



The Field is Upon Us Anti-Fascist Anthropology as Ethical Imperative

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Today, we confront existential threats to humanity which are inextricable from neoliberal fascist processes. Anthropologists who study fascism select subjects and sites (almost exclusively outside academia) that we identify with fascism in order to do so. Traditional hierarchical, positivistic dichotomies like researcher versus subject and home versus field have long been critiqued within anthropology as racist and colonialist. Yet the notion persists that academics are somehow immune to the embodiment of fascism, and that the ivory tower is a fascism-free space. Similarly, we are told that when we apply our work to the “real world,” our “engagement” must take the form of pragmatic solidarity or policy advising—rather than revolutionary anti-fascist struggle—even when our collective survival is at stake.

To propose an antifascist anthropology (versus an anthropology of fascism) is to take an explicit political stance. In this essay, I argue that antifascist anthropology must take the form of strategic, somatic solidarity ethnography. Framing our work this way requires us to reimagine the ethnographic project—currently structured by individualistic neoliberal logics of funding and employment—as instead part of an embodied, collective, emancipatory project of anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist struggle.

For decades, anthropologists doing “engaged” or “public” work have argued that their work should be measured by the academy in terms of real-world impact, rather than impact factors. I



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agree that academics' non-peer-reviewed work should be valued. However, this is not my argument here. Quibbling over metrics for promotion and tenure (itself a neoliberal fight only benefitting a privileged minority of university instructors) is irrelevant to anti-fascist anthropology, which the academy will never validate, and will always structurally impede.

While research structured by institutional academic logics aligned with neoliberal fascism of course does not necessarily produce fascist results, an anti-fascist anthropology structured as strategic somatic solidarity ethnography can be a revolutionary tool.

Before I give examples, I'd like to define some relevant terms as I'll be using them. First of all, as Henry Giroux and others (e.g., Karlin and Giroux 2018; McKenna 2018; Pine 2019; H. Giroux 2020, 2021; Hedges 2022) including myself have argued, today's predominant form of fascism arises from neoliberal imperialism. If you scratch the surface, it's easy to trace the direct historical lineages and current ties linking the major global institutions implementing neoliberal fascism—from the CIA to NATO and the IMF—to overtly fascist movements and states. However, neoliberal fascism, which mimics many of the structural processes of twentieth century classical fascisms, does not usually explicitly share the latter's stated ideological underpinnings. In other words, with neoliberal fascism, there can be fascism without fascists, and fascists (or postfascists, following Traverso 2019) without fascism. Neoliberal fascism is structural and exists on the level of State and Empire, in contrast to ideological fascists, who are individuals and groups who openly identify as fascist and/or who subscribe to some variant of a traditional fascist worldview, but who may or may not have the explicit backing of Neoliberal Fascist Empire or State in any given context.

What do I mean by strategic? Effective strategies of struggle require clear analysis of the problem's root causes; and often involve coalition building, coordination among large numbers of people working toward the achievement of a common goal, and the use of a wide variety of tactics that can change quickly according to shifting threats and opportunities. Having identified fascist processes, anti-fascists—including anthropologists—must develop strategies for effectively fighting them. And for our strategies to truly be effective we can't design them alone, as social and cultural anthropologists are generally trained to work; nor can we merely fight fascism from within the ivory tower or amongst ourselves as a vanguardist *complement* to anti-fascist struggles outside the academy. Instead, anti-fascist anthropological approaches must be integrated into broader, collective strategies to defeat fascism.

This is where somatic solidarity comes in. I've developed the concept over the past decade (e.g., Pine 2013) as a way to think about how true solidarity can be achieved in anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist struggle without denying or reinforcing structural power differentials within the movement, or falling into the trap of neoliberal identity reductionism, which precludes broad anti-capitalist solidarity. I contrast somatic solidarity with Paul Farmer's (2005) call for pragmatic solidarity, based on his assertion that true solidarity cannot exist between people who are situated up and down steep gradients of power. Farmer's pragmatic solidarity predetermines the role of people with privileged access to economic resources to be *a priori* acquiring those resources and using them to alleviate the impacts of structural violence for those experiencing the brunt of it.

Farmers' work with Partners In Health as an example of pragmatic solidarity certainly has mitigated the suffering of many people around the world, yet his model of ethnographically-informed, collaborative philanthropy falls squarely within neoliberalism. By failing to design a strategy that addresses the actual root cause of the structural violence that Farmer articulated so poignantly in his writings—namely, imperialist racial capitalism—and by limiting “appropriate” solidarity for the privileged among us to strategies that operate fully within capitalist logics, this approach reinforces those logics, and ultimately capitalist imperialism itself (Dubal 2012).

So what do I mean by somatic solidarity? To take a simple example, climate change—a function of capitalism—harms every human being's health and well-being, and threatens our collective existence. In general, it's much more harmful to people who are highly structurally vulnerable in relation to histories of colonialism and racial capitalism. Acting in somatic solidarity against climate change, for those of us who are less structurally vulnerable, begins with recognizing how capitalism provides a common embodied threat to the health and survival of us all, and thus a somatic basis for solidarity. Then, it requires working alongside others who are more structurally vulnerable, using processes that ensure that the latter have an inversely proportional role in the development and implementation of anti-capitalist (and thus anti-fascist) strategy, so as to not replicate the hierarchies created by capitalism in our efforts to dismantle it in order to halt the acceleration of climate change. Think Standing Rock, with Native Americans taking a necessary and appropriate leadership role in the context of the struggle, but accompanied in real bodily and strategic solidarity by large numbers of non-indigenous people.

As anthropologists engaging in collective anti-fascist struggle in strategic somatic solidarity, therefore, we may be called upon to develop and use skills that we don't tend to think of when we elaborate lists of examples of engaged anthropology amongst ourselves. **Skills are useful as tactics, not strategies.** So in some cases, publishing an op-ed, doing media appearances, giving expert testimony, or any of the other sorts of actions we tend to present as appropriate “engaged” interventions for public anthropologists *can* be an important part of strategic somatic solidarity ethnography. But if we are to embrace anti-fascism as anthropologists, it is the versatility and adaptability required of us as part of our broad, embodied, ethnographic training to which we must return.

Solidarity work is *fieldwork*. Think about some of the things you've done in the “field” as part of the ethnographic process. For example, I've learned how to make pupusas, how to speak slang with a Honduran accent, how to navigate in Tegucigalpa where taxi directions are generally along the lines of “Please take me to the block where the Cuban embassy used to be, just past the big mango tree,” and so on. Such embodied skills helped me improve rapport with my Honduran friends and interlocutors from all walks of life, and have been necessary for obtaining reliable ethnographic data. The ethnographic process also produces for me a deep sense of connectedness with, love for, and commitment to the many people generous and patient enough to have put up with me during the months and years I've spent with them. As anthropologists have done ever since they first left the armchair, I long tried to reciprocate through gifts, meals, help with job

connections, giving English lessons, and so on. I made a special effort to translate my writing into Spanish and give people photographs I'd taken of them.

But after the U.S.-supported coup in 2009 that led to 12 years of extreme neoliberal fascism, culminating in the eight year narco-dictatorship of Juan Orlando Hernández, my repertoire of ethnographically-acquired embodied skills and knowledge expanded, and the appropriate forms of “giving back” suddenly and dramatically changed gears. Now, my participant-observation involved learning embodied skills like how to wash U.S.-supplied teargas out of my eyes with vinegar, while pregnant, after fleeing a Honduran national police attack during a sociology conference at which I was presenting at the San Pedro Sula campus of the UNAH (National Autonomous University of Honduras). And how to survive being stoned by police while meeting with my anthropology students at the university's flagship campus in Tegucigalpa.

As more and more of my Honduran friends were persecuted, tortured, and murdered by U.S.-trained and funded state security forces for their resistance to the coup and the neoliberal fascist regime that it installed, “giving back” transformed into working alongside my Honduran *compañeres* and others internationally toward our shared goals of toppling the regime, and of weakening U.S. empire. While I brought my full toolkit of anthropological skills to bear to the struggle (which became inseparable for me from the ethnographic process, including research design, data collection, and publication), it was my years as a union organizer and educator that prepared me far better to think and act strategically, together with my *compañeres* in Honduras and elsewhere, to oppose U.S.-supported neoliberal fascism in Honduras.

I hadn't “gone native,” but I realized with greater clarity what I'd already known intellectually: that the things that made me bodily vulnerable in the United States, like the lack of universal healthcare and workers' rights, and a debt-fueled educational system, structurally and somatically connected me with Hondurans who were suffering far more acutely from U.S.-led global neoliberal fascism. We were in the same fight. Living in Washington, DC, it was generally far more strategic, efficient, and fair to my *compañeres* in Honduras who were daily risking their lives for me to spend nearly all my waking, non-teaching hours translating and disseminating analyses written by Hondurans, or to organize protests against key Washington actors and institutions supporting and profiting from neoliberal fascism in Honduras and elsewhere. These activities became at once my ethnographic process and its primary product.

Meanwhile, at American University, where I was working as an assistant and then associate professor of anthropology, the university chaplain helped his longtime friend—the former Honduran ambassador to the United States who helped plan the coup and lobbied on the Hill to ensure Congressional support for it—to get an appointment as “Diplomat in Residence.” The same chaplain also worked tirelessly through his “human rights” NGO, which receives millions annually in corporate philanthropic donations, alongside the State Department where his wife held a high-ranking position, to legitimate the coup. The AU Center for Latin American and Latino Studies, with the help of millions in private and State Department funding, continued in subsequent years to prop up the Honduran regime and the narrative of U.S. benevolence through a wide variety of “anti-corruption” and “anti-crime” policy initiatives, conferences, and publications; and to violate

basic standards of academic integrity in support of extractive capitalism and State Department-led regime change efforts elsewhere in Latin America (Bhatt 2013).

In 2011 I was shouted at by my dean (the current provost), who was reprimanding me for having breastfed my infant child during a class on feminist anthropology, and then disciplined and gagged by my then-provost (who also made clear that “boob-gate”—as the administration was calling it—would count against me in my tenure case) for having told colleagues about the experience. Over my years at the institution I spent long hours collaborating with brilliant Palestinian colleagues, in what proved to be futile attempts to protect them a series of ferocious attacks by the Zionist university. The proportion of tenure-track professors with the privilege of semi-free speech among the faculty was decreasing just as rapidly as administrative bullshit work (Graeber 2013) was increasing; my students were racking up debts in the hundreds of thousands of dollars; subcontracted AU service workers were suffering dramatic labor abuses and union-busting campaigns; and required “diversity” trainings posited that anti-war messages constituted discrimination against student veterans and active military servicemembers on par with racist harassment of students of color.

The jackbooted riot police and soldiers attacking students, faculty, and other workers on the campuses of Honduran universities were impossible to ignore. Most students and non-academic workers, as well as many faculty, recognized the connection between the UNAH’s rapid neoliberal privatization promoted by the coup regime, and the violent repression at the hands of state security that occurred on campus every time students and workers protested it.

It’s generally harder for most academics in the Global North to see the neoliberal fascism on our university campuses. But it’s there just the same. In the university, as in larger political bodies, ideological fascist and neoliberal fascist processes often work in parallel, despite their respective proponents expressing deep differences. Thus, university administrators and academics alike convey outrage over state-imposed restrictions on certain books, and attacks on, for example, Diversity, Equality and Inclusion initiatives and Critical Race Theory. Yet the same administrators impose labor restructuring processes tying faculty promotion and tenure (where tenure still exists) to sexist and racially-biased metrics that not only discriminate against professors who bring the wrong bodies to work, but also severely constrain the ability of faculty to teach critical thinking skills. And a majority of the professoriate—incapable of recognizing ourselves as laborers even while drowning in administrative “service” and panicking over publishing so as to not perish—fail to realize that we are already conforming to a model of education that fundamentally aligns with the goals of our ostensible enemies.

If, as anthropologists, we’re going to survive neoliberal fascism, which has brought humanity to the brink of nuclear war and climate collapse, we need to first learn to recognize it in the logics and practices of our places of employment (e.g., Ballas 2023), and even where it has infiltrated our own work; and then to reframe our ethnographic practice as anti-fascist strategic somatic solidarity. We need to do this without preconceived notions of appropriate anthropological contributions, alongside others locally and around the world who are organizing much more

effectively against fascism and toward a better future than our profession has ever done. After all, who's going to care if you made it to full professor if we're all dead?

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