

## **Anthropological Compulsions in a World in Crisis**

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(guest editorial)

We have seen, as recent editorialists in these pages have noted, a rapid deepening and widening of our discipline's concern with the study of violence, war and terror that could best be called an explosion, were the metaphor not so unfortunately concrete in this context. The days appear to be behind us when leaving the field once bullets started flying seemed a logically simple and morally certain step to take; now anthropologists wonder just how far they are expected to go in solidarity with the people they learn from. Or to put it another way, how far they may go and still be anthropologists and not advocates or partisans. Or, perhaps, martyrs to the cause of anthropology.

I will not attempt here to review or summarize any of the rapidly accumulating literature in this sub-field of the anthropological study of violence, war and terror. Rather, I choose to explore the notion that despite our attachment to the grassroots, to the ground level, and to human reality per se it is anthropology's deep impulse toward the transcendent that has naturally located our field, at this turn of the common era millennium, in places where human lives and deaths are at stake. I also suggest – as a faculty member not only of an anthropology department but also of a peace studies institute – that our disciplinary compulsions may offer special kinds of insights toward healing of the crises our world now faces.

Every ethnographer knows that however muted by academic discourse, fieldwork is for many of us a deeply – often wrenchingly – emotional and philosophical experience. Why do so many of us risk life and limb to venture to the ends of the earth, suffer enormous privation and delays of career and family, collect tropical diseases as other people collect stamps, all for salaries that often barely support us and a field whose value is barely recognizable by the outside world? Reflection on our motivation, by African campfire or Arctic starlight, shows it is surely not the adventure nor the intellectual curiosity alone. There is more to the ethnographic enterprise: I believe a sort of – dare I say it – spiritual impulse, that was recognized in the early days of our discipline but now lies unlabelled beneath the determined demeanours of those young

students bravely going off to Palestine or to Colombia, to face new kinds of fieldwork and new kinds of dangers.

Despite the fact that anthropologists and missionaries have most often found themselves on utterly divergent paths (not to say, at daggers drawn), it is worth thinking about why both found themselves the first Europeans to visit those 'savages' at the fringes of empire, and still today are frequently the only lonely souls staying on in a place when the 'non-essential personnel' are withdrawn and humanitarian agencies depart for lack of runways or water. I suggest that it is the impulse toward the other, an overriding and in some ways further undefinable impulse, that pushes ethnographers to the field and makes fieldwork such a momentous experience in the lives of many of them. The risks of the face-to-face, as Levinas calls it, are surely heightened a thousandfold when that face-to-face is taking place across a chasm of cultural difference. Nordstrom and Robben, in the introduction to their fine collection *Fieldwork Under Fire*, note that the all-to-familiar phenomenon of culture shock is complemented by what they label 'existential shock' (1995), highlighting the philosophical depth as well as the psychological dynamics of the field experience. Karl Rahner, a Catholic thinker, writes unashamedly of a 'transcendental anthropology' in which humans as agents compelled toward transcending their own boundaries are recognized, explored, and celebrated as such (1975).

But there is more. Beyond this undeniable, if little discussed, drive toward naked confrontation with the alter is, I believe, the impulse toward – again, I push boundaries in this secular academic culture that embraces irony over idealism – love. Edith Turner dared to write, in her account of her earlier years with the Ndembu, of 'speaking on behalf of a culture as a lover or a mother' (1987:x). Sikh militants with whom I work, who describe their own path of self-surrender as 'playing a game of love,' poetically defined an ethnographic moment in which the radical risk they took in admitting me to their circle was reciprocated by the radical risk I took in making myself vulnerable to them as 'placing our heads in each other's hands.' I am sure this resonates with ethnographic moments other colleagues have experienced. It is taking that leap of trust where one has no real empirical reason to be confident it will be vindicated. What is that but some kind of faith?

And I dare say that the fact that we keep engaging in such encounters means that theologians are correct who point to the 'grace' (however you want to define this) of these moments of freely given trust. We anthropologists do not use this language and in fact many of us bristle at it. But as one who does do ethnography in conflict zones and works among others who also pursue this enterprise, I am increasingly unable to

deny that there is a radically spiritual component to our labours and to those of scholars around us and ancestral to us.

I write about the motivations of anthropology in this way because today we are faced with some very dangerous 'cultural others' that I think we can be professionally helpful in coming to terms with: the operatives of al-Qaeda and similar organizations who are the current demons of Western society. These have been virtually written off the screen – even of many in the intellectual and academic world who are otherwise interested in the dynamics of religious violence – as utterly beyond intelligibility. Since the attacks of September 11, we have seen a flurry of conferences, seminars, and quickly-put-together book collections that focus on the necessity of encouraging 'moderate voices' in Islam as well as a strong tendency in the Western academy to stamp a certain kind of Islam as acceptable and correct and other kinds as 'distorted,' or, better yet, 'hijacked' versions. Very rarely has there been any attempt to delve into what might be the world view, social structure, or cultural context of the transnational radical Islamist world out of which sprang Osama bin Laden and his (not insignificant) circle of supporters. Anthropology has not been a prominent voice in these post-9/11 dialogues, but I would like to suggest that it could and should be.

As one who has studied and written about religious militants of another sort (Sikh separatists in Punjab), I know well the problems that face an anthropologist committed to the ethnographic understanding of militancy. But I believe that the skepticism we face about our motives in willingly suspending judgment or grasp the mores of a culture in which violence forms a central part will always be far outweighed by the practical benefits of pursuing this type of research. In my view my own current role in public policy arenas in several countries where Sikh issues are at stake speaks to the benefits of this work; in such arenas, if ethnographic acumen is not present, mythic projections will reign. Useful policy that serves to create conditions of justice, to sustain the 99% of Sikhs who are uninvolved in any violence, and to resolve conflict effectively for those who would otherwise pick up AK's or worse, depends on actual knowledge – the kind we gather – not on the ideologies of anti-terrorism that often spur further cycles of violence (Mahmood 2001).

Contrary to mainstream thinking in peace studies arenas, it may not be encouragement of moderates that provides the best or only opportunity for solid peacebuilding. The conventional wisdom is that the moderate community willing to engage in civil dialogue will, with encouragement, expand, and the extreme fringe will then simply fade away. But there may not be real evidence to suggest that this scenario is in fact plausible. And while 'conventional wisdom' has it that the extremists cannot be spoken to or engaged in fruitful dialogue, some of us know that this is simply not the case. As an

anthropologist committed to peacebuilding, I have worked directly with Sikh militants of six different guerilla organizations and with Islamic militants of three. John Paul Lederach, a well known peacebuilding practitioner in the Mennonite tradition, notes that sometimes the extremists are actually more approachable than the moderates (1997). They are often the most committed members of their societies with the strongest interest in resolving the conflict in which they are enmeshed. (One interlocutor challenged Lederach, when he explained the conventional model of beginning a dialogue with 'moderate' elements, 'You don't build a bridge starting in the middle.')

In the current crisis one may also note that it is not military but political leaders who are at the forefront of calls for further escalation of armed conflict.

I think that anthropologists are well suited, both by training and temperament, to be able to begin a dialogue with those who appear to have given up on dialogue. The proportions of crisis right now are such that it is important to try. Let us use our professional training to explore whether dialogue may be possible along avenues political leaders have closed off in favour of military options. Let us follow Zulaika and Douglass in their insightful call for serious anthropological exploration of the 'tabooed' topic of terrorism (1996). This means not only those movements that may more legitimately be defined as resistance movements or national liberation struggles, but also those we may be unable to sympathize with on any level but are still demanding of understanding if we are to avoid further war and bloodshed.

Intellectuals in the world Islamic community are going through a period of intense reflection and conversation as they grapple with the fact of September 11 and now the US and allied 'war on terrorism,' with its reverberating effects in Afghanistan and beyond. The Muslim renaissance that so challenges Western secularism in its 'fundamentalism' is one strand of that interior conversation that especially calls for the kind of cultural bridging at which anthropologists excel. In the current political climate of the United States, talking about the full diversity of the House of Islam and the real issues that face Muslims today is becoming increasingly difficult. One feels one must constantly re-condemn the WTC event and re-affirm the ultimate peaceableness of Islam; there is an evolving protocol for discussions of the topic that calls for the best of our ethnographic sensitivities. Yet our anthropological commitment to telling it like it really is must carry through to Washington, London, and other power centres where decisions are made that affect the fates of other people we study and care for.

Let us recognize that our compulsion to reach out to others and to share what we experience is of particular moment at this crisis point in which widening wars may be in the offing. Those of us with relevant specializations can use our compulsions to further

peace by having the courage to conduct the research that needs to be done, no matter where it takes us, and to speak the truth where it counts.

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