

# TYPECAST! SOME LESSONS FROM NORWEGIAN PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

## ABSTRACT

After many years of slumber, a string of disturbing political developments and setbacks in many parts of the world have convinced the anthropological community to recommit to its public role. As one of a mere handful of nations where anthropology has had a longstanding presence in public debates, Norway serves as an example for others to follow. In this essay, I use my experiences from years of varied media engagements to make the case for a public anthropology that is not merely a one-way enlightenment project but a tool for reflexivity and disciplinary critique. The didactic reformulation required when reaching out to new audiences can defamiliarise the things we know well and help us see things anew. In addition, the feedback, and occasionally outright resistance, often harvested by such outreach can provide a fresh take on established patterns of thinking and identify thematic and analytic blind spots. In Norway, anthropologists have gradually become collectively branded as belonging to the political left, which has blunted the potential impact of an anthropological critique. Showing that this branding is not entirely without substance, I argue that, by using media engagements as a two-way source of reflexivity, public anthropology can be a vital part of the discipline's epistemological agility.

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**KEYWORDS:** public anthropology, media engagements, reflexivity, theoretical imperialism, the anthropology of good

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## RETURN TO THE PUBLIC?

In this essay, I use my experiences from 15 years of anthropology-informed media engagements to address some challenges for public anthropology that, I argue, are shared across national boundaries.<sup>1</sup> I am fully aware of the audacity of this claim. In fact, there is a whole catalogue of reasons why this might be the easiest dismissible essay of all time. It can be read as a case of urgent ethnography,

describing the remnants of a rare and fading academic culture that once encouraged public engagement in a rather broad sense, directed at a national audience that until quite recently was highly receptive (although not unconditionally) to such exposure. To some, it will also serve as a token of the death throes of a certain form of privilege associated with the white male European academic, who has failed to realise that anthropology has moved away from him and who has had his licence to walk barefoot

through the whole of culture permanently revoked. The argument could be further compartmentalised by being linked to what Peder Anker (2020) has called ‘the power of the periphery’, which refers to perspectives from academic fringe zones welcomed by those to whom they are useful while being easily shelved as quaint and thus posing no true challenge to those who disagree. After all, Norway’s entire population is half that of New York, as some American colleagues keep reminding me. Still, I hold that there are lessons to be learned from Norwegian public anthropology, both in its heyday some 25 years ago (Eriksen 2003, 2005) and during its current slump. I also write this with a sense of urgency, because I have recently witnessed up close how anthropology can make people’s lives better: not only by contributing to ‘making the world safe for human difference’, the apocryphal quote attributed to Ruth Benedict, or by reminding us that humans in general are kind, caring, and cooperative, as historian Rutger Bregman (2020) successfully has done by drawing extensively from anthropological studies, but also by bringing a sense of consolation in troubling times. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been my unmitigated privilege to present the pan-human panoramic perspective of anthropological theory to Norwegian broadcasting audiences on a more or less weekly basis. According to feedback from both media staff and listeners/viewers, these contributions took the edge off some of the uniqueness and existential loneliness that characterised life under pandemic restrictions. From the anthropological tool kit, Victor Turner’s (1974) concept of *communitas* and the model of the various stages of social dramas provided interpretive frames for our collective responses to existential uncertainty during the initial phase of the pandemic; while a combination of Erving Goffman’s (1959)

situational analysis and Mary Douglas’ (1966) description of anomalies provided some clues to understanding why the home school-and-office existence felt so stressful and physically and mentally taxing. More recent works, such as Alan Fiske’s (2019) comparative project on the multisensory modes that usually exist in physical communion and, consequently, are not easily reproduced digitally, granted solace to many who suffered from Zoom fatigue or experienced inexplicable social communication failures; while Michael Herzfeld’s (2020) application of his term ‘cultural intimacy’ on the Covid lockdown phase not only made a number of pieces fall into place, but also reminded us that there are larger issues at stake beyond the pandemic navel that also need to be addressed. Witnessing the effect when people realise that their reactions are normal because they are precedented and shared by fellow humans across space and time has been remarkably rewarding. Anthropology has quite simply shown its power to bring people comfort. That is no minor feat.

Moreover, the timing for a recommitment to wider public engagements seems right. The insights anthropologists can bring to the table have always been unique. Now, they are also essential. Because even to dark times there is a silver lining. The past few years have brought us Brexit, Trumpism, an expansion of the European identitarian movement from a fringe phenomenon to the centre of politics, militarisation, and a marked autocratic turn to a number of regional and global powers, all of which seem to have jolted the long-slumbering vocation of engaged public anthropology. Where previously such involvements were made with reference to a vague sense of duty, ‘because we should’—for the purpose of enlightenment, to give something back to the public that finances much of our research, or because it supports the profile or ‘branding’ of a university or a

discipline—these days there is a much stronger sense of existential necessity: ‘because we must’ ‘Truth and responsibility’ was chosen as the theme for the 2021 American Anthropological Association (AAA) meeting, immediately followed by a refreshingly unconditional reminder of the ‘imperative to bear witness, take action, and be held accountable to the truths we write and circulate’ (American Anthropological Association 2021). Long-term ethnographic engagements with local communities made up of actual and acting people provide the base for the understanding of key political matters that will only grow more urgent in the decades to come: migration, integration, and the social impact of climate change. Our number is up, and it is time to act. The question remains, are we prepared for the task? Some recent publications suggest that our training and the structures of academic rewards have prevented the development of the skills required for public engagement, or discouraged those who had such skills from putting them on display (see for instance Borofsky 2019; McGranahan 2020; Fassin 2017). They argue that the style of academic communication that anthropologists are socialised into acts as an obstacle to the wider dispersal of our insights. It also affects our ability to engage constructively with each other (Billig 2013). Such ‘Academese’ (Borofsky 2011: 40) is ungainly in any self-proclaimed critical academic discipline (being difficult is, after all, the easy way out). To anthropologists, leaning towards the involute should be particularly unpalatable (or, put in non-Academese, ‘write clearly’), since our empirical material is so singularly open to empathy and co-imagination (see, for instance, Narayan 2012; Fassin 2017: 7–8). Historians pride themselves on the fact that any reasonably enlightened layperson can read their publications. There is no reason why anthropology, so wonderfully rich in that prized

asset of ‘good stories’ (Kolshus 2017, 2018), should not be equally accessible and appealing. A discipline that can be made understandable is perfectly shaped to contribute to further understanding.

So, it would seem that the stage is set for a much more extroverted anthropology. Research communication courses are already included in a number of graduate programmes. Changing the prestige structure that has confused obscurity with profundity and forced us to turn the blame for not comprehending the incomprehensible onto ourselves, so delightfully dissected by Ellen Hertz (2016), might take longer. Yet, with a new generation driven by a desire to be understood, reward structures that promote intellectual haziness, and communicative introversion should eventually go out with a whimper—at least if it is joined by a corresponding revaluation of merit in academic hiring, as Borofsky (2019) advocates, and as the recent modification to the AAA assessment criteria encourages. However, even though the attitude towards popularising efforts seems about to change, it will take time and concerted effort to give anthropology a public presence. For anthropological insights to become a difference that makes a difference, individual anthropologists as well as anthropological institutions must deliberately seek media platforms and other public venues that reach people who have not actively sought such insights. As I show below, this can be agonising. Not only because it is frustrating to realise that even our best reasoning can fall on deaf ears and barren ground, but, also, because we will at times be met with counterarguments that we have not been exposed to within the relative safety of peer exchanges. Some of these will even defy the apodictic, notions that we hold to be so unquestionably true that questioning them usually will rebound on the questioner while leaving the target unscathed.

When communicating beyond our ranks, challenges to these truths will regularly surface. Being forced into such reflexive detours—‘How do we know what we know?’—is nothing if not healthy since it bolsters intellectual vigilance. Public engagement can simply be epistemologically invigorating (see Kirch 2018). However, this requires acts of genuine reflection. We rightfully pride ourselves on how anthropology can contribute to destabilising the familiar, unleashing cultural creativity as well as uncovering naturalised power structures (frequently two sides of the same coin). A similar destabilisation of anthropologists’ professional doxa might occur through deliberately reflexive public engagements. In turn, this will deepen the impact and widen the audience of anthropology-inspired interventions.

This is where I enter the fray based on my experience with public anthropology in Norway over the past 15 years. I take my cue from Matti Bunzl’s (2008: 54) sobering challenge from one of several earlier rounds of concern for public anthropology: ‘If progressive punditry is in fact possible, then how do we explain the persistent failure of [the] contemporary anthropologist ... to play a more prominent role in the public sphere?’. My tentative answer is that in Norway, the approximately 2000 trained anthropologists (of whom around 200 are employed as researchers) have become collectively typecast as progressive lefties who wilfully disregard any possible virtue in other perspectives. Acknowledging that such a (mis)comprehension exists, I show how this has affected my own approach to media engagements and public debates. Inspired by Joel Robbins (2013) and Sherry Ortner (2016), I will also point to some developments in the anthropological classificatory apparatus that relate to notions of privilege and victimhood. A number of these are not attuned to finer local

nuances, since they are formed with reference to US-conceived middle-range theories (Merton 1968; cf. Knauff 2019), particularly related to identity and ‘race’ (see Andersson 2018), designed for a specific empirical context. However, since the most prestigious journals are US based, such proviso are frequently forgotten and peer reviews request framings that threaten to restrict rather than release the empirical potential. An anecdotal illustration will suffice at this point: A colleague recently submitted an article on poverty and demographic changes in a multicultural inner-city community to a high-ranking US-based journal, discussing why families moved elsewhere as soon as they had reached a certain size and income level. The principal reasons for relocating mentioned by the interlocutors were the low quality of the local school, a sense of insecurity caused by a high percentage of communal housing for residents suffering from substance abuse, and a shortage of larger apartments that could accommodate the needs of growing families. The manuscript was accepted on the condition that the author characterised this as ‘white flight’, to which my colleague grudgingly agreed after initial protests. This was in spite of the ‘flight’ being income-based and consequently a matter of class rather than ethnicity, evident in the fact that poor ethnic Norwegians remained while more affluent families with an immigrant background moved out as soon as they could. One thing is that such conceptual override prevents ethnographic challenges to the limits of these theories. More immediately problematic to anthropological relevance is how the analytic outcome lacks accuracy. All of the causes for moving brought up by my colleague’s research can be addressed politically. ‘White flight’, on the other hand, is merely a label—and a heavily moralising and depoliticising one at that. In the Norwegian public domain, these tendencies

have caused us to lose authority, since parts of the wider audience fail to recognise those points made because the analytical tools are not calibrated to the purpose.<sup>2</sup>

At the core is the question of trust. A big and unwieldy notion, surely, and, to some, just bringing it to the table in this phantasmagoric age of post-facts and fake news will sound preposterously naïve. I will nonetheless insist that attention to trust, and how to steward it, is crucial for any publicly engaged anthropology. It is also part of epistemological reflexivity, which includes awareness of analytical biases. As anthropologists, sensitive to nuances, we know that most issues come in shades of grey. By making this explicit, we are not easily compartmentalised, and, therefore, not easily dismissed as epistemologically predestined to reach certain conclusions. Consequently, those instances that actually *are* unequivocally black and white will stand out more clearly. Still sceptical? Consider this: When was the last time you paid proper attention to someone who referred to themselves as an evolutionary psychologist? In what follows, I show that, to an increasing part of the Norwegian public, sociocultural anthropology has become just as easily sidelined.

## FRONTLINES AND FAULT LINES

As far as anthropology's public presence is concerned, Norway has usually been singled out, either as a beacon of hope or, more soberingly, as a cultural survival, 'the remnant of the discipline's past glory' (Fassin 2017: 2). Since Fredrik Barth's mesmerising appearances on national television in the late seventies, a string of anthropologists with distinguished academic careers, such as Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Unni Wikan, and Marianne Gullestad,

have brought anthropological insights and ethnographic comparative perspectives to a range of Norwegian publics. Sometimes the engagements were light-hearted and teasing, sometimes they were solemn or even literally dead serious. We in the audience fell for the curious blend of enthusiasm and urgency, declaring 'this is something people need to hear!', even though the messenger usually was an expert on topics and places far removed from the lives of most Norwegians (Howell 2010; Bringa and Bendixen 2016). During the nineties, 'social anthropology ... arguably [became] the most visible academic profession in the mainstream mass media' (Eriksen 2003: 3).

My own immersion in public debate had been incremental, starting with public talks and lectures, via occasional radio appearances and the odd newspaper comment, before becoming a newspaper columnist.<sup>3</sup> The commentaries I wrote for the financial daily *Dagens Næringsliv* did not include an online comments option, whilst the readership would mostly consist of public servants, politicians, and professionals. I, therefore, had the privilege of being playful and sometimes essayistically equivocal, trusting that readers would appreciate not being told what to think. Occasionally, my pieces would cause a stir. After mildly criticising a famous comedian for a joke he made on his talk show about a kosher diet, the front page of both national tabloids featured pictures of him with the headline 'Accused of antisemitism!', followed by radio and television debates on the limits of humour. Twitter-active friends reported intense discussions, in which anthropologists in general were accused of underestimating people's ability to take a joke for just a joke. It was not until I started writing for *Aftenposten*, Norway's largest daily, that I was exposed to the full thrust of the new digital media reality, for which social media

shares, average reading time, and comments for the online versions were quantifiable indicators of success. My first contribution was a tongue-in-cheek analysis of how ‘challenge’ had replaced ‘problem’ in politician lingo. It struck a chord, beyond even the ranks of political cynics. The second column was informed by anthropology and fatherhood in equal measure, arguing that the overprotection of kids and ‘the capacity to worry’ had become a new standard for assessing an individual’s moral standing, and that for the sake of our children we all needed to be less concerned with optimising their childhood. It was a resounding success. Hubris-charged, I threw all caution overboard and decided to write about gender equality for International Women’s Day, arguing that the Norwegian man was the freest creature to ever walk the Earth and that it was the women’s liberation movement that had set him (well, me) free. Most of the next two days were spent in shell-shocked sleeplessness over the keyboard, overwhelmed by an avalanche of abuse. The gist of it was: emasculated ‘cultural Marxist’<sup>4</sup> anthropologist had no business coming here and telling proper men what to do or how to feel about themselves; once Norwegians were Vikings, now we are weaklings; but, deep down, everyone knows that women prefer the old Adam to this new amorphous version; and I could take my mindless relativism and stick it!

I had been woefully unprepared and, for that, I was deeply embarrassed. First and foremost, for failing to realise that I wrote as a generic Norwegian man without considering how my urban middle-class position obviously affected my outlook. Once I resurfaced from this immersion, I decided to take fieldnotes on my participation in the comments sections of particularly contentious contributions—that is, those that discussed gender, multicultural issues, or ‘Norwegian values’.<sup>5</sup> I had already

planned to write my next column on the differences between the three Scandinavian countries’ public debates on questions related to immigration and integration. I showed how Swedes seemed to actively subdue certain topics and cases (see Kurkiala 2016) and argued that this, in the longer term, would pose a challenge to the public trust in the media, academia, and government. The outcome was interesting, since it apparently confused the usual suspects in the comments section. A sensible anthropologist? They must have missed something. I followed up by experimenting with changing the byline information, from anthropologist to father, associate professor, soccer coach, and Oslo resident, amongst others. Those contributions that had the clearest political sting against causes associated with left-wing politics brought the most attention and positive feedback. Someone would inevitably turn up and remind others that I was, in fact, an anthropologist, so when they agreed with me, they must have misread me. These experiences were as troubling as they were interesting. I nevertheless dismissed them as part of an online community culture, with some justification. I had been (and still am) critical towards tendencies of disregarding the opinions of ‘disgruntled white men’ by default, but for the sake of my own sanity it did at times seem legitimate to do so. Their prejudices could surely not be widely held?

## AUDIENCE LOST

It was not until the fiftieth anniversary of the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo in 2014 that I realised how our public standing had changed. During the week-long celebrations, the strong tradition of public anthropology featured prominently in the department’s self-presentation, in international guests’ addresses, and also in the Norwegian

media. A feature story in the highbrow weekly *Morgenbladet* was complemented by several dedicated programmes on national radio's main science show and a string of articles devoted to anthropology in *Aftenposten's* science section. In my contribution to the article series, I discussed how anthropology had come to reach such a prominent position in the Norwegian public sphere, pointing to the favourable interaction between outstanding research communicators and Norwegians' long-standing international orientation, manifest in development aid initiatives, Christian foreign mission organisations, and seafaring and shipping traditions. I also mentioned that some now apparently had come to regard us as part of the left-leaning politically correct elite, with lopsided contributions to public debates. I made it clear that, to those of us who knew the discipline's wealth of perspectives, this impression was faulty, nonetheless offering some reasons why the relationship between the discipline and its formerly devoted public no longer seemed as cordial: 1) The playfulness that characterised the decade that followed the end of the Cold War caused by a feeling of facing a historic blank slate where everything was possible ended abruptly with 9/11. 2) Curiosity about the lives of other peoples was no longer seen as essential for understanding our own. 3) We anthropologists had probably too often referred to the 'majority population' as an undifferentiated category, which rendered us class blind and ignored the significant cultural differences within Norway and thus inadvertently helped to confirm the myth of pre-immigration cultural homogeneity currently haunting Norwegian integration debates. 4) Studies of Norwegian minorities had not been sufficiently methodically ambitious, where in particular a lack of language skills constituted such a serious shortcoming that

Eriksen's (2013: 51) characterisation of this as a 'professional scandal' seemed apt. And, 5) anthropologists had not acknowledged the fact that, in some urban areas, the lives of 'majority Norwegians' had undergone such major changes over a relatively short period of time that today their lives share a number of the traits we associate with a minority existence. My upbeat conclusion saluted the virtue of curiosity and promised that anthropology should remain recognisably unpredictable in the coming fifty years as well. Amongst colleagues, the diagnosis was largely met with a shrug and the odd pat on the shoulder. From the readership, however, the response was overwhelming, exceeding anything I had previously written. Some of the input was definitely on the rougher side, rejoicing in anthropologists' self-inflicted trouble and full of glee over the prospect of an anthropology-free future. The vast majority, however, was thoughtful, nuanced, and strikingly personal. A large portion came from people working in the public sector, many with an expertise in the integration of immigrants. They all revealed an early fascination for anthropology, for knowledge of peoples of the world, and for surprising comparisons and juxtapositions. Enthusiasm had dwindled as anthropologists, according to a number of those who wrote me, failed to point out that the ethical obligation to seek conviviality with and understanding of your fellow human was a two-way street. Anthropologists' attitudes seemed to be that We were supposed to understand Them, and We were supposed to understand that They could not understand Us. The odd counter-voices who had painted a more complex picture of the processes of integration had been treated poorly by fellow anthropologists. Many either explicitly or implicitly mentioned how we had met Unni Wikan's work and public engagements. She had addressed how Norwegian policies on

multicultural issues seemed to either leave patriarchal tendencies among Norway's immigrant population to pass or even outright facilitating them (Wikan 1999, 2001, 2008). Her academic and public contributions had shown the relevance of knowledge from faraway regions to understand the situation at home. Reactions from some of her colleagues were vile (see Wikan 2017 for an account), and were obviously noted by those engaged members of the public. Disenchantment had now set in, and if they wanted solid knowledge applicable for the specific challenges they were facing, they would look to other academic disciplines, since we consistently failed to ask the questions for which they needed answers. Two things were apparent: first, disappointment in anthropology for not completing the work of making everyone equally 'native', subject to the same expectations and thus open for a more radical equality; second, a related suspicion that fields and topics existed which anthropologists were careful to avoid, allegedly because we feared the answers we would get (what Fassin (2013) calls 'the black holes of ethnography')—or that when we actually engage with these questions, the findings we present subdue possibly troublesome data. The underlying tone was one of trust, or rather the loss thereof, from people who truly wanted to believe us, and who knew how to weigh two mutually excluding principles and opt for one, whilst acknowledging some virtues in the other.

According to Elie Wiesel, the opposite of love is not hatred but indifference. Judging by the overwhelming response it was obvious that people were far from indifferent. So I took the time to respond carefully. This also gave me plenty of time to think. Did they have a point? I decided to follow anthropological interventions in the public debate even more closely. One factor that soon became apparent

was the perception of cultural relativism. To anthropologists, this is a methodological principle and a prerequisite for grasping the connections and valuations that make people do what they do. In Norwegian public discourse, however, it had become synonymous with moral relativism, characterised by the prejudice of lowered expectations, by which we do not ascribe to others the same capacities of understanding and empathy that we attribute to and expect from ourselves, followed by a general licence to disregard any virtue 'Norwegian culture' might hold. This impression was not entirely without substance. For instance, an anthropology professor of Western European origin declared that the national day celebrations on May 17, a boisterous spectacle with school children's parades that Norwegians compare favourably to shows of military might present in many other national day celebrations, is matched only by the totalitarian autocracy in North Korea.<sup>6</sup> It was, admittedly, a refreshing comparative reflection that might have served a purpose—if the professor later in the interview had not underlined that she always fled town and had never actually seen, let alone taken part in, the celebrations she so readily denounced, showing that anthropological training by no means inoculates one against either prejudice or empirically shoddy conjectures. When a Pew Research Center (2018) survey found Norwegians to be more prone than other Western Europeans to agree with the proposition that 'our culture is not perfect, but it is better than others', anthropologists who were approached for comments were quick to label this cultural chauvinism. At first glance, it seems like the obvious conclusion. However, the same survey showed that the respondents had a very broad notion of Norwegian-ness, significantly more open than any of their Western European counterparts. The upbeat

message that the inclusive patriotism that has been described in other parts of the world (see, for instance, McDougall 2016) is not necessarily an oxymoron, not even soon after the moral panic caused by the so-called ‘European refugee crisis’ of 2015, merits curiosity. What can only be called a prejudiced anthropological framing made the public miss some truly interesting discussions, whilst anthropologists’ lack of real interest prevented the softening of some hardened truths. A cynic could be forgiven for thinking that to anthropologists good news is unwelcome. More disturbingly, it seemed that the journalists had approached anthropologists in search of this precise answer.

In 2015, I was trapped by a similarly restraining framing after several thousand Syrian refugees crossed the Russian–Norwegian border by bike (see Naguib 2017). A handful of the asylum seekers were married girls under the age of consent who were either pregnant or had their children with them. After registration, they had consequently been forcibly separated from their husbands who faced prosecution for statutory rape. The reporting caused a public outcry, and the case inevitably ended up on *Dagsnytt 18*, the main current affairs debate programme. Having unsuccessfully searched for willing experts on the Middle East, the producers eventually asked me to shed some light on the subject. I was quite clear about what I could and could not say, emphasising that this was counter to Syrian law and custom and had to be regarded as a consequence of the desperate and precarious situation characterising crowded refugee camps. The anchor seemed pleased and informed me that I would be facing a representative from Save the Children, an international nongovernmental organisation. Right before we went on air, the programme was introduced with the following teaser: ‘Pregnant 14-year-old mother of one crosses northern border. “Let

her stay with her husband”, says anthropologist.’ My heart sank. Nothing I had said during the research briefing had been anything near this pitch. Still, the most competent news producers in the country obviously found that this was something anthropologists were likely to say. The showdown they had set the stage for, between the relativist anthropologist and the universalist champion of children’s rights, came to naught, since we were in full agreement over both the causes of this situation and what was the best way to deal with the consequences. The anchor grew ever more impatient in his attempts to sow discord between us. From an editorial point of view, this 12-minute headline debate fell flat on its face. To me, it felt like a mission accomplished. I had brought up some crucial nuances to a case that otherwise invited moral condemnation of Syrian men, or the demonisation of Syrian culture, or Islam, or all three. Then, reactions started ticking in. A few appreciated my efforts. To most, it seemed that everything I had said had been filtered through the self-confirming programme pitch.<sup>7</sup> Anthropologists, in general, were accused of being apologists for any barbaric practice as long as it could be labelled ‘culture’, converting ugly ducklings of abuse into beautiful swans beyond reproach, whilst this tolerance for the suffering endured by some in the name of culture clearly showed anthropology’s state of moral bankruptcy.

## A CHANGE IN ANTHROPOLOGY’S CULTURE?

Since I knew what I had actually said, the comments did not hurt as much as they probably were intended to do. This freed intellectual space for reflection. It seemed clear that anthropologists had become the go-to people when a certain pitch was required, in the same

way that evolutionary psychologists are the contact-of-choice whenever you need someone to say that ‘in evolutionary terms, the stone-age ended just hours ago, so [*insert conservative topic of choice here*] is consistent with our true nature.’ This is the essence of anthropology’s media typecasting. It is confirmed whenever anthropologists deliver according to a tacit script of what anthropologists are expected to say because of our alleged epistemological override, whilst nuance and exception are siphoned off. Still, was this mainly the media’s fault? Given the reactions to the Oslo department’s anniversary piece a year earlier, and a clear feeling that popular perception regarding anthropology had changed, I began wondering whether my critics were onto something that I, being in the midst of things, had missed. Had there been an epistemological change that calibrated our analyses in a slightly new way? To me, who belonged to the large student cohort of the early nineties, it was anthropology’s light-heartedly serious intellectual leaps and surprising comparisons that had initially appealed to me. The collapse of the Berlin wall had made us Cold War kids believe that our world was rebooting, and everything was possible. By displaying the vast diversity of humankind, anthropology academically condoned this conviction. Our message simply fit the spirit of time like a glove (Eriksen 2005; Eriksen and Stein 2017), and there seemed to be no clouds on the horizon for either anthropology or society. However, two articles addressing recent disciplinary history suggest that this sense of deep relief and endless opportunity were not as strong on the Western side of the Atlantic. Sherry Ortner (2016: 61) wrote, ‘the real world in the 1990s was getting darker, as the promise of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s began to fade, and as young people born in the 1960s and 1970s were beginning to experience the beginning of

the end of “the American Dream”’. What she calls ‘dark anthropology’, which emphasises power dimensions, oppression, and the ‘harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them’ (49), displaced more culture-oriented issues. Joel Robbins (2013) points to a similar trend in anthropological representations, by which people who would previously be associated with what Michel-Rolph Trouillot labelled ‘the savage slot’ were portrayed from the 1980s onwards as victims of colonisation and neoliberalism in what Robbins (2013: 448) calls ‘the suffering slot’. This shift discarded the use of difference for intellectual life and self-understanding (Robbins 2013: 454). Expanding Robbins’ point, I find that the reflexivity resulting from the distortive mirror effect demands a more radical equality than that allowed by the restricting notion of victimhood: the life of ‘the savage’ is different and precisely, therefore, something to learn from, whilst life for ‘the suffering’ is just a poorer version of our own and thus has little else to offer except for bad conscience. Robbins (2013: 456) summarises, ‘suffering slot ethnography is secure in its knowledge of good and evil and works toward achieving progress in the direction of its already widely accepted models of the good’. On this point, Robbins fruitfully converges with the air of disappointment in many of the responses to my Oslo department anniversary diagnosis. The consequence of suffering slot ethnography is that the basis of anthropology’s radically comparative project dissolves, since guilt is not compatible with equality. It is displaced in favour of comparison along the one-dimensional inequality axis of over-privileged versus underprivileged. Only some seem worthy of our full understanding, leaving general curiosity as collateral damage.

The ‘suffering slot’ classificatory apparatus was set in motion when a father in one of the most ethnically diverse Oslo suburbs was interviewed for *Aftenposten*, saying that his children were being mocked by schoolmates with Muslim backgrounds for having salami in their lunch boxes. Two anthropologists immediately contacted the principals of all the primary schools in the area. Soon, they could almost triumphantly report that none of the principals were familiar with the story, which consequently, according to them, must be false. What is important is not whether the salami affair was true, even though my children’s experience from our ethnically and culturally diverse local school in the inner city of Oslo meant that I did not bat an eyelid at the father’s account. The bottom line is that no anthropologist would have questioned, much less publicly attacked, a story about students who were being bullied for *not* eating salami. Thus, we were not allowed to empathise with the children of this family, even though the label ‘majority’ hardly covers their experiences at the level where we anthropologists have our strength—namely, the local—where people’s lives are lived. The anthropologists’ intervention made the binary opposition minority: majority: victim: abuser not even situationally reversed, let alone challenged. This also spared them the strain of revising their interpretive frame.

## CURIOSITY RESTRAINED?

Benjamin Teitelbaum’s provocatively titled article, ‘Collaborating with the radical right’ (2019), features an equally provocative argument for an ‘immoral anthropology’. Behind these deliberately standoffish expressions lie epistemological as well as ethical concerns crucial to both ‘pure’ academic anthropology and its public guise. The provocative framing

possibly eclipses a crucial point, namely, that exposure to other ways of seeing things can have a transformative effect (McGranahan 2020: 3). But, being a feedback loop that includes a number of intellectual digestive processes, the outcome is usually quite different from the input. Teitelbaum’s account, inadvertently illustrated by the non-engaging approach of several of the invited comments to the article, shows that there is a clear limit about what anthropologists ought to be curious. It almost seems as if an ambition to document right-wing perceptions of the world is suspect by default. Susan Harding (1991) reported similar attitudes surrounding her studies of Southern Baptists, which she refers to as ‘anthropology’s repugnant other’, those whose worlds do not merit description from the native’s point of view. Like Teitelbaum, I hold that anthropologists should reign in any such tendency, if only for the sake of the social science division of labour. Methodologically, Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2018 [2016]), which provided some critical clues for understanding how a man of questionable intellect and unquestionably poor moral standing could be elected president of the most powerful nation on Earth, belongs squarely to our domain. Is it a coincidence that it was written by a sociologist, who had taken to heart the social science tenet that, in order to change the world, you first must understand and explain it?<sup>8</sup> Or was this omission actively reproduced through tacit disciplinary notions that some people or certain topics are not worthy of our attention? In *Shiv Sena Women* (2007), Atreyee Sen shows how poor, slum-dwelling women have the agency to be vile Hindu fundamentalists, spurring their men on in perpetuating xenophobic attacks on Muslims and non-Marathis. Even though they could be explained away, with reference to false consciousness or the misdirected anger

of the disenfranchised, such empirical nuances nonetheless destabilise established notions of victimhood. They will also cause a sense of ‘moral and epistemic uncontrol’ (Teitelbaum 2019: 432). To a discipline that prides itself on displaying the complexities of lifeworlds, it would be quite paradoxical if there were not frequent collisions between the needs and interests of one group and those of another.<sup>9</sup>

## THE WAY BACK TO TRUST

In hindsight, the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, proved a watershed to most Norwegians’ receptiveness to anthropological perspectives, as the world and its peoples went from being mostly intriguing to being mostly intimidating (see, among others, Eriksen and Stein 2017; Abu-Lughod 2016). Such grand narratives tend to overshadow other factors. These have undoubtedly been less significant. But, unlike the global security situation, they are conditions we as a professional community can do something about. The reason I include Ortner and Robbins<sup>10</sup> in an article about the role of public anthropology in Norway is that the tendencies they point to have also provided direction to Norwegian research and, in turn, to the dissemination of our findings and insights to a wider audience. This is not surprising, given that American anthropology by virtue of its size necessarily will lie at the centre of theory development and influence what research topics are in vogue. The impact is deepened by the academic reward structure and hiring practices that encourage publication in the most frequently cited journals, the vast majority of which are US-based. The consequence is that theories and perspectives developed in an American context flow more effortlessly across the Atlantic than they otherwise might have, despite some of them bearing the

unmistakable mark of being middle-range theories (Merton 1968), conceived for the purpose of specific empirical phenomena, and consequently are culture-inflected products with a distinct historical origin and semantic backdrop. Displaced from their original context and applied over other empirical materials, the analytical points will often be familiar and consequently readily accepted by those who want to believe the message. To others, they will be ever so slightly off the mark, resulting in a number of ‘yes, buts’. With every intervention that fails due to such uncalibrated tools, credibility suffers. Eventually, the audience will look for answers elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

This text was written in an age when the virtues of an encompassing public discourse seem to be an issue of hope rather than conviction. National news outlets present versions of the world that not only seem to be mutually exclusive, but, even more troublingly, have remarkably little overlap. Meanwhile, social media as the site of non-hierarchical public discourse has morphed into either intellectual monocultures or sarcasm-dripping mudslinging contests, leaving us more concerned with not saying anything that could be taken the wrong way than with saying anything that might actually be important (Kolshus 2018). The realistic conclusion is that attempts to re-establish public arenas for enlightened debate are bound to fail. Realism has never been my strong suit. Therefore, I have argued that anthropologists should have a go at it, beginning with the observation that we seem eager to engage and questioning whether we are rigged to do so, and whether we are ready to take advantage of the opportunities that arise from public engagements. I hold that we have thwarted the radical anthropological project of making everyone equally exotic, equally cultural, equally native, and equally comparable, since

the insistence on power inequality has blunted the potential of comparisons as cultural critique. Interventions that, for instance, could challenge the intellectual imperialism of biologisms on cultural and psychological phenomena, which are spurred on by pharmaceutical companies and the wider medical industry, are consequently easily compartmentalised. The main lesson from the fate of Norwegian public anthropology is that authority through trust can be squandered. It is a loss to Norwegian anthropologists, because we miss out on the reflexive corrections that will prevent intellectual arthritis. However, I find that it is a greater loss to the public, who lose the hope-inducing reminder that other lives are worth living, that there are alternatives, and that these alternatives are viable, because we humans are the ones living them. This message is lost if empirical complexity is rendered monochrome. Without us, the world simply seems less accepting of diversity for all.

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## NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Carol McGranahan, Paige West, Rahul Ranjan, my colleagues and friends at the Diversity Studies Centre Oslo (DISCO) at Oslo Metropolitan University, and the editors of this journal for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript. Obstinance prevents me from taking full benefit of their comments.
- 2 This point mirrors Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1999) rhetorically powerful critique of the universalisation of culture-specific North American concepts by proxy of social science theory, which Wacquant (2022) recently expanded into a book-length argument. With our long-standing sensitivity to how the

localisation of all migrating phenomena involves cultural adaptation and consequent modification, anthropologists are better positioned than any other social scientists to acknowledge the challenges of travelling concepts—even though early on Sartori (1970) pointed out the challenge posed by 'conceptual stretch' for comparative political science in terms that anthropologists will readily recognise.

- 3 The empirical foundation for this essay is experiences from a wide range of media engagements. I have been a newspaper columnist in the pink-sheet *Dagens Næringsliv* (circulation 80 000), and, since 2013, in the largest Norwegian daily newspaper, *Aftenposten* (circulation 250 000); contributed to developing the counterfactual *Anti-Panel* and its successor *What If*, with weekly 30-min slots on *Ekko*, national radio's primary science show; and have on average weekly contributions to a range of other media platforms with nationwide reach, occasionally on issues related to Vanuatu and Oceania, which is my ethnographic field of expertise, but usually more general anthropology-inspired commentary on life and society.
- 4 This term was used repeatedly in the 'manifesto' written by Anders Behring Breivik before the 22 July 2011 terrorist attack. It connotes political traitors and like-minded actors as undermining the nation state and abetting the cultural and racial genocide of the Norwegian people.
- 5 As has been experienced by many fieldworkers over the years, taking fieldnotes became a therapeutic tool by providing some analytic distance to emotionally charged experiences (see for instance Sanjek 1990). I have written two articles and one essay in Norwegian that discuss different aspects of this 'comments-field fieldwork', including my attempts to see the world from my detractors' (usually white, cis-gender, middle-aged men, like myself) points of view.
- 6 The virtually worldwide defunding of university anthropology over the past two decades has caused an increasingly international faculty in Norwegian anthropology departments. How this has impacted anthropology's position in society is not addressed here. Suffice it to say that institutional responsibility for reproducing a culture for public outreach should be a centrepiece rather than an afterthought and include explicit incentives.

- 7 The intensity of Twitter abuse more than compensated for the lack of discord in the television studio. When Tweeters moved on from Syrian child brides to asking how I would feel about my own underage kids being raped by their spouses on a regular basis, the moment had come to leave the platform for good. Twitter and I had not been much of a match in the first place.
- 8 In a classic article on how to shed anthropology of its colonial legacy, Diane Lewis (1973) pointed to European anthropology's historical attention to its own home turf, which she referred to as 'native ethnography'. This included studies of 'majorities', something Marianne Gullestad (1984, 2002) also encouraged repeatedly.
- 9 This is already recognised in the first point regarding the AAA code of ethics: 'Anthropologists may choose to link their research to the promotion of well-being, social critique, or advocacy. As with all anthropological work, determinations regarding what is in the best interests of others or what kinds of efforts are appropriate to increase well-being are value-laden and should reflect sustained discussion with others concerned' (<https://www.americananthro.org/LearnAndTeach/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=22869>).
- 10 These two articles have been discussed as a pair by a range of contributors over the past years and have also been subject to special issues of journals and widespread commentary.
- 11 Anthropology is currently rather far from its former position as 'the most visible academic profession in the mainstream mass media' (Eriksen 2003: 3). This is partly due to concerted efforts from the professional organisations of our social science cousins, most notably sociologists and psychologists, which have encouraged public engagements on a broad scale. Since these outnumber anthropologists by a wide margin, one could always argue that our current presence is proportional. It should be clear by now that I believe we should aim higher.

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