

PERSPECTIVES: AN OPEN INVITATION TO CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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American Anthropological Association
2300 Clarendon Blvd, Suite 1301
Arlington, VA 22201

ISBN: 978-1-931303-55-2

<http://www.perspectivesanthro.org>

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INTERVIEW WITH CAROLYN NORDSTROM

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Robert Borofsky: Where would you like to begin?

Carolyn Nordstrom: I'll start with what I was thinking about this morning. As I was walking my dog, I was reflecting on what makes anthropology so cool. I thought about all the definitions I know, the introductory texts I have read, and the various things anthropologists converse about.

All of a sudden, I thought: Wait a minute. When I think about what's in my heart, what is it that anthropology offers to others as well as myself? I realized I needed to go back to the Enlightenment of the 1700s. The Enlightenment asserted that the world was logical, that it was linear. It portrayed people as objective, as rational. Building on this perspective, various sciences categorized, classified, and boxed people and things in the world. Our theoretical systems are based on the rational nature of existence and the rationality of people. This perspective has produced many important innovations—engineering, harnessing electricity and energy sources, medical breakthroughs.

But you know what? A whole lot of the world is defined by chaos theory. Humans are anything but fully rational beings. We create incredibly noble values. We create things that bring me to tears. I see things in the world that are so moving. But this creativity is far from being logical, far from being rational.

We are this hot bed of rationality and irrationality all mixed together like a fine stew. We're logical as well as mystical and magical, we're absurd as well as practical. We are all these things, often at the same time. We don't merely live in contradictions; we embrace them. We at times deny them; we frequently argue over them. Still we embed them in our lives.

Anthropology opens these dynamics to us. It lets us touch these realities. I often ask my classes "How many textbooks have you read in your life that you loved and remembered?" The most anyone has ever answered is five, the average is one or a couple. I know it's painful for some academics to hear. Textbooks teach us important "stuff." But they don't often touch the reality of how we live our lives. Anthropology gives us tools to touch the heartbeat of humanity. I think that's anthropology's gift to the world.

Education in the West draws strongly on this model of logical, rational reality. We keep applying it over and over again in systematic, ordered ways. It would be better to ask: How can we apply models of rationality in irrational ways? The world is embracing digital and virtual realities, globalization, chaos and quantum theory, and multidimensional solutions to pressing issues. People today are breaking down many boundaries of what we take to be ourselves, our genders, our nations. Anthropology is well positioned to help us understand this changing, fluid world.

Robert: Could you share with students why you become an anthropologist?

Carolyn: Why wouldn't you become an anthropologist? You can go anywhere, study any issue. You are not bound to only follow it through the lens of politics and political science, or the highs and lows of economics. Your explorations can range from the offices of elites to the most remote locations on earth. You can ask any question. You can study borders and their breakdowns simultaneously. You

can study traditions amid change. You can study how people love and kill at the same time. You can do research and work anywhere in the world. No other discipline lets me do that.

Robert: What particularly excites you about anthropology?

Carolyn: Obviously, the big question is what does it mean to be human? That's fascinating. I grew up a world where everything had its "place." People were from places and things were put in "appropriate" places. One thing was in one place and not in another. We're now entering an era where we're able to move beyond this framework.

It's exhilarating because this new era is still uncharted, un-mapped. We are creating it as we go along. We know place is important; but things are also unplaced. How do you intellectually deal with holding both of those ideas in your head at the same time? It is this realization regarding migrant flows, cultural flows, and virtual flows that is reformulating how we think about place and how place affects us. We are studying something that is very much in motion.

For example, clothes are symbols. They involve values, which are full of stereotypes, morals, joys, and a range of other emotions. When I see people, if they're wearing clothes like mine, I often feel a certain kind of affinity. I make certain kinds of judgments. I can tell you what I have on and what particular place I'm in at the moment. But how does this information get all mixed together in today's flows? Just sitting here looking at what I have on, my clothes are a product of work from numerous countries. Clothes, indeed goods in general, flow from place to place and thus are "multi-place" and yet, at the same time, exist in very specific places.

How do we understand global financial flows? How do we understand the changing lives of people? How do we understand the experiences of Syrians, for example, given the horrors many of them are living through? What's home for them? What's family? What's safety? How do they understand humanity and security as they travel from Syria into Turkey and across Europe often faced with grave dangers?

Another topic I find fascinating is "invisibility." The world's full of things that we can see and others we are trained "not to see"—things that societies try to keep hidden from public awareness. Anthropology offers vibrant approaches for investigating and bringing to light these "made-invisible" realities, as I call them, so we are better able to forge solutions to problems that have seemed insurmountable in the past. What really goes on at the frontlines of wars, and in the elite command bunkers—and what impact does war leave in its stead? Why did Wall Street crash; what stories aren't they telling us? What's it really like to be a kid living on the street—in a rich urban city, in an impoverished shanty, or in a natural disaster? Governing institutions seldom ask the kids, making their stories, their perceptions, invisible to the public realm. In sheer objective fact it makes good sense to include children representatives on city councils, national committees, development programs, and United Nations assemblies addressing children's issues—but the idea seems ludicrous to cultures whose adults define only adults as capable of making fully informed and morally responsible decisions.

Understanding creativity is equally important to me. How do societies, advancements, beliefs get created: how do we produce social change, values, cultural ideas, innovation, new senses of ourselves? How do we create new worlds? How do we create answers to our questions?

Robert: You did fieldwork in war zones. What was that like?

Carolyn: I had no intention of studying war or violence. I was a medical anthropologist doing my graduate research in Sri Lanka, a country then often seen as one of Asia's tropical paradises. It was one of two countries in the world that had very high health standards for a relatively lower GDP—and this in a country facing both the spectrum of illnesses associated with urban educated life, and

tropical diseases in developing regions. It was anomalous because a strong link exists globally between lower economic rankings/lower health indices. Sri Lanka had created a very successfully health system, and I was intrigued to find out how.

In the midst of this research, I realized that as a student, and even as a medical anthropologist, I had never seen a definition of “illness.” I had seen thousands of definitions of different kinds of illnesses, but not of what defined the very core phenomenon of illness itself. So I started looking into what people viewed as illness.

This led me to devoting three months in Sri Lanka asking people—from urban to rural areas, doctors to patients, young to old—“What is illness?” I got some very intriguing answers. They were not what I expected. But they made sense. It changed my perspective, and helped shed light on bigger issues like why some aspects of medicine simply aren’t able to achieve desired results. I realized if we asked questions like this, we could provide better health care to people. We often seem to be treating things that people do not see as illness and not treating things that they do, or ignoring aspects of treatment patients deem important while focusing on some they find alienating.

In the middle this fieldwork, severe rioting erupted nationwide in Sri Lanka. In seven short days, one-sixth of the entire country was destroyed. Thousands died. I was in the middle of this weeklong massive slaughter; there was no escaping it. I got caught in places where entire city blocks were in flames, every building and vehicle set on fire. People were massacred in the streets, pulled from their homes, cars, and businesses and beaten to death or set on fire. I found I needed to try to make sense of what I saw: both for my own peace and mind, and to try to help correct many of the misconceptions in explanations of political and civil violence.

I had been taught about the exhilaration and glory of war all my life – in school, by public media, through books. Societies create myths about war that are widely believed. But there was nothing attractive about what I saw, nothing glorious. Seeing a body chopped up into pieces isn’t nice or wonderful. There’s no glory in burning people to death. If we show that reality, how horribly it affects everybody—victims, witnesses, and perpetrators alike—people might do a lot less of it.

I wondered why people killed each other like this? It lacked any ultimate sense. Why would someone drive a nail into someone else’s head? Why would someone see children, unarmed women, harmless grandfathers as dangerous—to be killed? This is not the exception, but the norm: today globally 90 percent of the casualties of political violence are non-combatant civilians. I began to ponder what violence involves. What motivates people to act in this way?

It’s important to stress that I also saw some amazing acts of altruism in the midst of this violence. People risked their lives in the middle of these riots for complete strangers. I witnessed the full spectrum of humanity, seeing extremes we normally do not see in our lives. It became obvious that what is portrayed in texts, media, and movies about such violence only scratched the surface, and generally presented “facts” that, as I wrote in one book, are 180 degrees the opposite of what really takes place in war.

This unexpected event in my life changed the direction of my research for decades to follow: for caught in the middle of this violence and seeking ways to survive it, I realized we needed a much better understanding of the dynamics behind how humans create and react to violence like this.

Robert: Students in my introductory anthropology class enjoy reading your book, *Global Outlaws*. How did you come to study the illegal global interchanges you discuss?

Carolyn: After studying political violence on several continents for more than fifteen years after Sri Lanka, I was pretty burned out with dealing with such traumas. Through the years I had collected lots of data on large smuggling systems running through war zones. I realized delving into this

allowed me to continue working with war and peace while giving me a respite from the frontlines violence.

People in societies at war need smugglers because governing, financial, and economic institutions are impaired, support services are interrupted, legal systems break down, and trade routes, industry, agriculture, etc. are disrupted. People can't get what they need to survive, from food and medicines to weapons and technology. I kept seeing a lot of the same international "players" wherever I traveled in the world—the same arms merchants, the same vendors of critical necessities, the same smugglers. I thought what's going on here; how does smuggling, how does the extra-legal in general, operate?

Such inquiries lead to questions on a bigger level: how do these extra-legal economies surrounding smuggling and politics affect global economies in general? It's impossible to have wars without it; and as I later learned it's impossible to do business today at all without some extra-legal activities. But there is little written about it.

Around this time, people were talking about blood diamonds, and I thought this might be a good place to begin studying illegal economies "on the ground"—where it's all taking place. I started in the center of Angola during one of the worst periods of the country's civil war. It quickly became obvious that smuggling didn't just involve diamonds and weapons. It involved a vast range of things—clothing, food, petroleum, computers, medical equipment, building supplies, vehicles, cooper wire, paint, pharmaceuticals, agricultural tools and seeds, lights, industrial supplies, textbooks, clean water—anything and everything that could be transported.

This extra-legal trade is profoundly international: goods come in from and go out to countries all over the world. And it is essential: the legal markets in any warzone I've been in are not able to provide anywhere close to what the country's population needs to survive. A small proportion of all smuggling is devoted to military supplies, the majority of it brings in survival and development supplies for the whole country, or carries out valuable resources (gold, diamonds, oil, timber, fish, etc.).

Smugglers seldom match the common media stereotypes of violence: young male adults (bearded, clad in leather jackets, and disenfranchised from society). Curiously, most smugglers are pretty peaceful people. Many see themselves as regular businesspeople. Some are considered noble by societies caught in war: people bringing in essential medicines, food, communications equipment, clothing, tools to make a survival living, *ad infinitum*. As true as the classic of "blood diamond for weapons of war exchange" is as an icon of horrendous violence, suffering, and war-profiteering—it is equally true that smuggling often involves getting critical necessities to the front lines, saving people's lives.

Since I found goods from all over the world in the middle of a remote warzone, I decided to follow how everything from massive Mercedes transport trucks to pocket-able diamonds got in and out of a country or, on a broader scale, in and out of a region where there was so much disruption, and ultimately traverses intercontinentally. How do the things that people need or want get across borders? Across continents? Across oceans? Expensive cameras, Nike shoes, elephants, high-tech products, mega-tons of fish and tomatoes, airplanes, scissors. A whole universe of essential supplies, raw resources, and luxury goods travel outside the law. All flowing in and out of Angola, of all warzones—and because many of these raw resources and goods went to, or came from, peacetime nations around the world—in and out of all virtually all countries.

World Bank, United Nations, and government indices at that time stated only 10% of Angola's economy was legal. 90 percent was what I call extra-legal: including informal, illicit, illegal, and unrecorded. Following extra-legal linkages globally, it became obvious that perhaps half the global economy—including both wartime and peacetime nations—involves extra-legality.

Yet there are no formal economic indices that calculate the impact of extra-legal goods, monies, and exchange on legal economies, on government and financial stability, or for development. There are no formal methodologies to research, track, analyze, and deal with extra-legal activities; no formal ways to even determine their size with any precision. The repercussions are dramatic: Angola's development policies, like all nations, focus on the legal realm only. But if 90 percent of the country's economy wasn't legal coming out of war—how can any development projects that deal with only 10 percent of reality work?

Because these flows in and out of Angola link across countries worldwide—so too do the repercussions. To study this, I followed extra-legal routes, across borders, along payment and laundering systems, and then globally. I traveled to a number of ports, first in Africa, and then globally (e.g. Rotterdam, Singapore, Long Beach USA) to look at how goods were entering and leaving; and also traveled on a freighter internationally.

We don't really understand economies if we don't understand their smuggling networks. It's fascinating. Perhaps a third or up to a half of the world's economy taken in total is moving across borders extra-legally in all kinds of ways and we don't know how to formally chart it. There are formal analyses for GDP, but none for what I call XGDP (extra-legal gross domestic product). What does this say about our economic analyses? We—government institutions, economic and development organizations, academics, alike—don't fully understand the vast world of smuggling and the extra-legal, yet it's critical to our survival.

Robert: Yes, you make a good point. Turning to another topic, if I may, what advice would you give introductory students thinking about majoring in anthropology?

Carolyn: I can tell you what I tell my introductory classes. I tell them anthropology is one discipline where you can study how various aspects of our lives and worlds are linked together. Anthropology is a global study not only in what it explores but also in how it thinks about issues. It looks at the big picture—not just at a single country, for example, but also at cross-cultural, international interactions. We take seriously not only understanding other cultures but the ways in which they fit together with one another to make the world we live in. We're interested in what takes us from human to humanity.

Anthropology values both the local and global perspectives. In the twenty-first century, businesses, medical schools, and NGOs are discovering that their policies do not work if they do not understand larger cross-cultural issues, the bigger picture that ties things together. Yet at the same time they need to understand on-the-ground daily realities: What are the rationalities and irrationalities that humans display in different contexts and at different times? What are the hopes, fears and dreams that drive people forward? How do these dynamics fit into the way we perceive governance, development, legality; shape our ideas of self, belonging, emotions, human potential; influence our definitions of good and bad, success or failure, possible or impossible?

One of the things that delights us in anthropology at my university is the fact that our anthropology graduates are equally competitive in getting in medical schools and choice business jobs as those coming from the traditional medical and business majors. Our students are very successful going into development, policy, planning, and innovation work—whether local or international—and people love them because they hit the ground running with cultural sensitivities and valuable field training. They have knowledge that isn't necessarily being taught in some of the others disciplines: they know how to cross intellectual as well as physical borders; link the micro to the macro; weave together seemingly different aspects of life to better understand societies, to problem-solve, and to gain a better understanding of why people act as they do.

Anthropology is well prepared to address future advances. For example, if I were to work in the civilian Space X program founded by Elon Musk, I'd want to be an anthropologist. The technical aspects are critical, of course—but technology has no meaning apart from the heartbeat of humanity that animates it. It would be fascinating to explore what goals and hopes guide the people involved in long-term space flight. What facilitates space travel, ensuring it doesn't totally disrupt the travelers—mentally and physically? What social bonds and human interactivity do people require, do societies wherever they are in space, depend on? What is human intelligence, as we increasingly turn technological control over to artificial intelligence—and what is not/human as people and digital technologies merge in more extensive and complex ways?

What other discipline studies such diverse topics—from smuggling to violence and altruism, from creativity to space travel, from local family interactions to global dynamics, from the changing definitions of what it means to be human to the vibrant ethnographies of lives being lived – and then weaves these together in groundbreaking ways?

Robert: Thank you for sharing your thoughts today. It is an exciting and inspiring vision of anthropology.