

The Anthropologist as Apologist?: Colonial Heritage, ethnographic representation and the ethics of advocating practice.

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Abstract

This paper is primarily concerned with the origin and consequence of the so-called “crisis of representation”, particularly in relation to the ethical and moral dilemma facing anthropological advocacy, and the notion that anthropology is hamstrung in its attempts to become “relevant” to the modern world by its colonial legacy.

Having initially surveyed the “colonial” origins of anthropology as a discipline, the paper then examines the anxiety of anthropological (mis)representation, and the denial of “expertise”, found in the critiques of anthropology and colonialism of the 1970s and 80s, which in turn have caused profound existential angst amongst a generation of anthropologists. The paper argues that it is only through an assertion of the *politics* of anthropology, through advocacy, that a self-aware, useful brand of anthropological engagement, of cultural writing and re-writing, can and should emerge.

Introduction

‘Has, for some fieldworkers, the representational crisis metamorphasised into one of direct action advocacy?’ (Parkin et al, 2000, 270).

In phrasing his rhetorical question thus, David Parkin has, in succinct terms, cut to the heart of the most important modern day issues facing anthropology, both as a discipline and a career option. The ‘crisis’ to which he alludes is of course that which gripped, or was perceived to grip, anthropology in the 1980’s, the result of a quite severe bout of introspection on the part of academic anthropologists, relating to the difficulty of fairly and accurately ‘representing’ the objects of ethnographic study, and the “truth” or otherwise of anthropological knowledge itself. Surely, it was argued (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Fabian, 1983) ethnography misrepresented “the Other”, spatially, temporally, perhaps literally, as much as it really “represented” them. What, then, can anthropology do but provide partial, incomplete and biased visions of other cultures, social systems and ways of living?

There is no doubt that this so-called “crisis of representation” was born of a specific historical context: namely the acknowledgement and critique of the colonial heritage of the discipline of anthropology (notably Asad, 1973; Said, 1978). The realisation of the complicit involvement of anthropologists in the policies and practices of colonial rule was understandably distasteful to a discipline engaged in the pursuit both of culturally specific knowledge and practices, and the “invisible” universal connections within and between societies. This search for both “otherness” and “sameness” is central to the anthropological project (Argyrou, 2002), and colours the politics and “temperament” of those both attracted to and already deeply involved in anthropology, at least in an academic context.

However, anthropology has, at base, another central driving force, ideology if you will, which helps shape the aims and ambitions of anthropologists. This is an ongoing desire to cement the legitimacy of anthropology itself, as a “useful” academic discipline, one worthy of both funding and respect. It is in this context, too, that anthropology faced a “crisis”: not of representation, but, as Ahmed & Shore have argued (1995, 15) of ‘relevance’ to the modern world. Removed from the comfort zone, both geographically and intellectually, of the colonial era, anthropology, and the

study of the “exotic”, no longer have their exclusive niche, either in terms of subject matter or methodology, and thus the very point of “being” an anthropologist, as distinct from a sociologist, say, is being called into question (Allen in Parkin et al, 2000).

Numerous recent monographs, articles and conferences have focussed on just this anxiety of relevance (Ahmed & Shore, 1995; Grimshaw & Hart, 1994; Parkin et al, 2000 naming only a few), and have sought to justify and legitimate both the morally dubious activities of anthropologist in the past and map out a coherent, “useful” vision for anthropology in the future. However, as new opportunities for engagement have presented themselves, for instance the anthropology of development policies and practices, important questions have been raised too about the way anthropology has come to regard itself, and the dichotomies (pure: applied, us: them and so on), which are still central to the “ideology” of the academic subject of anthropology.

It is, I will argue, only through a considered engagement with such issues, being at once both fully aware of the historical traditions of anthropology and of the perils and pitfalls of “representation” both in word and in deed, as well as of the ethics of such practices, that anthropology can escape from what Marcus (1998, 249) termed ‘a strong internal politics of anxiety’ and recast itself in an image more in keeping with the aims of its modern day practitioners: one in which “representation” refers both to the self-aware practice of “writing” a culture, and to that of advocating for the interests of that culture. This dual engagement might allow anthropologists to exert greater positive influences on policy and practice in the “real world”, assuage some of the ethical quandaries which the “crisis of representation” has thrown up, and reconnect anthropology with its humanist origins and instincts.

The Colonial Heritage: Practicing against Theory.

It is undeniable that the initial basis for anthropological research, and the rise and consolidation of anthropology as an academic discipline from its inception, is intimately linked to colonialism. From the founding fathers onwards, anthropology has sought out the exotic “other”, and had usually concentrated this search in the colonial possessions of the British empire, at least until the period of decolonisation and independence (Kuper, 1996, 99-120).

The man responsible for the founding of the discipline, at least methodologically, was Bronislaw Malinowski, whose own fieldwork amongst the Trobriand Islanders during the First World War was radically innovative and, so he himself thought and others have come to acknowledge, gave him ‘a strong claim to be the founder of the profession of social anthropology in Britain’ (Kuper, 1996, 1). This methodology was based on participant observation, and remains at the heart of modern ethnographic practice. Thus, anthropologists had a concrete, scientific method for analysing “others”, and, thanks to the colonial system, easy access to objects of study.

Such has been the accepted myth of origin for the discipline of anthropology for well over eighty years. Its proponents visualize Malinowski, Radcliffe-Browne and Evans-Pritchard, as titans of early anthropology, defining and defending the position of anthropology as an academic discipline, while critics have derided anthropology, famously, for being little more than a tool of the imperial administration, and as perpetuating the implicit and explicit power asymmetries of the colonial era (Asad, 1973). Such arguments tend to polarize opinion, and, I believe, obscure what was a much more complicated, and complex, set of relationships, both between anthropologists and colonial administrators, and within anthropology itself, between the theoretical, practical and moral considerations which went into the creation and legitimisation of the subject as a subject.

It is clear from Malinowski’s writings that he saw anthropology as being a scientific endeavour, concerned with the discovery of absolute “facts” about other cultures, which in turn might be of some practical benefit to colonial administrators. In his article entitled ‘Practical Anthropology’ (1929), Malinowski sought to justify the knowledge gained by anthropologists in relation to its use to colonial administrators:

Scientific knowledge on...problems is more and more needed by all practical men in the colonies. This knowledge could be supplied by men trained in anthropological methods and possessing the anthropological outlook, provided that they also acquire a direct interest in the practical applications of their work, and a keener sense of present-day realities. (1929, 23)

Here, Malinowski was not being altruistic, but rather seeking to legitimate the newly-fledged profession of anthropology as an entity distinct from other forms of analysis, notably sociology, and also making a bid for greater use of anthropologists by the colonial administrators. For, as Kuper makes plain (1996, 99):

Until the mid-1930s...there was little in the way of official anthropology in the British Empire and dominions. Taking the empire as a whole, it is not too much to say that by this time the direct anthropological contribution to administration was nugatory.

Neither would it be incorrect to note that the relationship between anthropologists and colonial administrators was at this time anything but cosy. In a response to Malinowski's 'Practical Anthropology' (1930), the colonial official Mitchell suggested, plainly, that anthropologists should let administrators get on with administrating, and that the opinions of anthropologists were in fact of very little use to "practical men" such as himself.

Even with the rise of such entities such as the "Rhodes-Livingstone Institute", set up in the 1940's in Northern Rhodesia, and intended to provide research which would assist colonial rule, the relationship between anthropologists and administrators remained ambivalent. As Brown notes in his contribution to Asad's volume (1973, 173-199) the Institute was never really a "handmaiden" to the colonial administration, and that, particularly following the appointment of Gluckman as head in 1940, the scholars 'were much more concerned with obtaining a British doctorate than in ministering to the needs of the Northern Rhodesia government' (1973, 196-7). Indeed he goes on to state that Gluckman advised the government to appoint its own anthropologists, and not to expect the Institute to tailor its research interests to administrative needs.

A further interesting tension in the relationship of anthropology to colonialism, one that I believe to be at the heart of the current reluctance to advocate for, rather than merely observe, "others", was the subordinate role of "applied anthropology", as opposed to "pure" academic writing. This distinction persists in modern day anthropology, and is drawn from the experiences of early "applied" anthropologists such as Lucy Mair and Audrey Richards, both pupils of Malinowski. As Kuper notes (1999, Ch. 8), Richards and Mair were interested in 'the problems of the colonial administration' (1999, 120), citing Richard's work on nutrition and matrilineal kinship amongst the Bemba of Zambia.

However, it is also clear that "applied" anthropology was considered less demanding, as well as less scientifically pure, and thus less valid, at least on the part of the academic establishment (Kuper, 1999, Ch.8). Added to this, Richards, Mair and other applied anthropologists were 'well aware that African colonial administrators might accept expert advice on matters of practical policy, but that they were not open to criticism on fundamentals' (Kuper, 1999, 131-2), and thus that, as Gulliver has argued (Grillo & Rew, 1985), working within the colonial system might well have been the only legitimate way to ameliorate the harm caused by colonial policies. Certainly, it calls into question some of the more extreme criticisms of anthropological engagement with colonialism made in the 1970's.

In the seminal volume "Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter" (1973), Talal Asad argues that anthropology was deeply embedded in the colonial system, and that the discipline in fact helped to perpetuate power relationships, built around inequalities between the colonial regime and the indigenous population, by imagining and representing the latter as an inferior "other". This is because 'anthropology does not merely apprehend the world in which it is located, but... the world also determines how anthropology will apprehend it' (1973, 12), and thus, he suggests,

'anthropologists before independence were "apologists for colonialism" and subtle agents of colonial supremacy' (1973, 15). Similar arguments about the constructed, imagined nature of Western visions of "Others" are made by Edward Said in his work "Orientalism" (1978), which concentrates on the ways in which Westerners have imagined oriental society so as to belittle it, and thus justify both colonial rule and, more recently, implicit Western hegemony.

Both works provide a much needed counterpoint to the uncritical acceptance of Western domination through imperialism as "natural", and point out, as Asad states, that the notion of "imagined otherness" made the anthropologist 'unable to envisage and argue for a radically different political for the subordinate people he studied' (1973, 18). This last point is doubly interesting. Firstly, Asad is prefiguring the "crisis of representation" of the 1980's by illuminating some of the complexities of anthropological, and specifically ethnographic, representation. Secondly, for an anthropologist aware of the dangers, Asad is perhaps offering a way out of, or rather through, the ethical dilemmas of "representation". Before expanding the latter point, I feel it appropriate to consider the former, and the ensuing "crisis" in anthropology, and its form, in greater detail. I believe it may well have been a crisis not simply manufactured by anthropology, but also a result of the scientific impulses of "modernity", the project, within which much of the intellectual heritage of anthropology was both formed and perpetuated.

Representing a Crisis: Listening and Writing.

The so-called "crisis of representation", prefigured by the critiques of anthropology during the colonial era noted above, was part of what is commonly seen as the post-modern turn within the social sciences more generally, which was at its zenith throughout the 1980's. For anthropology, this turn was particularly sharp. Once it had been demonstrated that anthropologists, and thus their ethnographies, were not operating in a power vacuum, and were in reality shaped by and helping to shape, for instance, the power relationships of the colonial era (Asad, 1973), the claims to scientific objectivity of the founding fathers, notably Malinowski and other functionalists, and the certainty of factual ethnographic representation were fatally undermined.

Thus "post-modern" works were published, which sought to illustrate some of the most serious difficulties involved in the (mis)representation of societies, which was perceived to occur through the writing of ethnography. Central to this was the tension, which was recognised as existing, indeed being implicit, in the very process of writing itself. Clifford & Marcus (1986) thus, with "Writing Culture", articulated this tension as one between the objectivity claimed by anthropologists as "experts" in their chosen field, or tribe, or social system, and the subjective nature of written representation through ethnography. As Clifford states, citing Wagner, a:

focus on text making and rhetoric serves to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts. It undermines overly transparent modes of authority, and it draws attention to the historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures. (1986, 2).

The tension of the written was removed, they argued, or else surmounted, only by the denial of multiple perspectives within societies in favour of the supreme authority of the experience of the author, who was, in general, a Western academic claiming "expert" knowledge of a previously "unknown" cultural trait, system or experience. Thus, ethnography became for them as much a literary as a scientific activity, providing not "facts" but a version of a truth, or as Clifford puts it 'fictions in the sense of "something made or fashioned"' (1986, 6), at once both partial and mediated through the pen of the subjective anthropologist.

The denial of the multivocal nature of experiences within societies, was accompanied by the denial, in ethnography, of the contemporary nature of "Western" and "non-Western" societies. Thus, Fabian (1983, 38-69) argued that the denial of what he termed 'coevalness' (1983, 38) meant that the "Other" in anthropological writing was denied equal status as both a rational actor and as a

human being. This construction of other cultures as backwards, primitive or otherwise less advanced than Western civilization reveals the extent to which anthropology represents a “modernist” project, using the “modern” West as a comparative benchmark and placing the “other”, once “known”, firmly in the less advanced locus of “tradition”.

These critiques of the constructed nature of ethnographic representations raised several issues within anthropology. Two of the most important were the issue of the purpose of anthropology, which had also been critiqued by works on colonialism, and the ethics of representation. It was now clear ethnography represented not scientific “facts”, but rather at best romanticised interpretations or, more dangerously, conscious or unconscious misrepresentations of societies, which perpetuated the power inequalities founded by the colonial system.

Having both noted the rise of a development “industry” after the Second World War and become acutely aware of the perhaps unwanted legacy of colonialism, anthropology sought to reclaim for itself once more its role as a “practical” discipline. Once again, the “will to use” returned, this time tempered by the awareness that anthropological knowledge did not represent “truth”, and that anthropologists could not simply claim “expertise” about a given society.

However, the new opportunities for ‘useful’ engagement through anthropology, for opportunities there were, came, argued Singer (1990; *contra* Halstrup & Elsass, 1990), through an engagement with the applied stream of anthropology, specifically advocacy. The trend towards advocacy, that is representing the community within which the anthropologist worked not only ethnographically but *politically*, throws up ethical dilemmas of its own. How and whether the anthropologist, as an outsider, had ‘the right to write - to write ethnography’ (Geertz, 1988, 133) was contentious enough, but to then suggest that anthropologists should engage in actively seeking to change that society by representing and advocating, surely goes against the doctrine of cultural relativism and is a pure product of imposed “modernity” to boot.

The dangers inherent in ethnographic representation are most clearly illustrated by the reaction to the charges of ethical misconduct made by Patrick Tierney in his book “Darkness in El Dorado” (2000) against Napoleon Chagnon and James Neel regarding their work with the Yanomami tribe of northern Brazil and Venezuela in the 1960’s. Quite apart from the (subsequently disproved) charge that Chagnon was wilfully engaged in spreading the measles virus through a programme of Yanomami vaccination, in order to study its effects in isolation, the most significant attack was on Chagnon’s purportedly unethical methodology and deliberate misrepresentation, on careerist grounds, of the Yanomami as fierce and warlike. As the range and number of responses to Tierney’s work in the journal “Current Anthropology” indicate, opinion was divided as to the validity of these latter claims. perhaps the best overall comment published coming from Lindee, who noted: ‘I am not sure what Chagnon was practicing, but I do not think it was the sort of thing students should be encouraged to emulate’ (2001 [2], 276). It is this type of case, which in part validates the apparent qualms, which anthropologists hold, about the forms of engagement and forms of representation open to them, and the ethics of their pursuit of such activities.

Nevertheless, anthropological advocacy in particular does provide an opportunity for anthropologists to “reengage”, and is, I would argue, perhaps the very solution which Asad was hinting at in his comment about the inability of anthropologists to imagine different futures. Indeed, anthropology has been involved, often unconsciously, in advocacy for many decades, and though the ethics of “advocating practice” are complex, a consideration of historical examples of anthropological advocacy might well illuminate more fully some of the challenges, and opportunities, which this kind of engagement offers both individual anthropologists and the discipline as a whole.

Representing the “Truth”: The ethics of anthropological “expertise”.

There can be little doubt that anthropology has its intellectual and practical roots in the ambivalent engagement with the colonial administration in the early to mid 20th century. The desire on the part of anthropology to be “useful” in practical terms, which was in part derived from the

need to legitimise the discipline as a discipline, has in fact persisted as one of the central features of the anthropological “project”. While anthropology, it would seem, has always sought to illuminate and examine the similarities and differences within and between cultures (Argyrou, 2002, 1), it has also consistently and persistently been involved in matters which had ramifications beyond the simply academic.

The “practical” tendency in anthropology was quickly codified in the form of the dichotomy between “pure” academic anthropology and “applied” work, which focussed on the real world uses of anthropological knowledge. Advocacy represents only one element of this practical engagement. The experience of American applied anthropology provides some of the clearest examples of the complexity, and ambivalence, of seeing anthropologists as “experts”, both for the non-academic audience they play to, and for anthropologists themselves.

The question of professional ethics has been much debated recently, following on from the discussions surrounding the “crisis of representation” mentioned previously. In truth, though, recent concerns simply echo earlier debates, which were instigated by a number of controversial anthropological “engagements” with the non-academic system. Most of these engagements occurred, coincidentally in the United States.

“Project Camelot” is a case in point. In the volume edited by Horowitz (1967) on the fallout from this project, in which anthropological studies of Latin America were funded by the US military in the hope that the information gathered might be of use in the case of future military operations in the region, Blumer, who viewed sociological knowledge as “scientific”, argued that, regardless of ethical considerations, such work should be avoided since it held ‘implicit dangers to the integrity of social science’ (1967, 153). However, it was felt that “Project Camelot” illustrated a need for ethical guidelines regarding the methodology and application of anthropological research, and thus ethical codes of good practice were revised or set up by anthropological associations across the globe.

Anthropology and advocacy have an equally complex relationship. As Whisson has argued (in Grillo & Rew, 1985), even Malinowski was engaged in “advocacy”, in its broadest sense, by supporting indirect rule for the Trobriand Islanders in his ethnography. Referring to his own applied work, Whisson felt that his opinions on the best way forward were often ignored by the very organisations, which funded his work. In 1960 he was commissioned by the Christian Council of Kenya to produce research, which would assist their development plans in the newly independent nation. The aim was to try to ‘eliminate the denominational and racial divisions which existed in Kenya’ (1985, 137). However, following two years research, upon submission ‘the target community gained nothing from the research as far as its defined goals were concerned’ (1985, 138) as the report was ignored.

Although admitting naivety in his expectation that the report commissioners, ‘as people of goodwill and good sense, would act’ (1985,136), Whisson’s subsequent involvement in anthropological advocacy was shaped by that experience. Speaking of his work on the resettlement of displaced peoples in South Africa during the early 1980’s, he felt that any benefits to those he had studied ‘have come about as much through unpublicized brokerage as through noisy advocacy’ (1985,143). Thus, the problems, and the possibilities, of anthropological engagement are thrown into sharp relief.

An example of deliberate anthropological advocacy, this time at the level of expert witness, is provided by Dobyns in the volume edited by Eddy and Partidge (1978). He feels that witnessing represents the best form of application, ‘the practical application of research findings on behalf of a group’ (1978, 262). Dobyns points out that anthropologists will act as witnesses rather infrequently (he himself was a witness only twice), and urges anthropologists only to base their answers, on ‘good ethnography’ and ‘good ethnohistory’ (1978, 263), rather than on moral or ethical impulses, or on a desire to help the group they represent. Dobyns also tackles the difficult issue of what sort of “expertise” anthropologists should claim for themselves. This is crucial, since the demands of a court case for essentialisms, generalisations and simplifications often go against the anthropological preference for “thick” description in academic and ethnographic representations. Anthropologists,

Dobyns concludes, are often constrained by the logistics of advocacy and “expert” representation, in terms of time and money, rather than by any lack of will to advocate.

This conclusion reclaims for anthropologists the morality of their position, and their actions. However, more recent silence on the part of anthropologists in relation to global issues, notably those to which anthropologists have a valuable and important contribution to make, somewhat undercut this complacent attitude. No anthropologists have come forward to comment upon, for instance, the recent US invasion of Iraq, or to consider the socio-political motivations behind the events of September 11th, 2001. Perhaps it is felt such matters are not for anthropologists to meddle in. But anthropology cannot escape from the political nature of its activities, and its representations, and therefore should not hold back from arguing its own political agenda for the sake of Blumer’s academic “purity”. Only by representing its own politics can anthropology reclaim its sense of purpose, indeed its sense of self-identity.

Representing Oneself: The ethics of “being” an anthropologist.

A recent article by Peter Pels has again scrutinized the nature of anthropological representations, particularly relating it to the notion of ethics. In the article (1999, 101-136) Pels argues that ethical codes in anthropology, such as those regularly issued by the American Anthropological Association (updated last in 1998) actually stifle true debate on moral and ethical issues within the discipline by codifying, and thus making “value-free”, anthropological ethics. He suggests too, controversially, that anthropology is based upon an inherently duplicitous methodology, in that participant observation calls for the often unconscious use of moral or ethical “double standards” on the part of anthropologists in the field. Further he refutes the idea that anthropologists can be ethically or morally “neutral” in dealing with their object of study, and draws out succinctly the paradoxical nature of anthropological expertise, which is at once seen as both “objective” and “true”: ‘Where is our neutrality if our “expertise” is to be “neutral” not only towards one set of values but towards several?’ (1999,131-2).

Here then, it might be argued, Pels is making the case for anthropological disengagement from the practical, since the very moral validity of anthropological knowledge, and thus the basis of any claims to particular anthropological expertise, is at best dubious. Certainly, Pels highlights the dangerous nature of comfortable certainties about the morally correct nature of the search for anthropological knowledge. However, I feel that to take such a pessimistic position about the nature of the anthropological “project” would be to misunderstand the potential benefits, both to the discipline and to the wider world, of active political engagement through advocacy.

Anthropology continues to be taught in universities, and people continue to have successful careers as anthropologists. The modern challenge to anthropology is to move beyond the talk of representational “crises”, and to reacquire a confidence in its relevance to the modern world. This, I believe, requires the acknowledgement of some difficult “truths”. One such is that anthropology cannot forever simply engage in abstract theoretical debates about its origins and methodological practices. Language, that most subjective of entities, and “truth” are mutually exclusive, and anthropologists will continue to write and represent partially, both essentializing cultures and perpetuating existing power structures. The “perfect ethnography”, from any perspective of “perfect”, will not, indeed cannot, be produced.

Anthropologists should not be surprised by this, but neither should they be demoralised. Since the reflexive post-modern turn of the 1980’s, anthropology has been all too aware of the moral and power dynamics of all relationships, and of its own susceptibility to these dynamics. I believe, however, that such an awareness leaves anthropologists uniquely placed to provide nuanced, balanced but forthright representations of their own political interests, and of the political interests of the groups they study. If, as the common view holds, anthropologists have a prime duty of care to their informants, still they have no less a duty to their own moral and ethical imperatives, and their training as anthropologists, to ensure their research is used in a positive but considered fashion.

This is not to say that anthropologists should try and save, or reshape, the world as they see fit. Anthropologists are not, and should not become, the handmaidens of development. They should, though, I believe, have the necessary courage to acknowledge their own agendas and then act, represent and advocate politically, where invited to, regardless of the ethics of engaging in both ethnographic and political representation.

This type of deliberate advocacy might be distasteful to those, like Parkin, who still hold the view of anthropology as some kind of objective “science”, but it may, at least, free anthropologists of the ethical quandaries of (mis)representation, and perhaps, positively influence policies and practices in the “real world”. If anthropologists do not follow Asad’s advice (1973, 18) and seek to imagine a different future, by criticising the flaws in and the power relationships underlying policy and practice, while being fully aware of the dangers and the potential of such a path, then it runs the risk of becoming merely an academic subject. That, I believe, would be both a waste of the potential, unique, I believe, to anthropology, for a balanced analysis of “development”, and an unnecessary break with the applied traditions of the discipline. It is one thing to endlessly criticise, quite another to have simply watched rather than witnessed.

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