

Agenda for an Anthropology of Peace

Cynthia Keppley Mahmood

published in Anthropology News

May 2003 (invited commentary)

This year's AAA Annual Meeting is to focus on "peace" – we know, hard to think about now in the shadows of war. But then, this same land, the names of whose cities resonate in anthropological minds with history and grandeur, has been fought over, bloodied, blasphemed and hallowed so many times before. We, of all people, must know that publics (since the rise of our proud "civilizations" anyway) have always lived in the shadows of war, and have always thought about peace in those shadows.

Ethnographic Study

While the archaeological study of the causes of war on the macroscopic level has provided much depth to contemporary analysis of intergroup violence, social and cultural anthropology complements this focus with new kinds of ethnographic exploration. Of course, anthropologists have always tried to draw inferences from pacific societies they encountered to point out that it might not be "human nature" to act aggressively, or to pursue ways in which social institutions may constrain the escalation of conflict to the point of deadly force. But the new interest in war and peace also takes the form of anthropologists doing their work in conflict arenas per se, work that is gradually eliciting not only more complex methodologies and ethics regarding such perilous fieldwork, but also a much richer understanding of how human beings experience violence. This includes how people come to the moment of engaging in violence, how as victims they suffer it, how society memorializes it, and what cascading effects the violence and counter-violence of war actually have.

At the same time, anthropological scholars in the violent field are also unraveling the complexities of the human yearning for peace and the deep creativity and resilience with which people in fact meet the unbearable situations in which they are enmeshed. So Carolyn Nordstrom illuminates in her harrowing, but perhaps ultimately inspiring,

work on Mozambique, *A Different Kind of War Story* (1997). We can hardly imagine that villagers who have suffered such brutality – often, from both sides of the armed struggle – can find any room for healing or for love. Nevertheless, they do, and contribute from the ground up to the eventual resolution of hostilities. This kind of anthropological research, and this kind of anthropological writing, call for a new sensibility about what anthropology is. For some, it is one deeply imbued with not only politics, but with philosophy as well.

Working with Policymakers

The pragmatic side of anthropology's interest in war and peace has always searched industriously for bridges between the academic and the world of policy. Ruth Benedict's flawed by classic *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, which played a role in the US decision not to destroy Kyoto during World War II, stands as one example of a successful influence in this country. Other leading lights in our field have stood for human rights, against racism, and been otherwise involved in peace-minded causes. The most effective of these, I believe, are able to affect the course of policy when their expertise ("culture") rather than their moral passions are front and center. By whatever unfortunate means, the fact is that "culture" is now a recognized concept in Washington and in other capitals. It is an opening that bodes well for anthropologists able to think strategically enough to bring their research into the world of policy.

The area of conflict resolution is one professional realm that has rather successfully worked to bring insights on culture to theoretical models on negotiation, mediation and reconciliation. Kevin Avruch describes the many ways in which anthropology's recognition of culturally local forms of discourse on argument, bargaining, settlement, and coexistence can fruitfully complement the rational-choice models prominent in many models of conflict resolution (*Culture and Conflict Resolution*, US Institute of Peace, 1998). The fact that such work is now being put into practice by people working on conflict transformation in various parts of the world should inspire those who hope to bring anthropology to bear on other arenas as well. It is a matter of bridging the world of the academy and the world in which conflicts erupt and decisions are made.

Interdisciplinary Dialogue

There is a more critical nexus between anthropology and academic peace studies too, however, which has not fully played itself out. Academic peace studies grew out of, and maintains an integral relationship with, the “peace community” of citizen-activists. In the universities, peace studies programs are usually closely tied to departments of political science and international relations – a holdover, I suggest, from the Cold War era when states were the major players in scenarios of war and peace. Today we know that most bloodletting going on is happening at the substate, transstate, ethnic, religious, add-your-label level, one particularly difficult for classically defined states with traditional military structures to deal with. (The ‘war on terrorism’ is the obvious example.) Anthropology is already a key interlocutor here as peace studies moves into new ways of thinking about a sustainable world order in which all kinds of units might viably coexist.

But even an uncritical acceptance of so innocuous a noun as “peace,” can be, as relativity-conscious anthropologists know, wrongheaded in certain contexts. For communities living in environments of state terror, for example, the language of rights and justices may be the more appropriate one, pacification and security frequently being tropes used by repressive governments themselves. “Peace” as a calling card can be received as a call to capitulate, a call to cease resistance. Indeed, since “peace” and “war” are concepts evolved in a state-based world order, they may not be the best poles at all through which to view this more complex world in which violence and nonviolence interpenetrate without clear-cut geographic or chronological boundaries. Our discipline can usefully bring these kinds of explorations to colleagues in the academy now seeking, as most of us are, glimmers of hope for humanity in this all-too-dark warscape in which we now live.

In this brief article I’ve offered, then, three areas that form an agenda for work in a social/cultural anthropology concerned with peace: 1) the ethnography study of war and peace; 2) pragmatic involvement with policy making toward coexistence and sustainable peace; and 3) purpose attempts at critical dialogue with cognate academic fields working on peace issues.

Cynthia Keppley Mahmood directs the book series on The Ethnography of Political Violence at the University of Pennsylvania Press, and conducts field research on Sikh and Islamic militancy. She consults with policy makers on issues of terrorism, security and human rights.