BOOK REVIEW

An Anthropology of Anthropology: Is It Time to Shift Paradigms?

by Robert Borofsky

Kailua, HI: Center for a Public Anthropology, 2019, 347 pages.

With the subtitle of his 2019 book, *An Anthropology of Anthropology*, Robert Borofsky questions, "Is it time to shift paradigms?" Spoiler alert: it is. He proposes a paradigm shift away from an academic anthropology assessed by traditional scholarly productivity and toward a public anthropology measured by outcomes favorable to human well-being and survival. His book speaks directly to the field of cultural anthropology, with insights easily extended to sociology. In this, the book speaks to the aims of the Christian Sociological Association 2024 conference theme, "Taking Sociology and Anthropology to the Public Square."

Borofsky is Professor of Anthropology at Hawaii Pacific University and serves as director of the Center for a Public Anthropology, a non-profit organization devoted to advancing public anthropology. Like prophets who challenge the social context they themselves live in, Borofsky resides amid the unresolved tensions he describes. Christian professors who long for the transformation of Christian higher education, and Christians who are both loyal to and critical of the church will appreciate and learn from Borofsky's self-awareness and humility.

In the first half of the book, Borofsky scrutinizes the structure and dynamics of cultural anthropology in the academy. In its origins, anthropology inspired curious individuals toward self-education and public service involving collaboration with clients. In achieving departmental status in universities, anthropology gained stability and credibility, but at the expense of public engagement. Flurries and mountains of academic output are shaped by tenure and promotion standards that incentivize book sales and publicity and that impress academic colleagues. Whether the work meaningfully advances thought within the discipline or benefits the broader public are secondary concerns at best.

In the book's second half, he proposes a paradigmatic shift toward public anthropology. It is somewhat accurate, but simplistic, to describe the shift as away from merely "doing no harm" to actively "doing good" (Borofsky 2019:123). Do-gooding is vital but insufficient; a public anthropology must also implement structural changes that embed public benefit into professional reward structures, departmental processes, and even everyday workflows. These structural changes include four measures that could be used in assessment metrics: benefiting others, fostering alternative forms of faculty accountability, transparency, and collaborating with

others. Interestingly, Christian colleges and universities have long built some of these values into their tenure processes and departmental structures, rewarding faculty and even structuring departments for multidisciplinary collaboration and service to church and community. Their organizational mission statements connect education with serving others as a means of living out the Great Commission.

Christian higher education provides a valuable case study of public anthropology, a niche of higher education in which the values of the paradigm are enacted at a structural level, influencing all disciplines. However, these institutional values have not led to great institutional wealth or prestige, because the broader industry of higher education continues to prize more conventional assessment measures for scholarly advancement and institutional accreditation. Over the last fifty years, Christian colleges have raised standards for faculty degrees and scholarly productivity in an effort to meet the standards of the broader industry while still maintaining their religious mission. This has elevated the rigor of education at these institutions, but Borofsky might recommend that alongside these changes, the broader industry might reevaluate its definitions of scholarly excellence.

Professors may readily agree with Borofsky's critique that "anthropology is committed to intellectual progress and change. Yet it is centered in a bureaucratic structure—academic departments—that doesn't readily facilitate change" (21). They may also readily despair in considering his description of anthropology's history: abundant efforts toward public influence, many of them impactful, undertaken as exceptions to or even defiant acts against the academic bureaucratic structures that maintain professional standards around hiring and promotion by rewarding a narrow and individualized approach to productivity.

Borofsky acknowledges the slowness of structural change and encourages tenacity in working toward it. Additionally, he encourages individual professors to examine their vocations.

> There is no reason individual anthropologists need pursue their careers lockstep with the specifications and goals of the current publishing treadmill and metric assessment standards. As many are drawn to produce publication after publication of ambiguous value, there is no reason you cannot – perhaps subversively – also produce work that does indeed refine perspectives, does indeed built cumulative knowledge and, most important, does indeed benefit others. (229-230)

There may actually be good reasons why professors may be reluctant to add a workstream of meaningful research that won't be highly valued in their promotion and tenure processes: work-life balance, caregiving responsibilities, under-resourcement, and a broader social climate of fear and insecurity about the value of higher education, the discipline of anthropology, and most pointedly, one's own job. Borofsky concludes with a prophetic call that encourages

professors to identify and expand available space: "You have a choice regarding how tightly you embrace the current hegemonic-like system. It is not an all-or-nothing proposition. While adhering to it, you can also subvert it" (230).

Read in Christian perspective, this book is deeply theological and spiritual. It examines what the world needs, what has gone wrong and why, and how we can maintain and practice hope in the face of obstacles. It defines a beautiful purpose and a falling away, articulates the frustration and agony of living in a fallen world, and offers both a vision and a practice of hope. Christian sociologists could also apply this thinking to their academic discipline by looking at the actual work of sociologists, how it benefits society (or doesn't), and the professional reward structure of the discipline.

This vocational wake-up call seems timely, an invitation to analyze the hegemonic structures that shape our days and years as professors. Indeed, our choices are not all-or-nothing. We can both adhere to the standards and metrics of our institutions with sincerity and respect, and also, with patience, diligence, and God's help, insist that they change. We can celebrate the missions of our colleges and universities when we see applied research, community service, and collaborations with students and communities valued in departments, and in promotion and tenure processes. As believers, we can even press beyond this call to analysis and choice-making, applying all our spiritual practices to our academic vocations: lamenting what is broken, proclaiming a vision of what could be, repenting and refining our own attitudes and behaviors, and praying for attunement with God's will and the courage to carry it out.

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