

# Engaging Anthropology: The Case for a Public Presence

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Publisher's blurb: "Anthropology ought to have changed the world. What went wrong? *Engaging Anthropology* takes an unflinching look at why the discipline has not gained the popularity and respect it deserves in the twenty-first century. From identity to multicultural society, new technologies to work, globalization to marginalization, anthropology has a vital contribution to make. While showcasing the intellectual power of discipline, Eriksen takes the anthropological community to task for its unwillingness to engage more proactively with the media in a wide range of current debates, from immigrant issues to biotechnology. If anthropology matters as a key tool with which to understand modern society beyond the ivory towers of academia, why are so few anthropologists willing to come forward in times of national or global crisis? Eriksen argues that anthropology needs to rediscover the art of narrative and abandon arid analysis and, more provocatively, anthropologists need to lose their fear of plunging into the vexed issues modern societies present."

## **1. A short history of engagement**

Anthropology should have changed the world, yet the subject is almost invisible in the public sphere outside the academy. This is puzzling, since a wide range of urgent issues of great social importance are being raised in original and authoritative ways by anthropologists. They should have been at the forefront of public debate about multiculturalism and nationalism, the human aspects of information technology, poverty and economic globalisation, human rights issues and questions of collective and individual identification in the Western world, just to mention a few topical areas.

But somehow the anthropologists fail to get their message across. In nearly every country in the world, anthropologists are all but absent from the media and from general intellectual discourse. Their sophisticated perspectives, complex analyses and exciting field material remain unknown to all but the initiates. In fact, whenever anthropologists endeavour to write in a popular vein, they tend to surround themselves with an air of coyness and self-

mockery, or they stress that the topic at hand is of such a burning importance that they see no other option than (god forbid) addressing non-anthropologists. Philippe Descola, writing in the context of a French anthropology which has produced popular works of great literary and intellectual value, thus, describes his mixed feelings when asked by a publisher to write something about the Jívaro, the Amazonian people he had lived amongst, for a general public (Descola 1996). Retracing the process of writing *Les lances du crépuscule* ('The lances of the twilight'), he admits to feeling 'an obscure wish to justify to my peers the project of writing an anthropological book "for the general public"' (1996: 208). He then speculates that the curious reluctance of anthropologists to address general audiences may be caused by an anxiety that the outside world might discover 'the fragility of the scientific precepts' fundamental to the subject. In other words, Descola suggests that it may ultimately be a lack of confidence that has caused the cocooning of anthropology. This view has a lot to recommend it although it is partial, and we'll look at it again below. But first it is necessary to make a brief excursion back in time.

For it was not always thus. Things were in fact going rather well for a long time. The Royal Anthropological Institute in London was founded in 1871 in the spirit of bringing science to the masses, and all over Europe and North America, nineteenth-century anthropology was firmly based in the museums, whose very *raison-d'être* consisted in communicating with the general public. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the dominant Anglophone traditions in anthropology turned away from a wider readership and began to gaze inwards. Why did this happen?

Of the men generally recognised as the founding fathers of modern anthropology, neither Lewis Henry Morgan, E.B. Tylor nor James Frazer saw themselves as members of a closed clique, but happily and energetically took part in the debates of their time. Morgan, whose work on social evolution and kinship has had lasting effects, was read eagerly by the likes of Friedrich Engels; Charles Darwin borrowed from Tylor, the originator of the modern concept of culture, when he wrote *The Descent of Man*. Frazer, the author of

the multi-volume *Golden Bough*, a vast comparative study of myth, was one of the most influential British intellectuals of the early twentieth century, stimulating writers like T. S. Eliot and philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein. Dealing with the large questions of cultural history and human nature, these early generations of anthropologists were part of a broad and colourful intellectual public sphere which included naturalists, historians, archaeologists, philosophers and others who strove to understand humanity's past and present. These anthropologists, lacking an academic training in a subject called 'anthropology', were generalists and often gentleman-scholars of independent means, who respected no institutional boundaries between university subjects in their quest for knowledge. In their last generation, they included Alfred Haddon, whose keen interest in biology led him to theorise human origins, W. H. R. Rivers, a pioneering cultural historian and an unsung founder of psychological anthropology, and Frazer himself.

Posterity has tended to dismiss these early modern anthropologists as dilettantes and, often inaccurately and unfairly, as speculative armchair theorists (Hart 2003). Tellingly, a leading representative of the next generation of anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski, boasted in 1922 that ethnology (or anthropology) had now finally begun to 'put its workshop in order, to forge its proper tools, to start ready for work on its appointed task' (Malinowski 1984 [1922]: xv). Professionalisation and specialisation were under way, and the stage was set for anthropology's withdrawal, although its ultimate cocooning was still a generation away.

In fact, there is still a stark contrast between Malinowski and his generation, and the postwar anthropologists, as regards their willingness to talk across disciplinary boundaries and to the interested lay public. Malinowski himself wrote in popular magazines and gave public lectures on topics of general interest, such as primitive economics and sex. Franz Boas, generally acknowledged as the founder of American cultural anthropology and an important public voice in the anti-racist discourse of his time, debated vigorously in the press, in magazines and journals, and at public meetings. His opponents were those who held that race could account for cultural variation,

and in the early twentieth century, they were many and powerful. In France and Germany, similarly, anthropologists were immersed in the issues of their day, and saw themselves not so much as a distinct intellectual movement as members of a larger public sphere exploring topics of shared interest. There was, by the time of the interwar years, a growing professional self-awareness by anthropologists, who had sharpened their theoretical tools and purified their field methods; but even the likes of E. E. Evans-Pritchard in Britain and Robert Lowie in the USA had to write their books with professionals and non-professionals alike in mind.

In fact, the interwar years saw some of the most spectacular successes in the history of anthropological interventions in a wider field. Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1934) was a bestseller in many countries, challenging popular preconceptions about culture and founding a research programme within anthropology at the same time. However, it was Boas' and Benedict's student Margaret Mead who would become the greatest celebrity and bestselling author in the discipline in the last century.

At the time when Mead published her first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), fieldwork-based anthropology informed by cultural relativism could credibly present itself as a fresh and exciting approach to human diversity, offering genuinely new insights and provocative truths about possible worlds. As emphasised by Marcus and Fischer (1986), Mead's books showed in powerful ways how anthropology could function as a cultural autocritique, by showing that much of what we tend to take for granted might have been different.

It was cultural relativism's finest hour. Boas could confidently, in his best avuncular style, preface his protégé's debut work as an exemplification of the best that cultural relativism had to offer – simultaneously a distorting mirror and a source of new, exciting knowledge, and ultimately probing deeper than most into the human condition:

*[C]ourtesy, modesty, good manners, conformity to definite ethical standards*

*are universal, but what constitutes courtesy, modesty, good manners, and ethical standards is not universal. It is instructive to know that standards differ in the most unexpected ways. It is still more important to know how the individual reacts to these standards. (Boas in Mead 1977 [1928]: 6)*

Mead's books never became classics within anthropology. She was perceived as too superficial in her ethnography, too quick to make sweeping generalisations and, arguably, too *engaged* to be properly scientific. Her uncomplicated, often overtly sentimental prose also had its detractors, as when Evans-Pritchard (1951: 96) described it as 'chatty and feminine', perhaps narrowly escaping allegations of misogyny by associating her style with 'what I call the rustling-of-the-wind-in-the-palm-trees kind of anthropological writing, for which Malinowski set the fashion'. In Europe at least, Mead is scarcely read by students, unlike her contemporaries Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard.

In fact, the mixed reactions to Mead's flowing prose seem to have set a standard for the later reception of popularised and engaged anthropology. As a rule, anthropological texts which become popular with a wider readership rarely receive much credit within the discipline itself.

There can obviously be both good and bad reasons for this skeptical attitude. In her eagerness to present crisp and clear-cut images of her 'alien cultures' for her middle-class American readership, Mead rarely shies away from making sweeping generalisations of at least three kinds: She caricatures her own culture, she turns 'the others' into cardboard cutouts, and finally, she draws conclusions about the characteristic traits of entire cultures after examining the stories of a few individuals. On the other hand, it can equally well be argued that Mead's intellectual style added a few drops of complexity to the lives of thousands, possibly millions of middle-class Westerners, and the world may have become a slightly better and more enlightened place as a result. Let the academics' academics discuss the finer points about explanation, interpretation and ethnographic accuracy, one might argue in defence of Mead; – and leave the dissemination of the main vision to someone

capable of doing the job. Apparently, in *Coming of Age in Samoa*, the comparisons between the Polynesians and the Americans were added by Mead following a suggestion by her publisher (di Leonardo 1998).

Mead wrote her first books at a time when cultural relativism stood for a new and largely untried perspective on the human condition, notwithstanding embryonic cultural relativism in canonical Western thinkers like Pascal and Montaigne; in some versions of intellectual history its ancestry is traced all the way back to Herodotos. As a tool for cultural reform at home, Mead's commonsensical relativist injections proved very powerful indeed, influencing beatniks, hippies and other cultural radicals in the postwar period; and her impact as an antidote to facile biological essentialism in the interwar years should not be underestimated.

In spite of her reputation as a feminist and a cultural relativist, Mead was not accepted as a fully paid-up member in either camp. Di Leonardo very acerbically, at the end of a lengthy treatment of Mead's work, describes Mead's 'relativism' as 'the self-assured modernist's imperial evaluation of the world's cultural wealth for the 'benefit of all'', adding that her views of 'benefits' had, naturally shifted over the decades (1998: 340) – and concludes that Mead 'thought the world was both her natural laboratory and a domain in need of her American tutelage' (1998: 363).

Mead was the best known, but far from the only anthropologist of her generation who easily, and with visible pleasure, translated research materials into engaging prose. Ralph Linton, a master of popularisation, wrote volumes of fascinating anthropology and sociology without ever lapsing into jargon. His most famous piece was probably 'One Hundred Per Cent American', first published in *The American Mercury* in 1936 before its inclusion in the author's introductory text *The Study of Man* (1937).

Featured in the chapter on cultural diffusion, the article was originally written as a subversive comment on tendencies to isolationism and nationalist self-righteousness in the US of the 1930s. Linton sets the tone of his ethnographic

vignette by an arresting opening sentence: 'Our solid American citizen awakens in a bed built on a pattern which originated in the Near East but which was modified in Northern Europe before it was transmitted to America.' (Linton 1937: 326) Following his 'typical American' through the minutiae of morning routines, buying a newspaper with coins (a Lydian invention), eating his breakfast with a fork (a medieval Italian invention) and a knife made of steel (an Indian alloy), he eventually thanks 'a Hebrew deity in an Indo-European language that he is 100 per cent American'. (Linton 1937: 327)

Unlike Mead, who had to describe others' lives vividly and intimately to create a basis for empathy and identification, Linton could safely rely on instant recognition among his readers. While she strives to make the exotic appear familiar, he makes the familiar exotic.

And there were others. Even the evolutionist Leslie White, who mobilised expressions like 'harnessing energy' and a distinction between 'general and specific evolution' in a bid to make anthropology less chatty and more scientific, could often be engaging and provocative (like, incidentally, his student Marshall Sahlins). In an article published in a popular scientific magazine, *The Scientific Monthly*, White (1948) talks about anything from mute consonants to women's skirt lengths and the puzzling absence of polygyny in Western cultures. White, who also once expounded at length about the curious American habit of treating dogs as though they were a kind of humans, had a complex argument to make about the insignificance of the individual will and the link between technology and culture. Yet he did it without losing his non-anthropologist readers on the way.

Much of the energy invested into popularised and interdisciplinary anthropology at the time came from a culture war fought on two fronts: against ethnocentric supremacism (our culture is the best; the others are inferior) and against biological determinism (humans should primarily be understood as biological organisms). Both tendencies were powerful ideological forces in the West of the interwar period. After the war, this changed. Nazism had discredited the notion of race and, through a logically



dubious corollary, the notion that humans were biologically determined. Scientists were divided on the matter, but the anthropologists were almost unanimous in arguing in favour of the primacy of social and cultural factors.

One of the most important public figures of postwar anthropology – a man whose works are rarely read in anthropology courses – was Ashley Montagu. A defender of the view that humans were shaped by the environment rather than biological inheritance, Montagu had a decisive influence on UNESCO policies in its early days, and until his death in 1999, he tirelessly wrote polemical tracts against biological determinism. Admittedly, his books could be unexciting, but they were lucid, passionate and important in providing ammunition against biological reductionism.

Montagu's position on race and culture conformed to the Boasian view, but it was enhanced by his background in physical anthropology, and the question he addressed also became a public issue of the first order during and after the war.

Doubtless helped by the Nazi atrocities, but also by advances in human genetics, the social and cultural anthropologists had won a provisional victory in the 'nature–nurture' debate. The conventional wisdom from the 1950s and a few decades on was that humans are primarily conditioned socially, consequently that biological factors are less important. At the same time, however, the relativist views which were now firmly a part of the anthropological teachings, became controversial from the moment they were seen to be inconsistent with universal human rights. In a 1947 statement from the American Anthropological Association on human rights, penned by the widely respected Melville Herskovits, the American anthropological guild denounced the idea of universal human rights, deeming it ethnocentric (AAA 1947). Instead of this so-called universalism, the AAA defended the idea that every culture had its unique values and its own way of creating the good life.

In the postwar era, thus, two fundamental tenets of the newly institutionalised discipline of social/cultural anthropology became central to public discourse

about the world and its peoples. Instead of capitalizing on this new public importance of their discipline, anthropology began to withdraw soon after the war.

There are exceptions, some of them very notable, and I shall only mention a few which have made a perceptible public impact. In France, where intellectuals of all kinds routinely interact with the outside world, Claude Lévi-Strauss published *Tristes Tropiques* in 1955, a travelogue and a philosophical treatise about humanity which was received well in almost all quarters. Lévi-Strauss, of course, is recognised as a *maître-penseur*, and through his long professional life, he has intervened quite often with political statements – and he seems to have rather enjoyed his exchanges with non-anthropologists, be they philosophers like Sartre or, more recently, sociobiologists.

A couple of decades after *Tristes Tropiques*, the American anthropologist Marvin Harris published a few books in a popular style, the most famous being *Cannibals and Kings* (1978), which sets forth to explain cultural evolution as a result of the interaction between technological and ecological factors. In Great Britain, by the 1960s Edmund Leach was almost alone in writing for magazines, giving radio lectures and engaging in general intellectual debate. Colin Turnbull wrote two books with a perceptible impact outside of anthropology, *The Forest People* (1961) and the much more controversial *The Mountain People* (1972), both of which were meant to shed light on fundamental aspects of social (dis-) integration. The latter was adapted for the stage by Peter Brook. Yet, in the 1980s, the only truly bestselling anthropologist in the UK was Nigel Barley, whose humorous books made fun not only of the anthropologist but also, less easily digestible, of his informants. A few more could have been mentioned, including Akbar Ahmed's important popularising and critical work on Islam (e.g. Ahmed 1992) and David Maybury-Lewis's work on indigenous peoples, such as *Millennium* (1992). Ernest Gellner's stature as a major public intellectual grew until his untimely death in 1995, but it could be argued that it was chiefly the philosopher and theorist of nationalism, not the anthropologist Gellner who became a household name in intellectual circles around Europe. More

recently, Kate Fox's popular books about the anthropology of racing, pubcrawling, flirting and Englishness have enjoyed very good sales and positive reviews in the daily press (as well as, it must in all fairness be said, a few extremely hostile ones). The merits of her books notwithstanding, Fox is an outsider in anthropology; she does not participate in professional meetings or contribute to journals and edited books, and she works at an independent centre of applied social research. *Watching the English* (Fox 2004), a description of 'typically English' forms of behaviour, contains no careful presentation of the data on which generalisations are made, and has little to offer by way of analysis. Fox is more comfortable discussing with people like Jeremy Paxman and travel writer Bill Bryson than engaging with anthropologists who have done research in Britain, such as A. P. Cohen, Nigel Rapport or Marilyn Strathern. (The only ethnographer of England who is cited in the book, is Daniel Miller.) In its review of the book, *The Daily Express* notes that "Fox is a social anthropologist, but that does not prevent her from writing like an angel" – while the *New Statesman* denounces the book as "witless, patronising pap". One cannot help wondering if Fox's ability to write light-hearted, easily digestible prose is a result of her insulation from university-based anthropological research. If that is the case, both parties should take heed.

This trickle apart – and only a few names have been omitted – the best anthropologists were able to do in order to engage people outside academic circles consisted in writing good textbooks, which is fine, but it is not enough.

The source would appear to have dried out. Or had it? Curiously, debate and theoretical development *within* the discipline flourished. The number of professional anthropologists, the number of conferences, journals and books published grew by the year. New intellectual fashions, like structural Marxism, appeared, spread and became obsolete. The women entered the subject on a large scale from the 1970s, and introduced new ways of writing anthropology, often with a potential for being widely read.

Anthropology became a popular undergraduate subject in the same period,

and a certain degree of anthropological commonsense seeped into the public sphere, at the same time as neighbouring disciplines such as religious studies and cultural sociology began to borrow ideas and concepts from anthropology. Scholarly works of great and enduring importance were published from the 1960s to the 1980s: Claude Lévi-Strauss' *La pensée sauvage* (1962), Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966), Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* (1969), Fredrik Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), Marshall Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics* (1972), Clifford Geertz' *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) and Marilyn Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), to mention but a few. Yet, the response from the nonacademic world was negligible, and this generation seemed to have no Margaret Mead to take current ideas and run with them. The discipline had become almost self-contained.

Yet it would be simplistic to conclude that anthropologists no longer try to communicate outside their discipline. For one thing, many are involved in important interdisciplinary work. For another, many try to break out of the charmed circle of their own discipline. To mention one example, Nancy Scheper-Hughes's award-winning books from Ireland (1979) and Brazil (1992) are well written, experience-near in their approach and skilfully constructed, and have received lavish praise from nonprofessional reviewers. Keith Hart and Anna Grimshaw's pamphlet series *Prickly Pear Pamphlets* and its successor series *Prickly Paradigm*, edited by Marshall Sahlins, have brought social engagement and good anthropological scholarship together in a snappy, pointed and occasionally funny form. Neither Marxists nor feminists would be inclined to see themselves as 'socially disengaged' or politically somnambulant. In the 21st century, anthropologists like Bruce Kapferer and Jonathan Friedman, Verena Stolcke and Cris Shore write powerful texts about the state and the conflict potential of globalisation; and I could go on. There is no lack of social engagement or general intellectual savvy among contemporary anthropologists. Yet they – let's face it – hardly seem to matter to people outside anthropology.

Clifford Geertz, the most widely cited living anthropologist inside and

especially outside the discipline, deserves special attention here. Geertz is not only an eloquent writer but an erudite man whose frame of reference extends well beyond anthropology. He is almost universally respected inside the discipline and occasionally contributes essays on anthropological publications to *The New York Review of Books*. Geertz' essays, rich in connotations and references to other intellectuals and artists, must be explained and unpacked to undergraduates for unusual reasons: If they fail to make sense of what he writes, the explanation may be that they have never heard of Croce or are uncertain as to exactly what kind of character Falstaff is, not that they are unfamiliar with the Nayar kinship system or Max Weber's view of Calvinism as the spiritual engine of capitalism. Geertz may be the closest anthropology comes to having its own Stephen Jay Gould (that dazzling humanist science writer), but at the end of the day, Geertz is too coy to come clean as a public intellectual. Although it would hardly cost him two calories to write an interesting essay on female circumcision in the *Atlantic Monthly*, or an op-ed piece on Islam in Indonesia for the *New York Times*, he does not do this kind of thing. One can only guess at his reasons; it is nevertheless beyond dispute that he shares this inclination to remain in the academic circles of discourse with almost everybody else in his profession. Which is a shame.

Norway is an odd exception here. When the main liberal newspaper, *Dagbladet*, made a list of the ten most important intellectuals of the country in January 2005, followed by ten extensive interviews and a lot of noisy, but ultimately useful debate spilling into other media, three of them were anthropologists (there were none in the jury). To this interesting anomaly we shall have to return later.

### **Styles of engagement**

There are many possible styles of engagement; there is not just one way of engaging a readership which is neither paid (colleagues) nor forced (students) to read whatever it is that one writes. Marvin Harris' readers are unlikely to overlap significantly with Lévi-Strauss's, and their respective books convey

their very different messages in equally different ways. Several styles of presentation, one might say dramaturgies, can be identified, sometimes in combination.

David Sutton (1991), in a discussion of the writer–reader relationship in anthropological writing, examines a clutch of successful popularisers, discussing to what extent they enter into a ‘partnership’ with their readers. Ashley Montagu, he argues, actively solicits the readers’ views and reactions, and prods them to allow his ideas to make a difference in their own life. Marvin Harris’s strength, moreover, lies in his holism, his ability to make sense of the world as a whole. The book *Why nothing works* (Harris 1987), Sutton says, might as well have been titled ‘How everything fits’. Harris often presents his topics as *riddles* (two of his books have the word ‘riddle’ in their subtitle). Closure, Sutton observes, ‘is always suspended until the end, when he brings everything together.’ (Sutton 1991: 97). Finally, Wade Davis, in his *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (Davis 1986), appeals to the shared world inhabited by both himself and his readers, avoiding any temptation to step back and watch human worlds only from the outside.

All these three ways of engaging the reader appear to have been effective. But in addition, there exist a variety of other strategies of communication with the outside world, which show the potential efficacy of a public anthropology not only in form, but also in substance.

- *The Verfremdung or defamiliarisation*. This technique was used to great effect by Bertold Brecht, and a variant is often utilised in science fiction stories, for example in Alfred Kroeber’s daughter’s, Ursula Le Guin’s, novels. Some of J. G. Ballard’s novels and short stories, moreover, are set in an England of a near future, where a tendency already noticeable in the present is identified by the author and slightly magnified – holidays in Spain, a fascination with speed and violence, communication via technological means such as telephones – with devastating and shocking results. In anthropology, defamiliarisation has been praised as a technique of cultural critique (Marcus and Fischer 1986), and it is sometimes utilised by anthropologists who study

their own society. As a younger colleague told me, upon his return from fieldwork in a semi-rural locality not very far from his native Oslo: ‘Well, obviously one of the first things I asked them was, “Who do you marry?” My training had told me that it is always important to sort this kind of thing out, and even if they didn’t respond immediately, I found out soon enough that they marry within a radius of one hour’s travel.’

When, in the 1980s, the Indian anthropologist G. Prakash Reddy was invited to study a Danish village, his primary motivation may not have been to defamiliarise the Danes, but that is how his work was perceived.

Notwithstanding the flaws and misunderstandings marring his work, Reddy made a number of observations which could have enabled Danes to see themselves from a new angle. Although his analysis (Reddy 1993) was controversial and hotly debated, it may have had the indirect effect of generating some reflection about the ways Western anthropologists unwittingly defamiliarise the people they study, for example village Indians.

Reddy made a number of interesting observations. On his first day of fieldwork in the Danish village, he asked his interpreter if it were possible that they could ring someone’s doorbell and ask for a glass of water. He thought this might not just be a way to quench his thirst, but also to get his first informant. Fieldwork began in the middle of a weekday, and the village was completely deserted, much to his dismay. The interpreter, incidentally a fellow anthropologist, explained that they couldn’t do that; one simply doesn’t knock on strangers’ doors and ask for water. Later, Reddy would write about the Danes’ odd relationship to their dogs, which they treated better, it seemed, than their old parents who might be tucked away in an old people’s home; about the weakness and isolation of the small Danish family and other issues that he saw in relation to his implicit horizon of comparison, the Indian village.

As it turned out, however, most Danes did not enthusiastically allow themselves to be defamiliarised. Reddy’s book was given a lukewarm reception among anthropologists and non-anthropologists alike, who felt (largely justifiably, it must be conceded) that he had misrepresented the

Danes. Some were scandalised.

Although it was published in both English and Danish, and reviewed in the *American Anthropologist* by Jonathan Schwartz, an American-born anthropologist living in Denmark, '*Danes are like that*' is scarcely known outside the country. The really sad thing is, however, that ethnographies of this kind, where anthropologists from the south study communities in the north, remain rare after all these years.

In general, the technique of defamiliarisation – rendering the familiar exotic – seems to have been more common in mid-twentieth century anthropology than at present. Linton's 'One hundred per cent American' has been mentioned; another classic, which defends its place in the Anthropology 101 courses where it is still a staple, is Horace Miner's amusing article 'Body ritual among the Nacirema'. The Nacirema, of course, are 'a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles.' Their body rituals involve the use of sacred fonts and potions kept in a chest built into the wall. The rituals are secret and never discussed even privately, except when children are initiated into their mysteries. The medicine men of the Nacirema have imposing temples, *latipso*, and '[t]he *latipso* ceremonies are so harsh that it is phenomenal that a fair proportion of the really sick natives who enter the temple ever recover.' (Miner 1956) What Miner does, apart from parodying exoticising ethnographic jargon, is to sensitise students to the implicit norms, rules and taboos prevalent in their own society.

One of the messages from anthropology is that nothing is quite what it seems. As Daniel Miller and others have demonstrated, fundamental aspects of human life can be illuminated through studies of modern consumption informed by anthropological perspectives. In his *A Theory of Shopping* (1998) and the subsequent *The Dialectics of Shopping* (2001), Miller argues that, contrary to popular opinion, shopping is not a selfish, narcissistic kind of activity. Rather, women shop out of consideration for others, whether they buy things for themselves or for relatives and friends. In Miller's analysis,



shopping can be compared to sacrifice, and his analysis is also indebted to Marcel Mauss' celebrated theory of reciprocity, or mutual obligations, as the most fundamental glue of human communities.

None of Miller's highly original texts on shopping are popular in a strict sense, but they fulfil their mission as general statements on modernity by being read outside of anthropology narrowly defined – in business schools, cultural studies and interdisciplinary study programmes on modern society. They also create a *Verfremdung* effect by positing that in fact, many of our everyday practices can signify *the opposite* of what we may be inclined to believe before we have bothered to find out.

- *The cultural autocritique.* Unlike Linton's vignette, Miner's article on the Nacirema is politically harmless and could scarcely be accused of being 'anti-American' when it was published in the 1950s, even if it makes fun of the American craze for cleanliness. In recent years, there has in fact been a substantial demand for similar self-exotising exercises in Scandinavia, where tourist boards, the civil service and even private enterprises solicit the services of anthropologists who are charged with the task of telling them 'what they are *really* like'. (Far more often, they ask consultants, who are more expensive, less knowledgeable and much more 'professional' than anthropologists, to do the same thing.)

A more critical, and much more demanding task, would consist in showing the peculiarities of majority culture in the context of immigration. In most if not all North Atlantic countries, it is virtually taken for granted in the public sphere that immigrants are heavily burdened with culture, while the majority are just ordinary people. One of Mead's great contributions to the public discourse of her time consisted in pointing out not only that the middle-class ways of life typical of Middle America were culturally constructed and historically caused, but also that things her readers took for granted could be changed; that gender relations, values underpinning socialisation and all sorts of cultural conventions were in fact different in other societies and therefore scarcely natural. This approach is hailed by Marcus and Fischer (1986) as

exemplary, although they – like almost everybody else – have misgivings about the quality of Mead’s data, both in Samoa and in the USA. They ask for more nuance and context, for proper ethnography on adolescence in the USA (rather than unreliable non-ethnographic accounts) and a less one-sided view of either culture. It may well be the case, however, that a public intervention of this kind has to make its point clearly and concisely at the outset, adding nuance under way. In fact, there is quite a bit of nuance in Mead’s account from Samoa, although much of it is buried in endnotes.

- *The riddle.* The narrative structure behind the ‘whodunit’ or detective story, the riddle form is a time-honoured and well rehearsed form of storytelling, which makes it no less effective today if placed in the right hands. The author begins with a naïve, but difficult question – why did the Europeans conquer the world? Why is the Indian cow sacred? Why do people everywhere believe in gods? Why does the mother’s brother have a special place even in many patrilineal societies? – and then spends the next pages – ten or five hundred, as the case might be – to answer it. He, or increasingly she, first brushes away resistance by presenting a few alternative explanations to be discarded as ludicrous or misguided, before embarking on the quest for credible answers. If the answer to the riddle is too obvious at the outset, the genre can degenerate to a just-so story. In that case, it may tell the reader, in the space of a couple of hundred pages, how humanity has moved from a foraging life on the savannah, via horticultural and agricultural forms of subsistence, to a situation where the fortunate worry about their mortgages and watch television, while the unfortunate toil mirthlessly as so many forgotten cogs in the heartless machinery of global capitalism.

The bird’s eye-view necessary for this kind of narrative to work properly is rarely adopted by anthropologists, who usually insist on the primacy of the particular, but the genre has been popular for centuries. A latter-day exponent of this style is the late Marvin Harris. Like a currently very successful non-anthropologist, namely the scientist and populariser Jared Diamond (1997, 2005), Harris skilfully moves between the vast canvas of human history and the nitty-gritty of local customs, weaving them together with a logic which is

invincible, all the accounts balanced, until the moment one confronts them with boring details, counterexamples and alternative interpretations.

Harris' popular books are not simple triumphalist accounts of technological progress. Disliked, ignored or sneered at by most of the anthropologists I know, *Cannibals and Kings* is not devoid of embellishments and has a trace of that inner tension which often distinguishes the excellent work from that which is merely good. Praised by *The Daily Express* as a 'brilliantly argued book', it defends the view, inherited from Julian Steward and Leslie White, that cultural evolution is tantamount to an intensification of technology and resource exploitation. Going further than his mentors, Harris also argues that spiritual beliefs are ultimately caused by factors in the physical environment. The aim is 'to show the relationship between material and spiritual well-being and the cost/benefits of various systems for increasing production and controlling population growth' (Harris 1978: 9). However, Harris' view is that contemporary industrial civilization does not represent the apex of human progress. Unlike in Marx' revolutionary writings, there is no place for a happy end in Harris' undialectical history of intensified production. In fact, like Darwin himself, Harris does not identify evolution with progress, and sees a potential catastrophe in the combined effects of population growth and industrial waste. Noting that prehistorical hunter-gatherers tended to be in better health than the succeeding agriculturalists, and that the life expectancy of an infant in early Victorian England might not compare favourably to the situation 20,000 years earlier, Harris manages to add an ounce of uncertainty to his otherwise linear and unexciting storyline. In a sense, he 'suspends closure to the end', as Sutton (1991) puts it, but since the intelligent reader quickly understands that the answer to all his riddles is likely to be protein, the charm in Harris's version of the anthropological riddle lies in his ability to create surprise at how, at the end of the day, everything has a simple functional explanation.

- *The personal journey.* The philosopher A. R. Louch once infamously intimated that anthropology was just bad travel writing (Louch 1966); just as his near-namesake Edmund Leach once remarked that all anthropologists

were failed novelists. Every self-respecting anthropologist would oppose this view and point out, perfectly reasonably, that anthropology raises the issues at hand in a much more accurate way than any travel writer would be able to, that it is by far more systematic and conscientious in its presentation of the events and statements of people that form the basis for generalisation, and so on. On the other hand, considering the professional skepticism of many contemporary anthropologists, who eschew the word 'science', relinquish explicit comparison and are disdainful of anything that smacks of human universals, a good travelogue might well pass for an ethnography today. In principle, that is; it does not seem to happen very often in practice.

The scarcity of readable, personal, anthropological travelogues is puzzling. It seems that just as anthropologists excel in the study of other people's rituals but are inept at organising and immersing themselves in their own rituals, and just as anthropologists have waxed lyrical about 'narratives' for two decades without offering many juicy narratives themselves, all the elements of the personal travelogue are present in the contemporary credo of post-positivist anthropology, yet they are rarely brought to fruition. Contemporary social and cultural anthropology is anti-scientific and concerned with positioning and reflexivity.

Phenomenological micro-description and hermeneutic empathy are contemporary virtues. And yet, there remain few bona fide anthropological monographs that have the characteristics of the personal journey. Michel Leiris' *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934) is one classic example, but it was not thought highly of by his professional peers in Paris. It was too personal and too critical of colonialism in the wrong way, and according to Boskovic (2003: 4), it embarrassed Marcel Griaule sufficiently for him to discontinue all contact with Leiris after its publication.

The one work that stands out, and which is included in any general assessment of the author's *œuvre*, is Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques* (1978a [1955]). The book seems to have no equivalent in English. Even the most personal monographs of recent years and in the English language, executed in

a spirit of 'experimental writing' (pace Marcus and Fischer 1986) and often portraying only a handful of informants, tend to be peppered with jargon and metatheoretical discussions (well, there are admittedly a few exceptions, such as Wikan's *Life Among the Poor in Cairo* (1980), Scheper-Hughes' *Death without weeping* (1992) and Davis' *The Serpent and the rainbow* (1986), but they are rare.)

*Tristes tropiques* reveals Lévi-Strauss' world-view. It tells us a little about the tenets of structuralism, especially in the passages dealing with Amazon peoples and the autobiographical chapter describing how Lévi-Strauss decided to become an anthropologist. But the message of the book lies in its sad beauty; the textures and sentiments evoked in the unwilling traveller's story overshadow any ethnographic or theoretical merit that it might possess. The book is a travelogue proper; it is long, poorly organised (one might say unstructured), full of prejudice and nostalgia, and it is also deeply engaging. *Tristes tropiques* was described as 'one of the great books of our century' by Susan Sontag, it moved Geertz to compare Lévi-Strauss with Rousseau, and it was important in bringing structuralism to the attention of the French (and later the Anglo-Saxon) intelligentsia. And it begins with the infamous sentence, 'I hate travelling and explorers'. So much for fieldwork, one might think, until, later on the same page, the author elaborates:

*Adventure has no place in the anthropologist's profession; it is merely one of those unavoidable drawbacks, which detract from his effective work through the incidental loss of weeks or months; there are hours of inaction when the informant is not available; periods of hunger, exhaustion, sickness perhaps; and always the thousand and one dreary tasks which eat away the days to no purpose and reduce dangerous living in the heart of the virgin forest to an imitation of military service... (Lévi-Strauss 1978a [1955]: 15)*

This kind of bad-tempered outburst, a reader must be forgiven for thinking, would best have been kept in the notebooks where it had, after all, lingered for fifteen years before the author decided to finish the book. But then Lévi-Strauss goes on to express his ambition to write a different kind of travel

book; he freely confesses that he finds it incomprehensible that travel books enjoy such a great popularity, a statement which is intended to make the reader expect that this book is going to be different. The jaded reader, knowing what he can usually expect from travel writing, sharpens his ears. Soon, he is drawn into the universe of the traveller who hates travelling, the ethnographer unable to get into contact with his informants, the anthropologist unable to conceal his contempt for Muslim societies, the travel writer who despises travel writing. Yet Lévi-Strauss manages to pull it off. Like Alan Campbell (1996), I have often wondered why *Tristes tropiques* became such a success, given its contemptuous attitude and self-defeating tone. Unlike Campbell, I like the book and believe the reason is the enigmatic persona of the writer and the many inevitable tensions that arise between him and his world. When Lévi-Strauss arrives in India, one cannot but wonder how he is going to cope with the filth, the misery and the sheer amorphous mass of Indian culture. (As it turned out, he coped slightly better than V. S. Naipaul would in the early 1960s.) The book drips with nostalgia, it is almost devoid of deliberate humour, most contemporary readers are likely to see the author as dated and prejudiced – and yet the book commands our interest. There is no doubt that Lévi-Strauss is a worthy companion, and he challenges our prejudices (or perhaps our belief that we have shed our prejudices) when, for example, in one of the book's more memorable passages, he says:

*Now that the Polynesian islands have been smothered in concrete and turned into aircraft carriers solidly anchored in the southern seas, when the whole of Asia is beginning to look like a dingy suburb, when shanty towns are spreading across Africa, when civil and military aircraft blight the primeval innocence of the American or Melanesian forests even before destroying their virginity, what else can the so-called escapism of travelling do than confront us with the more unfortunate aspects of our history? (Lévi-Strauss 1978a [1955]: 43)*

Now this is quite a mouthful, and it is well worth pondering in the wider context of the book and, especially, the much wider context of an interconnected world. The point is not whether one sympathises with Lévi-

Strauss' vision or not (personally, I consider it dangerous and reactionary), but whether he succeeds in bringing anthropology to non-anthropologists. The answer must be affirmative, and the reason is that the book is written in such an insistent, passionate voice that the reader is transported to the Amazon lowlands or the lofty heights of theory, almost without noticing.

The anthropological travelogue, written as a personal journey where the author addresses his readers as fellow travellers, has considerable untapped potential – it exists in France, in books such as Descola's *Lances du crépuscule* and the series *Terres humaines*, but in general, it is not established as a respectable genre, as something an academic may do without blushing. On the other hand, it is often mentioned that only small portion of the knowledge that the anthropologist returns with from the field, is being effectively used in her articles and monographs. We tell our doctoral students and even MA students returning from a mere three to six months of fieldwork, that they have to edit their fieldnotes carefully, with their research questions in mind, and leave out everything superfluous or irrelevant. This is a painful thing to do, killing one's babies and leaving one's cherished memories to oblivion, but much could be salvaged through a different kind of text. Perhaps the main explanation is simply that academic education tends to destroy our ability to write well.

- *The intervention.* It is not difficult to find anthropologists whose work and life are fuelled by a burning moral and political engagement. Many of them do important and admirable work with students, with NGOs and other kinds of organisations; some write important texts about violence, the state, economic exploitation or culture and human rights, just to mention a few topics – but few step forwards to the flickering edges of the limelight in order to intervene in the unpredictable and risky public sphere of the media and general nonfiction ('trade') publishing. Many say that they lack the skills, not the will; but that is no excuse – skills come from practice, and one has to begin somewhere.

Apart from writing well, the most important unlearning which takes place at

university affects the students' normative motivations. Time and again, students are being told that it's fine if they want to save the world, but really, academic learning is about understanding it – so if they would please keep their 'oughts' to themselves, they can have some more 'is' as a reward. Crude subjective opinion does not belong in a dissertation, which is supposed to be something different from a political tract. While I agree broadly with this view – analytical work is and should be different from advocacy – there is only a short step from neutral description to numbness, and a false contrast is seen to appear between professionalism and engagement. I suspect that not a few anthropologists have lost their original motivation for studying the subject – understanding Humanity, or changing the world – on the way, replacing it with the intrinsic values of professionalism. And yet, just as the anthropological travelogue may be complementary to the monograph, the engaged pamphlet can often be a necessary complement to the analytical treatise. However, that pamphlet is written too rarely. It gives no points in the academic credit system, it may cause embarrassment among colleagues and controversy to be sorted out by oneself. The easy way out, and the solution most beneficial to one's career, consists in limiting oneself to scholarly work. Yet Gerald Berreman was right when, speaking at the height of the Vietnam war, he said that the

*dogma that public issues are beyond the interests or competence of those who study and teach about man comprises myopic and sterile professionalism, and a fear of commitment which is both irresponsible and irrelevant. Its result is to dehumanize the most humanist of the sciences.* (Berreman 1968: 847)

In contemporary anthropology, there is one subject area whose practitioners are unusual in being generally strongly and explicitly engaged, namely the study of indigenous peoples. Organisations like Cultural Survival and IWGIA (International Work Group of Indigenous Affairs) were founded by anthropologists – the former by David Maybury-Lewis, the latter by Helge Kleivan – and under their auspices, much anthropologically informed policy work and advocacy, popularisations aimed at enlightening the public, and



normatively motivated research, is being carried out. The area of indigenous issues is a small universe of its own, shaped in no small degree by anthropologists.

One of the most important anthropologists to devote himself to an openly normative, generalist project in the twentieth century was Ashley Montagu, whose most famous book, *Man's Most Dangerous Idea: The Fallacy of Race* was first published during the Holocaust, in 1942. Going through several revisions, the sixth updated edition came out in 1997, when the author was 92. Montagu had one big idea, with both academic and political ramifications: that race was a dangerous fiction, and that humans were chiefly social and not biological creatures. The view was uncontroversial in mainstream social and cultural anthropology, and Montagu was never lionised among his own, in spite of his work, spanning more than half a century, consistently demonstrating the intellectual and political importance of the perspectives drawn from Boasian cultural anthropology.

Although he commanded a great deal of respect and affection, Montagu's books were neither loved nor admired in the way readers might love Mead's books and admire those of Lévi-Strauss. But many recognised them as being important and necessary. Montagu's main shortcoming as a popular writer consisted in not being a storyteller, a lack which would incidentally not have been a problem had he confined himself to the academy. Consider the following, typical extract from a popular article of his:

*In view of the fact that there exists, at the present time, a widespread belief in the innate nature of competition, that is to say, that competition is a form of behavior with which every organism is born, and that this is particularly true of man, it will be necessary to discuss such facts, with which scientific studies have recently acquainted us, which throw light upon this notion.*

*Just when the idea of the innate competitiveness of man came into being I have not the least idea. It is at least several thousand years old, and was probably in circulation long before The Old Testament came to be written. It*

*is quite possible that the idea of the innate competitiveness of man is as old as man himself. There are some existing non-literate cultures, such as the Zuni of the American Southwest, which abhor competition and in which the idea of innate competitiveness is non-existent. It is quite possible that many prehistoric peoples held similar notions. (Montagu 1952)*

Lucid and informative? Definitely. But engaging and exciting? Hardly. Yet it must be kept in mind that Montagu, a British Jew himself, studied under Boas at a time when mainstream intellectuals and politicians saw eugenics as reasonable and racial science as respectable, and that he wrote his first major book about race and culture at the height of the Second World War. The time and topic placed the context of his work beyond the demands of the entertainment industry.

- *The essay.* This challenging literary genre can be defined as an extremely subjective form of nonfiction. Assuming that Leach was right in claiming that most anthropologists were failed novelists, here is a chance to become a truly creative writer without having to invent persons and events. Michel de Montaigne, the 16th century thinker usually credited with the invention of the literary essay, saw his texts as *essais* in the proper sense of the word, that is, as *attempts*. The essay, unlike the article, is inconclusive. It plays with ideas, juxtaposing them, trying them out, discarding some ideas on the way, following others to their logical conclusion. In the celebrated climax of his essay on cannibalism, Montaigne forces himself to admit that had he himself grown up among cannibals, he would in all likelihood have become a cannibal himself. This is not an option that most 16th century French noblemen would even have contemplated.

It is possible to place essays on a continuum between the literary essay, verging on prose-poetry at one extreme, and the nonliterary, which at the other extreme approaches the article or nonfiction book. Unlike other nonfiction genres, however, the essay has to be written in a spirit of exploration. The author must not give the impression that she knows all the answers before the writing process begins (even if she thinks she does).

Moreover, in the essay, the writer sees the reader as an ally and fellow-traveller, not as an antagonist to be defeated or persuaded. The essay appeals to the reader's common sense, it may occasionally address him directly, and the essayist tries to ensure that the reader follows her out on whichever limb she is heading for.

There are many splendid examples of anthropological essays. Many of Geertz' celebrated writings would fit most of the criteria. Books such as Adam Kuper's *Culture: The Anthropologist's Account* (1999) and possibly Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966) could be classified as essays. Pierre Clastres' remarkable *La société contre l'Etat* (1977; *Society Against the State*, 1988) is both a romantic travelogue, a critical intervention with an anarchist tendency and – chiefly – an essay about the fate of stateless peoples in the modern world, written in the tradition of Leiris and Caillois. The German maverick anthropologist Hans-Peter Duerr, through his bold criticism of Norbert Elias' theory of 'the civilizing process' and his somewhat new age-tinged account of shamanism (Duerr 1984), has also engaged with the general intellectual debate of his time through the demanding, open-ended form of the learned essay. There are also some others – but again, they are surprisingly few. Rather than appealing to common sense and intellectual curiosity in the reader, most anthropologists close themselves off from general scrutiny (and readership) by retreating into the arcane conventions of the discipline.

One anthropologist who did not succumb to this temptation was Ruth Benedict, who wrote one of the most influential books about Japanese culture during the Second World War. The book's success may have led to some professional embarrassment among those who saw hands-on fieldwork *sur place* as the only possible way of gaining insight into another culture, since Benedict had never been to Japan, nor did she speak or read Japanese. Unlike the other American academics enlisted by the US Office of War Information to make sense of the enemy, however, she met and interviewed many Japanese who were interned in the USA, watched Japanese films and discussed them with natives, and did everything in her power to obtain intimate knowledge of

that 'enigmatic culture' from a distance (Hendry 1996).

Some readers may be surprised to find *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* as an exemplar of the anthropological essay. For was it not a book commissioned by the war industry, written with a very clear objective in mind, namely to understand the Japanese in order to defeat them? And did not Benedict also embody the very opposite spirit to that of the good essayist: linear, abstract, confident in her own answers? Well, yes, but her book on Japan is very different from the commercially much more successful *Patterns of Culture* in that she approaches her subject-matter with a certain humility and bewilderment, allowing her readers to share her initial confusion. The book, written largely for non-anthropologists, actually influenced not only policies during the post-war American occupation of Japan (a later version of the US government might have needed a similar book on Iraq), but has also led to vivid debates about Japanese culture and identity in Japan itself. According to a source cited by Hendry (1996), the book may have been read by as many as twenty million Japanese! The book is written and composed in the riddle genre, interspersing analysis and description with doubt and uncertainty. In the end, everything seems to fall neatly in place, but the book is sufficiently ambiguous (a virtue in essay writing, a vice in standard academic practice) to have been read in many ways, almost like a work of literature. Now, many recent anthropology books are also interpreted in different ways, but the reason may just as well be obscurity, deliberate or involuntary, as complexity – and obscurity is not to be conflated with subtlety. In Benedict's case, there is little of the former but much more of the latter.

- *The biography*. Single-informant ethnographies exist, such as Crapanzano's *Tuhami* or Shostak's *Nisa*, and many 'whole society' ethnographies might have been written as biographies, relying as they do on key informants. Add to this the growing appreciation of the life story as empirical material in anthropology, and it becomes nothing short of puzzling that so few anthropologists have written accessible, engaging biographies of people they know intimately. Publishers want biographies, readers want biographies, and the best biographies portray a time and a place just as much

as they tell the life story of some individual deemed interesting for one reason or another.

Life stories have been put to several interesting uses in recent years. One method is that deployed by Marianne Gullestad in *Everyday Philosophers* (1996), where the informants have themselves written lengthy narratives about their own lives and the anthropologist assumes an editor's role. Although few would use this method in its extreme form, prompting informants to write about themselves is arguably an underused form of data collecting. A less experimental, but no less successful, method is the one employed by Katy Gardner in *Songs from River's Edge* (1997), surely one of the most beautifully written ethnographies of recent decades. Based on village fieldwork in Bangladesh, Gardner's book has in effect crossed the boundary into literature, and it is presented by the publisher as a collection of stories. (She also published a more academic book from the same fieldwork.) Gardener has chosen narrative over analysis, and the book is free of jargon and was published as a trade book, not as an academic monograph. Reading it made me think that there is no good reason why anthropologists should not combine this approach – let the people's biographies and the events the anthropologist encounter speak for themselves – with an analytical wrapping at the beginning and the end. This is not the place to discuss whether Gardner's unusual way of presenting her ethnography is useful for anthropology (I suspect it might be, but there are several issues that need to be addressed before concluding), but as a way of enlarging a general readership's vision of the world, it is commendable. A flourishing of well written anthropological biographies, or documentary stories, would doubtless raise anthropology's presence in the popular consciousness, and as an additional bonus, it would alert the public to the differences between anthropology and other forms of academic inquiry such as cultural studies.

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Since the Second World War, anthropology has shrunk away from the public eye in almost every country where it has an academic presence. Student

numbers grow; young men and women are still being seduced by the intellectual magic of anthropology, ideas originating in anthropology become part of an everyday cultural reflexivity – and yet, the subject is all but invisible outside its own circles. In fact, one of the greatest anthropological publishing successes of recent decades has been something of an embarrassment to the subject, namely Nigel Barley's satirical books from Central Africa and South-East Asia. The feeling that anthropologists feed in a parasitical manner on 'the others' is still rather widespread among intellectuals outside the discipline, and Barley's books have done little to disprove this view.

With few exceptions, the examples of successful public engagement that I have discussed above were published at least half a century ago. Paradoxically, as the discipline has grown, its perceived wider relevance has diminished. In the mid-twentieth century, the day of Mead, Montagu and Evans-Pritchard, anthropologists still engaged in general intellectual debate and occasionally wrote popular, yet intellectually challenging texts. The number of anthropologists to do so has dwindled. In the USA, William Beeman may be alone in writing regularly for the press, and the cultural anthropologists visible in the huge and variegated American media landscape – Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Micaela di Leonardo are among them – can easily be counted. In the UK, Edmund Leach (d. 1989) and Ernest Gellner (d. 1995) were the last major public intellectuals among anthropologists.

There are more of us than ever before, yet fewer reach out to communicate with a wider world. Probably there is a cause and effect here. As Jeremy MacClancy has remarked (1996: 10; see also Grimshaw and Hart 1993, Wilcken 1994), the number of professional anthropologists was so limited in the interwar years that monograph writers were forced to keep a general educated audience in mind as they wrote. After the Second World War, anthropologists have increasingly been talking to each other, the argument goes, simply because they no longer had to speak to others.

As a general explanation this will not do. Surely, there is a very significant number of historians in the Anglophone world as well, yet many of them are

extremely successful in their attempts to communicate with non-historians. Their professional community is less sequestered, less bounded, less smug and possibly less self-righteous than the anthropologists' guild. There is something that the historians do that anthropologists could learn from.

An anecdote about the historian and the anthropologist may give a hint. The historian and the anthropologists discuss the relative merits of their subjects. The anthropologist says, in a smug voice: 'Well, if you historians intend to study a river, you have to wait until it has dried out. You then enter the dry riverbed with your magnifying glasses and whatnot. We anthropologists, on the other hand, wade straight into the messy wetness of the river and stay there until we have been able to make sense of it as it flows by.' The historian lights his pipe, looks out of the window and answers slowly: 'Yes, I suppose you are right. Yet, you anthropologists seem to dry out the living river, while we historians endeavour to bring water to the dry riverbed.'

What historians do is to tell stories. What anthropologists do is to convert stories into analysis. While this brings us a little closer to answering the question of why anthropology is out of touch with the popular consciousness, the question is sufficiently complex, and has enough ramifications, to need a chapter of its own.

*But if you want to read it, you'll have to [buy](#) the book!*

Engaging Anthropology: The Case for a Public Presence. Oxford: Berg. ISBN 978-1-84520-064-0. 192 s. Eriksen, Thomas Hylland (2004) Røtter og frø: Identitet i en omskiftelig tid. Oslo: Aschehoug. 250 s. Eriksen, Thomas Hylland (2018) Public ritual in Mauritius. I: The Composition of Anthropology: How Anthropological Texts Are Written. Routledge ISBN 9781138208124. s. 73-88. Eriksen, Thomas Hylland (2017) Sex, violence and nationalism. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 40.(9) s. 1438-1449. Eriksen, Thomas Hylland (2017) After 22 July 2011: Norwegians Together. I: Small Countries: Structures and Sensibilities. University of Pennsylvania Press ISBN 978-0-8122-4893-7. s. 67-82. Read the full-text online edition of Engaging Anthropology: The Case for a Public Presence (2006). Engaging Anthropology takes an unflinching look at why the discipline has not gained the popularity and respect it deserves in the twenty-first century. While showcasing the intellectual power of discipline, Eriksen takes the anthropological community to task for its unwillingness to engage more proactively with the media in a wide range of current debates, from immigrant issues to biotechnology. Eriksen argues that anthropology needs to rediscover the art of narrative and abandon arid analysis and, more provocatively, anthropologists need to lose their fear of plunging into the vexed issues m