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In identifying what he saw as best in humanity Joseph Schumpeter once pointed out that it is vital “To realize the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly”. By declaring this, he joins a long and diverse list of philosophers and political theorists that posit, in different ways, that the political sphere is not a site of truth, but rather one of manipulation (Machiavelli 1981; Weber 1946; Sorel 1950; Lefort 1986; Rorty 1989; Berlin 1986; Foucault 1972; Bailey 2001). In light of this, the question I want to pose today is what does this insight offer or suggest to a project of Public Interest Anthropology (PIA). Before I do this however, I want to ground this discussion by briefly explaining how I came to be interested in Public Interest Anthropology as I believe it illuminates some of the tensions this nascent field faces.

I came to graduate school after spending a few years working in development in Sub-Saharan Africa. I fled the development world because I was frustrated with my role within the structure and my inability to investigate and transform some of the grave problems in the field.

When I entered graduate school I was drawn to anthropology, as I believed it would leave room for serious intellectual engagement, without forcing me to lose sight of the issues and people with whom I wanted to work. This flexibility seemed liberating because it allowed for something I understood as intellectual growth and or knowledge making, while at the same time affording me the space for an engaged politics.

However as I spend time in the academic world and become more closely related to the field, I have found it difficult to keep focused on both the project of knowledge as well as the project of politics. This is precisely the paradox that I think public interest anthropology faces. In other words, how can PIA be political or public and make statements about the world that resonate outside the field while being housed and having allegiance to an institution that deems itself primarily a place of knowledge building?

In thinking about the relationship between politics and a committed academics I would contend that in order for PIA to take “public interest” seriously, it must explicitly define itself as political. This is inevitable if as a body of ideas or a movement, PIA takes as its objective the production and consequent injection of scholarship into the public sphere in the hopes of creating change. Consequently, just as politics is not a site of truth, the same must be said of anthropological research written in the interest of a public. Now to return to the question of PIA’s relationship to the political, I would suggest that Public Interest Anthropologists must let go some of the boundless intellectual questions and make specific choices so that we can employ a critique in a productive discussion within the public sphere. This is not to abandon important disciplinary questions such as representation, reflexivity and the subtlety of power as I will discuss later, but rather to understand that they can never be fully answered only attended to.

In light of this, today I intend to explore different meanings of the political for public interest anthropology, drawing a distinction between the types of politics embedded in our research and a broader form of political engagement. I do so in order to argue that at some level anthropologists need to reengage with the social sphere. I will then draw an analogy between the role of public interest anthropologists and Gramsci's idea of an organic intellectual. Finally I want to explore different potential tactics for engaging in the public or symbolic order.

The above contentions force me to define politics. Clearly noting that the political is not a site of truth, but rather a site of action or manipulation is a beginning. But what exactly does it mean to say that public interest anthropology should be understood as a site of action not of Truth with a capital T? To answer this it is crucial to work out some of the different dimensions of the political, and to interrogate the trajectory in which these different outlooks lead. My conviction is an engaged anthropology offers us the space to be more involved with the publics we seek to serve. Therefore, I would like to draw out what I see as an unreal but useful political continuum for public interest anthropology. On one side of the continuum I would place the study of the political, in the center engaged scholarship, and on the other side public participation, I say this realizing that the three categories naturally bleed into one another.

The first category the study of the political would encompass the politics that we research and write about in the field. This ranges from work on the political structures that surround the people we study and the ways that power is embedded in culture, to the politics of everyday life that are attended to in different sorts of resistance research. The defining characteristic of this category would be that it is concerned with the politics of our subjects.

Intimately related to the study of the political and in the center of my heuristic continuum would be engaged scholarship. This I believe comes naturally to anthropologists as it involves the enunciation of difference and the disruption of universals—an approach which ultimately brings the questions of representation, reflexivity and power to the fore of our work. This is common within anthropology as it develops from our methods and major conceptual terms. Thus often in the field, anthropologists reveal the varied ways in which people live and find meanings in their lives. Further, this tactic illuminates the contemporary political contention that the symbolic order is a socially produced sphere that is in perpetual contestation—an argument made by such diverse thinkers as Volosinov, Gramsci and Rorty. Accordingly, anthropological work in this vein illustrates the nature of these battles over the signifiers that define the social world and opens up spaces to imagine change and different ways of inhabiting the world.

Engaged scholarship is important and directly relevant to the last and most important category for the public interest anthropologist, public participation. This type of work entails moving past the mere disruption of universals to joining the fight over the definition of certain key terms and symbols that define the political arena. I make this argument in light of Susan Wright's insightful essay about the politicization of culture, in which she discusses the three levels in which there are contested processes of meaning making. At the most overt level,

Wright points to the symbolic and the contestation over key signs and terms. It is here at this most blatant level that I believe PIA must focus. What I am asserting is that at some level PIA must be willing to engage in this battle over signs. Currently, anthropologists mostly work within the bounds of the first two categories the study of the political and engaged scholarship, however the future I imagine for public interest anthropology involves a shift to encompassing all of these categories.

At this point, I'd like to reconsider Schumpeter's declaration that truth is contextual, and thus we must stand for our position realizing the transient nature of it's authority. The importance that I take from this is that there must be space to move beyond the infinite particulars to say something that has more universal meaning, even if that universe is contextual and dynamic and prepared for its own death. Admittedly, this would place public interest anthropology in another common paradox between fragmentation and unification, but as recent theorists such as David Harvey and Peter Hallward have argued there are ways to make strong powerful unifying statements about humanity without being trapped in a totalizing position.

I would like to draw an analogy between the public interest anthropologist and Gramsci's notion of an organic intellectual. This I think is useful because it illuminates the potential role Public Interest Anthropologists can play. For Gramsci the organic intellectual emerges from the socio-political group he/she serves, which in the case of his writing was the proletariat. Further, this intellectual plays the role of a hegemonic or counter hegemonic force fighting over the terms that define the social world. In late capitalist America, with the unbounding of class, it seems that at least within the academy, the anthropologist is most suited to the role of organic intellectual, both because of a commitment to specific publics and because of a research method which highlights experience near work and the creation of categories that at some level originate from those we study. This arguably places the anthropologists in a closer relationship with the subject of study and, most likely affords the public interest anthropologist the opportunity at a better representation of individual and group experience.

This analogy being drawn, just as Gramsci's intellectuals play a vital role in transformation of a social/political system the same I hope could be made of this burgeoning field. However, I want to add a vital caveat. This role could be quite dangerous if we do not infuse Gramsci's idea of the organic intellectual with what Richard Rorty identifies as a strong sense of irony. An irony, reconverging with Schumpeter, which is based in the wisdom that our beliefs are contextual. What this would afford the public interest anthropologist or ironic organic intellectual is the ability to use the provisional categories emerging from those we study in an attempt to fill some of the terms and symbols that organize the social world.

Here I would like to briefly suggest a few possible directions that the PIA could take to engage in this fight over the symbolic. Some of the ideas I have found theoretically illuminating are Georges Sorel's idea of myth, David Harvey's call for a metanarrative, or the recent intervention in postcolonial theory made by Peter Hallward in which he argues for a positional or even polemic academics

which appreciates that we make our own history, but not in circumstances of our own choosing. For me these ideas, among others, point towards new ways for the anthropologist to speak with the public.

Paul Wellstone once said, "politics is what we dare to imagine." It is in this spirit that I draw your attention to what I see as the potential for a surrealist inspired anthropology that places change and the fight for change in imagination. This politics would draw its meanings from the imaginings of the people we study and its power from the strategic deployment by anthropologists of these meanings in the struggle to define the thinkable in the public sphere. This is stimulating both because it carries its own inherent denaturalizing critique of the world and also because it is a future oriented transformative project

I want to end by referring to an email that came out prior to this conference regarding an AAA session on media. The email suggested, "Anthropology needs a stronger voice in shaping public policy.... Good communications with the media is one way of making sure that the voices of the people we work with are heard." I take this email as evidence of a growing sentiment in the field that we should be more accessible to the publics we seek to serve. It is my contention however, that this will happen not only through more currency in the public domain, but also via a change in how we research, theorize and write.