

Book Review

Borofsky, Robert. *An Anthropology of Anthropology: Is It Time to Shift Paradigms?* Kailua, HI: Center for Public Anthropology, 2019, 345 pages.

Edward J. Hedican
University of Guelph

Public anthropology as a field within social/cultural anthropology has gained momentum in the discipline in the last decade or so. The focus of this initiative is, however, not well-defined, and the conceptual territory remains somewhat nebulous. One wonders if the term “public anthropology” is simply one catch phrase among the many that have emerged in the discipline, or if there is something of pedagogical merit here that is sustainable in the long term. As an example, is public anthropology to be understood as a sub-field of applied anthropology? How about “engaged” anthropology, or Sol Tax’s earlier “action” anthropology, or “collaborative” anthropology, or “participatory action research (PAR),” or Malinowski’s “practical” anthropology, or “activist” anthropology? Unfortunately, this present volume by Borofsky does not shed much useful light on this conceptual issue. As for the future prospects of public anthropology, or the brand of it espoused by Borofsky, Erikson (2006, 32), for example, has cautioned that it is improbable that Borofsky’s book series will attract anyone except other anthropologists. Time will of course tell if this prognostication is accurate or not.

Borofsky’s book is well worth reading, if for no other reason than as an epistemological exercise in how to avoid the errors in logic the volume contains and how to circumvent them. The book also represents the failure of the peer-review process in academia, as seen when one enlists friends and colleagues to write favorable reviews and self-congratulatory endorsements of one’s work, and then publishes the work with a publishing house that one controls and directs. In this case, Borofsky, as most people know, is Director of the Center for Public Anthropology and the Series Editor which also published his book. This is not to suggest that self-publishing one’s own work might not lead to a credible result; it is that the scientific scrutiny that this peer-review process

engenders does not generally allow for critical analysis. Notice also the numerous anthropologists who have provided endorsements of his work, touted on the very first pages. All are, of course, highly laudatory of Borofsky's book. He seems to have gone to great lengths to solicit such support, suggesting, one suspects, that the work cannot stand academic scrutiny on its own merits. All of this begins to take on the aura of a special club of academics who tout each other's works. Where in all of this, one might ask, are the critical appraisals upon which sound academic work flourishes?

A case in point is the question posed by Borofsky which is the sub-title of this volume, to wit, "Is it Time to Shift Paradigms?" Most anthropologists would rely on Thomas Kuhn's, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* for a definition of a "paradigm," which is to say a research strategy that dominates and guides scientific inquiry. As the author states, "This book seeks to shift cultural anthropology's paradigm from one focusing on 'do no harm' to one emphasizing a 'public anthropology' focused on benefiting others" (xi). Rather than viewing cultural anthropology in a global perspective, as the author indicates, the "book narrows its focus to American cultural anthropology." This approach is what one has come to expect of our American colleagues who seem content to ignore what is happening in the rest of the world. Is this because the author does not care what is happening on a global perspective from the viewpoint of public anthropology, or simply because he happens to be unaware of significant occurrences beyond the confines of American academic borders? There are many themes that have a global perspective that are worth studying, such as Indigenous rights, resistance and public justice, global terror and US militarism abroad, to name but a few of the more significant topics that would resonate within America. Instead, this book reads more like an introspective work. "So," he writes, anthropology "can dig deeply [within]." A less myopic perspective would serve anthropology's needs more profitably by reaching out to the world and its issues rather than promoting a nativist standpoint for the discipline.

In regards to the "introspective" viewpoint, it is difficult to reconcile the deceptive contrast of the philosophy of "do no harm" with public anthropology. Does this mean that cultural anthropology should now abandon its doctrine of cultural relativism which has been a pillar of the discipline since the Boasian days? If the answer is yes, what would replace it? None of this is made clear in this book, and since this is the central question under consideration, this is unfortunate. Labelling the "do no harm" paradigm as "an albatross around the necks of many faculty" (40) tends to confuse the issue even more.

It is curious that there is virtually no criticism of the authors listed in the front of the book who have provided endorsements. Take Nancy Scheper-Hughes research among the Irish for example, which is not mentioned at all in this book but is of great relevance to Borofsky's "do no harm" assertion. Scheper-Hughes conducted research into the mental illness of residents living in rural Ireland, which she suggests was exacerbated by sexual norms associated with high incidences of celibacy and late marriage. This portrayal of the rural Irish brought on a heated debate in the Irish national press and an outcry of discontent from the local Irish residents themselves. Certainly, there are issues raised concerning her research about the ethical propriety in which the portrayal of community residents caused their privacy to be invaded. Much of the criticism concerned what was regarded as her callous disregard for the concerns of her local informants, so much so that when Scheper-Hughes attempted to return to the site of her research, her former hosts shunned her. So, it appears that Borofsky's book skirts important issues and ignores others depending upon one's relative support for his "do no harm" agenda.

On a more positive note, this book does contain an adequate discussion of existing "paradigms" (using the conventional meaning of the term) as used by Franz Boas, Marvin Harris, Marshall Sahlins, Margaret Mead, among others, which would make it an adequate resource for introductory students. Of course, such profiles can also be found in most introductory anthropology texts, so this is hardly a major contribution. In sum, one is hard pressed to recommend this book either as an introductory text or as an informative discussion of an emerging field of anthropology that would inform other academics. What we need is a critical discussion of the merits and deficiencies of public anthropology, a more precise delineation of what this field entails, and less self-congratulatory back slapping by academics who should have more intellectual integrity than is demonstrated here.

Reference

Erikson, Thomas. 2006. *Engaging Anthropology: The Case for a Public Presence*. New York: Berg.