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Tracing afterlives of ethnography: in pursuit of engagements and dialogues with publics

Review by Sarbani Sharma

If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography

by Didier Fassin, ed.

Duke University Press, 2017

Every anthropologist at some point in their career, consciously or not, responds to the particularities of their work of ethnography and its contribution to the space within which the anthropologist is located. Accusations of ‘speaking from an ivory tower’ further persuade the production of anthropological knowledge to vindicate its utility and validity in the face of a world that is witnessing unprecedented vicious cycles of deprivation, injustice, fear and hate. It is in this context that the volume ‘If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography’ edited by Didier Fassin, engages with some of the formidable debates of what lies ‘at stake in both the production of an ethnographic understanding of the world and its public dissemination’ (p.9).

Introducing the volume, Fassin begins by providing a comprehensive history of ethnography as a method within the discipline of anthropology and its evolution in terms of practices and presentation. For Fassin, the experience of interaction with one’s subjects and the subsequent process of writing leading to knowledge production and consumption by one’s fellow academics is only a part of the whole process of anthropological engagement. He insists on paying greater attention to the ‘afterlife’ (p.338) of one’s published work and the consequences of publicization (p.4) of the work to various publics. The author consistently reiterates the value of documenting, and critically examining the challenges and stakes related to its dissemination, promotion, reception, and utilization of their intellectual production. According to him these should not be treated as a mundane ‘after-sales services’ posing practical

problems to be solved personally and of no relevance for the discipline (p.2). 'Public Ethnography' is defined here, as the process and principle of publicizing one's work and documenting an ethnography of the subsequent encounters of the published work with various publics. In the epilogue to the volume, Fassin describes, through his own ethnographic work in France and South Africa, how the two operations of 'popularization' and 'politicization' (though both are not always necessarily interlinked) are critical to the practice of public ethnography. The collection of twelve essays is an attempt to explore the 'diversity of public afterlife of ethnography' by anthropologists who are predominantly located in metropolitan, global north universities (with two exceptions).

The first part of the book titled 'Strategies' elucidates how anthropologists labor to develop strategies (consciously or otherwise) to work with and work through their ethnographic material in order to communicate their ideas to an audience of specialists outside their discipline. Gabriella Coleman (Chapter 1) elucidates how her willingness to be at ease with some degree of uncertainty regarding her study (p.30) of a secret network of hackers facilitated her translation and explanation of the work and world of the hackers to the community of journalists. Ghassan Hage (Chapter 2) recalls how, during a personally distressing visit to Palestine on the sidelines of an invitation to deliver a lecture at a Palestinian University, he was able to effectively use his position as an academic speaker, to not merely echo his solidarity with the Palestinian cause, but also critically engage with the dynamics of power that operate within the tropes of resistance (p.61). Reflecting on the reception of her testimony requested by a commission investigating police brutality in the South African township, Kelly Gillespie (Chapter 3) makes a case for letting ethnographies meaningfully enter public debates by carefully considering the framing of those debates through an ethnographic insistence on the importance of contextualization and recontextualization (p.88-90). Manuela Ivone Cunha (Chapter 4) describes her experience of communicating ethnographic findings to publics mediating between research and policymaking in the Portuguese criminal justice system. She illustrates the relevance of context, complexity and process in ethnographic works that makes it persuasive to sensitize policy oriented audiences' understanding and planning (p.111).

The second part of the volume titled 'Engagements' discusses the various forms and specifics of engagements sought from ethnographers by their publics. Federico Neiburg (Chapter 5) self-reflexively illustrates the ethical and political negotiations in translating ethnographic expertise into the pragmatics of brokering peace. Lucas Bessire (Chapter 6) draws from a series of failed experiments in

anthropological advocacy conducted among the so-called Ayoreo Indians to question how ethnographic knowledge production practices impinges on the 'liberal metanarrative' (p.138) and its promises of 'revelations' manages to get co-opted by the very politics it attempts to fight. Bessire makes an interesting case for 'Indigenized public ethnography,' which is predicated on nonconformity and presumes its subjects to be constantly transforming, as against 'tactical public ethnography' that takes nonconformity as evidence of insufficiency or illegitimacy (p.151). Jonathan Benthall (Chapter 7), a scholar of Islamic Charities in West Bank, describes his experience of being discredited as a scholar and being prevented from publishing his ethnographic work after he was called upon to testify in a court case in which the defendant was accused of using humanitarian assistance for terrorist activities. Vincent Dubois (Chapter 8) draws links between the conditions of production and the conditions of reception of ethnography by various audiences to illustrate how policy ethnography can become public with the aim of contributing to ongoing debates beyond the immediate specific domains of policy-making.

The third part of this collection titled 'Tensions' illustrates cases of conflicts and tensions which have occurred in the course of the publicization and politicization of ethnography, often resulting in a threat to the researcher himself/herself. Nadia Abu El-Haj (Chapter 9) poses the question of how anthropologists should begin thinking of public ethnography vis-à-vis forms of misunderstanding, denial, ignorance, and criticism that seem to be deliberate misrepresentations of scholarly work (p.221). She insists on paying attention to the multiple ways in which an ethnographic work is received and the forms of evidence and authority that interpret anthropological texts (p.206). In the light of campaign by certain Jewish groups against her tenured position, Abu El-Haj interrogates the consequences of public ethnography that at times threatens academic freedom, perplexes the ethnographer and prevents any further response or engagement. Unni Wikan (Chapter 10), through her work on honor killing amongst migrant Kurdish families in Europe and her contestation of the much-celebrated multiculturalism of Norway, highlights the variety of ways in which various publics align to prohibit, or encourage, research on critical social issues and its entry into the public domain (p.228). Through his long engagement with Right to Health litigation in Brazil, João Biehl (Chapter 11) highlights the tensions over the reception of counter-evidence by various publics that resulted in a breakdown of epistemic collaboration between ethnographers and the policy-makers/administrators (p.263). Sherine Hamdy (Chapter 12) reflects on barriers to public ethnography based on her experiences conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Egypt, and her disappointing attempts to present it to people with diverse political and social worldviews. While acknowledging the cynicism that pervaded her ideas of ethnography's potentialities, Hamdy makes a

case for greater recognition and discussion of how various publics come with their own ideas, ideological commitments, and affective stakes that shape the ability of the ethnographer to engage audiences, as well as audiences' own receptivity to the alternative visions ethnography can produce (p.287).

While one can certainly understand the value of these illustrated stories of the anthropologists, his or her engagements, disappointments and anxieties, the reader learns much less about the effects of these engagements, strategies and tensions on the anthropological knowledge subsequently produced. With due acknowledgment to the value of publicization, popularization and politicization of one's ethnography, it would have been more interesting to learn about the anthropology subsequently developed from such engagements. Instantiations of the influence of public ethnography on the nature, source and limits of anthropological knowledge would significantly enrich the volume. Further, since theoretical mode of reasoning may not necessarily be a shared vocabulary with various audiences of ethnography, it would have been valuable for the volume to attempt to comment on what is the specificity of public ethnography's value and intentions that has not been already achieved by the *longue durée*, intensive and intimate works of journalists, activists, legal researchers etc.

Considering that the volume intends to explore the 'diversity of afterlife of ethnography', it would have been more stimulating to see the editor or authors be more curious about the afterlife of ethnographies produced in non-metropolitan locations, the majority of which never make it to anthropology's esteemed journals or university presses and yet engage with various publics in multiple ways. Perhaps, insight into the practices of public ethnography generated from these locations would genuinely provide destabilizers to evaluate the epistemic value of public ethnography albeit being venerated as exotic. That said, the volume is a must-read for every student of anthropology, policy maker and administrator trying to understand the complexities of the social world we inhabit.

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