

Repatriating Anthropology: Ethics and empirics in some lessons from Native America.

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John Simon Guggenheim Fellow, 2016

The story of anthropology as a “discipline in crisis” is by now a relatively old one, at least in the United States, and yet is still a dominant refrain in how the discipline is understood to this day. The idea that socio-cultural anthropology has lost its way emerged in the last quarter of the 20th century, and has been attributed to a number of different intellectual, social, and geo-political shifts characterizing that period. Thus one might trace the origins of this story back to the 1980s, when post-structuralist and other critical theoretical orientations were taken up by anthropologists to draw a skeptical eye on their own methods and epistemological limits. Another point of origin might be the 1970s, when the first ripples of decolonization in the Global South were finally reaching the shores of the European and American Academy, often with anthropology – tied as its fortunes were with Euro-American imperialism – as one of its first beach-heads. Or maybe the start was even earlier, in the 1960s, when in the aftermath WWII, optimism that rational scientific and humanistic knowledge would usher in a better world for all, finally began to fray, even in America, and scholars in disciplines like my own field of legal anthropology began to question whether its central concepts (for example “law,” “tradition,” even “culture”) could really give us knowledge and understanding about human life-worlds other than our own.

In these lectures, I will offer some reflections on the status of anthropology today, and the limits and possibilities for anthropology moving beyond its critical stance, but without losing the important lessons gained from this recent history. To do so, I will draw on my research and experiences working as a legal scholar and linguistic anthropologist with and for the indigenous peoples of North America, particularly with the Hopi Tribal Nation and its people. It is a position that, by some accounts, might arguably be seen as standing at the very heart of many of anthropology’s most critical storms of late 20th century. But I suggest that, for all the challenges working in this context may pose, the time may actually be ripe for reinvigorating a sense of anthropology as a mode of ethical and empirical inquiry that affords a unique understanding of and advocacy for the ways in which humans give meaning to and act in their worlds.

I will explore these themes first in light of my most current work; an on-going study of the Hopi tribe’s efforts to control, contest, and (in some cases) demand the repatriation of their cultural property that they argue has been misappropriated and misrepresented by non-Hopi individuals, scholars, and institutions. I will show how an ethnographic and historic consideration of these efforts suggest that these engagements are often less about ending relationships with non-Hopi individuals and institutions, than they are about repairing and restoring them in a manner consistent with Hopi cultural norms and practices. I will then explore how these insights enhance my understanding of the everyday operation of Hopi tribal institutions, including especially my on-going work as both researcher and judge in the Hopi Tribal Legal System. I then consider whether and how these perspectives might shed light on my experiences, albeit more limited, in working with other Native American peoples and organizations working on matters of self-governance and government-to-government relations within the U.S. In so doing, I suggest some possible ways forward for “repatriating” an anthropology that, without abdicating responsibility for the mistakes of its past, nor ignoring the possibility of making more in the future, might also be taken up as having productively ethical and empirical contributions to make for understanding the ways humans act on and give meaning to their worlds.