

Anthropology away versus anthropology at home: a deconstruction

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Abstract. It is tempting to represent anthropology at home versus anthropology in exotic places like so: “Whereas the latter is obviously legitimate and of interest to the discipline, the former is a borderline phenomenon at best and no department could function with just it. It is probably parasitic.” This paper offers a deconstruction of this portrait, but not a spectacular one, in which anthropology at home is presented as essential for accountability.

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“This is to deconstruction shame:

To have an instance so mundane”

When we think of social anthropology, we think of a posh white Westerner living amongst an exotic people and then reporting what they found, or at least that is a familiar image of the discipline. But what about anthropology at home? What about when a British anthropologist studies Britain, say? Regarding her fieldwork in the town of Bacup, the anthropologist Jeanette Edwards tells us

I am often asked, ‘Why Bacup?’ A question which requires me, I always think, to identify some significant or special feature that makes it a suitable focus for anthropological interest... perhaps the question, ‘Why Papua New Guinea?’ is asked but it seems peculiarly irrelevant to anthropologists. Non-Western localities are deemed axiomatically of anthropological interest and legitimate arenas of study. (2000: 8)

Edwards, as I understand her, perceives a stark contrast. On the one hand, anthropology far away amongst exotic peoples, conveniently but perhaps misleadingly referred to as Non-Western, is regarded as obviously legitimate and obviously of interest. On the other hand, anthropology at home is questioned. It is difficult not to pick up the suggestion that the questioners regard it as a borderline case of legitimacy and interest for the discipline, at best. “Anthropology at home is probably parasitic. The core of anthropology is based on fieldwork away, not at home. You cannot run a department with just the latter,” one imagines a questioner thinking. This paper offers a kind of deconstruction of this portrait (see Edward 2022), though I should warn readers that it is an unspectacular one.

Any department should be accountable. Outsiders should at some point review the work done. Some of these outsiders must be outsiders to the discipline, otherwise it could just be a cosy network of friends nodding along to each other’s claims. But outsiders feel unsure what to say about these exotic societies, or what are exotic societies from the perspective of mainstream British culture. They don’t know enough about them. So there must be some anthropology at home for them to review. So some anthropology at home is essential. In which case it is wrong to regard this work as parasitic, to devalue it in this way.

References

Edward, T.R. 2022. Almost Forgotten Deconstruction. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWAFD>

Edwards, J. 2000. *Born and Bred: Idioms of Kinship and New Reproductive Technologies in England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.