Vol. 17 No. 1 (2017)

ANTHROPOLOGY MATTERS JOURNAL

anthropologymatters.com

Afterword

Engaging Public Anthropology

Paul Stoller (West Chester University)

Sometimes an event can compel one to take an unexpected turn that leads to an unimagined destination. Forty years ago during my first fieldwork in the Republic of Niger, an event threw me onto an existential crossroads. I had been studying ritual language among the Songhay people in the village of Mehanna and had gathered a great deal of data for my doctoral dissertation. My project focused on how language could be used to construct hegemonic (Islam) and counter-hegemonic (spirit possession) discourses in the local-level competition for power.

Late one afternoon everything changed. As I sat at my desk and typed field notes on a spirit possession ceremony I had witnessed that very afternoon, a bird pooped on my head. Djibo Mounmouni, who was visiting, witnessed the event.

'Praise Be to God,' he proclaimed.

I could not understand why he would utter such a sacred proclamation.

'Praise Be to God,' he chanted once again. 'I have seen something today,' he said. 'You have been pointed out. You know me as a rice farmer, but I am also a sorko, a master of river magic. If you want to learn river magic, come to my house tonight and I will teach you.'

The unexpected shock of this event made me shudder. What an opportunity to learn about magic – from the inside! Even so, my first thought was: what would my doctoral committee think? Shouldn't I simply continue to do my doctoral research? Shouldn't I remain detached

and objective? I thought of Evans-Pritchard who in the 1920s faced similar circumstances among the Azande. He decided to send his cook to apprentice with an Azande witch doctor – to maintain cool objectivity in the hot arena of magic. I decided on a different course. Much against my well-rooted disciplinary inclinations, I decided to become an apprentice (see Evans-Pritchard 1976; Stoller and Olkes 1987).

Put another way, my fieldwork suddenly entered the uncharted territory of engaged research. Such engagement meant I developed deep relationships of trust with my teachers. Such trust opened many closed doors, doors that safeguarded precious knowledge of divination, herbal medicines, the world of the spirits and death magic. Exposure to such knowledge, however, also meant that I unexpectedly entered a chaotic world filled with incessant suspicion. It was a world in which my embodied implication in sorcerous alliances meant that other practitioners, who distrusted my teachers, also distrusted me. In the end, the existential choice of engagement resulted in a treasure trove of professional benefits and a bevy of unanticipated personal frustrations and fears (see Stoller 2008, 2014).

*****

As is evident from the excellent set of essays that comprise this special issue of Anthropology Matters on 'Anthropology and the Politics of Engagement', there is no small amount of confrontation, conflict, and vulnerability that emerges in engaged anthropological practice. All the papers problematize the notion of engagement. What is the relationship among engagement, participant observation, and disengagement (Ponte)? How do we juxtapose academic anthropology with activism? How does engagement impact the construction of anthropological knowledge and academic accountability (Datta)? How can engagement enable us to better understand non-academic audiences and their struggles with academic and bureaucratic orthodoxy (Foster)? Can we use engagement as an epistemological frame to better understand the communities we seek to describe? Can engagement give us a better sense of how multiple identities are formed (Douzina-Bakalaki)? How can engaged anthropologists transform their insights into a body of public knowledge that helps to promote social equity and social justice (Landi)?

In their comprehensive and eloquent introduction to the special issue, Kyriakides, Clarke, and Zhou provide a useful framework for situating engagement in anthropological theory and practice. 'Although anthropologists nowadays shy away from totalities', they suggest,

'one can discern the existence of an anthropological zeitgeist. "Engagement" is an active term of this circulation of ideas and concepts within current anthropological discussions, and has acquired staple usage in the anthropological vocabulary over the past few years' (2016: 1).

Engagement, of course, has a long history in anthropology, but as Kyriakides, Clarke, and Zhou wonder: is anthropology sufficiently engaged – in activism, in politics, and in public outreach? Indeed, the papers in this special issue all underscore the importance of what Faye Harrison (1991) long ago called 'decolonizing anthropology'. In so doing, anthropologists liberate themselves from disciplinary orthodoxy. As the editors of the special edition put it:

> Instead of thinking of engagement as having a direct correlation with public good, we suggest that anthropologists additionally pay more attention and develop a more nuanced appreciation and understanding of the political hierarchies, affective intricacies, and ethical ambiguities which permeate fieldwork, and through which the impetus for anthropological engagement arises. We perceive the cultivation of an ethnographic sensibility and awareness to such political complexities as an essential part of an engaged anthropology. Viewed through the prism of politics, the premise of engagement evades its instrumentalisation as simply a process of social welfare, and instead itself becomes a powerful tool for fleshing out and attending to the messy political contours of contemporary ethnographic milieus (Kyriakides, Clarke, and Zhou 2016: 4).

****

We live in perilous times. In America, millions of people have voted for Donald Trump, a racist, thin-skinned, psychologically compromised nativist who is ignorant about the complexities of the world. He is now the presumptive Republican nominee for President of the United States, meaning that in January 2017, a seriously unbalanced individual might have access to the US nuclear codes[1]. In the UK, the vote to leave the European Union demonstrates that hyperbole and myth have transformed Great Britain into a 'post-factual society'. In both countries, as well as the rest of the world, people in power have ignored

1 Editors' note: This was written during the run-up to the 2016 US Presidential election.

major changes to the global climate. These climatic shifts have already produced super-storms, massive coastal and river flooding, glacial melting and an inexorable rise in ocean levels, not to forget the emergence of new pandemics and highly resistant super-bacteria. Meanwhile, income inequality continues to increase, leading in many quarters to economic stagnation or recession. These gloomy economic trends, in turn, foster social resentments and unleash new, virulent strains of racism, religious intolerance, nativism, violence, and terrorism. In other words, the world is a mess.

That said, there is no better time for an engaged anthropology. Engaged anthropologists can provide ground-level and sensible insights about the intractable problems that threaten to shred the global social fabric. If these problems are left to fester, they promise a future of social and political chaos.

The question that remains, at least for me, is how do we become engaged anthropologists? Is engagement simply a matter of advocacy for the people we seek to describe? Is it a commitment to extending anthropological insight to political action? Does it mean that most scholars should take on a public role in social movements or political discourse?

There is obviously a need for anthropological engagement. But how many of us are willing to take the institutional risks that are one of the hazards of swimming in the raging currents of public discourse? And even if we have the gumption to be public scholars, do we have the tools to be effective in our public outreach? How many of us know how to write for the general public? How many of us know how to craft a powerfully effective op-ed or blog? How many of us know how to shoot and edit a policy-shaping documentary film, or mount a transformative installation or exhibit?

Public anthropology is more than a declaration of willingness to engage in anthropological practice. It is more than drafting an op-ed or posting a blog. It involves a commitment to social justice, but also a willingness to learn new skills, which may or may not be appreciated in the academic world. It is more than sponsoring a book series on 'Public Anthropology'. Engaging public anthropology also requires the readiness to take risks and accept a degree of vulnerability – both institutional and in the public sphere.

No public anthropology can work, however, if public anthropologists have not developed the skills to engage multiple audiences. Some of these skills are currently taught at the

University of Manchester's Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, where socially committed documentarians can learn to use the language of film to provoke social change. We need more programmes that train anthropologists – of all ages and stations – to extend their knowledge, their insights, and their wisdom to the public sphere. One such programme will take place in June 2017 at Wesleyan University, which will host the inaugural Public Anthropology Institute (PAI). This institute is a four-day course of instruction that features sessions on ethnographic writing, expositional craft and style, representational ethics, storytelling, social media, social media platforms, and risks and vulnerabilities (see Ulysse et al. 2016).

The papers in this special issue set a useful framework for a more publicly engaged anthropology. But engagement in today's world must find itself somewhere beyond the felicitous fusion of theory and practice. That somewhere is a space where anthropologists have developed the representational tools they need to fully engage in a more public anthropology.

Given the sorry state of the world, it is our obligation to do so.

In a recent Huffington Post blog post, I stated, 'Now is the time for scholars, guardians of truth and wisdom, to step up to the plate and play a much more central role in the public and political sphere. It is time to use our accessibly contoured wisdom to drain the fetid swamp of its intolerant hate of everything – other' (Stoller 2016).

****

Forty days after the death of my Songhay teacher, Adamu Jenitongo, I attended ceremonies celebrating the life of a great healer. Those of us who had apprenticed to the great sage were summoned to a remote spot of the bush east of Tillaberi, Niger. We walked to a crossroads, the symbolic point of power where the spirit and social worlds intersect. On this sacred spot, our teacher's colleague gave each of us a calabash filled with a special ablution:

'Go in the bush, where wicked things happen, and wash the filth of death from your bodies', he told us.

I accompanied Adamu Jenitongo's younger son to a remote spot, stripped naked and with a special ablution washed the filth of death from my body.
We dressed and returned to Adamu Jenitongo's dune-top compound. There, our teacher's senior colleague distributed Adamu Jenitongo's objects of power to his two sons, as well as to me, his fictive son. I felt extraordinarily fortunate to receive these precious objects, which are still in my possession. And yet, they carry a heavy burden. By taking possession of them, I also took possession of the enmity of my teacher's rivals, who in addition to trying to poison me also attempted to send death magic my way. I have lived with this burden for almost 30 years. It is a consequence of an engaged anthropological practice.

In the same vein, my life as a regular blogger for The Huffington Post has not been trouble free. Just as field engagement engendered a set of unexpected consequences, so have I experienced similar difficulties when I have presented anthropologically contoured ideas – sometimes controversial, sometimes contrarian, sometimes confrontational – in the public sphere. My political blogs have sometimes sparked on-line insults and threats. When I have blogged about the corporatization of the university, administrators have been less than happy, sometimes making my university life a tad uncomfortable. When I have blogged about institutional racism, some public responses have been disturbingly brutal.

In short, public anthropology increases a scholar's risk, as well as her or his professional and personal vulnerability. And yet, these are exceedingly small prices to pay to meet our classical obligations as scholars: to produce knowledge that makes the world a better place to live. In these troubled times, the public production of this wisdom gives us purpose, bearing and meaning in the world. It is a path more of us should pursue.

About the Author

Paul Stoller is Professor of Anthropology at West Chester University. He is author of 14 books and has been blogging regularly for The Huffington Post. In 2013, he received the Anders Retzius Gold Medal in Anthropology. In 2015, he received the Anthropology in Media Award from the American Anthropological Association.

References

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1976[1937]. Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Harrison, Faye. (ed.) 1991. Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology For Liberation. Washington D.C.: American Anthropological Association.

Stoller, Paul. 2008. *The* Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226775364.001.0001

Stoller, Paul. 2014. Yaya's Story: The Quest for Well Being in the World. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226178967.001.0001

Stoller, Paul. 2016. 'The Power of Public Scholarship'. *The Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-stoller/the-power-of-public-schol_b_10409082.html

Stoller Paul, and Cheryl Olkes. 1987. *In Sorcery's Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship Among the Songhay of Niger*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Ulysse, Gina Athena et al. 2016. "Introducing the Public Anthropology Institute." *Savage Minds*. http://savageminds.org/2016/06/27/introducing-the-public-anthropology-institute/