

WORLD ANTHROPOLOGIES: ACHIEVING COMMON OBJECTIVES THROUGH UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Thomas Reuter

The World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) was founded in Recife in 2004, and CASCA was one of the founding members. The council has since grown to include over forty associations of anthropologists. WCAA aims to provide new ways for these different national communities of anthropologists to communicate freely and cooperate globally by pooling their organizational resources. The council also promotes a new epistemological paradigm of 'world anthropologies', which insists that we need to reflect on human diversity not simply from a single western hegemonic vantage point but from the multiple and equally valued perspectives of diverse world anthropologies.

The WCAA for the first time provides an organizational platform where such a conversation can actually take place, allowing elected representatives of national associations from around the world to interact based on principles of equality and free participation within a world community dedicated to reciprocal cross-cultural reflection.

Anthropology's mission as the social science of cross-cultural comparison is to study human cultures in all their diversity and internal heterogeneity, and thus to understand some of the recurrent challenges and shared potentials of the human condition. However, anthropology has faced a problem from the beginning in claiming to be an accurate mirror of this unity in diversity due to the dominance of western scholarship. We need to reflect on the epistemological as well as the moral and political dimensions of this problem.

Critics in postcolonial studies and from within anthropology itself have

rightly argued that a project of knowledge such as anthropology cannot be value-neutral and genuinely universal so long as representatives of only a few privileged cultures or nations are able to participate in the construction of this knowledge, or so long as there are significant inequalities among those who do participate. From the perspective of a performance theory of truth, there are thus two necessary steps if we wish to realize the emancipatory potential of anthropology as a truly open forum for mutual understanding among cultures: The first, important step is to promote global participation in the social production of anthropological knowledge,



WCAA biennial meeting in New Delhi, April 2012

by creating equality within the discipline. Secondly, we can contribute consciously to the creation of more level playing fields on a political level, in society at large, by engaging with the power differentials we encounter in the contemporary world and by exposing associated crimes, injustices and misinformation campaigns in our capacity as public intellectuals. I will briefly discuss these two important steps.

Global Participation

In order to promote global participation in the production and dissemination of anthropological knowledge it is

absolutely vital that every available support and opportunity be provided to anthropologists based in developing countries to allow their full participation. In particular, we should support those few non-Western anthropologists who conduct critical research on Western societies from a distinctly non-Western perspective. Without such broad-based participation, there is no democratic foundation for the free and equal co-production of a genuinely global anthropological knowledge.

The World Council of Anthropological Associations actively supports anthropology in developing countries. While

we are not be in a position yet to offer financial support to individual scholars, we can make a significant difference by promoting free participation in global academic debates with travel grants to elected representatives of some of the poorer associations. The WCAA website is also important for promoting participation, for example, by providing space to national organizations to showcase their activities and achievements. The main aim of the council, however, has been to facilitate closer collaboration and the mutual extension of membership privileges among the national professional organizations of developed and developing countries.

Another important prerequisite for global participation is that we should all endeavour for our most important works to be translated into the language of the people we study, to be published locally and at an appropriate price. This affords our informants and local colleagues a greater opportunity to examine and critique our characterizations of their cultures. At the same time, it will be important also to

Continued/Suite Page 7

Continued/Suite Page 7

WORLD ANTHROPOLOGIES: ACHIEVING COMMON OBJECTIVES THROUGH UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Continuation from page 6/Suite de la page 6

translate important works of anthropology from their national language—whatever that language may be—into major world languages, such as Spanish or English, to allow them to reach a wider audience. These are some of the longer-term goals of WCAA and, of course, there are some practical obstacles yet to be faced along the way.

Politically Engaged Anthropology

We may all feel a little pessimistic at times and complain that anthropology has had limited impact on the trajectory of world affairs. Indeed, the world's political economy today is still not a genuine postcolonial so much as a neo-colonial system. Nevertheless, if global discourses today do pay at least some tribute to other people's right of cultural, economic and political self-determination, this is in part due to the active engagement of generations of anthropologists contributing to public debate and policy discussions.

The on-going fragility of cross-cultural relations in the contemporary world is illustrated, for example, by the dominant global discourses of political conflict of our present time. Once again cultural (and specifically religious) difference is abused as a convenient justification for demonizing others and waging war on them, or for silencing dissent at home.

Anthropologists need to intensify engagement with such 'culturalist' discourses by promoting a more rational public debate on cultural difference in the media, individually and through our national and international institutions. Again, the WCAA is important as a platform for consensus building on a number of global issues on which anthropologists may choose to speak with one voice, such as the rights of indigenous peoples, allowing us to make representations to other global bodies such as the UN.

Globalizing Anthropology

No matter whether we choose to be optimistic about the scope of anthropology for promoting world peace, mutual understanding, equality and social justice within and between nation states, and no matter how we may feel about the ethical dilemmas of engaged anthropology, one thing we can and surely must do is to expand the intellectual scope of our discipline by improving the general conditions under which anthropological knowledge is produced, shared and contested. We can achieve this by promoting participation within a shared global community of knowledge based on pluralism and equal access. The creation of the WCAA is a timely and necessary step in this direction.

ANTHROPOLOGY NEWS FROM DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

The government of soy beans in Paraguay, Filipino migration to Canada and Italy, transgenic free zone activism in Colombia, mutual frameworks for research design in Aboriginal communities, international retirement migration to southern Europe and Mexico, shifting ethnic boundaries in Rwanda, public experience of urban interactive art in Canada, global regulation of biotherapeutics and vaccines, Argentina's universal child benefit program, and the revitalization of Siddha medicine in South India – these are just a few of the topics currently being researched by anthropologists in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Dalhousie University.

Our department recently hosted renowned philosopher of science Professor Isabelle Stengers as guest lecturer in an extended conversation series, 'To See Where It Takes Us' (organized by Brian Noble), and

medical anthropologist Dr Denver Lewellen as a Fulbright Research Chair investigating the experience of Nova Scotians with HIV/AIDS as it is reclassified as a 'manageable' chronic disease.

We are also proud to welcome on a long-term basis Dr Afua Cooper, Dalhousie's new James Robinson Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies, who has done groundbreaking work on the 19th-century transnational Black abolitionist movement and comparative Atlantic slavery.

Anthropologists at Dalhousie welcome queries from potential graduate students, particularly those interested in our research concentrations of Social Justice and Inequality, Critical Health Studies and Economy, Work and Development.

Happily ensconced in a friendly joint

department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, we have a thriving MA program and a growing PhD program. Our graduate student anthropologists have been very successful in securing external funding, from SSHRC, the Killam Trusts and the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

Faculty publications of note include Kregg Hetherington's *Guerrilla Auditors: The Politics of Transparency in neoliberal Paraguay* and Liz Fitting's *The Struggle for Maize: Campesinos, Workers, and Transgenic Corn in the Mexican Countryside*, both published by Duke University Press in 2011, and Pauline Gardiner Barber's volume co-edited with Winnie Lem (Trent U), *Migration in the 21st Century: Political Economy and Ethnography*, published by Routledge in May 2012.