Experiments in Engaged Anthropology

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Engaged anthropology. Anthropology as advocacy. Ethnography-as-activism. Collaborative anthropology. Militant anthropology. Public anthropology. Despite their differences, all of these projects share a commitment to mobilizing anthropology for constructive interventions into politics. Prior understandings of anthropology as objective science might be seen as giving way to new concerns about social justice. However, the notion of science is also undergoing a transformation in which science and society are increasingly intertwined (Nowotny et al. 2001). Scientific funding agencies increasingly require projects to include mechanisms for making research results available to the public and sometimes request identification of the project's social benefits. Science is no longer seen as estranged from social problems, which both expands and normalizes the relationship between research and its potential applications. Within anthropology this has resulted in the proliferation of new conceptual categories and practices, which might be described as a series of experiments in how to make anthropology politically relevant and useful.[1]

Recent transformations in social movement politics have also influenced these new anthropological projects. The protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s culminated in mass marches through the streets of urban capitals in Europe and the Americas. These influential political spectacles exhibited the capacity of ritual to spill beyond its conventional frame of reference and precipitate lasting structural change. Some of these protests were successful in achieving their goals, such as the civil rights movement in the United States. However, today one might ask whether collective protests have lost their novelty, thereby diminishing

their political efficacy. Organizations from both the left and the right continue to march on Washington, DC, protesting for and against the same causes. Politicians have come to expect public protests and may even claim virtue in ignoring them by demonstrating their willingness to rise above popular opinion and make difficult choices.

Contemporary civil society is also less united by political causes or social problems that galvanized previous generations of activists and social movements, such as class politics or opposition to war. In Europe and North America opposition politics rarely rises to the level of collective action. Political sentiments are increasingly converted into nonpolitical modes of action, as when environmental critique is subverted into new forms of green consumerism, or when the inequalities produced by global capitalism are partially remediated through the fair trade movement, making the world safe for shopping as usual.

Feelings of powerlessness and the inability to effect meaningful political change are also pervasive in contemporary civil society. Corporations actively promote and benefit from these sentiments through such strategies as appropriating the discourse of their critics, co-opting their more moderate critics, and promoting corporate oxymorons that conceal important contradictions (Benson and Kirsch 2010a). An example of a recent corporate oxymoron is the advertising campaign for "clean coal," which invokes a technology to capture greenhouse gases that does not yet exist (Kirsch 2010). BP's 1997 effort to rebrand itself as "Beyond Petroleum" (Beder 2002) is a particularly ironic example of a corporate oxymoron given the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. These corporate responses to critique contribute to the widespread structure of feeling Benson and Kirsch (2010b) call the "politics of resignation."

Scholars also note the contemporary fragmentation of social movement politics. Alain Touraine (2007) attributes this trend to the rise of identity politics and what he calls the new social movements. Identity-based movements organized around gender, sexuality, ethnic difference, and indigeneity may be seen as dividing interests rather than reproducing the solidarities of older social movements based on class.[2] Touraine concludes that rendering politics in terms of identities means that social movement politics may ultimately be limited to projects of individual actualization and self-realization.

However, the decline of collective forms of politics may also per-

mit individuals to participate in new kinds of political projects that are not based on ascribed status. In the formation of these new political coalitions, the participants may only partially endorse one another's agendas and strategies, constraining the possibilities for collective action. But the resulting alliances may be enhanced by the multiple and complementary positionalities of the participants in relation to particular causes, along with their associated modes of access to power, discourses of persuasion, and forms of political leverage (Kirsch 1996, 2007; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Tsing 2004). These alliances, which are driven in part by the tremendous proliferation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) since the 1980s, offer novel possibilities for political engagement. Is it possible to see such alliances, and the commitments they entail, not as atomized politics based on personal projects but rather as distributed forms of collective action? How do the participants in these projects mobilize professional resources rather than their own identity politics? Here the classic formula of ethnographic engagement, which is based on relationships constructed across difference, provides an intriguing model. How might political collaborations formed in the context of ethnographic knowledge production contribute to these alliances? What happens when anthropologists embrace opportunities for political action that arise during the course of their ethnographic research?

The contributors to this collection on ethnography-as-activism address these questions and their implications for anthropological knowledge production. Pedagogically, anthropologists are comfortable teaching their students to think critically, to read against the archival grain, to recognize and assess the hidden costs of organizing social life and nature through capitalism and neoliberalism, and to denaturalize the terms through which conventional politics is organized. There is also a long tradition of anthropology as cultural critique, which repatriates insights from elsewhere in the world to provide a critical perspective on our own societies (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Yet the discipline has historically been less comfortable with the integration of politics and ethnographic research. The following articles challenge that intransigence. They ask: What are the consequences for ethnography when it is conceptualized as a mode of political engagement? What would these new modes of engagement look like? How might they reshape the field of anthropology?

What is unique and valuable about the essays is their attempt to think through these questions prior to conducting long-term ethnographic research. The most familiar examples of engaged anthropology are either associated with problems encountered during the course of ethnographic fieldwork or emerge much later in the anthropologist's career. So, for example, Terence Turner's (1991) classic essay on long-term research among the Kayapó divides their history into two distinct epochs, the periods before and after the emergence of Kayapó political activism. It also demarcates a shift in Turner's ethnographic praxis; only after a long period of separation from the Kayapó and the establishment of a successful academic career did Turner return to Brazil to collaborate politically with the Kayapó. Similarly, Alcida Ramos's (1999) argument that anthropologists are political actors emerged only after she became involved in addressing the problems caused by an invasion of *garimpeiros*, wildcat gold miners who brought malaria and influenza epidemics to the Yanomami. My reorientation toward the political began after two years of ethnographic research in Papua New Guinea, when the Yonggom asked for my help in addressing the environmental problems caused by the Ok Tedi mine (Kirsch 2002, 2006, 2007). For other anthropologists the shift toward political activism only emerged in the context of secondary research projects. For example, Nancy Scheper-Hughes's (1979, 2000a) controversial first ethnography of schizophrenia in Ireland, which uses the medical language of pathology to describe patterns of rural sociality, is a far cry from her sympathetic accounting of the responses to infant mortality in the *favelas* of Brazil (Scheper-Hughes 1992) or her more militant revelations about the global organ trade (Scheper-Hughes 2000b).

Thus the primary difference between the work of these scholars and the articles presented here is the intention of the student authors to incorporate the political into their research from its original inception.[3] Consequently these articles are not necessarily marking off an entirely new set of questions or problems for the field, although the vigor and commitment with which they pursue these concerns is noteworthy. The key distinction is that they are asking questions about how to integrate ethnography and activism, or new forms of political engagement, within their initial fieldwork projects. How might this a priori orientation shape the way anthropologists conceptualize and carry out ethnographic research and the kinds of relationships they form during the course of fieldwork? What are the challenges of these commitments? Inherent

in this project is the willingness of the students to take certain risks in their research, as they realize that the stakes of political engagement may be greater for them as graduate students than for more established scholars.[4] This is also in keeping with their experimental nature. They may not all succeed in finding ways to contribute to the political goals of the people with whom they work. Yet their courage and innovation in pushing the field beyond its conventional boundaries, projects, and relationships in pursuing the political as an integral part of doing ethnographic research is both exciting and potentially transformative for the field of anthropology.

Ethnography-as-Activism

The contributors to this collection are members of an interdisciplinary graduate student workshop on ethnography-as-activism that has met regularly since winter 2007 at the University of Michigan. This is how the group members describe the history and goals of the organization in a collectively authored statement:

> The workshop on ethnography-as-activism was set up to explore the challenges and benefits of ethnography that both studies and engages in activism. Through discussions of our specific field situations, the group considers the epistemic and ethical dilemmas presented by action or inaction in field research. Because ethnography entails long-term and often complex relationships between researchers and collaborators/informants, ethnographic research highlights important questions about the politics of knowledge production. This group attends to the implications of these questions within and beyond the communities where we study, the discipline, and the academy.(Ethnography-as-Activism 2010)

The following essays were initially presented at a conference on activist research held in Ann Arbor on April 3, 2009, and benefited from the participation and feedback of Shannon Speed, Luke Eric Lassiter, and Charles Price. Most of the papers were written after one or two summers of preliminary fieldwork, although several of the contributions are based on longer-term field experience. Chris Estrada, who was unable to contribute to the volume, provided the following opening words for the conference:

We seek to valorize engagement with or collaboration on activist projects with those people designated as the "subjects" of our research—to recognize such efforts not only on their merits as forms of reciprocation, but as methodological innovations with real theoretical worth and epistemological value in themselves that produce new kinds of knowledge not otherwise available.

Our own field sites might not be calling for an advocate to champion a cause, and we may not know how to resolve our own ethical and political convictions with what we see and experience in the field. Yet . . . I personally feel an obligation to engage critically in genuine dialogue with the knowledge *already* being produced by those for whom playing an engaged or activist role was not a choice, but a condition of daily life—knowledge produced by social movements, by workers in public health or human rights organizations, by environmentalists, by Third World intellectuals whose works are not read or even translated here, or who operate outside of academia altogether. (Chris Estrada, pers. comm., 2009)

The members of the Ethnography-as-Activism workshop describe their work in the following terms:

From a diverse range of field settings, these papers discuss ethical and practical dilemmas that go beyond the widely explored questions of establishing trust and collaborations in ethnographic practice. For instance, how might one align with activists with whose agenda one does not fully agree? What are our responsibilities in producing and disseminating knowledge, and how do we gauge the consequences of our research? How do researchers manage demands placed on them by the community members with whom they are working? How should anthropologists formulate research agendas so that they are responsive to community needs? What kinds of interventions—within communities and the academy—are we seeking by being engaged in activist research?

These papers, therefore, do not just raise ethical and methodological questions for collaborative research, but they also point to ways in which these questions may generate wider discussions on the meaning of scholar-activism.[5] How can we bring together issues of social justice and social theory in order to create a more praxis-oriented, socially responsible disciplinary practice? How can we bring the in-

sights we learn in the field to bear on our own institutions and communities in which we live and work? Finally, how can we make ethnographic insight and theoretical understanding relevant to struggles for social justice, and simultaneously make lessons learned from struggles for social justice relevant for the development of ethnographic theory?

We come to ethnography from a diverse range of disciplinary locations, which affect the type of questions we ask and the fieldwork situations in which we are involved. Some of us come as historians, seeking to address questions of social justice through a combination of archival and ethnographic research. Others come as social workers, already trained in certain applied methodologies, but recognizing that, from an ethnographic point of view, activism must arise from constant engagement with local knowledge. Still others are linguists, visual anthropologists, and medical anthropologists. We engage with a wide range of political questions and work in highly diverse field settings. However, what unites us, and this set of papers, is a commitment to ethnographically informed activist practices that will enhance or lead to social justice. We believe that responsible research entails advocating for social justice and responsible activism requires an attention to social theory that we as scholars may provide through our ethnographic practice. We do not consider this to be the goal of activist anthropology, but rather consider it one of the fundamental goals of anthropology in general. We hope the papers presented here, in their breadth and diversity, will provide a foundation from which we, as well as the readers of this journal, may pursue these common commitments. (Ethnography-as-Activism Manifesto, University of Michigan, 2010)

The Papers

Emily McKee, who conducted dissertation research in the Negev desert in Israel, works with both Israeli Jews and Bedouin on the politics of land and environmentalism. Her commitment to work on both sides of the current political conflict is unusual. Her paper addresses questions about political essentialism in a performance of Bedouin agricultural practices. She examines the political responsibilities of anthropologists who might be inclined to deconstruct such presentations and

concludes that her task is to explicate the broader political context and expectations that constrain Bedouin political activism.

Like McKee, Regev Nathansohn also works on questions of coexistence in Israel. His project is based in Haifa, which is popularly known as the city of coexistence despite the events of 1947, during which most of the Arab residents fled the city. In his interviews with Arab and Jewish residents in Haifa, Nathansohn finds unexpected narratives about coexistence before the Israeli war of independence. His informants describe how Jews and Arabs lived side by side, spoke each other's languages, and in some cases offered each other refuge during times of conflict. He asks whether these historical fragments could form the basis of an alternative politics in which coexistence might be based on new forms of intersubjectivity. Working in the eye of a political storm, Nathansohn finds that his project requires him to avoid choosing sides. Instead he patiently unearths alternative understandings of the past that suggest new ways to think about social relations between Israel's Arab and Jewish populations.

Elana Resnick works with the Roma in Bulgaria. For her, ethnographic research is inherently political. She presents a story in which she conveyed a commitment she did not intend and could not fulfill. How can anthropologists imagine larger forms of political collaboration before they are able to manage interpersonal relationships? This leads to her recognition that political collaboration must be ongoing and dialogical. For engaged anthropologists, politics must be founded on social relations rather than formulated independently of them.

John Mathias plans to conduct research among urban activists in Kerala, India. Like Resnick, he is interested in questions about how to conduct activist research. He finds common cause with an independent activist working on a series of local projects. Mathias's first instinct is to hammer out a contract for collaboration. This follows the dominant model for the ethical conduct of research promoted by institutional review boards. Yet the activist with whom he wants to work is uninterested in this kind of relationship. Mathias concludes that a combination of camaraderie and a shared political project or set of social goals might be a better way of thinking about the proper basis for collaboration. In this microsociology of political relationships Mathias temporarily suspends questions about social movements and causes, arguing that productive collaboration must begin with a particular kind of relationship.

Heather Tidrick also works with the Roma, but in Hungary. As a social worker she is attentive to the trafficking in cultural stereotypes about the Roma, not only by the general public but also by public intellectuals, ethnographers, and even NGOs focused on ameliorating poverty through the construction of housing. One particular image catches her eye: a photograph of a young child used to promote an NGO's housing scheme for Roma. Tidrick explains how this penetrating image—which is intended to improve the conditions in which the Roma live—reinforces negative stereotypes Roma seek to overcome. She identifies her object of study as the "field of power and institutions with which Romani people live and interact" and envisions a research project that will contribute to the reduction or elimination of the double binds that constrain their choices.

Like Tidrick, Katherine Fultz is interested in questions of visual representation. She works with several Maya communities in Guatemala, where the dominant representational economy has historically excluded Maya forms of self-representation. She recounts the methods she used as a social studies teacher, where she helped students develop their skills in deconstructing media images and in using cameras to create their own self-portraits. She plans research in another Maya community that is located near a controversial gold mining project. The mine is the subject of a war of images and texts on local billboards and in newspaper advertisements, and in the new electronic media, including videos posted on the Internet by NGOs and the mining company. Fultz asks how these debates might change if the Sipakapense Maya were better able to participate. Her political commitment involves working with community members to increase their ability to deconstruct and analyze these texts and images as well as to produce and disseminate new texts and images from their own community.

Jennifer S. Bowles works with farmers in rural Argentina. In her paper she asks how to conduct ethnography responsibly in a landscape she describes as being off the political grid. Central to her project are the politics of memory and forgetting. She brings her training and experiences as a social worker to these encounters, seeking answers to the question of how she might make a difference in the lives of the people she meets. Recent histories of political violence, contemporary environmental problems, and rural poverty are important political agendas, but above all she is mindful of an encounter with a man

who asks to be remembered, compelling her to write with his story in mind. Above all, Bowles emphasizes the emotional resonance of these encounters. And like Resnick and Mathias, she argues that these relationships must remain central to the kind of ethnography she intends to carry out.[6]

As these brief descriptions suggest, and as the papers develop in greater depth and sophistication, there is no single template or blueprint for conducting politically engaged anthropological research. The authors draw on their individual backgrounds, training, and experiences. They must listen to the people with whom they work in deciding if, when, and how they might intervene. Engaged anthropology is not simply a matter of endorsing a cause, bringing attention to a particular grievance, or writing for a larger audience. As the essays in this collection indicate, the kinds of engagement they imagine are far more complicated, varied, and risky than these examples would suggest. They seek nothing less than the enrichment of the finest traditions of ethnographic research while simultaneously addressing important questions of social justice.

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Notes

1. For an overview of the history of such engagements within anthropology, see Lassiter and Campbell (2010).

2. Tucker (1991) and Calhoun (1993), however, argue that there is little new about these identifications and their political significance.

3. Perhaps the closet analogue is Shannon Speed's (2007:2) *Rights in Rebellion*. Speed

(2007:2) writes that she "came to the discipline as an activist" and continues to define her work in these terms.

4. Such labor has generally been unacknowledged and unrewarded by the academy (Scheper-Hughes 2009), although this may be changing.

5. The students also note: "We are aware of the . . . current skepticism toward engaged or activist research [within anthropology], and hope to challenge this view" (Ethnography-as-Activism 2010).

6. I would like to mention briefly the work of two other students who participated in the original conference but were unable to contribute to this volume. Nishaant Choksi studies language politics among the Santals, an adivasi (or indigenous) community in eastern India. The Santals are spread over five administrative regions, each of which has imposed a dominant script. The Santals have also developed their own scripts, one of which, known as Ol-Chiki, has gained popularity. The slogan "one language, one script" has been a rallying cry for the Santals against the writing of Santali in multiple competing scripts, which fragments their political practices. In conceptualizing his project in terms of ethnographic engagement, Choksi faces unresolved questions of political alignment in a context in which the people with whom he works stake out competing positions in the politics of inscription. Bruno Renero-Hannan's research focuses on social movements, state violence, and the politics of memory in southern Mexico. He plans to conduct dissertation research on interconnected urban and rural struggles to construct *autonomía* (autonomy) in Oaxaca and the ways in which activists form networks across urban and rural spaces, articulating their struggles in relation to each other and to the state.

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