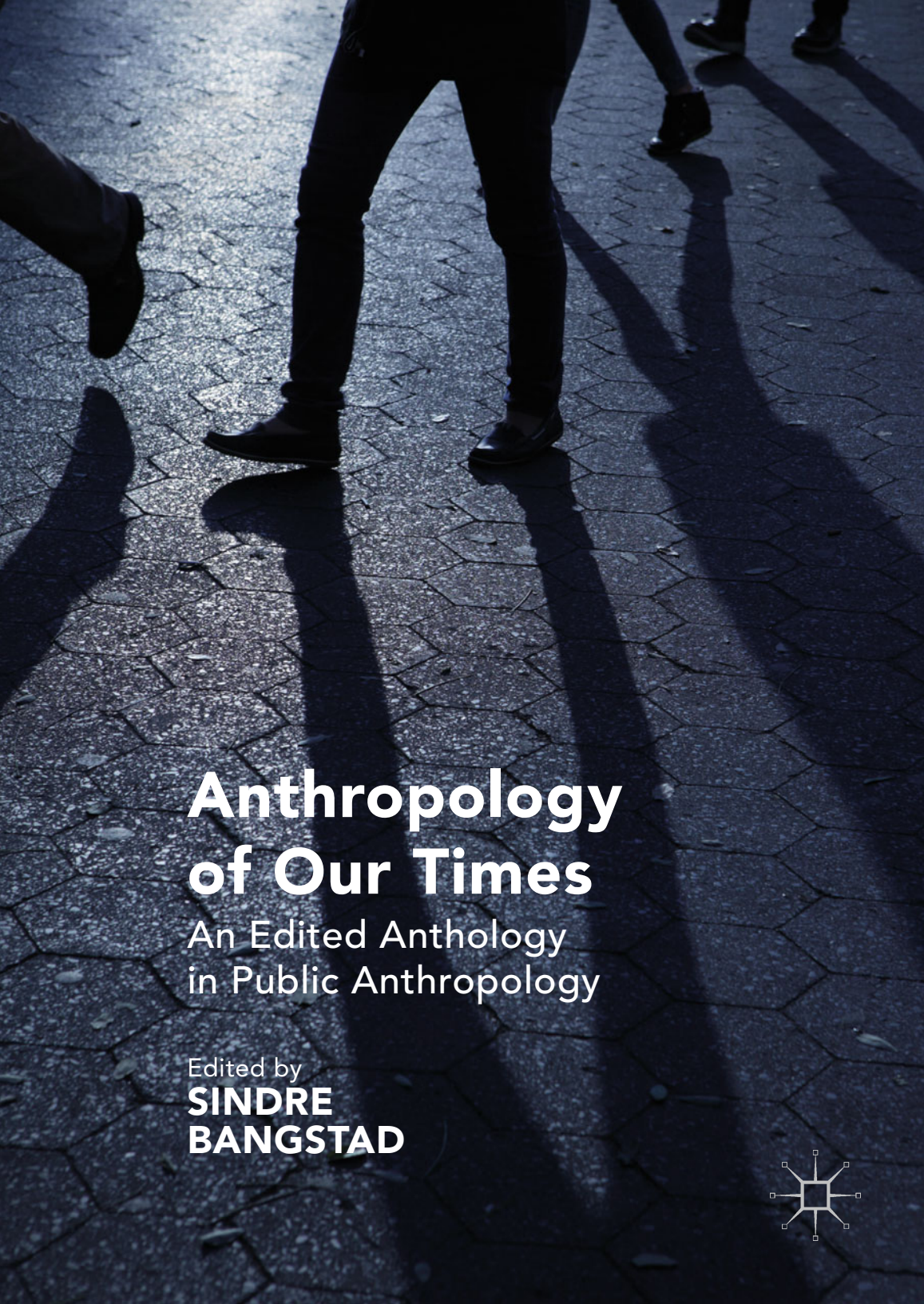

Anthropology of Our Times

An Edited Anthology in Public Anthropology

Edited by
SINDRE BANGSTAD

Anthropology of Our Times

House of Literature, Oslo. Photo courtesy of Andreas Liebe Delsett

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For Thomas, whose work taught me what public anthropology could be.
For Marianne G. for lessons in personal and professional integrity.

Foreword

In this Foreword, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Oslo Thomas Hylland Eriksen reflects on the ebbs and flows of the relationship of anthropology to the wider public sphere since the last turn of the century. Starting with Bronislaw Malinowski, Marcel Mauss, Franz Boas and Margaret Mead, Eriksen argues that public anthropology is not something new, and that there has not been any straightforward movement from openness to closure with increasing professionalisation of anthropology as an academic discipline.

The relationship of anthropology to the wider public sphere has gone through a series of ebbs and flows. In the nineteenth century, anthropology scarcely existed as an independent intellectual endeavour, but was largely a gentlemanly pursuit or an unintended, but not unwelcome side-effect of exploration and colonisation. Those who contributed to the emergence of anthropology as a distinctive field of scientific knowledge, from Lewis Henry Morgan in the USA to Henry Maine and E.B. Tylor in England, positioned themselves in a broader ecology of ideas and the pursuit of knowledge. The professionalisation of anthropology as an academic discipline began in earnest around the last turn of the century, enabling later practitioners to withdraw increasingly from political concerns and other scientific approaches to human culture and society. While many nineteenth-century anthropologists were not public anthropologists in the contemporary sense, they communicated with a broader

public in their writings—from lay readers to policy-makers—than most academic anthropologists of the early twenty-first century.

In addition, many early anthropologists, especially in the USA, were involved in what would today be called radical advocacy or action anthropology. Luke Lassiter notes that

> [l]ong before Bronislaw Malinowski insisted that anthropologists move 'off the verandah' and into the everyday lives of the natives … many BAE [Bureau of American Ethnology] ethnologists had moved into Native communities and were participating in people's everyday lives, doing fieldwork in collaboration with Indian informants, and, in some cases, following in the tradition of Morgan, acting on behalf of their 'subjects'. (Lassiter 2005: 86)

The increasing institutionalisation of anthropology as an academic discipline in the twentieth century enabled many anthropologists to effectively withdraw from the surrounding society (Eriksen 2006, Low and Merry 2010). Concerns voiced by some, such as A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, to make anthropology a 'real science' modelled on physics and biology, encouraged this kind of retreat into the ivory tower, and as the internal demographics of anthropology soared after the Second World War, the professional community grew large enough to begin to spin a cocoon around itself. Like a growing empire, it increasingly became self-contained, self-reproducing and self-sufficient, until the sheer demographic growth, decades later, again led to porous boundaries and defections.

There has been no straightforward movement from openness to closure. Important anthropologists who contributed to the institutionalisation of the subject were engaged in broader societal issues, and Franz Boas himself was an important public critic of racist pseudoscience. Among his students, Margaret Mead, the author of forty-four books and more than a thousand articles, keeping the steam up until her death in 1978, was the public anthropologist *par excellence* in the twentieth century. There were also many others whose work was read outside the academy, and who engaged in various ways with the world at large. Bronislaw Malinowski gave lectures on primitive economics to anyone who would care to listen; Marcel Mauss was engaged in French politics as a moderate socialist; and one could go on.

Moreover, applied anthropology has been a subfield—often unjustly disparaged by those involved in 'pure research'—since well before the

war. As noted by David Mills (2006: 56–57), anthropologists had, since the early twentieth century, tried to 'convince the Imperial government that anthropology served a useful purpose and deserved funding'. Although applied research was funded by the Colonial Social Science Research Council until 1961 (Pink 2006), little basic anthropological research received such funding (Goody 1995). Anthropological methods and anthropological knowledge have nevertheless, at various times, been deemed useful by governments and business leaders, most recently in the Human Terrain System of the US military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, where practitioners from anthropology (and other subjects) were drawn upon to enhance knowledge of local circumstances in war areas. Deeply controversial among American anthropologists, studied and criticised thoroughly by one of the anthropologists interviewed by Sindre Bangstad in this book (Price 2011), the HTS was denounced in a statement issued by the American Anthropological Association in 2007. The fundamental ethics of anthropological research is not compatible with legitimation of wars, nor are the ethics of fieldwork compatible with spying.

In a sense, anthropologists have always engaged with publics outside of anthropology. Sometimes, this has led to their academic marginalisation—one could easily be written off as intellectually lightweight if one got involved in advocacy or applied work, say, for development agencies—and there has, as noted by many (e.g. Pels and Salemink 1999, Borofsky 2011), been a clear, and arguably unproductive, tendency to rank pure research above applied research. Similarly, the hierarchy ranking tough academic writing for people in the know above lucid writing for the general public, is also debatable. Most of the anthropologists who are widely read by students may have put most of their intellectual energy into basic research and theory, but they have coexisted with other, no less important anthropologists, who either went out of their way to establish a broader dialogue about the human condition, or who actively sought to mitigate suffering and contribute to social change.

Public anthropology as such is, in other words, not something new. Nevertheless, the problematisation of distinctions that were formerly taken for granted, notably between 'pure' and 'applied' work, and the development of a reflexive and critical discourse about the ways in which anthropology can be made relevant outside the academy, has been on the rise in recent years. This development cannot be attributed to isolated initiatives such as Borofsky's Public Anthropology project, but must

be understood as a broader structural tendency. Already in the 1980s, anthropologists working in the Global South noted that many of the people they came into contact with had highly articulated and reflexive views of their own history, culture and identity. They certainly did not feel the need for anthropologists to identify who they were; in many parts of the world, local intellectuals had indeed read some anthropology and were familiar with its concepts. They were able to identify themselves and use some of the tools offered by anthropology to develop their own existential and political agendas, and did not see why they should need foreigners to do the job for them.

In our world of multiple transnational networks and global flows, the fiction of 'us, the knowers' and 'they, the objects of study', which was always objectionable, has now become untenable, and anthropologists now venture into fields, and delineate their topics of inquiry, in ways that were unheard of only a generation ago (see MacClancy 2002 for a sample). As Sam Beck and Carl Maida (2013) put it, the contemporary world is in every sense borderless. The consequences of the destabilisation of boundaries for the anthropological endeavour are many, and some of the most important consequences become evident in the debates around public anthropology: Who can legitimately say what, and on whose behalf can they say it? What are the benchmark criteria for good ethnography? What can anthropologists offer to the societies they study? And—in a very general sense—what is the exact relationship between anthropological research and the social and cultural worlds under study? These questions, which were always relevant, have become inevitable, and increasingly difficult to answer, in the borderless world of the twenty-first century.

This is not a time for complacency. Anthropology has, in the past, succeeded spectacularly in combating racial prejudices and biological determinism, accounting for—and, at least in the case of Margaret Mead, contributing to—cultural change, and throwing unexpected analogies and thought-provoking contrasts into the world, sometimes succeeding in 'making the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic'. Our failure to define a single public agenda over the last decades—and I am using the word public loosely, to include the media, politics, students and general intellectual debate—is actually quite serious. It does not mean that anthropologists are, generally, working with useless and irrelevant topics, that they are engaged in a self-enclosed activity of high sophistication akin to the 'glass bead game' described in Herman Hesse's last and most important novel, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, translated into English variously