

A STRUCTURAL CONTRADICTION

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I stand before you caught in a structural contradiction. The process is the problem.

On the one hand, my concern is with public engagement. I keep searching for the right combination of words to express what I mean by public anthropology. But for me certain elements are clearly critical. Public anthropology involves enlarging the public sphere, subverting the narrow niched conversations of specialization. It strives to empower citizens to deal with the critical issues of our time.

Rather than getting drawn into the academy's dysfunctional hegemonic styles - where verbal pirouettes (instead of concrete action) are the currency of status - it strives to change structures and, in the process, to make anthropology more accountable to the broader constituencies that morally, intellectually, and financially support it. In short, public anthropology emphasizes enhancing democracy.

And I have, in the works, several plans to transform the structures that inhibit this engagement. I might mention the California Series in Public Anthropology or the two journals I edit - Engaging Ideas and The Graduate Journal - or the American Anthropologist Archive Project or, critically, a set of Structural Change Initiatives to begin soon.

But here is the problem. Engagement involves active not passive audiences. The more I talk, the more passive you, the audience, become. So where is the engagement?

That is the structural contradiction. I want engagement but the structures offered, at the AAA, restrict it. The more I talk, the less there is. So I will end here. I will do my best to answer YOUR questions. Please, ask away.