



ENGAGEMENT BEYOND CRITIQUE? ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

IN RESPONSE TO THE IDEALS OF CULTURAL CRITIQUE, COMPLEXITY AND MORAL RELATIVISM PROMOTED IN POSTMODERN ANTHROPOLOGY, DIFFERENT ATTEMPTS HAVE BEEN MADE IN RECENT DECADES TO MAKE ANTHROPOLOGY MORE 'ENGAGED' IN THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL CHANGE. IN THIS ARTICLE, WE FOCUS ON THREE CENTRAL CONTEMPORARY POSITIONS ON ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT: POLICY-ORIENTED ACTIVIST RESEARCH, FEMINIST-INSPIRED COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH, AND WHAT WE HAVE CHOSEN TO CALL RESEARCH FOR ALTERITY AND ALTERNATIVES. EACH OF THESE APPROACHES HIGHLIGHTS CERTAIN IDEAS OF PARTICIPATION AND THEREBY CONJURE UP PARTICULAR KINDS OF COMMUNITIES TO WORK WITH AND THROUGH. WE DISCUSS THE VALUE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE THREE POSITIONS ON ENGAGEMENT AND ARGUE THAT, IN ALL ITS DIVERSITY, ANTHROPOLOGICAL PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH CAN PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN CO-CREATING PLATFORMS FOR RESISTANCE AND PROTEST AGAINST VARIOUS FORMS OF DOMINATION AND OPPRESSION WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY CONTRIBUTING TO PREPARING THE GROUND FOR ALTERNATIVE IMAGINATIONS, DESIRES AND WAYS OF LIVING.

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Introduction

How do we engage (with) the people we study and work with? Who should participate in and benefit from our research? Are we to use our research actively to promote social and political change? And, if yes, does ethically sound research entail political alignment with/empowerment of marginalized groups or rather an adherence to more neutral, multi-perspectival knowledge?

These and related questions are central to many social science disciplines but have perhaps been particularly foundational within social and cultural anthropology. Since the inception of the discipline in the early 20th century, the emphasis on ethnographic fieldwork and use of participant observation as a core method has given rise to continuous and heated debates about how anthropologists are to participate and engage in the world they are studying. Participation, in the context of ethnographic research, is an ambiguous term entailing fundamental dilemmas or tensions, including whether anthropologists should actively seek to empower the research participants and to what extent they have a moral obligation to engage in the struggles arising from the life situations studied.

Over the last few decades, there has been a growing focus on how anthropologists can engage more directly in the promotion of social change and social justice and make more of a difference beyond the academy. In order to do so, the participation of both the anthropologists and the people they work with are being renegotiated. New efforts are made to move beyond the idea that academic anthropology is and should be somehow 'pure' or 'neutral', and in contrast to an 'applied' anthropology directed at solving practical problems in the world outside academia (e.g. Pink, 2006; Pels, 1999). Some scholars have argued the need for "reclaiming applied anthropology" (Rylko-Bauer, Singer, & Van Willigen, 2006) and to make it more mainstream and integral to the wider discipline of anthropology. Others have coined new terms to indicate a similar shift towards a socially and politically committed anthropology: for example, action anthropology or activist anthropology (Schensul et al., 2014; Hale, 2006), militant anthropology (Scheper-Hughes, 1995), public anthropology (Eriksen, 2014) and engaged anthropology (Low & Merry, 2010).

In this article, we wish to contribute to the discussions of community-engaged participatory methodologies by providing some critical reflections on the conception of participation within different forms of socially engaged anthropological research. We explore the tension intrinsic to anthropological knowledge production between, on the one hand, analytical impartiality and, on the other, quests for making a judgment and taking sides, and point to the ways in which this tension has shaped anthropological thinking on participation and community. Our focus, therefore, is not narrowly on the pros and cons of particular participatory methods; rather, we discuss a selection of anthropological approaches that in different ways aim to generate social change and promote social equity and, in doing so, either explicitly or implicitly come to work with and promote particular ideas of participation and community.

We start the article with a brief discussion of important anthropological developments in the 1980s, linked to the introduction of participatory methods in studies of development aid and in anthropological writing. We then briefly discuss the influence of the 1980s postmodern positions on the ideals of (dis)engagement and participation in order to show how current approaches to and calls for anthropological engagement and their use of participatory methods are often defined in contrast to postmodern approaches and ideals of multi-vocality and relativism. In particular, we focus on three central contemporary positions on anthropological engagement: *policy-oriented activist research*, *feminist-inspired collaborative research*, and what we have chosen to call *research for alterity and alternatives*. We show how these approaches, in their development of a politically engaged anthropology that moves beyond cultural relativistic positions, come to highlight certain ideas of participation and thereby conjure up particular kinds of communities to work with and through. We discuss the value and limitations of each of the approaches and argue that, in all its diversity, anthropological participatory research can play an important role in co-creating platforms for resistance and protest against various forms of domination and oppression while simultaneously contributing to preparing the ground for alternative imaginations, desires and ways of living.

Development and participation

Anthropologists have long debated the use of participatory methods in the context of the involvement of communities in devel-

opment work. These debates have been highly influential to the overall development of the discipline and the moral self-scrutiny of who or what anthropological knowledge should benefit. As Hickey & Mohan (2004, p. 6) have shown, in the 1940s and 1950s when 'development' became a part of the colonial agenda, anthropologists contributed ideas of getting local communities involved. However, this involvement often came to presuppose and co-construct communities as somewhat stable, homogeneous and thus governable. Accordingly, in the wake of the independence processes in the colonies in the 1960s, extensive critique was raised against the ways in which the anthropological discipline had been implicated in colonialism and conjured up an essentialized and ahistorical perspective on 'native' culture and community.

From the 1980s, practice-oriented development scholars, such as Robert Chambers (e.g. 1997), advocated for improving development interventions through greater attention to social inequalities *within* and *between* communities, and inspired a new development paradigm focusing on participation. NGOs and other development agents increasingly talked about 'people-centred development' and called for bottom-up, participatory development acknowledging local knowledge forms, arguing that earlier forms of top-down initiatives had only led to failure. In order to obtain sustainable and efficient development, they argued, the knowledge and viewpoints of the so-called beneficiaries had to be taken more into account through methods such as participatory rural appraisal (Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Crewe & Axelby, 2013).

Participation became the new buzzword – and this to such an extent that, by the turn of the millennium, critical development scholars felt that it had grown into an unquestionable orthodoxy and a form of tyranny (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). They argued that participatory approaches had *not* empowered marginalized people and triggered transformative development as promised; rather, they continued to reinforce existing power structures, although in more complex ways than state-run modernization projects (cf. Mosse, 2013, p. 229). Furthermore, the critics argued, NGOs and other institutions were still working with and through certain kinds of preconceived or imagined communities, producing them as more or less self-evident entities and imposing "priorities and agendas while claiming to enhance communities' capacity to determine their own" (Kesby, 2005, p. 2047). Scholars of gender and development in particular pointed to the ways in which participatory methods often overlooked gendered difference in possibilities, capacities and consequences of participation within a community, even when specifically targeting women's participation (see e.g. Mayoux, 1995).

Overall, anthropological engagement in development processes have been characterized by conflicting approaches and tensions. On the one hand, anthropologists have engaged in developing participatory approaches and methods to allow local people to gain a voice; on the other hand, the discipline has raised significant critiques of the power structures implicated or overlooked in participatory processes – both between and within different groups of people.

Cultural critique and (dis)engagement

In parallel with the discussion and introduction of new participatory approaches in the development sector, in the 1980s a different move towards greater participation of the research subjects took shape among university-based anthropologists in particular in the USA. Inspired by postmodern thinking, it too identified problematic forms of anthropological representation and authority and argued for greater anthropological reflexivity and the need to incorporate in new ways the voices of the people with whom the anthropologists engaged during fieldwork. As we shall see, by combining these efforts with the quest for relativism in anthropological analysis, this so-called 'reflexive turn' has become both a source of inspiration and point of criticism within recent calls for a more engaged anthropology.

The postmodern inspiration witnessed in the 1980s in anthropology is perhaps best reflected in the work of George Marcus (Marcus & Fischer, 1999 [1986]; Clifford & Marcus, 1986) which played a central role in questioning the forms of representation and authority embedded in much earlier anthropological writing. Marcus & Fischer (1999) argued that anthropology experienced a 'crisis of representation' brought about by a general sense of "uncertainty about the adequate means of describing the social reality" (ibid., p. 9). They saw cultural critique – i.e. the use of ethnography to defamiliarize, deconstruct and denaturalize taken for granted beliefs or institutions within a culture (see e.g. Hart, 2015) – as central to anthropological analysis. However, they emphasized that it was to be accompanied by cultural relativism: the idea that the values, norms and practices of other cultures/communities must be understood in light of the particular culture/community in which they are found. Anthropologists were to pay attention to complexity, explore the conditions for the articulation of different values in different

places, and not make value judgments of particular ways of living (Marcus & Fischer, 1999, p. 167). Additionally, in order to move beyond authoritative ('objective') claims and representations of 'the other', calls were made for new experimental and collaborative writing styles (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

On the one hand, therefore, anthropologists now experimented with participatory ways of incorporating and empowering the natives' voices in their academic writing. On the other hand, in doing cultural critique, they often aimed to de-naturalise powerful knowledge categories, institutions and practices and deconstruct essentialism – in particular the essentialization of culture(s) in earlier writing. 'Participatory' (writing) methods, therefore, did *not* go hand in hand with explicit political alignment, value judgments or fights for social justice alongside the people the anthropologist worked with. Importantly, in this period, single-site or village/community studies were increasingly supplemented and replaced by more multi-sited approaches that allowed the ethnographer to 'follow' people, ideas, metaphors, things etc. as they move across and co-produce different sites or contexts (Marcus, 1986). Whereas 'community' in previous single-sited approaches was often related to actual interacting groupings of people, multi-sited approaches increasingly co-produced an understanding of community as an *imagined* one (cf. Anderson, 1983), as a " 'community of sentiment' [...], a group that begins to imagine and feel things together" (Appadurai quoted in Amit, 2002, p. 18). Community, in other words, was increasingly understood as a symbolic construct, a world of meaning existing in the minds of the members who contrast and create boundaries between their community and other communities.

To Marcus (1998), the multi-sited approach and the quests for relativistic cultural critique was associated with the emergence of a particular kind of anthropological 'activism'. He argued that anthropologists who engage in cultural critique and conduct *multi-sited* research become "circumstantial activists" (Marcus, 1998, p. 98) and "activists in spite of themselves as a function of operating across a number of sites" (ibid., p. 243). This kind of activism is not about affiliating or aligning with a particular social movement or community in struggle; rather, "it is activism quite specific and circumstantial to the conditions of doing multi-sited research itself" (ibid., p. 98) in the sense that at different sites one can be "working with and against changing sets of subjects" (ibid.).

Beyond critique?

As noted previously, with the growing calls for engaged, public and activist anthropology, in recent decades many anthropologists have argued for a move 'beyond critique' (see e.g. Venkatesan & Yarrow, 2012; Shear & Burke, 2013) – both in terms of the reflexive turn's cultural critique and anthropologists' critique of development aid. In the context of anthropological development research, post-structural or deconstructive analyses that mainly aim to criticize participatory development aid and point to the inequality and power regimes embedded within it are increasingly criticized for foreclosing a "consideration of how or whether it is possible to retain hope in the vision of a better or more just future" (Venkatesan & Yarrow, 2012, p. 2). In general, there seems to be a growing concern among anthropologists that the focus on the de-essentialization of communities and deconstruction of categories as well as a promotion of cultural relativist positions are of little practical and political use in a struggle for social justice and a better world. If focused on configurations of exploitation and oppression, it has been argued, critique can enable us to engage in resistance and opposition but may not be sufficient in terms of supporting and conjuring viable alternatives and possibilities for fundamental change (Shear & Burke, 2013). Accordingly, activist-oriented researchers have problematized the fact that even though the 1980s 'writing culture' debate and the turn towards a relativistic 'cultural critique' gave rise to more participatory approaches in terms of *writing* styles (including co-authorship with field work participants), it did not challenge or transform existing *fieldwork methods* to inform direct political participation.

The growing wish to combine anthropological studies with broader citizen commitments and activism gives rise to a series of questions, for example: What does it mean for the validity of academic knowledge if one allies oneself with a particular group of people? And, in terms of ethics, to what extent can 'outsiders' intervene to bring about changes in other peoples' lives (Low & Merry, 2010, p. 212)? In the following sections, we will look into three central activist-oriented approaches that in different ways attempt to move beyond postmodern cultural critique and engage ethnography more directly in efforts to promote social change. As we shall see, the three positions are in different ways entangled in the ambiguities and tensions linked to anthropological understandings of participation and community debated in relation to international development aid and cultural critique.

Activist anthropology: aligning with a community in struggle

Reproaching the 1980s movement of cultural critique for being too academically focused and too disengaged in direct struggles for social justice, activist researchers (not just studying but also engaging in activism) have been proponents of positions of alignment with the political struggles of specific groups and social justice causes (cf. Chari & Donner, 2010; Juris & Khasnabish, 2013; Ortner, 2016; Urla & Helepololei, 2014). One important early voice in this debate was Nancy Scheper-Hughes, who in her call for 'militant anthropology' (1995) argued that anthropologists can and should have a central role to play in fighting for social justice. In her view, anthropology is a profoundly political project, and anthropologists can no longer take a stance of neutrality. "Cultural relativism, read as moral relativism, is no longer appropriate to the world in which we live" (ibid., p. 409), she claimed. Here, anthropologists *cannot not* be morally and politically engaged in their informants' struggles.

However, as emphasized by Speed (2006), activist research is ridden by tensions between the insights of cultural critique and the political ambitions of social justice activism. Charles Hale, an anthropologist who positions himself as an activist scholar (2006, 2008), argues that the solution to the ethical dilemmas of activist research is to maintain *dual* loyalties to academia and to a group in political struggle. He describes his own activism as arising from a parallel engagement in Nicaragua in problem-solving and practice-oriented anthropology, on the one hand, and more academically oriented research, on the other. Hale criticizes the 'circumstantial activist' position advocated by George Marcus (described above). To Hale, activist research is fundamentally:

a method through which we [researchers] affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results. (Hale, 2006, p. 97)

In Hale's opinion, the cultural critique tradition of Marcus and colleagues makes the mistake of conflating the political persona into the professional and, thereby, mainly being loyal to academic demands and criteria. He finds that this form of engagement is driven by an unhealthy search for "ever-greater analytical complexity and sophistication" and deconstructive scrutiny with no "analytical closure" (Hale, 2006, p. 101). Therefore, it is not given, Hale argues, that this kind of anthropology will lead to any kind of emancipatory knowledge, which can help struggling or marginalized groups think through the political possibilities and strategies, notwithstanding that this may be the ambition. In the words of Gordon (quoted in Chari & Donner, 2010, p. 81), one could say that cultural critique, in Hale's view, may speak truth to power, but not "speak the truth *about* power to those who are without power ... and thereby empower them".

To activist researchers, empowerment for direct political participation requires pragmatic analytical closures – not ever more complexity. In fact, bringing in as many stakeholder voices as possible and taking up a 'neutral' position often means supporting rather than challenging existing power structures, argues the anthropologist Kirsch, who has engaged in activist and advocacy work based on his research on the consequences of mining activities on the lives of indigenous communities in Papua New Guinea (Kirsch, 2002, p. 181). Charles Hale (2006) also aligned with an indigenous community in Nicaragua and participated in their fight for land rights in an area in which the government had offered the logging rights to a multinational company. Among other things, he attempted to promote their cause through testimonies at a court hearing. As an 'expert' witness, he provided important historical and political contextualization – based on, for example, participatory mapping of community land claims – that supported the claims of the given indigenous community.

Obviously, this policy-oriented activism and the emphasis on "alignment with an organized group of people in struggle" raises questions of how one understands and defines a group (or community), when and how one community's fight is legitimate in a moral sense, and in what kind of social transformation the researcher participates. Concerns have been raised about "whether activist researchers are failing to maintain a critical analysis – not because they are not 'objective' but, rather, because their attention is on *immediate* political goals" (Speed, 2006, p. 73, our emphasis). If activist research primarily aims to produce responses to societal problems here and now, and focuses on influencing policy-making, then it may lose sight of different forms of and potentially more long-term social transformation. One strength of non-activist anthropology, it has been argued, is its ability to slow down responses to societal problems, offering conceptual frameworks for analysis and engaging in often more indirect forms of activism where structural forces are explored and analyzed in a wider context (see e.g. Schultz, 2014).

Another critique of activist research is that it “tends to presume that social movements and communities are clear-cut entities with common goals with which we, anthropologists, can easily name and align” (Osterweil, 2016). For example, as pointed out by Dorothy Hodgson, few activist researchers “have been willing to investigate the social inequalities, such as gender discrimination, that have been masked or even reinforced by certain forms of indigenous activism” (2011, p. 14). Positionings inside and between groups are always relational, and often political groups engage in ‘strategic essentialism’ (see Spivak in Grosz, 1985; Pande, 2017) in order to give themselves a more powerful voice and position in a political fight. In doing so, they also tend to produce what Hodgson calls ‘strategic silences’ (Hodgson, 2011, p. 14): silences that mute internal differences, inequalities or social struggles within a group.

As we shall see in the following, feminist activist-oriented anthropologists – working in line with the classic feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ – have experimented with other participatory methods to open up different spaces in which marginalized groups or (strategically) silenced positions within a community can gain a voice of their own. Feminist participatory approaches thereby differ *both* from the kind of participation promoted by the cultural critique proponents through textual collaborative strategies, *and* from policy-oriented activist research that aligns with ‘a community’, lends expertise to the service of marginalized people and thereby speaks for the ‘other’.

Feminism and empowerment through participatory collaboration

Feminist ethnography has been defined as “a project committed to documenting lived experience as it is impacted by gender, race, class, sexuality, and other aspects of participants’ lives” (Craven & Davis, 2013, p. 1). In focusing on questions of inequality, diversity and intersectionality, it aims to study topics that are socially and politically relevant to the research subjects. As Dana-Ain Davis puts it, “feminist knowledge production, when linked to methodological strategies, should unravel issues of power and include interventions that help move toward social justice” (Davis, 2013, p. 27). Concerns of social justice and empowerment of marginalized ‘others’ are at the heart of feminist projects. Accordingly, feminist anthropologists have also problematized anthropological modes of representation and ‘othering’, and written experimental, reflexive ethnographies – and they did so decades earlier than Marcus and colleagues, who have been criticized, therefore, for not acknowledging and paying attention to feminist insights and approaches (see e.g. Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, & Cohen, 1989; Schrock, 2013, pp. 51-53).

Feminist anthropology is multi-faceted and diverse, ranging from studies of women’s experiences of subordination and silencing in different cultures to post-colonial critiques of Western (white) feminism itself for victimizing and ‘othering’ third-world women (see e.g. Lewin, 2006; Schrock, 2013). Here, we will focus on a particular strand of feminist research, namely the Latina feminist-inspired approach evoked by the anthropologist Andrea Dyrness (2008). We do so because Dyrness explicitly positions herself against dominant models of ‘activist research’ that focuses on influencing and changing public policy, and because she puts participatory methods into use in a seemingly radical way in order to create emancipatory spaces for marginalized subjects.

Dyrness’ position draws on a tradition of collaborative action research that goes back to the 1960s and 1970s (see e.g. Schensul & Trickett, 2009). She describes her research as feminist-inspired participatory research – a collaborative research process that “aims to transform relationships between ‘researcher’ and ‘subjects’ and expand the capacity of participants to make change in their own communities” (Dyrness, 2008, pp. 23-24). Policy-oriented activist research like Charles Hale’s, Dyrness argues, tends to provide accounts that (re-)install the researcher as an authority (expert) above the community. Thereby, it ignores “how the research process itself could be an important possible arena for making change” (ibid., p. 25). Dyrness worked with a group of Latina immigrant mothers who felt marginalized and silenced in the wider community organizing for education policy reform in Oakland, California. The community organizing movement had been established with the aim of “reversing inequities in the Oakland public schools through the creation of new small autonomous schools” (ibid., pp. 27-28), involving parents and other community members in their design and creation. However, whereas low-income African Americans, Latino and Asian immigrants had been the first to protest the conditions at the schools, some of these parents were eventually marginalized in the organizing process, deemed too unruly, provocative and outspoken to work with by the main movement organizers.

Dyrness, who had been researching the process, decided to facilitate a group of Latina mothers' "own inquiry and action to address the problems that mattered to them" (ibid., p. 30). Over the course of a year, the mothers and Dyrness had weekly meetings where they discussed their personal experiences and, furthermore, interviewed other parents, teachers and students and analyzed the interviews together afterwards. This collaborative research process, Dyrness suggests, empowered the women to take action for change through a critical analysis of power relations intrinsic to the reform process, the use of personal testimonials and the building up of trust, and extending their vision of community from their own little group to the larger school community. The mothers could thereby take upon themselves a new and active role in the school (Dyrness, 2008, p. 31).

This kind of participatory research, feminist anthropologists argue, can transform:

the ideal of equity into a lived experience of shared power [...]. At its most successful, participatory research extends beyond the idea that researchers are studying subjects, and invites them to produce more nuanced and profound analyses of the problems or issues with which they are faced and to improve the conditions of their lives. (Davis, 2006, p. 233)

The approach disrupts essentializing views of a community and of social change movements by pointing to and working with diversities and inequalities within communities. The aim is to support and work with marginalized individuals in order for them to create spaces for *personal* transformation, which, the argument goes, can then make the foundation for more *public* forms of resistance, disruption of dominant stories and the promotion of long-term changes. As Dyrness argues, with a reference to bell hooks: "We cannot hope to transform social structures without first transforming ourselves, without 'remaking and reconstituting ourselves so that we can be radical'" (Dyrness, 2008, p. 39).

The position of feminist-inspired collaborative research explicitly addresses the key challenge of engaging research in social and political change without contributing to essentializing views of community. Still, this research position entails some of the same dilemmas and tensions as discussed in participatory development aid and in activist approaches more generally. As argued by Judith Stacey (1988) in her influential article "Can there be a feminist ethnography?", due to its promise of an egalitarian and reciprocal relationship with the researcher, feminist ethnography may inadvertently come to "mask the potential for deeper forms of exploitation" (ibid., p. 22), including various and subtle forms of dependency, manipulation or abandonment. Furthermore, in the situation where the researcher takes up a role as facilitator of mobilization among a selected group of people, the complexity of communal life writ large tends to be down-played, and a more one-sided story line is presented. While feminist participatory research, like Dyrness', offers a strong critique of existing power structures and works to carve out spaces for resistance and empowerment of otherwise silenced voices, it does not (necessarily) aim to develop and create radical alternatives to existing socio-political systems. This, however, is a central ambition of a growing group of anthropologists who seek to engage in so-called alter-politics and the cultivation of otherness.

Alter-politics: Engaging otherness

We now turn to a third and increasingly influential approach to engaging anthropological research in fights for social justice and the promotion of socio-political changes. This approach, which we call *research for alterity and alternatives*, reinvigorates the anthropological tradition of cultural critique – the use of the foreign and different to rethink the familiar – by untying it from the 'moral relativism' of postmodern thinking. Here, anthropological engagement is not about aligning with a community and, based on expertise, aiming to influence public policy (cf. Hale's position); nor is it focused on the empowerment of marginalized people and the creation of a safe space for identity formation through the use of participatory methods (cf. Dyrness' position). Rather, it is concerned with finding and cultivating *otherness* in order to co-create with other people new and alternative political imaginaries and ways of living (see e.g. Hage, 2012; Ciavolella & Boni, 2015; Povinelli, 2001).

The anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2012), known for his work on racism, nationalism and multi-culturalism, argues that one of the strengths of anthropological research is its ability to provide a different kind of *critical* thinking than other disciplines. Hage associates critical thinking with knowledge that "enables us to reflexively move outside of ourselves such that we can start seeing ourselves in ways we could not have possibly seen ourselves, our culture or our society before" (ibid., p. 287). While individual anthropologists in practice tend to mix and combine different forms of critique, and rightly so, Hage makes a heuristic

distinction between so-called *sociological* and *anthropological* critique.

Sociological critique, Hage writes, aims to take us “outside of ourselves” by uncovering (hidden) social forces and critiquing and denaturalizing existing power structures (e.g. colonial domination, racist ideologies, essentialist conceptions of culture (ibid., p. 290)). This form of critique has been the dominant source of inspiration in the production of what Hage calls ‘anti-politics’, i.e. protests against and resistance to dominant power structures and existing orders. In different ways, the policy-oriented activist position and the feminist-inspired collaborative position discussed above both seem to work within the logics of sociological critique, aiming to make visible, critique and gradually change the unjust power structures and forms of exploitation and marginalization. However, this happens without fundamentally conjuring up alternatives to the wider socio-political system. Importantly, some of the calls to move ‘beyond critique’ (see e.g. Shear & Burke, 2013), discussed earlier, can be seen to target this kind of sociological critique.

In contrast, by showing and telling people about radically different ways of living, *anthropological critique* can expose us “to the possibility of being other than we are” (Hage, 2012, p. 290). Anthropological critique, Hage adds, opens up for an ‘alter-politics’: the imagining and conjuring up of alternative societies and forms of living. This political mode has become increasingly central to the fights for social justice and equity promoted in certain social movements – the name change of the former Anti-globalization movement to the current Alter-globalization movement being a case of point. The clearest example of an anthropologist’s engagement in alter-politics and anthropological critique is probably David Graeber and the way his research on political organization in Madagascar became a source of inspiration in the Occupy movement (see e.g. Graeber, 2013). As an activist/anthropologist, Graeber participated in and promoted the participation of other people in a common project of imagining and prefiguring alternative political realities inspired by ways of living and organizing in other places.

Ghassan Hage’s position takes inspiration from new materialist lines of thought and what has been described as an ontological turn within anthropology (see e.g. Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017). As the activist and participatory approaches presented earlier, Hage also criticizes postmodern deconstruction and the relativist focus on epistemological differences between culturally different actors. “In the name of anti-colonialism, what became known as the ‘reflexive turn’ has brought with it an anti-primitivism that has in many places banished the founding notion of ‘radical alterity’ from the imagination of many undergraduate anthropology students”, Hage complains (2012, p. 304). In contrast, he points to the value of (re-)introducing a focus on radical otherness (‘primitivism’) within critical anthropology. Hage emphasizes that radical otherness can be found in both non-western societies (what in early anthropology was described as ‘non-modern/primitive’ societies) and western societies as ungovernable and “emerging social spaces that lie in the cracks of the existing order of governmentality and intelligibility and requiring an imaginative politics that can think them in their difference” (Hage, 2012, p. 294). The critical anthropologist, he contends, “is always on the lookout for minor and invisible spaces or realities that are lurking in the world around us” (ibid., p. 305).

In the context of this article, Hage’s position and emphasis on the exploration of ‘otherness’ is particularly interesting in terms of the way in which the researcher (implicitly) may come to engage with/through communities. ‘Cracks’ in western societies do not seem to be formed through/in well-defined organized communities. Rather, Hage seems to identify them in spaces of creativity and spontaneity that refuse singular categorization, essentialization and organization, where there are no representatives or leaders as such, and often no clear demands or strategic essentialization of a group in order to gain political results or rights. The ‘cracks’ are the “less obvious realities in which people are equally enmeshed without fully giving a cultural expression to this enmeshment” (ibid., p. 305).

Hage’s position may be read as an attempt to engage anthropological research in a space of co-participation within more loosely structured, transient and amorphous groups or communities. Here, the anthropologist becomes an activist among other activists but with a certain expertise in noticing and cultivating ‘otherness’, and thus in some ways a translator. As highlighted by Ciavolella and Boni, such translation entails an attempt to “provide historical ‘meaning’ to specific forms of political subjectivation” (2015, p. 6); a challenging endeavor in the multiplicity of voices in global alter-politics. There is, as in the example of Graeber’s involvement in Occupy, a “circularity of inspirations between anthropology, radical political theory and social movements in envisioning and constructing alterpolitics” (ibid., p. 4).

However, in this alter-politics approach, important questions arise as to if or how the researcher-activist can work with/through the ‘cracks’ and ‘alternative spaces’ within foreign worlds or communities. Should the art of noticing otherness also be used to open up new radical imaginings in societies and communities that are not the anthropologist’s ‘own’? Or is the anthropological

project mainly instrumental in the sense that it uses otherness from foreign societies to creatively conjure social and political transformation at 'home', like in the case of David Graeber's involvement in the Occupy movement? Indeed, the identification and use of radical alterity between 'non-western' societies and 'western' ones have been critiqued for contributing to the production of problematic forms of othering and the essentialization of different cultures/communities – even though this was not the intention (see. e.g. Bessire & Bond, 2014). By identifying and focusing so strongly on radical alterity in other people's lives, anthropologists risk conflating 'otherness' with 'the other(s)' and reifying differences between 'modern' and 'non-modern' worlds – or at least they risk being read in a way that does so.

Conclusion

In response to postmodern ideals of cultural critique, analytical complexity and moral relativism, different attempts have been made in recent decades to make anthropology more 'engaged' in the promotion of social change, while still contributing to anthropological knowledge. The positions of policy-oriented activist research, feminist participatory collaboration and the search for alter-politics share an occupation with the (historical and present) social injustices of contemporary societies. They are all based on critiques of power, inequity and domination; however, in their aim to generate social transformation and conjure up a different world, they use ethnography and participatory methods in very different ways and they come to work with/through different kinds of communities.

Policy-oriented activist research, in Hale's sense, aims to align with and participate in the work of an organized group in struggle and influence public policy. In order to do so, the anthropologist may need to take the role of expert and speak on behalf of the group, which aims to appear as one coherent and strong unit. Accordingly, this sort of activism may (have to) reinforce a static and homogenous notion of community rather than (also) shedding light on processes of strategic essentialization and strategic silencing involved in political struggles. Conversely, feminist-oriented collaborative researchers like Dyrness tend to focus on the internal diversities and unequal power positions related to, among others, gender, race, class and generation. Consequently, they base their analyses of political processes and structural power relations on what they identify as 'marginalized' voices within a community, not on the voices of other actors. In facilitating participatory spaces that can transform an individual's personal experience into wider political concerns and provide the foundation for public forms of resistance, feminist collaborative researchers dismantle assumptions of coherent political communities and reject the position of a powerful expert.

Both of the above positions tend to focus on protest and resistance to unjust power structures and forms of exploitation or marginalization. Neither of them explicitly sets out to engage in creative political experimentation and collaborate with research participants to co-produce fundamental alternatives to existing socio-political systems. This, however, is the aim of a seemingly growing group of anthropologists, who advocate so-called alter-politics that uses the ethnographic explorations of 'otherness' (within and between different societies) as a source of inspiration to prefigure and conjure up – in collaboration with other activists – alternative political imaginaries and ways of living.

Ethnographic participatory research is necessarily a paradoxical space. How does one strike a balance between, on the one hand, doing research that may deconstruct and destabilize the identity of different groups in the attempt to nuance anthropological understanding and, on the other hand, enable and support their fight for social justice? Can we avoid engaging in strategic essentialization of (and silencing within) such groups, and how influential should the anthropologist's analyses be in informing other participants' worldviews? The invocation of participatory approaches offers no rescue. As we have discussed, in terms of development aid, ideals of participation and collaboration may themselves become tyrannical, slip into unfruitful orthodoxy and work to reproduce existing power differentials. Due to its tradition for cultural comparison and for giving emphasis to participants' own understandings and practices, anthropological research seems to hold particular potentials for political engagement. In combining participatory methods and engaged dialogues with the art of opening up spaces of otherness, also within 'ourselves', one could hope that anthropological research may contribute positively to the creative formation of a more just world in which difference and diversity is recognized as an important and integral part of any form of commonness.

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