



The Public Presence of Anthropology A Critical Approach

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In October 1989, France paid tribute to its most famous anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, by organizing a sumptuous exhibition at the Musée de l'Homme, of which he had been the deputy director forty years earlier. The masterpiece on display was a superb canoe brought by a delegation of Haida Indians from British Columbia who had rowed up the Seine River in the weeks before the opening of the event. Notwithstanding the fact that the French anthropologist was known for his work in Brazilian Amazonia more than the Canadian Northwest, he and his third wife joined their guests with good grace in the final portion in Paris, between the Bridge of Iéna and the City Hall, accompanied by the Natives' ritual chanting (Casajus 1996). This public apotheosis in the most conventionally exotic representation of the discipline consecrated a man who had been elected eight years prior by 448 journalists, writers, artists and scholars, the most influential francophone intellectual alive, before Raymond Aron and Michel Foucault, a ranking which Pierre Bourdieu ironically called a chart show – in fact, he himself occupied the 36th position far behind the media personality Bernard-Henri Lévy (Bourdieu 1984). This exhibition was only one of the numerous homages that the author of *The Savage Mind* would receive in the last two decades of his life, the publication in 2008 of his works in the prestigious series *La Pléiade* usually reserved for dead greats not being the least. Yet, conspicuously, the anthropologist thus honoured by his country was a discreet man known for staying away from the major debates of a time with which he declared having little affinity, preferring the silence of his office in the library of the Collège de France to the clamour of the public sphere. One of his colleagues wrote that “to the members of his team in Paris, the image he evoked above all was the nearly permanently closed doors of his study” (Bloch 2009). He himself confessed: “For twenty years, I would get up at dawn, drunk with myths – truly I lived in another world” (Lévi-Strauss 1991: 80). How to account, then, for his formidable public recognition?

Interestingly, the intellectual retreat that he cherished at the Collège de France, where he was elected in 1959 after two failed attempts, had not always been typical of his relation to the world, and during the 1930s, he had even been tempted by a political career, dreaming to become the philosopher of the Socialist Party and join a ministry of the Popular Front (Bertholet 2008). It is in New York where he spent seven years at the New School for Social Research after having escaped from Vichy France in 1941 that he definitely turned to

* This essay is a revised version of the lecture that I delivered on the 20th of April 2016 at the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences on the occasion of the Vega symposium organized by the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography to celebrate the Gold Medal which it had awarded me. Although I expanded the original text, I have tried to retain its spirit and even its letter so as to preserve the memory of this event and of those who attended it.

anthropology, writing *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, which would gain him the esteem of his colleagues in the United States. But as soon as he returned to France, he accepted the invitation to participate in a panel of social scientists that UNESCO tasked with a reflection on the “race question,” which had haunted the organization in the aftermath of World War II. The result was the publication in 1952 of *Race and History*, a short essay that remains more than half a century later a reference manifesto for cultural relativism and anti-racism. Even the “fairly pretty scandal,” as he called it, caused by the sequel, *Race and Culture*, two decades later, at the request again of UNESCO, did not suffice to taint the original piece, despite its Malthusian affirmation that racial prejudices and hostility between groups were the ineluctable consequence of the uncontrolled global demographic growth (Stoczkowski 2008). However, the book that would bring him fame was a memoir published in 1955, *Tristes Tropiques*, which received generous praise and sold 55,000 copies in the following decade. The jurors of the famous Goncourt Prize even expressed their regret at not being able to grant the travelogue their accolade, which could only be awarded to fiction. In fact, more than its literary audacity or its scientific boldness, it was its humanism, longing for a lost world and critical of the modern one, that seduced its readership regardless of the problematically derogatory comments on India and on Islam scattered throughout the pages (Debaene 2008). Widely acclaimed, these two works nevertheless had their opponents. The thesis of *Race and History* had deeply irritated Roger Caillois, the influential founding editor of the journal of UNESCO, who claimed the superiority of Western civilization (Wendling 2010). The publication of *Tristes Tropiques* alienated Paul Rivet, the director of the Musée de l’Homme, who considered it of no academic value and refused to receive its author (MacClancy 1996). But each time he was attacked, Lévi-Strauss retorted virulently, more at ease with academic jousts than with public debates.

Why evoke, on the occasion of this symposium, an anthropologist whose engagement with contemporary issues seems, at least in the last five decades of his long life, so foreign to my own vision of the public presence of our discipline? Beyond the plausible nostalgia of a past when an anthropologist could be cited as the most influential living intellectual and even called, after the publication of *Structural Anthropology*, “a hero of our time” by Susan Sontag (1963), there are two main reasons for it. First, Lévi-Strauss’s glorious epic complicates the common image of the public intellectual. While he could have epitomized this classic French figure illustrated by Émile Zola and Jean-Paul Sartre, it is disconcertingly at the moment when he reached the academic pinnacle that he superbly retired to his office and even his country house, refused to get involved in the issues and movements of his time, and occasionally proclaimed theses in defence of cultural identities that received laudation from the far right. Provocatively, he affirmed that he “does not care” about the “utility for the present world” of his “interest in things that do not exist anymore,” and even described himself as an “old right-wing anarchist” while insisting on his intellectual “debt” to Marx (Lévi-Strauss 1985). In this respect, his uncompromising independence of mind should definitely be acknowledged. Second, the celebration of Lévi-Strauss is an invitation to reflect on the sociological conditions of possibility of becoming a public intellectual. In his case, it is the rare combination of institutional legitimacy, with the Collège de France and later the Académie française, and popular recognition, through his travelogue, two elements which he certainly craved but which were somewhat in tension as, in the scholarly world, fame does not always enthuse one’s peers. But perhaps more importantly, two general historical

conditions have to be taken into account. One concerns the structure of the media world: it was then undergoing a major transition, but the written press and its journalists still carried weight in the public sphere and, although media-friendly personalities were increasingly visible, the image of the intellectual remained vivid, with Lévi-Strauss outliving Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan. It is not certain that it would be possible for anyone to occupy the same position in today's world of social media and cable television. The other entails his very positioning away from major public engagements: by not having signed the Manifesto of the 121 against the Algerian War in 1960, by not having participated in the effervescence of the May 1968 Movement, and by dedicating his life to the erudite study of vanishing cultures, he could appear in the last years of the twentieth century as a sage situated above the fray (Keck 2008). Paradoxically, for many, his assumed distance from the media and politics was his best asset. In a period of growing anxieties regarding the globalization of a postcolonial world and the transformation of the moral order, Lévi-Strauss offered the reassuring image of a reclusive scholar occasionally leaving his study to deliver profound reflections on exotic beliefs and practices that elevated the debate on contemporary issues to the level of the history of humankind, with a zest of wistful conservatism. It was what the public, in France, expected from anthropology.

By taking this major, albeit atypical, figure – the most American of French anthropologists and the most secretive of France's intellectuals – to exemplify the public presence of the social science, I therefore want to emphasize the diversity and ambiguities, the serendipity and determinants of this public presence that most of its advocates tend to minimize or ignore. There is no doubt for me that making anthropology enter the public sphere and participate in democratic conversations is desirable and even crucial, especially in the hard times contemporary societies are experiencing. To be clear in this respect, I consider that the threat that they face comes less from crime, terrorist attacks, the influx of refugees and migrants, or other real issues to which they are confronted and which I certainly do not want to lessen, than from the responses they offer to these issues as they are dictated by both fear and the political exploitation of fear – which serve to justify the mass incarceration of African Americans in the United States, the oppression of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, the persecution of Shias in Saudi Arabia, the pogroms against Zimbabweans in South Africa, the repression of Muslim minorities in East Asia, or the rejection of migrants and refugees in Europe – Sweden being, along with Germany, a notable exception to this disgraceful trend of recent years. “A scholar can hardly be better employed than in destroying a fear,” wrote Clifford Geertz (1984: 263), whom I had the honour to succeed at the Institute for Advanced Study. The aphorism is especially relevant if we substitute “fear” with “politics of fear” – although to destroy it unreasonably exceeds the anthropologists' power.

However, my intention is not to advocate for a public social science. Others have done so. My aim is instead to reflect on and account for what is at stake when the work of social scientists is made public (Fassin 2015). From this perspective, I prefer to be analytic rather than programmatic, to study cases rather than promote a model, to adopt a critical stance rather than assert a normative posture.

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There have been, in the past decade, various calls for a public social science. On the one hand, Rob Borofsky (2000: 9-10) has pleaded for a “public anthropology,” creating a book

series and a research centre dedicated to the mission of engaging “issues and audiences beyond today’s self-imposed disciplinary boundaries.” Both words – issues and audiences – are important in this project, since its promoter considers that it is necessary to address “critical concerns” and invigorate “public conversations.” Deploring “our general intellectual isolation and insulation from the world’s problems,” he contrasts it with what had been the earlier engagement of anthropology “to intellectually explore where and how it wanted” for the benefit of more than “professional colleagues.” For him, “objectivity lies less in the pronouncement of authorities than in conversations among concerned parties.” On the other hand, Michael Burawoy (2005: 5-6) argues for a “public sociology,” observing that “the original passion for social justice, economic equality, human rights, sustainable development, political freedom, and simply a better world that drew so many of us to sociology is channelled in the pursuit of academic credentials,” but at the same time admitting that in recent years “the aspiration for public sociology has become stronger.” The latter, which is one of the four modes of practicing his discipline, with policy, professional and critical sociology, comprises two sorts of public sociology: one, “traditional,” refers to the readers, listeners and viewers of social scientists’ lectures, books, articles, opinion papers, radio programs, and documentary films, who constitute a largely “invisible” public; the other, “organic,” concerns the people with whom social scientists work, be they non-governmental organizations, neighbourhood associations, labour movements, trade unions, who often represent a “counter-public.” For both authors, then, the issue is the mobilization of their discipline beyond what they describe as an academic enclosure, with the idea of reviving a lost continent of public engagement on public issues. Theirs is a normative stance.

By speaking of public ethnography, I do not intend to coin a new phrase or delimit a new domain; I simply want to open a different perspective. My project is to apprehend some of the stakes and challenges relative to the public presence of the social sciences, and more specifically of ethnographic work. Ethnography is often purely conceived of as a method, in line with Bronislaw Malinowski’s (2014) famously enthusiastic account of his fieldwork among the Trobriands. It has also been thought of as writing in accordance with the etymology of the word, especially after the collection edited by James Clifford and George Marcus (2010). The dual dimension of fieldwork and writing, which typically follows an almost linear chronological development from the former to the latter, implies that the ethnographic work ends with the sending of a final manuscript to a publisher. The point I want to make is that the story continues afterward. The encounter with publics – which has in fact probably begun earlier in the research – is part and parcel of the anthropological enterprise. Public ethnography involves two distinct but complementary ideas. First, it questions the specificity of the publicization of ethnography, as opposed to other empirical ways of producing knowledge in the social sciences. Second, it resorts to the ethnographic approach to study this publicization, making it an object of inquiry. Having developed its various expressions in a previous series of essays (Fassin 2017), I will limit my discussion here to some of the operations involved in the process via which ethnography comes to be public. Two are of particular relevance: popularization and politicization. They are independent of each other but are often combined since the former facilitates the latter.

Popularization means making one’s intellectual production both accessible and likeable. Conversely, as Philippe Descola (1996: 210) observes in an essay in which he recounts his decision to write a *travelogue à la Lévi-Strauss* the conventions of anthropological writing

lead to “a certain standardization of the forms of description, the more or less exclusive use of the analytical categories recognized by the profession, and the self-imposed avoidance of the expression of too obviously subjective opinions.” Indeed, the hermeticism of many anthropological works, which probably contributes to their quasi-disappearance from general bookstores, is often associated with a dual process through which the discipline claims its academic place as a science while its members constitute themselves as a professional group. On the one hand, the complexity of the phenomena analyzed and the sophistication of the thinking involved would call for a specialized language as is the case for physics or biology, with the difference that anthropologists combine it with philosophical components. On the other, the building of a scholarly community would require both the reproduction of a normalized habitus and the establishment of an exclusive communication among peers, keeping laypersons at a distance, an attitude rendered all the more indispensable since the topics studied, when they are not exotic, may seem familiar enough to let anyone believe that they have achieved expertise in them.

Against these two trends, popularization supposes a double reaction. First, it asserts an affinity of anthropology with literature, without reducing it to a literary exercise. Such recognition implies to take seriously “the anthropologist as writer” in Helena Wulff’s words (2016). Second, it means that addressing a broad readership should not be, for the anthropological community, an embarrassment and, for the author, a definitive renouncement to an academic career and the respect of one’s colleagues. The impossibility for Margaret Mead, the most popular anthropologist of her time, to obtain her peers’ recognition and find a university position suggests, indeed, that the exercise is not entirely devoid of risk (Mitchell 1996). Being currently engaged with an illustrator in the translation of *Enforcing Order* into what I have suggested to call a graphic investigation, I still have to see how criminologists will react to this experimental genre. As I reveal in the epilogue of *Prison Worlds*, the book in which I found my inspiration while writing the ethnography of a French correctional facility was neither Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* nor Erving Goffman’s *Asylums*, both of which I hold in high esteem and discuss at some length in the conclusion, but Dostoyevsky’s *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* – not because of possible similarities between penal institutions in nineteenth century Siberia and twenty-first century France, but because of the unique way in which the author combines a faithful account of prison life and a broader reflection on the human plight. The fascinating conversations I have had with prisoners, guards and wardens as well as with journalists, activists and politicians, who had read the book, have convinced me that it is possible to render, through the work of writing, something of the carceral condition, even if one inmate rightly told me that I could not understand their experience for not having been myself incarcerated. Through these exchanges, I realized that the effort to reach out for broader audiences opened new avenues for public debates on punishment. I was thus invited to give lectures in the Ministry of Justice, at the National Law School, and to lawyers’ organizations, but also to participate in local initiatives aiming at rethinking the punitive moment. This leads me to the second operation involved in publicization.

Politicization is a polysemous and even ambiguous word. I do not use it here in the restricted sense of the political arena, but more broadly in relation with both *polis* and policy. The former is associated with discussion, the latter with action. The reference to *polis* suggests multiple forums where issues are debated with all concerned and willing individuals. Some of

these forums are constituted as such, a meeting with a local organization for instance, while others are indefinite, the audience of a radio program for example. This perspective is in line with Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action (1985), although it recognizes the unequal access of many to the public sphere and the existence of subaltern counterpublics, as Nancy Fraser (1990) argues. A potential contribution of anthropologists to such forums consists of making their work, their material and their reflection available to such open discussion, while trying to identify those who are not easily accessed and acknowledging the legitimacy of alternative publics – two tasks for which their ethnography may prepare them. Under these circumstances, their intellectual production can be appropriated, contested or diverted by the agents who receive it. The argument of academic authority can have no place here, although the actuality of the authoritative voice of the ethnographer should not be denied or minimized either. The first opinion paper I published in *Le Monde* in 1996, at the time of the *sans-papiers* movement, was aimed at correcting the false representation of undocumented migrants in the media as well as in political discourses. Whereas they were commonly described as illegal workers who had clandestinely entered the country, this depiction being reinforced by images of migrants found in the hold of ships or the back of trucks, the research I was conducting at the time showed that the majority of them had previously possessed residency permits and only became undocumented after changes in the law or its enforcement. Faithfully reflecting my demonstration that the government itself produced most of the irregularity it combated, the newspaper entitled the piece: “The state and the illegals”.

The interactions with the world of policy involve a different space, which is more directly related to action. However, it is not limited, as is often assumed, to so-called decision-makers to whom social scientists would serve as experts, but includes various counter-powers, such as non-governmental organizations, social movements and political parties, which may also use their expertise. These interactions are often deemed scientifically impure and ethically dangerous. Indeed, the knowledge shared with the agents can be manipulated or instrumentalized for questionable purposes. Yet, there is no reason why such practices should not be considered a legitimate form of the public presence of social scientists to the extent that they exercise a critical approach. Thus, they may contribute to the growing domain of critical policy studies advocated by Chris Shore and Susan Wright (1997). However, there are limits to such collaboration, as politicians and, for that matter, activists as well may try to exploit the authority of scholars for their own benefit. Having earlier conducted some research on mental health issues, I was solicited in 2008 by the health minister, Roselyne Bachelot, to chair the national committee on suicide, but having observed how academics had served as “spoils of war” – the term in use – by the right-wing government of the time to legitimize its policies, I politely declined the proposal. The cabinet had no difficulty finding an alternate who readily accepted.

Popularization and politicization do not exhaust the multiple operations potentially involved in the encounter with publics. I will mention three more: education, estheticization, and judicialization. First, transmission of anthropological knowledge seems generally limited to academic audiences, whether students or colleagues, but there are exceptions, and it is said that the television programs hosted by Fredrik Barth have significantly contributed to making Norway an improbable pocket of prosperity for public anthropology, although he stated in a 2001 interview that France was the country where this tradition was the liveliest (Howell

2010). This pedagogic process sometimes takes singular forms. I once attended a talk given by a commissioner in charge of the public relations of her law enforcement agency and was surprised to learn that police academies now had anthropology classes. When I asked who taught them, she answered that it was officers of the intelligence services. Second, museums offer to their visitors an estheticized version of anthropology, and Benoît De l'Estoile (2007) has devoted a study to their history in France from the 1931 Exposition Coloniale to the 2007 Museum of First Arts on the Quai Branly. Unexpectedly, a few years ago, the curator of an exhibition titled "Others. Being Savages from Rousseau to the Present" contacted me a few weeks before its opening after having read my description of how the police regarded the youths of the housing projects as savages in their jungle and wore badges that represented ferocious animals attacking supposedly hostile neighbourhoods. He could thus show in his catalogue reproductions of these ominous insignia. Finally, anthropologists are sometimes requested to testify in court to shed light on a context or a problem related to the case being adjudicated, and Anthony Good (2007) often served as an expert in the British asylum court to describe for the immigration judges the cultural and political contexts of the countries from which the claimants came. Similarly, at the first lawsuit brought in France by people belonging to minorities against the ministry of the interior for racial discrimination by the police, the lawyers asked me to write, as *amicus curiae*, a report on the subject based on my observations. This testimony was probably marginal in the case, but for the first time, racial profiling in policing was acknowledged in court and the government was condemned.

Each of the modalities of public intervention I have evoked requires negotiation skills (how to interact with people belonging to other social worlds), supposes translation competences (how to be understood beyond the circles of the social scientists), generates intellectual challenges (how to avoid the simplification of complex issues), and raises ethical questions (how not to betray the subjects of one's research). Often overlooked by the promoters of public social science, these problems and the dilemmas that accompany them deserve to be examined as such and incorporated in the research process. They represent the life of knowledge, with its transformations, misunderstandings, and contestations.

Such an enterprise supposes an inquiry into the actuality of the publics. This is a difficult task. "Publics are queer creatures. You cannot point to them, count them, or look them in the eye. You also cannot easily avoid them," writes Michael Warner (2002: 49), who compares publics to "corporate ghosts." Indeed, publics are elusive. In a seminar room or a conference hall, the auditors are physically identifiable, although often not individually known. But for a book or a film, a newspaper column or a radio interview, one generally does not have the slightest idea of the size, the composition, and the opinion of the audiences that have access to them. Commentators, when they exist, whether on paper, on waves, or increasingly online, are not representative or even indicative of the public, although they can be influential. In fact, the audience may expand considerably with what one could name vicarious publics: all those who have heard from someone who has heard about the work, or read someone who has read it, and who may still have strong opinions about it. For instance, I doubt that Nicolas Sarkozy's minister of the interior, Claude Guéant, had read *La Force de l'ordre*, my ethnography of police work, when, in a press conference, he replied dismissively to the question of a journalist who asked him what he thought about the book, but his collaborators had perhaps passed him notes about the reviews and interviews that had come out in the media since its publication one month earlier, and he could not have

missed the full front page of the newspaper *Libération* dedicated to the book with a headline provocatively playing with its title: “Les forces du désordre.” His disparagement gave me, moreover, the opportunity to expand the audience of the study since I was granted a “right to reply” on the national television evening news and via a column in *Le Monde*.

However limited the knowledge about these publics may be, one needs to be curious about them and be attentive to their reactions to what social scientists produce. There are at least three reasons for it. First, one can adapt one’s interventions to render them more relevant and effective. Second, one can respond to queries or criticisms in order to clarify and defend one’s positions, thus enriching the debate. Third, one can make them the matter of further analysis and an opportunity for a deeper comprehension of the stakes involved. Encounters with publics definitely imply a certain degree of alienation – in the etymological sense of being estranged from one’s work. But this alienation is generative.

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After having arrived at this point, one could legitimately ask whether it is really important for the social sciences and the humanities to have a public presence. And if yes, why? For disciplines such as physics or biology, publicization mostly entails popularizing a highly sophisticated scientific production with a dual objective of educating their audience and legitimizing their domain. Both objectives are intimately linked and crucial to their material reproduction – through laboratories, gigantic telescopes, powerful particle colliders, bioinformatical computer networks, etc. – which relies on the eternal promise of a soon-to-come theory of everything for physicists and of a definitive breakthrough in the cure of maladies for biologists. For their part, social scientists can certainly popularize their knowledge – which they probably do not do enough – but they cannot offer promises to change the world – or rather most of them would not regard such promises as serious and sincere. Moreover, they are confronted with a major challenge: the increasing competition of positivism on the market of the interpretation of human societies. Such competition is certainly not new, and students of the social sciences, such as George Steinmetz (2005), have analyzed historical parallels along the twentieth century, but the current technological advances and the fascination they arouse combined with the triumphant illusion of a possible rational neoliberal government of the world make the present time particularly vulnerable to the sirens of positivism. On the one hand, the strategic alliance between the philosophy of mind, experimental psychology, evolutionary biology, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience proposes a seductive universalizing paradigm for both the history of humankind and the functioning of the brain, which claim to explain cultural selection as well as social behaviour. On the other hand, the mimetic convergence of economics, political science, social psychology and quantitative sociology leads to an evidence-based approach increasingly mobilizing so-called big data whose results give them a symbolic hold on decision-making, quite independently of the factual validation of their predictions. Furthermore, these two sides have substantial overlaps and reinforce each other. In this context, which humanist social scientists and more specifically anthropologists should not ignore or dismiss but resolutely engage, what do they have to offer to legitimize their public presence? The brief, one-word answer to that question is critique.

By critique two things are meant. The first one, legacy of the Enlightenment according to Michel Foucault’s (1984: 45) reading of Kant, is the aptitude to question “what is given

to us as universal, necessary, obligatory,” in other words, what is taken for granted in the common sense as well as the scholarly domain. I consider that this intellectual operation is never as difficult and indispensable to achieve as in the moral realm: values, in particular when they are associated with affects, are so deeply entrenched in our intimate conviction and collective self-assurance, that they seem to become indisputable. In consequence, they should all the more be examined critically, that is, genealogically. This is what Talal Asad (2003) has done with secularism. This is what I have tried to do with humanitarianism – not to criticize it, as some have assumed, but to distance oneself from its moral evidence so as to pose ethical and political questions that were too often eluded. Anthropology is, if not by essence, at least by practice, the discipline that has – together with history – the most natural inclination toward this questioning. Indeed, knowing that what we consider as self-evident in our society is not so in other cultures and has not been so in the past forces us to acknowledge that the present order of things, whether local or global, near or remote, is the realization of one potentiality among many others that could have happened. Such recognition has important implications for the public sphere. If anthropology is, as Michael Carrithers phrases it, a “science of possibilities” (I wittingly delete the problematic adjective “moral”), then its epistemological openness can also be a source of political inspiration. The world as we know it could be different and may therefore be changed.

This leads to the other dimension of critique, the one that singularizes anthropology – and perhaps sociology this time – among the social sciences and humanities. This second aspect is a sort of empirical test. It consists in determining the consequences of the current state of affairs as it has turned out and the more general stakes that it raises. It is not enough to demonstrate that what we deem taken for granted is the result of historical circumstances and power relations: one must inquire which transformation this specific configuration entails. What is at play when one invokes women’s rights to legitimize moral crusades in the Muslim world as Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) has analyzed? What is gained and what is lost when one invokes the right to live rather than social justice in the politics of AIDS in South Africa, when one speaks the language of trauma and resilience rather than of oppression and resistance in the Israel-Palestine conflict, or when in France the public sphere is saturated with discourses about insecurity at the expense of inequality leading to the increasing incarceration of young men from disadvantaged neighbourhoods belonging to ethno-racial minorities, to name a few cases I have studied? To these questions, the patient work of ethnography provides invaluable answers. Far from merely being a way of producing empirical material, it is a way to access theory, as João Biehl (2013) demonstrates. In this sense, critical anthropology is inseparably theoretical and empirical. It provides alternative modes of understanding, more complex, more informed, more attentive to unheard voices, and thus reopens the public debate on contemporary issues that are so often analyzed with ready-made thinking.

Going public, especially with a critical perspective on such issues, means taking some risk. Speaking truth to power, as the motto goes – whether this power is academic or political – may be a perilous exercise. It implies being ready “to raise embarrassing questions” and “to confront orthodoxy and dogma”, in Edward Said’s (1994: 11) words in his lectures on intellectuals. Occasionally it leads to unpleasant moments when those who feel threatened by this truthfulness try to delegitimize the social scientist, discredit his or her work, block his or her career, prosecute him or her, or prevent the continuation of his or her program,

especially when it is conducted in a foreign country from which he or she can be banned, and even worse, under an authoritarian regime under which he or she incurs torture and imprisonment. But risks often take more subtle and ambivalent forms. They reside in the compromises accepted, sometimes not so honourable ones, when the researcher becomes the official expert for public authorities or private corporations. They lie in the challenges of translating complex issues into simple and potentially simplistic ideas as the ethnographer interacts with the media or general audiences. They ultimately originate in the suspicion existing within the scholarly domain toward the publicization of scientific work, whatever form it takes: popularization or politicization, or collaboration with journalists or lawyers. This wide range of risks – some of them stemming from external forces, others coming from social scientists and their professional community – has frequently for consequence a form of intellectual prudence that amounts to renouncement. Indeed, self-censorship is probably more common than censorship, at least in democratic contexts. Certain topics are avoided, certain issues are ignored, as many are not willing to take risks. The “courage of truth,” as Michel Foucault (2011) phrases it, is primarily a struggle against one’s own reluctance to go public for fear of being attacked or, more often, of losing some of one’s legitimacy or authority. There can be a cost to publicization, and one has to decide whether one is ready to bear it.

But there is also a form of social obligation to it – a responsibility, to use a word that stems from Latin *respondere*, which means both to give a reply and to promise in return (Fassin 2008). By going public, anthropologists thus repay society for the knowledge and comprehension they have acquired while posing questions that may have been explicitly formulated or merely surfacing. This settlement of their debt is their ultimate political and ethical commitment.

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