

**RECENSIONI**

---

**Elisabeth TAUBER, Dorothy ZINN (eds) | *The Public Value of Anthropology: Engaging Critical Social Issues Through Ethnography*, Bozen/Bolzano University Press, 2015, pp. 174.**

In recent years, many anthropological conferences, workshops and seminars have been dedicated to the idea of engaging anthropology in the public sphere. It seems that living in an anxious times fuels the need among many anthropologists to speak out and comment various public fears and concerns. Having participated in few such conferences and workshops, I must admit that most of them focus chiefly on the recollection of engaged works of our predecessors (e.g., Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, or even Claude Lévi-Strauss) and end with the standard call to act more. For that reason, I had rather high hopes when I stumbled upon *The Public Value of Anthropology: Engaging Critical Social Issues Through Ethnography* edited by Elisabeth Tauber and Dorothy Zinn. After all, the book seems to be an interesting attempt at turning the often long-winded idea of anthropological engagement into the practice.

The book offers a series of well thought chapters that cover a wide range of social, cultural and political issues, which are contemporary relevant and loom large in public discourse. Importantly, each chapter is ethnographically grounded what makes the book even more interesting and significant. In the introduction, Elisabeth Tauber and Dorothy Zinn attempt to clarify the principles of anthropological perspective as well as briefly outline the ongoing and rather complex debate about engagement in anthropological scholarship. It is a well-written and balanced effort to explain to non-anthropological readers the short history of anthropological research themes, ethnographic approach and the pervasive, yet often too tendentious and narrow-minded, distinction between academic and engaged anthropology. The introduction serves as a sounded point of departure for the subsequent chapters, which explore various issues in a critical way «with implications for globalised social reality» (Tauber, Zinn 2015: 18). In her chapter on complex policies and procedures involved in the asylum system, Barbara Sorgoni scrutinises institutional levels of power and their consequences for the asylum seekers in Italy. Her ethnographic research carried out among local decision makers, social workers reveals the misconceptions, which often are inscribed in the existing asylum systems. In the next chapter, Sabine Klocke-Daffa deals with a rather difficult



collaboration between anthropologists (academics) and curators (practitioners) planning together a museum exhibition in Germany. In a detailed, almost step-by-step account, she presents not only the predicaments of such collaboration, but also well-known difficulties of communicating anthropological knowledge to the outside world. Cătălina Tesăr, on the other hand, in her most interesting in-depth ethnographic field-work among Romanian Roma in Italy, problematises the common assumptions about begging. According to Tesăr, begging should not be simply combined with charity, but rather approached and understood in terms of work and agency. Following her field collaborators, Tesăr explores the most intimate aspects of begging and sheds a new light on often taken for granted ideas. Next chapter, written by Jane Henrici, concerns the relationships between craft production, fair trade and tourism in Peru. Henrici describes the consumption practices, which are driven by tourism and examines the existing «conditions of disparity». As she argues, in order to explore the complex intersections between tourism and fair trade, one needs to contextualise them in the lines of race and gender relations. The volume ends with the chapter written by Monika Wiessensteiner in which she analyses the meanings and functions of the practices related to the idea of «global fight against torture». Therefore, she scrutinises the context of medical, psychological and legal procedures imposed on asylum seekers in Europe. Interestingly (and justifiably), Wiessensteiner approaches the issue of procedural application as social practice of knowledge production, which has particular consequences for victims-survivors.

All of the ethnographic case studies included in the volume present a high quality research conduct, which is contextualized and problematized with intentions to enhance knowledge and raise the awareness. The social issues engaged through ethnographic method reveal the most important fields of inquiries in contemporary anthropology, such as the intersections between political and everyday life discourses and practices, cultural translation and the processes of othering or neoliberal capitalism and its consequences for our lives. The juxtaposition of formal (political, bureaucratic) and informal (daily life) strategies and practices in different chapters reveal the often concealed context of power relations and struggles between different social actors. By exploring agency at work, the authors show complexities and entanglements of the neoliberal world, what in my opinion makes their arguments even more convincing. The volume offers also a detailed problematisation of taken for granted assumptions, which widely pervade the public sphere. It is precisely what anthropology is about; the strength of anthropological perspective lies in the ability to make the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar. Importantly, such approach to communicating anthropological findings makes them more accessible also for non-anthropologists.

Although, the book is definitely an interesting contribution to the ongoing debates on engaging anthropology, it also raises one main concern. The title *The Public Value of Anthropology* is somehow misleading since it indicates that the book's main target readers will be not academics, but rather public audience. However, as the editors state

in the introduction, the volume aims to «make anthropological thinking and the construction of knowledge from ethnography accessible to other disciplines» (Tauber, Zinn 2015: 2) as well as students of social work, education and communication studies. Obviously, popularising anthropology among other scholars is important; however, one should not neglect the idea of reaching out beyond university milieu. Otherwise, it may be argued that focusing merely on academic readership reproduces the well-known problem of “ivory tower” and does not reveal the true public value of anthropology. Moreover, it is precisely the internal logic of academia that hinders engagement and any attempts to communicate knowledge with the “outside world”. Although scholars should have a sense of accountability towards general public and engage more in transferring knowledge to the “outsiders”, many choose (or are somehow obliged) to write merely for academic colleagues and milieu. After all, only by following the logic of academia one can pursue academic career; thereby, for many scholars to write for popular readers is rather of a secondary importance.

Nevertheless, *The Public Value of Anthropology: Engaging Critical Social Issues Through Ethnography* is a crucial reading for those, who are genuinely interested in anthropological approaches to the contemporary world. Unfortunately, the authors limit their scope of readership by aiming to engage only academics and thus neglecting the popular audience. As a result, the public value of anthropology remains valuable for academia itself.

**Marek PAWLAK**

Jagiellonian University in Cracow

marek.pawlak@uj.edu.pl