

Obituary: Ananthkrishnan Aiyer (1967–2015)

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Disdainful of many of the most fashionable and mainstream popular and academic ideas of our era, Ananth Aiyer spent his academic career ignoring petty bourgeois “public opinion” and committing instead to radical critique and Marxist social theory. He was never taken in by postmodern smoke and mirrors or by imperial rain dances. He had endless energy for the frequently thankless tasks associated with editing an academic journal—cultivating talent, searching for those with dissenting points of view, and convincing overcommitted scholars and revolutionaries to write commentaries, essay, and reports from the field. Indeed, no Marxist, anti-

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imperialist, or other dissident against the empire of capital was too big or too small to avoid his charm and persistence.

Ananth was the perfect editor-in-chief for our recent reboot of *Dialectical Anthropology*. He was one of the few who could claim to be the rightful heir to Stanley Diamond. He helped once again to put the journal on the map and to make it into a fresh and vibrant academic exercise. Working collaboratively with his co-editors, contributors, editorial collective and advisory board he made the journal live up to the overblown claim, inscribed by Stanley Diamond in its mission statement, “to transform class societies.” Former co-editor-in-chief Kirk Dombrowski called Ananth the “consistent glue and network hub that made sure there actually was a Marxist anthropology for the twenty first century.”

Ananth was born to a Hindu Tamil family, originally from Kerala, India. He grew up in Bombay (as it was then named) and did his undergraduate training in the social sciences at St. Xavier’s College in Mumbai. He received his Ph.D. from Temple University, in Philadelphia, in 2004. In 2000, Ananth joined the faculty of the University of Michigan, Flint. There, he became Director of the International and Global Studies Program, in 2009, and later, in 2012, the Chair of the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminal Justice.

Ananth’s fieldwork was among small miners in rural Nicaragua, and among peasants, farmers and water rights activists in Plachimada, Kerala, India. He published in various journals including, *Anthropologica*, *Identities*, *Cultural Anthropology* and, of course, *Dialectical Anthropology*.

Ananth was a charismatic teacher and an inspiring mentor: he taught classes on specialized topics, including political economy, Latin America, South Asia, globalization, urban anthropology, and Third World Cinema. Through his classes he recruited majors and encouraged many of his best students to go on for graduate study in anthropology and in related fields of study. At a recent University of Michigan-Flint event, a former student testified that, “If I had not had Ananth as a teacher, I know I wouldn’t be the scholar I am today.” In this way, he left an indelible academic mark.

In addition to his scholarship and teaching, Ananth was also well known for the depth and breadth of his political and scholarly networks, which stretched across vast geographical, cultural, institutional, and generational space. He was a tireless organizer who brought together radical traditions from South Asia, Latin America, the USA, and Europe, as well as those from many academic disciplines including anthropology, history, economics, geography, sociology, political science, psychology, international development, Marxist philosophy, and cultural studies.

Ananth was also well known for the camaraderie he shared with his friends and colleagues. I first met him at a cultural studies conference in Kansas City. I had recently become the Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Dialectical Anthropology*, along with Kirk Dombrowski, and we went to the conference in search of new authors, ideas, and friendships. Kirk also invited Ananth and George Baca, both members of the editorial collective, and I experienced for the first time what would become a regular ritual for me and many others involved with the journal over the years: a day’s worth of panels followed by a night’s worth of drinking and revelry at a conference hotel. I remember that, in this particular instance, we decided at about 2 a.m. to

write an email to the disgraced figure skater Tonya Harding, asking her to provide a journal commentary on the demonization of the rural US working class to accompany an article we were publishing on Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin and the concept of “white trash.” All that I can say is that it seemed to make very good sense at the time.

Ananth felt that there was far too little fun or genuine playfulness in academe and in Marxism, and he brought this sensibility, along with a commitment, of course, to rigorous analysis, to his tenure as co-editor of *Dialectical*, which began in 2010. Among the many commentaries we wrote together, the one defending piracy in the Indian Ocean as a form of redistributive taxation in the face of imperial plunder strikes me as one that exemplified Ananth’s ideal of playfully serious critique (Aiyer et al. 2010).

Ananth was also deeply committed to restoring the lost luster of *Dialectical Anthropology*. In 2013, he took over the position of managing/corresponding editor-in-chief and championed the journal with our publisher, Springer Press. Under his leadership, we changed the cover, brought in high-profile authors, grew our budget, and expanded the intellectual focus of the journal to be more inclusive of scholars working outside the affluent countries of the first world—especially in his two intellectual homes: South Asia and Latin America. Ananth set the goal of gaining International Scientific Indexing (ISI) for *Dialectical Anthropology*. This would make the journal a more hospitable place for radical intellectuals beyond anthropology and beyond the US and British academy, to build their careers, while they contributed simultaneously to the development of a transformational politics of liberation and justice.

Ananth’s death is sad and untimely. Yet it also reminds me of an old joke about the death of Vladimir Lenin in which he arrives in hell and the devil sends him to the lake of fire and brimstone. He immediately starts a community struggle to get air conditioning and air filters for residents and time out of the lake in a cool and refreshing environment. The devil then sends him to the pit of endless toil and he starts a union that demands toil breaks, better toiling conditions and improved toiling safety standards. Finally, the devil sends Lenin to the lake of blood and guilt and Lenin builds a movement to force the devil to provide guilt counseling and whatever it is that counteracts the badness of blood. The devil is beside himself when God calls and asks how things are going.

“This guy Lenin is ruining hell and making it into a nice place. I don’t know what to do. Nobody is going to fear coming here anymore. People will start doing whatever they want back on earth.”

“Don’t worry, I am all knowing and all powerful,” says God. “Send him up here and I will put him in shape and send him back to you a good citizen of hell.”

The devil sends him up and 2 weeks later calls god and says, “Hey God, how’s it going with that guy Lenin.”

“It’s comrade God and I don’t exist” is the response the devil gets.

For many a dialectical anthropologist, Abrahamic visions of an afterlife such as these may seem out of place. But the sentiment here represents precisely the kind of remembrance that Ananth deserves. It would, after all, be more than fair if Ananth got the chance to go wherever it is that Lenin went after he died, with the same

ironic consequences. And for those of us left behind, Ananth will be remembered as a warmhearted prickly fellow who cooked, smoked, swore, and told wonderful stories to adults and children alike, and who inspired us to work toward a Marxist anthropology. If Guevara had not said it first, *Hasta La Victoria Siempre*, might have belonged to Ananth. There are so many of us who will miss Ananth, our dear friend, comrade, and partner-in-crime.

Reference

Aiyer, A., K. Dombrowski, and A. Marcus. 2010. Editorial: “The enemies of all mankind” and will the real villains please stand up! *Dialectical Anthropology* 34(1): 3–9.