

feature

Can Anthropology Ever Be Innocent?

Gerald M. Sider

Two Stories

The first comes from an early 1970s off-Broadway play about a huge coal miners' strike in Colorado in 1913–1914. The coal miners were striking against three mining companies, one of which was owned by the Rockefeller family. The miners had been evicted from their company-town homes and were living in a tent city of about 1200 people, when the mine owners called in the Colorado National Guard, in April 1914. In what has come to be called the Ludlow massacre, women, children, miners, and union officials, plus one National Guardsman, were killed.

The play was about the strikers and focused on a union organizer. There were two other central characters. One was portrayed as a sweet, helpful, and friendly young man, the other as nasty and arrogant, who mocked the strikers and was definitely unfriendly. At the very end of the play, when the police came to arrest the union organizer, it turned out that the sweet young man was an informer for the mine owners and the police, and the nasty guy risked his own arrest to try to save the union organizer. The union organizer, in the midst of being

hauled away, probably to be sentenced to death, turned to the audience and said, in simplistic, romantic, but very useful terms: “You don’t choose your enemies, and you don’t choose your friends. History chooses them for you.” Anthropologists might usefully keep this in mind while telling themselves, their colleagues, and friends—and if they teach, their students—about how much they like and respect the people they study. This is a lovely emotion, and we can only wish it was more relevant to our current situation.

This second story is an event that happened at the annual meetings of the Canadian Ethnological Society, held jointly with the American Ethnological Society, at Laval University in Quebec City, also in the early 1970s, in the context of the Vietnam War. A French anthropologist and ethnomusicologist, Georges Condominus, was invited to give the plenary address to the meeting. He stood at the podium, tears rolling down his face, saying that the doctoral dissertation he wrote in France, on the music of the Vietnamese Montaignards, had been acquired by the U.S. CIA, translated, and used in Operation Phoenix to identify and kill the village leaders of the villages he had studied. The point he was making is still brutally direct: at this moment in history there is no such thing as an innocent anthropology.

We have to consider if there can be a more and a less innocent anthropology, in the context of this perceptive judgment. The judgment does not reference our intent, or our hopes and dreams; rather, it refers to how our studies of mostly vulnerable peo-

ples can be used, whatever our intent. There is a related question in the context of this issue, about how a partisan anthropology, done to help the victims of currently intensifying inequalities, might begin. Such anthropologies do not begin in sympathy, or any good-hearted attempt to be helpful. They begin in the design of fieldwork and in the context of understanding struggle and its potential.

Appropriating Anthropology

Currently, by widespread, but far from universal consensus, the most morally corrupt, discipline-degrading, and destructive to the people we study form that anthropology takes is a practice that the U.S. military has named the Human Terrain System. The military has decided that it needs to know more about the people it seeks to dominate and control, and so, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq, they are starting to attach people with some anthropological training to military patrols, but usually people with scant knowledge of, or experience in, the countries in which they operate. These folks, some of whom seem to either carry arms, or go in with armed protection (hard information about the program, beyond the public relations flack that is disseminated, is very difficult to get). These anthropologists go in to villages, or to sites that the military considers high priority, to discover what they can about local people that might be useful to the military. Interestingly, since anthropologists are supposed to study whole so-

cial systems, which here very much includes the military presence, the anthropologists don't seem to ask the military what they want and what they expect the locals to say or think. The military's defense of this use of anthropology is that it enables them to substitute knowledge for bullets, to talk to people instead of shooting them. But so far shooting is the primary mode of attempted domination, and it is clear that the threat of being shot permeates this call to dialogue. It is as if a man sat down for a moment in the midst of very seriously battering his wife, in front of the children, and said to her and the children, let's talk about how you feel about me. Or perhaps he could just sit alongside an anthropologist, while the anthropologist asked the questions.

This is my way of looking at it: you can share or deny this perspective and these values as you wish, for the central point is that all this is not fully relevant to the issue of what constitutes a decent anthropology. We just had to invoke and critique such direct and open betrayals of our profession to put that whole phenomenon aside. Otherwise anthropologists might think that if they don't work in such contexts they are doing well. But this evades the issue of how work gets used, despite its intent. We need to consider more fundamental, if less dramatic, issues.

I want to suggest that the fundamental mistake that anthropologists who work for the military's Human Terrain project is the same mistake almost all anthropologists make, and that is to ask the people that we study questions. This seemingly simple act opens our work to use by those who seek to

Asking questions seems so fundamental to our fieldwork that we only worry about what questions to ask, and not about the questioning itself. But it is a very problematic aspect of our discipline.

dominate and control the people we study. There are other ways we can work, less open, but not impervious, to subsequent manipulation.

Asking questions seems so fundamental to our fieldwork that we only worry about what questions to ask, and not about the questioning itself. But it is a very problematic aspect of our discipline, and one that leads us down alleys that we might not want to traverse.

A further story to underscore what is at stake in this issue. In 1965 I was working for a government contract research organization in Washington, DC. I was studying poverty and the design of community-action programs on Native American reservations, for the so-called war on poverty, or as we later realized, the war on the poor. In addition, for my own interests, I was trying to develop a potential Ph.D. dissertation study of native resistance to French colonial domination on the island of Madagascar, in its post-World War II transition to becoming the Malagasy Republic. One afternoon, I was visited by two men from the CIA who

had heard about my planned research. After what they regarded as some pleasant chit-chat they handed me a slip of paper, with the address of a so-called foundation in downtown Washington. They told me that if I went there I would get the money I needed to do this research. The United States had a very large airbase on the island, and they were interested in what had been happening. I told them absolutely no, and they told me that I was being foolish and naïve. They said that when my dissertation was done, they would buy a copy from University Microfilms, and so they would know what they wanted to know anyhow. All they wanted to do at this point was to make sure that the study got done. A half a decade before Condominus spoke, I was confronted with what seemed to me an impossible dilemma: there was no way I could find to study what I wanted to study without helping the cause of imperialism. A portion of my readers may want to do this, but I did not. Again, the major issue is not what our personal political feelings and commitments are—to think this is to misunderstand fundamentally the issues here. The major issue is: can there be an anthropology which does not lend itself to being bent to the ends of state or capital domination and exploitation of the people we study, whether we want it to be or not?

Questioning

Forty-three years later I still cannot deal with this problem completely, although I have worried about it since. The first thing I

did, to my sorrow, was to abandon this study of Madagascar becoming the Malagasy Republic. The second thing I did, very much to my joy and my own learning, was to go and join, as an activist and organizer, a civil-rights struggle being developed by the Lumbee Indians of Robeson County, North Carolina—at that point primarily off-reservation sharecroppers and small-scale farmers, as hard pressed and vulnerable as were African Americans, but with fewer resources for the struggle. Being an activist seemingly put to rest many of the concerns that I had, but these concerns have re-emerged in my current research on child suicide, substance abuse, and domestic violence among the native peoples of Labrador, both Inuit and Indians. What has brought these issues back to the foreground is the fact that at the current moment there is little open and apparent struggle by ordinary native people themselves against their domination and exploitation, or against the individually and collectively self-destructive practices that have very significantly intensified in this context.

There are a great many expert-designed government and tribal programs seeking to deal with the issue of self-destruction, so far mostly unsuccessfully. The self-destruction is clearly connected to the appalling ways native people are, and have been, treated, but the connections are neither very direct nor mechanical. One of the primary and usual accomplishments of struggle is to clarify such connections; the current absence of open struggle leaves the underlying issues largely concealed, and an activist or parti-

san anthropology rootless in significant ways.

In the quiet recesses of family and of community social relationships there are probably all sorts of struggles, much of it, we may assume, rather individualized, and it is scarcely possible to join such struggles. Without an open struggle to join I am once again confronted with what it means to be an anthropologist. In a context where government control over native lives is intense, and almost certainly part of the problem, I am faced again with the issue of what kind of anthropology lends itself more to people's needs than to aiding further control by the Canadian federal and provincial states and by the large and very intrusive mining, timber, and hydroelectric projects.

Clearly part of the answer lies in what I write and how I write it. At this point I am planning to write two related books: one for an academic and professional audience, where the detailed analytical and theoretical points are elaborated in lengthy endnotes. The second, which will have the identical theme, written from the outset in clear language, will omit the endnotes, and instead and in some detail suggest relevant further reading for those who want to pursue particular points or issues. This second book I will be seeking to get published by a local Canadian publisher, in a low-cost edition. But how I publish what I write is, in many ways, the easy part. The more complex point is how I learn what I know, or think I know, to write about.

The primary purpose of this essay is to raise that problem for people to think about

and talk about. In the books that I am presently writing I discuss the *how* of my subarctic research in some detail. This seems appropriate in that context, because it explains the specifics of what I do and do not know. It seems inappropriate in this context, for my task here is not to tell people how to work or to suggest that they copy what I do, but to get them to worry about a problem that anthropology I think needs to address openly, particularly now.

“Particularly now” is a complex issue. Anthropology has long served the interests of the state, as it has been practiced throughout the late 19th century and the whole 20th century, in the United States, Great Britain, and Western Europe. Sometimes it served the state in causes where the alliance made a bit of moral sense, such as in World War II. The anthropology done in this context was usually arrant nonsense, but that is a different issue. More often, as in Vietnam or in the British and French colonies of Africa and the East, the anthropology done in service to the state is far less excusable. But as the United States turns increasingly ugly and desperate in its pro-

Anthropology has long served the interests of the state, as it has been practiced throughout the late 19th century and the whole 20th century, in the United States, Great Britain, and Western Europe.

cesses of domination, openly flaunting basic human-rights guarantees, the alliance of anthropology with the state becomes even more problematic, even more corrupt, than usual.

Here I just want to make two suggestions, one of which will take us back to the issue of asking questions.

The first suggestion is that what I know, in part (because we can only know a part of what we study), comes from an intensive engagement with a history of the people and the issues. This needs always to be done from primary sources, for five decades of anthropology have shown me that the secondary sources almost always misrepresent what happened. But the key here is to never do history in terms of what happened, for that is the most naïve and simplistic kind of history, useful only as a starting point. The point is to see what gets carved into people’s bodies, into the landscape of their lives, and what reemerges, inescapably, in confrontation with their present and their future. History, exactly like the utterly naïve anthropological concept of culture, is not something that people just have: it is something they often must struggle against, whether they want to or not.

The second suggestion is to never ask any direct questions beyond ordinary daily life questions, such as “I’m going to town to pick up groceries. Do you want a lift?” Or “Do you think it will storm, or blow over?” Sometimes, when I know people better, I ask more serious daily life questions, such as “Is the doctor in town any good?” To ask a more probing question is to assume that

you know what is important, and this is either an intrusion of your fantasies onto their situation, or a probing for something that is useful to you, and perhaps the CIA or the military, rather than an exploration of their situation in terms they care to reveal. All I do out in the field is to say to people something like “Hi, my name is Gerry Sider. I’m writing a book about health here in the past decades.” If they are interested, I tell them in more detail what I am trying to study, but I do not ask any questions about it. Then I see what if anything they want to tell me or ask me. If it brings no response I chat about the things one chats about with casual acquaintances. They usually ask me where I’m from, and I tell them, and this sometimes leads somewhere else, where they want to go, if just very briefly and tentatively.

Order, Coherence, Silence

Once, years ago, doing field work in Newfoundland on the collapse of the fishery in the 1990s, and the massive depopulation of Newfoundland fishing villages, I encountered a woman who asked me to ask her questions, and asked me to tape record her answers. I have never tape recorded any person in the field, nor do I ever take notes, unless at times when I am talking to government officials and program officers. With those folks a notepad makes them think they are actually being interviewed, and keeps them centered and serious; with ordinary people, a pad of paper and a pen is a

At the core of the field research that I do is something I call listening for the silences.

wall or worse, a rocket ship that usually rapidly makes increasing distance from what you want to be close to. I carry a small pocket tape recorder in the car or in my backpack, for talking to myself about theory and interpretation as my ideas get provoked by field encounters. I got the tape recorder from the car and gave it to her to let her record herself. This whole process made me very uncomfortable, because it seemed to change the human encounter that always ought to be part of an anthropological engagement. Actually, all it did was take the exchange between us out of my control—she held the tape recorder, controlled its on/off button, and shaped the questions she wanted to be asked—and that helped me understand something about anthropological fieldwork as a form of domination and control, not too far underneath its illusions about “participant observation.”

The point about asking no substantial questions is not just to let the people define the issues and their content. At the core of the field research that I do is something I call listening for the silences. This is an attempt to grasp what might be said but is not, what might be brought out in the open but is kept hidden. My point is never to speak

the silence, to—as innocent historians put it—“give” people back their hidden history. Silences ought to be respected: people have their reasons. But they need to be acknowledged, for they color what is said.

There is a way of making this all far less mysterious, far less a new-age mumbo-jumbo. That is to put aside all our Weberian fantasies about social order and realize that power and domination do not make anything remotely resembling some kind of social order. Rather, power routinely brings chaos and rupture to peoples’ lives. Power is utterly incoherent in some of its central effects: that’s about one half of how it works. Power may organize the regular and for a while routine extraction of a “surplus” from peasants and workers, and simultaneously it seeks to mobilize and discipline labor as its other half, but in doing so it routinely brings chaos to peasant and worker lives. Power is, in a word, incoherent: it does not cohere at its center, and what it does is, for many, unspeakable in any clear or direct form. To listen for the silences is to grasp in our minds and our hands the incoherence of power and domination, and this grasp is the beginning, only the beginning, of our service to those we study.

This is so because turning the specific forms and processes of incoherence back on the perpetrators is often a very effective strategy of struggle against domination and exploitation: make them deal with the chaos they create, or try to.

Think about it. Check it out. Let people know what you find.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Joe Vitti for the productive suggestion that anthropologists who work for the Human Terrain Program are not doing their job well unless they also interrogate the military; Fran Smulcheski, an artist who did an exceptional installation at S.U.N.Y New Paltz in 2007 about domestic violence and another in 2008 on Inuit suffering, which alerted me to some of the hidden dimensions of domination when the violent speak of, and to, the vulnerable; and Katherine McCaffrey for fine editorial suggestions.

Suggestions for Further Reading

For a methodological illustration of my work in historical anthropology, see the prologue (which also contains the taped interview) in my *Between History and Tomorrow: Making and Breaking Everyday Life in Rural Newfoundland*, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2003. There is a more developed engagement with partisan anthropology in my *Living Indian Histories: Lumbee and Tuscarora People in North Carolina*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

For a very fine presentation of an analytical basis for a deeply engaged anthropology, see Gavin Smith, *Confronting the Present: Toward a Politically Engaged Anthropology*. New York: Berg. The best presentation of the need to work in this engaged

manner is from a medical doctor, Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*, California Series in Public Anthropology, 4. Berkeley: University of California Press, and for a vision from a new generation of smart confrontational anthropologists, I recommend Charles Menzies and Anthony Allen Marcus, "Toward a Class Struggle Anthropology," in the online journal hosted by the University of British Columbia, *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdiscipli-*

nary Inquiry, vol 1, number 1, Fall 2007. <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/newproposals/>

© Gerald M. Sider

Gerald M. Sider: professor of anthropology, emeritus, City University of New York; professor of anthropology, honorary, Memorial University of Newfoundland.