

The Anansi position

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Anansi the spider is the trickster of West African folktales, famous for getting the upper hand against larger and stronger adversaries through creativity, humour and imagination. Perhaps the Anansi stance is the right one for public anthropology.

Anansi the trickster

In a certain sense, the very concept of a public anthropology is a neoplasm: In so far as anthropologists address neither themselves nor personal acquaintances, they engage in public discourse. For those of us who teach, our most important public is arguably our students, most of whom will go on to do other things than working as anthropologists. Our obligation to them is to make certain they will always remember their studies of the human condition at university. We can only hope that they will remember more than the pyramids of rotting yams witnessed by Malinowski in Kiriwina and the daunting complexity of the Kariëra kinship system; perhaps the most important memory we can wish for our undergraduates to retain is that the search for knowledge should be driven by curiosity rather than anxiety.

Achieving this is neither easy nor trivial, but it is important, not least since much of what anthropologists say and write can be considered a form of public service. Lectures at universities are often open to anyone who wishes to attend, and anthropological publications can be read – in theory – by anybody. There is probably no anthropologist who does not wish to have an audience for his or her ideas. So, in this sense, all anthropology has the potential to be more or less public. However, public anthropology, as the term is generally being used, refers to a specific set of practices and positions within the discipline that aim to reach out beyond the confines of the academy. This can be accomplished through writing for different audiences, engaging in advocacy-oriented work in local communities, or by taking part in the transnational conversation about the ills and spoils of the contemporary world and what it means to be human.

The common denominator of these practices is the conviction that anthropology should matter, not just as an academic pursuit of knowledge, but also as a tool to engage with the world in a practical, if not political way. Robert Borofsky, the instigator of the web-based Public Anthropology project (www.publicanthropology.org), accordingly has argued that public anthropology addresses problems beyond the discipline – illuminating the larger social issues of our times as well as encouraging broad, public conversations about them with the explicit goal of fostering social change. It affirms our responsibility, as scholars and citizens, to meaningfully contribute to communities beyond the academy – both local and global – that make the study of anthropology possible. (Borofsky quoted in McGranahan 2006: 257)

In other words, public anthropology amounts to an attempt to bridge the gap and overcome the alienation between the anthropological community as a closed professional group and the global society that anthropology studies and in which anthropologists take part. The ideal readership of the public anthropologist are neither paid (colleagues) nor forced (students) to listen to them or read their work. They could be academics working in other fields, or they could be anybody. They could be your aunt in Reading and your niece in Stavanger. At this point, it may be useful to distinguish, following Besteman

(2013), between engaged and public anthropology; the latter explicitly aiming to contribute to a broad and non-specialized discourse about humanity, the former often engaged on behalf of a community or social grouping in which the anthropologist works (for this, see e.g. Beck & Maida 2013).

Although there seems to be broad agreement within the discipline these days about the desirability of a public anthropology, there is less certainty, or agreement, about its *raison-d'être*. What should an anthropology which engages closely with non-academic publics seek to achieve? There are several possible approaches to this question.

A position enunciated at the time of the radical student movement of the 1960s saw anthropology as an inherently critical discipline in a vaguely left-wing sense (e.g. Berreman 1968). To the extent that anthropologists are closer to 'ordinary people' than other researchers, including other social scientists, advocacy on behalf of local communities facing potential conflict with corporations or states may seem to follow logically from the experiences and social obligations developed by the anthropologist in the field. It is doubtless true that when anthropologists act or write on behalf of the people they do research on, they are more often than not defenders of the particular and local against various forms of standardization, state power and global neoliberalism. While this is an often laudable and even necessary task, the critical role of public anthropology can be taken further than advocacy for various kinds of local movements. This is especially, but not exclusively, evident when anthropologists engage with issues in their own society.

Anthropology at home and the double hermeneutic

Doing anthropology at home has its familiar rewards and pitfalls, mostly resulting from the close relationship of the researcher to the researched. For obvious reasons, this has been more thoroughly theorized by sociologists than by anthropologists, some of whom still tend to think of 'anthropology at home' as an exception. Accordingly, just as poststructuralism was replacing neo-Marxism as the dominant non-orthodox theoretical orientation in the social sciences, Giddens (1984) pointed out that the social scientist enters into a 'double hermeneutic' relationship in his or her society, since the concepts and analyses of the social sciences are both informed by lay concepts and in turn influence them. There is, in other words, a two-way hermeneutic process taking place. For instance, the anthropological concept of ethnicity has entered everyday discourse, while the political concept of integration (regarding minorities) has, conversely, influenced social research on the issue. Years before Giddens, the philosopher Hans Skjervheim (1957) described a related duality in a seminal essay marking the beginning of the Norwegian critique of positivism. He showed that far from being an aloof and objective observer, the social scientist is both participant and observer (an epistemological position not to be confused with the methodological device of participant-observation). There can, accordingly, be no neutral ground from which to view society.

Social scientists are, in other words, entwined with broader public discourse and societal concerns whether they like it or not; indeed, critics of positivism have long pointed out that this is true of all scientific enquiry. Thus, writing

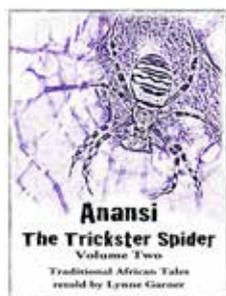


Fig. 1. Cover of Anansi the trickster spider: Traditional African tales by Lynne Garner (Mad Moment Media, 2012).



Fig. 2. Russ (high school graduates) passing by the Royal Castle during Constitution Day festivities.

in the context of the burgeoning radical student movements in the late 1960s, Jürgen Habermas distinguished between three knowledge interests (*Erkenntnisinteressen*, Habermas 1971[1968]), which he associated with the three main branches of academic inquiry. The natural sciences, he said, were driven by a *technical* interest, and found their justification in explaining natural relationships and processes in ways which enabled control and technological progress. The inherent knowledge interest of the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) was *practical* (in the Kantian sense) and aimed to deepen and maintain the communicative community on which both society and individuality depended. Finally, the knowledge interest of the social sciences was *liberating*, aiming to expose and account for the power relations of society, thereby contributing to the critical self-understanding of its inhabitants. Habermas worried that the technical knowledge interest was becoming overly dominant across the academic disciplines. It is easy to see evidence supporting this view today, when most social science research is commissioned directly or indirectly by state institutions, humanities are judged on their instrumental usefulness, and New Public Management provides the yardsticks for assessing academic achievement.

The knowledge interest of anthropology

Seen against the backdrop of Habermas, Giddens, the critique of positivism, and the perceived need for public engagement, it is fairly obvious that not all social science satisfies the criteria for representing a liberating knowledge interest. Some – perhaps most – social science is closely aligned with social engineering, planning and the formal structuring of society, and in state budgets, social research is justified by referring to its usefulness. It belongs to the domain of technical knowledge interest. Its dialectical negation, the broad family of approaches and persuasions falling under the umbrella of critical social science, either aims to improve a flawed socioeconomic system by addressing racism, inequality, misogyny etc. or to replace it with a better one. It can be liberating, but it depends conceptually on that from which it seeks liberation.

Anthropology is in a privileged position to develop a third way beyond system maintenance and social criticism, one which is arguably more in accordance with the young Habermas' (and his more radical predecessors in the Frankfurt school) notion of liberating knowledge (see Ferrándiz 2013 for an excellent example). Being an inher-

ently subversive and unpredictable partner in the long conversation about who we are and where we are going, I'd like to argue that anthropology can, and should, take on the part of Anansi, the trickster, in the sprawling fauna of the social and human sciences. In West African and Caribbean folklore, Anansi the spider always gets the upper hand in confrontations with larger and stronger adversaries, because of his imaginative and bold ways of turning his apparent weakness into a virtue. Since nobody fears him, he is capable of surprising them and makes the rhino, the lion and the python fall victim to their own vanity.

Similarly, the typical anthropological approach does not take home truths for granted, refuses to be co-opted by polarizing discourses and insists on the right to view society simultaneously as 'observer and participant'. We now move to a few examples from Norway, a country where public anthropologists are fairly thick on the ground (Eriksen 2006; 2013). In this small North European country, anthropologists often give public talks in forums ranging from Rotary clubs to Oslo's popular House of Literature, they comment on public events in the media, and several write regular columns, op-eds and the occasional book for a general readership.

Anthropologists playing the trickster at home

An extraordinary and understudied ritual which is organized and participated in by thousands of nineteen-year-olds in Norway every year in May is the *russefeiring*, the graduation celebration of school leavers. They dress in characteristic red uniforms with white nicknames and other insignia, drive around in usually dilapidated buses painted red and decorated in white, loud music blaring and horns honking; above all, they organize a series of large and boisterous outdoor parties culminating on Constitution Day, 17 May. A lengthy celebration of anti-structure in Turner's sense (1969), the *russefeiring* is generally tolerated, but it is also the source of considerable anxiety among parents and other respectable citizens who are directly or indirectly affected by it.

Some time in the early 1990s, the late Eduardo Archetti (1943–2005), an Argentine anthropologist who had lived in Norway since the early 1970s, was interviewed about this spectacle by the leading right-of-centre Oslo newspaper *Aftenposten*. The father of two teenagers himself, Archetti had some first-hand insight into the phenomenon, and he explained to the journalist that this was a self-organized rite of passage. Moreover, he added, for many of these adolescents, it was their first experience of rituals which involved sex and intoxicating substances, and this went a long way to explain why it was so emotionally powerful and fraught with tension.

Not the most reassuring statement for anxious parents, perhaps, Archetti's description was instead faithful to the experiential space inhabited by the participants themselves, conveying a sense of the complex emotions invested in the exciting and slightly dangerous celebrations. Like Anansi in the folktales, Archetti came across as a social scientist driven by curiosity rather than anxiety, which is an unusual and, to many, surprising position to take in a public sphere where social scientists are generally expected to share the concerns of the state and, more generally, to worry.

My next vignette tells the story of a more contested and controversial situation, namely that of the Roma Gypsies in Europe. As in many other European countries, Norway has seen a considerable, to some extent seasonal, growth in the influx of Roma in recent years. Their presence has led to a series of local and national controversies: Some accuse them of being simple thieves and criminals masquerading as an oppressed minority; others disapprove of their livelihood on moral and aesthetic grounds and have called for a general ban on begging. At the local level,

Fig. 3. From a demonstration in support of Roma in Oslo, July 2012, at the height of anti-Roma propaganda in the public sphere.

there have been skirmishes over their right to camp in parks and other public spaces, and many have pointed out that the Roma tend to leave their designated campsites in an untidy and filthy state when moving on. The occasional eviction by the police from empty lots in the city has led to the mobilization of support groups arguing for their right to stay, and a recently formed NGO (non-governmental organization), *Folk er Folk* ('People are People'), has the plight of the Roma as its main focus.

Yet there seems to be no simple solution to this knotty problem. Although it cannot be denied that Roma and other Gypsies have suffered terrible oppression across Europe, from slavery and indenturedship to attempted genocide, the conflicts between itinerant Roma and settled Europeans are real enough, not least seen from the perspective of the latter, who see their parks and recreation areas deteriorating due to the regular presence of people who scatter rubbish around and sometimes threaten passers-by. There are mainly two approaches to the contemporary Roma question which may shed light on it in different ways. According to the first, the Roma in Norway are best described as unemployed and homeless; according to the second, they avoid regular waged work for cultural reasons and are a nomadic people. The first perspective is characteristic of the Norwegian Left, including *Folk er Folk*, while the second perspective can be gleaned from the analyses and comments of Norway's leading scholar specializing in Roma Gypsies, the anthropologist Ada Engebriksen (Engebriksen 2007).

The begging and camping population of the capital increases perceptibly every summer, and Engebriksen is regularly contacted by the media for comments during the warm months. She has, over the years, contextualized the Roma Gypsies for the Norwegian public in many ways, refusing to moralize either way. She has confirmed that some of them steal, adding that this would be the case of most ethnic groups. Engebriksen has also pointed out that the term 'Roma' is unfortunate as a catch-all phrase for all Gypsies, since only some European Gypsies are Roma. She has on occasion explained that Roma often get married around the age of 14 to 16, which implies that persons of this age are considered responsible adults who often have children of their own. She has also stated that begging, to them, just forms part of their survival repertoire – there are no 'human traffickers' nor 'a mafia' sending Roma from Romania to Norway. They travel independently in search of a means of survival. Finally, Engebriksen (2012) has shown how group-based begging can be economically profitable, even if the hourly income can be as low as 20 to 40 kroner (€2.50-€5.00).

These snippets from Ada Engebriksen's long-standing service to the public as a researcher of Roma Gypsies suggest that her role in the Norwegian media has neither been that of advocacy (for a minority) nor of anxiety (on behalf of e.g. the welfare state), but has rather consisted in asking open-ended questions and trying to make sense of, and convey, some central elements of the Gypsy life-world to the Norwegian public. As a result, her work cannot easily be co-opted by political interests, whether favourable or unfavourable to the Roma presence in Norway. It is morally ambiguous.

My final short example is more generic than the other two, and it is included because it indicates a different dimension of the subversive potential of anthropology – namely that of turning a familiar story on its head – but also indicates the risk of being categorized within a polarized political discourse.

In the media debate about immigration to Norway, which has increased significantly after the turn of the millennium, there are major concerns around a practice formally known as 'family reunification', whereby migrants already settled



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and with full citizenship rights in the country can 'import' a new person from the native country through marriage. Moral outrage often accompanies media stories about this practice, sometimes disparagingly spoken of as *henteekteskap* ('pick-up marriage') as opposed to an 'authentic' marriage based on mutual affection and individual choice.

An underlying assumption is that these marriages are part of a racket which in practice increases the immigrant population in Norway in a morally illegitimate, if technically legal way. To strengthen this interpretation, it has been mentioned, rightly or wrongly, that a young girl or boy of Pakistani parents with Norwegian citizenship is spoken of as 'a golden passport' in their place of origin. An anxiety-driven social science perspective on this practice might either search for ways in which this kind of migration could be reduced (e.g. by raising the minimum age, or by requiring a minimum income for the spouse residing in Norway), or argue that these marriages are no less emotionally and morally valid than those of the ethnic majority.

A characteristic anthropological approach to this kind of practice would take an informant's perspective. For example, it might convey the view of the Pakistani father. Suppose, the anthropologist might argue, you were not an affluent person in a rich, well-organized country, but a struggling father in a Pakistani town. Suppose, moreover, you had a son or daughter of marriageable age, and that you had relatives living overseas in a country, admittedly cold and expensive, but with huge economic opportunities, physical security, free education at all levels, a secular public sphere and a fairly reliable public sector? Living in a country where corruption is rife, the economy is in a shambles, the public administration is distant and inefficient and violence is common, wouldn't you – assuming that you wanted the best for your children and grandchildren – do everything in your power to help him or her find an appropriate spouse in that other country? I have myself often pursued this line of reasoning when commenting on questions to do with cultural diversity and migration in the press, admittedly with mixed results.

There is no guaranteed outcome from this kind of thought experiment, but the detour via the Pakistani father's life-world does the job of adding nuance and complexity to

Fig. 4. Bata Diallo, who made the film about Djeneba, later to be viewed in a remote part of Papua New Guinea.



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Giddens, A. 1984. *The constitution of society*. Cambridge: Polity.

Habermas, J. 1971 [1968]. *Knowledge and human interests* (trans.) J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press.

Johnson, P. 2013. Letter to University of Tromsø, in support of the Visual Anthropology programme.

McGranahan, C. 2006. Introduction: Public anthropology. *India Review* 5: 255-67.

Skjervheim, H. 1957. Deltakar og tilskodar ('Participant and observer'). Mimeo. Oslo: Department of Sociology.

Turner, V. 1969. *The ritual process*. Chicago: Aldine.

an otherwise one-sided, myopic and intellectually lazy perspective.

Curiosity versus anxiety

The three examples – Archetti on the *russ* and their rituals involving sex and alcohol; Engebretsen on the Roma Gypsies and their frictions with the majority; and the family reunification seen from the perspective of the sending family and not the receiving country – highlight public anthropology as a potentially unpredictable, subversive practice which refuses to be co-opted by a polarizing discourse.

At the same time, public anthropologists face a formidable problem of translation between that which we do best and mainstream journalism which thrives on politicized polarization. Of course, individual anthropologists can – and sometimes must – be part of a polarized discourse, when it is their obligation to react against injustice or oppression. There is nevertheless nothing in our professional training that equips anthropologists with a superior faculty of normative judgement.

When, from 2004 to 2010, I directed an interdisciplinary research programme on cultural complexity in the new Norway (CULCOM), we anthropologists were sometimes politely criticized for being moral cowards by the moral philosophers or theologians in the network. It is true that we were often reluctant to take a normative position in academic discussions (although we would be more than happy to do it privately). The reason is probably that the kind of analysis developed by anthropologists does not typically lead to a normative conclusion. Our job is not to tell other people what to do, but to show that everything could have been different.

I recently spoke with Fredrik Barth about the changes experienced by the Ok peoples of highland New Guinea in recent decades, bringing mixed blessings of modernity to erstwhile horticulturalists. I asked him, conversationally, whether the momentous changes had, in his view, made life better or worse for these small, until recently stateless and illiterate peoples whom he had known before monetization. He shrugged and said that this question lay out-

side the scope of anthropological knowledge. Even asking Ok people for their view – the obvious thing to do for an anthropologist – would be unlikely to elicit an unequivocal answer.

Knowledge of an unexpected kind can help people make sense of the world in new ways. A striking story about the liberating potential of new knowledge was recently brought to my attention by Penny Johnson, a medical anthropologist working in Melanesian societies. In 2012, she brought a film from Mali, made by Bata Diallo, a student of visual anthropology in Tromsø (Norway), to the people of Bimadbn, a remote village in western Papua New Guinea. The film depicted the daily struggles and predicaments of the Malians, and the Bimadbn villagers 'were profoundly affected'. They exclaimed that they had no idea that there were other poor, black people in the world with simple technology, no shoes and a religion that resembled theirs. 'We thought the rest of the world was aeroplanes and supermarkets', one said. When the main character of the film, Djeneba, said that she would have gone far if she could only get an education, the Bimadbn villagers started crying and exclaimed that this was their story, that the West African girl named Djeneba was their sister.

Bata Diallo's film offered no solution for either the Malians or the New Guineans, but it expanded the world of the villagers who saw it on Johnson's laptop, giving them new knowledge on which to act in the future. This is how a public anthropology, with no overt normative agenda, can serve a deeply moral purpose.

By being a curiosity-driven rather than an anxiety-driven mode of inquiry, anthropology may serve a genuinely liberating knowledge interest, in Habermas' sense, since it is capable, no strings attached, to question what is usually taken for granted, to turn familiar stories on their head and to shift the perspective in unexpected directions; it is not by providing blueprints anthropology can hope to improve the human lot. Ours is the role of Anansi. ●