

Savage Minds and the anthropological ground zero

Now I'm not the first person to identify a particular anthropological tradition emanating from the 'West' that defines what is called 'anthropology'.

I'm not the first to rant about the dominance of a Euro-American worldview – with its accompanying (selective) modes of funding, disciplinary canon and research areas – that (I believe) pervades anthropology and the discipline uses to 'construct reality.'

I'm not the only person on SM either to allude to such suggestions – Kerim's timely abstract for AAA, and peanut's comments for example both reflect a similar sense to my own.

In the wider published anthro-scape too, authors like Restrepo, Escobar and Ribeiro in particular with their 'World Anthropology Network' have written on this problem, its realities and the possibilities of dialogue, for the last 15 years.

In particular they ask how do places not necessarily English-speaking or dominant in the production of anthropological tradition, places like Latin America and the Caribbean, complicate the picture of a hegemonic anthropology that historically comes from the metropolitan centre?

And how can they help to envision an anthropology beyond the modalities, models and conditions already consolidated in Britain, France and the US, and spread throughout the world by the expansion of the Western university system?

While these allusions may at first seem like a rehashing of familiar watersheds – Dell Hymes or Talal Asad or the Writing Culture debate and more (studying up, anthropology with an accent, native anthropology etc.) – that is not the case either.

This is not an argument about one tradition as a truer producer of anthropological knowledge than another. Of 'us' being better than 'them' or the powerless writing back to the powerful.

It is rather the claim that some voices are louder, and speak more often, than others. That some ideas, concepts and bibliographies have more paradigmatic weight.

And that the simple everyday repetition of such conventions has pedagogical consequences that determine the quality of students we produce, the anthropologists we create and the way we envision the future. Basically, some discursive formations and institutional practices are normalised over others.

For example, all anthropologists study the history of anthropology as defined by the West yet not all anthropologists study knowledge produced by anthropologists outside the Western canon.

I believe that students should not all be reading from the same hegemonic page because the reality of our endeavour – one that is both humanistic and scientific – is that different environments require distinct anthropological toolkits not necessarily commensurate with the intellectual formations disseminated by the 'anthropology' carried in the expanding Western university system of the 20th century.

Let me illustrate. At the University of the West Indies, St Augustine campus where I teach a two semester course called Anthropology of the Caribbean I use an already understood local paradigm – carnival (with its industries, history and representation) – to explain neoliberalism in an introductory fashion that enables the students to envision an idea – ‘Accumulation by Dispossession’ (D. Harvey) – in the framework of something local they already understand.

Carnival as an ‘indigenous intellectual device’ works well in the Caribbean but not in the US university system I have also taught at, where students do not have the same intimate connection to carnival.

Furthermore, the use of race and class as generations of foreign trained scholars (both locals and those from abroad) have faithfully and traditionally done to tell the story of Caribbean social structure does not tell the story of the islands as those here understand it. Students here don’t get “race” as Euro-American scholars do, nor does class fit so well into a society whose historical evolution has little to do with original Marx or Marx revisited.

Race and class here are more correctly understood as two of many bases of ethnicity, and ethnicity itself is a paradigm locals get better than most because as Trinidadian scholar Lloyd Best pointed out the society here is comfortable “living all the ethnic identities that are convenient to them”.

These examples may seem non-sensical or a drab even – yes, of course meanings shift – but anyone visiting Trinidad, whose population is more mixed than Barak Obama (to add some contemporary political salience) realises when he says “I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents; and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible” is very much my point.

We in the non-Euro-American spots around the world hear definitions of reality from a hegemonic ‘anthropology’ that ignores the realities of our experiences and privileges the experiences of others.

What happens to the Caribbean student who says, “Europeans have no idea what ethnicity means?”

What happens to the Caribbean teacher who says, “ethnicity is not race, that ethnicity has nothing to do with race?”

Astrepo and Escobar answer these questions by saying anthropology, as a field, needs to be understood as fractured, plural and multiple.

Now I don’t expect there to be an overnight transformation in the ways anthropology is taught. The solution will have many aspects both in the short term and the long term.

What SM has done in its capacity to bring people back regularly to its website and create dialogue in the global anthropological community is important work in this endeavour but for me SM has to be careful too. It should not merely mirror the existing power dynamics, something I feel it does at times.

SM should be more than the same old syllabi and books, the same old theorists and concepts, the familiar conversations we had in grad school.

Most importantly, the blog can be a mechanism for “the translation of knowledge across sites that are linked by networks of connections among power-differentiated communities” (Restrepo and Escobar 2005).

Which brings me to the paragraph I should of stopped at in my original comment. ‘Occasional Contributors’ is a great idea for creating dialogue. But what about some others ideas too, like:

*An archive for papers that have been previously presented at conferences with a comment function to encourage conversation (papers would be shortish versions 10pgs max).

*An exchange of syllabi perhaps called ‘Comparative Syllabi’ – so if there’s a common class being taught across continents we can see what books and authors colleagues are using and find pertinent in different locales.

Further, if MIT and other ‘elite’ universities are establishing their canons by extending it to people over the net through website and podcasts, other voices need to speak up too and offer alternative canons in a similar fashion. Something SM with its readership is well positioned to provide.

Further Readings:

Best, Lloyd. 2001. ‘Race, Class and Ethnicity: A Caribbean Interpretation.’ Paper presented at the Third Annual Jagan Lecture, York University, March 3, 2001.

Restrepo, Eduardo and Arturo Escobar. 2005. ‘Other Anthropologies and Anthropology Otherwise’: Steps to a World Anthropologies Framework’ in Critique of Anthropology Vol. 25 (2) 99-129

Ribeiro, Gustavo Lins. 2004. ‘World Anthropologies: Cosmopolitics, Power and Theory in Anthropology’ available