

# Public Anthropology in the 21st Century, with Some Examples from Norway

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**Abstract** Although there seems to be broad agreement within the discipline about the desirability of a public anthropology, there is less certainty, or agreement, not only about how to achieve it in a responsible way but also about its very *raison-d'être*. What should an anthropology which engages closely with non-academic publics seek to achieve? Starting with a historical overview, the article argues that the lack of a clear societal task or assignment liberates anthropology from problem solving for the state, enabling it to stimulate the collective imagination by making bold comparisons and unexpected conjectures. The empirical examples from Norway show how public anthropologists can successfully mix the 'light' and the 'heavy' in getting their argument across and raising anthropological issues while also engaging with a broad, non-academic public.

**Keywords** public anthropology, Norway, history of anthropology, interdisciplinarity.

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The relationship of anthropology to the wider public sphere has gone through several stages, or ebbs and flows. Until the end of the 19th 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 colonization. Those who contributed to the emergence of anthropology as a distinctive field of scientific knowledge, from Lewis Henry Morgan in the US to Henry Maine and E. B. Tylor in England, positioned themselves in a broader ecology of ideas and the pursuit of knowledge. The professionalization of anthropology as an academic discipline began in earnest around the turn of the last century, enabling later practitioners to withdraw increasingly from social concerns and other approaches to human culture and society. While many 19th-century anthropologists were not ‘public anthropologists’ in the contemporary sense, they engaged with a broader public than most academic anthropologists of the 20th century did.

The increasing institutionalization 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, about making 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 corporation, it increasingly became self-contained, self-reproducing and self-sufficient, until sheer demographic growth, decades later, again led to porous boundaries and defections.

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

In a sense, anthropologists have always engaged with publics outside of anthropology. Sometimes, this has led to their academic marginalization – one could easily be written off as an intellectual 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 Saleminck 1999; Borofsky 2011), been a clear, and arguably unproductive, tendency to rank pure research above applied

research. Similarly, the hierarchy ranking difficult academic writing for people in the know above lucid writing for the general public is also debatable. The fact remains that most of the anthropologists who are widely read by students put most of their intellectual energy into basic research and theory, and we therefore need to be reminded of the fact that they have all coexisted with other 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.

In our world of multiple transnational networks and global flows, the contrast between ‘us, the knowers’ and ‘them, the objects of study’, which was always questionable, 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 some examples). As Sam Beck and Carl Maida (2013) put it, the contemporary world is in many ways borderless. The consequences of the destabilization 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 21st century.

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 recent decades – and here 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, in general, 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 as *The Glass Bead Game* and *Magister Ludi* (Hesse 1949 [1943]). The glass bead game has no ulterior point beyond that of allowing its players to display their dazzling skill and intellectual dexterity, and as the novel’s protagonist Joseph Knecht comes to realize, the single-minded commitment to the game demanded of its players makes them unfit for living in the world. Hesse’s novel comments on self-enclosed, self-congratulatory academic pursuits with little relevance beyond academia. Novelists and poets have been known to regard literary studies, not least in their post-structuralist

versions, in such terms. But anthropology? Well, clearly not. What attracted many of us to anthropology in the first place – the possibility of raising fundamental philosophical questions while simultaneously engaging with the world of real, existing people – is still there. However – and this is a matter of regret for all of us – it is still largely to be found inside a cocoon.

### **Anthropology as cultural critique**

Although there seems to be broad agreement within the discipline about the desirability of a public anthropology, there is less certainty, or agreement, not only about how to achieve it in a responsible way, but also about its very *raison-d'être*. What should an anthropology which engages closely with non-academic publics seek to achieve? There are several possible approaches to this question.

A position enunciated at the time of the radical student movement of the 1960s saw anthropology as an inherently critical discipline in a vaguely left-wing sense (e.g. Berreman 1968). To the extent that anthropologists are closer to 'ordinary people' than other researchers, including other social scientists, advocacy on behalf of local communities facing potential conflict with corporations or states may seem to follow logically from the experiences and social obligations resulting from fieldwork. It is doubtless true that when anthropologists act or write on behalf of the people they conduct research on, they are more often than not defenders of the particular and local against various forms of standardization, state power and global neoliberalism. While this is an often laudable and even necessary task, the critical role of public anthropology can be taken further than advocacy for various kinds of local movements. This is especially, but not exclusively, evident when anthropologists engage with issues in their own society.

Conducting anthropological research at home has its rewards and pitfalls, mostly resulting from the close relationship of the researcher to the researched. This has been more thoroughly formulated as a theory by sociologists than by anthropologists, some of whom still tend to think of 'anthropology at home' as an exception. Just as post-structuralism was replacing neo-Marxism as the dominant non-orthodox theoretical orientation in the social sciences, Giddens (1984) pointed out that the social scientist enters into a 'double hermeneutic' relationship in his or her society, since the concepts and analyses of the social sciences are both informed by lay concepts and in turn influence them. There is, in other words, a two-way hermeneutic process taking place. For instance, the anthropological concept of ethnicity has entered everyday discourse, while the political concept of integration (regarding minorities) has, conversely, influenced social research on the issue. Years before Giddens, the philosopher Hans Skjervheim (1957) described a related duality in a seminal essay marking the beginning of the Norwegian critique of positivism. He

showed that, far from being an aloof and objective observer, the social scientist is both participant and observer (an epistemological position not to be confused with the methodological device of participant observation). There can, accordingly, be no neutral ground from which to view society.

Social scientists are, in other words, entwined with broader public discourse and societal concerns, whether they like it or not; indeed, critics of positivism have long pointed out that this is true of all scientific enquiry. Writing in the context of the burgeoning radical student movements in the late 1960s, Jürgen Habermas thus distinguished between three ‘knowledge interests’ (*Erkenntnisinteressen*, Habermas 1971/1968), which he associated with the three main branches of academic inquiry. The natural sciences, he said, were driven by a *technical* interest and found their justification in explaining natural relationships and processes in ways enabling control and technological progress. The inherent knowledge interest of the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) was *practical* (in the Kantian sense) and aimed to deepen and maintain the communicative community on which both society and individuality depended. Finally, the knowledge interest of the social sciences was *liberating*, aiming to expose and account for the power relations of society, thereby contributing to the critical self-understanding of its inhabitants. Habermas worried that the technical knowledge interest was becoming overly dominant across the academic disciplines. It is easy to find evidence supporting this view today, when most social science research is commissioned directly or indirectly by state institutions, the humanities are judged on their instrumental usefulness, and New Public Management provides the yardstick for assessing academic achievement.

### **Being irrelevant in a relevant way**

Seen against the backdrop of Habermas, Giddens, the critique of positivism and the perceived need for public engagement, it is fairly obvious that not all social science satisfies the criteria for representing a liberating knowledge interest. Some – perhaps most – social science is closely aligned with social engineering, planning and the formal structuring of society, and in state budgets social research is justified by referring to its usefulness. It belongs to the domain of the technical knowledge interest. Its dialectical negation, the broad family of approaches and persuasions coming under the umbrella of critical social science, either aims to improve a flawed socioeconomic system by addressing racism, inequality, misogyny etc., or to replace it with a better one. It can be liberating, but it depends conceptually on that from which it seeks liberation.

Anthropology is in a privileged position to develop a third way beyond system maintenance and social criticism, one which is arguably more in accordance with the notion of liberating knowledge held by young Habermas

(and his more radical predecessors in the Frankfurt school). Being an inherently subversive and unpredictable partner in the long conversation about who we are and where we are going, I would like to argue that anthropology can, and should, take on the role of Anansi, the trickster, in the sprawling fauna of the social and human sciences. In West African and Caribbean folklore, Anansi the spider always gets the upper hand in confrontations with larger and stronger adversaries because of his imaginative and bold ways of turning his apparent weakness into a virtue. Since nobody fears him, he is capable of surprising them and makes the rhino, the lion and the python fall victim to their own vanity.

Similarly, the typical anthropological approach does not take received wisdom for granted, refuses to be co-opted by polarising discourses and insists on the right to view society simultaneously as ‘observer and participant’. We will now move on to a consideration of the situation in Norway, a country where public anthropologists are fairly thick on the ground (Eriksen 2006; 2013). In this small Northern European country, anthropologists often give public talks in forums ranging from Rotary clubs to Oslo’s popular House of Literature; they comment on public events in the media, and several write regular columns, op-eds and the occasional book for a general readership.

In keeping with the prevailing instrumentalist view of knowledge, representatives of the different academic disciplines in Norway sometimes speak of their ‘societal assignment’ (*samfunnsoppdrag*). As far as the social sciences are concerned, the economists run the country (through powerful institutions such as the Ministry of Finance, Statistics Norway and the Central Bank); the political scientists look after the nuts and bolts of government at all levels, from foreign policy to municipal councils; and the sociologists defend the welfare state and gender equality. What about the social anthropologists? There are many of them in Norway, which may have the largest proportion of anthropologists in the world. With no clearly defined professional niches, they work in many areas, from development NGOs and local government to communication agencies, libraries and the media, in addition to having a wide-ranging academic presence well beyond the universities, in research institutions of various kinds. A previous President of the Sámi Parliament was trained as an anthropologist, as was a former Minister of Development. Yet anthropology remains more of a vocation than a profession. It is unclear why the country – or any country – needs anthropologists, and there is an ongoing struggle to show why anthropology matters. To this end, Norwegian anthropologists have for many years made themselves visible in the public sphere. Moreover, a subject called ‘sociology and social anthropology’ is the most popular optional subject in secondary school, and many Norwegians have an idea of what anthropologists are and do. It is commonly assumed that anthropologists are politically radical; they are expected to defend immigrants and indigenous peoples, to criticize New Public Management and predatory capitalism,

to take a detached, sometimes ironic position on Norwegian nationalism, and to favour green and leftist politics. While this is empirically simplistic – for example, the most famous Norwegian anthropologist, Fredrik Barth (b. 1928), is largely apolitical – it is not altogether wrong. Economic anthropology is very different from economic science in that it has been just as preoccupied with gift exchange as with markets, at least as concerned with the human economy as with profitability, and when economic anthropologists study central banks or the financial crisis (Holmes 2013; Appadurai 2015) they see them as cultural systems. Political anthropology, likewise, has a long-standing interest in symbols, kinship and ritual, with power struggles often added almost as an afterthought.

In the public eye, anthropologists represent a kind of intellectual habitus which renders them susceptible to favouring egalitarian small-scale societies and cultural diversity. Yet, compared to the other social sciences, anthropologists do not have a societal assignment – *samfunnsoppdrag*. It may seem as if their main task in the public sphere is to make unexpected comparisons, to ask unusual questions and to interrogate the received wisdom. It is not our job to be worried. As a result, Norwegian anthropologists have often played the part of the trickster, like the Ash Lad (*Askeladden*) in Norwegian fairytales (Witoszek 1998), or Anansi in West African and Caribbean lore (Eriksen 2013).

Nevertheless, precisely because society has not provided anthropology with a set of social issues to deal with, an area of responsibility or a problem-solving mandate, there is a real risk of withdrawal. As elsewhere, Norwegian anthropologists are rather fond of talking amongst themselves and often forget to include the outside world in their conversations. The science-fiction author Tor Åge Bringsværd once likened the relationship of society to science with the act of sending a shuttle into outer space. Society has invested money and effort into this endeavour, with the obligation on the part of the space shuttle to return and explain what it has seen. Too often, Bringsværd said, the space shuttle just stays out there without returning, which is a source of great disappointment for the greater public.

It is easy to sympathize with this sentiment. For what is the use of knowledge if it only circulates among the initiates? This is not to say that every anthropologist should popularize the subject, engage in the increasingly messy meshwork that is public debate and go out and preach the gospel of anthropology to the unwashed heathens. In fact, those who do depend on those who don't; without the often arcane and difficult original research which never travels beyond seminar rooms and online university libraries, public anthropologists would have nothing to be public about. Some of the best-loved and most admired Norwegian anthropologists rarely made public appearances outside academia. One example is the late Reidar Grønhaug (1938–2005, see Vike 2010). Intellectually agile and original, generous and interested, Grønhaug was

so reticent and shy that he scarcely even published his own work, allowing unfinished writings to languish in his drawer, but at least ensuring that some of his finest texts circulated among students and colleagues as mimeos. A good example is the strikingly original 'Transaction and Signification' (Grønhaug 1975), a spirited synthesis of Barth and Lévi-Strauss where the centrepiece was a reanalysis of the beer-hall scene in Clyde Mitchell's *The Kalela Dance* (Mitchell 1956). Many other examples could also be mentioned.

The tension between the internal and the external, between openness and closure, between building knowledge and sharing it, represents a fundamental dilemma in all group dynamics. A version of this tension is wonderfully described by Sahlins in his old, memorable if contested article 'Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief' (Sahlins 1963),<sup>1</sup> in which he outlines the structural dilemma of the Melanesian 'big man'. In order to ensure his power base, he must spend considerable amounts of time with his relatives and supporters in the village and offer gifts to them. However, he also has to build alliances with outsiders, mainly to prevent war and feuding, but also to extend his sphere of influence. Yet if the big man spends too much time and resources on outsiders, his kinfolk and supporters will begin to grumble and may eventually depose him. He thus has to strike a fine balance between the internal cohesion of the group and the creation of alliances, or between consolidation and expansion.

Anthropologists who have gone out of their way to communicate with a non-anthropological audience have often been reminded of the broader significance of Sahlins's perspective. If you go out into the world, you may flourish, and it may enrich your own people by making them more famous and attractive to others; but it may also be your own undoing since you start doing business with outsiders before paying your debts at home.

For a long time, Norwegian anthropologists have taken their chances. What sets Norwegian anthropology apart is not only the fact that anthropologists are fairly numerous in this country, but also that they are a familiar sight, individually and collectively, in the public sphere. Regular as clockwork, Norwegian anthropologists appear on radio and in the newspapers every year before Christmas to explain the logic of gift exchange, often with a sideways glance to the potlatch and Melanesia; when spring comes, they comment on the rituals and symbols of football supporters; around Easter, they may write or talk about the peculiar Norwegian habit of spending Easter skiing in the mountains; and in autumn, they may take part in more serious discussions about the significance of the Muslim headscarf among Norway's growing Muslim minority. They risk becoming academic court jesters, but they may equally well

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1 Incidentally, this is also the title of a song performed by a group of students and junior staff at parties since the early 1990s. The lyrics were written by Bjarne Træen, and in its most eclectic incarnation the band was called Pigs for the Ancestors. On a number of occasions over the years, I have played a bit of sax on it.



be those who can speak the truth to those in power because they have no vested interests. To use Milan Kundera's contrast from his *Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), there is both lightness and gravity in the work of the public anthropologist. I will now consider, with the help of a few examples, the relationship between lightness and weight in Norwegian public anthropology, and will argue that it has changed since the turn of the millennium.

### **The light and the heavy in public anthropology**

An anthropologist specialising in food and consumption, Runar Døving wrote his doctoral dissertation about change and continuity in the food habits of a small hamlet in south-eastern Norway. Active in the public sphere, at the time of his dissertation work he wrote an op-ed in the Oslo newspaper *Dagbladet* where he defended the hot dog against its detractors. Without mentioning Bourdieu once, Døving (2002) persuasively and convincingly attacked food snobbery and the new culinary distinctions resulting from forms of individualization and differentiation that he associated with neoliberal deregulation. The article was written with verve and passion, it was light-hearted and fun to read, yet at the same time it was serious and heavy. Tracing the development of food processing from pre-modern to industrial times, Døving points out that the mass-produced food of today, jeered at by the culinary elites, is tastier and more wholesome than the unique and painstakingly hand-made food romanticized by the food snobs. In fact, he says, the contemporary abundance of industrially produced food ought to be celebrated, considering the food scarcities and hard work implied in food production just a couple of generations ago. He then goes on to describe how children had to contribute to food production, how that expensive luxury called butter was distributed in open, unhygienic containers (and went off quickly), and how Dad had to work fifty hours a week while Mum and the oldest children spent the afternoons rinsing and salting herring. Døving's seemingly light-hearted defence of the hot dog 'with that exciting tomato sauce, the ketchup' thus turned out to be a bitter critique of new class distinctions and a defence of the achievements of modern food production. One of the very best of his many op-eds, the article summarized a small library's worth of recent food anthropology debate, posing as a defence of hot dogs, fish pudding and tinned mackerel.

Some years earlier, the anthropologist Hans Christian (Tian) Sørhaug carried out an applied research project on drug addicts in Oslo. One of his findings was that they could meaningfully be compared to hunters and gatherers: their storage capacity was low; they relied on immediate returns from investments; they were itinerant; group size was flexible but small; and there was a continuous, accepted tension between egotism and solidarity. Theirs was a 'harvesting economy'. This discovery was genuine and original and contributed to a deeper understanding of the plight of the city's heroin addicts. Yet

the comparison could easily be perceived as light-hearted, almost facetious. After all, the society in which drug addicts live and the forces that have created their situation are very different from the world of hunters and gatherers, and in order to appreciate the comparison you have to put aside prior assumptions about cultural differences. You had to be able to switch between a playful mode exploring options and lifeworlds, and a serious concern with the plight of the homeless heroin addicts.

Similarly, Eduardo Archetti was interviewed by the Oslo newspaper *Aftenposten* some time in the late 1990s about the prolonged graduation partying that took place among Norwegian teenagers after leaving school. A unique tradition, these celebrations known locally as *russefeiring* (Eriksen 2013) are characterized by alcohol and frivolous partying in parks and other public spaces, and last for more than two weeks, from May Day to Constitution Day, 17 May, when the celebrations reach a climax of sorts. Asked about this ritual, Archetti, himself the father of two teenage children at the time, responded that this was a powerful and meaningful experience to those young people, not least because it was the first time that many of them had participated in rituals that involved sex and intoxicating substances. It may safely be assumed that more than a few anxious parents did not find his comments reassuring. Nevertheless, the point is that Archetti did not see it as his assigned task to take the part of the worried social scientist, to tell the parents, for example, that it was important that they stayed awake and had a good chat with their children when they returned home from the day's partying, or that girls should never walk home alone in a drunken state. His job was to view the graduation celebrations as a ritual, not as a social problem.

I have briefly introduced three anthropological interventions in the public sphere, which – unlike most public anthropology – represent a complex rhetorical position, where the intended *logos* risks being drowned out by the perceived *pathos*. Although serious in intent, they all reveal a light, playful dimension as well, even involving a perceptible degree of jocularity. The anthropologists in question have all embarked on a risky journey, but one which is arguably more common among social anthropologists than in any other academic profession in the country. The risk consists in not being taken seriously because people only remember the jokes and not their context. This is a familiar problem for political satire (if it is too funny, people forget that it is serious) and for science fiction (superficial readers remember the technology but not the philosophical or political insights), and, similarly, anthropologists who expose their comparative imagination in public risk being written off as irresponsible dilettantes. Yet it is an open question whether this somewhat indeterminate aspect of public anthropology is ultimately a problem or an advantage.

## Anarchists of Western academia

The times have changed since the turn of the millennium. In the recent past, Norwegian anthropologists, the anarchists of academia, could occasionally find themselves being co-opted by the entertainment industry. More than once has more than one of us been accused of having become ‘a song and dance man’. Although the spirit of the times has changed in this century and there is less room for irresponsible play with ideas than at the height of post-modernist optimism in the 1990s, anthropologists can still, on a good day, be counted on to say weird or unexpected things. Yet today, at a time of rising Islamophobia (in Norway currently represented within the government itself), difficult refugee issues, rampant marketization and an instrumentalist view of knowledge operating in tandem with New Public Management to threaten the freedom of the universities, the lightness of the recent past, of which I have given a few examples, has almost faded from sight. Although there was a serious underlying concern below the lightness I have depicted – Døving was concerned with class, Archetti with the pain and excitement of becoming an adult, Sørhaug with the double binds and illusions of absolute freedom among drug addicts – it seemed harmless and indeed legitimate to play the part of Anansi the spider.

The fact that lightness can become unbearable was brought home to me in a dreadful and rather personal way a few years ago. Ideological polarization had already been developing for some time, fanned by the Islamic terrorist attacks on New York, London and Madrid, and social anthropologists were increasingly being associated with a naïve multiculturalism gone awry. For many years, some of us had been questioning social boundaries, asking critical questions with a bearing on the ethnic dimension of Norwegian nationalism. Then, at the height of summer 2011, a bomb exploded. The majority that anthropologists had been busy deconstructing now had to be reconstructed, and violent means were deemed necessary to this end.

As a matter of fact, ‘deconstructing the majority’ has become something of a catchword in Norway since the terrorist attack in 2011, when an unemployed right-wing extremist killed 77 people. In his manifesto and YouTube video, posted online immediately before the attack, he had quoted me in several places, the most notorious quotation (which has subsequently appeared on right-wing websites worldwide) being my view, taken from an interview on an obscure University of Oslo web page ([www.uio.no/culcom](http://www.uio.no/culcom)), that it was about time that we deconstructed the majority, since we had devoted so much attention to the minorities. Before and after the terrorist attack, this statement (from 2009) has often been denounced as hate speech against the Norwegian people, its originator labelled a traitor. In short, when I spoke about deconstructing the majority, I misjudged the readership. The notion questioned the self–other boundary and pointed to the internal diversity among ethnic

Norwegians as a possible means of building an abstract community not based on race and kinship. Since deconstruction refers to taking something apart, ethnic nationalists worried about their boundaries felt threatened. However, even in the cheerful 1990s, when Norwegian anthropologists made fun of earnest, flag-waving nationalism, there was always an underlying, serious intention. Behind the jokes, we intended to raise questions about inclusion and exclusion in ethnically complex societies, asking whether ethnic nationalism was a helpful vehicle of identity in a world which was ‘on the move’ (Bauman) and, ultimately, asking what a meaningful delineation of the word ‘we’ might be. The message, normative but founded on anthropological knowledge about cultural diversity, was that all human lives have value, that solidarity with others does not necessarily follow ethnic lines, that imagined communities are less homogeneous than is often assumed, and that a collective identity not based on cultural similarity was perfectly imaginable and could be feasible. Following the terrorist attack and its aftermath, which has seen an increasing ideological polarization around questions of identity and inclusion in Norwegian society, the lightness typical of the anthropology of the recent past may have been one of the first casualties.

This is a shame, because anthropology can be at its heaviest when it is at its lightest.

### **Avoiding pitfalls**

Since problem-solving for the government or the corporations is not an option, anthropologists have to find other ways of being relevant – or, as Tian Sørhaug once said, true to the light/heavy duality of the work of the public anthropologist – ‘we’ve always been irrelevant, but it seems that we have to find new ways of being irrelevant these days’. There has been a shift towards a more aggressive, uncharitable and hostile view of cultural diversity in dominant parts of society, and this shift requires that public anthropologists change their tactics. Since some version of social anthropology is known to the Norwegian public sphere, the problem is not so much – as it might have been in the 1960s and 70s – that people out there don’t understand what anthropologists are saying; they understand it perfectly well and dismiss it as irrelevant (in the wrong way) and potentially subversive. Accordingly, it is more difficult to produce the kinds of discussions that might be productive than it was before the recent shift towards a stronger assertion of boundaries and a more conservative view of identity.

It is beyond the scope of this short contribution to resolve these issues. Instead, I would like to conclude with a reminder that there are two pitfalls to be avoided, namely oversimplification and obscurantism. This should be the overarching aim of public anthropology – to make things as simple as possible, but not simpler (as Einstein reputedly said); to encourage imagination,

but not confusion. The knowledge regime which is currently dominant prioritizes not only instrumentally useful knowledge (useful, that is, for the powers that be, mainly in politics and the economy) but also anything that can be measured (Eriksen 2015). Since our strength lies in producing knowledge about phenomena that cannot easily be counted or measured, anthropologists have to make an effort to show the relevance of their irrelevant knowledge. Equally, if nobody understands what we are saying, that is not an indication of profundity but of poor language skills and muddled thought. As Marshall McLuhan once put it, ‘even mud can give the illusion of depth’.

We can be sand in the machinery, but we can also open up new vistas.

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