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Interview With

Arthur Kleinman

A Passion for Anthropology

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I met with professor Arthur Kleinman a day after his keynote speech at the 2016 AAI conference in Maynooth. The talk he delivered was a moving account of the politics and morality of care and suffering. But the power of his speech came not only from the insightful theoretical approach, but first and foremost from sharing a very personal experience of care-giving to his wife of 45 years, Joan, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2003, and whom Kleinman was taking care until her death in 2011. So when we met for this interview, I somehow expected a conversation which would continue in a similar vein, and would follow up on the topics raised the day before. But paradoxically, in this small Maynooth cafe, the intimate atmosphere of the yesterday's lecture hall was nowhere to be found. But even though our talk had a very different ambience, it revealed a great dedication of Professor Kleinman to anthropology. Without much of ado he directed our interview to the most current issues in academia. Echoing the conversations that are happening in most universities in the world, including Maynooth, where curriculum reform is being introduced, Professor Kleinman noted that we live in a time, when universally the whole academic world is changing: research universities are moving away from a balanced model combining science, humanities and social sciences to a model led by applied science. That worldwide emphasis on applied science raises a question about the purpose of the humanities and social sciences, and what is their role in the education of students generally, and what role do their fields have. Eventually what happens is the contraction of humanities and social sciences, which has very substantial significance for anthropology.

E. Drążkiewicz: So what is the future of Anthropology in that context?

A. Kleinman: It's pretty clear that one of the domains in anthropology and sociology that will be supported in the future is going to be that aspect, that has to do with real world problems and real world solutions. Within that domain what will also be prioritised will be, what we in the USA call area and global studies. Global studies are going to be dominant in the Universities in future, and the issues there which are going to be dominant will be global health, global environment, global trade and finance, global energy, global aspects of social and health inequality. The extent, to which anthropology and sociology will engage in these areas, will be the extent to which they will be supported. And if they don't they will have trouble surviving.

[*This assessment of the future trajectory of anthropology comes from the reflection on Kleinman's own field of study -**ED***]

The area I do, medical anthropology and the related area, the anthropology of science are very popular in the United States and in much of the world because it is one of the ways in which anthropology makes a profound contribution to the real world problems. This is reflected in the career paths of those I have trained in medical anthropology. Majority of them are teaching at the universities, but a lot of my students went outside of academia in a way they might not have in the past. So for example, if you look at my students from Harvard MD – PhD programme, where people get medical degree and PhD in social anthropology, you will see that one of them is Jim Yong Kim, the president of World Bank, the other one Paul Farmer is probably the main figure in global health. Another one, Matthew T. McGuire, holds a strong position in the Obama Administration. So this speaks to our condition and our future. And the reason I am saying this is that 50 years from now if anthropology makes no significant contribution in improving people's lives, and improving society, there will be no anthropology, in my view.

ED: So what is your suggestion, how can anthropologists engage with the world, get involved?

AK: It is to be collaborative. It is a great failure of anthropologists that they tend not to be collaborative. If you look at other disciplines, other fields, such as physics, biology, astronomy, you will see a huge number of people engaging in collaborative enterprises. You will read their articles, in their journals and you will almost never come across an article with a single author. In astronomy there might be one hundred names on the article, in physics fifty names. Economics, political science they all are becoming increasingly collaborative enterprises, where books are written by several people, articles co-authored.

ED: *[Indeed, Kleinman's own success in academia has been also possible because of multiple collaborations. Without them much of his works, many of which are co-authored would never happen. But this career path is extraordinary in anthropology. While our discipline promotes individualism, other subjects already at the undergraduate level are incorporating collaboration as a learning technique, graduate students are cooperating in laboratories, and working as parts of the larger investigating teams. Indeed, Kleinman's approach might reflect the fact that he is both anthropologist and a physician.]* So what would be his suggestion for anthropologists?

AK: Anthropologist simply will have to become more active, to become more successful. Political science is a much larger field then anthropology. They work in the field and they work collaboratively in the field. Development economists, they also work in the field, and also in collaboration. Sociologists work also in a very non-laboratory way, in a field but they collaborate.

ED: *So why is there no such thing in anthropology?*

AK: Because anthropology, in this regard, is closer to humanities where a dominant model is a sole author working on things by herself. But in literature and in history that is beginning to change and it will have to change in anthropology as well. I am of course not against you writing your own book on your field research. But in addition to that you have to do other things. Attend workshops, conferences where your work is connected to

other work. You have to engage global studies in your area in some way. When Raymond Firth won an award from the Royal Anthropological Institute in the 1980s, and we actually were awarded medals at the same time, in his speech he said that anthropology strength was in the big questions it asked. Its weaknesses were its methods. It's a wonderful method to illustrate very important ideas, to make connections with theory. But in my view, the importance of theory is not only to guide research, but also social policy. And this dimension of anthropology has not been developed substantially enough: a connection of anthropology to policy. This is what Paul Farmer, Jim Kim, Matthew Basilico and I were trying to achieve in our book "Reimagining Global Health". This book came out from a course that we teach at Harvard. What it does, it teaches global health through social theory. We take key theories of Weber, Foucault, Bourdieu, and many others and use them to develop health programme interventions. We show how central medical anthropology is, both theoretically and in terms of ethnographic research, to the implementation of those programmes. I strongly believe that the main purpose of anthropology and sociology is to improve people lives and to contribute to social reform. I think now we finally have recognised that cultural critique is crucial but insufficient. The problem with anthropology, I think, is that we haven't moved very far beyond cultural critique, and forgot that social betterment is the founding idea of social sciences. If you look at great liberal thinkers such as Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, John Locke and many others, you will see that they believed that the main purpose of systematic social inquiry was to improve society and social life. But also Max Weber, C Wright Mills, Hannah Arendt, Jane Addams, the entire Boasian school of anthropology, Herskovits and many others who were internal critics of sociology, they also believe that the most important questions are those of how to improve the society. Hannah Arendt is a great example here: she is a great political theorist but also very influential outside of academia. She said that we have more or less forgotten the social question in social science. The problem is that most of the questions are articulated either on an individual level, or on such a massive macro level that almost nothing can be done. So what is important is to reconfigure the questions as social problems and look for potential social solutions to those problems. For instance, if you think of substance abuse today, or the depression and anxiety that are affecting refuges and migrants and people who lost jobs. Those are very important issues that are bound up, and have their sources in structural violence or neoliberal political economy, or other things. And it is important to note that. But there are things that can be done. These might include the reforming of the economy, but also there things that can be done on the ground to improve the quality of lives of these people.

ED: Can you think of examples, from your own work of such engaged work, of successful contribution to the social change?

AK: My own career is organized around China studies. I was the first foreigner, the first non-Chinese who systematically studied the survivors of the horrific Chinese Cultural Revolution. I did that early on in 1978, 1980. In fact my research is probably the first research on that topic. I showed what effects the revolution had on intellectuals, on workers, on cadres and how those traumatic effects were embodied. Of course, back then the collective complains, could not be voiced openly or you went to prison. However they could be voiced in bodily terms. I showed how three bodily metaphors were in fact pointing to the fact that people were exhausted, injured and disoriented from the political

campaigns that they have gone through. I also showed that people who came out of these public campaigns with serious depression or anxiety could be treated, even though these were conditions which were unrecognised, at that time, in the Chinese society. But I think the best help that I gave is illustrated in the letter from one of the people I interviewed in the 1990s who was a leading cadre in central China, and who was terribly abused during Cultural Revolution for over a decade. He wrote me a letter out of the blue, as I lost touch with him. He wrote through his son, who is a professor in one of the universities in California and tracked me down. And in this remarkable letter, in Chinese, he said: “you know, you were the first person to listen to me, whom I was able to tell my story to, and that was enormously important to me, and it kept me going for that time”. And I think that was very important in that research, and in any research: to allow people to tell their stories. I believe this is a very important aspect of anthropology: the kind of personal narratives that it can solicit. I developed an entire technique for doctors and nurses in medicine to do that kind of thing. But also anyone who is doing research today with people who have been seriously injured in a natural or social or political catastrophe, anyone doing that can benefit from it, as their research goal should also be contributing to help that person. You can't just do research, or else it becomes voyeuristic and it can injure people. My research method is a way to get deep information about people’s experiences, but at the same time to support who they are. I believe that this is the fundamental moral basis for social research. I see that many anthropologists don’t do that, but I would say that this will be changing now because ethical review committees will not approve in future any ethnographic research, unless there is some evidence, that attention is being taken that it doesn’t hurt people, doesn’t injure them and that it does or intends to do something positive for people. This is a social care approach to research.

Of course, in applying this method, in some ways I am advantaged because I am both anthropologist and psychiatrist. But even if you look at the origins of anthropology, especially in UK where many of the members of the Torres Straits expedition were doctors or psychiatrists, you will realise that there are many dimensions of clinical medicine and anthropology that have similarities. For me, one of the most important ones is intensive involvement with people, an engagement with the problems people experience. Of course, I am not asking that anthropologists become practitioners of some sort of therapeutic art. I am simply saying that in doing social science, in doing ethnographic research, in making comparisons, in using social theory, they also have to think about what are the implications of this for social policies and programmes. We actually allowed sociologists to dominate that area. I don’t think that is going to happen anymore. Otherwise there will be no anthropology anymore.

ED: But there are many people in anthropology who are actually against political engagement, and for whom a ‘real anthropology’ is the one concerned with tribes in Amazon, rather than let’s say development or organisations, or studies of Western societies. Why do you think is that?

AK: First of all in my country, in US very few anthropologists are studying tribes in Amazon. We are studying large scale societies, we are doing anthropology of the US, or in my case of China, so just in doing that we are asking a different set of questions. But even in the case of those who do the anthropology of small scale pre-literate societies, there is that dimension of

the work, which they never write about, which is that you can't be in a society where there is a very high mortality rate, where people are sick all the time without contributing. So, the same medicine that they brought for themselves they share with others, or they drive people if they have a car, so they try to contribute in some way to the society that they are in. From an ethical standpoint, if you don't do that, you are occupying untenable ground. You are just preying on people. You are observing and preying on them. And who reads most anthropological monographs anyway? Do the people from whom the knowledge was extracted read them? Of course not! So you can say that a certain part of anthropology has been engaged in knowledge extraction. Not dissimilar to the extraction of oil, minerals, of wealth that is taking place under colonialism and neo-colonialism. My point is that it is as untenable to extract knowledge as it is to extract minerals without somehow giving back.

But let me just say that I also don't except the idea that if you engage with the world, for instance through medical anthropology, that you can't be theoretically sophisticated or write on the highest level. I would say that ethnographies in medical anthropology are some of the best ethnographies ever written, that social theory done in medical anthropology is as rigorous as any other done in any other way. I don't see medical anthropology, very frankly, as an applied field. I believe this is theoretically sophisticated field, which, in my view, represents the best of social and cultural anthropology. That is how I feel.

ED: But what would be your suggestion on engaging with elites, with policymakers, how this can be achieved?

AK: Well this can be done by beginning to write things that can be read by policy makers, and here I think we have a long way to go. But speaking from my own experience, this April I am doing something in the policy domain that I have tried to do a couple of times. In 1995 at the UN in New York I led a project for World Mental Health. That made a first report on the status of mental problems in the world, and the way they were being dealt with or not dealt with. And Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who was Secretary-General of the United Nations at that time, took it on board and it had some effects in helping to build global mental health as a field. But this April [2016] with the head of the World Bank Jim Yong Kim, and with Margaret Chan, the Head of the World Health Organisation, I am co-chairing a programme, aimed at the Finance Ministers of the world, on depression and anxiety. These are the two mental illnesses that I spent my career working on and relating them to social development, to humanitarian problems. I have always worked on implementing effective interventions to them. And the reason the Bank is interested in it, is that we have a lot of evidence to demonstrate indirect economic costs of these problems. This means in a sense that depression amongst poor people, in settings in which there are limited job opportunities and resources, there depression is the major barrier for people to be able to find work and to improve their lives. When you go to the area that is poor, of course not everyone has depression, not everybody has anxiety, but if you can assist those who have it, if you can help them in finding work and having more adequate success in life, I think this is a real accomplishment, and we are going to work on that. For the first time Finance Ministers will begin to take that seriously and began to invest in the programmes in this area. Let me just say that: it is easy to stand back and say: “oh but you are not removing all the poverty, you are not changing societies. We should wait for the revolution to happen, for when

the world changes, and when we get rid of the neo-liberal economic system, then things will get better". Voltaire said exaggeration doesn't count. Those utopian ideas are foolish, not just foolish, they are dangerous and they are held by social scientists who hold the position that I find morally untenably: they believe that they are ethically on the higher level, that they can look down from a mountain top at people struggling in the world, and treat them as if they were ants. And then they speak how the ants were organised, and how they failed. But the truth is that these researchers are part of the same universal experience that all of us have. The anthropologist is not better and no worse than other people. Anthropological knowledge is embedded in the real life experiences of people. That is the basis of my work, and this idea became central to a book that I co-edited with Veena Das, Bhrigu Singh and Michael Jackson "The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy". In this book you will see that my theories have been organised around this idea that we are all in this together, that the knowledge comes from experience and goes back to experience and informs it. My whole life I have been enormously influenced by William James, Jane Addams, and also John Dewey - American pragmatists. And they all argued that all knowledge, all social knowledge comes from experience. If you are going to understand that, this engaging with experience, you have to dive deeply into it. But you also have to bring back this knowledge, back to experience in order to help people, to improve the social world.