Advocacy in Anthropology: Active engagement or passive scholarship?

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Abstract

In this paper I will examine issues of advocacy in anthropology in a number of ways. I will begin by discussing terminology and then raise some of the key questions relevant to this topic. These will then be explored in depth by taking two contrasting cases where anthropologists have adopted radically different positions about the appropriateness of advocacy. Finally, the paper ends with some reflections on the relevance of this debate for 21st century anthropology.

Keywords

Advocacy, applied anthropology, ethics, neo-colonialism

"I went up to Chagnon and said, 'You know these people are really sick. Some of them could die. I think we should go and get medical help.' Chagnon told me that I would never be a scientist. He said, 'No. No. We didn't come to save the Indians. We came to study them'" Tierney (2000:60)

"Those who have the good fortune to be able to devote their lives to the study of the social world cannot stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of that world is at stake" Bourdieu (cited in Hillier and Rooksby, 2005:7).

"If you wish to shatter the social fabric, you must not expect your Professor of Social Anthropology to aid and abet you" Frazer in his augural lecture (cited by Kuper, 1996:95).

Introduction

One of the most memorable lines of Karl Marx is his assertion that "The point is not merely to understand the world, but to change it."1 With reference to anthropology we might re-phrase it to read: "Is the role of the anthropologist to try to change the world or to 'merely' understand it? Can (and should) anthropologists act as advocates for the rights of people they study, or does this compromise their objectivity?

This inevitably engages with fundamental questions about the role of anthropology: What is anthropology for? Who is it for? Why should anthropologists strive for 'objectivity'? These questions go to the heart of anthropology by revealing some of the unresolved tensions inherent in the history of its development into an academic discipline. As the 'bastard child of European colonialism', from the very beginning proto-

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1 Source: http://quotes.gaia.com/Karl_Marx (accessed 17 April 2008).

anthropologists were engaged directly or indirectly, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and complicity, in the colonial project or its legacy (Asad, 1973; Kuper, 1996; Barnard, 2000; Ervin, 2000; Sillitoe, 2007). The unequal power relationships of colonialism are echoed today in continuing global inequalities and injustices between north and south, as well as between the rich and powerful and the poor and dispossessed within countries. It is in this complex, messy and uneven scenario that most anthropologists find themselves involved, usually at the micro-level with individuals and local communities. Should the anthropologist act to try to improve the circumstances of local people? Should the anthropologist act as intermediary and voice on behalf of local people, particularly when requested to do so? Should anthropologists engage as active agents of change?

To do so would of course draw the anthropologist away from detachment towards engagement. Many of the founding fathers of anthropology were originally from a natural science background (e.g. Haddon, Rivers, Malinowski) who brought with them ideas of positivism and objectivity associated with the 'scientific' method. Those advocating such an approach treated 'native' people as objects of study and attempted to retain a distance from them. They believed that their endeavours were 'purely scientific', but their effects were certainly applied, even if not recognised. We now realise that neutral objectivity is a myth within the social sciences (and some would claim for the natural sciences also, for example Feyerabend). We cannot separate ourselves from the material world within which we act: 'subject and object merge in a world of "betweeness"' and 'fieldwork is now openly recognised as a personal encounter and ethnography as an intersubjective reality' (Hastrup and Elsass, 1990:302).

In this paper I will examine these issues in a number of ways. I will begin by discussing terminology and then raise some of the key questions relevant to this topic. These will then be explored in depth by taking two contrasting cases where anthropologists have adopted radically different positions about the appropriateness of advocacy. Finally, the paper ends with some reflections on the relevance of this debate for 21st century anthropology.

Terms and definitions

There are a number of overlapping terms which are used when discussing the application of anthropology (Sillitoe, 2007) including: applied anthropology, action anthropology (including Participatory Action Research), praxis anthropology,[2] engaged anthropology, practical anthropology, as well as advocacy anthropology; and there is a similarly wide range of possible practices covered by these terms (Sol, 1975; Paine, 1990; Singer, 1990; Stewart and Strathern, 2005; Rilko-Bauer et al, 2006). Ervin (2000:2) attempts to clarify by offering a continuum, with academic anthropology at one end and applied at the other.

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[2] Praxis anthropology attempts to *'bridge the gap between theory and applied anthropology'* (Ervin, 2000:9). This relates to the work of Bourdieu (1977).

Table 1: Types of Social Anthropology (Ervin, 2000:2)

Socio-cultural anthropology				
Academic anthropology				**Applied anthropology**
Theoretical and ethnographic research	Studies of social issues	Policy analysis	Academic applied research	Practicing anthropology

This appears to position theory against practice, reflection against action, and 'pure' against applied, whereas the reality is more nuanced and complex. Such simplistic dualisms are not helpful, and 'distort anthropology's dynamism as a discipline and a profession' Sillitoe (2007:161). According to Bennett (1996:S23) "applied anthropology in the United States emerged as a mixture of New Deal humanitarian liberalism and progressive industrial management ideology and in Britain as a humanitarian advisory function for colonial administration in Africa." Today much applied anthropology is connected with international development agencies, NGOs, and a range of consultant and corporate organisations. In most cases it is commissioned by organisations who may want socio-cultural background knowledge but who normally 'expect concrete recommendations for specific purposes' (Ervin, 2000:4). In contrast to 'academic' anthropology, the topic is not selected by the anthropologist, and theory is usually less prominent. Several authors suggest that there is an implicit hierarchy within anthropology which privileges academic, theoretical anthropology and regards any applied activity as inferior and second best (Stewart and Strathern, 2005).[3]

Advocacy anthropology may be considered as a sub-group within applied anthropology, and whilst sharing several common features, particularly methodologies, there are usually significant differences related to time: consultancy work is usually strictly time limited ('the quicker the better'), whereas academic ethnographies are generally accorded higher credence with greater length. There is also a crucial distinction to be made between anthropologists contracted to research, interpret and possibly represent local people, to the situation of 'academic' anthropologists who in the process of carrying out ethnography find themselves with the dilemma or opportunity of moving beyond research to engage in advocacy on behalf of 'their people'. It is this second category which is the focus of this paper.

Why advocate?
There are a number of arguments used by those supporting advocacy. These range from pragmatism and effectiveness to more fundamental issues around morality and ethics. It can also be argued that from an epistemological perspective all anthropologists are in some ways acting as advocates through documenting and communicating their informants' perspectives to others: "Advocacy derives naturally from the practice of anthropology… it is an integral part of the process of representing other people's views" (Layton 1996:40).

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[3] This is the opposite case in my own discipline of architecture where the design and realisation of building projects are seen as 'real architecture' - in contrast to academic study which is generally not accorded high status (although some of the most admired designers are also theorists).

Singer adds: "From this perspective all of anthropology is advocacy, because all activity is goal-oriented and has consequence in social life" (Singer 1990:548).

Although advocacy is promoted because of its potential to make a difference to people's lives (Layton, 1996), and also because it may help the anthropologist obtain access or achieve better collaboration and hence collect better quality data, the main debate centres around the ethics and morality of intervention by outsiders in promoting a particular cause or speaking on behalf of others (or 'the other'). This debate goes to the centre of anthropology as a discipline and practice.

Wade (1996) raises the issue of the 'inherent reflexivity of anthropological practice'. He reminds us that in many parts of the world (he makes specific reference to Colombia) local anthropologists are directly engaged in social problems and political struggles. Central to these processes is the production, control and communication of knowledge - which is highly controlled and unequally distributed. He argues for enhanced reflexivity through methods which 'subvert' normal communication channels 'to try to create an arena in which anthropologists can engage politically and speed up, so to speak, the cycle of reflexivity' (Wade, 1996:4).

He defines advocacy as 'a particular mode of engagement or reflexive academic practice' and in common with other forms of political engagement is inevitably problematic: Who and how to represent? Whose interests to privilege? How to deal with divided communities? He uses the term 'direct advocacy' and argues that because such action inevitably means engagement at 'the sharp end' of these problems, this is not a good enough reason for not engaging.

Moral engagement in anthropology

Scheper-Hughes argues for a radical approach which is politically committed and morally engaged. She believes that anthropology must be ethically grounded and that cultural relativism, which she equates with moral relativism, is no longer appropriate. She is critical of the anthropologist as a 'neutral, dispassionate, cool and rational, objective observer of the human condition' (Scheper-Hughes, 1995:410).

The personal story of her transformation 'from "objective" anthropologist to politically and morally engaged companheira' (410) is illuminating. As a Peace Corps volunteer she worked in a poor favela in Brazil as a 'politically committed community organiser'. Twenty years later she returned to the same favela, but this time as an anthropologist (and mother) to study infant mortality and chronic hunger (Scheper-Hughes, 1992). Rather than participate in community action she tried to focus on her research, but was challenged by the women in the favela: "Why had I refused to work with them [as before]? Didn't I care about them personally anymore, their lives, their suffering, their struggle? Why was I so passive, so indifferent?" (1992:17-18). She replied: "my work is different now. I cannot be an anthropologist and a companheira at the same time." But this argument was rejected by the women who insisted that "the next time I came back it would be on their terms, that is as a companheira, 'accompanying' them as I had before in the struggle and not just sitting idly by taking field notes. 'What is this anthropology to us anyway?'" (1995:411). She

agreed, and on subsequent visits divided her time and loyalties between anthropology and political work in support of her friends and informants.4 In the process she came to the realisation that the more she engaged with the public world beyond the favela 'the more my understandings of the community were enriched and my theoretical horizons were expanded' (ibid: 410). Here she argues that politically engaged advocacy is not only morally correct, but theoretically valid and practically advantageous.5

Her engagement with extremes of violence, poverty and social exclusion in many countries6 led her to believe that "there was little virtue to false neutrality in the face of broad political and moral dramas of life and death, good and evil, that were being played out in the everyday lives of people. …What makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and political) stand on events we are privileged to witness?"(1995:411).

In a similar way to Wade (1996) she reminds us that the idea of an 'active, politically committed, morally engaged anthropology' (Scheper-Hughes, 1995:415) is more common in countries of the south where anthropology is 'at once ethnographic, epistemologic, and political' and local anthropologists commonly have more engagement and communication with 'the polis' and 'the public'. She argues that 'those of use who make our living observing and recording the misery of the world have a particular obligation to reflect critically' (ibid: 416), and to produce "politically complicated and morally demanding texts and images capable of sinking through the layers of acceptance, complicity and bad faith that allow the suffering and the deaths to continue" (ibid: 417).

She argues for accountability, commitment, engagement, responsibility, solidarity, empathy, compassion and interestingly suggests that such an approach would be 'more womanly'. She believes that a change is required which would turn the anthropologist from 'spectator' to 'witness', and explains why 'neutrality' is not an option - as non-involvement is also an ethical and moral position.

Her position echoes Bourdieu's criticism of a synoptic view of activity - in which the viewer attempts to stand apart from the action, as opposed to a participatory view which regards the world from a participant's

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4 Sometimes she was reluctant to be drawn into the political campaigns and strikes to which she had been assigned: *'My reluctance to do so was born out of my own natural anthropological inclination to want – as Adlai Stevenson once put it – just to sit back in the shade with a glass of wine in my hand and watch the dancers."* (Scheper-Hughes: 1995:411).

5 But it can also be personally dangerous. Here is her description of squatter camps in the Western Cape in South Africa: *"At times the shanty town or the squatter camp resembles nothing so much as a battlefield, a prison camp, or an emergency room in a crowded inner-city hospital, where an ethic of triage replaces an ethical regard for the equal value of everyday life"* (Scheper-Hughes, 1995:418).

6 She has worked as *"an activist and with social movements in Brazil (in defence of rural workers, against death squads, and for the rights of street kids) in the United States (as a civil rights worker and as a socialist-anarchist Catholic worker for the homeless and mentally ill, against nuclear weapons research) and internationally (in defence of the rights of those who sell their kidneys)."* She has also worked in Cuba, Ireland and in South Africa at the time of independence, where she joined the ANC and spoke up against violence in the squatter camps. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nancy_Scheper-Hughes (accessed 24 February 2008).

standpoint (Hillier and Rooksby, 2005:21). We are all actors within a social reality and cannot be neutral, disengaged spectators. Therefore according to Scheper-Hughes (1995: 417, 418) we have a responsibility to be involved: we cannot flee 'from local engagements, local commitments, and local accountability' but must use our ethnography as 'a tool for critical reflection and for human liberation.'

Is advocacy incompatible with anthropology?

Hastrup and Elsass articulate an opposing view, based on their involvement with an isolated indigenous group (Arhuacos) in the mountains of northern Colombia. This is an appropriate case to compare with Scheper-Hughes, as in both situations the local people themselves specifically requested the advocacy of outside professionals; both deal with marginalised groups in Latin America; and both potential advocates had developed close, long-term, trusting working relationships with the people requesting their help.

Hastrup and Elsass[7] were requested by some Arhuacos to help promote a 'development' project to increase their autonomy within Colombian society. Their limited traditional land was under threat from encroaching peasant farmers and the proposed irrigation project was meant to increase yields. The project aimed to revitalise traditional cultural patterns through its combined 'ecological and cosmological overtones' and the main beneficiaries would be women. Elsass and Hastrup believed the proposal was sound, but on reflection decided that they would not act as advocates.

They gave a number of reasons. Firstly, that they were not needed, that some of the educated Arhuacos could do what was required; secondly, they were concerned about their relationship with the Bureau of Indigenous Affairs; thirdly, they questioned why they should privilege the Indians over the peasants; and fourthly, they felt their participation would be patronising and an extension of romantic notions attached to the European vision of the Indian as the ultimate 'other'. They ask: "in what sense could we 'speak for' them without possibly inflicting romantic post-colonial views upon them to the exclusion of a thorough understanding of the complex Colombian context?" (Hastrup and Elsass, 1990:304).

They were also concerned about apparent divisions within the community: 'they want to present themselves to the outside world … as a united community and therefore tend to be silent on issues of local conflict. We cannot take this self-presentation at face-value; it masks a divided truth. Ultimately, our uncovering this "truth" may enable the Arhuacos to speak more convincingly for themselves' (307)

They are correct to point out divisions, and to ask 'whose voice' should be represented. There are dangers in speaking for one particular interest group against another, but no community is homogeneous and their response appears patronising – as they expect unanimity within the community as a precondition for advocacy. Why should they expect this of the Arhuacos? They attempt to reinforce their position by citing literature which argues that the advocacy discourse is "over-emotional, oversimplified, rhetorical, over-dramatic, ex-

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[7] Hastrup and Elsass had been involved in various ways with the Arhuaco Indians over a 15 year period, including several film projects (http://www.nafa.uib.no/nafanet/nafa96.html - accessed 15 April 2008).

aggerated, single-minded, without footnotes: in short the exact opposite of our academic writing" (307). This is an unhelpful generalisation as advocacy can equally well be 'dispassionate, empirical, substantiated, careful in the way it is framed, and based on very substantial information and research' (Ervin, 2000:129).

Concluding discussion: advocacy or anthropology?

Hastrup and Elsass argue that the rationale for advocacy is never ethnographic and that advocacy is incompatible with anthropology as scholarship: 'what is required of the anthropologist as scholar... is to raise the context awareness of the people themselves so that they may eventually become better equipped to plead their own cause" (306). Neither do they believe that any 'cause' can be legitimated in anthropological terms as: 'advocacy has its own discourse because it is directed towards specific goals. The pursuit of these goals cannot be legitimated in terms of anthropology, though it can be informed by it.' (307). They also emphasise the differences in terms of knowledge by claiming that 'ethnography is legitimated by established canons of scholarship and the creation of knowledge, while advocacy rests on moral commitment and the use of knowledge' (302). They conclude that to become advocates anthropologists have to 'step outside' their profession.

It is difficult to avoid concluding that in justifying their inaction and non-advocacy (passivity) they are constructing an alternative narrative for anthropology which defines the subject in a narrow sense to avoid confronting the complex issues which many would argue require action. In this case the Arhuacos themselves specifically requested their support. Grillo (1990:308) points out that Hastrup and Elsass propose an 'amoral relativism' and 'an austere, persuasive definition of anthropology and a rather narrow view of the principles on which the subject and its practices are based and of what they can and should comprise.' In contrast Scheper-Hughes insists on the central importance of morality: 'if we cannot begin to think about social institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes me as quite weak and useless" (ibid: 410).

It is relevant to be reminded that 'the people who find themselves being researched are rarely content with academic studies of their communities. They want information that can improve their lives rather than furthering someone's career' (Ervin, 2000:129). They can also legitimately expect some form of reciprocity, and as Kirsch (2002) points out: "activism is a logical extension of the commitment to reciprocity that underlies the practice of anthropology." This is illustrated by Burr (2002:6) who deeply regretted not taking a more active role to protect her young informants from HIV infection, and concluded that a 'social activist route would have been preferable.' 8

There are multiple ways of 'doing' anthropology and given the complexity of most situations the call by Paine (1990) for 'a professional statement about the kind of things we do, or should do as anthropologists'

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8 Even well-meaning actions can lead to unpredicted consequences and tensions. Unni Wikan (1980:12-15) attempted to help her friends in the Cairo neighbourhood she was studying by distributing clothes (from the Norwegian community in Cairo). This created serious conflict and rivalries between neighbours and led to a deterioration of relationships.

would seem unnecessary. The ASA Ethical Guidelines9 already recognise that 'anthropologists … are faced increasingly with competing duties, obligations and conflicts of interest' and to create more detailed proscriptive rules would undermine the autonomy of each anthropologist to interpret the guidelines in accordance with their professional judgement, personal beliefs and understanding of the context in which they are operating.

There is an inevitable tension within participant observation between greater observation (passive) and more participation (action), but effective research requires 'active engagement with our subjects' (Crapanzano, 1995:421). Cultures are never static and change is inevitable. Even the presence of the researcher in the field changes the situation however apparently minimally, and hence I would argue that the role of the anthropologist is to recognise and embrace our active role as agents of change. Heightened reflexivity is a precondition to using our insights, knowledge and skill in attempting to guide change in what appear to be more positive directions, however modest and small scale, and despite the potential pitfalls. For some this must include direct advocacy.

This contrasts with Hastrup and Elsass (1990:307) who concluded that "we should never forget that a commitment to improving the world is no substitute for understanding it." This can hardly be an unknowing inversion of Marx's maxim with which we opened this paper. There is little doubt that the lives of many people in the world are desperately in need of improvement and as anthropologists I believe we have a responsibility to support them. Concern for their condition is not sufficient: "the issue for us [all] is how to translate concern into action; and an anthropologist without concern is no anthropologist at all." 10

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9 The ASA Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice can be found at http://www.theasa.org/ethics/guidelines.htm (accessed 8 May 2008).

10 Cohen quoted by Paine (1990:310)

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