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FROM THE EDITOR

Visions of Government Funding for American Anthropology

Tom Boellstorff
Editor-in-Chief

“From the Editor” writings represent a rather unusual genre. Their basic purpose is simple: to introduce the contents of an issue of a journal. Some editors also use the opportunity to make broader statements about issues of the day, and this has most certainly been the policy of *American Anthropologist* under my editorship. This requires taking into account the pace of journal publication. Like the contents of any particular issue of *AA*, a “From the Editor” piece you see was written approximately six months before first appearing in print and online. Responding to current events is impractical; what is more feasible is to reflect on the long-term debates shaping those current events.

With this in mind, in this “From the Editor” missive I briefly address the value of government support for anthropology in particular and the social sciences more generally. I am moved to do so by debates that took place over the summer of 2011 over reducing or even eliminating National Science Foundation (NSF) support for social science research, in the context of the political crisis over raising the federal debt ceiling at the time. Because *AA* is the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association, it seems relevant for its editor-in-chief to ask why taxpayers might want to support anthropological research. Mindful of the fact that these musings will be dated by the time they appear in print if focused too directly on the summer of 2011 debates, I want to speak in more general terms. Although referring to testimony from that period, overall I cast my comments in a future-oriented mode of possibility, even of hope—of a vision for government support for anthropology.¹

DUSTING THE BUDGET

A fundamental barrier to reasoned debate over the question of government funding of social science research involves the Manichean terms in which such funding is typically miscast. A common rhetorical question runs along the lines of “should taxpayers support social science research?” This elides how, for instance, NSF funding for the entire “Social and Behavioral Sciences” domain in 2010 was \$255 million out of a total NSF budget of \$7 billion and a total U.S. budget of \$2,080 billion. Of that \$255 million, the amount allocated to cultural anthropology was a little under \$5 million. How would the debate change if the question posed was “Should the

government spend 0.0122596 percent of its budget (i.e., a little more than one-hundredth of one percent) on understanding culture and society?” or “Should the government spend less than three ten-thousandths of one percent of its annual budget (0.00024 percent, to be exact) to support cultural anthropology research?” We are talking about vanishingly small sums—“budget dust,” in the words of those inside the Beltway. For such a minuscule investment, we can afford to take a chance on social research whose practical outcome is not always immediately evident. If reducing government spending is ostensibly at issue, can anyone seriously claim that further trimming a line item that totals less than three ten-thousandths of one percent of the annual budget would have any discernible effect?

ROOTS OF THE “STEM”

One reason government support for anthropology is important is that we need to better understand the social contexts worldwide in which science is rooted. U.S. government officials have placed great emphasis on supporting scientific research, but one trend has been to equate such research with the “STEM” disciplines—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. In this formulation, “science” is typically limited to what are often known as the “hard” sciences, excluding anthropology and other social sciences. Now, not all anthropologists see themselves as scientists or see every research project they undertake as scientific. Support for anthropological research by bodies like the National Endowment for the Humanities is thus important and should be expanded. However, it is intellectually shortsighted to either equate science with STEM fields or to restrict the “s” of that acronym to a truncated definition of scientific inquiry.

People are the roots of the STEM—all these modes of knowledge production are human endeavors, carried out in specific times and places. We desperately need a better anthropological understanding of these contexts, as well as of the broader cultural domains in which STEM work takes place. We need to support scholars working in these areas, including junior scholars. The unsubstantiated claim that “it is clear that NSF currently incentivizes people to pursue careers in fields in which there are meager opportunities” likely misrepresents the effects of highly competitive grants

like those provided by the NSF.² If anything, such grants have the opposite effect: they help identify and support precisely those scholars most likely to succeed in academic or nonacademic positions. This is important because an improved understanding of all aspects of human being helps us better respond to the ways that scientific knowledge is produced and used in daily life, the market, and politics.

POLITICAL HORIZONS

Of course, this issue of politics is not external to the domain of research. In this regard it is frustrating to see the notion of the “political” treated as self-evident and additionally as either a feature of only some scientific research or something absent in true scientific research. All research, even the most “basic,” has implications for policy, and these implications often appear far more quickly than those involved imagined at the outset.

Furthermore, there is a stifling effect that results from certain topics becoming identified as political—or as frivolous, sensitive, or otherwise unworthy of funding. In 1997, I was fortunate enough to receive NSF support for my dissertation research; I might not have finished my dissertation, obtained an academic position, and have become editor-in-chief of *AA* without this support. My proposal for studying gay Indonesians, entitled “The Gay Archipelago,” received strong reviews and was recommended for funding. Yet as part of accepting this funding, I was asked to change the project title to “Translocal Identity in Indonesia” and omit all mention of homosexuality from the project’s abstract. I complied—not just because I needed the money and recognition but because I sympathized with hard-working NSF staff who even at that time faced inappropriate scrutiny from members of Congress.

The scrutiny was inappropriate not because Congress has no oversight role but because attempts by Congress to decide what kinds of research they like undermines the principle of peer review that should be the basis for funding and evaluating scholarly research. Thus, to claim that “Congress should cut funds wherever they are being used by NSF to advance non-science agendas” or that “Congress should beware funding for projects that slip too easily into contemporary policy debates” begs the question of how Congress is to decide what counts as “science” or “policy.”³ I have been shocked, for instance, to see how online research has replaced topics like sexuality for Congressional staff to identify as “unscientific” by definition. Things like Facebook or blogs may seem unimportant to these staff, but given their powerful and quickly changing roles in societies worldwide, spending, say, one-hundred-thousandth of one percent of the federal budget on the issue is in fact a wise investment.

GOVERNMENT FUNDING OF PUBLICATION

I would like to round out this discussion of government support for anthropology by touching briefly on the issue of publication. Even in these times of austerity, there is a

place for imagining possible futures. Setting aside for the moment any judgment about the spectrum of arrangements that currently exist for publishing anthropological research, I want to take a moment to imagine a future in which all major anthropological journals in the United States, including every journal in the AAA portfolio, are supported fully by government funding. The journals would thus be completely open access to any U.S. citizen, to all libraries, even to high schools. Citizens would have timely access to a broad range of anthropological research, including the subset of such research that had been conducted with some degree of government support. Furthermore, the journals could be globally accessible, helping to raise the profile of the United States as a force for intercultural understanding and making available the results of research so often conducted beyond the borders of the United States itself. With such government support, potential editors would no longer have to give up the hope of running a journal because they work at a university or college without the resources to support an editorial office. This would result in a greater range of scholars participating in the work of editorship. We would have resources to translate submissions in languages other than English or to translate accepted manuscripts into other languages, further supporting “American” anthropology as part of a transnational network of scholarship.

This is of course but a statement of possibility. But I certainly think it worthwhile to “run the numbers” and obtain a reliable estimate regarding what such government support for anthropological publication would cost. Then let us set that number—which I strongly suspect would be “budget dust” in the context of so many other government expenditures—into conversation as a question of priorities. Budgets are of course moral documents; crafted through compromise and debate, they represent a collective vision for the future. That vision should include government support of anthropology.

IN THIS ISSUE

This issue of *AA* opens with a brief letter, “Global American Anthropology,” from Erin J. Moran, who in September of 2011 became the fourth editorial assistant of *American Anthropologist* during my tenure—taking the place of Allison Fish, who after two years of stupendous service and the completion of her Ph.D. has moved on to full-time academic employment. I have been fortunate to have had such capable and effective editorial assistants throughout my editorship; they make the everyday work of the journal possible in the most fundamental sense, as well as contribute to the vision of *AA* itself.

Ms. Moran’s letter is followed by our second “Vital Topics Forum.” As with the first Vital Topics Forum that appeared in December of 2010, this forum features a prompt by a guest editor—in this case, *AA* Associate Editor for Public Anthropology Barbara Rose Johnston—around the topic “On Happiness.” Dr. Johnston’s prompt is followed

by short commentaries from eight eminent scholars; the forum concludes with a response from Dr. Johnston.

The eight research articles that follow the Vital Topics Forum illustrate a broad range of innovative research. As I provide an overview of these research articles, I note examples of government support received by their authors. In “Instant Noodles as an Anti-Friction Device: Making the BOP with PPP in PNG,” Deborah Gewertz, Tatsuro Fujikura, and Frederick Errington examine how instant noodles, now ubiquitous worldwide as food of the poor, act in Papua New Guinea to shape consumerist sensibilities. Gewertz first received an NSF Training Fellowship in 1971 to support her graduate training; she later won a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Fellowship that supported the research leading to the book *Sepik River Societies* (Gewertz 1983). Errington’s graduate work was supported by a National Institutes of Health (NIH) Traineeship Grant; his dissertation work was supported by a National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH) grant, resulting in the book *Karavar* (Errington 1974). Together, Gewertz and Errington have received an NEH Interpretive Research Grant and two NSF grants, all of which have supported multiple publications (incl. three books) and laid the groundwork for their article appearing in this issue of *AA*. This article is followed by “Rituals of Creativity: Tradition, Modernity, and the ‘Acoustic Unconscious’ in a U.S. Collegiate Jazz Music Program.” Here, Eitan Wilf uses an ethnographic exploration of a U.S. collegiate jazz music program to ask after the relationship between imitation and creativity in social action, particularly in the context of new technologies of digital reproduction.

The beneficial impact of sustained governmental support is also illustrated by “Cattle Cults of the Arabian Neolithic and Early Territorial Societies.” In this article, Joy McCorriston, Michael Harrower, Louise Martin, and Eric Oches discuss evidence for cattle sacrifice in southern Arabia during the Neolithic period, examining how this evidence “points toward alternate social strategies for territorial maintenance.” This research was substantially funded by an NSF Collaborative Research grant to McCorriston and Oches and an NSF dissertation research grant to Harrower. In addition, McCorriston has received five separate NSF grants in the past 15 years for her work in South Arabia alone; this kind of sustained support has been crucial to developing a research project in an area like southern Yemen, which has not been a focus of archaeological work. Government support for dissertation research also helped make possible “Architecture as Animate Landscape: Circular Shrines in the Ancient Maya Lowlands.” In this article, Eleanor Harrison-Buck (who received support from a multiyear collaborative NSF grant as well as an NSF Dissertation Improvement grant) develops a framework for considering how animism might help in the understanding of “landscape archaeologies” and historical relations between human and nonhuman entities.

Erica Weiss, in “Principle or Pathology? Adjudicating the Right to Conscience in the Israeli Military,” draws on research supported in part by a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowship to explore how Israelis seeking exemption from military service find their claims more legible to the state when framed in terms of embodied, visceral revulsion rather than political commitment. The complexities of transnational, national, and religious discourses in the Middle East are also examined in Nell Gabiam’s “When ‘Humanitarianism’ Becomes ‘Development’: The Politics of International Aid in Syria’s Palestinian Refugee Camps.” Gabiam investigates how the reconceptualization of humanitarian intervention in terms of “development” has consequences for the political narratives through which Palestinian refugees understand their place in the world, including their relationship to forms of international aid. Gabiam’s research was supported by a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship as well as a FLAS Fellowship.

In “Moral Maps and Medical Imaginaries: Clinical Tourism at Malawi’s College of Medicine,” Claire Wendland explores the uneven globalization of medical knowledge and practice between Malawian medical students and Western medical students visiting Malawi to learn about “global health.” It is fascinating to set this study in the context of another research article based on work in Africa, “A Biocultural Approach to Breastfeeding Interactions in Central Africa,” in which Hillary Fouts, Barry Hewlett, and Michael Lamb explore the entangled biological and cultural factors shaping breastfeeding practices in the context of economic inequality and cultural discourses of childhood and childcare. This research was supported by a grant from the NIH.

This issue features an amazing array of public anthropology reviews, visual anthropology reviews, and book reviews. I would like to extend a particular welcome to John M. Bishop and Naomi H. Bishop, the new visual anthropology review editors. They take the place of Marc Moskowitz, whose service to the journal and the profession was outstanding. These are all the kind of people who, frankly, make me look good, and I am greatly indebted to them for all they do.

We round out this issue with obituaries of Lewis Roberts Binford and Walter Rochs Goldschmidt. Binford’s engagement with the discipline can be seen in contributions to *AA* as far back as 1966 (Binford and Binford 1966) and as recently as 2002 (Binford 2002). Goldschmidt’s influence on anthropology is well reflected in *AA* as well, covering a 60-year period from an initial brief communication (Goldschmidt 1940) to a reflective autobiographical essay (Goldschmidt 2000) and addressing topics from the origin of clans (Goldschmidt 1948) to social class in the United States (Goldschmidt 1955). Additionally, he was editor-in-chief of *AA* from 1956 to 1961. The long and productive careers of both these scholars can stand as an inspiration to all of us as we walk the paths of our lives—in pursuit of our own

questions and in the company of our colleagues and fellow travelers.

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NOTES

1. I focus on testimony to Congress by the anthropologist Peter Wood; his full testimony can be found at http://science.house.gov/sites/republicans.science.house.gov/files/documents/hearings/060211_Wood.pdf (accessed on December 7, 2011). For fuller coverage of these debates, see the excellent posting by Ryan Anderson in the Savage Minds blog (<http://savageminds.org/2011/07/13/making-the-funding-cut-the-nsf-anthropology-and-the-value-of-social-science/>). For the sake of brevity, I do not list the various discussions and reports cited by Anderson but encourage readers to access them via the links in that blog post itself. I provide links here only to two publications of particular interest: Senator Coburn's May 2011 report on the National Science Foundation (http://coburn.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File_id=2dccf06d-65fe-4087-b58d-b43ff68987fa) and the July 2011 response to this report by the Democratic Staff of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology (<http://democrats.science.house.gov/sites/democrats.science.house.gov/files/coburn%20memo.pdf>).

2. Peter Wood's testimony to the NSF, p. 5.
3. Peter Wood's testimony to the NSF, p. 6–7.

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