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The possibility of a critical anthropology after apartheid: relevance, intervention, politics

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This paper, prompted by an Anthropology Southern Africa conference around the theme 'Public Anthropology', argues that any post-apartheid anthropology that abandons criticality as a core disciplinary principle risks distilling any radical content that anthropology may have to offer South African society. Anthropological practice that, in the name of activism or application, misrecognises the necessary and complicated relationship between thought and action by privileging action, threatens to slip into a positivist position that silences broader political questions and becomes fundamentally repetitive (in Freudian terms). The authors call, on the other hand, for anthropology as 'negative work', as an intellectual practice that constantly queries the terms of its own social claims. They argue that this kind of intellectual engagement is itself a form of political action, and that without it post-apartheid anthropology could become, yet again, an uncritical handmaiden of the state or the market and their normative forms of political action.

Keywords: Anthropology, post-apartheid, criticality, anti-positivism, humanism, activism, negative work

I]n the necessary settling of accounts now taking place in SA, a radical self-critique is a necessary precondition for recasting anthropology as a tool for human liberation in the new South Africa. Without this, anthropology in South Africa will survive only as the quaint hobby of privileged post-colonials (Schepet-Hughes 1995: 415).

Introduction
South African anthropology's more or less complicit relationship with colonial and apartheid rule has significantly contributed to a post-apartheid disciplinary crisis in which nothing less than the institutional survival of the discipline is at stake. It would not be alarmist to insist that unless we take seriously the project of redefining our object of study, unless we make clear headway in rethinking our intellectual contribution in terms of an adequately post-colonial, post-apartheid project, we will indeed be worthy of the allegation of - at best - anachronism. Over the past fifteen years, there have been several calls for, and attempts at, the reformulation of anthropology after apartheid. Two major proponents of this reformulation emerged strongly in the 1990s. First, the historical coincidence of the arrival of post-apartheid and the postmodern turn in anthropology allowed South African anthropology to borrow heavily in its own contention with history from the more general disciplinary crisis of representation. Although sensitivities to representation are important in any anthropology classroom, the degree to which these usurped other concerns and pedagogic objects risked making the discipline self-referential to a fault. And, as an important commentator has argued (Trouillot 1991), the labour of representational angst often does little to disinherit the problematic terms of anthropology's history. Second, - and here is the reformulation with which this paper is concerned - there have been demands to resuscitate anthropology by making it more 'relevant', more 'practical', and by putting an anthropological repertoire to use in service of 'public good'. Practically, this has meant anything from a commitment to transforming anthropological knowledge into development policy, to the equipping of students with the kinds of market-friendly skills that could effectively deliver them jobs at the end of their anthropology degrees.

Contemporary claims to the importance of and need for a more publicly relevant anthropology in South Africa are set largely in terms of social 'application' or 'intervention', where anthropology is understood as a tool for civic action. These claims provoke, for us, questions about the terms in which ideas of 'public', 'relevance', and 'intervention' are constituted. Any simple claims to these ideas veil, we believe, broader questions about the constitution of the relationships between anthropology, the political, and the role of critical theory in post-apartheid South Africa. They also veil a key assumption about the place of the university in society. Indeed, 'public anthropology' (around which the Anthropology Southern Africa 2007 conference was themed) seems to invoke, crucially, a distinction between the university and life 'out there' in the 'real world'. The conventional claim of a 'public anthropology' seems, furthermore, to suggest an imperative of 'involvement' in life beyond the university, a 'usefulness' that would enable anthropology to transcend the university and be of 'service' to society. We feel deeply ambivalent and even entirely skeptical about anthropology.

1. This paper was conceived of and written completely cooperatively, and the order of the authors suggests no privilege: we are equally responsible for the interpretation offered. The authors would further like to thank the anonymous reviewers of Anthropology Southern Africa for critical comments, and Kees van der Waal for his patience and encouragement.

2. Trouillot (1991: 21, 36): 'In desperation, the baffled [postmodern] anthropologist burns his notes to create a moment of light, moves his face against the flame, closes his eyes, and, hands grasping the camera, takes a picture of himself.... The postmodernist mood [is] primarily Western and primarily petit bourgeois.'
rendered in terms of utility. And we offer our dissent to readings of the university that position it as necessarily antithetical to public and political engagement. Instead, without denying the strength of a call for the ‘positive’ or ‘progressive’ involvement in the social problems that confront South Africa, and indeed, the world today, we would want to assert the worth of theory – and thereby the worth of the university that position it as necessarily antithetical in involvement in the public.

Assumption about the incommensurability of the ‘real world’ and the academy is sustained, including in and via the academy (Warner 2002). If the assumption about the incommensurability of the ‘real world’ and the academy is simply allowed to pass unquestioned, then the potential for the specifically critical contribution of anthropological thought and method will be seriously undermined.

Undoubtedly the most controversial claim to a relevant post-apartheid anthropology has been a position articulated by Nancy Schepers-Hughes. Her ‘The primacy of the ethical: on the call for a militant anthropology’ (1995) evoked vigorous responses for its scathing account of South African anthropologists’ lack of political involvement in the anti-apartheid movement. Many of the critiques of Schepers-Hughes’ important text have been devoted to defending anthropologists against this accusation. In this paper, however, we wish to take up the more central claims of her argument, which are concerned with what anthropology after apartheid could become. In particular, we are concerned with how her argument constructs an ethical imperative towards political ‘intervention’ (in South Africa and elsewhere). We believe that the fact that this central claim is left largely untouched by the critics of her paper is important, because it allows for a general Weberian division between critical thought and (radical) political action to go unquestioned. Such a division between a critical project and an interventionist project is accepted, with very different ends in mind, by anthropologist Marilyn Strathern. Our question in the paper is whether this very basic presupposition, of the division between critical thought and action (conceived of in terms of politics or in terms of intervention) is tenable, and whether it should guide understandings of anthropological practice in post-apartheid South Africa.

We would argue, following Judith Butler (1994) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991), that the presupposition of the thought-action divide fails to recognise how social action depends upon social categories that orient and predispose any social actor towards particular modes of engagement with social life, particular strategies of intervention. Acting without a critical awareness of such predisposition risks entrenching existing social categories and indeed the political status quo. Moreover it is crucial to acknowledge both action and thought as bound up in the same historical terms; that even intellectual thought in the academy is constrained by larger social forces that seek to naturalize particular ways of thinking and living. For us, then, an adequate analysis of the relationships between these forces and everyday forms of thought and action, insofar as it seeks to comprehend how action is constructed and constrained, is a critical component of a political project. Without such an anthropology that takes critical theory seriously we will argue that we risk what Freud called repetition, where anthropology, and any possibility for political intervention in the apparently autonomous ‘world out there’, cannot understand the conditions of the present in their own terms and are rendered increasingly impotent to effect any substantively meaningful social change. More than a decade after apartheid, reformulations of anthropology cannot dismiss critical theorising in the service of political ideals of development and market logics of job creation, however urgent these demands might be. That these contemporary logics contain a particular (neoliberal) political content is obvious. What is perhaps less so is that without attempting to adequately come to terms with these logics through a critical anthropology which places theorising at its center, anthropology as a discipline in South Africa risks accepting a utilitarian definition of relevance that, while appearing politically free of its past, undermines its possibility for sophisticated social understanding and, ultimately, for political critique.

South African anthropology and the burden of the past

In general, anthropology’s disciplinary emergence alongside and through the colonial encounter has justifiably demanded, in conditions of postcoloniality, a degree of self-critique unparalleled in other academic disciplines. In South Africa, anthropology carries the added and unavoidable burden of having to contend with the discipline’s history of irrefutable complicity in the cultural racism of apartheid. In the most direct way, volkekunde, the anthropology practised at most Afrikaans-speaking universities in apartheid South Africa, was constituted within what Gordon reads as a discursive formation bound up with the Afrikaner nationalist project to serve the Afrikaner volk [nation] (Gordon 1988). Here anthropological practice was explicitly activist, initially seeking to constitute and transform ‘poor whites’ (viewed as discrete from other marginalised groups in South Africa) into a nation that could rule South Africa, and then in terms of knowing and maintaining the African other as divided into different ‘cultural’, bounded, entities. Indeed, volkekundiges argued for a form of national cultural relativism that formed the very grounds of the theory of apartheid: that each volk should be able to develop separately without contamination from another (Sharp 1981, Gordon 1988). Social anthropologists at English-speaking universities were opposed to volkekunde, and much of the work of social anthropology during apartheid was to distance itself from the thinly veiled racism of volkekunde. In the tradition of Radcliffe-Brown and Gluckman, social anthropologists were formally concerned to view South Africa as a single entity rather than one divided by unbridgeable formations determined by race and ethnicity. In practice, social anthropologists, politicised by apartheid, studied black South African communities in an attempt to demonstrate the brutal effects of separate development and how, through the lens of political economy, these communities were not bounded cultures but suffering and disintegrating groups only held together by the apartheid state apparatus. As political as their motivations might have been, the unintended consequences of the work of social anthropologists was to live and write in the relative comfort of white universi-
ties and study disenfranchised and marginalised black South Africans, replicating the tropes of the colonial anthropological project (Gordon and Spiegel 1993).

At the birth of the 'new' South Africa, anthropology in the country thus faced its own special type of disciplinary crisis. More than just a crisis of representation, South African anthropology was tarnished with the brush of apartheid to a much larger degree than any of the other social sciences, and had to be able to show its relevance to a new project of democratic nation-building or face extinction. In this context, it was perhaps unsurprising that many anthropologists became involved in development work, putting their fine ethnographic skills to work in poorer, historically disadvantaged, communities. This meant, to some extent, putting the theoretical critiques that metropolitan anthropology offered to one side. Moreover, as Ferguson so aptly pointed out, in his study of the development industry in Lesotho, an instrumentalism understood in terms of the urgent need to 'help' people, often forecloses in its practice the possibility of sustained political questioning of its own assumptions (Ferguson 1990). The historical urgency of inequality, violence, and poverty in the aftermath of apartheid seems, surely, to provide enough reason to get to work immediately in redressing decades of racist rule through the project of national reconstruction and development. And yet if there is no hesitation, no will to critically engage the deep logics at play in such an urgent agenda, to bring a theoretical sensibility to bear on the historical conditions of social action, then we have little recourse to understanding the historical terms of our practice. This is not to say that conversations in public anthropology, or applied anthropology have not made some headway in thinking through these concerns. It is rather to articulate a position of caution in any simple construction of post-apartheid anthropological practice. Most importantly, it is to argue the case for a committed critical theoretical project in South African anthropology's future, even as the burden of anthropology's past seems to compel South African anthropologists into privileging practical action/intervention over what is often perceived as elitist thought (and non-action).

Intervention, or not: Re-reading the 'Primacy of the Ethical'

It was perhaps, unsurprising that it was an outsider to the historical burden of anthropology in South Africa who offered the most provocative attempt to formulate the terms of the discipline after apartheid. Nancy Scheper-Hughes' 'The primacy of the ethical: the call for a militant anthropology' made a serious claim about the relationships between anthropology and politics, and offered an imperative to guide the discipline in the future. A well-established Berkeley anthropologist, Scheper-Hughes spent some months as a visiting scholar at the University of Cape Town anthropology department in 1993-4, during the South African political transition. Scheper-Hughes reflected on her time in the country and outlined a more general call for an 'actively politically committed and morally engaged anthropology' (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 415). Because of its harshly critical stance on the positionality and perceived lack of politics on the part of anthropologists in South Africa, the article provoked numerous responses from anthropologists working in or on South Africa; responses that took her to task for her failure to recognise how politically motivated many South African anthropologists were during apartheid (Kuper 1995, Ramphela 1996, Robins 1996, James 1997). What is interesting about this paper, for us, however, are not the ways that it might misrepresent individual political positions or involvements during apartheid, but rather the ways in which, despite its radical overtones, it seems to conceptually capture a certain divide between critical thought (understood as belonging to a 'comfortable' ivory tower) and social action (intervention) in the world that we think might be a presupposition guiding much anthropological practice in South Africa.

Scheper-Hughes' essay is important because it is the first serious philosophical comment on how to extricate South African anthropology from its problematic historical relationship with a particular notion of 'difference' — a mobilising idea in the development of anthropology which became severely compromised by its centrality to apartheid racial policy — so as to pave the way for appropriate post-apartheid public intervention. At the heart of the essay, Scheper-Hughes draws on Levinas to argue that cultural/social difference should be understood as a secondary or epiphenomenal feature of human experience. Prior to this difference, she argues, is an essential and primary relationship of one human being to another, a humanist identity. Although Levinas theorises the 'face' of the other as an 'opposition', as something irreducible to oneself, this opposition is not one of hostility or force, but of a 'pacific opposition', the possibility for an essential recognition and a direct relationship between two beings. 'Violence consists', he writes, 'in ignoring the face of a being, avoiding the gaze' (Levinas 1998: 19). Violence emerges, in other words, out of an inability to recognise in the face of the other, a shared human experience.

The absolute nakedness of a face, the absolute defenseless face, without covering, clothing or mask, is what opposes my power over it, my violence... The fact is the fact that a being affects us not in the indicative, but in the imperative, and is thus outside all categories (Levinas 1998: 21).

Once we have recognised this philosophical humanism at the root of human relations, Scheper-Hughes argues, we are able to understand the imperative of recognition before any concern with difference. And we are obliged, she urges, to act according to a pre-cultural ethical compulsion to support, assist and most importantly intervene into the lives of our fellow humans. In Scheper-Hughes' argument, an understanding of an essentially human ethical responsibility can provide a clear guide for the interventions of anthropologists into the lives of others. Although the precise character of this moral relationship might at times be unstable and require careful interrogation, for her, there are clear moments in which generally accepted universal standards are being violated, and, at these moments, it is irresponsible — violent, in Levinas' terms — to claim neutrality or a moral relativism (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 410).

Scheper-Hughes, then, presents an argument on the side of intervention. While the contents of this intervention might be radical, we don't need sophisticated analysis in order to grasp on whose behalf we should intervene or how domina-
tion is constructed, since these are transparently discernable from her humanist standpoint. Indeed, such an attempt to understand domination in relative, situational, terms, might well be paralysing, and end up reproducing an elitism, or in her terms 'the quaint hobby of privileged postcolonials'. For her, we can be 'companheiro [comrade] anthropologists', since there are often clear terms for doing the 'right thing'. Without intervention, she claims, we end up reinforcing the existing power relations, and instead we need to intervene with an ethic of 'responsibility and care' as engaged witnesses rather than as mere observers (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 418-419).

If Scheper-Hughes' interest is to reformulate anthropology in terms of public political engagement, Marilyn Strathern is not prepared to give up the 'quaint hobby' of an anthropology distinct from political engagement. Strathern's work is concerned with carefully showing how gender inequalities and domination are not as transparent as a humanist project would like to believe. Strathern's discussion of the relationship between feminism and anthropology in The Gender of the Gift (1988) illustrates this tension. In her reading, a feminist politics often requires acceptance of the category of 'woman' as coherent and stable — much like Scheper-Hughes' category of 'human' or indeed any politically mobilising category ('black', 'disabled', 'gay') in order to make political claims about discrimination and exploitation. Such acceptance does not allow an inquiry into how the notion of 'woman' is itself constructed, and does not allow us to question particular ideological schemes that generate and legitimate social perception itself, easing the perpetuation of the belief that women and men are naturally distinguished. Conversely, such a radical intellectual project that seeks to decipher and undermine the naturalness of perception, for her does not provide any clear guidelines towards political action, and most often, for her, leads to non-action. Strathern describes her deconstructive critical project as resistant to transformation into an agenda for activism.

For Strathern, there are serious intellectual stakes at issue for anthropology itself: should anthropologists accept that culture and/or ideological systems of meanings are merely 'superstructural', in the sense they simply arrange essentially human biological needs in different ways, or is anthropology's distinctive claim that even notions of 'biology' and 'need' can only be understood as a product of cultural/ideological system? (Strathern 1988: 28-35) From the former position it is much simpler to make claims about right and wrong, to intervene, and to measure one's usefulness. Strathern is critical of this position, terming it 'commodity-thinking', with the implication that it fetishes concepts to the detriment of understanding their conditions-of-being. In other words, for Strathern, by essentialising or ontologising different human conditions and needs for the sake of a political project, we undermine the very basis of anthropology's radical philosophical contribution: understanding different lives and cultures on their own formal terms.

Scheper-Hughes and Strathern's positions are opposite, but they do seem to share a basic premise. They corroborate a reading of criticism and activism as relatively autonomous forms of activity that can even be understood as incommensurable. Either we take power and domination to be relatively easily understood with reference to a universal humanism and practice politics, or we engage in radical theoretical critiques in the attempt to understand the different forms that might animate different levels across space and time, and dispense with aspirations to politically intervene in the world. In short, we can intervene, or not, as mutually exclusive choices. In the South African context, Strathern's position of non-intervention might be understood as a retreat to the ivory tower, and be unsustainable for a discipline that locally already has a charge of elitism and dubious political involvements haunting its steps. Despite objections to particular charges in Scheper-Hughes' article, then, it seems that many South African anthropologists would be inclined to agree with her position that anthropology cannot afford the paralysis of remaining in an ivory tower, and that a philosophical humanism underwriting perspicacious political involvement and cooperation with the new regime is the best antidote to South African anthropology's sins of the past.

**Negative work and the question of repetition**

What are the stakes of sharing this basic assumption about the relationship between anthropological criticism/theory and social action? We are more inclined to understand both as historically-positioned modes of social engagement, that disavow any simple distinction precisely because they are bound up in the same historical terms. Radical change work, we would argue, necessarily involves the diagnostic capabilities of serious critical theory, theory that allows for the kinds of distancing techniques that disavow the taking of those historical terms for granted. Scheper-Hughes' essay contains two statements that we believe could be the beginnings of pointing a way past this thought-action distinction, provided they are not folded back in her general arguments about a clear consensus on humanism. She suggests the possibility of anthropologists becoming 'negative workers' — providing labour that works against hegemonic structures of power and privilege — and combating the 'routinisation of suffering' — shaping a persistent sensitivity to the unacceptability of the conditions of life in our region. These statements contain an important potential for us in constituting a practice that could be considered at once intellectual and political: sustaining a critical intellectual practice that prioritises an antagonistic, negative relationship to systems of power and dominance. We wish to hold open the possibility of understanding critical thinking and teaching as a crucial moment in the constitution of political action. This is important to us because we take it as a starting point that intellectual activity and thought are always located politically. To use Walter Benjamin's (1934)

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3. Strathern (1988:27): 'So two radicalisms emerge: (1) a radical politics: concerned to change our own condition, we see it in the condition of others too, and seek for change whenever we encounter persons like ourselves; and (2) a radical scholarship, which questions the grounds on which identity is constructed or conditions shared. Changing the way one thinks may or may not be regarded as practical action, but academic radicalism often appears to result in otherwise conservative action or non-action. Radical politics, in turn, has to be conceptually conservative. That is, its job is to operationalize already understood concepts or categories, such as "equality" or "men."'
evocative phrase the author [is] producer', suggesting that, whether we are conscious of our location in the structures of social power and exclusion or not, this location shapes our practice as scholars. That our academy is implicated in structures of the political past and present, for us, is beyond doubt. By assuming that we can simply 'intervene' or simply 'theorize' obfuscates our positionality and complicity in the dominant categories of thought of our time, which require interrogation. The danger of the assumption of the separation between thought and action lies in the repetition of the structures of our present and our past, because we are unable to recognise them as determining structures. Only through a certain kind of 'negative work', an intense criticality that recognises the conditions that structure our positionality, can repetition be avoided.

Let us work through this argument carefully. The first step is to consider how the anthropological categories are themselves structured. In his attempt to rethink the anthropological project after the 'postmodern' turn, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991) argues that 'postmodernists', in demanding reflexivity, confine their interrogation to the internal discourses of the discipline which for him fails to adequately grasp the way in which anthropology, and intellectual thought itself, was produced out of a much larger symbolic universe that took its own colonial categories for granted and ordered the world as such. To comprehend this symbolic order, Trouillot maintains, it is not sufficient to merely understand internal disciplinary dialogues; instead we require a deciphering of the formalistic order that structures disciplines themselves. In the South African context, this position becomes a challenge not just to think about the most literal relationships between anthropological discourses and apartheid, which admittedly people have engaged, but to understand our practice and the categories we take for granted in relation to that past, as well as our relationship to the present 'consensus': how is anthropological practice implicated in the current order, and what are the politics and demands of that order? Despite stated commitments to humanism, have we really engaged what we do and who we study, and does this humanism actually help us understand the present terms of social exclusion and domination, or does it become a position in which the anthropological academy actually perpetuates new terms of exclusion?

It should be clear, by now, that we view the academy as itself implicated in dominant political frameworks. But what role do particular kinds of knowledge and institutional establishments play in constituting and changing or reproducing the political? Is volkekunde simply an isolated example of academic anthropology creating knowledge for political ends that we can discard in our newly found humanism? Or are there more formal terms in which the academy engages the political?

In writing about the rise of two traditions of intellectual thought closely tied to political movements, Judith Butler traces how Gender Studies and LGBT studies have slowly lost their connection to the politics that spawned them (Butler 1994: 5-8). Formed as responses to different waves of feminist politics in the attempt to come to terms with the need to understand both gender inequality and different forms of sexuality, they became parcelled into discrete and marketable objects, bureaucratised and passive. In consoli- dating as disciplines, as orienting themselves around particular coherent objects of study, Butler argues that their radical impetus was lost. She suggests that within the academy, through the formation of 'proper objects', a logic of appropriation and domestication takes place, which almost inevitably ends in academic inquiry moving away from grasping at the larger — dare we say 'total'? — conditions of social life. In other words, feminism, as it becomes formalised and specialised in the academy, dispenses with a more ambitious and political critique of the structuring of thought and action in society.

For Butler, the 'sad end' of this process is the 'gay republican' who, comfortable with her position in the private sphere to practice sexuality as she wishes, is able to refuse the political grounds that inspired the possibilities for her to exercise these rights at all. As we pull away from these big questions, these emergent struggles and their relationship to the larger dynamics of social ordering and control, we reduce our critical worth and the potential for the university to take seriously its responsibility to negative work. If we are not prepared to position our research, our teaching, our conversations within intellectual traditions that take seriously the political project of critical thought, then we may well stand accused of 'quaintness'. To accept or fail to engage the 'liberal humanist' consensus, for anthropology, directly contributes to the foreclosure of adequate political critique.

This brings us back to our original concern: should we be concerned with this foreclosure of politics and the concomitant undermining of critical thought? Can we just accept that, in the conditions of the new South Africa, the desperate need to educate and train South Africans emerging from the scourge of colonialism and apartheid, the academy in general and anthropology in particular, should take a kind of 'humanism' for granted, become utilitarian and interventionist? Are we willing to accept the routinisation and domestication of the politics of critical thought because of anthropology's past and the urgency and inequalities of the present?

For us, this utilitarianism, 'the foreclosure of the political', accompanied by a certain triumphant managerialism, must be resisted if we are to generate an adequate anthropology; if we are to enliven — through negative, critical work — academic publics in meaningful, politicising ways that extend way beyond 'usefulness'. As Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton argues in a recent interview in the South African press,

The current appeal to the image of the university as Ivory Tower by administrators ... is a profoundly mystifying one ... "The whole idea of the university", he explains, "was to have a space relatively free of real-life pressures so as to make it possible to engage in a kind of critique and dialogue impossible outside of it. But what results from this disengaged process is very much an engagement with society ... One almost gets to the point of saying that reading a poem with sensitivity becomes a kind of political act just because it resists the encroachment of instrumental reason (Higgins 2007: 4-5, our emphasis).

This idea of interrupting utility is especially important because of what we regard as the political and critical danger in ideas of the utilitarian of what the late Freud called repetition. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, he casts his gaze on society as a
whole, as opposed to focusing on just those with mental illness, and argues that repetition occurs where society is collectively unable to diagnose the present in its own terms, and compulsively revisits the past in order to make sense of the present (Freud 2006 [1920]: 145-151). It is only through an adequate theorising of the present, and its relationship to historical determinants, that we are able to overcome repetition, and understand precisely what the present is. In South Africa, the only way, it seems to us, to diagnose these new social forms of exclusion is a criticality that takes an analysis of 'the political' seriously, refuses to accept that thought and action are discrete spheres, and denies that utilitarian solutions are sufficient to guide the academy or understand contemporary conditions in the country. The history of anthropology in this country, after all, reveals to us that unquestioning intervention and the service on behalf of a state project has disastrous consequences. We do not wish to repeat that fate.

Coda

In our analysis of what we understand to be the conundrums that face anthropology in contemporary South Africa, we have deployed an idea of 'negative work'. For us, borrowing broadly from critical theories inspiring the scholarship of Trouillot and Butler, negative work emphasises the importance of intellectual thought freeing itself from positivism in an attempt to grasp the ordering of society as well as to foster an explicitly political attempt to overcome it. From this standpoint, all thought is intrinsically political, even if this thought does not recognise its own politics, and a certain kind of critical thought provides a fundamental political challenge to the existing order through an analysis that grasps how forms of thought and social relations that serve particular interests are veiled and come to appear as natural. A radical politics thus depends upon a sophisticated analysis that contends with the way the socio-political field is constructed and foreclosed. For example, an analysis of how particular commonly accepted understandings of humanism and tolerance end up legitimating their opposites and foreclosing truly transformative understandings of humanism or tolerance. While this position might not satisfy the call for a 'direct' engagement with politics, a politics that marches on the streets, it emerges from a tradition that takes social politics as its raison d'être, and sees the production of knowledge as an important, if not foundational, strategy in conceptualising power and its negation. The naturalisation of social terms (ie positivism), an uncritical acceptance of the tropes of contemporary life, allows a seamless interaction between the empirical and the analytical/intellectual that stymies radical forms of interruption.

It is to this 'labour of the negative' that we have looked in our paper. We have argued for care in the disciplinary reconsiderations of anthropology in the wake of apartheid, and the way that in assuming a division between thought and action, we risk repeating the very forms of the past that we believe we have overcome. In the call for a 'public anthropology', any easy argument for 'intervention', 'relevance' and 'application' risks a closure of the space for the kind of negative critical work that resists co-option into status quo, and that opens up the possibility of a truly transformative practice. We have also suggested that the academy itself is subject to an instrumental reason and to a routinisation that seeks to dampen the potential for radical imaginaries and practice. In an era in which we are called to professionalise our students for the market, and offer our skills as consultants in public and private 'development' projects, we forget the worth of critical intellectual work to the peril of our politics.

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