

# ANTHROPOLOGY IN OUR MOMENT IN HISTORY: INTERVIEW WITH PHILIPPE BOURGOIS

---

*Robert Borofsky, Hawaii Pacific University, Center for a Public Anthropology*  
borofsky@hpu.edu  
<http://www.publicanthropology.org/>

## ***How did you become an anthropologist?***

Discovering anthropology for me was like falling in love. I was a freshman in college and I knew nothing about the subject. I didn't have a major. I took one of those big introductory classes in a large lecture hall because I was curious, but I didn't really have any idea what anthropology might be.

The very first lecture blew my mind. It was by an old-style style anthropologist talking about his fieldwork in the Amazon. He introduced us to the Yanomami, an indigenous people who were at the center of a huge anthropological debate about the nature of violence at the time: How much of human violence is cultural? How much of it is at the essence of human nature? How much of it is imposed by larger historical and economic forces? The teacher described to us their "shaman" who sniff hallucinogenic drugs to communicate with spirits and to protect their village from sickness and attack by neighbors. The Yanomami shaman are the Amazonian equivalent to our philosophers, scientists, doctors and religious or political officials. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Here is an academic discipline that sends its practitioners around the world to immerse themselves in utterly unfamiliar, foreign cultures in order to explore the meaning of human existence.

I adored the class even with all its old-fashioned faults—it did, after all, "exoticize" indigenous people as if they were not our contemporaries but lived in a bubble, oblivious to the effects of global power relations and colonial conquest. The teacher did alert us, however, to the contemporary invasion of non-indigenous settlers, miners and cattle barons who were—and still are—destroying indigenous ways of life all around the world. I quickly signed up to major in anthropology.

## ***What do you find special about anthropology?***

There are a few things that I think are magical about anthropology but, what I like best is our methodology of "participant-observation ethnography", our insight on "cultural relativism" and our multi-disciplinarity. Our methodology is extraordinarily powerful but simple. To put it commonsensically, it is the technique of deep "hanging out" in a setting to attempt to see the world through the eyes of the people or society you want to find out about. You engage with people in a friendly, empathetic way, and participate in their daily life activities so as to avoid distorting interactions or calling excessive attention to yourself. This allows you to break through appearances and simultaneously experience emotionally and document rationally life in that setting. We have developed strategies of note-taking, tape-recording and, most importantly, of self-reflexive skepticism. You have to learn to be careful not to see only what you want to see and not to confuse the way you want the world to be with the way the world really is. You try to figure out how things really work by being aware of your own biases.

Participant-observation methodology forces you to break through the barriers of status that limit people's lives: economic class, race and ethnicity, gender, and social conventions—to name a few. Anthropology tells you: “Go out there and explore the world; open your mind to all kinds of different perspectives and settings—or take a long close critical look at your own society. Treat your own culture and its common senses as if you were an outsider confronting the bizarre logic of an exotic people for the first time. You discover that there is nothing more normal or right about your culture than anyone else's culture.”

Anthropology pushes you to dare to break through, what we have called the “intimate apartheid” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2007) that confine us to our narrow little segregated worlds that we find most comfortable. Too often these intimate apartheid turn us into ethnocentric, or even racist individuals, who think so highly of ourselves and our way of being that we end up disrespecting and mistreating anyone who is different from us.

Respect for others is a related core value of anthropology and is reflected in our core value of cultural relativism which is not a theory, but simply a heuristic device, (a technique) that enables us to learn about others without being blinded by prejudgments. In a nutshell, cultural relativism declares that cultures are not good or bad; they all have a logic. Our job as anthropologists—and indeed as human beings—is not to judge culture along righteous moral lines, but to find out how its internal logic makes it operate. Often the first reaction of people confronted with something different is, “Ewww gross!” simply because it is different from what they are used to and what they consider to be normal, or moral, or the proper way to do things.

Anthropology tells us to throw out our preconceptions and biases and recognize our own culture's brain-washing and instead become aware of why people do things, because those different ways of doing things inevitably have a meaning and a logic to them. All people everywhere are convinced that they too are moral, good, and normal in the same way we think we are moral, good—and for the most part normal. No matter how horrific/crazy/cool/mean or beautiful a cultural practice may appear to be at first, our job as anthropologists is to jump into its logic to see how it makes sense to the people engaging in that practice. It is this combination of participant-observation ethnography and cultural relativism that can make anthropology powerfully anti-racist, self-critical and alert to power inequalities and disparate life chances across the world, and in our own society—or even in our own families!

Finally, anthropology is also an unusual field of study because it spans the scientific boundaries that divide academic disciplines. We include multiple subfields—cultural anthropology, archeology, linguistics, biological anthropology, and medical anthropology—that transcend the academic gulfs between the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. I happen to be a cultural (sometimes called a social) anthropologist and also a medical anthropologist. The questions important to me draw from theories and methods from both the humanities and the social sciences. Furthermore, as a medical anthropologist concerned about HIV, addiction and violence I find myself in dialogue with laboratory scientists and epidemiologists who operate with very different (primarily quantitative) definitions of facts and who are often initially unfamiliar with, and sometimes fail to recognize, the value of qualitative anthropological research.

Anthropology makes you realize that academic disciplines are like cultures. They each have their logics and insights, as well as their blinders and biases. Anthropology has a long history of melding together different epistemologies—that is to say different techniques of understanding the world. We read widely in philosophy, literature, history, economics, art, architecture, poetry, biology, law—you

name it. This makes our theoretical approaches to understanding why the world is the way it is especially innovative.

***What do you like best about anthropology?***

Conducting fieldwork is the best part of being an anthropologist. I think I am happiest when I'm in the middle of a participant-observation ethnographic fieldwork project. Some mornings I have to pinch myself when I wake up. It seems like a dream that I am paid to spend my time in so many different, interesting—sometimes scary—settings and with such compelling people to learn from and about them.

Much of my work has been in the U.S. inner city. These are settings beset by social inequality, poverty, violence and substance abuse. As part of my fieldwork, for example, I lived for almost five years in a rundown tenement apartment building in East Harlem, New York with my family, right when the crack and HIV epidemics hit. I watched many of my friends and neighbors get swept off their feet by crack, and some died of AIDS. I befriended a network of crack dealers operating on my block and they invited me into their homes. I wrote a book about how they and their families made sense of their world and struggled to survive (Bourgois 2003). I also became a medical anthropologist to try to contribute usefully to policy and advocacy in the field of public health and HIV prevention.

My neighbors and friends were suffering real poverty. Most were unemployed, struggling with addiction, and engaging in violence. There was a great deal of gun violence. The mid-1980s through the early 1990s were a dangerous and stressful era on U.S. inner city streets. But on another level, it was an exciting and fun moment of history to be in East Harlem. It was the birth of hip-hop and rap. People were eager to talk, full of hope and the illusions of going from rags to riches. I tried to make their suffering, struggle, and dreams less invisible and more humanely comprehensible to the rest of America.

I wanted readers of my book to understand the historical tragedy of inner city poverty, the effects of de-industrialization, racist segregation and the loss of jobs. The economy was in shambles, because of the disappearance of factory jobs to lower wage, countries that repressed unions and human rights. The global narcotics industry flooded in to this devastated economic vacuum overwhelming all of us. These were “structural forces” that were badly managed by U.S. politicians and misunderstood by the press. The young men and women I befriended could not find legal jobs that would pay enough money to feed a single individual—let alone their families and loved ones. Schools were not working; abandoned buildings were going up in flames, and crack offered a seductive promise of sudden, easy access to the American Dream: Get rich quick through risky entrepreneurship.

Setting up a crack house at that time was not so different from founding a high-tech start-up company today except that your product was illegal and you had no access to loans from banks, or to legal protection for enforcing contracts. You had to rely on your wits or brute force to start your business, stay alive and keep off of drugs. At that moment in history, politicians and the press vilified crack dealers as public enemies, but in fact, they were the logical product of powerful social and political forces that trapped them into a destructive, violent relationship with their community. More often than not they ended up as victims themselves, becoming addicts and spending the rest of their lives rotating through prison, because this was the moment when mass incarceration was taking hold of the United States.

Since that time, I've done similar fieldwork in other inner city settings. I co-authored a book on homeless heroin injectors and crack smokers, called *Righteous Dopefiend*, with a student, Jeff Schon-

berg, who is also a great photographer (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). Jeff is now an anthropology professor at San Francisco State University. We combined the documentary and aesthetic/emotional effects of photography with the analytical tools of anthropology to convey the human suffering of homelessness, social inequality, and addiction. We also critiqued the dysfunctional effects of the war on drugs and offered practical solutions such as harm reduction and “housing-first” interventions and diversified medical treatment options—including opiate prescription—for indigent addicts.

### ***What was your first fieldwork as a student?***

My first fieldwork was in Central America among the Miskitu Indians in Nicaragua. They are an extraordinary people who were at the center of a terrible cold war conflict in the 1980s. A populist leftist revolution had triumphed in Nicaragua overthrowing a brutal, U.S.-supported dictatorship that had been in power for forty years. I literally jumped on a bus heading for Nicaragua and presented myself at the New Agrarian Reform Office saying, “I’m an anthropologist. I’d like to work for your socialist experiment.” They replied, “Oh, you’re a gringo [i.e. from the United States] anthropologist. You must like indigenous people.” This is the stereotype of anthropologists. And frankly it is largely true, cultural relativism guides anthropologists to respect indigenous cultures. The revolutionaries sent me out to Miskitu territory in the jungle along Nicaragua’s Atlantic coast, and I took a leave-of-absence from graduate school. That is how I found myself among the Miskitu Indians in revolutionary Nicaragua in 1979-1980 instead of in school. Unfortunately the revolutionary leaders were just as racist against the indigenous minorities in their country as the right wing dictator had been before them. The Miskitu people were excited about the revolution, but they wanted to retain control over their culture, language, land, and natural resources and rebelled against the revolutionary central government’s racism. Unfortunately the CIA stepped in to manipulate the conflict because of its Cold War era anti-communist obsession and flooded the Miskitu territory with AK-47 machine guns. A bloody civil war erupted.

The revolutionary leadership in Nicaragua failed to recognize that the cultural demands of the Miskitu were just as legitimate as the economic demands of the poor, Latino non-indigenous population for whom they had fought and overthrown the dictatorship. Most Latino Nicaraguans viewed the Indians as being from a “lower cultural level.” But again, cultural relativism tells us there is no such thing as a lower cultural level. There are simply different ways of organizing society. All cultural forms are legitimate in their own social uniqueness. The Miskitu conflict made me realize that anthropology can have a very important role to play in changing the world for the better.

Several anthropologists with whom I was working in the agrarian reform ministry co-authored a report and published a book calling for the decolonization of the Miskitu territory and the establishment of an autonomous local government of indigenous regional autonomy (Philippe Bourgois and Jorge Grunberg 1981). The revolutionaries could not understand our anthropological perspective. Instead they pursued a hard line against the Miskitu and repressed everyone demanding cultural rights. I was thrown out of the country and returned to graduate school. Four years later, the revolutionary government realized that its policy had backfired, and it granted regional political autonomy to the Miskitu territory. They invited me back to Nicaragua in 1985 to evaluate their experiment in autonomous indigenous territorial and political rights. Unfortunately the Nicaraguan revolution foundered three years later—that often happens to populist revolutions. The regional autonomy they

initiated, however, is still an interesting model for indigenous people around the world and has a great deal of potential.

### **Have others benefited from your work?**

My commitment to engaging with urgent contemporary social and political problems has taught me that it is important not to think we have all the answers, know the truth, or even ask the right questions. We have to be careful about taking ourselves too seriously as anthropologists. The crack dealers I had befriended in East Harlem came to the book opening party for *In Search of Respect Selling Crack in El Barrio* hosted by Cambridge University Press. They received copies of the book and liked the fact that their words were published to make a complex theoretical and policy analysis of de-industrialization, racism, and gender power relations. Nevertheless, one of the most violent, main characters in the book insightfully poked fun at me, “Oh Felipe you make us sound like such sensitive crack dealers.” Another one resisted the linearity of my argument about the impact of structural forces on the neighborhood and his life, “I don’t blame nobody but me, myself and I for the bad I’ve done.”

I still keep in touch with several of the main characters in the book and I asked my best friend from the scene, whom I called Primo, if he minded if I could publish a follow-up article about his addiction to heroin (Bourgois 2000). He was ashamed of being a heroin user and I didn’t want to embarrass him or violate his privacy. He looked at me in a super hesitant and pained way. I thought, “Oh no! He’s going to tell me I can’t publish this!” Instead, he said, “I don’t mean to disrespect you... but you can write whatever you want to write. No nobody reads the shit you write—at least not no one that I know.”

It made me realize that we have to be humble as academics. Our anthropological publications only reach a small section of college-educated people. My books on the inner city, for example, are mostly read by college students. That is frustrating on some level. But college students are at a turning point in their lives. They can open their minds up to new perspectives and transform their ways of thinking in ways that can alter the course of their lives and the future of their society.

Some of the readers of my books in college classes send me feedback through email. I also occasionally get letters from prisoners who somehow gained access to my books through crummy, underfunded prison libraries. Sometimes they tell me they see themselves or their parents reflected in the pages of *In Search of Respect* and in *Righteous Dopefiend*: “I was always so angry at my [violent or addicted or neglectful] father—or my mother—but now I can begin to understand what was going on . . .”

Working in public health on HIV prevention as an anthropologist has also been rewarding but challenging, especially with the government wasting so much money on locking people up, which simply makes the problem of violence, addiction, and unemployment worse. But frankly, we need to figure out how to reach more people more broadly and more effectively. That is where future generations can help with the explosion of digital technology and social media. The new technology offers new ways of communicating anthropological insights. It is very effective to show images and display audio at the same time that you present on anthropological analysis. It can render off-limits places and problems more humanely visible or it can help set the individual experience of viewers in the larger context of our moment in history.

Remember, an anthropologist can study almost anything. You can enter the world of stockbrokers or crack dealers, doctors or homeless heroin injectors, indigenous hunter-gatherers or suburban

commuters and shed light on what gets taken for granted but may actually be problematic, urgent or complex or is simply beautiful and inspiring. New access to online technologies gives anthropology greater potential to address the urgent questions of our contemporary moment in history and reach wider audiences. But, we still have to figure out how to use these platforms effectively. We have to be wary of becoming inadvertent pornographers or manipulators of the truth like reality TV shows. I think anthropology should be at the forefront of the digital communication tide and it will be the new generation that embraces these new possibilities. Digital technology has already transformed public health and politics and most nefariously big business is enslaving us to it and monopolizing online access. It is up to the new generation to wrench back its potential.

### ***Any Closing Thoughts?***

I want to end by saying that ethnographic fieldwork and theoretical analysis can help us understand the invisible negative effects of power, domination, and social inequalities. Actions that seem immoral or look horrendous—behaviors that seem to be pathological—may often be imposed on individuals by larger structural forces—harsh economic conditions, environmental assaults, repressive public policies, and discriminatory social hierarchies—that constrain the lives of the individuals we study ethnographically. In some sense we are all trapped into doing the things that we do. This is certainly the case for addiction, HIV and the violence surrounding drug distribution and mass incarceration. Anthropology’s ethnographic method gives us intimate access to people’s daily lives while simultaneously allowing us to grasp the bigger picture. The challenge is to use anthropology’s critical tools to recognize the burning issues of our moment in history and go out into the world to change some corner of it for the better—or at least try to help stop it from imploding.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Bourgois, Philippe., and Jeff Schonberg. “Intimate Apartheid: Ethnic Dimensions of Habitus among Homeless Heroin Injectors.” *Ethnography* 8 no. 1(2007): 7–31.
- Bourgois, Philippe. “Disciplining Addictions: The Bio-Politics of Methadone and Heroin in the United States.” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 24 no. 2(2000): 165–195.
- Bourgois, Philippe. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Bourgois, Philippe, and Jeff Schonberg. *Righteous Dopefiend*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
- Philippe Bourgois, and Jorge Grunberg. “Informe de Una Investigacion Rural En La Costa Atlantica Norte.” In *La Mosquitia En La Revolucion*. Jaime Wheelock Roman, ed. Pp. 89–149. Managua: Centro de investigacion y estudios de la reforma agraria [CIERA], Colección Blas Real Espinales, 1981.