



The Perils of Popularizing Anthropology

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The perils of popularizing anthropology

As a beginning assistant professor, I once reported to a few sympathetic senior colleagues that I had heard of some interest in a book manuscript of mine on the part of an editor at a trade press. Concerned that I do all I could to bolster my case for eventual tenure, my colleagues warned me to run, not walk in the other direction from a contract with a non-academic publisher: they cautioned me that I shouldn't waste precious time that should be sent building up the strongest case for promotion.

As Jeremy MacClancy writes in a new collected volume on *Popularizing Anthropology*¹, the structure of Anglo-American publishing is such that '[i]n the last decade the specialist/trade distinction has become even sharper'. Combined with the structure of American academia, this fact rendered the advice offered by my colleagues all too appropriate. What is that makes anthropologists – like many in other disciplines – so nervous about becoming 'popular' in a wide arena beyond the immediate charmed circle of fellow scholars?

In high school, the urge to be popular in the social sense overcame many of us as otherwise reasonable teenagers. Motivated by the dream of joining whatever 'in-crowd' with which we identified, we might have studied the walking and speech styles of our most popular classmates, drunk more beer than we liked, pretended interest in the local football games, taken after-school and weekend jobs to earn money for the latest in popular fashion. At an earlier stage, even we academics yearned to be popular.

But something happened on the way to the academy. Terrified by a range of fears – over-simplification, over-generalization, distortion, misquotation, vulgarization – many of our colleagues learned to disdain professional popularity beyond the invisible but nonetheless real worlds of the academy. And sometimes they have good reason to. Wendy James points out that in writing for a broad audience, authors often 'produce Punch and Judy versions of some of the classic texts'. If we don't 'dumb down' our texts ourselves, others may do it for us – in the process, wantonly misinterpreting in appalling ways. For example Dominique Casajus documents in a chapter of *Popularizing Anthropology* how the work of Louis Dumont has been misappropriated by some ultra-right forces in France as endorsing hierarchy and condemning egalitarianism, an interpretation Dumont roundly rejects. Given the possibility of such misinterpretations, anthropologists may proceed along the 'once burned, twice shy' principle.

Not all academics are so retiring. In the same volume, Philippe Descola points out that physicists and historians often seem far less wary than do anthropologists when it comes to spreading understanding of their discipline. Joy Hendry further speculates that it may be because anthropologists classically paid attention to demographically small, rural, 'primitive' and seemingly 'exotic' societies that we are even now afraid of being mocked as antiquarian and so have retreated from the public gaze.

It is a twofold retreat. Not only do many among us never even consider writing for a non-specialized audience, but we may even resist the attempts by others, such as journalists and novelists, to popularize and/or fictionalize our findings for us; and we often condemn their attempts, once made. In this case, it may be that we are nervous about having the tables turned on us: in

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¹ This book is edited by Jeremy MacClancy and Chris McDonough and published by Routledge at £14.99 (paperback).

effect, to be used as (paper) informants. Howard Morphy argues that this was indeed the case with Bruce Chatwin's very popular book *Songlines* (mainly about Australian Aboriginal religion), which received an icy reception indeed – in Morphy's view, unjustifiably – from most of the informed anthropological community.

Maybe we are at least partly responsible, then, for the fact that at least in the English-speaking world (less so than, say, in France) our opinions don't seem much to matter to journalists when they seek informed comments about modern society. If we are consulted at all, it is usually the archaeologist who is asked about an early hominid find; very occasionally, an Africanist may be questioned (when the political scientists have run out) about the latest crisis in a seemingly 'Other' country such as Rwanda or Somalia. The breach of a truce in Northern Ireland, the fact that 12 per cent of all births in the USA are to teenage mothers, the most recent breakdown of the Arab-Israeli negotiations, the foreign policy crisis caused by the rape of a Japanese schoolgirl by a U.S. soldier – rarely are such properly anthropological issues, lying at the power-heart of the modern world, the stuff of anthropological commentary in the mass media of the West.

Topics such as these are indeed frequently the subject of thoughtful analysis in the pages of ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY. But this journal has limited circulation. As its editor acknowledges with some regret in the volume under discussion, so long as the budget of the sponsoring RAI remains at current levels, A.T.'s readership is destined to be limited to an essentially academic audience. Elsewhere, the journal has no corresponding publication at all – not in the US, nor in any other nation with a robust anthropological tradition – making the forum for anthropological pieces on topical issues even skimpier in countries other than the U.K. We seem to like it that way.

Yet even scholars yearn for a certain level of popularity – if they can control the bounds of their admirers. Who among us doesn't sneak furtive but regular peaks at the bibliographies of others' books and articles or the Citation Index of their field to count up that year's references to their work, in a primitive, post-secondary-school rite or yearning to join the scholarly 'in-crowd'? We all like to find a fan club among readers of our 'restricted code', as Basil Bernstein might say. If this were not the case, as Alan Campbell suggests provocatively in this collection, people would simply publish their works anonymously. The problem enters when the citations start bulging beyond those respectable bibliographies and indexes, and we lose control of the limited circle of admirers.

Ironically, at a time when the study of popular culture is becoming the basis for its own discipline of Cultural Studies, many anthropologists are digging their heels even more deeply into elite circles, writing theoretical and technical treatises that are increasingly impenetrable to a broad audience. In the worst case scenario, Jeremy MacClancy claims in this volume that ethnographies are 'usually boring, and ... virtually unreadable'. Do we have any right to complain about being ignored by the society at large if, as Alan Campbell suggests, our writing is simply incomprehensible to all but the most loyal following?

Of course, there is still a place for more technical writing in academia, and by no means is everyone meant to write for a non-specialist audience. Several authors in this volume point out the literary skills necessary to do such writing well, avoiding the triple dangers that Descola points out of complacency, condescension and narcissism. But not only do few of our discipline attempt such extraordinary forays; we often marginalize those who dare to broach the discipline's walls, even as such anthropological best-sellers as Laura Bohannon's *Return to Laughter* and Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa* continue to be reprinted, and to be ordered in large quantities for introductory courses. Let us not forget: Laura Bohannon – like her younger colleague, 'Manda Cesara', author of *Reflections of a Woman Anthropologist* – wrote her memoir pseudonymously, and Marjorie Shostak still had not obtained a permanent academic position at the time of her premature death this past October. Often, at best, we view popular successes such as theirs ambivalently, as Joy Hendry demonstrates is still, posthumously, the case of the *oeuvre* of Ruth Benedict. At worst, we ignore them altogether, as Judith Okely mentions was long the case for Margaret Mead – who retreated to the American Museum of Natural History rather than have to deal with her colleagues at Columbia University who were incapable of dealing professionally with her staggering success beyond the academy.

But in the late 1990s, can we really afford to maintain disdain for the non-specialist audience, to eschew journalists' curious or even annoying questions, to continue to write for our immediate colleagues and them alone, to ignore wide-readership forums such as the Op Ed pages in newspapers, or local radio talk shows? Surely an increasingly globalized world demands a suitably globalized analytic gaze. And anthropologists of all the social scientists are, I contend, best equipped to provide the sort of comparative framework which points to disparate forces linking distinct populations that appear unrelated, which helps to humanize both near and distant Others, which explains otherwise inexplicable behaviour.

Given this potential, I suggest it is time to relinquish our shame at the slightest hint of popularity, and for a larger proportion of us to share our passion for our data and our discipline, and our broad knowledge of the world's history, depth and breadth, with those who know least about them. After all, for the large numbers of us who teach, this is our charge in the classroom. Perhaps even the shyest among us might be encouraged along the route to a broader dissemination of our knowledge and our analyses if we simply think of the world beyond academia as the classroom writ large. With that vision, a much larger cohort of students awaits. □

Nigel Barley – one of the few professional anthropologists who also doubles as a popular writer and journalist: here seen extending his ethnographic skills to television in a series (Native Land, 1989) where he investigated the British seaside holiday. Barley's writing for the public is analysed by Jeremy MacClancy in the new book *Popularizing Anthropology*. (Photo: Channel Four.)



Alma Gottlieb