Praxis

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Editor (1991–1993)

Since 2010, social mobilizations such as the Occupy movement in the USA and the Indignados in Spain have focused on hyper-exploitative capitalism, gross income and wealth inequalities, deindustrialization, the intersections between class, race, and gender oppressions as well as the effects of globalization through such entities as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the World Trade Organization. These mobilizations have been considered by many a kind of praxis. Yet praxis is a term that is seldom seen in anthropological texts and journals today.¹ At least, these are my observations as an anthropologist and editor of *Dialectical Anthropology*. This no doubt has to do with the fact that the term praxis, subsequent to its premodern classical and Enlightenment usages, has been almost entirely associated with Marxist critical thought, including Marxist anthropology. The turn away from its public critical stance against class and related forms of oppression by an anthropology associated with the rise of neoliberalism from the 1980s onward has made the idea of praxis unfashionable. Recent mobilizations suggest that the key issues that Marxist approaches have dealt with have become once again prominent

¹ A search going back to 1992 found only four books in anthropology and five articles in refereed journals with the word “praxis” in the main title or subtitle (Social Science Citation Index). Most of the references date to the early to mid 1990s.

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in public debates and under these circumstances, a clear discussion of praxis could be viewed as a proposal to anthropologists to bring the theoretical, political, and ethical concerns of a future anthropology more in line with those of the public it is still supposed to educate. I make my reflections here on the idea of praxis as an effort to make this proposal.

Conceptions of praxis in Marx and Gramsci

“Praxis” must be distinguished from “practice” defined as the customary or usual way of doing something, although in informal speech the two are often conflated. For Marx, praxis consisted of theoretically informed and self-reflexive human action devoted to the emancipation of the working class from domination by the capitalist class and the capitalist state. When in the Third *Thesis on Feuerbach*, Marx wrote that “the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*” (Marx and Engels 1975: 4), he was alluding to praxis. In *Capital, Volume I*, praxis took the form of workers parties organizing struggles over the length of the working day between laborers and capitalists under the new arrangements of the “real subjection” of labor to capital in the textile mills of Manchester and other cities in early nineteenth century Britain (Marx 1976, chapter X). Here, according to Marx, such actions were allied with the new tendencies toward cooperation that the capitalist labor process required among diverse and previously fragmented workers (Marx 1976, chapter XIII). New revolutionary workers’ organizations came into being according to Marx as a result, but only in part, of the new tendencies among workers toward cooperation imposed by the discipline of the machine-driven labor process. Thus, in *Capital* and elsewhere, Marx combined the defining aspect of praxis—its self-reflexive, theorizing but uncertain and contingent effort to work for the liberation of industrial workers—with the necessity imposed by the historical logic of industrial capitalism to require cooperation, and hence a degree of solidarity, among workers. Whereas Marx would have pointed to the dialectical connection between workers’ voluntary efforts toward organization and capitalists’ new requirements for cooperation among workers, he would have also seen this two-sidedness as an historical contingency.

Simply put, in this period, there was the sense that “history is on our side” in favoring efforts toward liberation, but it could have been otherwise. Certainly it is the case that the Western labor movement’s success up through the 1970s derived in part from workers’ cooperation on the shop-floor (e.g., coordinated sabotage of production), just as its subsequent failure has been the result of transnational corporate capacities to divide and fragment the labor process and thus workers among multiple locales, and thus reassume control over production (through, e.g., the creation of global supply chains). The point is that praxis has been theoretically informed action aimed at the liberation of working people, whether the industrial working class or some other, but within its definition there are no guarantees that the circumstances under which people engage in praxis will allow for the emergence of dialectical complementarities between its aspects of “freedom” (e.g., organizing

efforts) and those of “necessity” (e.g., required technical cooperation among workers), as contingently occurred during the period of industrial capitalism. What praxis leads to in Marxist theory is not the inevitable discovery of some historically necessary technological telos that facilitates or even brings about liberation. Instead, praxis has within it the intrinsic impetus to seek the processes that arise from the logic of capital accumulation and to strategically align political efforts to organize working people to take advantage of these processes, but to continually re-theorize collective action to take advantage of new tendencies within these processes when they arise. The rap against Marx and Marxists that they are “technological/economic determinists” by uninformed anthropologists today is a result of their complete misunderstanding of this key point about praxis (see Harvey 2006: 98–104). It is an important one given the changed conditions from the industrial past within the landscapes of globalized capitalism today, as discussed below.

Subsequent to its expression in Marx, from the 1870s through the 1920s, the concept of praxis went into eclipse, as first Engels’ and then Lenin’s and Stalin’s scientific and positivist obsessions with the “objective” factors of material production and the rise of vanguardist revolutionary bureaucracies controlling workers organizations repudiated the “spontaneous” and voluntary capacities of workers to organize for their own liberation, indeed made this latter a dangerous undertaking for workers in the USSR.

Within Marxist political philosophy, praxis next finds its most interesting and generative use in Gramsci’s discussion of the “philosophy of praxis” in the *Prison Notebooks* (1971), but the concept’s development is still incipient, as Gramsci simultaneously argued against both the idealism of Croce and the overly determinist and evolutionary views of the “laws” of capitalist development as viewed by Soviet Marxism, but was unable to fully extricate his theorization from his commitment to Lenin’s notion of a vanguard revolutionary party. That said, Gramsci’s analysis of hegemony makes a complex and important argument for the praxis of revolutionary “organic intellectuals” who would engage in the cultural and ideological work that would separate the worker’s conservative consciousness “inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed” from dominant classes from the consciousness “implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world,” and develop the latter as the basis for revolutionary action (Gramsci 1971: 333–334).

As such, praxis might take a variety of forms, but always strategically directed toward the liberation of working people, most broadly conceived. Thus, there are different forms of praxis among those who are committed to liberation—the praxis of the shop-floor organizer, the party intellectual, the Catholic priest of Liberation Theology, and many others. As to anthropology, then, the praxis in question would be: What theoretically informed, self-reflexive actions do anthropologists engage in when they seek the liberation of working people, that is, among those anthropologists who actually are committed to this end?

What is anthropological praxis?

There is a standard liberal response—that anthropology by virtue of its objects of study (marginalized people and their cultural production) and its methods (ethnographic, based on empathy and the faithful recording of experience of marginalized peoples)—necessarily already engaged in “praxis.” According to this view, all anthropology promotes inter-cultural understanding between people, and in that sense makes their liberation possible, if not guarantees it, and this is all that reasonably can be asked of anthropology. This amiable and highly institutionalized definition of praxis is not only disciplinarily self-serving, but obviously false. There is nothing specifically intrinsic to anthropological research as such that contributes to the liberation of working people. In fact, one might well argue the opposite—that much anthropological research has either no benefits to the people it studies but does not harm them, or in some cases promotes the encompassment of the lives of working and marginalized peoples, and the commodification of their land, mineral resources, and cultural products into the broader circuits of capitalist production and exchange, e.g., through the commercial appropriation of cultural heritage into the global tourist industry.

Despite the fundamental contributions to the critique of capitalism made by Marxist anthropologists [e.g., Wolf (1982), Mintz (1985), and others], their praxis was largely separated from the academic analyses for which they are best known—the history of global expansion of Western capitalism (in Wolf’s *Europe and the People without History*), and the history of Western modernity and its class-specific consumption practices (in Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power*). This is not a criticism, but rather an acknowledgment that capitalist modernity fragments the lives of anthropologists into diverse dimensions that include professional ties, métier, intimate family life, friendships, relationships with students, and personal politics—and that Marxist anthropologists are as subject to such circumscriptions as other scholars.

Their praxis was however often rooted in other theoretical and self-reflexive connections than those evident in their major theoretical contributions, but derived ultimately from their critical Marxist perspectives. One must admire Eric Wolf’s and Joseph Jorgensen’s public and risky interventions against the Vietnam War in their attack on anthropologists working on behalf of the US military in Vietnam in the war against the rural Vietnamese population (Jorgensen and Wolf 1970). But even more remarkable was the decision by Bridget O’Laughlin, then a brilliant but untenured Marxist anthropologist (see, e.g., O’Laughlin 1975) to leave elite American academic circles to go to Mozambique to support the liberation struggle against the South African apartheid regime and its regional allies—a decision of great courage and for which she paid a high price, as she was an injured survivor of the letter bomb by BOSS which murdered Ruth First in Maputo in 1982 (Mozambique History Net 2012).

One form of praxis of Marxist anthropologists such as Wolf, Mintz, and O’Laughlin is particularly crucial to acknowledge because it is often not well known—their work with and encouragement of students coming from working-class

and marginalized backgrounds whose research entailed engaged scholarship in support of their own or other communities' liberation. This can only be noted here as a significant but underappreciated form of anthropological praxis needing further study.

Anthropological conceptions of anthropological praxis

The works of two sociocultural anthropologists are noteworthy for attempting to theorize contemporary anthropological praxis, although it is fair to say that their attempts to date remain incomplete and need further development. Johannes Fabian (1983) saw much of anthropology up to the 1980s—whether Boasian, evolutionary, symbolic, functionalist, structuralist, or other—as exhibiting a “failure to conceive a theory of praxis,” a shortcoming that “blocks the possibility... to receive anthropology as an activity which is part of what it studies” (Fabian 1983: 157). Fabian goes on to argue for a Marxist “materialist theory of knowledge” as the basis for a praxis—one that places both the anthropologists and the cultures they study within a common historical framework, e.g., of imperialism, capitalist exploitation, and race formation. Perhaps most generatively, Fabian writes of the requirement “to make consciousness the starting point—not disembodied consciousness, but in Marxist terms, from the *German Ideology*, ‘consciousness with a body,’ inextricably bound up with language” (Fabian 1983: 161). That is, anthropological praxis requires that Anthropology's Other must always be able to speak to the anthropologist who seeks the Other's liberation in a collaboration that must occur under conditions of social, economic, and political equality—a difficult practical situation to attain.

The other major attempt to conceptualize an anthropological praxis is the work of Gavin Smith (2014). Smith sets out a productive definition of praxis as “the ability of people as collective subjects to become a force in history, not merely the objects of other people's history” (Smith 2014: 23). He writes of praxis as “the emergence of a collective subject that has historical purchase,” (Ibid. 153), and as “willed intervention in the unfolding of history” (Ibid., 162). Smith's approach to praxis emphasizes a key feature—that any attempt at praxis must be attentive to historical contingencies and spatial specificities which allow for collective subject making. In this conception, the intelligence of praxis must attend not only to the determinations of capitalism—the structures of surplus appropriation and exploitation—but also to the possibilities that allow certain working people, in certain specific periods of time, in certain specific spaces and places, to connect what Smith refers to as their “autonomous practices of the self” to their formation as collective subjects who can make their own history through successful struggle against such structures (Ibid., 150–176). To seek out these possibilities, Smith advises, we must move back and forth to locate a threshold between a “politics of negotiation” that contends with capitalist domination within the terms set by capitalism, on one hand, and a “counter politics” that represents a radical “intervention against the legitimacy and authority of the society of capital and hence also against a kind of politics that can be negotiated in that society's terms,” on the other (ibid., 19). Smith's paradigm,

however provisional and incomplete, provides a fruitful framework to explore the meaning of anthropological praxis in the contemporary era, which I now turn to.

It is important to note that praxis must always be historically specific to the times and places in which working people are subjected to the exploitation by capital and predation by the corporate state and its institutions. Invariably, such specificity requires attention to emergent patterns of work, labor, and beyond these, to the capitalist production and exchange processes of the times, up to and including the specific class formations that have come into existence and are still emerging at present. That is, to summarize a key point in the new global anthropology of labor, the decline of the Western industrial working class under contemporary post-Fordist capitalism does not mean “the disappearance of class,” as some conservative anthropologists and other pundits contend, but instead its reconceptualization (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014). Instead the class of working people has expanded and proliferated under the conditions of the neoliberal globalization of capital, including self-provisioning and the re-emergence of slavery, indentured servitude, child labor, and prison labor. It is, strictly speaking, necessary to include both those working for wages and those who are not, since all have been subsumed under the domination of transnational corporations, corporate states, and allied state coalitions (e.g., the WTO)—a domination which jeopardizes the social reproduction of the class of all working people (Ibid.)

During the period of Marx’s investigation of the labor process within the industrial capitalism during the mid-nineteenth century, the commitments of his praxis and that of the communist and socialist parties and the Euro-American labor movements were to the liberation of the industrial working class. In contrast, the history of late twentieth and early twenty-first century global capitalism has led to the imperative to reconceptualize specifically who “working people” are, what forms of domination they are currently subject to, what forms of collective identities, organization, and action they can create, and how these can become the objective of anthropological praxis.

In the current period associated with a global over-abundance of industrial laborers, a worldwide deflation in the price of commodities, and the emergence (not for the first time in capitalist history) of a dominant financial capitalist sector that has restructured the world economy, “working people” include, in addition to the industrial working class, those laboring in most intellectual occupations (e.g., software programmers, professionally insecure academics, and other members of the so-called cognitariat), the self-employed, virtually all clerical workers, and most middle managers. It also includes small-scale farmers, farm workers engaged in stoop labor for large-scale agro-industries, people residing in rural areas dependent upon remittances from family members working in wage labor markets overseas, unemployed urban migrants displaced by war or natural disasters from rural areas, and indigenous groups whose mineral resources and cultural heritage are subject in quite different ways to corporate takings (e.g., pharmaceutical corporations using cultigens connected to traditional environmental knowledge, media corporations appropriating the music of indigenous groups).

Nonetheless, working people, thus broadly defined, are all subject to the logic of capitalist exploitation and appropriation. Although they may maintain residual

control over cultural and natural resources (often in the form of commons), or have property-like assets (e.g., the cultural capital of advanced degrees), they have been subjected to a variety of related processes through which large-scale transnational corporations and corporate states dispossess them of their resources and property, and drive them into the capitalist labor market or into the chronically unemployed “industrial reserve army.” Their status as “working people” is defined by the facts that they depend upon their labor for cash incomes to meet their needs of social reproduction, that their lives are increasingly precarious, and that they have little or no access to income- and wealth-generating forms of property—whose possession remains the defining characteristic of the capitalist classes that dominate them.

One major and quite widely imposed instrument of dispossession rises through the new global domination of finance capital (Smith 2014: 200–204). This is the institutionalization of a variety of forms of debt peonage inflicted on diverse groups. Intellectual workers (e.g., academics and university students), farmers, wage laborers, the self-employed, marginal racial groups, and indigenous peoples find themselves subject to debts for education loans, credit card use, loans for fertilizer and GMO seeds, etc., and have been subject to predatory payday loans, subprime mortgages, and many other forms of indebtedness, and made the object of violence by the apparatus of debt collection, harassment, garnishing of wages, and land, etc., that accompanies such indebtedness. People thus being dispossessed are highly diverse, and not all share the same interests, but they now form a large proportion, and perhaps will soon form the majority of the peoples of the world. Large numbers of working people have become increasingly excluded by the imposition of political and legal stigma from any sources of income to the point that their social reproduction or even their biological survival is threatened, illustrating what Smith (2014: 181, 200–204) refers to as “selective hegemony” under the current reign of finance capital.

The concept of praxis pushes anthropologists to a much more critical stance than the liberal view that the majority of people, however oppressed they are, will be better off when enlightened by the findings of ethnography. Praxis assumes instead that conventional anthropological knowledge and the cross-cultural understanding it promotes may actually be used to maintain the domination of the majority by the few, since academic knowledge production is largely under the control of those in power. To the contrary, a strategic reversal of how knowledge is produced, and by whom and on whose behalf it is produced is crucial if there is to be a genuine anthropological praxis. Thus, praxis for anthropologists could take such forms as providing working people with the analyses they require about the instruments and mechanisms of power, and about the ways in which capitalist corporations, the corporate state, and allied institutions (e.g., philanthropic foundations, think tanks, international financial institutions) operate in ways that harm the lives and interests of working people.

Methodological diversity, allowing for multiple, flexible, and innovative approaches to domination and how it can be resisted, characterizes an anthropological praxis. If praxis can utilize the tools of ethnography, so much the better; if it cannot, but must use other analytical tools, so much the worse for ethnography, but so much the better for anthropology and for the working people whose liberation an

anthropology of praxis supports. Thus, instead of the conventional model in ethnography with its assumptions that the field site is stable, that access by the anthropologist to marginalized people is unproblematic, and that people stay in place sufficiently for fieldwork to occur, it is necessary instead to turn to alternative approaches—such as those of short- or medium-term investigative journalism based on a combination of strategic interviews and recourse to privately held “sensitive” information; statistical analyses of corporate abuses that go against the grain of the extended qualitative data collected in most ethnography; and the power-structure analyses undertaken by “corporate campaigns” that explore the vulnerabilities of corporations engaged in attacks on labor unions, or in attempts to appropriate the mineral resources of indigenous groups. Accusations that such methods are “unprofessional” or “non-anthropological” surely have missed the point of what anthropological praxis is.

Praxis within anthropology in the sense defined here demands that the specific actions in which anthropologists engage in, in their attempts to further the liberation of working people are always subject to self-reflection and to critique—not only by anthropologists themselves, but also, and crucially, by the working people on behalf of whom their praxis is undertaken. Contention over what liberation means, how it can be secured, and the role of anthropological research within the broader strategies by which liberation is to be secured is a necessary and intrinsic part of this process. Particularly in the present conjuncture, neither praxis nor working people can assume that “history is on our side,” unlike the situation of the industrial capitalism of the past. There are no guarantees that the actions that praxis requires will lead to liberation.

Anthropological praxis can take the form of “engaged scholarship” where the latter promotes the liberation of working people from capitalism and associated ills of racism and sexism, etc. It may be directly collaborative with the people on behalf of whom it is done, where there is what could be called a rolling accountability between anthropologists and those with whom they do research which occurs as research priorities are being discussed, negotiated (and sometimes argued over) between the two. Thus, some anthropologists are engaged in “participatory research,” usually in collaboration with specific marginal groups among working people (see Graduate Certificate in Participatory Research, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 2016: <http://participatoryresearch.web.unc.edu/>).

Anthropological praxis may also be undertaken in anticipation of future collaborations that have not yet emerged or are in process of emergence. Such anticipatory praxis is connected to the key issue of scale, and the pivotal processes and strategies of “scale making” (Smith 1996). That is, working people have increasingly sought to form new social movements representing their interests, and the history of such social movements is defined by their capacity to “scale up” or “jump scale”—or by their failure to do so. Thus, anticipatory praxis is often involved in promoting scale-producing strategies among working people, where scaling up occurs in the course of which coalitions are built, collective identities and collective political goals are simultaneously developed and asserted by working people to challenge dominant capitalist institutions. Put another way, contemporary anthropological praxis can take the form of anticipatory, self-reflexive, theoretically

informed organizing that assists working people to form alliances and build up their numbers into effective organizations to engage in effective resistance against the dominant capitalist order.

Whether praxis takes the form of direct organizing or other actions, it has the potential for being profoundly intellectually original, opening up new areas of research for anthropologists. In addition to its theoretical generativity, praxis also can provide models for ethically acceptable and even admirable behavior in a world in which the conventional avenues of professional advancement increasingly restrict the human potential not only of the people studied, but also of the anthropologists who study them.

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