

PERSPECTIVES: AN OPEN INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Can Anthropology Save the World?

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We are living in difficult times, facing out of control, escalating wars in the Middle East for which we are partially to blame and destructive political wars at home. We are a divided nation within a profoundly divided world despite globalization and its allegedly democratizing effects. The gap between North and South, Middle East and Mid-West, between haves and have-nots has become a chasm making all of us less free and less safe.¹

Two weeks ago, I was giving lectures in Rome and Prague on the plight of political refugees in detention and deportation camps cropping up in Europe. It was a sobering visit, as many countries including Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Denmark were taking moves to build walls and to reject the waves of refugees fleeing wars and drought in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and crushing poverty in Somalia. It is the largest migration of people in Europe since World War II. Smugglers are legion and they defraud frightened refugees of their money and even of their kidneys, demanded in exchange for basic necessities. One of the smugglers involved in this shady business is a human trafficker who I have run into before named Boris Wolfman. Indeed as the old adage goes, “man is wolf to man.”

1. This text was prepared as a commencement address and was delivered at the Department of Anthropology graduation ceremony at the University of California, Berkeley, May 19, 2016.

In Prague hate, rather than love was in the air driven by a new nationalism and popular calls for rights to cultural, racial, and religious homogeneity. Czech police began pulling refugees off trains and wrote numbers on their arms with felt-tip pens, a creepy (rather than creeping) xenophobia, Islamophobia, and a re-emerging anti-Semitism within the country. In the beautiful historical center of Prague, resisters began to plaster the walls and windows of certain hotels, museums, and restaurants with posters announcing: "Hate Free Zone" as if this was the exception. This could happen to us. At the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, where I gave my lectures, I found it difficult to talk about human trafficking in a way that would jibe with the art exhibition on the Soul of Money. While humans and animals might have souls, I was pretty sure that money did not.

The trip to Prague was painful because I was born in 1944 into a Czech immigrant family growing up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn when it was still a slum and "Holocaust haunted." Eastern European Catholics and Hassidic Jews lived side by side but mostly in silence about our histories. What could we say? Meanwhile, the public health department periodically appeared to shoot educational films about the East River rats and garbage on our streets and in our tenements. Today these same buildings that have survived are worth a fortune.

My older brother and I were the first in our large extended family to go to college. I didn't quite get the hang of it and I dropped out of Queens College (City University of New York) twice, first to join the Peace Corps in 1964-1966, and then, after an abortive return to Queens College, I dropped out to go South to the Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama in 1967-1968 in part to memorialize and to replace one of my classmates, Andrew Goodman, who

was killed with two other rights workers during Mississippi Summer in 1964. I joined SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as one of the last two white civil rights workers under the auspices of the Lowndes County Black Panthers and the Black Power Movement.

Thanks to an undergraduate mentor at Queens College, CUNY, Hortense Powdermaker, the author of an anthropological memoir, *Stranger and Friend: The Life of an Anthropologist*, I followed her to Berkeley in 1969 where Powdermaker had retired to work on her last anthropological research project, youth culture. I was invited to be her research assistant while completing my B.A. at U.C. Berkeley and going on to get my doctorate in Cultural and Medical Anthropology.

I chose the life of an anthropologist, because it was a field so open, so free, that it allowed one to be a freethinker, to think outside the box, as my colleague Laura Nader puts it. So let me suggest based on my life as a dedicated anthropologist and obsessive fieldworker some rules to live by. I'll call these rules "Operation Instructions for the New Generation of Anthropologists."

Operating Instruction: Rules to Live By

Rule 1: Everything in life is an Experiment. There are no winners and no losers. There's just a precious amount of time to live.

Rule 2: Work is essential, but it should not be an obsession. Peter Maurin, a French peasant philosopher who lived on

the margins of New York City wrote in his book, *Easy Essays*: “There’s always work, there’s just not always **paid** work.” He added: “The world would be better off if people tried to become better. And people would become better if they stopped trying to become better-off.”

Rule 3: Drop Out—Take a Break! Gap years are important before jumping into the fray. Join the Peace Corps or go on a road trip or cross the country by bicycle (as Professor Harley Shaken does each summer). Find work as you go along. Carry a paperback copy of Mark Sundeen’s book: *The Man who Quit Money*.

Rule 4: Be disciplined, that is, be a disciple. Find someone wise, or smart, or creative and follow him or her. Seek out people who are doers and thinkers, artists and artisans, philosophers, innovators and inventors, authors and scholars, political leaders, surgeons and country doctors. I’ve had so many mentors in my life I’d be here until tomorrow morning and would not get to the end of the list that includes former professors, colleagues, collaborators as well as people whose writings changed my life or way of thinking: Ivan Illich, Oliver Sacks, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, the anti-apartheid lawyer Albie Sachs, and the Italian radical psychiatrist Franco Basaglia. The forensic pathologist Claude Snow gave me the courage to refashion myself as a cultural medical forensic anthropologist. My students have taught how to teach and how to write, while my companions in the field—hundreds of them—have been my lifelong teachers. Alfred Kroeber, the founding father this department, always answered the question, occupation: as student of humanity.

Rule 5: Be inspired by others. Everyone doesn't have to be a leader. I've been an intellectual heretic for most of my life and I don't often seek to lead. When I do I often find it uncomfortable. I'd rather be commenting *sotto voce* from the sidelines, a trickster, of sorts. Mario Savio inspired me when he was an awkward and extremely shy student at Queens College. But he had a soul on fire. In 1963 I followed Mario— who then called himself Bob Savio and 38 other Queens College students who traveled by bus from New York City to Guerrero, Mexico to work with local activists on building schools, and working in hospitals and public clinics. A local newspaper in New York City announced our project in unflattering terms: "QC Students Invade Mexico to Help Peons." Our bus tickets were two feet long and it took us a week to arrive in Guerrero. After crossing the border, we traveled by *Flecha Roja* through desolate desert areas. Bob Savio and several guys were assigned to work in Taxco. Three of us were sent to Chilpancingo where no one knew quite what to do with us. In letters home, I wrote that that racism toward indigenous communities was rampant. I began to wonder why we had come and what we could possibly accomplish.

We heard rumors that Bob Savio was stirring up a storm in the beautiful post-colonial city of Taxco, doing what we had hoped to do, advocating for social justice among the rural and indigenous communities. So Marsha Steinberg and I left Iguala and Chilpancingo to see what was going on in Taxco and if we could lend a hand. But by the time we arrived Bob had returned to the U.S. The sole survivor of his group, Kevin Donovan, told us that Bob and the local Catholic Bishop didn't get along and that Bob had been ordered to leave the country.

Kevin was in awe of Savio and told us of Bob's transformation, as he emerged, chrysalis-like, into a powerful speaker and organizer who had participated in demonstration by indigenous people protesting their inhumane treatment by landowners. The local Bishop was so flummoxed by Savio that he sent Bob and his team packing. I was amazed at the story of the man who we knew as almost incapable of carrying on a conversation, a profound stutterer who had no Spanish to speak of. How had he managed to reach people across language, class, and culture? The Savio we knew was a modest, solitary fellow. We couldn't fathom how Bob had managed to stir up so much trouble and what it was that he could have possibly conveyed to indigenous Nahunta speakers. He was "inspired" was all that his buddy could tell us.

Bob moved to California and enrolled in U.C. Berkeley where he changed his name to Mario and in December 1964 Mario jumped on top of that car and he let freedom ring. He said those unforgettable words: "There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even *passively* take part, and so you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!"

Rule 6: Admit to Errors and Correct Them. Our Berkeley anthropology founding father, A L Kroeber, made a huge mistake following the death from tuberculosis of the Yahi Indian known as Ishi. He sent his brain in a bottle with cotton and formaldehyde to a racist physical anthropologist

working at the Smithsonian Institution. Kroeber never spoke of Ishi again. He could not stand it, he wrote, acknowledging the genocide that preceded Ishi's living in what was then the Lowie Museum as a custodian and a spectacle — the last wild Indian. But he helped his wife to write the book he could never have written himself: *Ishi in Two Worlds—The Last Wild American Indian*. First published in 1961, the book names what actually happened in California beginning with the Gold Rush, in chapters with titles: A Dying People; The Long Concealment, and The Yahi Disappear.

Rule 7: Engage in dialogue those with whom you most disagree. Cross those aisles. In my work on human trafficking, I've had to work with an Afrikaner cop who spoke rudely about his Zulu assistant and in Israel I worked with a military man and Zionist forensic pathologist. In both cases, we changed each other as well as got some good work done. In April 2015, I got to meet up close a man who I had lambasted, in an article entitled "Can God Forgive Jorge Bergoglio?" of being a poor choice for the Pope who would replace the dogmatic Rottweiler of the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI. Bergoglio, I argued, was a weak protector of Argentine people, ordinary people, and priests and nuns when he was the principal head of the Jesuits in Argentina during the Dirty War. I had accumulated a lot of evidence that he had led leftist-leaning men and women dedicated to liberation theology which the Argentine junta targeted as Marxist insurrection. My article was sardonic, suggesting that God could, after all, forgive any sin, no matter how grave, but first, the penitent needed to acknowledge their fault, to confess it, to do penance and to create a new social contract.

When I received an invitation to present my work on human trafficking in the Vatican it came with a Xerox copy of a handwritten note by Pope Francis saying that “organs trafficking” would be part of the plenary session held inside the Vatican and I was to be “it,” that is the only participant invited to speak on the topic. Of course, I expected it was a mistake and that as soon as I arrived I would be banned from entering the Santa Marta residence where we would be housed during the conference, on the same floor where Pope Francis had his simple two-room apartment. I died a dozen deaths on entering the lunchroom to find Pope Francis sitting a few tables from mine. On meeting Papa Francisco after the first three days at a special Papal audience, I stood at the very end of the reception line carrying a Spanish translation of my book, *Death Without Weeping*, with a long inscription, and paperclips marking the pages I hoped he might possibly read that linked the hunger and death of angel babies of the Alto do Cruzeiro, Brazil to the Vatican’s ban on contraception and abortion. As I awkwardly knelt to kiss his papal ring I begged him: “Remember the women!” Papa Francisco pulled me up on my feet. Of course, he wore no papal ring, and no pink papal slippers either. From the floor I could see that his shoes were black and scruffy. The bodyguards in tuxedos rushed up to grab the books and articles I had brought to the Pope. He pushed them aside and nodding his head he said. “Pray for me.” *What a lesson in humility.*

Rule 8: Humor is Mandatory. Our iconic humorist, the late Alan Dundes, is no longer with us. He was often criticized for making politically incorrect jokes. But Professor Dundes held nothing to be too sacred, taboo, or even too disgusting to be a source of humor. He said that sacred cows made

the best hamburgers. He saw jokes as Geiger counters of the spirit— as expressions of deep-seated social anxieties and conflicts. When I was writing my book *Death Without Weeping* on mother love and child death in Brazil, Alan mischievously stuffed a reprint of his analysis of “Dead Baby” jokes in my campus mailbox. I was shocked at first, but then I sat down to read the article and found his analysis sobering and insightful. He argued that these offensive jokes were an unconscious cultural expression of American ambivalence toward babies, a kind of fallout from the sexual revolution that had produced a new generation of adults who wanted sex without babies.

Alan knew that “folklore” had the capacity to act as a force for evil as well as for good, as his book on the Blood Libel Legend— as a history and projection of centuries of anti-Semitism powerfully demonstrated. Ironically, Dundes, who was Jewish, was accused of anti-Semitism by conservative American Jews who asked for his dismissal in 1988 following an article he wrote about German jokes set in Auschwitz that had been published in Harper’s Magazine. The subject outraged Alan’s accusers. Likely, they had not read his analysis. Alan saw these jokes— offensive as they were—as keeping alive the memory of Auschwitz in the German collective consciousness. Comedy and tragedy were two sides of the same coin and black humor—even Auschwitz jokes —albeit culturally insensitive and inadequate—allowed Germans to come to terms with the unimaginable horrors that occurred at German death camps. The jokes were an *acknowledgement* of, rather than a *denial* of the tragic history of the Holocaust.

Rule 9: Beware political correctness — be self-critical, be

sensitive but be honest and openly expressive. Resist censorship and even worse self-censorship.

Rule 10: Flexibility as needed: All rules can be amended or suspended.

In two days, I fly to Recife and Timbauba in Northeast Brazil to work with 120 community health agents with middle school educations who are the first and often the only responders to the needs of pregnant women infected by the Zika virus, which carries the threat of severe birth defects and is complicated by Brazilian laws that still prohibit abortion. The public health crisis is occurring during the near collapse of the Brazilian economy and the real threat of a coup d'état against the Workers Party President Dilma Rousseff whose impeachment by Brazil's congress was an attempt to avoid corruption charges against themselves.

We are facing another kind of populist coup d'état in the United States. And you, dear class of 2016, are walking into a booby-trapped terrain, a world not of your making, and ill-equipped, you might think, with little more than a degree in anthropology. But never more was that degree more valuable and more needed. First of all we need to erect real intellectual barriers against xenophobia, the dangerous fear and hatred of strangers.

Xenophilia

I think we have a little known secret in anthropology. The opposite of xenophobia would be *xenophilia*, a term that barely exists on the internet except with reference to certain botanical species that seem to adjust to cohabiting with alien

plants. Taking that botanical metaphor, xenophilia is not so much the love of difference as freedom from the fear of difference, and a healthy curiosity and desire to understand strangers who anthropologists have always seen as precious repositories of human knowledge. Can anthropologists – cultural, biological, medical, linguistic and archaeological—deploy our deep commitment to human and biological diversity to resist the forces of hate, fear and xenophobia?

Anthropologists are restless and nomadic people. We are a tribe of hunters and gatherers of human artifacts, human cultures, life ways, and human values. Anthropology requires us to become intimate with the people we want to understand— getting inside their skin, standing in their shoes kind of thing. Ethnography is an art form, a work of translation, that demands all the senses—the observant eye, the attentive ear, a keen sense of smell, touch, and a sense of taste—a “gusto” (in Portuguese) that carries a double valence — a taste not only for new foods and spicy condiments, strong drinks – but also a taste for the sentient life through which a “society” is embodied— catching its sense of time and timing, its movements and gestures, its patterns of work, play, and devotion, its sense of humor and its sense of justice, its sense of dignity.

Anthropology also requires strength, valor, and courage. Pierre Bourdieu called anthropology a combat sport, an extreme sport as well as a tough and rigorous discipline. Anthropologists are the Green Berets of the social sciences. Archaeology teaches not only a deep appreciation and reverence for the past and for “small things forgotten,” as Jim Deetz described historical archeology. It teaches students not to be afraid of getting one’s hands dirty, to get down in the dirt, and to commit yourself, body and mind. Susan Sontag called anthropology a “heroic” profession — one that

required brains and strength, sensitivity and guts. It was not just a job, not just a profession. It was, she said, one of those very few rare and true vocations.

You, the next generation of anthropologists are the ones in which your professors have invested their hopes and their trust. We need your intelligence, your initiative, your risk-taking, and your energy. We look to you as the next generation of “loyal rebels” — loyal to what anthropology has taught you: to value diversity; to embrace and enjoy (not just tolerate) human difference; to be open to the wisdom of strangers and resolute in refusing any proposals that denigrate other ways of living and being in the world. You are the heirs to a great tradition of anthropology. May it give you the courage to work in the service of all humankind and be conservative protectors of all the creatures and plants and bio-diversity that sustains Mother Earth. May you be wise and strong and steadfast in building a better world than the one you have inherited.