

INTERVIEW WITH

DOUGLAS HOLMES

ANTHROPOLOGY FOR & IN TROUBLED TIMES

BY ELZBIETA DRAZKIEWICZ

On the occasion of the 2017 Maynooth Ethnography Winter School

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Elzbieta Drazkiewicz: You became known as a researcher of ‘despicable people’. And perhaps sadly somehow your research from the early 2000s from Italy, from United Kingdom is now becoming particularly relevant. So I wonder if you could tell us more about your research approach, your methodology and how to carry out such work on such challenging topics? How to conduct research with and among people who have a ‘despicable’ label, and if it is possible to move beyond such label?

Douglas Holmes: I think it is important to note, that I have never imagined myself to be immune from sexism, racism, from any despicable sensibility. I am aware that I am entirely capable of it. Perhaps the fact that I acknowledge that somehow slightly protects me from sliding into it, but I never imagined myself to be somehow, being immune from those things. And because in my research I always followed my curiosities hence the questions I was asking was not about confronting a particular set

of values, or confronting people that are appalling, or evil, but it was more important to me to ask compelling questions.

ED: But how do you do that on practical level, methodological level? How do you build a relationship with people who spread hate, who during interviews appropriate violence and racism, how do you avoid confrontation?

DH: Offending such men would simply be self-indulgent. I am sure I offended a lot of people in my research but that was unknowingly. In my opinion it is important to keep in mind your research question, and see if the person you talk to can help you understand this question: to listen and follow where this person is going. You also have to be aware of your own background: I am coming from Texas, and to come to Europe to accuse these people of being racist would be just madness. You know, some of my students were harbouring much more disturbing values than my subjects in Europe, so...

ED: And these students were still interested in anthropology?

DH: Yes.

ED: This is interesting, my presumption has always been that most of the students who come to anthropology seem to be already very open minded individuals, interested in diversity and cultural difference. So sometimes, teaching anthropological subjects, seems like preaching to the choir. The situation you are describing is different. Could you tell me a bit more about this challenge, how do you influence your students?

DH: You see, we in the US often do get people who are not anthropology majors, so this is a slight difference. I think they had curiosities, and their racisms were probably unacknowledged... I teach in a fairly low-key way and encourage them to think through these questions on their own terms. I never really imagined that I will reshape their thinking about world. I don't like this notion of nudge, but probably what I was trying to do is nudge them towards certain kinds of broader understandings of the world. I taught for almost twenty years in Texas. My provost once said to me, admitting that she was surprised that there'd never been a complaint about an anthropology class. No student ever said: they're talking about abortion, they're talking about this or that... and we do talk about all these things. Somehow we found a way not to make it an overt challenge to their values or insult to their values but something that could expand their values. What is non-insignificant is that the way I treated my subjects during the 1990s and '80s was consistent with my being in Texas, and there having to live with people who harboured similar notions, in fact often worse notions, but who also had an enormous humanity about them and enormous intelligence about them. Would

I have done the same kind of work from New York? Maybe not.

ED: But doing research is one thing, and then the question is what happens with this research? How do you write about it? How to write in a way which is reflecting those things you have mentioned, this respect, but is it still possible to name things as they are?

DH: Well, I am inclined to take full advantage of the fact that I'm a senior faculty member. I'm tenured. The kind of tenure I have in the US is really very rare. There are things I can do now that I wouldn't have done earlier in my career.

ED: What are these things?

DH: I think what I'd do is encourage the work of junior faculty that I encounter and try to provide a modicum of protection for them. But going back to the issues we discussed earlier, I have been always suspicious of some of the assumptions that guide anthropology from the time I was a graduate student. Some of the moral discrimination we made are kind of 'hygiene' dominated anthropology. It was a great mistake to dismiss the extreme figures that I spoke to in my research as merely racist. They were of course racists, but stopping there was a terrible mistake. If there was much more going on in that politics then we should acknowledge that and reflect upon it.

ED: So what can we do better? What should we do now?

DH: We should try to account that the phenomenon we're studying is full of complexity. This is just a basic lesson I learned as a graduate student: indicate the multiple voices and multiple ways of

thinking about any given phenomena. We should also be recognizing that even out of the very troubled figures we might get some important insights. Very unattractive figures can articulate truths that are very uncomfortable and we should listen to them.

What's going on in this post-fact, why are these people tell these lies, why are they comfortable to telling them? That's offensive to me in every conceivable way. But those questions are the questions of our time. We better figure out what's going on in these phenomena and not assume that it's entirely or even necessarily just bad faith. I think these questions are just so important.

Maybe that's the issue, that we started dealing with those issues in anthropology in the post 1968 period, when we're thinking about questions of nationalism that go beyond the local community, and we are still in that era. And now we are now confronted with the big questions of our time which just happened to be operating at eye-level for anthropologists. This is our language. People are taking our concepts and using it as identity politics. We are implicated from the beginning. If only because our language and our concepts are now part of what we call now, extremism. That has a different kind of restraint on our part in recognizing that our role is not either identifying good guys and bad guys or victims and perpetrators. We have to insist on more complicated stories.

ED: So, when people spread lies or those 'false truths', you would not encourage people, to counter them?

DH: Not in the first instance. I would first listen and try to account for the complexities of what's going on in front of

me or around us. I think the impulse to activism, to make a moral judgment forecloses inquiry. In my research I have an experience of doing interviews with unsavoury Nazis, where I wanted to punch a guy. On one of such occasions, luckily a daughter of my informant fortunately intervenes by walking through the scene. And then I realized this story is more complex than just my hatred for the guy, that what is important here are issues which often are less politically obvious. But another issue which links to that is that our reliance on theory has become suffocating at the moment.

ED: That's not very popular thing to say...

DH: Takes a lot of friends from me. That's just the dominance of the theory that's just has informed us but limits our thinking.

ED: How do you avoid theory then? Or rather, how do you not avoid theory but how do you move on and make a step further, given the peer-reviewed pressures and also the politics of anthropology?

DH: All of that is unmanageable for junior faculty. I think powerful paradigms both inform and obstruct simultaneously. We have to acknowledge that theoretical framework allows us to see and speak about certain kinds of things but it inevitably makes much of what's unfolding around us inscrutable. I start with that kind of basic philosophical thing.

It is important to see theory, but it is also important to generate insights that could not be easily reduced to theoretical insight. If we're dealing with future-oriented politics, if we're dealing with contemporary, then that is something that we have to take very seriously. I always thought that it is more important to say

something that reconstitutes our understandings, social relations to try to capture that reality. For example, I'm working on a dissertation now that started off disastrous. There's a series of chapters that just read like seminar essays. So I said to the student who was a very troubled, we had a very upsetting kind of encounter, "Okay, I want you to take all this stuff in theory and put it in footnotes so that we have an ethnographic narrative and not completely stripped of theory, but with the ethnographic narrative is what appears in the text and these scholarly arguments are part of the footnotes." And he did it. He said, "I was just really troubled by how naive the ethnography is standing on its own." I said, "That's the problem, we have to beef that up". And we did. And then we put back all the footnotes into the text in a limited way and it works better. So I want to foreground the ethnography so that we have a story that has integrity in its own terms, where you are trying to make a compelling depiction of the phenomenon rather than trying to look at something and try to relate it to every scholarly citation an anthropologist can think of.

One of my colleagues Joshua Reno, is absolutely superb with that. He's just extremely gifted at laying out the theoretical implications at every insight he has. But then I go, "Josh, your ethnography is much more important than the scholarly crap." I can forgive him because he does it so well, but otherwise it just extinguishes what good ethnography is capable of doing.

ED: I really like this idea. Do you have any other suggestions for those who are at the beginning of their anthropological journey?

DH: I think what really matters is a compelling question, the compelling

question is what gets you a grant, not whether or not the citations are correct or the method is correct. Actually, reviewers look for the important question rather, the nuance. I mean, there's some people look for the nuance of scholarly distinction... but if you're reading 100 proposals often you realise, "Oh, this looks like a great student, this looks like a very smart student, this looks like a very--" but then but then you go, "Whoa, but this person is doing something that I've never heard of before and this sounds like a potentially really productive work." Based on my reading of proposals this becomes a key. Now, you might say it's incompetent on the standpoint of scholarship, and hence that should be disqualified but I would prefer imperfections in the scholarship with a quality question.

ED: Do you think now, given dominant paradigms in anthropology, do young students have a chance to put new questions, that are ground-breaking, but also that reflecting contemporary issues?

DH: At the moment in every department in Europe there are graduate students and post-doctoral students redirecting their research towards extreme right. There is a major shift, people are desperate for a language that can help them talk about this issue. You also asked today about the ethical stance that would allow us to systematically explore these politics. There are people in Norway who are doing this, in France, in Central Europe, so I think a shift is taking place. And I think it is important in such research is to know who these people are but also to understand that their lives and their thinking has a kind of integrity of its own and try to approach them from that state, which is not to say

you don't accept what they're thinking or that they believe.

Having said that, I think this is a moment when we have resolve that we screwed up big time: that we were on the wrong side in the story and that our ideas are been assimilated fully by the extreme-right, and hence, we're implicated on that basis. We weren't sensitive to that. I think we could go into a massive critique of what anthropology has done over the last 30 years. I also think that it is potentially self-destructive and we should acknowledge that but not indulge in it and as we have other questions that should be the focus of our attention.

ED: Where do you think those discussions should take place, where there is a need for the most change? How can we move forward?

DH: I try to do that with my students: all of them are doing projects do have potential job possibilities outside of academia. I think there's a point at which we have to go back to this question, is ethnography and anthropology something that is tightly circumscribed within an academic department, that's the only place in which it can range? Or do we acknowledge that we have a role of some kind applied anthropology. We have to acknowledge that we can do anthropology in different kinds of ways. Many anthropologists play roles outside of the academia and if we begin to acknowledge that then in our teaching then we have to start preparing people for more than just academia. And frankly, there are no academic positions available, period. It's not just ludicrous, it's corrupt to train people for positions where the training can last a decade...

ED: and cost a fortune....

DH: ...and cost, but not just in financial terms but also can have those costs of putting off marriage, putting off family, procreation. If private employers did that, we would go crazy. If we believed that there was an industry that produced a 50% unemployment rate, we would think this was the height of immorality. It's a very simple word, hypocrisy and corruption. That is corrupt.

ED: How do we change that?

DH: As I said, I am now a distinguished professor (it's a name which scares me). I need students to enhance my credentials in my career. And recently I was visiting a friend, I hadn't seen in many years, and she said, "Well, how many graduate students you have?" I said, "I don't probably have enough, something about five to seven." She rounded on me and started cursing me out. She said, "You do not need any more PhDs in Anthropology, and you don't need them to ratify your mistakes." She used very, very explicit language. [laughs] She was furious at me.

Yes, I believe she was right. I was disturbed that I so casually said, "Well, I don't have enough." If I thought for five minutes, I would have realized the same thing. I need more practice to work on the problem... But the notion is still there. At least in the old days the notion was, "Yes, you got a PhD student, and you got to get that person a job when they're out of here." And today the notion is only on: we need more PhD students to keep this going...

ED: And we need more international students because they pay more, and then they will go away, and we do not have to worry about that...

DH: But this notion is called the "Ponzi Scheme" in finance. We would go ballistic if we heard of similar behaviour in finance, right? We are running drones of capitalism, exploiting, but we don't say that. That old link, that again you need to be responsible supervisor, that basic assumption that you had an obligation to help in every way possible to get your students employed, that's broken today.

ED: I really did not plan this interview to turn into yet another conversation about the precarity of academic life...

DH: But, I think that the problems we face in the contemporary moment are by no means inseparable of the questions of how we think about our careers, and our lives. Today the structure the academia is so radically conservative to everybody. The institutional structure of anthropology insists a replication of the same questions over and over again, but maybe with slight modifications. I might be not impartial in saying it, but maybe in anthropology we should actually focus much more on economic theory and try to take it seriously sometimes. That expands the scholarly reach - this is the kind of struggle that anthropology has but also any other human science. This issue is visible in the changes of publishing market: there were 2000 copies printed for my first book, second book 1500, third book, 750. No one is reading, no one cares, no one is interested. We have nothing to say in terms of the key questions of our time. You want to learn something about the world go on BBC, read the New Yorker." That sets the bar pretty high for us. The New Yorker knows how to create a very important journalism, it's accessible for the public. But are they going to sit down and read a

dissertation with obscure theoretical references?

So, the ultimate question where the real confrontation is going to be is 'who listens to us?', 'who is our audience?', 'is their audience?'. And I think that there are ultimate audiences who are not academic and that we should go to those. You know we had all those Margaret Mead awards, for those who popularise anthropology and we were still reaping the rewards of her work until maybe the last decade. But now somehow we resented it... but she gave anthropology a profile! Now, Gillian Tett, on any given week has an audience that exceeds the entire audience of all anthropology for the entire year. Right? Well, maybe I slightly exaggerated, but she gets like a million readers a week. But the slight emendation of her career and pushing it towards financial journalism, suddenly opens up an audience that is massive. So I think the problem of audience, who is our audience, is particularly important. There is something to be said about academic discipline being able to speak to people. People are now writing blogs and maybe that's the first sign of change? I think we have to be very, very true here. Is there an audience with this?

I recently visited a very large Eastern European university and I ask how many majors do you have? And they say some 20 undergraduate majors. I thought that they will be terrified but, they were not: no, it's fine, really, we are not under pressure to have more majors. They may not today but my guess is, that someday in the future, suddenly the story will change radically. We should be beginning to anticipate that administrations are no longer going to be particularly happy about having

departments where there are 20 undergraduate majors. When they have 25, 10 faculty members.

ED: Maybe there is also something in the society that makes anthropology less attractive?

DH: But shouldn't that be part of reflexive anthropology? Who are we speaking to? Why? What is the bigger sense in that? Again, that's a result of orienteering ourselves to speak through theory, as if theory was sovereign. That is an illusion. And we can look at Denmark for an example, where currently the most competitive major – even more competitive major than medicine and law – is anthropology. I think it probably is something to do with linking anthropology to design and with real questions: you know those kinds of funky artistic questions but also the real practical question of how do we design the city. It's about the embracing of a larger audience and it is also about fostering a different kind of anthropological story. I think now, we have to look – not into practices such as REF – but into how many students get jobs after anthropology. This is even more important if we want to start a new programme, so we need to justify it. We have to show there is employment. I think we have to justify anthropology and I think we can. I don't think that my generation is particularly good at talking about these questions. It is going to take new generations.