

## *Introduction*

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# Responsible Anthropology in the Pandemic

Anthropologists have a mixed legacy of complicity with colonial powers and support for pro-local progressivism. Both strains of anthropology share a desire to travel among “othered” peoples. As a guild, anthropologists are aware of this intersectional conflict in disciplinary identity and desire. Neo-Trotskyist anthropologist Kathleen Gough called for anthropologists to subsume themselves in the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles and, in so doing, transform anthropology. For a brief moment in the discipline’s history Gough’s call resonated within the discipline as part of a global social movement for justice and the overthrow of propertied elites who commanded the heights of national states. But as movement after movement was defeated, anthropologists turned away from material struggles for change to explore nuance in experimental representations of their research in print and visual media instead. It was a crisis in the global order of rule that created the opportunity for a progressive social moment in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic a similar moment of crisis of authority and the normal is occurring. We see the effects of decades of privatization, underfunding, and tax cutting in the tidal wave of death sweeping through long term care facilities for our elders. Facilities left to profi-

teers employing low paid marginalized workers have been the center of the worst effects of the pandemic. The need to throttle the wider economy arises from the same ideas of lean management and finding ‘efficiencies’ in our healthcare system. Here we see our hospitals lack the adequate resilience to respond to a serious crisis without shutting down all other services, pushing people out of care, and then closing the rest of society.

It didn’t have to be this way and it doesn’t need to be this way in the future. It will be up to historians to dissect how we got here, but we can all focus on how we should move forward today. There is much to learn from the earlier generation of progressives like Gough. They argued for a locally relevant anthropological practice that was tied to an emancipatory social justice practice. It was also an anthropology that was interested as much in making changes in the home nation and communities, as it was oriented to changes elsewhere. In fact, the most committed of the earlier generation of progressives were far less interested in making professional milestones than in facilitating progressive change at home and globally.

So where does this take us? How can we practice anthropology responsibly in the pandemic? We can start with doing anthropology where we are. It has been the luxury of global travel that propelled the dif-

fusion of the virus globally into a pandemic. Combine global travel with key cultural events – lunar New Year in Asia and Spring Break in North America – and we have a recipe for disaster. Anthropologists, despite their claims otherwise, perform very much like cruise ship voyagers travelling to hot spots of interest and feel totally empowered to do so. So, step one, stop travelling for research.

Step two – study local. Work where we are, in our own neighbourhoods, networks, and communities of account. Especially in the pandemic this reduces adverse impacts of crossing social boundaries. This also addresses issues of power imbalances that social scientists have identified with middle class researchers heading off to study groups of historically marginalized peoples.

Step three – act locally for social justice. The impacts of the current pandemic are magnified by longstanding historic injustices. Long-term care for the elderly has been driven primarily by a privatized for profit sector that pays poorer wages to people with inadequate job security, the result in the pandemic has been needless early death of our elders. Our hospitals have been managed to run lean at near 100 percent capacity with over-paid specialists at one end and poorly-paid core staff at the other, with the net effect that our hospitals don't have the resilience or capacity to respond without shutting down society and discharging thousands of people who needed care.

A responsible anthropology in the pandemic would thus be local and engaged in fundamental political, social, and economic changes.