

FORUM

What Good Is Anthropology? Celebrating 50 Years of *American Ethnologist*

A view from another side, or, not just another quit-lit essay

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Abstract

Academic anthropology is a paradoxical realm. On the one hand, opportunities for creatively exploring the human condition are hemmed in by administrators and bureaucracy. On the other hand, scholars in the academy have the space to call for justice—in Palestine and elsewhere, as they did in 2023, when the American Anthropological Association passed a resolution to boycott Israeli institutions. This paradoxical quality suggests some parallels between anthropology and the human rights system, especially in their logistics and activities. Drawing from my experiences as I step off the professional academic ladder, I reflect on how this complex academic environment can lead to cynicism and resentment, yet also produce launching pads to collective action.

KEYWORDS

anthropology, education, human rights, liberalism, Palestine

As I near the formal end of my life as an academic anthropologist, I'm reflecting on the arc (or spiral) of my understanding of what anthropology is and can be good for. My resignation took effect at the end of August 2023, after a two-decade career that included three degrees in the discipline at a “top” US department, two postdoc positions at two ivies, and teaching anthropology classes on Palestine and human rights at several “top universities” and one refugee camp. That pedigree helped get me jobs that gave me time to publish in “top” journals and a “top” university press. As I slip sideways from these institutions, I've pulled different strings to spin the tops elsewhere, into writing in other genres and reading to make a living as an editor. From these personal revolutions, my early fervent commitment to anthropology as an ideal mode of consciousness-raising has been tempered, as metal is tempered. Wikipedia tells me that the metaphor is more apt than I realized: “Tempering is a process of heat treating, which is used to increase toughness. ... Tempering is usually performed after hardening, to reduce some of the excess hardness, and is done by heating the metal to some temperature ... for a certain period of time, then allowing it to cool in still air.”¹

Academic anthropology was a cauldron of frustrations. With its inconsistent opportunities for exploring tiny corners of the vast human condition, bound by bureaucratic madness, pressured by the race for citations and administrators' arbitrary targets as they wreaked their energy-zapping havoc, it increased

my toughness to the point of cynicism, even resentment. The kind of resentment you might have for a lover who turned out to have wasted your time, stringing you along with false promises of never-ending joy and life-binding commitment, only to show up at the breakfast table demanding their food be served just so and right then, hands clenched menacingly around fork and knife, pointy sides up.

When I decided to leave the abusive relationship of academic anthropology shortly after COVID-19 began its takeover of reality, marching across my nerves in steel-toed boots, my patience with the discipline's faddishness and the squeeze of institutional shackles had grown thinner than a butterfly's wings. That this burning planet, full of so many kinds of real slavery, could yield people blissfully debating the agency of tables and trees, or insisting, as if it were a surprise, that science is a material engagement with the world, was making my spinning top topple.

The only relief I found was in the work of people like Alf Hornborg, a political ecologist–anthropologist. He criticized anthropologists who shirk their responsibility to critical social science, a responsibility that, he and I agree, is “to communicate clear and analytically rigorous arguments,” not “to fashion prose as imaginatively as possible, replete with evocative allusions, poetic metaphors, and unbridled associations” (Hornborg, 2017, p. 62). This helped me feel that I was not alone in my frustrations and impatience. Hornborg's snarky

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suggestion resonated: “We might ask ourselves why anthropological deliberations on the Anthropocene increasingly sound like dinner conversations after some glasses of wine” (p. 62). “Anthropocene” could be replaced with so many other terms (like “decolonization,” “agency,” “ontology”). When the whole of the discipline began to seem like a neurotic Woody Allen party, I knew it was time to leave.

I have been away from anthropology and university life for a while now, tempering, pausing in the cool, still air, softening, the wings regaining dimension. So I take this opportunity from a top American anthropology journal to reflect on what the discipline is good for, from this vantage point somewhere in the Midlife Crisis Mountains, brain fog wafting across the path, giving me a chance to survey with differently focused eyes, to consider what else anthropology might be good for, and what other forms it can take.

* * *

My attraction to anthropology, sparked through a liberal arts undergraduate degree, was the attraction that a young person can feel, filled with equal parts enthusiasm, earnest outrage, and certainty that Things Could Be Better. It was that liberal arts degree, and exposure to the humanities and social science—not only anthropology—that allowed me to start naming those improvable Things: the system I newly recognized as “patriarchy,” thanks to Lauren Berlant’s class on feminism (a system long known to me through experience); the human propensity to violence and war, which a class on Gandhi told me could be challenged otherwise; and capitalism’s exploitation of the underdogs, revealing some of the drudgery of my working-class childhood as unfair and not just boring. Anthropology was my perception-opening drug, offering a glimpse of what I thought Aldous Huxley, Jim Morrison (whose sultry image decorated the ceiling above my student dorm top bunk), and William Blake were talking about. (It turns out some of them were just talking about mescaline.)

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake (1906) wrote, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.” Taking inspiration from Blake, via Huxley, Morrison the poet-prophet invited intense and romantic teenagers to break on through these doors, and anthropology was my battering ram.

Anthropology replaced the novels I used to read to escape and explore. It became a differently complex path out of the suffocating miasma of a large family and Catholic school, which mostly offered narrow vistas and convention. Not only did anthropology describe the variety of human experience, but it also provided a language for appreciating other ways of being, for critiquing the systems that sustain convention, a language for writing fresh conceptual air into being.

That all may sound naive—now that anthropology has been revealed to be sometimes a handmaiden of colonialism; partially built on assumptions of a universal white liberal individual subject; populated by sexual predators; always part of the racist, sexist, classist society in which it is written and taught; always reflecting and often entrenching those powers, worse for the hypocrisy of sustaining the unjust status quo in deed

while objecting to it in word. And surely it was naive. But even though anthropology is all those things, and even though it may not have been mescaline but “ethnographic sentimentalism” (Jobson, 2020, p. 261) that I indulged in as a younger person, fresh out of the confines of a mostly apolitical family in Kansas City, Missouri, there is still something to appreciate.

Offering a starting point—not realizing its aspirations—anthropology could spark the wonder that comes from recognizing human creativity; it could incite joy and humility in the face of our world’s multiplicity; and it could give anthropologists the pickaxes they needed to crack the multilayered granite slabs of oppression. It’s those lessons and tools of anthropology, more inspirational and metaphorical than logical and material, that can launch one on the path of understanding bumper stickers on shared taxis in Palestine that exhort fellow commuters to “live free or die.”

What one does with that understanding, what one does after becoming dislodged from the “liberal disposition to the sanctity of life” (Rubaii, 2023), which is really a disposition to value some lives over others, so painfully displayed in Western responses to Israel’s October 2023 war on the Gaza Strip (Makdisi, 2023), requires leaps beyond a discipline and academia. There is a simmering power in that kind of understanding because it can lead to the power of collective organizing for collective rights.

As an example, the AAA’s 2023 vote to heed Palestinian civil society’s call to boycott Israeli institutions emerged, in part, from anthropologists with new understandings.² The people who organized the campaign leading to this outcome included some whose journey out of ignorance was long. Starting points can be simple but lead to deeper things.

Anthropology is the first discipline to pass such a resolution outside the interdisciplinary or area studies associations. Maybe anthropology was the likeliest place for this to happen, in part because there are many anthropologists with deep knowledge of the SWANA region and of Palestine (Bishara, 2023). And, more broadly, our disciplinary appreciation for the material effects of symbols—like boycotts—encouraged thousands of us to take Palestinian civil society’s call seriously. When education and solidarity came together, a collective effort coalesced into a public stand. An earlier AAA boycott vote in 2016 was initially defeated in a statistical dead heat by only 39 votes and partly as a result of extra-academic pressures (Allen et al., 2023). Some AAA members’ opposition to taking a public stand against Israeli apartheid, and the politically superficial as well as bad faith arguments that were mobilized to counter the boycott campaign, were mere whispers of the anti-Palestinian racism, dehumanizing warmongering, and censorship that would define public discourse about Israel, Palestine, and Palestinians in the US and elsewhere after October 7, 2023 (Palestine Legal, 2023). But the 2023 vote in favor of boycott was a refusal of all that.

ANTHROPOLOGY AS HANDMAIDEN TO HUMAN RIGHTS

I am a slow learner and always have been. It’s a disposition that leads to continual surprise and regular disappointment. Going

into graduate school, I naively believed that anthropology, with its regular attention to underdogs and its consideration of the struggles of the marginalized, could itself change things. This was my belief: that, if only the world knew—if only the world knew how Israel tortures, discriminates, how Israel maintains a stranglehold over nearly every aspect of Palestinians' lives, that its existence is premised on racist hubris—then surely, the hazy “they” would put a stop to it. My notions of power—of the “they” who are in charge somewhere—were vaguer than Foucault's.

I saw my task as that of a glorified muckraking journalist, exposing the hidden truths about the corrupt and the dominant. It was a logic similar to that of the human rights system itself: naming and shaming. Anthropology could provide the ethnographic proof of systemic wrongdoing, with the imprimatur of academia's authority, just as human rights reports record the evidence of it, stamped with the assumed credibility of universalism and objectivity. Like human rights activists, I and many anthropologists “unapologetically and explicitly search for justice and speak of human flourishing” (Barnett, 2018, p. 315). The problem with these frameworks was, and is, that both rely on liberal premises and moral values. That is, they function within a liberal fantasy that nation-states or even continents can have a conscience (Greenberg, 2022), and that they base their policies and actions on ethical principles rather than those of capitalism.

It was probably this liberal do-gooder affinity that led me from thinking that anthropology could support the work of human rights to studying the human rights world as an anthropologist. Then, having seen how the sausage is made, to analyzing and criticizing it (Allen, 2013; Allen 2020). I came to this new depressing perspective by observing how liberal human rights ideology fills so many with the hope that evidence of violations and rational legal argument can convince the powers that be to make just decisions and implement international law, and then, by observing the contrary realities on the ethnographic ground. Which I then used to depress my students, who just wanted to go out in the world and do good.

When my pessimism at all the cynical systems—of higher education, anthropology, human rights—left me unable to encourage my students, I stepped away. Some others with more fortitude and patience use anthropology's critical knowledge to support their students in acting, in concert, to make political change.

Take, for example, students organizing in the UK against the “Prevent Strategy”: they have shown how scholarship can feed into organizing for change.³ The Prevent duty, reinforced by the 2015 Counter Terrorism and Security Act, requires public bodies, including universities, to report on people perceived as vulnerable to “radicalization.” It has led to censorship of Palestine activists and to the suppression of scholarship on the Middle East and Islam, as well as to the further stigmatization of Muslims in higher education (Allen, 2019; Guest et al., 2020). Anthropologists provide data and perspective to those fighting to protect civil rights. Students' perspectives are widened by those scholars who explore and record the conditions of Muslims—in Europe, Sri Lanka, India, the Middle East, and elsewhere—and who critique the narratives and laws that

governments spin to police them (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Deeb, 2006; Fadil, 2019; Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012; Mahmood, 2006; Ozyurek, 2015; Thiranagama, 2011, 2023). Even if it's no cure for anything. Anthropologists can contribute voices to a chorus shouting for change, and although it is insufficient, it is something better than nothing when silencing forces are growing (Jamal, 2023; Sainath, 2023).

In that, too, anthropology is like the human rights system. Maintaining my criticisms of institutionalized human rights for distracting from collective action, I can recognize with Jessica Greenberg (2022) the usefulness of their normative underpinnings, because they “can offer important ways to take ethical and political stands: to draw lines and take stands against forms of state violence.” In these days, when far-right and outright fascist governments are rolling back basic freedoms—academic, civil, political, and national—human rights organizations remain as a kind of bulwark in the face of this terrifying juggernaut. In these days—when war crimes, including genocidal assaults against Palestinians (*Democracy Now*, 2023) and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians (Roth, 2023), have been green-lighted by the president of the United States (Speri, 2023) and echoed by other, lesser dignitaries (Smith, 2023; McShane, 2023), when US politicians legitimize rabidly Islamophobic Hindu nationalists (Essa, 2023)—anthropologists and other scholars have spoken out to defend Palestinian lives and rights. Anthropologists and other scholars are acting to defend the right to speak out just as they support the rights of their students to speak out (AnthroBoycott, 2023; Jadaliyya Reports, 2023). And human rights can feed into other positive political tides. The groundswell of human rights NGOs and the UN's naming Israel as an apartheid regime prompt and reinforce a shifting popular consensus. Supported by this human rights system, there is a growing public recognition of Palestinians' rights and Israel's wrongs, even in the US (Serhan, 2023), as evidenced in the huge pro-Palestinian demonstrations that have been taking place globally. Even if this general understanding of Palestinian rights stops short of calling for decolonization, equality, and the right of return (Baconi, 2022), anthropologists can help push and pull the bandwagon further.

CONCLUSION: ANTHROPOLOGY AS LAUNCHING PAD

This may, in fact, be just another quit-lit essay, and it definitely emerges from a place of privilege. But I hope that what comes through is something more, namely, my appreciation of what anthropology offers as a base layer of paint for people seeking richer palettes. While the quit-lit genre (Moe, 2022) has generated some wrenching prose, many of the conversations around scholars' exodus from higher education's wreckage are too individualistic, in my opinion. A Facebook group called the Professor Is Out is a good example of how many are dealing with this structural crisis, each blowing up their personal inflatable raft, trying to bob to safer shores. The posts there are full of encouraging advice about how to write CVs and cover

letters for the real world outside academia, how to market oneself and one's skills as transferable and sellable. When a member of this online community gets hired by an ed-tech start-up or accepted into "private industry!," congratulatory responses of "don't look back" stream in. I've seen no collective organizing against the anti-education policies of Ron DeSantis in Florida or Michael Gove in the UK, nor have I noticed the development of a playbook to counter that of the anti-education lawmakers in the US (Fischer, 2022) and Europe, where—as in Hungary (Hajnal, 2023; Müller, 2017)—an article such as this one would be illegal.⁴

In contrast, I have gestured at the collective responses that can parlay anthropological perspectives into something bigger. We can use anthropology like a trampoline, doing fancy tricks in the air but landing in about the same spot. Or we can use it as a launching pad.

With the AAA's passage of a boycott resolution, we have proof that anthropology can do, and has done, something meaningful in the world, even if sometimes—especially as governments perpetrate ethnic cleansing and support war crimes on a massive scale, as in Gaza—we feel impotent.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Wikipedia, s.v. "Tempering," last updated August 15, 2023, 06:20, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tempering_\(metallurgy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tempering_(metallurgy)).
- ² See details of the campaign that led to this vote at the website of AnthroBoycott, a collective of anthropologists: <https://www.anthroboycott.org/>.
- ³ Several student organizations have spoken out against the Prevent duty, including the National Union of Students (n.d.) and Students Not Suspects (n.d.).
- ⁴ Viktor Orbán's far-right government published a law on May 2, 2023—referred to as the "revenge bill" because it was passed after a year of teachers' strikes protesting horrible working conditions—which, among other drastic impositions, limits educators' freedom of speech, forbidding them from making negative statements about public education, including outside working hours (Hajnal, 2023).

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