

# Culture, Society, and Praxis

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## Anthropology and Praxis: Theory in Action

By Stephanie Watson

*Watson's reflection stems from the challenge of conceptualizing the learning experience that originates the creation and development of this journal. The piece reflects prominently in the concept of Praxis as a generative concept that leads theory into action.*

What is Anthropology and Praxis? At the beginning of each semester a new group of upper division CSUMB students sit in a class of the same name, trying to answer that question. Some of the students have already been actively participating in this non-traditional class in past semesters while others are just beginning their adventure.

The students' answers are not only a *litmus* test measuring their awareness of key concepts. What they are actually doing is recreating and reinventing what the class will be. What they decide to do one semester does not limit what they do the next. The new students are encouraged to contribute to this dialogue, altering the direction that the class takes according to their interests.

There is ultimately the intention to define a solid academic space for reflection and action that can be legitimately justified as an effective and conducive space as the best lecture class could be. According to social science definitions, Anthropology is the study of culture. Praxis has been considered the process of making theory into history, but more specifically clarified by Gramsci as putting thought into action. The group's self-definition is only slightly different. "Anthropology and Praxis to us, is a non-hierarchical collaboration among like-minded students, using our professor as a

resource to facilitate our ideas," says one student. Another contributes the idea that, "A&P is a continuous student-based application of ideas into action that can benefit the community and society around us. The non-traditional, classroom setting enables students to first see and then grab hold of their own education. We are in the driver's seat steering our quest for knowledge. This freedom fosters true learning: that which is motivated, sought out, and assimilated by self-actualized individuals." There is little in the way of traditional deliverables; instead, the class provides the student with the ability to transform theory and method being taught elsewhere into action to produce a tangible outcome.

Anthropology and Praxis is a group of intellectuals who are collaborating, discussing, promoting and eventually advocating particular ideals. "We are the lucky few who come together with our thoughts, ideals, theories, experiences and practices and mold them with each other, creating an environment of social education." Rather than attempting to maintain control of their intellectual property, the group desires to share it with others. "Overall, Anthropology and Praxis is a work of intellectual art, promoting the foundations of theory, collaboration and action."

The use of the word intellectual

in this context is not limited to the Western intelligentsia who hoards their knowledge and intellect for themselves. Rather, A&P uses Gramsci's idea of an engaged intellectual. "We propagate the idea that all people are intellectuals, users of language and transmitters of culture from one generation to the next. In this way, we attempt to spread Freire's idea of cultural literacy to our university CSUMB, to the regional community and the online community through many venues."

A&P's purpose is twofold and includes both theory and application, although the foundation of A&P is theory. Each week at the beginning of class theory is discussed through the analysis of one member's capstone project (undergraduate thesis). The person presents their progress and their obstacles. A dialogue begins about the specific theory they are using. Some examples of theories discussed this semester are: Cultural Resistance Theory, Social Reproduction Theory, Game Theory and Anarchism. Constructive criticism and helpful suggestions are given to the presenter. Based on these discussions, readings are sometimes assigned in order to broaden the understanding of the students. These readings also present an opportunity to review pertinent theorists such as Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci, and to apply those theoretical ideals to the ever-changing role of A&P in this community.

Despite the very explicit connection with certain theoretical interpretations and paradigms, more pointedly Gramscian and Freirian approaches to Social Science and Education, the group does not have an *official* ideological base. The world today is much different from the worlds

Gramsci and even Freire lived in. We are now confronted with a world that is complexly interconnected at a scale and immediacy never before experienced in what it is known as the process of globalization. We are confronted not only as *producers*, but more often as *consumers*, and there are multiple agendas that concern our intellectual work. So instead of ascribing to a single theoretical (ideological after all) agenda, the group is tasked with exploring, engaging and reflecting from multiple perspectives and even perhaps without a simplified agenda of action. A&P aspires to transform.

This theoretical basis gives a solid foundation for praxis to occur. This praxis occurs prominently in the form of an online journal, "Culture, Society and Praxis." This journal gives us the ability to bring to life certain aspects of the CSUMB vision statement, to serve "the diverse people of California, especially the working class and historically undereducated and low-income populations... The identity of the university will be framed by substantive commitment to multilingual, multicultural, gender-equitable learning."

Whereas most academic journals have a prestige to maintain, the students of A&P choose to be unhindered by such restraints. Their goal is to make a quality academic journal that includes the voices of those who might not otherwise be heard. As a non-traditional academic journal, articles only make up a percentage of the submissions. Past submissions include art and music as well as articles written in Spanish. "We look for potential rather than a perfectly polished presentation," says one of the copy editors. "We will take a paper that is poorly organized and underdeveloped

and work with the author until it fulfills the potential that was always there. In this way, we are offering a very diverse and colorful presentation with fresh new ideas to the online community.”

Aside from the online peer reviewed journal that is produced, there are a variety of other activities supported by Anthropology and Praxis. One of the focal points to the group is social action. Says a veteran member, “this requires at least one person to take an issue and bring it out into the public. We participate in such activities as the Citizenship Project in Salinas. We help hook up Internet services and work with the youth in pursuing higher education.”

Another aspect of the group’s praxis is seen through the colloquiums presented each semester. Working hand in hand with existing University groups such as SBSA (a student club), A&P puts on colloquiums to address relevant current events. In September there was a Round Table discussion, “Re-examining the Ruins of Iraq.” This was a follow-up to last semester’s Round Table on the war itself. This semester’s panel was composed of CSUMB professors Dr. Julie Schackford Bradley, Dr. Juan Gutierrez, Dr. Keith Goshorn and a guest speaker from the local chapter of the Libertarian party.

These colloquiums are a vitalizing force to the intellectual community on campus. Many students have expressed appreciation for the outlet that the colloquiums provide. This roundtable conversation, for example, featured Keith Goshorn's paper on the ruins of Iraq, which was published in the second issue of the journal. Among some of the topics of discussion were: the new role of the US after the war, the changing position of the UN, and the changes in the daily lives of Iraqi

citizens. A&P is actively trying to present opportunities for students to voice their opinion on controversial issues.

In order to fund future colloquiums, the students of A&P began a fundraiser this semester. This fundraiser is a fair trade coffee stand located in the Social and Behavioral Sciences Building on the CSUMB campus. The coffee made is only coffee that is purchased through fair trade, and money is earned on a donation basis. This project began simply as a way to raise money for the colloquiums but soon turned into push for raising awareness about fair trade. Several members of the team started researching fair trade issues and presenting them at the coffee stand. One of the members “was thrilled with the idea of promoting fair trade coffee. Fair trade is a concept not quite known to many people, and emphasizing the “fair”-ness of the economic aspects of the coffee was what brought my attention to the issue.” Information presented at the stand includes the type of coffee that is produced through fair trade corporations, where it is grown and where it can be purchased. Different types of fair trade coffee are made for students and faculty to taste. Purchase is not required, and this only gives added incentive for students and staff to continue drinking and supporting this type of coffee in the future.

Another student comments “Anthropology and praxis, I see as one way in which I turn my thoughts and what I learn into action. This process of turning my thoughts into action produces more learning experiences and therefore enables me to make better decisions that are more in line with my values. The fair trade coffee stand is such an endeavor.

In critiquing the relationship between democratic governance and undemocratic economics, I find relationships of dependence and exploitation being internalized and reproduced, at all levels of inquiry. In an effort to transcend such relationships we set up the Fair Trade Coffee stand. This stand serves coffee, which is produced under fair trade standards, based on donations to continue. The stand has become a focal point in the SBS building to engage in discussion around fair trade and other social issues, which has helped me to refine my understanding of social and economic justice, culture, and freedom.”

In addition, the coffee stand produced unforeseen benefits. Many of the students feel that the purpose of the fundraiser completely shifted, landing itself “within the realm of practicing social action and advocating the need to consume a fair trade commodity.” Not only has the stand itself surpassed all daily goals, the student volunteers at the stand find themselves serving as an informal resource to students. Due to budget cuts, there are no longer paid

positions in the SBS department to advise students about classes. While sitting in the lobby, members of the team often informally advise students. Also, several students take advantage of this time to practice the observational methods taught in anthropology. Some of the team decided to observe students coming and going in and out of the center in the morning in order to fine-tune their data collection skills.

Through these different realms of work, the group produces subject topics for the online journal that are pertinent to the society and further define their role in the CSUMB intellectual community. In sum, the group stresses that they are not just another journal. Although, as a group they admit to being idealistic, they claim to be making a difference. “Who we are and what we do are subject to consistent change, but as a group we are taking the vagueness out of the application of social science. A&P is giving us the ability to say, I am doing, right now, what I want to do for the rest of my life.” 