Report on the Winter Meeting of Apply

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On 31st January, about 15 anthropologists gathered at the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) in London to discuss applied anthropology in Britain. The organisation, under the auspices of Apply, is comprised of two groups which had previously been autonomous: the Network of Applied Anthropology, which is a division of the Association for Social Anthropology, and Anthropology in Action.

The discussion focused on a number of issues, including the viability of Master’s degrees in Applied Anthropology as a relevant and marketable credential for pursuing jobs in a range of applied fields. While there was general consensus that training in Applied Anthropology was excellent preparation for work on research projects in a number of areas, the other issue we discussed was the fact that the kinds of governmental and voluntary organisations that usually fund that kind of research are under severe financial pressures and are therefore cutting back.

Nafisa Fera, from the staff of the RAI, spoke about the new A-level exam in Anthropology and about the need to do outreach to colleges and schools to let teachers and younger students know about the opportunity to begin pursuing an interest in anthropology before applying to university. The RAI is maintaining an excellent dedicated web site, http://www.discoveranthropology.org.uk/, to provide resources for teachers, students and for the general public. There was a somewhat humorous discussion about finding someone who would be well known to younger people who had studied Anthropology (aside from Prince William).

The group then heard a presentation from Janice Pederson who has an MA in Applied Anthropology and is currently working at the Humanitarian Centre. She was considering whether or not to continue with a PhD in anthropology since she was not certain she wanted to pursue a conventional career in academic anthropology. Participants discussed the notion that many of us who do not work in academic settings preface our remarks when talking about our work by saying, ‘Well, I am not actually working in anthropology now.’ We all agreed that there was something of a (perhaps self-imposed) tyranny in the idea that there was something called ‘real’ anthropology as opposed to work that was not ‘real’ anthropology and we talked about how to broaden ideas about what anthropology is in both the public sphere as well as within the discipline.

The conversation moved on to ways to achieve greater visibility both in terms of our work outside university contexts and to be seen as a discipline that has something valuable to say about contemporary social issues. We talked about the need to do blogs, for example, and to produce products like YouTube videos and web pages that are not usually part of our regular work but that often reach large audiences. (A blog I would strongly recommend which is written by a friend and colleague of mine is: http://paulmullins.wordpress.com/. Paul’s work on archaeology and material culture has often been picked up by mainstream media through his unusually scholarly and well-written blog postings.) And, we all agreed that we are often so pressed for time that this seems like one more obligation. But, then again, we also thought that we might be able collectively to put together some sort of blog on Applied Anthropology to which different individuals might contribute.
Brendan Donegan then talked about his participation in a project based at Goldsmiths University on ‘Reading the Riots’, in which social scientists and journalists have been collaborating to produce work that will deepen the public’s understanding of the causes of the summer 2011 riots in London. We agreed that as ethnographers we often have a rather fraught relationship with journalists, who are often seen by the public as producing much faster and more accessible products offering insights into current events. We concurred that we need to demonstrate ways in which work by anthropologists probes far more deeply into such issues, providing a kind of complexity and historical context often missing from journalistic accounts.

This was an invigorating and enjoyable meeting and there are hopes to reconvene the group again in late spring or early summer.

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