

Then again, one could argue that the place of activism within anthropology is unavoidable, and even when a group advocates for themselves as outlined above the role of the anthropologist is unavoidable in that activism. This is to say that the anthropologist by the method of overt participation – participating in a group that know you are studying them - (and indeed covert participation in which they do not know you are documenting them but comes with its own ethical issues) - one is securing the place of activism within anthropology and supporting it by taking part. By opposing it they risk their personal safety, that of the group they are studying and the quality of their research. When an individual commits to participant observation their ability to become one with this group – to be like them as much as possible is important to the integration within the group and the understanding of their way of life. The quality of ethnography as a practice hinges on this. Though not specifically to do with activism this sentiment is particularly illustrated in the ethnography 'Eating Christmas in the Kalahari' by Richard Borshay Lee (1969) in which he details the attitudes towards achievement among the !Kung, and how in the face of prosperity they will exaggerate, highlight or create negative aspects and comments (specifically he gets an animal for them to eat, it is a good animal) this is done in order to ensure that a person stays humble and does not become big headed. This understanding depended on his ability to get to know the !Kung people – it was only when one of the !Kung explained their attitude towards achievement that the ethnographer understood the people better. Now this is not an act of activism in any way, shape, or form but if it had been and the ethnographer had not taken part, he would not have either been able to develop an understanding or develop a relationship enough with the people in question that an understanding could be taught.

Briefly highlighting the above idea that in ethnography with a group one is complicit in the groups actions is the case of the Zapatistas of Mexico (Vidal, 2018). The Zapatistas are a Mexican advocacy group notable for their use of guerrilla warfare against the Mexican government in the wake of NAFTA or the North American Free Trade Agreement which greatly affected the rights of indigenous Mexicans (for whom the Zapatistas themselves advocate) and depleted the industries these people relied on through competition from other countries that they could not compete with. The Zapatistas notably used ethnography and the media to draw attention to themselves as they felt (and to a degree were correct) that the Mexican government could not move against them while they had the attention of the world (in some shape or form) on them.

To conclude, in modern day practice anthropology and activism are intrinsically linked and to debate the place of activism within anthropology is to not understand the practice and process of anthropology and ethnography. In a world in which more and more societies are hurtling towards globalisation – a force that could be considered to be culturally homogenising – groups which have

for many years and seek to continue to live in a way that, from the view of globalisation is 'different' must engage in activism (think Zapatistas and especially the Kayapo, whose claim to their land depends on their activism – if they were complacent they would be moved to the side.) in order to keep their place in the world and assert their right to practice life as they see fit. This is not to say that groups that were not able to preserve their way of being and prevent culturally homogenising efforts from disassembling their groups and families and religious beliefs (1900's USA practice of placing Native children in boarding schools to convert them to Christianity). Or that these groups did not try and advocate for themselves while this was happening. This is to say that today, in an age where the case of Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun gained global attention and went 'viral' (when something gains a great deal of attention on social media and bleeds out into traditional media such as the news) appearing on everything from BBC news (BBC News, 2019) (traditional press) to Philip DeFranco (Why People Are Freaking Out About Sofia Vergara, Gordon Ramsay, Jake Paul, & Florida Felons..., 2019) (A YouTube based news source and personality based in the US who covers both US and Global news – relevant because of the sheer size of his audience and his reach cross-platform on other forms of social media such as Facebook) that now groups and people have the platform that did not exist in this form 20 or 30 years ago and certainly not during colonial eras, to elevate their problems and persecution to the public eye. For the record, Rahaf was able to travel to Canada and claim asylum – before she went viral online, she was being detained in Bangkok and being threatened with deportation back to her home country to the custody of her family. Rahaf's attempt to escape was on the basis that her family would kill her for disobeying them as she had become too western and renounced religion. This is a small-scale example of the struggles many groups face, and through activism within anthropology help can be given. The real work in ethnography is in learning to ingratiate one's self with the people and culture in question. When all is said and done, and the ethnography is written up (if it is in text) or edited (if filmed) the anthropologist has much to be thankful for to the host group. I am of the opinion, that say in theory a group does not have access to clean water or is facing persecution, then it is of little effort to contact the appropriate group – be it a water charity or the United Nations or similar such group. After a group has allowed you to observe them, in some cases they may have given you a name in their language and a place among them - in the case of Ton Otto (2007) a family including a parent to whom as a child he had duties - then it is the least you could do to advocate for them where appropriate. Maybe I as a person am biased in my stance, because for me if there is a chance for me to do good, I know because I have already done it where possible.

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