

Mediated Experiences: 1-7

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Science,
Medicine, and
Anthropology

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The question is not only: What are practices of science today? The question is: How do we become capable of naming anthropological problems of the sciences today? Vocationally, what work on ourselves as anthropologists might we need to do in order to be capable of carrying out this activity?
(Stavrianakis, Bennett, Fearnley, 11)

1. I have a distinct memory of my first graduate presentation: a visceral sense of anxiety felt acutely from my stomach to neck. A fear that I'd be unable to articulate what I'd been thinking; that my thoughts weren't even worth articulation in the first place. Learning to engage with the texts (to read, speak about, and think with) was an experience that was part panic, part excitement. They led me to inhabit a space where I constantly questioned and reflected on how I understood myself, my capabilities, and my limitations.

That research methods seminar was organized around many of the same texts ([https://www.academia.edu/15386387/Research Methodology in Anthropology Syllabus](https://www.academia.edu/15386387/Research_Methodology_in_Anthropology_Syllabus)) as *Science, Reason, Modernity: Readings for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*, and we (at the time, three students starting graduate school and their professor) traced one possible variation on the “genealogical line” and “pedagogical legacy” (p. 33) to which this reader is extended as an invitation. The spirit of that invitation is, in our understanding, not to a canon that would replace any number of others, but to a set of equipment. We take this book forum as an opportunity to reflect on *Science, Reason, Modernity* through our experiences, exploring how these texts served as our tools, and to what end.^[1]
(# ftn1)

2. I remember my initial surprise, in the seminar as in this reader, at the relative lack of texts disciplined into anthropology. Learning to become a “subject of truth under the conditions of modernity” requires as much unlearning as it does thinking about new concepts and ways of conduct.

The works in the twentieth-century human sciences collected in *Science, Reason, Modernity* have brought, in the words of Paul Rabinow, to whom the reader is dedicated as the editors' teacher (and directly or indirectly ours), “philosophical learning, diagnostic rigor, and a practice of inquiry that operates in proximity to concrete situations into a productive relationship” (p. 250). That is, the reader's texts demonstrate a mode of inquiry that is identifiably anthropological in Rabinow's sense, and share key characteristics of the anthropology he has come to conceptualize and practice. Of course, as Rabinow notes in a different section of *Anthropos Today*, “it is worth *forcefully* repeating that there are a multitude of other practices anthropologists might pursue” (emphasis in the original, 2003, 85).

3. I often asked myself “where do I start?” I had a preliminary idea for a research project that would be part of my Master’s thesis, but found it difficult to articulate what I’d been thinking. Confronted by what Stavrianakis, Bennett, and Fearnley describe as “diffuse, if not contradictory, possible approaches” (p. 1) toward an object of study, I found it difficult to make sense of what I was doing in anthropology. Many of the texts in *Science, Reason, Modernity* provided the foundations of a seminar in which I was able to finally conceptualize what it was I wanted to do, identifying the “‘actual interconnections among things’ in the world” not as ends in themselves, but in order to “grasp the ‘conceptual interconnections among problems’” (Weber, p. 10). Rather than provide an overview of widely varying works and a history of methodology, this assemblage of texts helped the reader, a student beginning his graduate program, articulate his own position within an ever-changing field.

As the editors, Anthony Stavrianakis, Gaymon Bennett, and Lyle Fearnley, observe, “The modern problematizations of science, those troubled figures illuminated by Dewey and Weber, Canguilhem and Foucault, are themselves already becoming historical.” The anthropology of science has captured, in French tradition, an anthropology of the experience of modernity, or as the editors put it, an anthropology of modernities. They argue that therefore future anthropologists of science must take up, observe, and reflect on their relationship to these prior problems in order to “articulate lines of inquiry neither bound within nor forgetful of the modern crises of truth and life” (p. 33).

4. It was only once I stopped expecting “modernity” to present itself to me as an easily digestible concept that I came to see its traces exist almost everywhere. In the reader, the question of modernity is addressed in terms of both its scientific origins and how contemporary anthropology has been transformed in thinking through it. Modernity—what to a student may appear as an elusive concept—becomes a historical event and is put in relation to changes in anthropology. Modernity, for me, became a means through which to better comprehend the existence of contemporary phenomena that include the not-so-distant past.

Yet the need to take up the problem of modernity is not quite, or not only, because of the empirical history of a given research topic and the way it exists in the contemporary. The editors tell us that the reader is composed as a guide, a set of texts that has helped them “engage the sciences as matters of truth, power, and ethics” (p. 11). While the texts provide a genealogy of how the human sciences have problematized the “hard” sciences, the editors are clear that intentions are pedagogical. “We delineate a genealogical pathway,” they tell us, “in order to provide some of the equipment that will enable readers, we hope, to constitute themselves as subjects of a contemporary anthropology of science” (p. 11). As Rabinow wrote in 2003 (excerpted in the reader), the mode of inquiry that he identified in these readings “proceeds through mediated experience. It contributes to what used to be called a *Bildung*, a process of self-formation, that today might be called an attitude or an ethos” (p. 250).

5. Over the course of our program, the students in my cohort not only critically reflected on who they were and what they were doing in both superficial and fundamental ways, but also struggled with emotional stability, relationships, and even health. In fact, one of the closest bonds I made with another student was after realizing that we were both excusing ourselves from our communal study room to break down and cry in private.

This experience was not one of taking ourselves too seriously. Rather, it was part of the process of developing trust in our abilities and the conviction to take ourselves and our work seriously. Roland Barthes writes in “To the Seminar,” “just as, for Brecht, Reason is never anything but the sum total of reasonable people, for us, seminary people, research is never anything but the sum total of people who, in fact, search (for themselves?)” (1989, 341). The need to search for ourselves, however, came in part through our need to become capable of doing research and the demands that that work, our interlocutors, and our material, then made on us. One premise of our seminar was that the work we did together with these texts was as fundamental to becoming an anthropologist as the field and “the desk.”

Underlying this position, and the editors’ selection process, is Foucault’s work in the ethics and politics of truth, particularly his lectures concerning “practices of the self” or “care of the self.” In one of the texts *Science, Reason, Modernity* includes, Foucault writes that “the care of the self” had been the framework and justification for “knowing oneself” in Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman societies (200). In proposing to guide students towards being a “subject of truth” within this modern moment, the editors are not only tracing ways that the importance of the “care of the self” became displaced to “knowing oneself,” they are also trying to encourage students to ask themselves (ourselves) how we can become capable of “speaking the truth” (p. 31).

6. I find this sentiment as inviting and confusing as I did two years ago when I began my graduate studies. To think about oneself as a subject enmeshed in ethical concerns and conflicts seems immensely important in upholding some kind of “ethnographic responsibility” which goes beyond overly stylized attempts at self-reflexivity in ethnographic writing, demanding that the researcher critically think about who they are and what they do. I admit that I am still at a loss to understand how “care of the self” can be incorporated in this “modern moment” – especially in our contemporary universities and disciplines which do not only prioritize knowledge but monetize it into result-oriented production.

Through these readings we came to rethink what it means to know: to problematize and creatively think about how the “hard sciences” construct knowledge, curiosity, and objectivity as well as to reflect on our own relationships with truth. “Caring for the self,” as Foucault demonstrates in Antiquity, had a positive meaning as well as a generally recognized importance for being able to “know oneself.” As subjects seeking new ways to engage with truth in this contemporary moment it is for us to not just place ourselves along genealogical lines but to learn to recognize a journey while it is unfolding and undertake it intentionally.

7. Three main questions remain active for me: how can “care of the self” can be taught? What counts as a sacrifice or transformation in order to gain access to the truth? And what would it mean if students, specifically, are more conscious that what they are embarking on is changing the kind of subjects they (we) may become?

One question *Science, Reason, Modernity* poses is what it means to practice anthropology as a vocation, and, as we engaged these texts as well as our fieldwork, we found that for us this is experimental, conceptual, and ethical. The empirical situations and material of our projects compelled us to adapt our methods and develop new concepts. This required experimentation with the forms, practices, and venues of our anthropological practice, and with ourselves.

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¹¹¹ (#_ftnref1) Each of the numbered paragraphs was written independently as a response to the reader by Dunseith, Miller, and Przybylak-Brouillard. The rest of the text was written by Dunseith, and Stalcup, who compiled, rewrote, and edited the ensemble.

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