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Australian Anthropologists and Public Anthropology

Mary Edmunds & Monique Skidmore

In 2004, the authors convened a session entitled 'Public Anthropology' at the Australian Anthropology Society's annual conference. The session examined the development of a specific stream of public anthropology in the USA and Britain and its articulation by writers such as Robert Borofsky in the aftermath of the Yanomami controversy and Richard Werbner in the African context. In pursuing this discussion, we identify three key characteristics that distinguish public anthropology: the broader application of ethnography to urgent and political social issues in a way that shows the profoundly relational nature of current crises to historical, political and local events and forces; a focus on this approach as a central aspect of training, particularly at the postgraduate level; and an active and accessible engagement in public discussion and debate. We present a short case study from Skidmore's research on disease, suffering and the health system in Burma to illustrate ways in which a public anthropology approach could represent the current health crisis in Burma in an effective manner. Drawing also on the work of our fellow panellists, we argue for the timeliness of the development of a public anthropology stream in Australia and for the deliberate inclusion of public anthropology in the Australian Anthropology Society's mandate.

Keywords: Public Anthropology; Australia; Burma; Australian Anthropological Society; Asylum Seekers

The aim of 'public anthropology' is to bring the issues, concerns and insights of anthropology to both academic and non-academic audiences, in order to illuminate the broader social issues of our time. In our view, 'public anthropology' is distinguished by three key characteristics: the broader application of ethnography to urgent and political social issues in a way that shows the profoundly relational nature of current crises to historical, political and local events and forces; a focus on this

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approach as a central aspect of training, particularly at the postgraduate level; and an active and accessible engagement in public discussion and debate.

Raymond Firth (1981), and later Georges Guille-Escuret (1996), referred to the term 'engaged anthropology' as a third dimension of anthropology, beyond the pure/applied distinction. We suggest that, while engaged anthropology plays an important role in public and policy arenas in Australia, and continues the dynamic relationship between practice and theory, it is different from 'public anthropology' as it has emerged in the USA and Britain. Public anthropology as we have defined it above, as distinct from engaged anthropology, is still to be developed in Australia.

There is a significant history in Australian anthropology of 'engaged anthropology', that is, of active involvement in issues of public concern that draw on our disciplinary knowledge and skills. Elkin (1943), Stanner (1964) and Thomson (1949), to name but three anthropologists of an earlier generation, all in their very different ways used their ethnographies in the service of particular public imperatives. That tradition has been followed by other anthropologists, from the 1971 Gove case (in which anthropologists worked with the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land to contest the development of the Nabalco bauxite mine on their land),¹ through the development of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth) and the Queensland *Aboriginal Land Act 1991* and subsequent land claims, to current native title claims. Other anthropologists continue to work with indigenous people in Australia and elsewhere in helping to improve industry practices, for example, in mining. A number work in areas such as health and medicine with policy implications outside the academy.

Anthropologists in Australia have entered or been drawn into the public sphere, sometimes willingly, sometimes very reluctantly. The Coronation Hill controversy in the late 1980s and early 1990s over proposed mining on Jawoyn land in the Northern Territory was one such occasion. In the more recent Hindmarsh Island bridge conflict in South Australia, a number of anthropologists, but most starkly Deane Fergie, were subjected, for nearly a decade, to intense and often hostile public scrutiny in the media, through a 1995 Royal Commission and a 2001 Federal Court trial. The Court found, without qualification, in favour of Deane Fergie and the Ngarrindjeri women with whom she had worked. Unlike anthropologists in other more dangerous parts of the world, we have had no fatalities. However, there has been vigorous debate, for example, on the AASNet Internet listserve about the ethics of public commentary on mining, native title and indigenous land issues.

Public Anthropology, Citizenship and Human Rights

When Richard Werbner gave a lecture in 2004 at The Australian National University, entitled 'Reasonable radicals and public anthropology in Africa', it raised the question of whether the various strands in Australian anthropology constituted what he was referring to as public anthropology. In that lecture, and subsequently, Werbner argued the need for a public anthropology to 'widen knowledge of and

theoretical interest in public debates about rights, citizenship, and political morality in [Botswana] at a time of historic transition in Africa'. Drawing on his long-term research in Botswana, Werbner (2004, 3) challenges 'that intellectually dominant movement, Afro-pessimism, by rewriting the Africanist agenda'. This is a bold claim, but one he supports by his study of the Kalanga elites and by his analysis of the relationship, rather than the opposition, between town and country in Botswana:

Anthropologists rightly take pride in letting the people they study lead them. In following the move from country to town and back there arises the immediate challenge for public anthropology in Africa: to straddle this divide, both in fieldwork and in theory. The great issues of the day, no less than the people themselves, flow urgently across any supposed rural–urban divide, and so, too, must anthropological research ... The more public anthropology builds on its strength in countryside research, the more likely it is to reach greater strength in related research in town. (Werbner 2004, 7)

Central to Werbner's analysis is a view of the new forms of political and cultural pluralism in Africa as key aspects of the negotiation of difference. He also sees these new forms of pluralism as profoundly relational; most groups, like his Kalanga elites, now inhabit an environment in which they confront, and are confronted by, a multiplicity of different cultural milieux that are, nevertheless, necessarily experienced as related and interrelated (Werbner 2004, 6). This kind of relational analysis is the specific contribution of anthropology, and hence of public anthropology, to dealing with the larger social issues of our times, not just in Africa, but more generally.

Wilson and Mitchell (2003, 8) make the same point in terms of the anthropology of human rights where 'human rights are a property of relationships and interconnections between social persons who exercise moral agency ... Anthropologists portray human rights as embodied in social persons and embedded in social networks.' Our concern as anthropologists is human sociality, and is therefore about rights at the level of social practice (Wilson and Mitchell 2003, 5). Establishing and analysing these links allows us to move between a local and a public anthropology. In Australia, the field of human rights has been left largely to lawyers and political scientists, although anthropologists are making forays into the area through indigenous rights both here and in the Pacific.

Public anthropology has been articulated in the USA from a different perspective by writers such as Robert Borofsky (2005) in the aftermath of the Yanomami controversy, and Paul Farmer (2001, 2005) in relation to suffering and the right to health. The majority of poor children's deaths worldwide are due to untreated infectious diseases. This is a biomedical fact, and it is also a social fact evident to many anthropologists working in Third World countries. Farmer (*e.g.*, 2001, 263–82) has called for massive public effort to be put into alleviating the diseases of poverty, and he calls upon Westerners to understand their role in allowing the health and pharmaceuticals industry to be structured in such a way as to make this alleviation of disease an extremely expensive procedure. He speaks publicly on these issues and lobbies governments to allocate funding for those human rights often called

'secondary' human rights, such as the right to health (e.g., Farmer 2005, xiv–xxviii). Farmer's social advocacy is an example of how anthropology is being reconfigured as a truly 'public' anthropology in the USA. This social advocacy is 'engaged' and can surely be considered 'urgent', and it is, as Werbner (2004, 6) terms it, profoundly relational, because it makes explicit the links between the politics of the local across avowedly 'liberal' Western nations and the broader geo-political and globalised consequences of twenty-first-century capitalism and corruption upon the lives of children in the Third World.

To date, this kind of relational work linking our ethnographic sites to the moral, political and social crises and issues of our times has been little addressed in Australia. Here, the debate has occurred mainly in the context of the relationship between 'pure' and 'applied' anthropology (see, for just one example, Smith and Finlayson 1997). Even events critical for anthropology in this country, such as the Hindmarsh Island case, have not been cast in terms of bringing the issues, concerns and insights of anthropology to both academic and non-academic audiences, or illuminating the specific ways that anthropology and anthropologists can effectively address the larger social issues of our times (see Borofsky 2001). They have, instead, been viewed as issues potentially damaging to anthropology's public image.

We believe it is timely to develop a more explicit notion of public anthropology in Australia, and to explore what it might mean in our region and for the Australian Anthropological Society (AAS). It is the expansion of the anthropological focus that lies at the heart of public anthropology. Both the American Anthropological Association and Britain's Royal Anthropological Institute take these issues as fundamental to the ongoing growth of the discipline. We also believe in anthropology's capacity to engage with broad social and global issues, while retaining the integrity of the ethnographic method. The concept of a truly 'public' anthropology requires us to move beyond our disciplinary boundaries and traditional modes of debate among members of our discipline or professional society, while maintaining the intimate knowledge based on careful ethnography that is anthropology's strength. Ethnography is not just our craft; it is an act of witnessing, and of testimony, and it challenges the ethnographer to analyse just whose interests are being served, and to make those findings readily available.

Critical Ethnography and Public Anthropology

A recent issue of *Anthropological Forum* was dedicated to the topic of critical ethnography in the Pacific. Petersen, one of the contributors, whose title raised a question—'Important to whom? On ethnographic usefulness, competence and relevance'—observed that, 'The message I repeatedly find in reports and editors' headlines is that anthropologists have not been especially concerned about what happens to the people we study' (2005, 308). While this judgment may be a little harsh, it suggests, as he goes on to say, 'that whatever it is that ethnography is or has become, it is understood poorly, if at all, by the public'.

In the same issue, Feinberg (2005, 297) reflected that:

Critical ethnography, as presented in this collection, involves a reflexive consideration of the anthropological enterprise, its effects on the communities in which we work, and on the global community of which they (and we) are a part. Such consideration may encompass, as Harrington (this issue) observes, 'writing about an issue *crucial* to people's lives'. As such, it must engage 'in the analysis of exploitation, oppression and injustice, including those forms of these ills in which anthropology itself may be complicit'.

Feinberg's comments, and those of his colleagues whom he cites, make the claim that, at least in the Pacific, ethnography and ethnographic practices are unequivocally political. Their arguments resonate in terms of the possibilities for a broader public anthropology. Anthropologists play a range of roles in relation to public life and public policy. The way in which our testimonies and witness statements are incorporated into institutional frameworks is an area of anthropological praxis requiring further attention and a clear understanding of the ethical risks of procuring and providing such testimony (Wedel and Feldman 2005). We engage as expert witnesses in the courts as well as in other facets of public life relating to policy and development.

Like the term 'engaged anthropology', an anthropology of public policy is a necessary component of a public anthropology in Australia. It is the most effective way, we believe, of rejuvenating links between an anthropology that is relevant to the public and an anthropology that draws upon what it does best in grounded ethnography. Wedel and Feldman (2005, 1) have recently made the case that policy issues 'lie at the heart of anthropology'. This is what they have to say about the relevance of an anthropology of public policy (pp. 1–2):

Increasingly central to the organization of contemporary societies, public policies connect disparate actors in complex power and resource relations; wittingly or not, these actors reproduce, resist or otherwise affect larger, non-localized regimes of power. Policy thus offers an ideal venue for examining the grounding of global processes ... Anthropology offers distinctive contributions in how it constructs its object of study (e.g. policy as a fluid site of political contestation) in the multi-faceted ways that it studies that object (e.g. ethnography, the 'extended case method' [and] discourse analysis), and in the ways that it theorizes that object (e.g. the power relations and interactions of parties to a policy process) ...

'Studying through', the process of following the source of a policy—its discourses, prescriptions and programmes—through to those affected by the policies (be they a community, company, social network, 'clan', general public or other entity) provides a promising framework for examining policy processes.

To take up the task of analysing public policy in a globalising and post-9/11 world is thus an initiative especially suited to anthropology. In a public anthropology, then, ethnography remains the centrepiece, but carries with it responsibilities to tackle related broader social issues and to communicate research results in a way that is accessible to the public. So public anthropology is not just about how we study (that is, 'studying through', or relational anthropology) but equally about how results can have impacts beyond the discipline.

Ethnographic writing can be powerful and moving in its description of individual lives and in its concrete examples of suffering, atrocity, social inequality and injustice. In accepting the responsibility to write about individual and mass suffering in an engaging, accessible language and in non-scholarly formats, we erase the narrow dichotomies so prevalent in our discipline. Jonathan Benthall (1995, 6) has remarked that anthropologists 'love to step the catwalk of haute couture universitaire', and Orin Starn (1994, 22) has written that 'ramified into subfields with their own debates, jargons, journals, and conferences, anthropologists have grown increasingly removed from the public sphere'. Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2006) has gone further, creating a list of techniques that anthropologists use to cocoon themselves from the public domain. He calls it the 'art of staying aloof', and it includes a commitment to certain philosophical or bounded ideas that he defines as:

elitism, a myopic specialisation resulting from 'my ethnography'; complexity as conclusion rather than premise; the postcolonial critiques and the loss of 'the native'; loss of confidence as science; anthropology as a subversive kind of activity; and the privileging of analysis over narrative. (Hylland Eriksen 2006, 20)

Public Anthropology and Postgraduate Training

In 2004, we organised a session on 'Public Anthropology' at the AAS Annual Conference.² In North America, the introduction of an academic stream defined as public anthropology has been responsible for a surge in membership to professional anthropological bodies by early career researchers and graduate students. In this context, it is perhaps worth noting that the Public Anthropology session at the 2004 AAS conference attracted an overflowing audience and had to be moved to a larger venue. We later received requests for information about public anthropology from PhD students around the country. The PhD research undertaken by one of our panellists, Nathan Boyle, indicates that there is already an interest in such an approach by Australian postgraduate anthropology students. His topic, 'Promoting human rights: NGO practices in a Thai context', is based on a year's fieldwork with Forum-Asia, a regional human rights NGO based in Bangkok. Its campaign for an investigation into the disappearance of a Thai human rights lawyer is one of the ways in which Boyle suggests that Forum-Asia provides an important alternative public discourse in a society where human rights are often sacrificed to military, political and economic interests at the highest levels of power. In focusing not only on the ethnography of definable social worlds but also on the intersections between those and other worlds, doctoral students such as Boyle are taking up the challenge of creating a public anthropology in this country. Finally, the creation of the Australian Network of Student Anthropologists (ANSA), a postgraduate student body of anthropologists with a membership now close to 200, is evidence of the desire and determination of the next generation of Australian anthropologists to form alliances and forums for networking. It is to be hoped that these young anthropologists will

together begin the process of relating their field research to the broader intellectual and human rights issues of the new millennium.

Perhaps we are beginning to see in Australia a parallel with developments in the USA, Britain and other parts of the world. Public anthropology has become, in less than a decade in the USA, a vehicle for reinvigorating student interest in anthropology, by asserting head-on its relevance to and usefulness for understanding the contemporary world. One example is the Public Outreach Assessment Project, hosted on the Public Anthropology website, which lists centres, institutions, universities and museums across the USA that emphasise public outreach. Through such outreach activities and innovative new forms of graduate training, the public anthropology initiative in the USA has broadly reinstated the utility of anthropology with regard to social suffering, social justice and inequality, and social advocacy. It has been able to do so by taking as one of its basic tenets the aim of addressing broad social, transnational or emerging global problems beyond the discipline.

Developing a Public Anthropology

Public anthropology in North America and Britain is also based on a belief in the relevance of anthropology and its ability to make a significant contribution to public debates by providing important information and concrete examples concerning the beliefs, concerns and life experiences of its informants. Certain subfields of anthropology lend themselves to this endeavour more than others. Genocide scholars, forensic and medical anthropologists, and anthropologists of human rights, peace, war and violence all bear witness to urgent contemporary problems of great relevance to governments, international aid organisations and other policy-making institutions.

Public anthropology is not the only anthropology. Nor was it the purpose of our panel to advocate that we all become public intellectuals and frequently speak out in public. Some of us, and some of our research work, are better suited to this than others. What we do believe, however, is that our discipline sometimes places us in situations where we witness atrocity, injustice and suffering. In those circumstances, we have a moral responsibility to write, if not speak, against it. Anthropology has a truly radical and subversive potential that has yet to be fully realised in contemporary Australia.

The work of Agamben (1998) shows that in becoming stateless persons asylum seekers and refugees are seen by governments and humanitarian organisations as figures of 'bare life'. Using arguments drawn from Arendt, Agamben (1994, 2) distinguishes bare life from political life—the break-up of 'the identity between man and citizen'—with the refugee posing a paradox where, 'in the nation-state system, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterise them as rights of the citizens of a state'. This calculation about the rights of state citizens is also seen in the

work of Asad (2003), who argues that the contemporary nation-state rearranges 'forms of suffering' into the 'violence of national and colonial wars' (quoted in Das 2006, 93). Das (2007, 30) takes Asad's assertion further, arguing that, in this sense, 'violence becomes part of the subject's attachment to the modern state'.

Anthropologists are in a position to further this understanding of the rights and definitions of modern state citizens by looking at the purposeful reinscribing of humanity to 'stateless citizens', through social networks and relations of asylum seekers and refugees. Some of those networks will have been destroyed or disrupted, but continue to form a framework of reference (and produce cultural effects); some will be exploitative or oppressive; others will constitute networks of mutuality, support and reciprocity as they are developed among groups of refugees and asylum seekers and also between them and members of their host societies. In this context, public anthropology can help to expand public debates about rights, citizenship, and political morality (Werbner 2004), as these concepts are thrown into question by the experiences of particular asylum seekers and refugees.

The situatedness of anthropology takes issues from the abstract level, examines how they operate in people's everyday lives, and then feeds them back into public debate. An anthropological account of these stories must, therefore, examine the broader social, cultural and institutional processes and networks that came to shape them, but it does so by starting in the place of those involved. It notes how they interpreted and responded to the conditions in which they found themselves; how their cultural and social background shaped their responses; what cultural and social transformations have been effected by and for them via this combination of external circumstances and individual and group responses. An anthropological approach also takes account of what new social networks have emerged as a result of these circumstances and responses and what constraints have been imposed by the institutional context within which they have had to operate. Then there is the new social environment that asylum seekers and refugees have encountered, made up of networks of refugee support and human rights advocacy groups, as well as the refugee communities themselves.³

In Australia, a more detailed analysis of these kinds of issues may include, for example, an examination of the security officers and guards (first, Australian Correctional Services, followed by Global Solutions Limited) in charge of the mandatory detention centres for asylum seekers, as well as officials of the former federal Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA).⁴ Both the detention centre security organisation and, particularly, DIMIA officials, all of whom had been protected by extreme secrecy, came under criticism in the *Palmer inquiry into the Immigration Department* for 'a culture of denial and self-justification' (Palmer 2005, 168). It is perhaps ironic that this analysis of the culture of the Department comes not from an anthropologist, but from a former head of the Australian Federal Police (and overseer of the inquiry into DIMIA), Mick Palmer.⁵ However, anthropologists, of course—and journalists, lawyers, refugee advocates, human rights activists and defenders—were all excluded from undertaking any such

examination. A public anthropology approach to this issue would seek to demonstrate what happens to people who experience a lack of human rights: how they seek to engage with the conditions in which they find themselves, including the public institutions involved, in order to achieve better access to these rights and to a better life. Such an approach would make explicit the links between these experiences and 'rights, citizenship, and political morality'. This work is already being begun in Australia in other fields; see, for example, 'Bare life: Asylum-seekers, Australian politics and Agamben's critique of violence', by philosopher Fiona Jenkins (2004).

The refusal of a state to inscribe its citizens with basic human rights is a further form of the dehumanising process described by Arendt and Agamben. In contemporary Burma, the right to health is, like so many other basic human rights, denied to all but those few who can afford international healthcare and who are given access to passports to leave the country. Like Farmer's (2005) analysis of the new war on the poor, Skidmore argues, in the following short case study, a form of complicity evident in the action of the witnesses and foreign aid programs that prolongs the misery and suffering of Burmese people. She argues that, in such situations, a public anthropology approach is the only ethical response for anthropologists.

Case Study: Burma's Humanitarian Crisis

In the monsoon season of 2002, I was manning the bellows for a wiry, gaunt, 78-year-old alchemist, during a three-month apprenticeship in the white, but forbidden, arts of Burmese wizardry. As I levered the bellows up and down, dodging the sparks from the bubbling mercuric salts in the crucible, the old man was telling me about his ongoing experimentation (on human subjects) to find a cure for AIDS. He knew that I was interested in his view of the range and frequency of Burmese illnesses and he drew back, momentarily, from his AIDS narrative, to put his quest for a cure for AIDS in perspective. He said to me that:

In the Buddha's discourses on anatomy, he mentioned ... *sarnar*—hungry pain, the greatest disease of all time. There are many diseases in existence like cancer and the notorious HIV ... but they cannot be compared with the greatest disease of hunger.

He went on at length into a particular disease taxonomy, but always returned to his key point: 'Again, the essence is hungry pain that can never be absolutely cured, regardless of an individual's personality or religion.'

I went away that evening from the little alchemy hut beside his house, wondering how I could explain *sarnar*, the greatest disease of all time, to development and emergency aid organisations. The total expenditure on health in Burma is 1.5 per cent of GDP (1998 figures), and there are less than 30 physicians per 100,000 population (WHO 2007). The mortality rate of children under five is more than 10 per cent, and the life expectancy for male children born today is 60 years (UNICEF 2007). Because of economic sanctions, aid provides US\$2.50 per capita per year (UNICEF 2007). Deforestation, industrial pollution of air, soil and water, inadequate

sanitation and water treatment all contribute to high disease rates, and 40 per cent of the country is not covered by even the most basic health services (UNICEF 2007). Burma is clearly in the midst of a health and humanitarian crisis. This is, of course, exactly what Burmese people are saying when they talk about hungry pain.

In the villages and peri-urban fringes of central Burma where I work, it is extremely rare to meet a family that eats three meals a day, and those that do eat small portions of rice so that they can stretch their two adequate meals into three. My fieldwork data indicate that approximately 40 per cent of such Burmese drink the water in which rice is cooked as a way of quenching hunger pains, especially infants and young children. There are seemingly infinite ways of staving off hunger, betelnut paste and opium derivatives being the most common antidotes to *sarnar*. Burma is not considered a country in which people are starving, so is not a priority area of funding for the World Food Program and other United Nations agencies. It is true that people who eat two meals a day of rice, beans and a little shrimp paste are not starving; they are just perpetually miserable, constantly stalked by the spectre of *sarnar*. The lack of a balanced diet and of vitamins and minerals leaves the population with lowered immune defence systems. Coupled with the abject poverty of the majority rural population and the lack of affordable health services, wounds take longer to heal than would otherwise be the case and people are thus more susceptible to secondary infections. Amenorrhea, also due to a lack of nourishment and nutrition, is the major reason women under 40 present to traditional medicine hospitals and clinics.

Foreign aid targets vaccination and literacy rates, for example, and it sells condoms at discounted prices. Development aid is mostly bilateral and administered through UN agencies such as UNICEF. The military regime thus has the final say in the recruitment of the individuals who will distribute, monitor and prioritise aid. The regime has created a set of parallel aid institutions, and requires international organisations to partner these Government-Organised, Non-Government Organisations (GONGOs) and provide training to them. Not only does little of the money allocated to Burmese health programs reach its target audience but also the programs themselves are often bandaid approaches.

Rather than laying down tubing and building water purification plants to ensure potable water, for example, health programs create, instead, videos and pamphlets telling Burmese to wash their hands frequently and boil their water. Similar public education drives teach Burmese people the five main food groups and the secret to a balanced diet. What no one is saying here is that the secret to an adequate diet is to pressure the military regime to stop taxing farmers an ever-increasing proportion of their rice harvest and to stop forced labour, forced military recruitment and forced relocation that prevent Burmese people from having the resources to grow crops to supplement rice.

Sarnar, hungry pain, lives in the countryside, where 87 per cent of the Burmese population live, many miles away from the reach of urban development organisations and their four-wheel-drive vehicles. To write about *sarnar*, to give examples of the futility of bandaid approaches to aid, to follow families whose children would have

lived, not if they were vaccinated by UNICEF for measles but if they had had adequate food in the first five years of life—these are ways for anthropologists to collect data that matter. Such data can be presented using concrete ethnographic examples to bear witness to the misery of rural life under authoritarian rule, and can directly challenge the funding priorities of aid organisations and governments. Further, such data can be used to call upon UN agencies to be more accountable and more effective in their monitoring of aid flows. Almost everyone in Burma is on intimate terms with *sarnar*, as funding agencies and program development officers should also be, and public anthropology can be a powerful tool for social and even political change in such situations. In Burma, there is a well-known but seldom voiced idiom that revolution cannot occur on an empty stomach.

At a writers' conference in Australia in 1996, Noam Chomsky was asked to talk about writers and intellectual responsibility. On that occasion he said:

To speak truth to power is not a particularly honourable vocation. One could seek out an audience that matters—and furthermore ... it should not be seen as an audience, but as a community of common concern in which one hopes to participate constructively. We should not be speaking *to*, but *with*. (Chomsky, in Borofsky 2001)

On the same occasion, Chomsky also said that 'the responsibilities of someone in a more free and open society are ... obviously greater than those who may pay some cost for honesty and integrity'. Chomsky believes that intellectuals who are respected and privileged are the people who write history, and that they have a strong tendency to subordinate themselves to power.

I have worked in Burma for more than a decade now, and it has been my intention from the beginning of this research to speak truth to power, knowing that my access would inevitably be revoked, but that can be said for only a minority of foreign scholars who work on (but rarely 'in') Burma. The Burmese regime is incredibly congenial; its minions are gentlemanly and appear eager to cooperate and to facilitate links between themselves and academics. It is difficult to get past them to the people they are so ruthlessly repressing, and it is very easy to be borne along by the tide of seemingly reasonable requests for collaboration at conferences, ASEAN meetings and regional development forums, and for international associations and links between the regime and universities around the world.

This outward display of congeniality and desire for cooperation contrasts starkly with the situation within Burma, where a centralising authoritarian military council uses the armed forces to quell all dissent. The military is not accountable, and there is no recourse to a legal system or a way to seek justice when wronged. Since 1962, the military juridical apparatus has acted to stop freedom of speech, association and assembly, and to repress all forms of political opposition and mobilisation.

In order to get into Burma and be able to return there, many foreign academics become unwilling to write or say anything controversial about Burmese policies in case their access privileges are revoked. They speak publicly about the 'future' of Burma, but omit the grim brutalities of the present. Often this is couched in terms of

the need for objective or pure scholarship, of not sensationalising violence or taking a one-sided activist approach. As a result of the censorship that occurs within the country, the debate about the current political situation in Burma is being conducted outside the country, especially in relation to issues concerning engagement and sanctions. In such a situation, then, it is especially important, from the perspective of public anthropology, for anthropologists to provide a diversity of voices and understandings of what it is like to be Burmese, because there is currently no other way for the majority to have a voice in these debates.

An example of such public anthropology occurred in 2003, when I provided expert commentary for use by the plaintiffs in the case of the people of Burma versus Unocal (a US-based major energy corporation).⁶ In this case, Unocal was accused of being complicit in the murder, torture, rape and enslavement of Burmese people in the area in which its gas pipeline was being laid in Southeast Burma. Fourteen Burmese people and several activist NGOs needed expert testimony about life in Burma to counter Unocal's claims of always being kept at arm's length by the military regime, and to prove that there was once a system of law and order, which had effectively ceased after the military coup of 1962.

The debate in the US media effectively focused upon the public relations firms hired by both the regime and Unocal to have economic sanctions against Burma lifted, as this would allow both parties to profit from the proceeds from the natural gas pipeline. In what was seemingly an unrelated academic exercise, political scientists, both active and retired, began to convene conferences and speak in the media about the futility of sanctions as a weapon of statecraft, and about the harm sanctions are creating to the economic prospects of hundreds of thousands of Burmese people. They base their arguments on wobbly figures provided by the military regime, and argue instead for engagement and an opening up of trade and cultural links, in order to force new ideas and an atmosphere for change upon the Burmese Generals. Johns Hopkins University has become the latest university to apologise publicly for hosting such scholars, as recent participants in the anti-sanctions conferences have not disclosed their paid consultancies on behalf of companies such as Unocal.

Relatively few of my informants have suffered the kinds of degradations and tragedies meted out to those unlucky enough to live in the pathway of Unocal's pipeline, but, like the Unocal plaintiffs, a great many of my informants have been forcibly relocated. When people are relocated in Burma, it is either into zones administered by the military in areas of active conflict, or into areas previously used for agriculture or foraging. The influx of internally displaced persons means that both the farmers and the forcibly relocated people lose their land and their livelihoods. The commandeering of arable land around Rangoon (Yangon), Mandalay and Pagan (Bagan) has meant that previously self-sufficient peoples have become dependent on unskilled or semi-skilled jobs and are chronically unemployed or under-employed. These people have flocked to the cities to try and eke out a living, and are forming the

kind of slum areas so familiar to Third World cities, slum areas that are also home to the disease of hungry pain.

The military regime has drawn an enormous number of people, both inside and outside Burma, into complicity and tacit acceptance of its rule, and foreign academics and universities have been among the casualties. As public intellectuals, we have, I believe, a moral responsibility to listen to the concerns of Burmese people, such as this lack of land and subsequent shortfall in the necessities of everyday living, and to reframe current engagement and sanctions issues through feeding back into the public domain the results of our research in a way that is engaging and accessible. Our academic freedom, our right and ability to speak publicly and in a scholarly way about the results of our research into the everyday lives of our informants, must be jealously guarded. When one asks Burmese people to speak about their life, they often describe themselves as either having or not having the basic necessities for survival. The term they use is *sarnaryenar*, which translates literally as food, water, clothing and shelter. An example of public anthropology would surely be the use of academic freedom to counter the claims of the regime to economic and moral legitimacy through international linkages, and the use of concrete ethnographic examples of the millions of people in Burma currently denied *sarnaryenar*.

The Utility and Responsibility of Anthropology

The Australian government's current policy of engagement with the Burmese junta, and the actions of a goodly number of Australian academics with interests in Burma, run directly counter to the project of speaking against that country's multiple human rights atrocities and lack of social justice. Yet, a focus upon such issues of urgent social concern is the wave of the future in anthropology and in the humanities more generally. The Fordism and sub-specialisation that have characterised the humanities and anthropology are slowly giving way, at least in America, to a graduate-training-driven change in the ways in which anthropological research is prioritised, projects are formulated and investigated, and results are disseminated. Rather than simply thinking this is more of the same kind of applied anthropology, or even collaboration with industry partners such as the UN or the biomedical profession, this is in fact an act of *translation* that makes findings accessible and interesting to the general public through both traditional and non-traditional media and includes the use of concrete ethnographic examples.

Hylland Eriksen (2006, 9) has suggested ways in which anthropologists can write about their research results so that they appeal to audiences beyond the discipline:

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

Hylland Erikson (2006, 9–20) suggests that defamiliarisation, the cultural autocritique, the riddle, the personal journey, the intervention, the essay and the biography are all writing techniques that can be used to bring the results of ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological analysis into dialogue with a broad audience.

In the USA, there is a burgeoning number of subjects as well as Masters degrees in Public Anthropology, producing graduates as researchers, public intellectuals, community leaders and grassroots organisers in the public service and in social advocacy. These include the Social Movements Initiative at Syracuse University, the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) Alliance for Community Transformation (ACT), the Program in Public Anthropology at the University of Oregon, the MA in Public Anthropology at the American University, the Public Interest Anthropology Program at the University of Pennsylvania, the graduate track in Activist Anthropology at the University of Texas (Austin) and the Peace Corps Masters International Program in Environmental Anthropology at Washington State University, to mention just some of the diverse ways that anthropology in the USA is responding to the call for a re-engagement with the public and with the communities of its informants. The way in which anthropologists have traditionally engaged with public issues is thus undergoing a sea change. Key issues such as the nature of our respect for the people we study, the impact of anthropological (mis)representations, issues of cultural ownership and appropriations, and the roles of anthropologists in the context of indigenous people's political agendas (such as land and native title claims) are currently being debated and reframed, including by a new generation of anthropological students in Australia and abroad.

Perhaps the most theoretically interesting aspect of the public anthropology debate in North America is the rethinking of the utility of anthropology. In a 1999 article, Bojan Baskar rebuked the Eastern European section of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) for its uncritical acceptance of Serbian propaganda and majority nationalist myths in the analysis of the violent break-up of Yugoslavia and the rule of Milošević. Like the anthropologists who lazily interpreted much of the violence in the Balkans as simply due to tribal feuding, so in Burma academics also do a disservice to their informants by colluding with the regime and refusing to write about the realities and brutalities of military rule. The ongoing attempts at engagement with the Burmese military junta by many academics are proving useful in allowing the regime to make a show of creating peace talks, a roadmap to democracy, a slowly phased-in opium substitution program and other problematic ways in which it is able to 'engage' with the international political and scholarly communities, while continuing to act with impunity. A public anthropology might in this case include an analysis of the Australian government policy of 'engagement' with the military regime. It might also include researching and documenting the commitment of atrocities and creation of mass graves as well as the formation of peace communities, local human rights initiatives in zones not controlled by the junta, and the collective mobilisation of the Burmese diaspora community as they chart democratic models and methods for

returning Burma to peace and prosperity. This would be, for me, a form of anthropology worth engaging in.

In recent issues of *Anthropology Today*, anthropologists such as Emma Tarlo (2005) and Magnus Marsden (2005) have examined stereotypes of fundamentalist Muslims prevalent in the public sphere, Tarlo in London and Marsden in an area in northern Pakistan heavily infiltrated by the Taliban. Their findings show a richness and diversity of understandings among Muslims as to what 'fundamentalism' has to offer them, and of ways of resisting, appropriating and accommodating the demands of fundamentalist power structures in the wake of Al-Qaeda bombings in London and New York, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. *Anthropology Today*, *Anthropology in Action*, *Critique of Anthropology* and *Anthropological Forum* are journals that seek to address contemporary issues and make them relevant to a wider audience, but these journals are in the minority, and Benthall (1995, 23) notes that in general:

anthropology has contributed relatively little to public debates on the most controversial—and therefore most widely discussed—issues of our times, including 'ethnic cleansing,' fundamentalism and war ... This is not to say that anthropologists are not concerned with the key issues of our times, only that the anthropological voice tends not to be heard beyond the domains of the university campus or the refereed journal.

In an almost direct reversal of the situation in Australia, anthropologists in Norway have enormous social capital. In fact, if an issue of public concern arises, say, for example, the federal government's policy of putting religious counsellors in public schools, an outcry would occur in the media as to why anthropologists were not getting involved. The silence of anthropologists on the issue would be read as significant to the merits of the debate. According to Hylland Eriksen (2006, 3), social anthropology is, in Norway at least, 'the most visible academic profession in the mainstream mass media during the last decade or so'. There are many lessons we can learn from Hylland Eriksen in his *Engaging anthropology: The case for a public presence* (2006). Not only can we learn from Norway and put these lessons into practice in Australia but we can also begin to teach these lessons to student anthropologists. Trevor Purcell (2000, 34) is absolutely correct when he states that:

to make public anthropology a recognisable reality then we must awaken students' imagination to the radical potential of the discipline, and we must, by our own stance in the discipline and in society, demonstrate that engagement/participation is its own fulfilment.

The Possibilities for Public Anthropology in Australia

To date, public anthropology has remained a descriptive term in Australia rather than, as in Britain and North America, a title for new ways of thinking about the relationship between, on the one hand, the local focus of anthropology and, on the other, the broader social conditions that these days engage the lives of all human

groups. As we have recognised, many Australian anthropologists engage in the public domain as expert witnesses in courts and government inquiries, and contribute to public policy issues. Some write for and speak to audiences other than our academic colleagues or students. Some are thrust into the public eye, sometimes with dramatic and drastic consequences.⁷

Anthropologists entering conflict situations, joining forensic and exhumation teams, studying creative peace-making, and writing about genocide, ethnic cleansing and terrorism, are all relatively recent, and are all examples of why public anthropology goes hand in hand with what the Smithsonian Office of Anthropology termed, as early as 1966, 'urgent anthropology' (Smithsonian Institution 2004). In shifting the analytical focus to incorporate urgent social concerns and emerging conditions that engage and impact upon the lives of all human groups, Australian anthropologists can become more relevant and self-conscious in their professional mandate. The American Anthropological Association (2006) seeks to 'represent the discipline nationally and internationally, in the public and private sectors'. This includes 'the dissemination of anthropological knowledge and its use to solve human problems'. Similarly, the Royal Anthropological Institute (2006) 'has a particular commitment to promoting the public understanding of anthropology, and the contribution of anthropology to public affairs'. To this extent, the Royal Anthropological Institute funds a PhD scholarship in 'urgent research', and its journal, *Anthropology Today*, consistently seeks to further the debates around engaged and public anthropology. The Australian Anthropological Society website does recognise that 'anthropological work is broad in scope' and that it includes public commentary. The AAS constitution also glances in this direction, but confines itself to: 'advance anthropology as a professional discipline grounded in the systematic pursuit of knowledge and to promote its responsible use in the service of humankind'. We suggest that there is an imperative to re-examine what we mean by 'responsible use in the service of humankind', and to build on this discussion about the future of anthropology in Australia: to become part of a movement to create a truly public anthropology in Australia, and to expand the Australian Anthropological Society's mandate to one that, like our companion organisations in Britain and North America, commits anthropology explicitly to the world not just of policy but also of public affairs.

In the Burmese case study above, the anthropologist acts alone to provide input into a number of public forums and debates, but, in the USA, graduate students, in particular, have joined together to create networks and alliances of individuals who wish to speak with one powerful voice. Examples include the International Agricultural Development Graduate Group at University of California, Davis, and the Laboratory in Ethnography at Indiana University. Within Australia, interdisciplinary centres are beginning to have a voice in national debates, such as the public advocacy of the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion at Macquarie University. The media commentary around the recent Cronulla riots provided an opportunity for Sydney-based anthropologists to contextualise the forms of

intolerance that erupted into violence. The Australian Anthropological Society is not the only body that can and should re-engage with the public in this country. The Norwegian experience is evidence of the resilience of anthropology as a university-based project when it creates clear lines of communication with the public. Numbers of anthropologists in Australia are already doing this, but not nearly enough, and often without the necessary support of their institutions. We need to inspire the new generation of anthropologists with the possibilities of being responsibly active through public anthropology, of seeing the relevance of anthropological analysis to broad social and global issues; and we need to provide them with institutional pathways and support if we are to see anthropological departments survive the cost-cutting and restructuring that is occurring in the higher education sector. We also need to broaden the discussion about the possibilities and the requirements, but also the potential pitfalls, of developing a public anthropology in this country. We offer this paper as one contribution to what we hope will be a vigorous and timely debate.

Notes

- [1] *Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd and the Commonwealth of Australia* 1971 17 FLR 141.
- [2] We both presented papers in this session (Research School of Humanities, The Australian National University), as did Deane Fergie (Department of Anthropology, University of Adelaide). Respondents to the papers were Richard Werbner (Social Anthropology, University of Manchester) and Nathan Boyle (Gender Relations Centre, The Australian National University). We thank our panel members for their generous and insightful contributions.
- [3] Glazebrook's research with Hazara refugees in Victoria has identified many of the ways, including the use of mobile phones, that people use to maintain active contact with, and provide support to, one another after they have moved into the general Australian community (work in progress).
- [4] In 2006, Indigenous Affairs was removed from this portfolio, leaving the department as Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA).
- [5] As a policeman, it is likely that Palmer himself is familiar with the way in which police culture was identified as a key factor by the Fitzgerald Inquiry in Queensland (1987) and by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987–91).
- [6] The title of this case was *Joe Doe et al. v Unocol*.
- [7] Deane Fergie, speaking about the Hindmarsh Island Bridge case, as part of the 2004 Public Anthropology panel, drew on that experience and her commitment over a number of decades 'to bringing anthropological insights to bear on matters of public debate'. She suggested an agenda for developing a publicly engaged anthropology in Australia in terms of the anthropological practices required. Her agenda covers the main features of what we are describing as public anthropology. She identifies a fundamental conceptual shift, which she characterises as a change in our 'depth of field', or which could more accurately be described as a shift in our 'analytic length' from local contexts to much broader contexts, issues and problems. There is the taking, as a primary object, of the 'unsettling' of taken-for-granted assumptions in public debate. Fergie urges clearer thinking about voice and the relationship of the scholar to those who are or were their ethnographic subjects. We need, and we need to train our students in, broader and more effective communication skills (in a variety of different media and genres). Our anthropology needs to be considered and strategic and have

great regard for the risks involved. It needs to be based in better training and the development of skills different from those currently emphasised in Australian universities.

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