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Acting anthropologically
Notes on Anthropology as Practice

Andrea Cornwall,
SOAS, University of London

Abstract. In this article, I explore the role of anthropology and anthropologists in unsettling orthodoxies and provoking disquiet with taken for granted ways of thinking and doing. Set against the backdrop of the debates about engaged anthropology, my interest is in exploring an approach to anthropology that takes anthropological practice seriously and with it the role of the anthropologist as activist and agent of change. I argue that the work of the anthropologist is not just to do fieldwork and produce texts, but that "engagement" has a more interactive dimension. By acting anthropologically, I suggest, anthropologists can be activists in ways and in settings that are distinct from the kinds of engagement envisaged in contemporary debates on "engaged", "activist" and "public" anthropology, as well as the modes of practice characteristic of "applied" anthropology. I draw on fragments of auto-ethnography to explore what the idea of acting anthropologically might offer within as well as outside the academy.

Keywords: Development Anthropology; Applied Anthropology; Engagement; Activism; Participatory Rural Appraisal.

Introduction

Anthropology's engagement with "engagement" is a recurring theme in the history of the discipline[1]. Many influential early anthropologists, like Sol Tax, Hortense Powdermaker, Audrey Richards, Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict worked in a way that was by definition "engaged". Debates in the 1970s centred on the questions of relevance set against the backdrop of anthropology's colonial roots (Asad 1973; Jacobs 1974; Hymes 1972). In the 1990s, discussions turned to the politics of engaging with struggles for social change, institutions and authorities (see, for example, Scheper-Hughes 1995 and responses by Crapanzano and Kuper; Rodriguez 1996; Bennett 1996; Rappaport 1993). More recently, as the old borders between "applied" and "theoretical" or "pure" anthropology have become fuzzier and more contested, consideration has been given to anthropology's

[1]This paper was given as a keynote at the Italian Society for Applied Anthropology conference in Cremona, in December 2018. It benefited from comments given by members of Manchester's anthropology department at a seminar some years earlier.

public role and the relationship between anthropology and activism (Kirsch 2010, 2018; Shah 2008; Van Meter 2008). Reflection has focused on the prospects for an engaged anthropology concerned not only with the real-world implications of anthropological research, but also the pursuit of social justice (see, for example, Thorne 2009; Shankland 2012; Rylko-Bauer, Singer and van Willigen 2006; Baer 2001, 2012; Mullins 2010; Besteman 2010; Gow 2002; Sanjek 2004; Ferguson 1997; Kellett 2009; Lamphere 2004; Resnick 2010 and others).

What was once "applied anthropology" has been reframed in recent years to offer anthropologists new registers of interaction with wider potential publics (Bennett 2005; Rylko-Bauer, Singer and van Willigen 2006; Gardner and Lewis 1996; Resnick 2010; Low and Merry 2010). Within the academy, new categories of anthropological practice have been defined: "public anthropology" (Borofsky 2000; Purcell 2000; Eriksen 2006; Mahmood 2012), "militant anthropology" (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007; Van Meter 2008), "activist anthropology", "strategic anthropology", "engaged anthropology" among other anthropologies-with-adjectives. Indeed, as Louise Lamphere (2004) notes, contemporary anthropological work is often about the *intersections* between applied, practising and public anthropology. But for all that has changed since the ASA guidelines expressly proscribed engaging in change, there is still ambivalence about anthropology as activism and *as action*.

For all that we might write ourselves and our positionalities into our texts, producing ethnographies is not all there is to anthropology. In this article, I contend that it may be fruitful to look at anthropology as a mode of practice that can in itself have real-world effects in the absence of textual production: what I call *acting anthropologically*. I turn to snapshots from my own journey as an anthropologist to reflect on a set of questions: What might acting anthropologically tell us about anthropology, and about the contributions of anthropology to society and social change? Are those acts that are so much part of the anthropologist's lived practice constitutive of anthropology in the same way as, for example, the writing of ethnography? What implications might this have for the way we convey our discipline to students, many of whom are unlikely to become academics, and to wider publics? Like Enslin (1994), Hale (2006), Osterweil (2013), Fassin (2013) and others, I use my own experience as a basis for reflection rather than making any claims about its worth.

Tools for Our Trade?

> Rather than continue to see engagement as something we do "out there,"
> it is crucial that we revision - topographically and ontologically -
> how we see ourselves in relation to our "objects of study (Osterweil 2013: 617).

I didn't know what anthropology was when I began my first anthropological research project. It was the late 1980s. I'd fled Thatcher's Britain to travel in Africa and wound up teaching in a rural school in post-Independence Zimbabwe. Pregnant school girls and rumours of baby dumping led to me putting on sexuality education classes. I visited the mothers of the girls in my classes to ask advice. They turned the tables, asking mine. Why were they getting headaches all the time? Putting on so much weight, swelling up? What was this pill that they'd been given doing to them? Was it going to kill all their eggs and stop them being able to conceive again?

I delved further. Zimbabwe's family planning programme had been phenomenally successful by training local community-based distributors (CBDs) to administer basic consultations and monthly supplies of the contraceptive pill. But because the terms of their explanations did not fit with what women knew about their bodies, the pill was causing worries rather than achieving "child spacing". Some women feared the pill would eventually destroy all of their eggs, and responded by having children in as rapid succession as possible. I tried to get over the basics of reproductive anatomy and physiology. But this presented me with a dilemma. My whiteness was in itself understood as a form of expertise. The last thing I wanted to do was to treat them as ignorant. I listened, asked questions, listened some more, turning around in my mind the idea of developing an explanation to bridge our versions and answer their concerns. In the process, I became aware of substantial conceptual differences between us.

It was, in retrospect, the perfect engaged anthropology project: an inquiry into "indigenous reproductive knowledge". Except I had no training in anthropology. I'd never read any anthropological theory. My half-finished degree in Physiology, Psychology and Philosophy had left me with a biomedical perspective, a vestigial knowledge of the functioning of the reproductive system and a keen interest in the philosophy of language. I began there. It seemed crucial to get to grips with some of the concepts that were puzzling me. Anatomical terms that seemed to mean one thing in one conversation came to mean something quite different in another. It wasn't that what I was hearing was ignorant or confused. There was a consistency to it. I was just failing to understand. A chance discovery of an article by the brilliant anthropologist Carol MacCormack (1985) inspired me to move from words to images. Women drew their pictures. I drew mine. Quickly, the source of my conceptual confusion came into view.

Pictures offered us a way to communicate that lent the concreteness and clarity that I'd been craving. They served as a way of externalizing meaning into an artefact that could become the basis for dialogue and exploration. Later, they were to serve as a Freirean code in workshops that brought women and local health workers together to create and evaluate potential explanations. I wrote a long report and sent it to the Zimbabwe National Family Planning Commission. A chance conversation led to a presentation of the method at a participatory research workshop in Brighton, and a short methodological piece for a practitioners' newsletter, *RRA Notes* (Cornwall 1992). I made up a name for the method: "body mapping". It turned out to be one of the most significant articles I've ever written, inspiring an incredible array of applications. I came to think of the broader repertoire of participatory visualisation methods that it became part of as a way to get people who might not otherwise pay much attention to other people's versions of their bodies or lives to think and act anthropologically.

Proper Anthropology

> The question is not so much what anthropology has to offer,
> but rather how it can effectively contribute (Gow, 2002: 302).

Entering the academy as an undergraduate student in Social Anthropology at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, I expected to learn how to do properly what I'd been making up as I went along. I couldn't have been more wrong. Plunged into the vicissitudes of post-structuralist theory at a time when anthropology was

torturing itself with the so-called "reflexive turn", I was wrenched away from the domain of the practical. I was caught in the grip of three interlocking moves in the discipline. The first was the *Writing Culture* school (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). I have to confess to reading the abstruse ramblings of self-absorbed white men in US ivory towers with a large dose of scepticism. Little did I realise this signalled such a crisis of identity and purpose for anthropology it was to have repercussions for decades (Marcus and Pisarro 2008). The second move was the emerging counterpoint between what has more recently been described as the dichotomy of "cultural critique" versus "activist engagement" (see, for example, Hale 2006, who draws this contrast most starkly). Problematic as it is (Osterweil 2013), this dichotomy came to frame the politicisation of anthropology. With this came a move that was, in my view, welcome and needed: the demand for an anthropology that serve not the powerful, but those who are marginalised and dispossessed. It marked a decisive transition from being a "handmaiden of colonialism" (Asad 1973) to working with oppressed minorities and producing ethnographies infused with passion and care like Nancy Scheper-Hughes' *Death Without Weeping* (1993).

The third was a distancing move in which a nascent "anthropology of development" distinguished itself, aloofly, from "development anthropology", the application of anthropology to development (Gardner and Lewis 1996; Grillo and Stirrat 1997). What struck me in my first, puzzled, encounters with these anthropologists of development was that there was just as much a whiff of moral superiority about them as there was emanating from the theory crowd, whose view of anthropological application was, as Lucy Mair describes from her own experience with Malinowski, something for those who were second rate and not quite up to doing "proper" anthropology (Mair 1969). I couldn't help but observe that quite a few of those anthropologists of development seemed to have no such qualms about being paid handsomely by the development industry for the consultancies that allowed them to gain material for their academic publications.

Preparing for my PhD fieldwork, I sat through discussions with fellow anthropologists guarding a guilty secret. My experiences with body mapping had led me to become involved with a form of participatory research called Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). I liked the politics of encouraging people to generate their own representations of reality, and arrive at their own analyses and their own solutions (Chambers 1983, 1997). I also liked the idea of anthropologists working alongside professionals from other fields to encourage them to interrogate their assumptions and listen more closely to what people were actually saying. I thought PRA's visual methods could be as useful to moving beyond the conceptual confines of speech as they had been to me in Zimbabwe. Robert Chambers' pithy epithets captured a restless pragmatism with which I could identify, identifying the need for 'appropriate imprecision' (you don't need to know things exactly in order to know that there's a problem) and 'optimal ignorance' (you don't need to know everything to be able to begin to act).

As a budding anthropologist, PRA seemed to offer a way anthropology could offer much more than producing long, barely intelligible works, written with such disciplinary insularity that they were largely inaccessible. As RRA became PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal), it felt even more like a way of doing what anthropology was *for*. But I rapidly came to realize I'd fallen in with the wrong company. PRA was treated by anthropologists as if it were some kind of corrupting cult. Those involved in it were suspected of being politically naïve and epistemologically compromised. Anthropological critics rounded

on it. Some conflated methodological principles with practice, maligning unskilled applications of method and male-biased choices of fieldworkers and facilitators as if they constituted fatal methodological flaws (Mosse 1994). Others took issue with the danger that this "quick and dirty" "pseudo-science" (Richards 1995) would displace "real" social research. There was in this a touch of self-preservation: after all, if participatory practice were to take off, anthropologists might be cut out of the picture, too "long and lost" (Chambers 1983) for anyone to bother with.

There appeared to be a deep reluctance to name what might really be going on: anthropologists got insights that other researchers didn't because they hung out with people in their own everyday settings, paid close attention to what was going on around them and listened. It wasn't rocket science. Whether or not they knew their Marilyn Strathern from their Malinowski, encouraging people to suspend judgement and to listen attentively, using visual methods as a way of opening up the conversation and creating a shared medium of communication, struck me as simple common sense.

I have been as critical as any of the anthropologists who have engaged with PRA and RRA about the political economy of "participatory" knowledge production, and the epistemological sleights of hand used to produce politically convenient "voices" (Guijt and Cornwall 1995; Cornwall 2000; Cornwall and Fujita 2012). But there was and remains something that irked me very deeply about what I saw at the time as elite researchers' boundary claims. Indignant after a workshop in which efforts to describe what exactly it was that anthropologists *did* could not come up with anything more than vague talk about "the anthropological eye", I wrote a piece called *Tools for Our Trade?* (Cornwall 1992) in which I vented my frustrations to an audience of *Anthropology in Action*. I was approached in years to come for advice, guidance and training on participatory methods by some of the very people who had been so very snooty at that event.

Revealing Realities in Suburban Britain

> Anthropology should be conceived, I believe,
> as a creatively agonistic arena whose centering and boundaries
> are always in question (Crapanzano 1995: 420).

In a thoughtful response to Mahmoud's (2012) intervention in marking out a place for anthropological engagement as core to what an anthropologist does, Greg Feldman points out that «teaching is either omitted from, or marginally included in, discussions about engaged anthropology» (2011: 25). What my experience with RRA and PRA left me with was a belief that the capacity to think, see and act anthropologically was something that could be taught not just to anthropology students, but also to professionals. I came to conceive of it as a mode of anthropological activism. I began to reflect more on the potential that this might have to drive change.

I was sick of anthropology's elitism. I wanted to get as far away as I could from the subject position of white anthropologist writing about an African Other, however sympathetically I'd tried to do that. The coloniality of the development industry repelled me. I wanted no part of that either. Time, I thought, to do something in my own back yard. Was there scope, I wondered, to apply the participatory visualisation methods of PRA to economically marginalised communities in the UK? A tender calling for a consultant to do a 'needs

assessment' for the British National Health Service on a regeneration programme on a housing estate in Surrey with very poor social indicators provided me with an opportunity to answer that question.

My fieldwork began with a bus ride from East Croydon station. I'd asked the bus driver to tell me where to get off and we chatted as he drove the almost-empty bus in the direction of the estate. He spun lurid tales of knife fights, police raids, drug dealing in the garages under the estate's walkways, painting a picture of a place local residents regarded as a 'dumping ground' for people with social problems. Once on the estate, I heard a very different story. Neglected by the authorities, subjected to appalling health delivery, residents had their own diagnosis of the problems. What was wrong, they said, was that the heating ducts that ran through and between their homes were giving their kids asthma. The doctors were no good. There were no jobs. And there was nothing for young people to do except hang around and cause trouble. The official record revealed a population with higher than average levels of all the conditions associated with chronic poverty and ill-being; the composite social exclusion index used at that time showed it to be an island of deprivation in a zone of leafy green avenues populated largely by middle-class suburban commuters.

I could have happily researched and written an ethnographic report on that estate. But my political sense told me that such a study could easily be ignored, not least by those who trusted only numbers and had little time for prose. I could do the finding out and the knowing. But who else needed to find out and know for that knowledge to actually effect any change in people's lives? My bid proposed not a conventional study but a process of engagement that involved training a multi-agency team of service commissioners, providers and residents in participatory methods, then facilitating a participatory wellbeing assessment on the estate. It captured the imagination of the health promotion manager. Despite having no prior experience of such work in the UK, I was awarded the tender.

Within weeks, I was living on the estate. A journalist had been given my CV by the local authorities and used it to make an eye-catching headline in the local paper: anthropologist comes from working in Africa to suburban Surrey to study the "natives". No-one knew what anthropologists did. There was a vague suspicion that I did something involving skulls. I presented myself as a health researcher but did not behave like one. As an anthropologist, it seemed obvious that if I was going to find out what was going on, I needed to make the estate my "field" and take up residence. But as a white middle class professional I was not expected to do anything of the sort. There was something a little threatening, it seemed, about me traversing such a solidly entrenched social divide and placing myself somewhere I *didn't belong*. The professionals I worked with, suspicious, asked me a volley of questions. How did I find a room to live? (I asked around, it took me couple of hours). Wasn't I nervous about being there at night, of moving around the concrete walkways that connected the buildings of the estate after dark? (After living in a favela in Brazil?). I'd lived in not dissimilar housing estates as a child. It wasn't at all strange. It was part of my process of working in my own "backyard".

That choice to live on the estate was the key that unlocked the suspicion that residents would otherwise have greeted me with, as just another "professional". «We used to tell them, "You don't understand, you don't live here",» said John, one of the community leaders. He roared with laughter. «We can't tell you that can we!». Even if the highlight

of my week might be an evening playing bingo or chatting with the group of older men who sat together on benches at the back of the community centre bar, smoking and downing pints ("death row", residents used to call it), simply being around made a huge difference. It meant being there in emergencies, like when John's disability allowance was cut, leaving him on the brink of homelessness, and I was able to write the letter that expedited its reinstatement. It also meant being there administering tea and sympathy to the activists when tempers rose in the fraught negotiations that accompanied the transfer of social housing to a housing association, a sign of the times we were living in.

All of this meant I had a pretty good handle on what was going on. I could see a combination of poor prescribing, systematic failures in referral, lack of effective preventive medicine, racism, class prejudice and xenophobia, hostility towards and distrust of middle-class professionals, poor housing stock, poor access to fresh food and poor eating, drinking and smoking habits, unemployment, isolation, boredom and social exclusion were mixed together in a toxic swirl, as in many such neighbourhoods across the UK. I could have written an assessment of what was wrong after a couple of days of intensive immersion. Indeed, six months later, there was little the participatory wellbeing assessment surfaced that I hadn't heard about in my first few days.

But the kind of analysis I could have written of what was wrong would not have helped to put anything right. For a start, one of the major issues my anthropological analysis pointed towards was relationships: between those working to deliver services, between statutory and non-statutory service delivery workers and their agencies, lower-level health workers and the local doctors, doctors and patients, longer-standing residents with roots in the working class families who'd been resettled on the estate from inner London in the 1960s and new-comers, especially those seeking asylum and any non-white residents. The list goes on. And there was more. I'd rumbled a potentially explosive issue on my very first day on the estate that involved allegations of systematic medical malpractice and serious shortcomings in primary care provision. It took only a couple more days to realise that there was a big problem and that lower-level health workers were feeling bullied into covering it up.

Working as a lone anthropologist would not have got me very far. Instead, I sought a strategy of enlistment, bringing together as many professionals with some kind of positional power as I could into what I called a "training course". I ended up recruiting the entire multi-agency consultative group that I'd been hired to work for - managers and commissioners from the health authority, public health officials, front-line health, housing and social services workers, local non-statutory agencies and residents. I parcelled up the methods training in small bite-sized chunks of a couple of hours here and there that would work with busy schedules, and created a complex timetable to facilitate each small group carrying out their research around their day jobs. It involved using different methods, in different places with different groups of residents, engaging people in public spaces and tapping into people's social networks.

The residents called the final report "our book". It carried not only the findings of our research, but also the commitments negotiated from the authorities. This gave it far more chance of follow-up. Ownership rippled through the system. One public health official found herself redeployed to patient complaints, where her experience transformed the way she did her job. Health promotion staff struck up new relationships on the estate that became the basis for a lasting partnership. The commissioner who had ordered me to stop

had softened. Sitting in the home of the mother of a young baby, hearing over a cup of tea about her worries about her baby's health care, this most human of encounters touched him in a way that no data would have been able to do. The estate got a new doctor and a new dentist.

As a "development anthropologist", I could have produced a report, listing my recommendations in a neat catalogue of bullet points. As an "anthropologist of development", I could have written it all up for an anthropological journal, deconstructing the narratives deployed by the health service, for all the good that would do for the residents who were getting sicker because of poor quality services. But I am in no doubt that while what I would have said may have resonated with some of the professionals, it would neither have been read by the residents nor taken to heart by those in positions of power. It was only through the mobilising effects of the participatory wellbeing appraisal that we managed to get issues on the table that had been so effectively swept under it in the past. And it was the very visibility, the *public*ity, of the exercise that made it impossible to continue to ignore what the residents were saying.

My role as an anthropologist was as instigator and facilitator rather than participant observer or indeed expert. This is not to say that I didn't make use of my position. I took as much advantage as I could of opportunities to act as an advocate for those who were not at the table. But I saw even in this that what I was doing was acting anthropologically. I was using my institutional knowledge, acquired through the application of my anthropological training, to identify and then use whatever levers existed for change, to prise open doors and create spaces for residents to have a voice. Most of all, engagement made me deeply partial: I had stepped as far as it got out of the position of privileged observer and become part of the action. Was this "activist anthropology"? But I was working for the National Health Service, at the service of the state. I was one of the "professionals". And there was no anthropological output to mark my engagement, no cleverly written monograph, no article in «American Ethnologist». Yet by acting anthropologically I felt more of an anthropologist than ever.

Just Enough, Not Too Much: *Lagom*

> Militant Research is not a specialised task, a process
> that only involves those who are traditionally thought of as researchers …
> Militant research starts from the understandings, experiences and relations generated through organising,
> as both a method of political action and as a form of knowledge (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007:9).

Bureaucrats working in a state development co-operation agency are perhaps the least likely band of militants as one might ever wish to imagine. But doing anthropology with a group of self-styled "guerrilla bureaucrats" brought me further insights into the potential of acting anthropologically. Militant research, Van Meter writes, seeks «productive cooperation that transforms both into active participants in producing knowledge and in transforming themselves» (Van Meter 2008: 1). Coletivo Situationes notes, «it is not so much a question of reacting when faced with already codified options as it is about producing the terms of the situation ourselves» (2007, cited in Thorne 2009: 195). This was, in essence, what the project nicknamed *Lagom* was all about.

After my experience in London, I was interested in the side-effects of participation on professionals. It was a heady time. Participation was on the international development

agenda. And I was a disciple of participation's most influential guru, Robert Chambers. I took up a research fellowship at the Institute of Development Studies to work with him, thinking that as long as I didn't make any compromises and retained my activist sensibility, I could tread the line between engaged critique and collusion. Robert recognized the subversive and transformative potential of PRA for changing development professionals; he spoke of it as a "benign virus". I liked the sound of all this. And I loved this revered old man's sense of mischief. We struck up a friendship as kindred spirits: both of us disruptive, incorrigible, idealistic and utterly stubborn.

We had a large grant and had been given carte blanche by our Nordic donor to work on whatever we thought would make the most difference. One of my first jobs was to produce a paper mapping the trajectories of participation in development. The donor who commissioned the paper was surprised. She was expecting a conventional short paper full of bullet points and case study boxes. The paper was long and discursive, a short monograph called *Beneficiary, Consumer, Citizen: Perspectives on Participation for Poverty Reduction* (Cornwall 2000). My agenda is clear from the title. As an activist, I saw an opening for a shift that would take on the communitarianism of the participation discourse of the time, which served the neoliberalism so well, and insert a more radical democratic project of engaging citizens in framing demands and pressing for accountability. This was, after all, what I'd been doing on those London estates. And it chimed with the political theory that inspired my praxis, the work of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Hannah Arendt and Iris Marion Young. I'd chanced in that donor upon another kindred spirit: an anthropological activist in bureaucrat's clothing, employed as a "Socio-Cultural Adviser". She not only liked what she read. She wanted me to come and work with her, to transform her organisation.

A "participatory learning group" in the immaculate offices of a Scandinavian international development bilateral donor seems an unlikely setting for anthropological activism, less likely still a mode through which to practice militant anthropology. The group was composed of individuals from each of the major departments in the donor agency, hand-picked by the Socio-Cultural Adviser. It included someone who described himself with a smirk as a 'super-bureaucrat', another whose quiet persistence chimed with a role that gave her considerable scope for changing the ways certain vital bureaucratic functions were performed, a rebel on the brink of retirement with a frankness that no longer needed guarding, someone whose quiet and contemplative air masked a penchant for the subversive, and an unlikely manager whose flashes of creativity were matched with an impatience with any rules at all. We became a band of comrades.

The group chose to be known as *Lagom*, a word that evokes sensible moderation essential to the bureaucratic enterprise: just enough, not too little, not too much. Secretly, though, we identified ourselves with another Scandinavian word: the "firesoul", those who burn with a desire to make change. We were told by the head of the division that yes, we could do this work, but we needed to have a Scandinavian on the team. Seema Arora-Jonsson joined us, bringing with her an acuity of insight and an impeccable ability to capture and convey the comic moments in the learning group's many episodes.

In the formal organizational space, we performed participatory learning group activities, each bringing examples from their everyday bureaucratic lives for inspection by the group. In the pub afterwards, we plotted outrageous take-overs of lumbering white elephant projects and more mundane acts of bureaucratic rebellion. For all our

revolutionary fervour, we were soon to realize how limited were the tools at the bureaucrat's disposal. One of the most poignant examples was our decision to do an action together that we could subsequently analyse. From initial ambitious plans, our scope for actually doing anything was soon revealed: the best the group could muster was to work together on a Terms of Reference for a tender for a consultant to conduct a study on the viability of an urban infrastructure intervention in an African country.

The abject failure of this merry band of bureaucrats to do more than ensure the right words were in place in the terms of reference for a study that turned out to be the kind produced by the consultancy companies who mop up so much development money offered us a salutary lesson. But it didn't diminish the enthusiasm of the group for small acts of intervention, from sending agents into committees to insert slivers of text into operational manuals to introducing changes in the way departmental meetings were run. These small acts were largely imperceptible. We couldn't claim them as "impacts" or "outputs". Indeed, to have done so would completely undermine our purpose and blow our cover. But, together, they helped tilt the course of decisions and processes that would have otherwise remained business as usual.

The work of the anthropologist in this process was not of the participant observer. The meetings the learning group had every couple of months were far from the usual ways people in the group worked, by design. There would not have been much prospect for participant observation in the everyday doing of bureaucratic affairs in any case, as much of this was done in Swedish. What we brought to this process was precisely the anthropological art of making strange the familiar, and also something that I suspect is an under-appreciated quality of anthropologists: the capacity to be interested in things that other people might find tedious, mundane or plain boring. Bringing the elements of everyday bureaucratic life under our intense collective gaze, and subjecting them to pokes, tweaks, ironic commentaries, a sharing of tactics to deal with managerialism, joking and story-telling, was a process of interruption and disruption that turned our comrades into anthropologists of their own organisation, and made them ever more the bureaucratic activists they possibly hadn't recognised themselves as being up to that point.

One of the dilemmas for the anthropologist who "studies up" is what they write about their "informants", who are likely literate and interested in what is being said about them. For us, one of the biggest dilemmas was that the act of encoding what we learnt in text would undermine the effectiveness of our little band of bureaucrats, as well as expose some of the things that we had instigated. This would not be good for anyone. There were secrets shared, dirty linen aired, small acts plotted and executed, none of which could ever be shared openly. It would have been impossible to write up a conventional ethnography of the organisation. No one wanted to be outed. Nor did we think a textual rendition of our activities worth risking: it would undermine what we'd been trying to do. Instead, we thought we'd produce a policy brief, a classic artefact of policy-focused research. We stumbled and failed. One version was just too inflammatory for the milder members of the learning group to countenance, provisionally entitled *Voices of the Bureaucrats: Crying Out for Help* in ironic mimicry of the World Bank study of poor people's perspectives on poverty. Another, a conventional how-to-do-participation-better was just too boring. We all knew that fellow bureaucrats would either file it along with the other briefings they received, or, more likely, drop it in the recycling bin.

Instead, we turned to quasi-fiction, producing an A6 sized book of episodes from *Lagom*. Called *The Beast of Bureaucracy and Other Tales from Valhalla*, it cast our bureaucrat comrades and ourselves as Nordic and Celtic gods and goddesses. The threat of publication vanished. It was handed around through the subterranean networks of bureaucrats. Our Sociocultural Adviser comrade wrote us a delighted email about passing one of her senior male colleagues as he sat over a coffee leafing through it and chuckling his head off.

Close Encounters with Neoliberal Governmentality

> … [D]istancing is not so much about seeing what is familiar in a new light…
> than about alienating a familiar research environment
> in order to avoid a bureaucratically contingent othering (Gottwald *et al.* 2018: 87).

It took me more than a decade to return to the scenes of everyday bureaucratic life that had so captivated me in Sweden. I'd taken up a job a year or so before as a proper anthropologist in a university anthropology department. Making myself eligible for employment had involved dusting off chapters from my unpublished thesis and sending them indiscriminately to proper anthropology journals, the kind that lock your work behind paywalls and play their part in policing disciplinary boundaries through peer review. I'd made it. I was inside the establishment. More than that, I was a part of that curious collective noun, the Professoriate. I looked around, searching for kindred spirits. I found friends, but few people on the same wavelength when it came to activist research. Little of my knowledge, skills or experience seemed to be legible. It was a strangely alienating environment.

When my boss left and no-one wanted to fill his shoes for the handful of months it would take to hire his replacement, I stepped into them. This was, as I saw it, engaged anthropology. I'd spent my career pursuing anthropological interests in institutionalised forms and spaces of participation, accountability, governance and power: a promising mix of interests to bring to this unanticipated opportunity for auto-ethnographic fieldwork. What I had also brought with me was a recognition that by acting anthropologically, I could try to translate values that we ostensibly shared as academics – equality, dignity, social justice, transparency – into the way things were done. This involved changing the rules, the incentives and the culture. Not an easy task in the neoliberal university, especially from a position of middle management in a somewhat authoritarian neoliberal regime. I threw myself into that window of opportunity with enthusiasm. I revelled in it. With a gleam of anarchic glee in my eyes, I set about a whirlwind of change. When it was time to hire someone to do the job for real, a petition landed on my lap with the signatures of the School's radicals. The prospect of being able to do more than just tinker led me to apply for and get the job, with its five-year sentence.

I approached the job acting as an anthropologist. In a move that any academic would recognise as deeply unusual, if not actively perverse, I signed up to as many committees as possible. I volunteered for working groups, sub-committees, successfully ran for election for Senate and Council, inserted myself into every space in which I could legitimately have a presence, in what Gottwald, Sopa and Staples (2018) refer to as "at-home ethnography of bureaucracy". I sat there taking copious fieldnotes, filling dozens of exercise books. It amused me that I could hide in plain sight quite so easily, as a

white middle-aged woman in a space filled by white middle-aged men. No one paid much attention to me at all. I could sit in the middle of a row of those grey-haired men in suits as they vied for the attention of the Vice-Chancellor and not be noticed. I tried putting up my hand to speak. It didn't work. I turned to the traditional means used by women to gain voice in such spaces, buttering up patriarchs and watching with a smirk as they carried my points into meetings. I turned to my ethnographer's training in close observation, and spent a good few months doing just that. Those fat notebooks carried transcripts of meetings, snatches of speech, reflections and reactions. I used my fieldnotes as any anthropologist might, to map traces, discern patterns, make sense of the unfolding scenes that were as foreign to me as anything I'd experienced doing fieldwork in other countries.

Once, early on, I was challenged by the receptionist at the entrance to the building housing the university's administration. «Who are you?» she asked. «Head of School» I answered. «No, you aren't» she said. «Look me up» I replied, gesturing at her computer. She did and apologised with chagrin that remained nailed to her expression years later. As she buzzed me through security, I flashed her a smile and a parting shot: «Do I look like an anarchist? ». The problem was, I did. This prompted a series of sartorial experiments. I applied anthropological analysis of the dynamics of gender expression to create a series of gendered identities to see what effects I could produce with them. I'd entered the job presenting as quite androgynous, with short red hair, dressing in black jeans and the black puffa jacket that had so alarmed the receptionist. I let the dye grow out, returning my hair to mousy brown streaked with grey. As my hair grew longer, it curled. I took to departing from my usual routine of running into the shower and out to the train station without looking in the mirror and began applying eye makeup and styling my hair.

I'd eschewed ostentatious femininity in the past, seeing it as a liability. Now I sought every means possible to affirm it[2]. I purchased a wardrobe of dresses and skirts from shops I had barely set foot in before. I even wore tights (As a male bureaucrat friend was to tease me later, I never managed to get the footwear right; kitten heels were somehow a step too far). It worked a treat. The more I slipped along the gender spectrum in the direction of feminine, the more effective I was. It was a surprising finding. I'd let myself to believe that female masculinity was the way in which I might achieve efficacy. I had initially focused my efforts on edging along the spectrum in the other direction. But intensive observation of women presenting with female masculinities in these spaces led me to recognise this as a flawed strategy.

The feminine me felt like drag, at first. And then it became fun. I especially enjoyed deploying tactics that disarmed attempts by men to bully me. I used my eyes a lot. To flutter and flatter, graze along diminishing hairlines or trace an invisible line across the room so as to hint at dissent.

Backstage conversations won me a front row seat when a man faithfully carried the points I wanted to make into the room. The bonus was that I got to smile sweetly in agreement, then applaud him afterwards. My interest in the anthropology of language was piqued in these spaces, where bureaucratic argot was thickly mingled with business talk. Deep dive. Strategic optimisation. Low hanging fruit. Value proposition. A Scottish word "outwith" became the litmus test of whether someone had gone over to the dark side.

[2] I'm grateful to trans activist and writer Persia West for this discovery.

As with *Lagom*, regaling my "impact" would undermine my carefully-laid efforts at influencing. Indeed, part of the problem with the whole impact agenda in UK academia is precisely this: taking the credit for something you got someone else to do without them being aware of your agenda is not exactly edifying for them, nor a way to maintain such influencing power in future. What I can claim some credit for is helping to stop various things happening. And I have to admit that I took pleasure and found a sense of purpose in knitting together skeins of resistance aimed at bouncing off interventions that would have immiserated us all. Most often, though, I used well-trodden bureaucratic pathways. I transgressed where I could, stealing into decisions that were not mine for the making, changing the bureaucratic scripts and bending the rules when no-one was paying too close attention. My erstwhile boss had once invited me in for a telling off, "rules are there to be followed, not to be bypassed or broken". I took no heed. Filipina former colleague Rose Nierras' "Rule #2" became my mantra: *That Which Is Not Forbidden is Allowed*.

An unlikely "militant anthropologist" I may have been, but I was acting anthropologically. Participant observation became more than a method. It was a survival strategy. I'd flick the mental switch in the direst of meetings, and could count on it to transform my experience, allowing me to actively solicit silence rather than be subjected to silencing. Acting anthropologically, I applied close readings and discourse analysis of the texts produced in bureaucratic contexts to infusing our Strategic Plan with language that could strike a note of dissidence with the neoliberal marketization of education.

I applied tactics inspired by Ernesto Laclau's (1990) analysis of the ways in which words placed into proximity with value-words in "chains of equivalence" gain dissonant meanings. I very much doubt, in retrospect, that my colleagues paid any attention at all at these signifying practices. But they gave me succour.

All these forms of engagement were deeply infused with anthropological knowledge. I was eclectic in my borrowings. The debate on the "ontological turn" provided light relief as I moved between worlds and versions of them that seemed incommensurable. I found Foucault's Collège de France lectures on neoliberal governmentality especially helpful. I re-read Evans-Pritchard (1937) on witchcraft amongst the Azande to understand the strange rituals of student number forecasting. In discussions about the University's interpretations of Home Office guidance for tracking visa holders and reporting "radicalisation", I found inspiration in the work of James Scott, and his writings on the ways in which people avoid becoming legible to the state (Scott 1998). Collusion with fellow managers was enriched by working with Scott's earlier work on "hidden transcripts" (1992) and "weapons of the weak" (1985). Marilyn Strathern's (1988) *The Gender of the Gift* helped me make sense of a particularly noxious female bully, just as her 2000 edited volume *Audit Cultures* saved me from succumbing to the worst vicissitudes of bureaucracy myself. And just as I'd used Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) to discern the performative femininities of transgender sex workers in Brazil as an undergraduate student, I drew on her ideas to "undress" (Edström 2014) the white heterosexual male bureaucrat who I made the focus of my attentions, striped shirt, cufflinks and all.

The Anthropologist as grit in the oyster

> The other promise of anthropology… [is] to serve as a form of cultural critique for ourselves. In using portraits of other cultural patterns to reflect self-critically on our own ways,

anthropology disrupts common sense and makes us re-examine our taken-for-granted assumptions (Marcus and Fisher 1986: 1).

The anthropological sensibility often makes us content with critique. Busting myths. Debunking taken-for-granted assumptions. Locating what we believe to be natural or true as cultural artefacts, products of other kinds of cultural processes and the play of power. This is the kind of thing at which anthropologists are exceptionally skilled. It is what makes the discipline rich, exciting and vital. The cleverness of all that criticality, the incisiveness of analysis, that capacity to reveal that which is invisible to those immersed in the scene, these are the very things anthropologists pride ourselves on as a professional group.

Acting anthropologically is, I suggest here, an extension of that critical anthropological engagement with culture and with power. It is not just about putting anthropology into practice in a way that can transform professional practice in any occupation, including that of being an academic anthropologist. It is itself an instantiation of anthropology: one that requires no texts as outputs. Doctors who learn how to think and act anthropologically can bring these skills to understanding their patients' lifeworlds, as well as to changing medical cultures by acting differently. Airline stewards, architects, hairdressers, politicians, sex workers – just about any job involving people can benefit from a training in the basic elements of anthropology, and anyone involved in these jobs has something to offer its practice in the academy.

The fashioning of critical questions that upturn assumptions or the making-strange of elements of everyday life are tactics, a mode of anthropological practice, a kind of doing, a skill to be acquired and taught, one that can help to make anthropology relevant to just about any field of human endeavour. This process of critical questioning of that which is taken for granted can provoke and intensify the energy, the anger and the passion that is a vital wellspring of social change. Anthropologists have a critical role to play in all that, more than ever in times like these. As with the examples of the small acts described in this article, anthropologically-informed actions can be just as much a form of activism - understood as acting on the world in order to change it - as more visible and glamorous involvement in protest, mobilisation and direct action.

As anthropologist-educators, many of us are already anthropologist-activists. In our classrooms, our students learn to question everything. They go out as fledgling anthropologists into "the field" alert to their own positionality, to the hegemony of certain ways of framing and knowing to the exclusion and erasure of others. Those who leave the academy behind when they graduate to go into the vast range of professions for which anthropology is the best of training are equipped with a life skill second to none: the stepping aside from immersion in life in order to observe it critically that participant observation grants us. As we as a discipline face dwindling numbers of students and entertain again talk of the end of anthropology, perhaps it is time not only to reinvent ethnography and give it a public relevance and face (Borofsky 2000; Fassin 2013), but to popularise the skills that come with the best of anthropological practice. Acting anthropologically can, after all, make a better world for all.

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