THEME SECTION

Anthropologies in, of, and for the world

Edited by

Graeme MacRae
Knowledge production and the politics of positionality in globalized and neoliberalized times

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Abstract: This theme section seeks to keep alive important debates about the place of anthropology in the world that have been raised periodically since the 1970s, and most recently in a special issue of this journal entitled “Changing Flows in Anthropological Knowledge” (Buchowski and Dominguez 2012). The three articles in this theme section consider the place of anthropology in the university system, the building of a world anthropology, and the methodological challenges of the new conditions in which we work. All three critically address the interface and relationship between areas of changing power/knowledge and their relevance to the future of anthropology: both its place in the world and its contribution to the world.

Keywords: anthropologies, globalization, knowledge production, neoliberalism, peripheries, political of knowledge, universities

The primary work of anthropology is to reflect on the world (and its changes) but at the same time anthropology is itself situated within the world and subject to the very changes it reflects on. As a result, the conditions in which anthropological knowledge is produced are changing, in ways that we summarize, perhaps too glibly, as ever-increasing globality and neoliberalization, which can easily serve as alternatives, even obstacles, to critical reflection. These changing conditions have produced challenges to anthropology’s twentieth-century tradition of beginning with knowledge of the local and proceeding, by way of comparison, to more regional levels of generalization. Arjun Appadurai (1990) among others, alerted us eloquently to these challenges nearly a quarter of a century ago and proposed some steps toward addressing them. Since then we have come a long way in developing deeply and distinctively anthropological ways of researching and making sense of these conditions (e.g., Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Tsing 2005; Padel and Das 2010).

At the same time, however, we have discovered repeatedly (usually to our ethnographic delight) that local interpretations of and responses to the global/neoliberal nexus vary considerably according to circumstances of culture, politics, economics, and increasingly, environmental factors. In Anna Tsing’s (2005) elegant metaphor, the supposed “universals” of globalization are in practice worked out in the “frictions” of their encounters with inevitable specificities of historical and local context.

We begin here from the other end, from the observation that anthropological knowledge is...
also produced in the distinctive frictions of its various locations—geographic, institutional, and cultural-historical. How, we ask, does/can/should anthropology respond to the growing pressures and novel challenges produced by these frictions? These challenges are simultaneously epistemological (our objects/subjects of study are changing), political (it is harder to speak authoritatively about other peoples and cultures or to maintain the distinctiveness of the discipline with increasingly blurred boundaries), and institutional (the bureaucratic demands of governments and university management on productivity and outputs).

More broadly, we are concerned about the expansion of a globalizing system of control over all domains of life. Institutions such as the media and universities, once bastions (or at least refuges) of free information and critical thought, are now seen by political-economic elites as threats to their power and defined as disruptive. They are being tamed by demands to produce instrumental knowledge leading to innovations and profits rather than critical thought. Within the universities, the critical social sciences are seen as politically suspect and economically “irrelevant” and are especially vulnerable within current regimes of university reform.

At the same time, however, anthropology is in an intellectually privileged position to imagine and promote a different kind of globalization, based on mutual respect and the value of diversity, critically informed by memories of a history in which we were also complicit in the construction and maintenance of conceptual and political peripheries (the primitive, indigenous people). Periphery-center relations are ultimately systems of power and knowledge. Mapping of such systems and analysis of their local manifestations has long been the core business of anthropology. These kinds of issues have been raised periodically since the 1970s and the articles collected here seek to keep the debate alive by contributing something new to them.

We begin, as Susan Wright puts it, “at home,” with the ways these processes are now manifesting in the very institutions in which anthropology is situated—specifically, the ways in which the pervasive neoliberalizing developments that characterize government policy and practice all over the world have been adapted and applied to the British university system. She argues for and demonstrates the need for anthropologically informed methods and modes of analysis of these changes.

Thomas Reuter also begins at home, with anthropology itself, but looks the other way—into the world beyond these institutional locations and constraints. His unashamedly polemical article documents the emergence of new global institutional forms of anthropology that seek to redress historical inequalities between national and local anthropological knowledges as well as address more general patterns of inequality and hegemony. He argues that these new ways of creating anthropological knowledge provide a model of global cooperation and a vision and means for addressing world issues.

The final article, by Cris Shore and Susanna Trnka, forms a link between the two previous perspectives on anthropology’s institutional location. Developing June Nash’s (2001) metaphor of “peripheral vision” as a tool for analysis of the rapidly shifting and elusive forms of recent capitalisms, they suggest a conceptual approach and a set of methods that are newly conceived and distinctively and deeply, even classically, anthropological, but also well adapted to the challenges both Wright and Reuter set for us.

Together, while these articles share a recognition of less than comfortable times for what has long been an “uncomfortable science” (Firth 1981), or indeed for the world, they go beyond critique to offer a vision of anthropology as “part of the solution”—a set of conceptual, methodological, and institutional tools for an anthropology of the world. If we cannot rely on the global economy or even the universities to reflect critically on their own deepening neoliberalization, let alone turn this supertanker around, we can at least begin with our own anthropologies.
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Graeme MacRae was trained in Australian and New Zealand universities, and since 1998 he has taught anthropology at Massey University’s Albany campus. His initial research was in Bali, but has since extended to other parts of Indonesia and occasionally India. His recent research focuses on the ways in which human societies intersect with natural/ecological processes by way of technological interventions such as agriculture, waste management, disaster recovery, and architecture. Since 2010 he has been chairperson of the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand and New Zealand delegate to the World Council of Anthropological Associations.

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References


