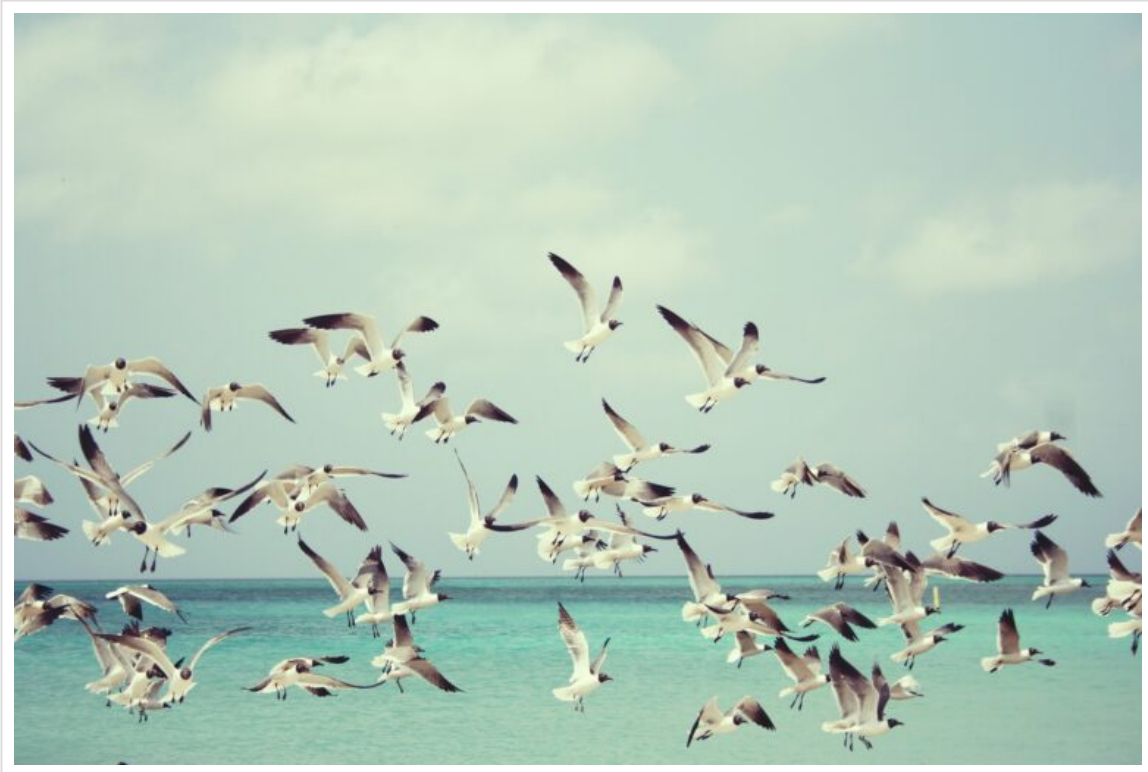# Public Anthropology

Andrea E. Pia

Department of Anthropology
London School of Economics and Political Science

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What and how does anthropology contribute to public life? Do anthropologists have a responsibility to contribute to those communities beyond the academy that make the study of anthropology possible? What happens when ethnography goes public? And who is the audience of ethnography? These are some of the questions that animate a new teaching module, entitled Public Anthropology, I recently set up at LSE Anthropology. This new module emerged in response to students' demands to diversify aspects of the curriculum across the Department.

Anthropology is unique among the social sciences for being perpetually stuck in "cyclical crises of legitimacy" (2020), as Ryan Cecil Jobson has recently put it. Typically caught between the unjustified stigmatization of applied anthropological work – "the rock" – and recruitment bottlenecks that reproduce class and racial disparities (and reward cronyism) – "the hard place" – debates about the social value of anthropology have been rocking the anthropology-boat for quite some time now, though with negligible results. Often, these debates are fought between opposing moral and political camps, with the result that uncompromising views are further entrenched and meaningful change within existing power centres is deferred into the future.

Public anthropology can be conceptualised as an increasingly coordinated movement originating from subject positions and perspectives that rest at an angle to established institutional and discursive spaces in anthropology. As an intellectual project, it expresses impatience with the field's continuous inability to confront and repair the social inequalities and the systemic exploitation the discipline had once been, and still largely is, complicit in. As a social movement, it envisions new ways of practising anthropology, ways that fundamentally challenge the pigeonholing of the discipline in ready-made institutional confines: what counts as anthropology, how is it produced, and what, and whom, is it for?

The reading list I propose below is an extract from my Public Anthropology syllabus. It puts forward an inescapably personal take on this emerging field and correlated disciplinary practices, while highlighting areas of theoretical innovation, political maturity, and epistemological audaciousness. Thus, this reading list explores the relationship between anthropological theory, the power fields in which it is inserted and its diverse publics. In compiling these resources, I have tried to give precedence to material in open-access format. The fact that I have largely failed to do so for each single entry is indicative of how much work still needs to be done, within and outside academia, to secure universal access to the research outputs of the social sciences (I will return to this point in a moment).

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What anthropology is for?

Public Anthropologists are reconsidering the public relevance of anthropological knowledge, asking what happens to ethnographic insights and findings once they are made available to audiences beyond peers and students. Robert Borosfki is perhaps the one single anthropologist who has laboured the most in this regard, publishing extensively on the topic and raising awareness about the limited reach that anthropological scholarship has towards non-specialist publics. His open-access book, *An Anthropology of Anthropology* (2019), delves into what he calls the "two puzzles" of public anthropology: most of the widely read, popular books that deal with anthropological issues tend to be written by non-anthropologists. Why is that? The second puzzle, anthropologists have helped to enrich understanding of humanity's past and present and facilitated concrete changes that improve

people's lives. Yet anthropology's positive efforts have not often been highlighted in the world's newspapers or other media outlets. Again, why?

Alongside Borosfki's book, I suggest two articles. The first is by Andrea Cornwall's, who in *Acting Anthropologically* (2019) considers the role of anthropologists in unsettling orthodoxies and provoking disquiet with taken for granted ways of thinking and doing. Her paper explores an approach to anthropology that takes anthropological practice seriously, and to that end the role of the anthropologist as activist and agent of change. The second is Didier Fassin's *Why Ethnography Matters* (2013), which analytically differentiates two tasks for publicly-minded anthropologists: popularizing and politicizing ethnography for multiple publics. Here, Fassin evokes the risks related to the appropriation of the ethnographic work by the media and the loyalties toward the diverse and sometimes opposed subjects of ethnographic research.

The University

There is no public appreciation of the merits and benefits of anthropology without a critical focus on the systems, processes, and relations of production that make anthropological knowledge possible in the first place. In *The Neoliberal University and its Alternatives* (2016), Michael Rustin walks us through the many centuries since the "invention" of the University only to show what higher education might look like if it differed from the current commercial, neoliberal, model. Among other suggestions, Rustin argues that post-school education is a public as well as a private good, and should be seen as the entitlement of all citizens, supported and funded by the democratic state. In an earlier contribution, *Constituent Imagination* (2007), Stevphen Shukaitis and David Graeber reasoned along similar lines, asking how we can create a space, ethic, and practice that uses the space of the university to go beyond itself and to create something else. "How can we open the university to use its resources for the benefit of movements and organizing?" – Shukaitis and Graeber ask – "How can we use it to create a forum for collective reflection, to re-imagine the world from wherever we find ourselves?".

Today, public anthropologists strive – as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten would have it – "to be in but not of" the neoliberal University (2013), engaging pragmatically with the prospects for change afforded by strategic inside-activism. One aspect of this emerging academic activism revolves around the question of the knowledge commons. Indeed, if Anthropology aspires to reach the largest possible number of people, it first ought to confront a scholarly publishing system that actively endeavours to forestall the free circulation of ideas and creates artificial scarcity for profit. In *Beyond Copyright and Technology* (2014), Christopher Kelty noted how university administrators are still rewarding faculty based on publications, which are usually stored behind expensive paywalls. Review committees fall back on publishing metrics and journal reputation, which drives scholars to be desperate for that "credentialing" article in a major, paywalled

journal. This creates another "cyclical crisis", in Jobson's words. The authors of the recent *Labour of Love Manifesto* (2020), all editors of independent scholar-led publications, take this argument further, arguing for a re-politicisation of scholarly publishing that could reclaim anthropology to a new critical agenda. Finally, in *Other Anthropologies and Anthropology Otherwise* (2005), Eduardo Restrepo and Arturo Escobar reflect, among other things, on how Universities in the Global North systematically profit from research collaborations in and with scholars in the Global South, giving anything in return.

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Operationalising Anthropology

Today, anthropology-trained individuals work everywhere, from the corporate world, to NGOs, to the cultural industry. Academic anthropology typically looks down to career paths that are perceived as misaligned with the (now questionable) values which encrust and adorn the ivory tower. This contempt is especially reserved for graduate students, who, as a recent PrecAnthro Collective report suggest, are more than ever facing an impossibly squeezed academic job market. Public Anthropology reserves an important role for applied, activist or differently engaged anthropologically informed projects. These projects tend to be animated by sensibilities and subjectivities that are often poorly represented by elite departments.

For instance, Kamari Clarke, in *Toward a Critically Engaged Ethnographic Practice* (2010), assesses the potential for corrective engagements with the US military that goes beyond the often sterile, virtue – signalling stance – prevalent in many academic quarters – of considering critique as the only form of scholarly agency. Charles Hale makes a similar argument to Clarke's, when in *Activist Research v. Cultural Critique* (2008), he chastises "disengaged" anthropologists for the chauvinism they demonstrate when they fail to align their research goals with the political projects of organized groups of people in struggle. A recent, glaring example of emancipatory research practices that wed activism with theoretical rejuvenation in anthropology is *Transcontinental Dialogues* (2019). This book brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous anthropologists who work at the intersection of Indigenous rights, advocacy, and action research. Transcontinental Dialogues investigates how anthropological obligations manifest in differently situated alliances and what consequences these may have for anthropological practice and action.

Similarly, applied anthropology has long been reputed –and sometimes rightly so – to remain too close to various partisan or corporate interests, lending little credibility to its own lofty ideals. In recent years, public anthropologists have started reviving the legacy of applied anthropology, showing how working across difference, and outside one's scholarly comfort zone, can still yield appreciable results for research participants. This is the case of the work of collectives of scholars who by authoring pieces such as *Reclaiming Applied Anthropology* (2006) and *Applying Anthropology* (2018) are demonstrating the possibility of translating

anthropologists' critical, careful thinking to a broader audience that is not based in the university.

Yet, public anthropology is at its best when accepting cross-fertilisation between different fields of knowledge production, diverging intellectual projects and biographies. When anthropology is recast as a space for the collective cultivation of a "constituent imagination," as Graeber and Shukaitis put it, marginal or otherwise antagonistic subjectivities gain frontstage and become invested with the power to generate new knowledge. In *Rethinking Public Anthropology through Epistemic Politics and Theoretical Practice* (2013) Michal Osterweil shows what political anthropology might gain from incorporating the critical epistemology of the alter-globalisation movement. John Borneman's *Ethics, Morality, and Moralizing in Anthropological Research* (2020) reflects on the limits of a particular brand of the anthropology of ethics by entering in dialogue with child sex molesters in rehabilitation programs. Finally, in *Collaborating with the Radical Right* (2019), Benjamin Teitelbaum provocatively challenges established ideas and liberal worldviews, which are often predicated on a misplaced sense of moral purity, by reflecting ethnographically on his own constructive and very often amicable relationships with members of the Norwegian Alt-Right.

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De-textualising anthropology

One final example of how public anthropology is expanding the horizon of what can be rightfully called anthropology, and its accompanying disciplinary praxes, is offered by briefly looking at recent attempts by young (and not so young) researchers to go beyond textual representation. Charlie Rumsby's *Retrospective (re)presentation* (2020) skilfully navigates the possibilities of drawing, whether that be sketches, cartoons or illustrations, to enhance self-reflexivity, conduct anthropological fieldwork, and disseminate research findings to new audiences. Equally, Aleksandra Bartoszko in *Graphic Possibilities* (2019) communicate powerfully the potential of graphic ethnography for the dissemination of anthropological insights. Drawings, Nika Dubrovsky suggests, are also crucial when thinking about ways anthropology can help children question the value systems they have inherited. *What are Kings* (2021), where she articulates the problem of textuality, is a working book for children that grapples with big questions in anthropological theory – as in "what is sovereignty?" – through drawings.

Others, like the author of this text, are instead exploring digital publics and new avenues for publicity being opened by web-native formats. In *Writing Hypertext* (2019), Andrea Pia suggests that videogames can appear 'good to play with' to anthropologists if explored along the discursive tension generated in the friction between their escapist intentions and the opportunities of self-transformation that their mechanisms afford to players. Basing his reflections on the experience of developing and producing a *digitised ethnography* (i.e. a digital interactive story based on original fieldwork material), Pia argues that

anthropologists may contribute to diversify the cultural offer of online gaming and expand the imaginative resources and endpoints of online journalism. Meanwhile, photo-essays are enjoying a second youth in online journals such as Roadsides. And Renato Rosaldo has coined *antropoesía*, poetic verses with an ethnographic sensibility, which challenges the limits of ethnography as it is usually practiced.

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Andrea E. Pia is Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science.