



# ANTHROPOLOGY PUT TO WORK

EDITED BY LES FIELD  
AND RICHARD G FOX



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# Anthropology Put to Work

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In memory of John W. Bennett and his delight in  
breaking through academic orthodoxy.

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# Acknowledgments

The Wenner-Gren International Symposium “Anthropology Put to Work/Anthropology That Works?” was held at the foundation’s office in New York City on 19–22 May 2005. The symposium was the 136th supported by the foundation, but it was the first held in Wenner-Gren’s new office space on Park Avenue South. For the first time in over thirty years, the foundation was able to host an international symposium “at home.” We were very glad our symposium led off in the new space, and it served us well—better than any castle in Austria would have!

We are much in debt to Laurie Obbink, who has directed the international symposium program for many years—and always with verve, savvy, and loyalty to the foundation’s goals. Not only the foundation but also anthropology has profited greatly from Laurie’s long-standing dedication. Maugha Kenny, the foundation’s director of finance, is someone else who aided us—behind the scenes—by making sure the new space had equipment, furnishings, and a general ambience conducive to making our symposium a “go.” Victoria Malkin at Wenner-Gren helped us throughout the pre-publication process to make this volume the best we could. Hannah Shakespeare at Berg Press proved to be a capable and considerate acquisitions editor, and Jane Kepp copyedited with the precision and pinpoint accuracy of a sharpshooter. We would also like to acknowledge the important contribution Craig Howe made during the Wenner-Gren symposium.

Fox came up with the idea for this symposium when he was still president of the foundation, which means that the current president, Leslie Aiello, is not to be taxed for any misconceptions or failings it might have had. We sincerely thank Leslie for her goodwill and generosity toward this “inherited” undertaking.

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# Participants in the Wenner-Gren Symposium

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# Introduction

## How Does Anthropology Work Today?

*Les W. Field and Richard G. Fox*

We had military governments many times [in Argentina] but this one was particularly bloody and thousands of people disappeared. And so, when democracy returned—that was '84—there was the need to recover the remains of the people that had disappeared... The first time I went into a grave, I basically was very concentrated on what I was doing... I was able to work ... and I realized that I felt [good] about doing something concrete..., meeting with the families of victims and feeling that there was some concrete thing that we could contribute ... to try to do something about what happened in the past.

—Mercedes Doretti, on becoming a forensic anthropologist

From its beginnings, cultural anthropology claimed to work. By “working” we mean that anthropologists claimed they had the training and skills to gain knowledge necessary and useful to society. This knowledge could be theoretical or practical or some mix of the two, but it was, early anthropologists insisted, of benefit to society that people know it. The rationale for why such knowledge benefited society might even shift. In anthropology’s early days, for example, researching primitive societies was said to matter because their customs reflected previous evolutionary stages. Later, it was because primitive societies showed the range of human cultural possibility. Whether such knowledge claims “work,” that is, whether they are accepted and rewarded, is a matter of conventional understanding in the wider society—a projection of education, media, the market, and the other institutions that create judgments of value to society. Whether anthropology works, therefore,

is something anthropologists cannot proclaim or legislate on their own, although they can try to convince society that what they know has high value. Knowledge claims that a society rewards at one time, furthermore, may not be well regarded at another, as phrenology, parapsychology, eugenics, and a heap of other discarded sciences attest.

Our first proposition—the one that motivated us to organize the symposium on which this book is based—grew out of our perspective on these knowledge claims and how they have been and will be put to work. For anthropology to work in the future, we suggest, anthropologists may need to change their orientations, methodologies, and pedagogy—or, better put, they may need to accept the changes now impinging on them. Our proposition about the future depends, however, on a particular view of anthropology's past.

Is anthropology's history a succession of grand theories, competing schools, and great men and women thinkers? No doubt it is in part, but we also need to recognize that anthropology's history has to do with the pursuit of work—jobs, income, financial security, and the legitimacy in society that underlies all the foregoing. One significant measure of whether past anthropology “worked”—and one not necessarily dependent on some abstract measure of anthropology's worth—is whether anthropologists found jobs to do and what those jobs were. For anthropologists to find work, anthropology had to “work”; that is, its knowledge claims had to be accepted as valuable in the wider society. We therefore use the word *work* in two senses: it refers to the jobs anthropologists did or hoped to do, and it also refers to anthropology's legitimacy in society, which made those jobs available.

At the beginning, when little was settled, anthropology claimed to work in multiple ways: to train and advise colonial administrators, to collect information useful for governing internal minorities such as American Indians, to collect artifacts for museums and set up displays of them, and to undertake university research and teaching as one of the liberal arts or sciences. By the 1920s, many of these knowledge claims had proved not to work. Colonial administrators judged anthropology's knowledge of kinship and ritual esoteric, and the American government turned away from ethnographic research and survey. From this time onward, anthropology in the United States came to work mainly as a museum and university subject, although it never entirely gave up claims that it worked—that is, could be applied—in the wider society. In the United Kingdom and France, anthropology's knowledge claims were even more restricted, because museums played a smaller role in those countries, and recognition of anthropology as a legitimate scholarly

discipline, at least in terms of university appointments, came later and on a smaller scale.

The Great Depression and, even more, World War II and its aftermath momentarily brought anthropology back into working directly with the state and its practical objectives. Anthropologists joined multidisciplinary projects during the depression and the war, by which social science was put in the service of the burgeoning American welfare state. After the war, anthropologists took part in international development and labor management projects, which had similar managerial objectives (see Bennett 1996: S26).<sup>1</sup>

In the 1950s, academic anthropologists mostly withdrew from this kind of work. The reason, according to John Bennett (1996), was a resurgent interest among them in building grand theory. Shortly thereafter, proponents of the radical critique of anthropology, focused on the need for “relevant” research, distanced themselves further from what had come to be commonly labeled “applied anthropology.” In the radical view, applied anthropology was inherently compromised by association with colonial administrations and state managerial policies (see Bennett 1996: S24). The boundary between anthropologists whose work was applied and those whose work was basic or pure—a boundary, we argue, that is increasingly fuzzy nowadays—was strengthened during the 1960s and 1970s. The “crisis of representation” in the 1980s and 1990s further fortified this boundary, as an all-pervading relativism cast doubt on the very knowledge claims that allowed anthropologists to work in public.

Anthropology’s history for us therefore consists of when, where, and how it was put to work. Among the many claims anthropologists made, some worked at one time and not another, others never worked or not for long, and in any case, what worked and what did not were hardly at the disposition of the anthropologists. As we began to organize a Wenner-Gren International Symposium on how anthropology was being put to work at the beginning of the twenty-first century and how it might be in the future, this view of anthropology’s history provided us with three premises:

1. The jobs senior anthropologists do or have done recently may not be those that young scholars can or will do in future.
2. The current sense of crisis that many academic anthropologists (mostly in the United States) have about their mission misses the fact that important changes in anthropology’s work have already occurred. In particular, there has been a steady erosion of the

boundary between applied and basic research in terms of where and with whom anthropologists work and what kind of anthropology they produce.

3. Most importantly, applied and basic research do not represent separate scholarly positions or divergent intellectual stances; they reflect different jobs done by anthropologists. That is, they have frequently reflected the degree to which anthropologists have obtained protected and well-rewarded jobs in academe, where they can undertake what is called “basic research”—and then whatever else these anthropologists or others do gets labeled “applied.” As access by anthropologists to such highly privileged academic jobs decreases, the boundary becomes increasingly fuzzy. The fact is that most anthropology has been “engaged” and “public” in intention—and thus, in a general sense, applied—whether or not that intended public saw it as legitimate and authoritative and whether or not the anthropologist’s job description called for application.

Some personal experiences can clarify this last point. Fox’s work (1985) on the interplay between British colonialism and Sikh identity in northern India was not applied in a narrow sense, but when he was called upon to address militant Sikh congregations in the United States during the Khalistan agitation in the 1980s, it became so. Militant Sikhs scrutinized his research for what it might say about the degree of separation between Hindus and Sikhs, in aid of the movement to carve a separate Sikh state out of India. Fox also found himself, on the basis of his historical research, defending Sikhs against accusations of terrorism after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. One dean at Duke University even asked him to warrant that a Sikh who had recently moved into the dean’s neighborhood would not be making bombs in his basement.

Field, by contrast, began research with California Indians in the employ of one unrecognized tribe, the Muwekma Ohlone of the San Francisco Bay Area. His research agenda, interview and life-history formats and scheduling, and access to archival materials were all arranged and planned with and through the tribe. Only after working on a variety of projects connected with their federal recognition petition for almost a decade and doing similar work with other unrecognized coastal groups did Field begin to explore projects that departed from specific “applications” of anthropological research relevant to the tortured relations between the federal Indian bureaucracy and the unrecognized

tribes. But this move also took place, in large part, at the instigation of members of Indian communities.

The best way to see that our future work may not be what we do or claim to do today is to view our past from the vantage of the present. How passionately we disown much of that past and the way anthropology was put to work then! We are dismayed that Franz Boas, American anthropology's founding father in the early twentieth century, robbed Indian graves for skeletons and concocted a false burial to fool a young Inuit into letting science have his father's corpse. We are ashamed that Alfred Kroeber, Boas's early student, betrayed Ishi, his Indian friend (or captive, depending on your view), and sent his brain for scientists at the Smithsonian to study and preserve. And what sort of folly was it that might have led Margaret Mead, a later Boas student, to be hoaxed in the 1920s by Samoan young women who made Samoa out to be just what Mead wanted? Accusations made in the 1970s of anthropology's complicity with colonialism and its fellow-traveling with American imperialism similarly impugned anthropology's history on the job (see Freeman 1983; Hymes 1972; Starn 2004; Thomas 2000).

We anthropologists have often been quick to disown this past, as if we could purify ourselves by vilifying our ancestors. There is no need to worship these ancestors, but there is another lesson we need to take from the past—in respect of our future. These past “failures” should tell us that anthropology worked differently in the past. Boas and Kroeber, for example, believed in a salvage anthropology that could take liberties in the name of science in order to rescue American Indian customs and languages before the native societies disintegrated. If Mead was truly hoaxed, it came about because of a naive faith in ethnographic rapport, long before anthropologists began to work with populations and in a world where the boundary between good guys and bad became fuzzy. All three worked at a time when anthropologists needed to gain legitimacy within universities, and no doubt the then current image of the sober and unbiased scholar, for whom science came first, conditioned what they did and the way they presented themselves.

To be sure, we must uncover past instances of naiveté, complicity, and duplicity in anthropology if we are to improve our understanding and better our knowledge—of ourselves and thereby of the world we study. At the same time, we had better take the lesson that anthropology can be put to work in different ways and that anthropologists have had to respond to the job opportunities available to them at any one time.

In planning our symposium, therefore, we conceived of anthropology's future in a way fundamentally different from that of anthropologists

who have recently called for a “public” or “engaged” anthropology re-focused on critical social issues (see Basch et al. 1999; Lamphere 2003; Scheper-Hughes 1995). No doubt these exhortations are well intended, and the anthropologists expressing them are in earnest. For us, however, this image of anthropologists “reaching out” from protected academic positions to a vaguely defined “public” is elitist and out of touch with the working conditions of many anthropologists, especially those junior and untenured. We also have strong doubts that anthropologists can be whatever they want to be; the “just do it” sentiment behind these fervid appeals seems more in line with both nationalist and individualist American ideologies than with the current realities of scholarship in the United States. Furthermore, the exhortations by senior anthropologists for an engaged, public anthropology assume a crisis situation that we think is neither new nor sudden. In our experience, younger anthropologists have had to respond to this “crisis” for at least two decades.

We based our symposium, therefore, on the premise that profound changes have *already* occurred in anthropology, leading to new kinds of work for a large number of anthropologists. We decided to focus our symposium on this work as a way of making it better known and more instructive to young anthropologists. We did not assume that there is an essential anthropology, based in the academy, that needs to become better at managing public relations and “reaching out” or that needs to reassume the authority to name the important social issues of the day. Rather, we presumed that new anthropological work has responded to changing social and cultural demands, and we doubted that anthropology could determine on its own which issues to highlight. For us, the meaning and significance of an “anthropology in public” is neither obvious nor simple, because there is no singular, dominant anthropology that allows us to determine when and how to “engage” with “the public.”

We hoped to bring together at the symposium a sample of the many new forms of work in which anthropologists engage, but we know that this volume represents only a handful of examples. In the event, we had fewer participants from outside the United States than we expected, and certain workplaces, such as the corporate world and private philanthropies, needed greater representation. We believe, however, that the contributors do show that anthropologists are put to work in diverse ways today and that anthropology has changed profoundly because of it.

Although this volume cannot cover all the new career scenarios, we think it does identify the degree to which the work of anthropologists

has changed. We hope it will aid graduate students and early-career scholars to accept these changes, without feeling that something essential to anthropology has been lost, and to adapt to them, because there really is no other choice for most young anthropologists. Others have documented the current dearth of academic jobs and the increased vulnerability of untenured—in many cases, never-to-be tenured—junior faculty, and we see little point in reiterating these projections here. We want to focus instead on what these changed conditions of work, these new career scenarios, mean for the way anthropology gets done differently and the way, in the process, our basic operating concepts get modified.

The contributors to the volume indicate that the new conditions of anthropological work require significant departures from standard and widely accepted principles of cultural anthropology. In what follows, we discuss the chapters in relation to these significant departures.

### **From Rapport to Collaboration**

The most significant departure concerns the concept of ethnographic rapport and reflexivity in fieldwork. Ethnographic rapport in its canonical version—this is, the image of the anthropologist among the “natives,” building up trust and friendship with them in return for information—has come under attack for being disingenuous in several ways. Peter Pels (1999: 107) finds a fundamental “duplexity” in ethnographic fieldwork, in that “the anthropologist poses as someone wanting to be converted to a ‘native’ audience during fieldwork and as someone who has been converted (but, perhaps, has returned to ‘normal’ ways) when reporting on this fieldwork ... back home.” Pels also reminds us that “rapport” helps the anthropologist overcome native reservations about the anthropologist’s ulterior motives, when in fact the academic career underwritten by the fieldwork is precisely an ulterior motive.

Another contradiction is that ethnographic rapport invokes a sameness between anthropologist and “native,” at least enough to facilitate communication, whereas ethnographic texts construct difference or “otherness” (see Argyrou 1999). “Rapport” also suggests an equality in the relationship between anthropologists and their subjects, when the norm is for the poor and vulnerable to be our target populations. Finally, the concept of rapport assumes that the anthropologist gets along well with members of the society or population under study,