

Editorial

In opening this 2009 volume of *Anthropology in Action*, it seems important to comment on what are self-consciously interesting times. The first quarter of the year has already witnessed the inauguration of Barack Obama as US president, bitter and destructive bombing campaigns in Gaza, and further financial shocks in the world's markets, with a seeming domino effect of wealthy capitalist institutions turning to national governments for support. Global and local relations, networks, identities and conflicts have been brought into sharp focus by world events, but anthropology is rarely visible in the news, and anthropologists rarely called upon to comment, despite a wealth of potentially valuable knowledge. Applications of anthropology are becoming gradually more accepted within the academy, but seem to have come only a short distance in terms of public profile or ability to influence national and trans-national policies.

However, an interesting feature of the 2008 US presidential campaign was the focus on Obama's multi-cultural and ethnic background and influences, including the profile of his mother as a US anthropologist, whose perspective was shaped by her fieldwork experiences in Indonesia in the 1960s. Time magazine, for example, ran an article on his mother's years in Indonesia and featured Obama's family tree, describing him as 'a one-man melting pot' (Ripley 2008). In another article, Obama was even dubbed a cultural anthropologist, conversely in order to present him not as a multi-cultural icon but as an academic anthropologist, so out of touch with ordinary Americans' lives that he was like Margeret Mead describing Pacific Islanders when he talked about small-town America: 'I can see heads nodding as Professor Obama describes the odd and outdated native customs of church-

going and gun-toting. No doubt the "aha!" moments were many: "Oh, so that's why they go to church! The poor folks just have nothing else to cling to." ' (Throckmorton 2008).

Taking a similar means of political attack, an Asia Times columnist also described Obama's relationship with America as like that of an anthropologist, describing the field research methods of anthropologists in the most critical terms: 'He has the empathetic skill set of an anthropologist who lives with his subjects, learns their language, and elicits their hopes and fears while remaining at emotional distance. That is, he is the political equivalent of a sociopath. The difference is that he is practicing not on a primitive tribe but on the population of the United States.' ('Spengler' 2008). Two key points stand out from this commentary: first that it views anthropology as essentially disengaged, and as being about the analysis of primitive cultures. Second, Obama's anthropology is described as a metaphorical one in which in his political operations he 'holds his own view in reserve and emphatically draws out the feelings of others' and 'applies the tools of cultural manipulation out of resentment against America'. While this media perspective on anthropology, its methods and motivations may seem old-fashioned or out-of-touch with recent developments in the discipline, it does present a challenge to those within it to present a different, more engaged face and role to the wider public. The articles featured in *Anthropology in Action* (see for example, Vol 12, issue 3, 2005) and in *Anthropology Today* (see for example, Lutz 2008: Vol 24, issue 5, 2008) in the last few years have highlighted and discussed the often hidden other face of anthropologists' political engagements, such as their roles in wartime covert surveillance, and partisan government support for anthropological research.

Controversy around recent research-funding programmes potentially linked to surveillance have continued the debate (AAA 2007). What is clear here is that even when anthropologists do not consciously and reflectively engage in a 'public anthropology', the roles they adopt and positions they take have public consequences.

The 2008 presidential campaign was also featured by innovative use of internet-based social networking to organise political support, and presumably to increase democratic participation and activism from what had been historically low levels in the self-described champion of democracy. Within this approach, a group called Anthropologists for Obama, with 66 subscribers, ran an active list serve and blog and raised considerable funds (Anthropologists for Obama Statistics 2009). While some might question whether political campaigning is the most appropriate form of engagement, the listserv described its purpose as to inform Obama and present questions to him.

In 2009 we hope to contribute to the public and political (without a capital-P) engagement of anthropology through the articles and commentaries featured in *Anthropology in Action*. We invite readers to respond actively to these by submitting letters and commentaries in response, for rapid publication on the *Anthropology in Action* listserv, or for publication in the following article of the journal. We are pleased to say that the issues will be returning to regular publication times of spring, summer and autumn/winter this year, so responses will be published in a timely fashion. We also continue to invite submission of free-standing articles, and pieces for comment or debate, in addition to the special themes issues, which are a regular feature.

Forthcoming issues in 2009 will look at the public role and profile anthropology, including reflections back to its involvement in past political and development projects, such as the Cornell University Vicos development project, and current work engaging in more participatory and critically engaged anthro-

pological processes. This year will feature a two-part (summer and winter) special issue on Public Anthropology, guest-edited by Sam Beck and Carl Maida from the US, which will also include free-standing articles and commentaries discussing gender and human rights, including people trafficking, indigenous rights of forest peoples and their roles in sustainability, identity and social capital, and questions of ethical behaviour within the discipline of anthropology itself.

This first issue, however, focuses on a more specific area of applied anthropology, looking at the role of anthropologists in design and technology. We're very pleased to have developed this issue as a joint themed issue with the *Irish Journal of Anthropology*. The focus is on the central role of design and technology in Ireland's recent economic and social developments, and visions of its future (the so-called 'Celtic Tiger', which seemed to spring Ireland from a rural economy and society that exported people along with produce, to a post-modern technological one that attracted people and exported high-tech expertise and goods). The different articles illustrate both the ways in which anthropologists are contributing to the field of design and technology, and the way in which their work can contribute to thinking within anthropology.

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