



Anthropology and imperialism: Past, present, future

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In 1968, during an intense period of anti-colonial struggles in Asia and Africa, Kathleen Gough famously asserted what is now largely taken for granted within the discipline: anthropology is a child of Western imperialism (1968). Since then, the discipline's engagement with imperialism has, I would argue, flowed in three broad currents – all touched upon in this collection – whose inter-connectedness and intensity have varied over time.

Imperialism and knowledge production There has been a reflexive exploration of the discipline's own entanglement with empire, imperial power, and colonial subjugation. What is anthropology's relationship to colonialism and imperialism? What would a decolonized discipline look like? How should the discipline, and anthropologists, engage with empire?

This current has taken a variety of forms. Some scholars have explored how an earlier generation of anthropologists helped to advance the colonial-imperial project – how anthropologists were agents of empire. Others, and Talal Asad's work stands out here (1973), have focused less on the imperial complicity of individual anthropologists and more on the conceptual and methodological infrastructure of the discipline. How is it that politically committed, “anti-imperialist,” anthropologists can still reproduce colonial imagery, understandings, and assumptions? To what extent are the discipline's concepts and methods fundamentally colonial?

This reflexive exploration of the discipline's relationship to empire is an important project, in part because it is not enough to recognize that anthropology is a child of imperialism. We must also, as the editors to this collection make clear, find ways to develop an anthropology that helps us not only understand how colonialism and imperialism work, but how anthropology can advance an anti-imperialist project.

To the extent that it has focused our attention on knowledge production, this reflexive current also includes what has come to be known as decolonial theory, including broader concerns about decolonizing contemporary academic disciplines, museums, universities, and public spaces – an intellectual project that has recently

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received even greater attention due to renewed calls to interrogate academic disciplines and spaces along racial lines (Gupta and Stoolman 2022).

Although this tendency has certainly been welcome, Campbell and Aung note in their introduction that a focus on “demarcating alternative epistemic voices,” and decolonizing not only knowledge, but sites and systems of knowledge production, has at times come at the expense of political economy and broader discussions about the economic impact and architecture of empire. As they point out, this has been accompanied by, and in a sense made possible by, a marginalization of earlier anti-imperialist intellectuals, activists, and militants from the Global South who struggled centrally with the question of the imperialist political economy. Despite a surge of writing on decolonization, then, the focus on imperialism within anthropology remains minimal.

Political-economy of empire The second tradition to emerge out of earlier interventions by anthropologists such as Gough, Asad, Eric Wolf, and others has dealt directly with the political-economy of colonialism and imperialism. The current initially emerged out of the critical observation that an earlier generation of anthropologists largely ignored the impact of broader political and economic forces, including colonialism and imperialism, on the peoples they studied. By conceptualizing and analyzing tribal units, villages, and communities as isolated, distinct, socio-cultural wholes, they essentially ignored the broader forces that shaped people’s lives.

This was an important observation, and one that has informed the research of subsequent generations of anthropologists. In fact, although I agree with the editors that an explicit focus on imperialism within anthropology has been lacking in recent years, it seems worth noting that since the 1960s there have been reasonably robust currents within the discipline that have dealt quite directly with the political economy of empire. Put another way, although relatively few anthropologists explicitly theorize, or perhaps even name imperialism, they have certainly continued to examine how a profoundly unequal global economy has impacted people all over the world (for better or worse, the more neutral term “globalization” came to replace imperialism as a way of talking/thinking about the global political-economy).

This current has a long and varied history, with figures such as Wolf, Sidney Mintz, June Nash, and others having led the way. Although this tradition may not be as prominent as it once was, many of its lessons have become common sense within the field, and it certainly remains an important tendency within the discipline. Even if we set aside the ongoing work that anthropologists are doing on earlier historical periods defined by formal colonialism, scholars working on more recent periods continue to explore how wealth is transferred from the Global South to the Global North, and what it means for people on the ground, through natural resource extraction (Finn 1998; Golub 2014; Gill 2016; Smith 2021; Banks in this issue), and agriculture (Trouillot 1988; Krupa 2022; Raj 2022); by multinationals directly exploiting labor forces and environments throughout the Third World (Fernandez-Kelly 1984; Bohme 2014; Zolniski 2019); via the unequal exchange that takes place through international trade (Moberg 2008; Lyon 2010); through military power and schemes (Gill 2004; Lutz 2009); and through the transfer of wealth (and human

labor) associated with the migration of people from the Global South to the Global North (Reichman 2011; Binford 2013). Collectively, this literature is very large, and most of it is at least subtly informed by the political economy of empire.

In this respect, the two contributions to this volume by Emma Banks and Thomas McNamara are good examples. In broad terms, the article by Banks is a wonderfully rich look at how foreign mining companies looking to extract natural resources from the Global South have impacted indigenous communities – and how communities in Colombia have fought back. That is, it is all about imperialism, and particularly how multinationals largely call the shots at the expense of indigenous peoples who, in this case, are remarkably clever at contesting their own dispossession. And yet, as with most current anthropology working within this tradition, there is no need to overtly theorize imperialism, or really even reference it, even as the article itself can be read as something of an exploration into the architecture of empire. The contribution by McNamara also takes us into the inner workings of empire, without any explicit engagement with formal debates or discussions about imperialism. In this case, the article explores how, to oversimplify a bit, imperial power (and process) co-opts domestic actors in South Africa to effectively suppress more radical projects around just transition and climate change. This is a really sophisticated discussion of how domestic politics are shaped, in part, by global (imperial) forces.

Still, this collection raises two important questions about this scholarship and anthropology as a discipline. First, to the extent that recent anthropology has not dealt with imperialism sufficiently, how would the discipline benefit from a more explicit-direct engagement with a theoretically informed (political-economic) understanding of imperialism, including a deeper exploration of scholarship and struggles from the Global South. This remains an open question, and one this collection has raised in a useful way.

Second, why have more recent generations of anthropologists not dealt with imperialism sufficiently, both in the sense of analyzing imperialism's political-economy and contributing to its theoretical debates. One reason may be that there continues to be an uneasy, perhaps contradictory, relationship between anthropology's central method, ethnography/fieldwork, and historical political economy. Although numerous scholars have pointed to the limitations of fieldwork, including the fact that so much of what is important about life cannot be directly observed in the field, ethnography remains (too) firmly rooted in the discipline. What this means is that although anthropologists remain quite good at exploring the impacts of empire on the (often marginalized) people they study, this does not always lead to a deeper analysis (and history) of the political-economic structures that propel imperialism and colonialism.

Beyond this, as many scholars have pointed out, there has been a broad move away from political economy within the discipline as a whole since at least the 1990s, a shift that has never been complete, but is nonetheless discernable. In this sense, it may be useful to understand the rise of decolonial theory, and particularly those tendencies within it that tend to ignore political economy, as more of a symptom of broader shifts within the academy than as an explanation as to why imperialism's political economy has not received more attention.

Anti-imperialist struggles A third, related, current focuses on anti-imperialist political struggles. This tradition is also quite varied, with some scholars focusing on struggles to fight off particular expressions of empire (Striffler 2002; Lutz 2009; Bohme 2014) or to forge transnational solidarity in the face of imperialism (Edelman 1998; Gill 2009; Striffler 2019). This would also include efforts by left-wing groups to productively utilize anti-imperialist analysis and rhetoric to forge radical political movements. Aung and Campbell's contribution to this volume, for example, provides a rich history of the Myanmar radical tradition – how “it” both emerged from and opposed “colonial racial capitalism” – and thus fits comfortably within this current.

An anthropology against empire?

In their introduction, Campbell and Aung suggest that Mike Davis is misguided for suggesting that “Revolutions of the poor in backward countries can reach for the stars but only the proletariat in advanced countries can actually grasp the future.” For Campbell and Aung, Davis is demonstrably wrong in part because every twentieth century revolution occurred in the periphery. Setting aside whether Davis is wrong or right, or even whether the framing is useful, the statement – and Davis's work more broadly – nonetheless points us towards the kinds of questions and projects anthropologists should consider if we want to advance an anthropology against empire.

How does empire work?

An anthropology against empire needs to spend more time studying imperial power. While it is true that all twentieth century revolutions occurred in the Third World, it is also true that they struggled deeply to advance, strengthen, or sustain themselves – and in most cases ultimately failed – in large part because of the overwhelming power of imperial nations (imagine for a second Chile, Cuba, Nicaragua, Vietnam, and more recently Venezuela and Bolivia without US imperial power). A discipline that wants to be against empire has to help working people not only understand, but undermine, imperial power based largely in the United States and Europe. Likewise, although it may not be the case that only the proletariat in advanced countries can actually grasp the future, it is also hard to imagine an effective anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, movement emerging (at least one that can strike a decisive blow to imperial power) without working people in the Global North embracing a radical politics informed by left internationalism. An anthropology against empire must help make this happen – or least understand the obstacles standing in the way.

Where, and with whom, does revolutionary agency lie?

This question was at the heart of all of Davis's work, and is one that few anthropologists tackle, in part because it is an awkward question to ask – since it implies some

groups are better positioned politically than others, that some struggles are more vital than others, etc. The question particularly informed Davis's *Planet of Slums* (2005) and *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory* (2020) in ways that should interest anthropologists (the latter book was something of a sequel to the former and is where the above quote originates). In *Planet of Slums*, Davis suggests (following others like Walter Rodney) that formal imperialism-colonialism underdeveloped Asia, Africa, and Latin America through the nineteenth century, defined the course of the twentieth century, and generated the revolutionary responses we are familiar with. He also suggests, however, that imperialism's form has changed, operating now through global financial institutions and Third World elites in a way that destroyed peasant agriculture and sent hundreds of millions of people into Third World cities that lacked industrial jobs, or even formal employment. Most importantly, he asked: How do we think of revolutionary agency in a world economy that cannot create jobs or ensure basic food or housing security; where hundreds of millions of people are essentially surplus populations left to survive on their own, now in the face of catastrophic climate change? How do we think about the formation of an effective, radical, working-class coalition under this changing imperial-capitalist order? These are the questions – and political project – that an anthropology against imperialism must grapple with.

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