

FORUM

What Good Is Anthropology? Celebrating 50 Years of *American Ethnologist*

Applied anthropology, injustice, and the ethics of intervention

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Funding information:

None

Abstract

Fifty years ago, anthropologists, including applied researchers, were caught up in a dilemma of ethics and practice, in the face of criticisms of ethnographic embroilment in colonial, military, and neocolonial projects. But the epistemological crises that this provoked, together with anthropological engagement in political movements, sharpened our commitment to work with others to counter systemic, structural, and enacted violence. Today, continued inequality at local and global levels is deeply complicated by corporate globalization and climate change. Ethnographic research and anthropological engagement is urgent and critical, requiring our persistence to redress social wrongs through supportive, generous partnerships, as advocates and as outspoken witnesses.

KEYWORDS

ethnographic engagement, history of anthropology, politics, power and positionality, social change

American Ethnologist was established at a time when the ethnographic project was at risk, when the discipline was in crisis, when even more crises were unfolding. In celebrating *American Ethnologist*'s 50th birthday, I have revisited the field from the time of the journal's birth, particularly attending to (some of) anthropology's challenges and controversies.

ETHNOGRAPHIC INTELLIGENCE

Anthropologists sit on uneasy territory. We can, of course, conduct research and write as if our work were of no account, but it is hard to imagine an anthropology that could survive such passivity, or worse, emulate 19th-century romances of difference. Instead, we have increasingly used our scholarship and ethnographic skills to expose the excesses of inequalities of power under colonialism and neocolonialism; we have increasingly worked on policies of social justice and practical interventions through brokering links between communities and states. And we have joined forces with other colleagues to counter the powerful cartels of global capitalism and to slow the disasters of global warming. But the story of how we got here, and thus the good of applied anthropology, is one of redemption in the face of a deeply problematic history.

Below, I focus on politics, more so than development economics. At the same time, I am mindful of the vast amount

of work by anthropologists across many practice fields. Historically, much of this work was directed to ensure that development programs (under colonialism and subsequently) took account of local knowledge systems, resources, and environmental constraints. This work overlapped with and is always shaped by political agendas. Although applied anthropologists rarely engaged directly in policy-making, they have always been state funded, in recognition of the value of their information.

Anthropology's role in facilitating colonial rule is well documented (Asad, 1995; Pels, 1997). Anthropologists were co-opted by a project of exploitation that Beltran (1974, p. 2) describes as shaped by "the aristocratic ideal of Aristotle, the hierarchical universe of Thomas Aquinas, and the unscrupulous nationalism of Machiavelli." Even before the US joined the war against Japan, anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (1941) were addressing contemporary politics, and during the Second World War, as Price (2002, p. 14) documents for the US, social scientists (anthropologists among them) "were harnessed at new levels as analysts, propagandists, foot soldiers, officers and spies." Elsewhere, anthropologists contributed to plans for postwar reconstruction and colonial independence, informing foreign policy and development programs in ways that served national self-interest. The manipulation of economies under the cloak of colonial divestment was an increasing source of disquiet (Mabee, 1987; Mills, 2002).

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The compromises in anthropology became far more apparent in the 1960s. In 1964, a number of anthropologists were implicated in Project Camelot; the project remains the best-known and documented example of anthropological co-optation and collusion. Shaped at a time of intense Cold War politics and ongoing military engagement across the world, the project was designed, under the US defense budget, to fund anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and political scientists to study insurgency, insurrection, resistance, and civil war (Horowitz, 1967; Kao, 2018; Solovey, 2001). The project was terminated in 1965 after some six months, after the Chilean government denounced it and the US Congress undertook an inquiry (Rohde, 2013). For the rest of this decade and thereafter, anthropologists' involvement was the subject of rumor and scrutiny, and anthropology operated under an ethical shadow. Even so, research funding continued to support anthropological inquiry in areas of strategic interest, albeit with some changes to process and intent; still open to question were the ethics of anthropological practice, the transparency of processes and engagement, and anthropology's reputation within the academy and beyond. By the time *American Ethnologist* appeared in 1974, applied anthropology in particular was facing growing criticism for being a handmaiden to colonialism and neocolonialism, its participation in contemporary wars being just one example. The chosen title for *AE*—the use of “ethnologist,” with its common usage in relation to cultural difference and folkloric interest—seems counter to political sense. Yet it flagged the importance of paying attention to culture, and it perhaps pushed back against many anthropologists' uneasiness and embarrassment.

AE built its reputation for a thoughtful mix of theory and rich empiricism, when, notwithstanding the fallout from Project Camelot, the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) counterinsurgency program was operating to support the South Vietnamese government and the US military. Its aim was to use local knowledge to win “hearts and minds”—the rhetoric became a hallmark of the US war. Military strategists later rued the US government's failure to pursue this sufficiently, “to take full advantage of the massive U.S. capabilities for cultural and social research and analysis” (Kipp et al., 2006, p. 11) in ways that might have changed the war's course. On that presumption, in the first decade of the 21st century, Kipp and colleagues were instrumental in advocating the Human Terrain System (HTS), which would integrate US social scientists into combat units; provide ethnographic and cultural intelligence in Iraq and Afghanistan; and thus “gather, store, manipulate, and provide cultural data” on human subjects, such as “key regional personalities, social structures, links between clans and families, economic issues, public communications, agricultural production, and the like” (Kipp et al., 2006, p. 13; see also Perugini, 2008). The American Anthropological Association opposed HTS in 2007 as an “unacceptable application of anthropological expertise” (AAA, 2007) in conflict with its Code of Ethics (for discussion, see Forte, 2011). Nonetheless, the HTS project continued and was abandoned only in 2014. The news of its abandonment was announced nine months after the fact, likely to minimize further public outcry (González, 2017, p. 52; Müller, 2020).

HOW POLITICS FURTHERED FOCUS

As these controversies unfolded, anthropologists were increasingly involved in local political change, working alongside and supporting populations with whom they had ties through field research, and working as members of subject populations. By the early 1970s, anthropologists joined the growing movements to defend the rights of indigenous peoples, gay people, Black people, women, and workers, and we increasingly built epistemologies in response: the work of feminist anthropologists is a case in point. Moreover, these movements laid the foundation for more thoughtful collaboration—the first “nothing about us without us” sentiments date back to this period, as do the global political steps to this end (Charlton, 2000; Ginsburg & Rapp, 2020). Separately and together, these movements asked anthropologists to scrutinize their involvement, and as anthropology worked to undo public distrust associated with colonialism and counterinsurgency, ethnographers like James Clifford and George Marcus expressed their unease with authorial voice and questioned the ethical engagement and power relations between anthropologists and the populations they were studying (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). But in the late 20th and early 21st century, particularly after 9/11, anthropologists remained engaged in counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and related issues—drug trafficking, unsanctioned immigration, and various outbreaks of local and global violence (Müller, 2020). In the first 25 years from the founding of *AE*, therefore, individual anthropologists and professional associations needed to address fundamental questions about what we do and with whom, for whom, and why we do it, even while individual scholars and practitioners took off in multiple directions.

And motivation was never clear. The challenge for most of us was political, including our personal positioning toward dictatorships, oppression, exploitation, the rule of the law, and tensions between national and international jurisdiction and human rights. In the context of increasing public scrutiny and moral qualms, applied anthropologists regularly bounced between different approaches and interventions, trying to strike a balance between responding to immediate crises and addressing the challenges of structural and economic changes.

Notwithstanding the awkward, disturbing examples of anthropological co-optation for defense purposes, anthropologists after 9/11 became involved directly in diverse ways—in forensic research, in countering negative generalizations about Islam and the Middle East, in trying to make sense of the disaster and its protracted fallout at local and global levels, and in working to promote an anthropology of war and peace that reached beyond ideology and state politics (Checker, 2011). In doing so, Lutz and González have written that “a public anthropology of war and peace has had trouble garnering attention even for a realistic version of soldiers' and veterans' lives, for the wars' wounded (regardless of nationality), or for a sociological imagination of the ways in which the world is being fundamentally transformed by the long military response to 9/11” (Lutz & González, 2011, p. 495). Some anthropologists, horrified by 9/11, may have embraced the opportunity to participate in HTS. The echoes continue as I write now, in October

2023, as other politics and political histories shape escalating violence in Palestine/Israel.

The commitment of applied and practicing anthropologists (the latter, loosely, indicating those working outside the academy) has been to contribute to positive change, as reflected by diverse publications in journals published at the same time as *AE*. This includes *Human Organization* (*HO*), which in 1974, in addition to engaging with debates about representation, advocacy, gatekeeping, and pedagogy, included articles on trade unions and industrial entrepreneurs, factories and factionalism, homelessness and housing, relocation and migration, energy and ecology. Many of its contributors then, as before and since, were influenced by the agendas of multilateral organizations, such as the World Bank and the UN Development Programme, but also, in many areas, by the growing frustration of anthropologists and those with whom they worked over persistent inequalities at local and global levels, inequalities that did not dissolve but increased after political independence, and increased further as corporate globalization came to shape lifeworlds everywhere.

With the growing commitment to disrupt inequality, there was a lot of work to be done. The kind of applied anthropology undertaken and published when *AE* was established was often US-centric and neocolonial, and anthropologists have had to reshape this field. There are brilliant articles in *HO* and other journals that illuminate anthropology's status and (lack of) authority as an applied field. In part, this related to anthropology's poor profile with other peoples; authors in *HO* wrote of lack of credibility, mistrust, and gloomy futures (Maynard, 1974). This likely fed into arguments, then as later, about qualitative versus quantitative methods and power calculations (advocating not ethnography but multiple regression, for example). Fifty years ago, too, applied anthropologists published many articles uncritically advocating modernization, without interrogating who was benefiting from this. Styles of writing, including passive voice and gendered generics (man and him), further date the work. More importantly, the conceptual tools and frameworks then current, such as distinctions between emic (local, internal) and etic (general, assumed to be cross-culturally valid), tended to reinforce perceptions of universal truths, power, and knowledge between anthropologists and agencies, on the one hand, and ethnographic subject populations on the other. The implications drawn from this, as I read some of these articles, is of etic as good (appropriate for development, modern, flexible, objective) and emic as traditional, fixed, grounded, and resistant to change. The alternative was to flip these viewpoints and adulate the traditional, despite understanding, at least in theory, that all societies change all the time (albeit at different velocity) for multiple reasons.

Since *AE*'s inception, applied anthropologists have taken major steps alongside other applied social scientists, parallel with debates about power, representation and knowledge, and in response to global advocacy and policy statements, international declarations and covenants. This has included emphasizing community participation and advocating it to other actors, such as implementing agents for community health and development projects. To be clear, these were not new

steps. Multilateral and regional organizations, including the World Health Organization and the Organization of African Unity, had early challenged questions of epistemology, "vernacular" knowledge, and power (Tilley, 2021), and these questions had been taken up from the outset by anthropologists writing in *HO* (originally published as *Applied Anthropology*, 1941–48; the title changed owing to concerns over using the term *anthropology*).

There was, of course, diversity in the methods, settings, and subject matter of applied anthropologists at this time, and considerable insight. Consider, for example, Milton Freeman's (1974) critical, introspective, and sometimes whimsical and very funny article published in *HO*, when *AE* was in its infancy. In this, he summarizes anthropology as needing "(1) more support from sponsoring agencies, (2) more cooperation and understanding from the subjects we research, and (3) more people to take seriously our individual findings and collective opinions. The inference," he continues, "is a credibility gap between social scientists (in sociology and anthropology) and nonsocial scientists (and some former social scientists now in government)" (Freeman, 1974, p. 391).

He wasn't wrong. In general, much applied anthropology published 50 or so years ago reflects writing styles and standpoints directed to nonacademic audiences: officials in government development agencies and internal departments, multilateral agencies, NGOs, and other entities. The affirmation of ethnography, as reflected by the publication of *AE*, offered a corrective to what now reads as a bureaucratic and formulaic approach to anthropology as an applied science, a corrective that likely reassured many of us who were wedded to both the power of ethnography and the projects of applied work.

By the mid-1970s there was growing concern for improved communication in development and for anthropologists to assume expanded roles in diverse fields. That is, anthropologists working as consultants with (and within) organizations outside universities were increasingly interested in how they could contribute to broader-based, interdisciplinary, and multiagency projects. In this context, from the 1980s especially, there was a rise in the publication and use of methods guides and manuals for rapid rural appraisals, rapid ethnographic assessments, and participatory action research, involving researchers in the US and beyond (Scrimshaw & Hurtado, 1987) working with WHO, UNICEF, the United Nations University, and other multilateral agencies (Agyepong et al., 1995; Bentley et al., 1988; Dawson et al., 1993). The significant work in agriculture and rural development undertaken out of the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex University, particularly by Robert Chambers (1981, 1992) and colleagues, led many applied anthropologists to adopt this approach in their work on bilateral programs and through consultancies with the World Bank and regional institutions such as the Asian Development Bank. In collaborative work interrogating this approach to quick data, Peter Aaby and I argued for the importance of local engagement and more nuanced, extended research (Manderson & Aaby, 1992); we were concerned to avoid collapsing the complexity of locality and local structure and reducing anthropology's contribution to checklists that others might use (see also Adams et al., 2014).

TOWARD INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND BEYOND

Many of us engaged in applied anthropology sought to build collaborations across disciplinary fields and to negotiate the tensions around methods. This tension has continued, as reflected in explanations of methods, power calculations, sampling, and statistical analysis in articles directed to readers outside anthropology, who might be suspicious of participant observation. At least within applied medical and public health fields, epistemological debates from the 1970s (and before) were often characterized by (and reduced to) concerns about qualitative and quantitative data, as suggested above; in this, anthropologists were often on the losing side of reliability and validity. Moreover, anthropologists' status tended to be fragile, and those of us working in medical anthropology and public health were mindful that professionals with a double degree (an MD rather than an MPH) were granted more authority than those with training in anthropology alone. This is still the case for health and medicine, but less so in applied fields where double degrees are uncommon, such as architecture, education, social work, engineering, and agronomy (cf. Sankar et al., [forthcoming](#)). But because of tensions around methods, and the drift toward quantitative methods as generating more reliable data than ethnography, if not truth, we have risked selling out our "anthropological imagination" (the term first used by Dimen-Schein, 1977). By this, I refer to our capacity to bring together individual experiences and local circumstances with the structures that shape social life, to write of these in ways that capture the imagination of others, and to bring in the rich contextuality that is the power of ethnography. In advocating "slow research," Vincanne Adams and colleagues' advocacy brought us back to reflect on and celebrate what we offer in anthropological research, and to reckon with the challenges, in applied fields, of realizing our goals (Adams et al., 2014; see also Manderson & Aaby, 1992); they remind us that rich ethnography enables rigorous critique and analysis, and supports and builds responses of practical import through attention to the processes, structures, and contexts that shape everyday life. In the simplest terms, using applied medical anthropology as an example, checklists of vernacular terms for signs of disease, with the aim of building culturally consonant health education, do little to address the impact of illness and associated disparities in health outcomes, given that health systems in many contexts are moribund. In a more recent example, that of COVID-19, multilingual messaging around handwashing and social distancing cannot, ever, resolve the problems that derive from the lack of access to safe piped water or the overcrowding that characterizes slums and informal settlements (Manderson & Levine, 2020).

WHAT APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY DOES

Applied anthropology is not a single field; many people who work in applied domains do so across social, political, and economic endeavors—museums and heritage, humanitarian crises

and disasters, refugees and immigration, health and education, business and communications. Not all the anthropology we conduct in these fields (any field) is "applied"—tied to practical outcomes, a new program, policy changes, the development and introduction of new technologies, and so on. But our theories and understandings as anthropologists, in making sense of contemporary local and global social formations, are always already applied anthropology. It is hard to imagine an anthropology that is not applied, now, in light of the formative ideological changes, institutional structures, technologies, and global shifts that have occurred since the early 1970s and that foreshadow our futures.

Anthropology provides a means of inquiry and enables analytical understandings that clarify multiple problems facing human and other life, including global warming and planetary precarity. Perhaps everything we do as anthropologists sharpens our understanding of the processes, damages, and defects of globalization, corporatization, climate change, racism, and other social and structural violence. Ethnology brings these processes and structures "home"—for us, the research generates insight that is accessible only through long-term engagement, and for others, ethnographic writing offers access to settings in accessible and compelling ways. Ethnology gives an immediacy to research findings; it nurtures empathy and engagement. This has important implications for how we, and others at all levels and in all sectors, address questions of agency, equality, and power. By spelling out the relationship between social structure, systematic discrimination, and access to state services, for example, and by painting the reality of this through stories of deep poverty and insecurity, we are already advocating structural change. Ethnographic writing and ethnology make people's lives accessible, and they are a powerful companion to applied work; they capture realities that are only hinted at in a series of tables, even when the numbers themselves are proof of state neglect and corporate greed.

Fifty years ago, when *American Ethnologist* was first published and I was doing PhD fieldwork, there was little sense that anthropologists might be employed outside universities, and there was a less urgent sense that the discipline itself was a technology for change. Today, most anthropology graduates will be employed outside universities—by corporations, government departments, community agencies, NGOs, and multilateral entities. Historically, in a field rattled by colonialism, Project Camelot, and other areas of compromise, this might have been judged as amoral or as a sellout of the discipline. Today, although the shift to diverse work settings is partly driven by the limited possibility of employment in tertiary institutions, we are rather more canny about what anthropologists should do, where we might work, and to what effect. Most anthropologists working outside universities use their anthropological training to understand their immediate surrounds and the wider environment. We navigate different systems through an ethnographic sensibility that has been nurtured by journals like *American Ethnologist*. Our capacity to effect change for the good, to reveal the destructive forces that face us all, is surely enhanced by good ethnography and good ethnologists.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am extremely grateful to the anonymous reviewers, who encouraged me to rethink how to characterize some of the transitions that have occurred over the past 50 years. Omissions and errors are my own.

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How to cite this article: Manderson, Lenore. 2024. "Applied anthropology, injustice, and the ethics of intervention." *American Ethnologist* 51: 12–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13252>