Public Anthropology

Publicity, commitment and conflict

Our class began with the question: what is public anthropology? And we've arrived at a series of answers. Public anthropology is anthropology that seeks to make anthropology more politically relevant in the world. Public anthropology is about asking: just what is a public space? How does public space work? What does political involvement mean? On behalf of whom does one act, does one listen? Public anthropology is fundamentally a place where we can become more politically conscious. In that minimal sense at least, this class seeks to inherit something from the political activists we've been talking about.

So we started out thinking about our class as a public space and the first thing I learned here, thanks to the clarity, courage and honesty that you have all displayed in writing about your views, is that we are a very diverse group of human beings. And that our diversity is also division, about politics, about the significance of racial divides in Stellenbosch, about what counts as moral and what counts as objectionable. Interestingly, one of our class's greatest moments of unity was when we talked about why people think that the class is a divided space. Overwhelmingly, there's agreement that what divides us most is race, class and the very history of South Africa.

"Society itself is divided," one of you wrote; "I think the classroom is indicative of that." I completely agree. Indeed society is divided; indeed the classroom is indicative of that. And again let me emphasize: I'm absolutely not saying I personally think *it is a great thing* that we are divided, certainly not in the specific racial and class terms that we actually occupy. And I'm not also saying we always have to be divided, that we have nothing in common, or that the present we live in is a prison with no exits. To be fair, the great virtue of human beings is that we will never be entirely homogenous or utterly without contention. But at the same time, the specific conflicts we now inhabit are bound to change, and perhaps — let's be optimists — to lessen.

In post-Apartheid South Africa, I think, the first lesson of public anthropology is simply to remind you that no social actor is an entirely neutral presence in the world. We change things just by being here; and it does matter how we change them. And in a world that was already divided, long before we were born, along lines of race, gender, sexual identity, social class, cultural affiliation, language, nationality, age, and so on, it's important to figure out where we identify and where we disidentify. We don't always have to keep living in the place in the world that comes naturally to us. But we do have to understand how we got here.

There are, of course, many different contexts, many social agendas and social problems, many different entire worlds out there, and the question you will have to ask yourselves as you leave the class is: Which world is mine? Which world is the one that most deserves my energy, my attention, my attempted intervention? The class isn't going to teach you which world, or which part of the society, matters most to you, or which side of various sides you are on. What it is going to do is show you some ways of being sensitive to worlds and spaces, and some strategies that could help shape their unfolding development.

Strategies

What were these strategies for doing public anthropology? You have to divide them into five different types, many of which we've modeled in class:

1. Strategies for listening: you put aside momentarily the notion that your interpretation of someone else's voice begins with what you take for granted; you try to assimilate the different social and historical contexts that underlie what you are hearing; you try to make sense of how people unlike yourselves make sense of the world, make it coherent.

2. Strategies for research in general: you can do interviews, you can analyze videos and manifestos, policy documents and historical texts. Above all, you can do ethnographic observation, meaning that you can look around you at the spaces you already inhabit — like this very classroom — and see how people present themselves, how they clump together or keep apart from each other, how they look and sound, whether or not they are bored. Often people end up objecting to your research; you may need to think about how to handle that.

3. Strategies for analysis: this is what we have been doing each class, trying to make sense of different cultural

objects that we encounter. We've talked about a bunch of different frameworks for doing anthropological analysis: the development of public spaces premised on the exclusion of specific groups (women for instance); the contrast between liberal rights and non-liberal traditions; the postcolonial play of vulgarity, obscenity and conviviality between rulers and the ruled. And then during the middle third of the course we saw some of the important moments in the formation of what now we call intersectional politics: we saw that the seventies were a time when race, class and gender categories began to converge. The very categories through which we analyze politics — and through which activists practice politics — are themselves products of history.

4. Strategies for disseminating knowledge: Fundamentally, you can disseminate your knowledge by teaching, whether face to face (as in our pair teaching exercises) or in writing. Try to remember when you write that writing is also a form of teaching: it just has the odd property of making it impossible to see your student at the moment of reception. If you write an actual published opinion piece, it will be successful inasmuch as it teaches people something and persuades them. Conversely, even a regular classroom can become a public space if we make it into one. I wish we had gotten farther into that project, but I do feel that these writing exercises have been important, if admittedly strange and indirect, moments of collective teaching. In any case, let it be said that this class has been for me personally a remarkable introduction to South African society.

The object

So there's a skill-building component of our course. But the course has also been *about* something: the history of student activism. And you may wonder: what ultimately should I learn from this history? What is its significance?

1. On a rudimentary historical level, what needs saying above all is that the world around us is always trying to present itself as a quiet, peaceful, and above all settled affair, but such an image of the world is largely inaccurate. Moments of institutional order may be more common than moments of unrest, but you can't understand moments of order except as provisional settlements of moments of contestation. Even the general history of postcolonial politics is bound up with the history of higher education, since many African radicals passed through these institutions and were, as in Biko's case, radicalized by it. So however you relate personally to these politics, they have brought the present into being, and in some measure, therefore, they are prequels to this very moment.

2. But one can say more about universities as political spaces. The Comaroffs wrote in their essay on "policulturalism" that the post-Apartheid South African state — with its emphasis on liberal recognition of equality before the law — could come into conflict with traditional culture and authority. Perhaps you have been asking yourself: what does this have to do with student protest at universities? But the connection is this: The university *is itself a "traditional culture"* that can come into conflict with South African constitutional liberalism. Except that instead of being centered around an African indigenous culture, a university like ours essentially has whiteness as its traditional culture, one with a deeply masculine component as well. The traditional culture here is embodied in the statues of Jan Marais or Danie Craven. And the kinds of conflicts that go on at Stellenbosch are very much about the claims of a sort of culture that pictures itself as the local tradition — an Afrikaans-speaking predominantly white tradition, in this case — faced with certain imperatives to diversify. "A politics of difference runs up against the limits of liberalism," said the Comaroffs. The irony is that in this case, the "politics of difference" is one that affirms a kind of hegemonic identity, not a kind of subaltern marginality.

3. Mbembe's very difficult essay on the "Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony," which many of you are probably still lamenting having to struggle with, is also not without a curious, subterranean relevance to student protest culture. In short, this play of deliberate vulgarity that Mbembe talks about is also a definite component of protest tactics. Think of those pictures of French protesters in May 1968 fighting with the police: tear gas is always quite a vulgar political argument, as is throwing paving stones uprooted from the streets of Paris. Political violence of this sort itself has a kind of deliberate excess: whether by protesters or the "forces of order," it is designed to intimidate, to make politics physical again (and thus quite often decidedly masculine), but also to rupture the usual symbolic order with an open display of physical obscenity. To be obscene is to be "offensive or disgusting by accepted standards of morality": thus the symbolic potency of throwing excrement on the statue of Cecil Rhodes, the symbolic potency of burning artwork, the symbolic potency of striking protesters with batons: we are in the conviality of excess,

a game that unfortunately tends to escalate once it begins.

So in sum, we couldn't have gotten to the post-Apartheid present without protest; protest often becomes a zone where liberal politics come up against traditional culture, in this case the traditional culture of white higher education; and in some long-standing play of political imitation, activist protest and state repression can come to participate in a disturbing conviviality of excess and escalation. What is the moral of this, you ask? One really could take it in one of two ways: Perhaps, as historically now-informed actors, you should simply *not be surprised by protest if it emerges around you,* since it is a well-established tradition of its own. (Struggles over protest traditions are at the heart of how political ideas develop, for that matter.) But on the other hand, one could also argue that, *if one is surprised or offended by protest itself*, that is also not surprising, because what makes protest effective is generally its performance of excess.

Public anthropology, then, is partly a project of making public life less surprising. But I have to say that, nevertheless, this class has been marvelously surprising to me, and I want to thank everyone for participating in it.