

The Value of an Anthropological Approach to International Intervention, Part I: Anti-Positivism and the Ethic of Freedom

I was recently reading a piece by Webb Keane that got me to thinking about how we present the value of an anthropological approach to international intervention. (It is a chapter in a 2005 volume entitled *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences. Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, edited by George Steinmetz. Keane's chapter is entitled "Estrangement, Intimacy, and the Objects of Anthropology.") In it, among other things, he offers an account of why cultural anthropology in North America has for some time been anti-positivist in nature, tracing "certain themes that run through the effort to place people's self-interpretations at the center of study and the privileging of intimacy over estrangement as the source of legitimate understanding" (63). The article got me thinking in two ways. The first has to do precisely with the issue of positivism and the relationship between anthropology and the disciplinary cultures of other social sciences. It seems to me that anthropologists often define the significance of their analysis of international intervention by casting that analysis against normative approaches which are characterized by a more positivist epistemology – i.e. that we deploy an anti-positivist critique of received categories, of comparative generalization, and of theoretical abstraction, all of which is part of our training as social/cultural anthropologists. And indeed, I have found that our work is valued by anthropologists and non-anthropologists for this. Some value the critical edge this kind of anti-positivism gives our scholarship. Others value the empirical explanatory promise offered by the ethnographic focus on the particular. But both of these can produce a tension, because so often the desire from our more normatively-minded interlocutors is to fit anthropology's particular knowledge into a positivist format. This can come from more positivist disciplines like political science or from practitioners active in contexts of intervention: the push towards generalization, to use individual cases to verify or build theoretical models with an implicit claim to trans-cultural and trans-historical validity, the privileging of prediction, and the creation of "Best Practices" and portable "lessons learned," and so on.

This raises a number of questions for me. How much is our knowledge shaped by our imagined audiences or by other scholarship in the areas in which we work? What does it matter that the majority of knowledge produced about contexts of international intervention is created by and for people seeking to shape those contexts? Do we enter the field with questions implicitly or explicitly defined by (or against) these non-anthropologists? Does being in conversation with, or imagining as a potential audience, foreign practitioners (policy makers, aid agencies, intervention institutions, donors, any number of NGOs) or "natives" of various kinds influence how we see or present the

value of anthropology? Is the value of anthropology simply a critical one, pointing out the flaws in the knowledge practices of intervention practitioners or in the effects of their practices? Does such a critical role draw us into a normative conversation that pushes our own practice or framing of anthropology in directions we might not otherwise take? What are the drawbacks or disadvantages of this? What are the drawbacks or disadvantages of NOT writing for or imagining an audience made up of these different actors and agencies?

The second way that Keane's article got me thinking was his argument that the anti-positivism of cultural anthropology can be linked to an underlying ethic or desire to demonstrate "some locus of human self-creation not reducible to external determinations" (84), an ethic "that stresses the value of human self-determination and opposes it to reductionism and to mere contingency" (62). He argues that through the critiques of anthropology (by anthropologists) in North America, beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the 1990s—even among those who take very different positions in these debates—one can detect an ethic motivating them that "stresses the value of human self-determination." When discussing the crisis of representation and the attention to power that animated the critiques of the 1980s and 1990s, he notes "For all their differences, many protagonists in the debates can be understood as competing over whose approach better recognizes human agency and self-determination" (76).

[Side note: Keane continues his point by tracing two common strategies for responding to the problems of representations that "restag(e) anthropology's claims to an epistemology of intimacy. One is to present oneself as a mere reporter of others' stories...the second is to claim some identity with the people being represented" (78). This foreshadows trends we can see in writing on the role for anthropology in international intervention to be discussed later. Think of the first strategy as similar to the anthropologist-as-witness described, albeit differently, by Fassin (2010) and Marcus (2010); the second strategy bears a strong resemblance to what Robbins (2013) argues is behind the emergence of the "suffering subject" as an object of anthropological inquiry].

To drive his point home, Keane looks at both the humanistic critique of Lili Abu-Lughod and her call for an epistemology of intimacy, as well as to the political-economic critique of Jim Ferguson and Akhil Gupta and their call for an epistemology of estrangement – and identifies, again, the same interest in human agency and freedom. He ends the chapter by noting some of the dangers of this ethic, which he argues is normative in cultural anthropology: "in seeking to overcome determinism, it tends towards an

equally problematic notion of freedom. Pitted against a hypostasized notion of science, it risks reifying a rather specific, humanist model of the subject” (85).

It is no surprise, given Keane’s own research, that he detects in anthropology such a concern with freedom, and links it to the capacity for self-interpretation. Whether or not you agree with his thesis, it raises a set of questions about how anthropologists working in or on contexts of international intervention see their role and the aims of their knowledge. How much anthropological writing on international intervention is anchored by this ethic, by a concern with freedom, self-determination, or the relative capacity for action?

I would argue quite a bit. Sometimes this is quite explicit, and dovetails with the critical role mentioned above. There is a rich anthropological literature on development, to take one long-standing example of international intervention, which is explicitly framed in such terms: “rendering technical” as de-politicization, the anti-politics machine, the neo-imperialism of exporting as universal a particular cultural model of socioeconomic organization, a concern with hegemony, etc. Perhaps this is an inevitable part of paying attention to relations of power in these contexts. Perhaps it comes with the theoretical architecture prominent in anthropological studies of intervention (Foucault, Gramsci, Agamben, etc.). Or perhaps these theories are attractive because of the underlying ethic that Keane identifies. Moreover, anthropologists are not the only scholars motivated by such an ethic, which again makes the critical potential of anthropology interesting for those other scholars. What is noteworthy is that some anthropologists who take up this critical role cast their knowledge in normative terms similar to non-anthropologists; for instance, they rely upon normative understandings of democracy or sovereignty in order to identify the anti- or un-democratic or non-sovereign effects of such interventions. This suggests a similar set of questions as those posed above. Is the role for anthropology to scrutinize the practices of international intervention to understand their consequences for human self-determination and freedom? Is the way we craft our anthropology, or argue for its significance, influenced by the value placed by others on its critical potential (i.e. what it has to say about the relations of power among, or relative freedom of, those we study)? What is gained and what is lost when we take up this role for anthropology?

Works Cited:

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