‘Kill Your Ancestors: The Wars of Decolonization’

American Ethnologist 50(3)

Andrew Sanchez  
Department of Social Anthropology  
University of Cambridge  
Free School Lane  
Cambridge CB2 3RF  
United Kingdom  

as2672@cam.ac.uk  
+44(0)7534594991

Abstract

This essay explains why debates about the decolonization of anthropology tend to become reactionary and confrontational, and outlines a model for why productive critique is central to intellectual progress. In a small, young discipline that values subjectivity and the questioning of ethnocentrism, the decolonial critique of tradition is more likely to be felt as a personalized war on one’s professional community and sense of self. The tendency towards factionalism in anthropology is further driven by an emphasis on charismatic and individualistic intellectual work. The essay argues that decolonization should not be conceived as a discrete generational war that can be definitively won. Rather, it is an ongoing collective transformation that expresses the logics of social progress and is consistent with the ethnographic imperative.

Key words

Ancestors, Decolonization, Generations, Progress, Transformation

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the Editor Susanna Trnka for her careful and productive comments on the work, and to five anonymous reviewers for their feedback. Drafts of the essay were read by Natalia Buitron, Alanna Cant, and Michael Degani. Comments received at the Social Anthropology Seminar of University College London were helpful to developing the piece. Finally, while I was writing the first draft of this essay, the students of my ‘Politics and Ethics of Ethnography’ course reminded me why I love being an anthropologist.
The Ancestors

I work in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. We are a small department based in a building in the city centre that has a lived-in sort of charm that I like. I have a particular affection for the Edmund Leach Room, which is where we hold many of our seminars. A space only means something to people because of the social experiences that are associated with it. For me, the ‘Leach Room’ is associated with the thrill of learning things with my colleagues and students. Most academic departments have a space like this, which is where the community comes together to express its character and values (Gell 1999:5ff).

The walls of the Leach Room are decorated with pictures of the department’s ancestors (people that died or retired while associated with Cambridge). The pictures trace a partial history of British Social Anthropology. There is a sketch of James Frazer, photographs of Edmund Leach, Meyer Fortes, Ernest Gellner, Jack Goody and many others. There are also images of retired people that still play a major role in the discipline, like Marilyn Strathern. Everybody on the wall has white skin, and most of them are men. As a mixed-race person from a working-class background, the images of the ancestors make me aware that this has historically been quite a homogenous club. The ancestors also make me feel that I ought to do things which prove that I belong on the wall alongside them. This is a form of status anxiety that erodes one’s confidence, and makes it harder to do new things one one’s own terms. But when I stop feeling anxious about my professional standing, my intellectual position is that at some point in the future I do not want my own presence on the wall to unwittingly constrain a new generation of scholars. When I become an ancestor, I want to be replaced by living people that do things better than how I did them.
I often feel that the ancestors are suffocating me. But as Freddy Foks reveals (2018), anthropology’s forebears were more politically complex characters than they are sometimes given credit for (cf Lewis 1998). The primary ancestor of British Social Anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, typifies the inconsistencies that Foks draws attention to. Famously, when Malinowski’s widow Valetta published his Trobriand field diaries in 1967, they revealed a man riddled with doubt and prejudice (Malinowski 2020 [1967]). The diaries suggest that in his most self-pitying moments Malinowski regarded himself as an enlightened man, stranded among people that were less rational and insightful than himself. However, Malinowski’s racist conjecture in the 1910s is contradicted by his engagements with anti-colonialism.

While teaching at the LSE, he supervised the anthropological research of Kenyan anti-colonial leader Jomo Kenyatta, before writing the introduction to Kenyatta’s 1938 monograph ‘Facing Mount Kenya’ (1978[1938]). Kenyatta’s study of Kikuyu life is a largely descriptive account of kinship, religion and economy. However, the book is also the first truly decolonial ethnography. Buried within Kenyatta’s bland functionalist analysis is a more radical argument (endorsed by Malinowski) that private property rights in colonial Africa privilege white Europeans and should be replaced by collective property rights based on a relationship to the land (ibid).

The problem with the ancestors then is not that they are one-dimensional villains. It is that our selective veneration of them unwittingly elides the recognition of other traditions of thought. As Patricia Uberoi, Nandini Sundar’s, and Satish Deshpande’s efforts to trace an alternative genealogy of Indian anthropology would suggest (Uberoi et al. 2007), there are substantial areas of disciplinary history that, although recognised by regional specialists, remain largely peripheral to the professional genealogy that many anthropologists acknowledge. If the normative
genealogies determine the pictures on our walls, then some people find it harder to identify with the anthropological endeavour (Hlatshwayo & Alexander 2021). Moreover, it is harder to understand the breadth and possibilities of the discipline. Writing this essay at the age of 41, and employed in what is ostensibly a leading university, I find that there are still gaps in my knowledge about how the development of anthropology was shaped by people that were either not white, or not based in Europe and North America (cf Allen & Jobson 2016). This is a consequence of how I was trained, and of the professional habits that I acquired over many years. These shortcomings are not there by design, and they are not the fault of anybody in particular. Rather, they emerged through an array of professional structures that constitute the academy, and through implicit intellectual assumptions that are all too easy to ignore. As a result, I have a less acute understanding of the world than I ought to.

It should be clear from this discussion that the disciplinary power of the ancestors concerns me. However, I doubt whether the progress of decolonization will be best served by simply removing their images from the Leach room. This argument may appear contradictory, but it is borne from a consideration of how to enable anthropology to transform in a lasting and meaningful form. Ancestor veneration has many different functions and effects (Cannell 1999:138; Fortes 1965; Houkamau & Sibley 2019; Whitehouse 2004; cf Hage 2017). For this reason, other people in my department have a different reaction to the ancestors than I do. Their engagement with a specific ancestor is less to do with broad professional genealogies, and more to do with personal attachments, and an idealised notion of anthropology as a fundamentally critical discipline. I believe that these issues are important to how the politics of decolonisation works, and why that politics lapses into unproductive war.
I came to work in Cambridge seven years before I wrote this essay, and had never been in the department building before my job interview. For that reason, most of the ancestors are remote and abstract characters that have little personal meaning for me. However, for some of my colleagues, the younger ancestors are human beings that they knew and respected; it is reasonable that they would venerate them, and it is understandable that they might see the iconoclasm of removing their images as sacrilege.\textsuperscript{ii} The ancestors are also totems for those contemporary academics who idealise the aims and successes of early ethnography, and who regard their own labour as the continuation of a proud disciplinary struggle against ethnocentrism. This example of the Cambridge ancestors reveals something broader about the fraught relationship between progress and veneration in anthropology, and the tendency for debate about such things to become warlike.

Anthropology is a small, young discipline that values subjectivity, and traditionally sees its role as unseating dominant understandings of human social life. These characteristics mean that critical engagements with the field’s history have the capacity to be felt in personalised ways, since they force one to reinterpret the mythology that contemporary ethnographers are the kin and heirs of intellectually radical ancestors. Even for iconoclasts, the distance from the ancestors can be briefer than one would assume: the person who trained me as a PhD student at the LSE, was himself trained by Edmund Leach, who had been trained by Bronislaw Malinowski. Lots of scholars are marginalised because their professional genealogy does not allow for close kinship with those particular ancestors (cf Hlatshwayo & Alexander 2021). For those that do enjoy this kinship, professional intimacy makes it more likely that a decolonial critique of a tradition will be felt as an attack on one’s community and sense of self. In anthropology, debates about decolonization feel
personal, and are therefore more likely to degenerate into war. Compounding the personalised, factional, tendencies of the discipline, is anthropology’s reification of the exemplar of the intellectual ‘giant-killer’.

Debate is a process of persuasion whose objective is to change the mind of another. However, war is a process of aggression whose objective is to subdue. Wars tend to fall into cycles of communal offence and retaliation which compel people to take aggressive stances in defence of their community (cf Sanchez 2016). This commentary is about that process of decolonisation as professional, generational war. The essay tries to explain why debates around decolonisation tend to become reactionary. I also suggest how these debates ought to proceed, and how that relates to the process of social change through time.

**Generational War**

If decolonisation is often perceived as a generational war, then a key source of disagreement concerns the extent to which people regard anthropology as a self-reflexive, cosmopolitan discipline that has *already* decolonized itself. The current decolonizing impulse might be especially provocative to scholars whose professionally formative, or highly productive, years spanned the two decades from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. Certainly this is the impression gained from a survey of contemporary academic commentary on decolonization (Hann 2022; Kuper 2023; Lewis 2021; Sahlins 2017). This is the generation that shaped, or lived through, the first iteration of decolonial anthropology, and which might see in the current moment a reactionary ignorance of the discipline’s long history of radical self-critique.
In 1975, Talal Asad’s ‘Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter’ laid the foundations for an interrogation of the discipline’s relationship to structures of imperialism (1975). This debate ultimately developed into the Crisis of Ethnographic Authority, through an unlikely convergence of South Asian Subaltern Studies in the early 1980s (Guha 1982), and the post-modern theory of Europe and North America. Both coalesced in the ‘Writing Culture’ era to shape a discipline that was sensitive to the limits of ethnographic knowledge but was nonetheless aware of the political power of ethnographic representation (Clifford and Marcus 2010 [1986]). In the 1990s, the interventions of Faye Harrison (1991), and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) took this project further, to radically rethink the production of theory and the practice of fieldwork. As a result of this work, few contemporary ethnographers conduct their work in absolute ignorance of power and coloniality. More broadly, a wider range of people conduct ethnographic research than they used to, and on a wider range of experiences. However, some structures of academic colonality have proven resistant to generational change.

For example, in October 2022 University College London hosted a meeting of British-based anthropologists of African heritage. The organisers claimed that at that time there were scarcely more permanent faculty of African descent in British Anthropology departments than there were in the 1950s.iii As far as I can tell, this claim was accurate. For a discipline that values a plurality of culturally-informed perspectives, it ought to be a widely recognised embarrassment that there are so few black anthropologists in the United Kingdom. Such racial exclusions are an outgrowth of colonial era structures of race, power, and intellectual authority. Despite the creative and impactful work of previous generations, there is still good reason to
return to decolonization, and to think about how the discipline might be reshaped in the future.

A healthy academic field is one that embraces the power of critique to generate disciplinary transformation. In that transformation, individual academics are transitory contributors to the cumulative understanding, who should anticipate that they will one day be reassessed and even surpassed. This will happen to both the decolonisers and their antagonists. My thinking on this topic emerges from a wider anthropological interest in the human urge to change the world around us. If I apply that understanding to the experience of being an anthropologist, then I find that although there is plenty to complain about in an academic career, the work is nonetheless still satisfying (Sanchez 2022). I believe that satisfying work processes are based on an ethic of transformation (Sanchez 2020). I spend my academic working life sifting through data and transforming my confusion into understanding. I then transform my patchy thoughts into clear expressions through my writing and teaching. When it goes well, this is a chance to transform the understanding of somebody else. This is a long-winded way of saying that I am trying to make an impact.

However, the impact of academic work is fleeting. As time passes, my work will be increasingly unable to speak in a contemporary register and less people will read it. Even if my publications are a fixed record of the thoughts of a real human being, I will cease to be a full character in the imaginations of my professional descendants, who may identify me as just one expression of an anachronistic academic trend. If, in several decades, there remains any transformative potential in my work, then it will be wielded by other people. At that point, I will have become an ancestor.
You will also become an ancestor. When that happens, new people will figure out that you are wrong, harmful, or offensive in ways that you could not anticipate (cf Freeman 1983; Kuper 1996). As part of this process, your work will allow your descendants to come into being, but they may justifiably critique you anyway. Perhaps this is a dispiriting thought. However, what I have outlined is a normal and productive part of human social change through time. The same transformative logic that might drive you to critically interrogate the world, will also be the same logic by which you are reappraised by others. Maurice Bloch captured the violence of generational transmission well in his analysis of Orokaiva initiation rituals:

“Biological and social reproduction depends on the creation of a chain of individuals who are born, nurtured and die and in which the young replace the old. In this system, what is left of the old and the dead, that is, principally what they have created, is taken by the young for their own purposes. Thus, ultimately, the experience of life is that the young conquer the old and consume their product” Bloch 1992: 19

The capacity of the young to reform prior forms of life and thought, is a necessary part of how human societies retain their vitality. Without such a facility, there is no capacity for progress and improvement. This is why the principle of conservatism is inimical to the human spirit. However, applied to the ongoing project to decolonise anthropology, the principle of productive generational change ought not to suggest a self-defeating logic that the young are always correct and the old are always wrong. Rather, it ought to instil a higher degree of self-reflection, and more awareness of the ideally non-warlike character of the project at hand.
The project of reimagining anthropology is not a discrete war that can be ‘won’ at any given moment, since the project will never be complete: every new generation has a responsibility to critically examine and then improve upon the work of its ancestors. To an academic audience in the early 21st century, such a claim may sound like the aspirational logics of Euro American neoliberalism, or a modernist idea of progress that brutally marches forward in one direction (Berman 2010; Guyer; Huyssen 1984; Negri 2004). However, this is not what is implied in my valuation of collective change and improvement.

Neither neoliberalism nor modernism have monopolies on an aspiration towards improvement. Rather, such progressive aspirations are integral to radical thought, since they establish conditions for critique, and underpin the resolve to transform the problematic present into a better future (Graeber 2007; Sanchez 2018a; Shah 2014). Furthermore, notions of cyclical time notwithstanding (Campbell 2022, Rivera-Cusicanqui 2023), it is problematic to regard progressive aspirations as a culture-bound pathology of neoliberal Euro-American societies. Such an assumption tends to understand non-Euro-American societies as ciphers that code all that is ‘opposite’ to the hegemony of white global power, eliding the full breadth of emic capacities for critique and reinvention. On these terms, an assumption of radical alterity is often depoliticising (cf Graeber 2015; Todd 2016).

Anthropologists do not have a right to appropriate all forms of knowledge (Smith 1999; Tuck and Yang 2012, 2014), and ethnography should entail a collaborative discussion with one’s research participants about what it is appropriate to share and interrogate (Alonso Bejarano et al 2019; Lassiter 2005; Rasch & Van Drunen 2017; Russell & Barley 2020). Nonetheless, anthropology remains a project of improving our understanding of the human condition. With this aim in mind, the
progressive aspirations of this essay strive towards collective re-examination and improvement in the academy. However, those aspirations do not assume a utopian teleology that idealises the future as a fully ‘fixable’ project. Rather than a finite generational war that can either be won or lost, the decolonisation of anthropology is an open-ended historical transformation whose outcome is unpredictable. As a collective social enterprise, decolonization is a process that should engage everybody in our professional community (Sanchez 2018b), and where one should be critically attentive to the potential for the endeavour to be performatively co-opted (Rivera-Cusicanqui 2020).

Writing in 2023, I am concerned by how many anthropologists have lost sight of the productive, collective and open-ended nature of transforming the discipline. There is a war-like imagination in anthropology which assumes that those who disagree with you are enemies that are necessarily wrong about everything. Such an oppositional mode of engagement is by no means universal. However, it is common enough to be a major feature of the field’s character. The history of anthropology is punctuated by moments of rupture and disagreement that ostensibly change the course of the discipline (Borofsky & Albert 2005; Freeman 1983; Obeyesekere 1992; Shankman 2013; Stoll 2008). Sometimes these moments expand our imagination by correcting the shortcomings of earlier styles of research (Ntarangwi 2010). However, they are also part of a wider professional complex of factionalism, underpinned by the charismatic authority of the ‘intellectual’. My assumption is that the academic social sciences have been driven by such dynamics for a long time, but that they are currently accelerating.

The social sciences are a community whose heroes are disproportionately imagined to be ‘Public Intellectuals’. The role of the public intellectual is to stand
between the academy and wider society, and to offer insightful and impactful commentary on the human condition (Gattone 2012). The public intellectual is a charismatic exemplar that underpins the academy’s entrepreneurial ambition to be a field that is listened to. Such values are embedded within misleading ideas about the role of individual ‘genius’ in collective advancement (cf Monk 1991), and are entrenched by research funding regimes that reward scholars whose work has a demonstrable ‘impact’ (Bandola-Gill & Smith 2022).

Despite its centrality to our collective hopes and imagination, the impactful public intellectual is an unattainable career model for almost all social scientists. As such, the academy is a field where the motivating principles of professional life are undercut by anxious fears of failure, and where the successes of others are believed to stem from some intangible charismatic alchemy. This trend towards accelerating personal anxiety is consistent with the employment structures of the neoliberal university (Berg et al 2016), and its creation of an academic self that should be both enterprising and publicly performative (Ball 2012). These professional characteristics reinforce a market of prestige whose currency is the recognition of doing something original; the charismatic exemplars that do so, are the primary figureheads for intellectual factions.

The factional tendencies of the discipline are accentuated in the ‘decolonizing’ moment, as some scholars feel themselves besieged by allegedly ill-informed younger generations, rather than participating in a collective cycle of reform and progress (Lewis 1998, 2021). In such a context it is all too easy to engage with academic work in a reactionary manner (based on the politics that it signals), instead of engaging with its nuanced and sometimes contradictory content (cf. Nakassis 2013). The styling of this commentary is intended to illustrate this point. As an
experiment in the politics of early 21st century academic life, the title signals an
imagined content that has the capacity to provoke an emotive yet superficial
reaction. Perhaps ‘kill your ancestors’ indicates a sincere radical appeal to entirely
erase the past from history. Or perhaps it is a spiteful conservative caricature of the
decolonisation movement. In truth, the essay is neither, which will be clear within the
first two pages. But my anticipation is that a sizeable number of people who engage
with this piece will not have read far enough into the text to know.

Looking Ahead

The term ‘decolonisation’ inspires strong emotional reactions in the academy, partly
because it compels people to consider whether their well-intentioned efforts are part
of problematic power structures. This is an uncomfortable position to be in, and it
should be anticipated that people might feel offended and harassed by the
proposition. Certainly, this has been the case since the 1990s (Overing 2006).
However, the intellectual decolonization of anthropology need not be considered a
war-like project of violence that strips things away. It is rather a project of expansion,
which seeks to consider a broader range of ideas, methodologies, and human
experiences (Sanchez 2021: 4). I understand this impulse to be integral to the
ethnographic imagination.

Historically, the intellectual and political foundation of anthropology has rested
on efforts to test assumptions about human social life, through the use comparative
cultural enquiry. In doing so, anthropology is the discipline that unsettles the most
reductive and misleading of social scientific ideas. This is the method that allowed
Marcel Mauss to unseat the ‘natural economy’ concept, by showing that gift
exchange in non-market societies could be calculating, productive, and sophisticated (2002 [1925]). It also allowed Evans-Pritchard to dismantle the idea that a belief in witchcraft was ‘irrational’ (1937). Moving beyond these canonical examples, the discipline has used the same method to destabilise understandings of ethnicity, gender, and politics. Alpa Shah describes the destabilising ethnographic method as a ‘revolutionary praxis’ (2017).

Ethnographic praxis helpfully turns its attentions inwards, to reconsider the terms of anthropological knowledge and the assumptions of earlier years. This is how a professional field progressively transforms itself in an open ended, fashion. However, such self-examination is less productive when it takes the form of a terminal battle between opposed cults of scholars, seeking to subdue one another in the pursuit of a finished and final truth. When thinking about the nature of collective intellectual progress, anthropology might draw cautious insight from the Philosophy of Science. In 1962, Thomas Kuhn’s ‘The Structure of Scientific Revolutions’ (1962) deconstructed the dominant notion of science as a unilinear march towards understanding. In that earlier model, the collective mass of scientists contribute to a steady accumulation of reliable natural facts. Contrary to this, Kuhn argued that the history of scientific advance was structured by pivotal moments that question core assumptions, and chart entirely new directions for research. Kuhn’s name for these moments will be familiar to most anthropologists. He called them ‘Paradigm Shifts’, and the idea became embedded in non-scientific understandings of intellectual change.

Anthropology has largely incorporated the paradigm shift model into the conception of its own history, as a series of generational iconoclasms, where different schools and ‘turns’ disprove one another (cf. Laidlaw & Heywood 2013).
Even post-modern anthropology, with its self-avowed aversion to universal truths, embodied this professional tendency. However, there are two important aspects to Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts that have not made their way into the anthropological imagination. First, sometimes a paradigm shift is driven by the realisation of uncertainty, as opposed to a confident march towards truth. Second, Kuhn’s model is a fundamentally cooperative vision of how critique transforms a professional field, rather than a model of opposed intellectual forces in battle with one another. Assuming that anthropology could overcome its tendency to think of change as war, then what next?

The ongoing project of decolonisation will require more self-reflection in the centres of anthropological power, not just on our engagements with history, but on the uneven distribution of contemporary intellectual authority and prestige. In particular, the process should be more attuned to the neo-colonial structures of the discipline, and its reliance on writing styles, professional practices, and arenas of validation that remain concentrated in colonial, or settler-colonial societies. This is especially apparent in the lingering dominance of British, and (to a much greater extent) US anthropology.

Major Anglo-American academic institutions, journals and publishers, have made laudable attempts to broaden their critical engagement, editorial boards and advisory bodies. Indeed, you are reading a critical commentary by a Cambridge academic, published in a high-profile US journal. The collection will include contributions from a range of global scholars, and will engage with an even wider body of ideas. In making this the subject of the 50th volume of the journal, the Editors have made a decent, and productive contribution to the field. However, this collection of work will be more widely read because it is in American Ethnologist. A collection of
similar work, published in a venue based in the Global South, would be less likely to make an impact. The absurdity of this situation should concern every reader of this volume. Despite the radical intent of contemporary American anthropology (cf Gupta & Stoolman 2022), it would be unwise to look to de-facto neo-colonial powers to provide most of the vocabulary and tools for global liberation. A decolonial future is one where such structures have been dismantled.

By the time I become an ancestor, I hope that anthropologists will not need to publish in a handful of Euro-American journals to be heard. If there is progress in the discipline, then the American and European journals should be no more widely read than those based elsewhere, and colleagues will no longer perform the mass pilgrimage to the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, seeking the validation and acculturation of the powerful. More broadly, anthropologists based in a handful of institutions like my own will not dominate review panels and high-profile publications. When this shift happens, I do not want the world to ignore the American and European anthropologists, or to erase them from history. I simply hope that we all benefit from a wider range of professional possibilities, and hear from a broader range of people. My belief is that these are the core aims of the decolonisation movement, and they are essentially productive.

I do not know whether my picture will ever be on the wall of the Edmund Leach Room, or if I will do things that make me fit to be remembered. But there are two things that I do know. The first is that it will not be up to me how I am perceived in the future, because that is not how generational progress works. The second is that I shouldn’t worry about it too much: there is more than one lineage in anthropology, and they all have something to teach us.
References

Allen, Jafari & Jobson, Ryan. 2016. ‘The Decolonizing Generation: (Race) and Theory in Anthropology since the Eighties’ *Current Anthropology* 57(2): 129–148


Rivera-Cusicanqui, Silvia. 2023. *A Ch’ixi World is Possible: Essays from a Present in Crisis*. Bloomsbury


Hann, Chris. 2022. “Colonial Encounters. From Caliban and Owain Glyndŵr to Ilham Tohti and Petra Köpping” (unpublished Abschiedsvorlesung lecture, Halle, 23rd June 2022)


Kuhn, Thomas. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago


Laidlaw, James & Heywood, Paolo. 2013. ‘One More Turn and You’re There’. *Anthropology of this Century* 7


Lewis, Herbert. 2021. ‘On the Counterfactual History of Anthropology’ communities.americananthro.org 12th June 2021


Nakassis, Constantine V. 2013. ‘Citation and Citationality.’ Signs and Society 1(1): 51-78


Overing, Joanna. 2006. ‘The Backlash to Decolonizing Intellectuality’ Anthropology and Humanism 31(1): 11–40


Uberoi, Patricia; Sundar, Nandini, & Deshpande, Satish. 2007. *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology*. Permanent Black

The room is named after the British Social Anthropologist Edmund Leach (1910-1989).
See Graves 2008 on the violence of iconoclasm.
Toyin Agbetu and Chima Michael Anyadike-Danes, Personal Communication, 19th July 2022