Public anthropology assumes a particular relationship to the world. It also implies diverse practices. One is ‘writing’ for the public – making our work more accessible and also more accountable. In the tradition of Margaret Mead, this version of public anthropology involves ‘translating’ anthropological ideas and concepts into a version that appeals to a broad public. A less conventional way of getting anthropological research findings and interpretations to broader publics is through active and on-site collaboration with journalists and the media. I did fieldwork on the global traffic in organs alongside journalists – Larry Rohter and Mike Finkel of the New York Times, Marina Jimenez of Canada’s National Post, and other journalists from Brazil, Moldova, Albania, Turkey and the Philippines. Most anthropologists fear ‘contamination’ by journalism: few scholars are comfortable with articles that may read more like ‘investigative journalism’ than ethnography. But that’s a risk I’ve been willing to take.

I continue to write in various registers with various publics in mind. The anthropological public is just one, though still – in terms of identity and affection – my primary audience. But thanks to collaborations with journalists I now know how to call on ‘fixers’ when I need them and I know how to conduct myself in radio and TV interviews, which does not come easily to academics. And by wearing several hats – anthropologist, academic, documentary journalist and human rights activist – I have been granted two exemptions by my university’s Internal Review Board. This does not mean exemption from ethical guidelines, but rather an acknowledgement of the hybrid activities of a scholar who is also actively intervening against human trafficking for organs, and against death squads and international child adoption markets in northeast Brazil. My argument was that my published revelations of criminal networks should not be gagged by normative academic ‘protection of human subjects’ guidelines as they are in the public interest and protected by freedom of speech. Naturally, this has attracted criticism from within and outside the academy.

* * *

To make anthropology public is to invite criticism as well as to face ‘erasures’ of ownership of research findings once we share these with journalists, for whom anthropologists are simply a ‘source’, sometimes named but never fully ‘acknowledged’. Even so, it is satisfying to see one’s work appear on the front pages of the New York Times or the Sunday Times Magazine, and thereby surreptitiously enter into a more public discourse than if we guard our research findings as ‘private property’.

Collaboration with investigative reporters is not always easy and can be distressing. However, the more I collaborate with skilled national and international reporters and documentary filmmakers, the more I am impressed with their thoughtfulness, thoroughness, dedication to accuracy and their own very different ethical and political sensibilities. In teaching graduate seminars on genocide, the writings of anthropologists often pale beside the work of political journalists like Philip Gourevitch (1998), Mark Daner (1994) and Alma Guillermoprieto (1994). A little professional humility would go a long way to foster the potential for collaboration drawing on the strengths and skills of each.

One major obstacle to public anthropology is our reticence to describe events before we have gained a deep understanding of their context. By the time we finally feel

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we have something of significance to say, the moment has passed into history. In a sense all ethnography is historical – a history of the present – always trailing well behind the moment.

In parts of Europe, India, Africa and Latin America there is a strong tradition of anthropological public intellectuals engaging their various social and political terrains. Pierre Bourdieu was a tireless commentator on French radio and TV. Michel Foucault participated in the underground cultural politics of San Francisco, writing scathing broadsheets that never reached graduate seminars on Foucault at UC Berkeley. Gilberto Freyre, Brazil’s first public anthropologist, famously described Brazil as a racial democracy which became a national symbol of Brazilian identity rooted in ethnic and cultural hybridity. Although Freyre’s thesis hid the entrenched race-class system, it created a popular national stereotype. Despite being rejected by his social science colleagues in Brazil, the idea was embraced by the popular classes (in the mocambos and favelas of Recife), who claimed Freyre as their intellectual, the man who made ‘brownness’ a symbol of Brasiliand. And the poor descended from the hillside slums to participate in his very public funeral procession.

* * *

In addition to bringing anthropology to the public, we also need to bring public issues and dialogues to bear on anthropological thinking and practice. This was my purpose in co-teaching a graduate seminar several years ago on ‘Anthropology and the World’ with former California Governor (now State Attorney) Jerry Brown, a move that scandalized my colleagues. Had the Committee on Courses approved Brown as a co-instructor? I reminded them that as governor, Jerry had appointed the regents that as governor, Jerry had appointed the regents who govern the entire public university system, and that during his tenure he had added two maverick anthropologists to that powerful governing board: Gregory Bateson and Theodora Kroeber. During his tenure he had added two maverick anthropologists to that powerful governing board: Gregory Bateson and Theodora Kroeber.

Finally, in the tradition of C.W. Mills’ *The sociological imagination*, the goal of public anthropology is to make public issues, not simply to respond to them. This is what I have tried to do for the past decade with the Organs Watch project: to make the global traffic in humans for their organs into a pressing social issue requiring a global, multilateral response. At the beginning of the project (1998) I was ridiculed and drummed out of transplant meetings. I was called a liar during a Regional Ethics Board meeting in Cape Town and dismissed at a special meeting of the Council of Europe in Bucharest (2002) as a medically unsophisticated naive caught up in urban legends of blood-sucking, organ-stealing monsters; a transplant coordinator called me an ‘organs terrorist’ responsible for the deaths of patients on transplant waiting lists. Bearing out Virginia Woolf’s contention that ‘ridicule, obscurity and social censure are preferable to fame and praise’, my interventions eventually bore fruit at the 2008 Istanbul summit of international transplant professionals, where we jointly and unanimously passed the Istanbul Declaration on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism.

A final caveat. Scholars who want to reach diverse publics – through popular writing, speaking, or participating in social activism – are not only under-rewarded by their universities, they are often penalized for ‘dumbing down’ anthropological thinking, cutting social theory into bite-sized ‘sound bites’, ‘vulgarizing’ anthropology, sacrificing academic standards or (in the US) for playing to the anti-intellectual, illiberal American popular (working) classes. Public service here tends to mean service to the academy – our discipline or university – rather than service to global publics.

Thus my engagements with the media, my documentary collaborations, my participation in congressional and parliamentary hearings, UN and WHO panels and federal investigations of human trafficking, my newspaper columns and radical pamphlets are ‘counted’ by my university as ‘community outreach’, on a par with giving a lecture on the cultural origins of Halloween to local primary school students. This academic reward system is based not on malice but on a fallacy. While community service and primary and secondary school outreach are recognized, more critical engagements in domestic and international policies – through popular writing, speaking, or participating in social activism – are not only under-rewarded by their universities, they are often penalized for ‘dumbing down’ anthropological thinking, cutting social theory into bite-sized ‘sound bites’.

* * *

My first mentor, Hortense Powdermaker, gave her last public speech as a keynote at the student Kroeber Anthropology Association Meetings in May 1970, just...
This editorial is based on the author’s discussion/comments at the 2008 Presidential Session of the AAA meetings on ‘The Academy and the Public’, organized by Paula Sabloff on 20 November 2008.


Gourevitch, Philippe 1998. We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.


The Transplant Society (TTS) and the International Society of Nephrology 2008. ‘The Istanbul Declaration on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism’. Istanbul, Turkey, April 2-4.


TAMARA CHERRY
Sun Media

VIENNA, Austria — Are children being adapted for organ transplants? Medicaladoptions.com suggests just that, leaving UN officials wondering whether the so-called adoption agency is a hoax or another wriggling layer to the ever-growing human trafficking industry of organ transplants.

The web site, which surfaced at a discussion yesterday about organ trafficking during the second day of the UN’s global forums to fight human trafficking, claims to be a Kentucky-based adoption agency that sells parents the “perfect match…for the transplantation of one or more of ‘non-essential’ organs to be donated to one of the adopting parents or your own children.”

At first glance, the findings are shocking. Children priced according to their category — platinum, gold, bronze or copper, with five-world children listed as platinum and third-world children as copper. “Your new child will grow of themselves the same way you will grow unto them,” the web site says.

a month before she died. It was a period of heightened campus turbulence. No sooner had Berkeley recovered from the Third World Strike and People’s Park riots than the invasion of Cambodia prompted strikes and class disruptions. Powdermaker’s advice is as fresh today as in 1970 when she told Berkeley students: “I call myself a tribal elder and a premature radical and as someone who was always primarily interested in my own society”.

Her stance changed from direct political action as a young college graduate and union organizer to the more distanced and reflexive role of the social scientist who studies social change rather than participates in it. Originally, she saw these roles as incompatible. However, moved by the student campus rebellions of 1968 and ‘69, towards the end of her life Hortense began to reconsider her views. She concluded her cautionary tale by directly addressing the angry, radicalized Berkeley students: “So you want to do your own thing? Then just do it! I’ve always done my own thing and I’ve gotten away with it too! […] I was a rebel in the 1920s […] avant-garde before it was the fashionable thing to do! In [Goucher] college I was a rebel of one. So, if you want to be a rebel or a revolutionary, if you want to join the struggle of the workers or of racially oppressed minorities, my hat is off to you! Do it! But for heaven’s sake don’t expect to get college credit for it!”

So, how does one survive in the academy as a militant anthropologist? Ironically, by keeping one’s public engagements fairly private. And very much like the first generation of working mothers, you do double time, keeping up with expected home-front duties, with the expected rate of scholarly productions of books, articles and graduate students, participating in academic meetings, etc. while simultaneously doing human rights work, serving on international panels, giving keynote speeches in places and at events that don’t matter a hoot to one’s peers (such as to the Association of Transplant Co-ordinators in Wroclaw, Poland, or working with South African, Israeli, Moldovan and Brazilian police to interrupt criminal networks of human trafficking for organs).

Paraphrasing Hortense Powermaker: you want to be a public anthropologist — then do it! I always did. But don’t expect to be rewarded for it. Instead, consider it a precious right and a privilege. Be grateful that, despite the treachery of bureaucratic intimations toward social conservatism, we can still ‘do what we want and get away with it too!’ In Homo academicus, Bourdieu described the clash of academic cultures between the bearers of ‘orthodox’ and institutionally approved intellectual viewpoints and practices and those who hold ‘heterodox, even heretical’, views. While academic heretics are often marginalized, in some instances they gain enough followers to become what Bourdieu called ‘consecrated heretics’. Eventually these may win grudging acceptance within powerful academic circles while continuing to espouse heretical views. Some may gain freedom from routine committee work in exchange for giving up the power to shape departmental futures. Autonomy can be a precious reward. This is another well-kept public secret.

Finally, don’t be overly cautious in expressing heterodox views or taking heretical positions. Don’t wait until you are safely tenured to jump into the public fray. If you do, you may find you have lost what I call ‘the habit of courage’. But protect yourself by keeping up with the expectations of the academic home front. And don’t complain about overwork and under-pay. Just be glad they don’t pull you off the stage and haul you off to jail for speaking your mind, and for being what academic administrators sometimes call a ‘loose cannon’. That is the privilege of academic freedom in a flawed but still viable democratic society, the privilege to be engaged in national and global struggles against injustice, exploitation, racism, homophobia, unjust wars and for the rights of immigrants, minorities and political prisoners.

If anthropology cannot be put to service as a tool for human liberation why are we bothering with it at all? A public anthropology can play its part in all these developments: it has an opportunity to become an arbiter of emancipatory change not just within the discipline, but for humanity itself.

Kids sold as donors?

Organ brokers prey on the ‘socially marginalized, desperate, disabled or young’