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Think like an anthropologist and act as a contrarian

Laura Nader. *Contrarian anthropology: the unwritten rules of academia*. Berghahn Books, 2018
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Contrarian Anthropology is a collection of articles published by Laura Nader over the past 50 years that focus on the relationship between knowledge production and power. The book draws extensively on two seminal articles written by Nader on "studying up" and "controlling processes," both of which had a significant impact on several generations of anthropologists in the US and beyond. All of the articles use the approach of studying up, considering, in turn, the professions of science, law, gender studies, medicine, as well as anthropology. While believing that anthropology is "inherently contrarian" and well equipped as a discipline "caught between science and humanities" to unravel how power works, Nader also subjects anthropology itself to critical interrogation (p. 1). The collection also works as an intellectual biography, a window into Nader's lifelong achievements.

It was her original call to "study up" that allowed Nader to turn the anthropological gaze from studying the powerless to studying the powerful, from studying the poor to studying the rich, from studying the Other to studying one's own (American, globally dominant) culture. Studying up not only redirected the gaze of anthropologists, it pushed them to ask new questions that were only rarely asked in anthropology. Why are the wealthy rich, not why are the poor, poor? Why do we study what we study, the clients and the patients, but not the professionals tasked with "helping" them? Why is science conceived as being scientific – or "when is science

scientific?" (p.1). More generally, how do the questions we are taught to ask act as silencing speech and work as a form of power as control?

Likewise, the method of making cross-cultural comparisons, as Nader points out, is "particularly useful in illuminating processes that may otherwise remain invisible" (p.70). Nader uses this method to unravel how "images of women in other societies can be prejudicial to women in one's own society," and how male dogmas in different societies use positional superiority in order to control women (p. 129). The comparative perspective also sheds light on the nature of the nation state as patriarchal everywhere, as all "the nation-states of the world are … male centered and all share an ideology or construct of male domination" (p. 73). It helps unravel how positional superiority within and between "civilizations takes different forms and makes use of different mechanisms" (p. 134).

Theoretically, the concept of controlling processes, defined as "the mechanisms by which ideas take hold and become institutional in relation to power" (p.268) is used by Nader to unravel the processes of control in the daily lives of the professions. Controlling processes helped lead to a shift in anthropology from studying social control – the control over groups or relationships – to putting cultural control – control over ideas – at the heart of the analysis of how power secures consent. Since control over ideas is incremental, cultural control is more efficient as it naturalizes hegemonic ideas, leading them to seep into our everyday thinking.

Supporting this work is the committedly comparative nature of Nader's anthropological approach: this constituted a call to anthropologists to study their own societies while studying other societies as comparison, in order to help unravel how controlling processes work in different situations and contexts. As an example, Nader studies "harmony ideology" in Mexico, the USA and internationally, through NGO promotion of neoliberal discourses of the rule of law and good governance, analyzing in different settings how harmony becomes valued more than justice, with the goal of bringing an end to conflict superseding the need to address the injustices that triggered conflict in the first place. Further, Nader's work is strengthened by her ability to conceptualize power not according to only one theoretical frame – e.g., Marxian or Foucauldian or Gramscian – but to develop a dynamic conceptualization of power that incorporates all of these frameworks, as well as others, such as that developed by the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski.

Contrarian Anthropology also functions as a critical history of US anthropology, shedding light on prevailing anthropological mindsets from the 1960s on, when Nader began her career. We see here the rise of "patriotic anthropologists" in the aftermath of the Second World War, who supported the US state explicitly as an act of patriotism; and later, the emergence of "Cold War anthropologists," embedded within the state, supporting the US fight against global communism. Rather than challenge hegemonic ideas of development and modernization, many American anthropologists embraced these ideas, dividing the world into the modern and traditional, the developed and underdeveloped, importing barely implicit convictions of US and western cultural, political and economic superiority. Such models contributed to processes of control domestically as well, applied as they were to underprivileged populations in the United States itself. The US war on terror again brought back the patriotic anthropologist, contributing anthropological knowledge to state projects to combat global terrorism, now argued to be an inherent tendency of Islam. Nader, challenging such work in her article, "The Three Jihads," instead points out how Jihadism has historically been present in Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike.

If a contrarian anthropology seeks to shed light on how controlling processes operate in everyday life and how professional practices are shaped by power, now is a more important time than ever to be a contrarian anthropologist. Control of the academy includes not only the state apparatus, but multinational corporations and other elite groups as well, and corporate funding has extended from the sciences to the social sciences and humanities. This influx of private sector funding shapes the kinds of questions that anthropologists and other academics are most likely to ask. As Nader notes, "those who fund can determine what you study, and what you find, tax free" (p.230). Following Nader's example here, we might point to the rise of the entrepreneurial anthropologist, ready to sell his/her skills to big funders, to follow the latest fashions in preferred funding, and even to cease doing fieldwork, subcontracting this work out to others. We might also note the rise of the impactful anthropologist, asked to quantify the impact of his/her research on society: and all too often, being impactful entails producing knowledge in congruence with dominant ideas. Indeed, these dominant ideologies are enabled to travel across the academy and beyond through the recurrent injunction to have impact.

A contrarian anthropology, as Nader demonstrates, is a committed anthropology that seeks to unravel how professional mindsets are constructed and made hegemonic. It is a critical

anthropology that seeks to counter these mindsets, as a step towards committing to justice and not harmony, to the powerless through studying power, to the marginalized through pointing out how such mindsets allow for their continuing marginalization, and to colleagues in academia to unravel how they are themselves part of the system they sometimes criticize. Nader's own long body of work provides an example of how we can do this, methodologically and theoretically, and through being an academic whose widespread respect comes from a manifest integrity, intellectual honesty and aversion to power.

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