Check for updates

CRITIQUE of ANTHROPOLOGY

Introduction: Ethnographies of power and the powerful

Critique of Anthropology
2021, Vol. 41(3) 195–205
© The Author(s) 2021
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0308275X211038605
journals.sagepub.com/home/coa

Matthew Archer
Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies, Switzerland

Daniel Souleles
Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Abstract

This introduction suggests that anthropology often assumes that the people anthropologists work with are relatively powerless. Due to this default, anthropologists tend to design their research and theorizing to reflect a relatively powerless other. We suggest that the accumulated scholarship on studying up, that is, studying those who structure the lives of many others, offers more accurate ways to theorize power and its exercise as partial and situated, as well as more plural and productive ways to imagine anthropological practice and ethics. We also suggest that this line of thinking gives us some ground to speak to the larger direction of the discipline.

Keywords

Anthropology, ethics, power, studying up

Questions of power saturate the discipline of anthropology. Historically, it was the power of the colonial state that allowed ethnographers like Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard to drop into their remote field sites, porters and other servants in tow with books, medicines, and weapons. These early ethnographic expeditions were enactments of the power of Empire, and the data they generated were often

Corresponding author:
Matthew Archer, Centre for International Environmental Studies, Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies; Centre for Business and Development Studies, Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark.
Email: mbarcher@protonmail.com

mobilized in service of those empires. People across Africa, Asia, and the Americas became subjects of empire in part because they became objects of anthropological analysis. Underlying the colonial state's violent exercise of power over colonized people was a more mundane exercise of power, namely the power to document, to classify, and to categorize, as well as its claim to being the only source of scientific, objective representation.

Anthropologists have been complicit in these exercises of power since the discipline's founding. One entailment of this history has seen anthropologists trying to figure out how to practise anthropology, how to learn about people, without reproducing imperial ways of knowing and abetting imperial or capitalist ways of extraction, dispossession, and exploitation, a difficult task for a discipline billed as 'the child of imperialism' and 'the handmaiden of colonialism' (Gough, 1968, cited in Sinha, 2021).

This history led to power itself becoming a constant, if amorphous, topic of anthropological inquiry. Early ethnographers mostly focused on the micro dynamics of power vis-à-vis kinship and political structure in so-called small-scale societies (e.g. Leach, 1961, 1973). Things got more complicated in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, as new theories of power and domination (such as those by Foucault and Said) emerged alongside a 'crisis of representation' (Hymes, 1969; Asad, 1973; Hoebel et al., 1982; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Trouillot, 2003) in which anthropologists and other social scientists began to critically reflect on the limits of understanding or describing the lived experiences of other people particularly from a specifically scientific epistemic standpoint. These novel approaches to power suggested that, in addition to local exercises of power which observers can note and document to a lesser or greater degree, there is a larger world-systemic context for everything that anthropologists observe (Wolf, 1982), and that academics will always be constrained by the nature of their conceptual a prioris when they seek to know and write about other people (again, Trouillot, 2003). To take but one example, assuming that a group of people has a unitary culture could both homogenize intergroup difference, as well as obscure the fact that life looks the way it does because of an imperial occupation.

All this crisis literature and reflection prompted a more acute focus on power both in the context of situations that anthropologists observed and in their writings. But this focus, in turn, was often filtered through another persistent anthropological bias – presuming that the relatively powerless or the recently disempowered are *the* standard anthropological object of study, what Abu-Lughod (1990) characterizes as an overt focus on domination and resistance. This literature generated a conceptualization of power that, according to Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 5), combined the Foucauldian 'idea that power relations permeate all levels of society' with both a Bourdieusian 'stress on the active practices of social agents' and a Gramscian reminder of 'the eternally incomplete nature of hegemony'. Empirically, a focus on the 'suffering subject' (Robbins, 2013) was at the heart of this 'dark anthropology' (Ortner, 2016). And yet, even

with all this critical self-reflection for the past 70 years, 'calls to expunge this legacy of hierarchies and hegemonies', according to Sinha (2021: 265):

> have not been acted upon by its practitioners and produced the requisite changes. The ensuing problematic ethnographic practices – in the field, in the classroom, and in professional arenas of conferences and publishing, have managed to thus survive, often sidestepping criticism of the discipline's embeddedness in imperial, neocolonial, and neoliberal politics, with rhetorical and ornamental maneuvers.

Anthropologists are likely familiar with this trajectory. It's more or less the story that the discipline tells about itself – imperial grounding, constant critique, all to better understand, ethnographically of course, the larger world of the peripheral and powerless. Despite this, it's worth noting that a number of other trajectories for anthropology emerged in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, ones that sought to reimagine anthropology along different lines, with different objects of study, and with different apprehensions of power (see Allen and Jobson, 2016).

Studying up 2.0

One such trajectory grew out of Laura Nader's (1972) suggestion that anthropologists should study up and understand the way in which relatively small groups of people (often in the anthropologist's home country) structure the lives of many, many more people in capitalist societies. This direction for anthropological inquiry subverts many of the assumptions embedded in common anthropological approaches that, while impeccably critical, focus on the peripheral and those perceived as powerless, reminding us of the inherently political nature of ethnography (Harrison, 1997). In turn, this special issue will seek to develop and explain what an anthropology that focuses on those who exercise power and structure the shape of other people's lives looks like both theoretically and ethically,[1] thereby developing and explaining a bit of what we've learned from this alternative anthropological trajectory. Put another way, we start answering the question: What might anthropology look like if it kept its attention to history and the context-specific analysis of power, but also focused on those actually exercising power? How do anthropological theories and theorizing change? How does anthropology's ethical practice change?

The empirical archive of studying up suggests that anthropologists should revise how they theorize power and its exercise due to its local contingency (Priyadharshini, 2003), and that they should re-evaluate some of how they think about consent and access when they do their work by perhaps giving less habitual deference to the people anthropologists work with (see Souleles, this issue, in particular). Moreover, the fact of describing and analysing power often makes anthropologists complicit in the plans and projects of powerful actors in somewhat predictable ways (also, Souleles, this issue).

Power in an ethnographic context generally looks fragmented, partial, and situation specific. Rarely are there all-powerful individuals whose will is law; and even if those with power are locally understood as some kind of omnipotent agent, it's just about never the case that the directives of the powerful unfold smoothly. The contributions to this special issue illustrate the piecemeal nature of power by studying people whose power is often taken for granted and essentialized in other anthropological literature seeking to explain the world that the powerful create: oil industry professionals, bankers and commodities traders, government engineers, mid-level executives, and the leaders of influential non-governmental organizations. These are the interlocutors who are often less visible in ethnographic examinations of power, crowded out by abstract appeals to powerful institutions like corporations, banks, and other organizations. From the perspective of these actors, the contributors to this issue cobble together incomplete and at times contradictory theories of power, something Samanani (this issue) reminds us should be expected, and even embraced, as an outcome of ethnography. Through these emic accounts, however, power emerges as something that is in fact always liminal, always mediated, but also always grounded in specific experiences and specific contexts, with recountable histories and predictable futures.

A renewed approach to studying up is one way to contribute to the 'incomplete project' of decolonizing anthropology, an epistemological intervention that avoids the essentialized and particularized categories in which critical anthropologists often find themselves placed: 'native anthropologist', 'female anthropologist', and so on (Sinha, 2021). Rather than studying up with the intention of filling in the gaps of existing anthropological theories of power, however, we see studying up as a way to glean new, emic theories of power from people who many people think of as relatively powerful, and as a way to model different, perhaps less exploitative forms of anthropological engagement and practice. Thus, building on Nader's call within the context of more contemporary debates around decolonization, care, and abolition, contributors to this issue were invited to think about what studying power means in a world where up, down, and sideways are exceedingly difficult to distinguish theoretically, but exceedingly easy to distinguish empirically. What we mean by this is that theories of power emerging from the centre of anthropology have become so complex that it can be difficult to make heads or tails of what power is and how it works, even as it becomes increasingly clear who wields the most power and structures other people's lives in contemporary political and economic relationships (from the Israeli occupation of Palestine to Jeff Bezos's immense, Amazon-derived wealth).

Wolf (1990: 586) made a similar point more than 30 years ago. Anthropologists, he argued, 'actually know a great deal about power, but have been timid in building upon what we know', a timidity he attributed to the fact that power, as a term, is 'one of the most loaded and polymorphous words in our repertoire'. Is power, as Hobbes (1996) argued in the 17th century, one's 'present means, to obtain some future apparent good', through various and often compounding modes? Is it something, following Foucault, that is 'grossly and subtly deployed' in 'the modern

world', something that is 'in every crevice of life, and in which there is no outside to power' (Ortner, 2016: 50–1)? Or is it, as Latour (2005: 64) argues, better understood 'like society' itself as 'the final result of a process and not a reservoir, a stock, or a capital that will automatically provide an explanation'?

Rather than trying to navigate these complex, often scholastic and abstract approaches to power, or trying to cram actually existing power relations into neatly categorized 'modes of power' (Wolf, 1990), the contributors to this special issue demonstrate the value of going out and observing power, something our interlocutors are able to explain quite compellingly. Each contributor to this volume describes some circumstance in which individuals need to reckon with the fact that they are structuring other people's lives, making them do things they wouldn't do otherwise, while also reckoning with the fact that their lives are structured by others. We suggest, too, that the accumulation of this ethnographic reporting starts to gesture towards a more pragmatic notion of power, one that grounds any effort to study up, and one that should be distinguished from how anthropologists have thought about power in the context of those who don't have much of it. Rather than a unified force or field that looms in the background, in our telling, whatever power is, its exercise is always partial as well as reliant on a specific social milieu. Those who exercise power almost always feel like they're just a cog in a larger machine, with some superordinate force, people, or ideas constraining them.

One other central insight of these analyses is a distinction between power and the powerful. Anthropologists' tendency to focus on people who are relatively powerless has posited an implicit distinction not between the powerful and the powerless, and not between power and powerlessness, but between *power* and the powerless. In this way, there are powerless people on the one hand, and then a homogeneous force that acts upon them on the other. As our accounts show, this predominant dichotomy only partially reveals what is going on in the social world. By studying up in the ways we describe in this issue, we are able to show that power is specific – that is it is exercised by specific people according to specific local cultural logics, logics that don't necessarily travel terribly far or translate terribly well. Increasingly, then, we suggest it becomes a sort of academic malpractice to explain away some group's problems by gesturing to impersonal, homogeneous power of one sort or another. While ethnographic work generated from the perspective of those who are relatively powerless has ingrained the idea that power is amorphous and omnipresent, as difficult to grasp as it is to resist, we show instead how power is relative and relational, historically particular and mediated by anticipated futures.

In Sayd Randle's contribution, a pervasive nostalgia among contemporary engineers for high modernist state interventions in water infrastructure that characterized mid-century planning sheds light on the way perceptions of power and powerlessness – of both individuals and institutions – depend on the particular histories of political ecologies in which power is exercised, maintained, and resisted. Michael Prentice makes a similar point, showing how the purported

power of dynastic corporate owners in Korea is attenuated within organizations by the way mid-level managers perceive their power. Moving from Korean *chaebols* to Texas oil and gas conglomerates, Sean Field also challenges the perception of hegemonic industrial power, showing how even relatively senior people in the oil industry, people who reside very comfortably in 'the one percent', experience and negotiate precariousness within their social and professional networks. Matthew Archer and Hannah Elliott's contribution traces the power of 'the market' across the certified tea supply chain, from Kenyan tea estate managers to Dutch tea traders to sustainability standards developers, showing how deferring to the market as a deciding factor in social and environmental outcomes both masks the power of lead firms like Unilever and Tata Global Beverages while also giving other actors a way to theorize and critique their power. Farhan Samanani looks explicitly at the way community organizers in London theorize their own and others' power, arguing that emic conceptualizations of power are sufficient in their own right. Daniel Souleles reflects on ethical conundrums he faced during ethnographic research on algorithmic trading in the United States among financial elites, questioning the received wisdom that ethnographers should always seek consent from research participants or give them the chance to correct the record, especially when those interlocutors occupy positions of such immense power and influence. Finally, in her afterword, Ellen Hertz builds on the articles collected in this issue to emphasize the distributed nature not only of power, but also of responsibility, noting that both must be understood in their complexity if power is ever to be exercised responsibly.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue give a face to power in a way that does not impose externally derived or even necessarily coherent modalities onto the messy data that ethnography ineluctably generates. As a collective project, they resonate with recent work in anthropology that distinguishes both empirically and theoretically between power and politics (Escalona Victoria, 2016), between power and political agency (Sen, 2017), or between power and the powerful. These grounded accounts of power show us who is powerful in particular contexts, implicitly theorizing power as something that is ubiquitous but not intractable.

Relative power in anthropology: The case for a controlled burn

One final observation, and, perhaps, a provocation: more than anything, the contributions to this special issue demonstrate the continued relevance of anthropological understandings of power as operating partially, locally and specifically, which seems particularly important in light of recent calls to let anthropology burn. On the one hand, the discipline can indeed appear irredeemable. From the American Anthropological Association's regressive both-sides-ism on topics like the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the Black Lives Matter movement to the almost daily reminders from the Anthropology Community listserv that a lot of anthropologists have rather appalling politics, Ryan Jobson's (2020: 265) indictment of anthropology, citing Brodkin et al. (2011), 'as a "white public space" that maintains a liberal myth of perfectibility through the progressive incorporation of

historically subordinated peoples into the comforts and privileges of property and citizenship', rings depressingly true.

On the other hand, this characterization of the discipline and the consequent call to let anthropology burn was issued from a particular place and time, namely from the US during what proved to be the final days of the Trump administration. Many anthropologists, working outside or at the edges of the discipline, see anthropology quite differently from those trained and working in elite departments, finding it difficult to locate their own work in the landscape Jobson describes (see e.g. Traweek, 2021). Reflecting on Al-Bulushi et al.'s (2020) call for a consideration of the 'politics of location' implicit in recent discussions about the future of anthropology, we think a consideration of the politics of position coupled with attempts to theorize power, its exercise, and its resistance might be of some use in continued efforts to reinvent anthropology. Who has the power to start a fire, and what kind of power do they have? Once aflame, who, if anyone, has the power to say whether and when a burning discipline should be extinguished? Are the structures of power that define contemporary anthropology degraded by a fire, or are they strengthened, like iron in a forge? What kinds of new power relations emerge from such a charred terrain?

This sort of cleansing fire imagined by advocates of anthropology's incineration resonates with what Paulette Steeves (2015) has described as 'pyro-regeneration' and 'pyro-epistemology'. Steeves notes that:

> Pyro-epistemology is a term I coined which metaphorically describes critical Indigenous scholarship. A practice of pyro-epistemology through the ceremony of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing is one which cleanses the academic landscape of discussions that misinform worldviews and fuel misunderstanding and racism. Such literary renewal clears the way for new discussions and intellectual growth in academic fields of thought and centers of knowledge production. (2015: 62)

Seen in this way, Steeves is adapting Indigenous forms of environmental management to academic practice. Steeves suggests that the overgrown, pernicious underbrush of wrong and racist self-justifying settler knowledge might be consumed and dispatched, leaving behind longer standing, more deeply rooted Indigenous histories and ways of knowing and being. Part of the appeal of this sort of pyro-epistemology, for Steeves, is that it would go some way towards remediating the 'soul-wounds' (2015: 59) caused by Western archaeological and anthropological ways of knowing Indigenous people, ways that have often denied Indigenous people their history in North America and continuity with their ancestors, and have led to poverty and dispossession.

Steeves' explanation of what a pyro-epistemology is and where it is coming from should give us pause when we advocate something similar within anthropology. Where Jobson draws on the metaphor of wildfires that occasionally raze the mansions of Malibu (Davis, 1995), Steeves' pyro-epistemology draws on a metaphor of the controlled burn techniques that are a key element of Indigenous land

management. These controlled burns follow context-specific rules regarding when and where to set fires, in order to facilitate the growth not only of new trees and grasses, but to attract game animals and other participants in cultural, economic, and political life (Kimmerer and Lake, 2001). Wildfires, in contrast, tend to be unpredictable, uncontrollable, and often murderous; everything is consumed except the oldest, strongest trees, rocks, and contours of the landscape.

If we extend this sort of dynamic to anthropology, we can easily imagine a scenario in which the chaparral, the scrub, and the low-lying stuff – that is, anthropology in community colleges and education schools, anthropology in the context of participatory research, anthropology in blended departments, the anthropology done by precarious graduate students and as practised by people on the periphery of the discipline – burns and disappears if and when a wild fire shows up, especially if no one does anything about it (much less fans the flames). How does an incinerated anthropology affect the power of elite departments to control the exclusionary production of 'scientific' knowledge? Does it make space for modes of knowledge production that are less legible to the neoliberal university and its donor-investors, or does it merely shift power to other, more fire-retardant disciplines like sociology and economics? In making a case for letting anthropology burn, we must distinguish between the controlled burn techniques of Indigenous land management and an uncontrolled (and uncontrollable) inferno that only spares the most elite, the most imperious, the most historically extractive, and the longest intellectual lineages that the discipline has to offer. Where the former leaves space for pruning the discipline in such a way as to increase the power of those at its margins relative to those operating at its imperial and imperializing centres, the latter threatens to leave those obdurate structures of power intact.

Perhaps instead of a wildfire that spares only the oaks or the redwoods, we can imagine a future where these solid old trees are neighboured by prairies that are maintained with an occasional burn, spaces that invite new forms of life and new forms of engagement, creating mosaics (Fairhead and Leach, 1996) and patchworks (Günel et al., 2020), a kind of shifting cultivation of anthropological knowledge that yields new insights, new theories, new collaborations, and new politics. Perhaps someday we can even imagine a situation in which the discipline's oaks and pines and redwoods, having reached the end of a long and storied life, become mulch and compost to fertilize wilder gardens, an ecology in which untamed – or less *disciplined* – landscapes are nurtured rather than overshadowed by those gnarly old trees.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Matthew Archer https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1510-414X
Daniel Souleles https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7192-2596

Note

1. Ironically for a discipline that is so reticent on the topic, many others have already written productively about methods in the context of studying up, such as Gusterson (1997), Ho (2009), Ortner (2010) and Souleles (2018).

References

Abu-Lughod L (1990) The romance of resistance: Tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women. *American Ethnologist* 17(1): 41–55.

Al-Bulushi S, Ghosh S and Tahir M (2020) American anthropology, decolonization, and the politics of location. American Anthropologist website, 22 May. Available at: https://www.americananthropologist.org/commentaries/al-bulushi-ghosh-and-tahir (accessed 22 July 2021).

Allen JS and Jobson RC (2016) The decolonizing generation: (Race and) theory in anthropology since the eighties. *Current Anthropology* 57(2): 129–148.

Asad T (ed.) (1973) *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. London: Ithaca Press

Brodkin K, Morgen S and Hutchinson J (2011) Anthropology as white public space? *American Anthropologist* 113(4): 545–556.

Clifford J and Marcus GE (eds) (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Davis M (1995) The case for letting Malibu burn. *Environmental History Review* 19(2): 1–36.

Escalona Victoria JL (2016) Anthropology of power: Beyond state-centric politics. *Anthropological Theory* 16(2–3): 249–262.

Fairhead J and Leach M (1996) *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest–Savanna Mosaic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Günel G, Varma S and Watanabe C (2020) A manifesto for patchwork ethnography. Cultural Anthropology website, Member Voices, Fieldsights, 9 June. Available at: https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography (accessed 22 July 2021).

Gupta A and Ferguson J (eds) (1997) *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Gusterson H (1996) Studying up revisited. *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 20(1): 114–119.

Harrison FV (1997) Ethnography as politics. In: Harrison FV (ed.) *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology for Liberation*. Arlington, VA: American Anthropological Association.

Ho K (2009) *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hobbes T (1996) *Leviathan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hoebel EA, Currier R and Kaiser S (eds) (1982) *Crisis in Anthropology: View from Spring Hill*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.

Hymes D (ed.) (1969) *Reinventing Anthropology*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Jobson RC (2020) The case for letting anthropology burn: Sociocultural anthropology in 2019. *American Anthropologist* 122(2): 259–271.
Kimmerer RW and Lake FK (2001) The role of Indigenous burning in land management. *Journal of Forestry* 99(11): 36–41.
Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Pxford: Oxford University Press.
Leach ER (1961) *Pul Eliya – A Village in Ceylon: A Study of Land Tenure and Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Leach ER (1973) *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. London: Routledge.
Nader L (1972) Up the anthropologist: Perspectives gained from studying up. U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare, Office of Education. (white paper), ED 065375.
Ortner SB (2010) Access: Reflections on studying up in Hollywood. *Ethnography* 11(2): 211–233.
Ortner SB (2016) Dark anthropology and its others: Theory since the eighties. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6(1): 47–73.
Priyadharshini E (2003) Coming unstuck: Thinking otherwise about 'studying up'. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 34(4): 420–437.
Robbins J (2013) Beyond the suffering subject: Toward an anthropology of the good. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19(3): 447–462.
Sen D (2017) *Everyday Sustainability: Gender Justice and Fair Trade Tea in Darjeeling*. New York: SUNY Press.
Sinha V (2021) Annihilating the 'savage slot' from anthropology: Materializing reflexive practices. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 11(1): 264–272.
Souleles D (2018) How to study people who do not want to be studied: Practical reflections on studying up. *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 41(S1): 51–68.
Steeves PF (2015) Decolonizing the past and present of the western hemisphere (the Americas). *Archaeologies* 11(1): 42–69.
Traweek S (2021) Let canons burn? *Anthropology Now* 12(3): 34–38.
Trouillot M-R (2003) Anthropology and the savage slot: The poetics and politics of otherness. In: *Global Transformations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 7–28.
Wolf ER (1982) *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Wolf ER (1990) Distinguished lecture: Facing power – old insights, new questions. *American Anthropologist* 92(3): 586–596.

Author biographies

Matthew Archer is an interdisciplinary environmental social scientist working at the intersection of anthropology and human geography, where his research focuses on questions of ethics, power, and responsibility in corporate sustainability, sustainable finance, and sustainable development. He has an MSc in environmental economics from the London School of Economics, a PhD in environmental studies

from Yale University, and postdoctoral research and teaching experience from Copenhagen Business School.

Daniel Souleles is an anthropologist and associate professor at the Copenhagen Business School. He studies value, wealth, and inequality and has done fieldwork on Catholic hermit monks, private equity investors, employee-owned companies, and computerized stock trading, all in the United States. He is the author of *Songs of Profit, Songs of Loss: Private Equity, Wealth, and Inequality* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019).