

GUEST EDITORIAL

Anthropology as a Vocation: Listening to Voices

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Anthropology is a vocation, not a job. It is something we are called to do, not something we are hired to do. I want to consider this in the context of five words: being or being there, listening, negotiating, transcending, and formulating. Contained in these words is a series of obligations that comprise the vocation of anthropology. Vocation as a word is subject to diverse definitions, but I do not want to depart much from the etymological sense of the word—*vocatio*—a calling, a sense of an urging or an obligation to respond to a situation because of a strong predisposition. And in what does that urging or obligation consist? Only in the obligation to be there, to listen, to negotiate, to transcend, and to formulate.

For me, the anthropological voice has fundamentally to do with the inclination to hear voices. An important part of our vocation is “listening to voices,” and our methods are the procedures that best enable us to hear voices, to represent voices, to translate voices. Anthropological work that does not contain voices somehow misses its calling. It is work that misses our opportunity to listen to voices. If it does not contain the authentic voices of the subjects of investigation, throw it aside, because it does not have lasting value. Anthropology is a paying attention to the voices of those among whom we live and study.

Would it not be true to say that, among the disciplines, anthropology most requires a “sense of proportion”? Certainly it is a discipline characterized by a series of paradoxes, of which the most important is the paradoxical method: participant-observation. Such a method surely demands a sense of proportion! How much should be given to participation, and how much to observation? The obligation of the ethnographer to give voice to the voices of others—by his or her own voice—does not escape the paradoxical either. In giving voice to others’ voices, what guarantee is there that we do not fall into the temptation of substituting our own voice for theirs? A sense of just proportion in the inevitable mixing of foreign voices and one’s own voice may be one guarantee.

Anthropology is a vocation (1) because it permits us to realize in some small part our distinctively human potentialities and (2) because there is a passion implicit in our work and a sense of responsibility that combines the commitments of the scientist and the man or woman of politics.

With respect to the realization of potentialities, anthropology enables us to be with others (we are, after all, social animals), to share with them, by listening and negotiating, their preoccupations (we are, after all, animals with a marked capacity for sharing), to transcend a too exclusively ethnocentric involvement (as language-using animals we have unique powers of displacement and self-awareness), and finally by means of transcendence to formulate the

general principles that are discovered as we transcend many particular cases (as language-using animals we have unique powers of concept formation). Please note that the theoretical component in our calling is found at the end of the list of our obligations that together constitute our vocation.

Stubbornly inductive, we resist formulation until we have been there and listened. The deductive approach is weak on being there and weak on listening. It is precociously transcendent and perhaps too powerfully formulative for those who entertain the “politics of listening to voices” as a vocation.

Our pursuit of the formulation of pure structure—our scientific vocation—is stayed by our desire to increase conviviality, that is, by our political vocation. By listening carefully to others’ voices and by trying to give voice to these voices, we act to widen the horizons of human conviviality. If we had not achieved some fellow feeling by being there, by listening carefully and by negotiating in good faith, it would be the more difficult to give voice in a way that would widen the horizons of human conviviality. Be that as it may, the calling to widen horizons and increase human conviviality seems a worthy calling—full of a very human optimism and good sense. Who would resist the proposition that more fellow feeling in the world is better than less, and that to extend the interlocutive in the world is better than to diminish it?

At the same time, there is a paradox here, one that demands of us a sense of proportion. Although the anthropologist is called to bring diverse people into intercommunication, he or she is also called to resist the homogenization that lies in mass communication. We are called by our very experience to celebrate the great variety of voices in the human chorus. The paradox is that we at once work to amplify the scale of intercommunication—and in effect contribute to homogenization—while at the same time we work to insist on the great variety of voices in communication. We must maintain here too a sense of proportion. We must recognize the point at which wider and wider cultural intercommunication can lead to dominant voices hidden in the homogenizing process. Human intercommunication has its uses and abuses.

In any case, significant endeavor—endeavor that has the characteristic of a calling and that qualifies as a vocation—is one that responds to human potentials and human evolution as we understand them to be. There will always be debate about these potentials and this evolution, but the important point is that we continue to amplify the scale of interlocution and grant to other voices their commentary on the subject. The vocation of the anthropologist, therefore, is to feel called beyond himself or herself by other voices—not as in other centuries by divine voices, but by human voices distinctly “other” and characteristically little listened to. We can talk about a kind of passion for listening to those voices, and we must talk about a responsibility to give voice to those voices.