PERSPECTIVES: AN OPEN INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Envisioning a More Public Anthropology: Interview with Fredrik Barth

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Fredrik Barth: Let me begin with a general preamble to our conversation. Since anthropology draws on the ethnography of the whole world—as it must and should—it has a unique potential to supplement Western science and Western humanism. It can contribute broadly to human thought, to human imagination.

Robert Borofsky: You are referring to anthropology's role in broadening people's perspectives?

FB: Yes, to opening up windows of human reflection on the human condition in radically new directions, that people have never really imagined. Certainly anthropology has not been very good at doing this, at shaping an image of the diversity of how people live. But nonetheless, something is there and we must cultivate it and harvest it much more actively.

RB: Why do you think anthropology has not succeeded in this goal?

FB: Well as far as American anthropologists and American anthropology are concerned, and this probably will not be popular, I think one difficulty is the emphasis that American

anthropologists have placed on an evolutionary perspective. It's a fine perspective for some purposes, but it gives a license for others to say, "How interesting, how great, yes, if I was interested in the past I would listen to you, but I'm interested in the present." It shunts anthropology off to the side when what we should do is speak about issues now and the human condition now. We should consider the issues people presently engage with. Implicit in this is a view that democratic societies need a wide and public discussion of ideas.

RB: Let's talk more about anthropology's role in this regard.

FB: I think it's very important that if we want influence in the world, we should speak up about issues that are important to others, not just ourselves. Even more important than voting, though that is important, is presenting a view, a voice, on issues because that may influence public policy. One should, of course, realize the difficulties here. But speaking out is much better than only responding to the packages that the political system presents. That is part of being a citizen – finding the occasions and the places where you can have public influence.

RB: What forms do you think a more publicly-engaged anthropology might take?

FB: I think it important that we enter into as many discourses as possible that are already going on where there is an audience that is already engaged and knowledgeable. What we want to do is find ways of bringing something additional into public conversations that are already going on – thereby subverting the established position and contributing something that may catch people's attention.

RB: Can you provide a concrete example?

FB: One example is Unni Wikan's work on the new immigrants of Europe. Here is an issue that lots of people were thinking about, talking about, and in fact being quite confused about. The main discussion of Norwegian immigration policy focused on how many immigrants we should let in? Unni was allowed a two-minute statement on Norwegian public television on the topic: She said we should be talking about what are we doing for the welfare of those who are here already rather than focusing on those who might come. With this intervention, she helped redefined the entire discourse on the subject. It led to people voicing their concern about what was happening inside Norway and to developing programs that could be critiqued and argued about. It broke a political silence about the issue.

RB: A more publicly-engaged anthropology in this sense, then, would be directly engaging in public discourses about public problems.

FB: It would try to find ways of reframing publicly-articulated issues. To do this, however, you need some kind of cultural capital so that people will say, "listen, this may be important.

RB: How do you gain such capital?

FB: You need to speak out but speak out carefully, with limited purposes in every case – not to grab the microphone to give a lecture on anthropology, but to formulate something that really pricks people's attention regarding one aspect of the problem. Rather than disrupting the conversation that's going on, you become a part of it. If you are too ambitious, and feel this is your one chance to speak

out, then you start lecturing others. You become irrelevant to what is going on in the conversation. We need to develop an ability to focus and make our points relevant to others' concerns.

RB: Would you say that there is more of this sort of public engagement, by academics, in Europe or America?

FB: There is more of an audience for it in Europe because people are more prepared to believe that academics have cultural capital. There is the idea that academics are competent to address the world's problems. Many countries, both in Eastern and Western Europe, have cabinet ministers who are professors, not just professors of political science, but professors of other subjects as well: humanists, historians and scientists. It affirms that academics are thoughtful people to be listened to while in America academics tend to be looked down upon as impractical intellectuals.

RB: To what might you attribute this dynamic of American intellectual life?

FB: Brad Shore (at Emory University) once commented to me that his neighbors felt sorry for him because he do not make as much money as they did. Here is a very crude measurement of private influence and judgment. But, of course, it is reciprocal. Many anthropologists think going public is less than respectable. The public does not respect us so we do not respect them. If you want to speak to the public effectively, you have to respect them.

RB: Where in Europe do you see an active intellectual tradition, among anthropologists, that contrasts with the one in America?

FB: I guess the place where there is the most of this is in France. I think it used to be in England – Malinowski was fashionable and his seminars were famous. Intellectuals in England talked about him. In France, of course, Levi-Strauss has been very famous. But other French anthropologists also have followings and public visibility. It thus becomes interesting for a French reading public to know what French anthropologists are saying about the issues of the day. Also in India, in Mexico, in Brazil, and perhaps in Scandinavia, there is more public interest in this way than in the U.S.

RB: What specific steps might be taken to draw American anthropologists into such public engagements?

FB: The image that comes to mind is of American anthropologists, like penguins on the edge of an ice sheet afraid that something in the water will eat them. They stand on the ice and push and push each other until one falls in, and then they see what happens to him. If nothing bad happens, then they might be willing to dive in, too. I do think many people would like to have some input, and if they see that it's possible, they would jump. But they must do it individually.

I think one of the difficulties that's hidden somewhere in this syndrome, is that there is in America, because of the media hype that one is used to, a sense that you have to be tactical. You can't speak as a free spirit, you can't afford to be self-critical and honest. You must find some way of projecting some facile image, and take a tactical position, or else you will be totally ineffective. And this is contrary to academic quality and intellectual integrity. I think the way we see it constantly is in the roles played by ecologists and political scientists. When they speak on public television,

they are hung up in the tactical game of trying to manipulate audiences instead of speaking honestly. They hold back things that they know are relevant but seem politically incorrect or critical of their own constituencies. At times there seems to be almost a pre-set agenda. We shall touch on these things and not on those because they are contrary to American interests. Let's not talk too clearly about them, let's position ourselves in ways that don't raise ugly issues.

I think it is important to speak out in contexts that are not made up only of anthropologists. I should speak to historians and political scientists who say things about the clash of civilizations. But I would not lay out the problem as an anthropological issue. I would try to disturb and subvert their frames of reference by undermining one or more of the premises on which they base their arguments, showing how it does not make sense from a broader perspective.

RB: Could you give an example?

FB: Well I presume that's what Boas did long ago. Boas addressed something that everybody was concerned with—race—and had a specific point he wanted to make. He had professional research supporting his position regarding the cultural, rather than genetic, basis of behavior which was highly relevant to other people who weren't anthropologists.

Perhaps the whole controversy around Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* is a lost opportunity. Instead of piling abuse on Huntington for what he said, we might have undermined particular positions presented in a careful scholarly way that other scholars would take note of.

Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland (the former Director-General of the World Health Organization) was on a United Nations

commission regarding the environment and coined the idea of "sustainability." Her idea was not all that well thought out at the time. Still, it changed the frame of reference. It replaced the optimistic sense that we will invent our way out of our environmental problems to asking what we can so as not to reduce options for future generations.

One final example: I've just written an op-ed for the main Oslo newspaper on the university's function. There have been committees that have tried to plan and redesign universities so that they are more responsive to the specific needs of contemporary society, to make them more accountable. What I did was to say, look here, we must not forget that the university's first task is to produce competently trained personnel for a changing world. It is not simply offering skills for today but preparing these students for the world they will find themselves in tomorrow. The point, I am saying, is to suggest new ways of looking at problems.

RB: What type of response, would you hope for, from your op-ed piece?

FB: I would hope that more of those who engage in the university debate will start saying: But the issue is not only how some established kind of knowledge or competency can be deployed in society but rather how we must secure a place where creativity and imagination can flourish for the future. We must train people who are intellectually awake. Disciplines are breaking down. We must be able to be creative as an academic community to cope with a changing world. I would hope the government's department of education, which is in charge of universities, would review plans for reorganizing the university from a different

perspective. My colleagues might also start using this argument in the defense of more money for research, more advanced training, more investment in post-doctoral students rather than simply addressing the problem as others have framed it—of being accountable.

I would not mind if I were called to argue this with others. Others might say that they have certain priorities that must be taken care of, and I would then have to show how they could be better taken care of in the way I suggested. They might well challenge me. They might examine my arguments and find points that are factually distorted, incomplete, partial, or where the logic failed. But the discussion would change—we would be arguing over facts and logic from a shared position. Yes, we all want universities to train professionals in a better way, yes we want them to be more publicly responsible and so on. We would be arguing about different ways to approach the problem that would not follow the political packaging and rhetoric of the moment.