



Zero Anthropology

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Publicity or Marginality?

On the Question of Academic “Silencing” in Anthropology

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Abstract

What is “silencing” and is it out of place in the contemporary North American university? How do “silencing” and “public anthropology” intersect? What are the roles of academic power and academic capital? Readers are invited to explore the proposition that “silencing” is really about the political economy of value—the destruction or creation of value, as measured in terms of academic capital and academic power. In that frame, “silencing” is better explained as having to do more with political economy than with morality, ethics, or legality. Both silencing and public anthropology involve actors situated in established professions within institutional matrices of power and profit. If silencing is understood as a problem, then what might be some immediate solutions?

Keywords

silencing; public anthropology; capital; political economy; censorship; publicity; media

Academics in anthropology in Canada and the US, like academics in other social science disciplines, have heard many calls from among their ranks for the development of a public practice: a high-profile, very visible, widely respected, public communication of their discipline. It is assumed that a “public anthropology” is inherently good, or at least better than the alternative.¹ Often such calls bemoan the current absence of a publicly prominent “representative” of the discipline, like a nation lacking an ambassador to the most important capital city on earth. In addition, we are told that the task of public anthropology is to engage in *political advocacy*. Thus the new journal, *Public Anthropologist*, describes its mission as one that, “directly aims at facing conditions of violence, inequality and injustice, and exploring ways anthropology might impact processes of public awareness and policy making”. Public anthropology’s connection to the media is also made explicit: “[*Public Anthropologist*] is interested in the area in which newspapers, television, political actors, new media, activists, experts and academics continually mobilise positions that support or challenge dominant narratives”.² The journal seeks to blur the boundaries between a journal and a newspaper and blogs. The question then is how do public anthropologists confront attempts to impede their mediated political practice. In a recent issue of the above journal, the editor-in-chief states that, “academic silencing is dangerous because it limits the intellectual and political freedom of researchers....it is also dangerous because it feeds the power machinery that...normalizes domination, inequality and injustice”.³ But what is “academic silencing” and how does it matter? How should it matter?

Though little beyond dictionary definitions of “silencing” are available to us, we can take silencing to refer to those actions that result in:

- *quieting* competing or opposed views—tantamount to *censorship*;
- *concealing* opposition to one’s views by competing perspectives, by omitting to acknowledge the existence of such views;
- casting opposing/competing views into effective *oblivion* by denying them any space to be aired—*blacklisting* someone from established publications would be an example; or,

¹ Some of this essay continues themes that were initially discussed in Maximilian Forte, “Beyond Public Anthropology: Approaching Zero,” *Zero Anthropology Project*, October, 2011. This paper was initially developed as an invited response to Laura Nader, “Unraveling the Politics of Silencing,” *Public Anthropologist*, October 11, 2017. The author withdrew the essay from further consideration for publication in *Public Anthropologist*, for some of the very same reasons elaborated on in this essay, but primarily driven by an interest in publishing autonomously and free of arbitrary limits. In Nader’s kind appraisal of this author’s work on *Zero Anthropology*, she applies the label “public anthropologist” to the author; it is instead a label that is resisted on *Zero Anthropology*, and in this as in the 2011 paper, its value is questioned. However, *questioning* the ways public anthropology has been practiced and sold to academics, does not mean it is being rejected outright. The intention of this essay is not to create a polemical opposition between “scholarship” and “advocacy,” and even less so is the aim to oppose the daily routines of academics against their occasional communication with the media. What is questioned is the hierarchy of value, the prestige ordering of diverse forms of communicating one’s research—the basic act of communicating one’s research is not in question, since it is the duty of any scholar and there ought to be as few restrictions as possible on communicating research. What is indirectly examined in this essay then is how such a hierarchy of value itself creates new restrictions on communicating research. To put it simply: in selling “public anthropology,” communication through the mass media is overvalued, while teaching is undervalued. To the extent that this true, how does this constrict the basic reason for being an academic?

² See the journal’s “About” page at <http://publicanthropologist.cmi.no/about/>.

³ See Antonio De Lauri, “Introduction: Confronting Silencing,” *Public Anthropologist*, October 11, 2017.

- ⊙ to *undermine* competing/opposing views by attacking them on any of a number of levels, including by attacking the messengers.

In practice, silencing can be taken to mean even more than this, and the definition seems to be limited only by the number of examples one can find, rather than anything more substantive than quieting, concealing, and ostracizing. The general point of silencing is that those who maintain views that are deemed unpopular, controversial, beyond the pale, impermissible, and so forth, should be made to *pay a price* for airing such views, such that they either desist from further airing those views, or they lose an audience to receive their views. Thus silencing involves a range of practices that penalize, demoralize, or effectively boycott an academic. But since actual silence is not a realistic outcome (except in very extreme cases), then why does silencing happen? What does it achieve?

Very little about the intersection of public anthropology and academic silencing offers material that we can afford to take for granted. A major challenge to our ability to analyse the issues that arise is the abundance of assumptions that have acquired the weight of convention. Among the standard assumptions—which in fact are working fictions—we can include these as some of the most common:

1. universities offer room for creative thinking that is critical and independent, refreshed by free and open discourse that admits the widest possible variety of perspectives;
2. academics reside in an ivory tower;
3. conservative thinkers in academia are censored by far-left radical academics (Marxists, allegedly); or,
4. radical academics themselves are the usual victims of silencing.

These beliefs are useful to different interests at different times, but they are inaccurate accounts of reality. In place of these assumptions, we can instead begin with some basic questions:

1. Is *silencing* actually achievable in any absolute sense?
2. Are academics as much perpetrators as victims of practical silencing?
3. How does silencing affect public anthropology, and how do we judge the results?
4. What role do accusations of silencing play in furthering public anthropology?
5. Can academics in fact speak “truth to power”?
6. If silencing is a real problem, then what might be some solutions?

Instead of presenting the many personal experiences this author could offer (ranging from censorship, to plagiarism, blacklisting, mobbing, threats to employment, death threats, and what is here called “anti-recognition”), some or all of which might be classed as “silencing,” the aim is to digress from the now fashionable victimological approach and dig beneath what are commonly traded stories. Universities—institutions of power that work as products and producers of a system of inequality⁴—will inevitably produce the situation where almost every academic has some story of being “victimized,” and it’s difficult to

⁴ Neither socio-economic nor political *equality* have ever had a place in universities, which are fundamentally hierarchical institutions, and closed off from public voting. More importantly, the societies which have produced universities are marked by advanced social stratification and political hierarchy, and that is also true of universities in socialist societies. The point here is that when analyzing something, we must analyze it on the basis of what it actually is, rather than what we subjectively would like to imagine *ought* to be the case.

determine how one person's story is inherently more important and more deserving of attention than another person's story. Instead, the aim of this essay is to consider how "silencing" is really about *the political economy of value*—the destruction or creation of value, as measured in terms of *academic capital* and *academic power*.⁵ Better understanding silencing in these terms might open up some useful solutions, even as it raises new questions about the value of public anthropology itself (see fn. 1).

What this essay proposes is that "silencing" is really more about political economy, and specifically *publicity* and *marketing*, than it is about morality, ethics, or legality. Questions of what is right, good, and proper or respectable are tools for acquiring capital. In other words, silencing ultimately has more to do with capital than it does with notions of responsibility, commitment, or free speech, primarily because the silencing in question has to do with actors situated in established professions, situated within institutional matrices of power and profit. Therefore the focus on capital/value seems to be the more obvious focus for further investigation. While this essay casts serious doubt that silencing can ever be achieved in practice, in any absolute sense, it does point to various tactics and strategies for overcoming any attempted silencing.

This essay will only present an overview of some key questions about the terminology we use, namely "silencing" and "public anthropology," with a critique of both. That leads into a discussion of the routine nature, that is, *the normality of silencing in academia*. Academic practice also operates within numerous political spheres of encompassing practices of silencing. From there what is outlined is how publicity serves as a mechanism of value creation in academia, with numerous attendant pitfalls, and then some questions are raised about relationships between academics and activists. The essay concludes with a section that introduces some possible solutions to the problems identified.

As an "essay," this is not a full-blown research report. While the writing is certainly rooted within reflection on personal experience as an academic, and as one who has been writing for non-academic audiences for more than two decades, it is not based on extensive survey data, interviews with a wide-variety of actors, or archival research. All of these would be needed for a more complete study. For now, three decades of personal experience as a participant-observer (ethnographic immersion), combined with correspondence with students and colleagues, plus regular review of institutional reports and media analyses, together comprise the bulk of the data on which this essay is based. Still, this essay for now is just an attempt to think through certain problems in a manner that would normally and logically precede any rigorous research program. Observations that follow pertain to the university experience in Canada and the United States, and the author is not in a position to generalize across all academic experiences worldwide. This essay is also not a global survey of public anthropology.

⁵ "Academic capital" is constituted by the authority to produce knowledge, control access, and can be measured by such things as the number of PhD candidates one supervises, positions held in prestigious scientific societies, and the creation of relations of dependency with colleagues and students, with the result being the elevation of one's academic status and ranking. "Academic power" is closely related to academic capital, and it involves influencing the career expectations of others, limiting competitors, and enforcing hierarchy. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Trans. Peter Collier), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988, pp. 84–86, 87–89.

Working Fictions: The University, Public Anthropology, and Silencing

While they have been clearly useful for diverse actors, a number of fictitious representations of reality pose impediments to an adequate analysis of the problems considered in this essay, beyond those listed at the outset. Some of the major working fictions follow below, focusing on some of the most common and enduring ones.

The University

Analyzing the professoriate cannot amount to an analysis of the university: by themselves, professors are not *the university*. They themselves tend to acknowledge this fact when in their own universities they speak of “the university” as an entity external to them. To think otherwise would be to confuse the part with the whole. At the very least, this will complicate the usual picture of who, or what, is responsible for “silencing”.

In recent decades university administrations have taken greater power as they grew in size, acquired a larger share of the university’s capital, and with that they have taken much greater license. When universities became “corporatized” in Canada, thanks to the decisions of governments acting under the ruling neoliberal ideology, they favoured “experts” from the private sector who would help “manage” universities. Boards of governors were populated by very wealthy individuals from private corporations and foundations. The idea was to gradually decrease the amount of public funding for universities (part of the “austerity” that is popular with neoliberals), and to increase universities’ dependence on private donations. To better attract private donations, they would need to operate in a manner that increased confidence on the part of donors, who in their daily transactions were more accustomed to dealing with banks, lawyers, and real estate agencies than with scholars. University administrations spawned new positions and populated them with “experts,” some hired straight from the private sector (made more available by firms collapsing or downsizing during the 2008 financial crisis), and some imported at great expense from “prestigious” universities which were held as the models to follow (“best practices” involves imitation). In the Canadian case, corporatization thus opened the door to a new wave of Americanization as well, operating at the highest levels of university administration.

University administrators have become active as actors in their own right, often imposing themselves on faculty by formulating “strategic directions” and “signature areas” that privilege the kinds of research favoured by administrators. University executives claim to have seen the future, and have drawn up plans for developing the “next generation” university.⁶ This has eroded the autonomy of North American university departments, which are increasingly not allowed to articulate their own hiring needs apart from the wishes of university administrators. University administrations may in some cases commission their own research, which they pay for and publicly promote, and they may work with private donors to set up research institutes that are directed by non-academics selected with the blessing of donors.

⁶ Typically these experts could not see as far as even 2016, even in the years *after* 2016. Media produced by university administrations, such as alumni magazines, are often host to articles expressing shock and dismay over Brexit and/or the election of Donald Trump—but none show how these forward-looking expert managers saw any of it coming. They continue to prepare students for a “globalizing” world, even when it is increasingly de-globalizing. The immediate outcome could be the production of a generation of maladjusted cadres, trained into thinking with the wrong paradigms, and raised with false or unrealistic expectations.

What many of us now call the “neoliberal corporate university” is something that has far greater power to govern academic speech than professors have, either as individuals or as groups. Thus one prominent working fiction, that “universities are dominated by Marxist radicals” is misleading on several levels: academics do not have exclusive control of the university, and in any case Marxists as such remain a minority. What this does mean is that the concepts of “academic capital” and “academic power” have to be broadened to include private forces that have seized control of public goods (in Canada universities are all, at least nominally, public universities).

It is in the context of neoliberal corporatization that we have seen the following tendencies develop:

- ⊙ increased militarization and securitization of research;
- ⊙ work that promotes interventions of all sorts in the affairs of sovereign states;
- ⊙ research and teaching that promotes the earning potential of private corporations;
- ⊙ greater accommodation of the interests of powerful external political lobbies;
- ⊙ growing linkages to financial institutions;
- ⊙ acute attentiveness to mass mediated social and political fads; and,
- ⊙ efforts to train students as activists to support the causes of an elite that may recruit them into their ranks as technocrats.

Writing originally in 1963, University of California president Clark Kerr explained that there were “two great clichés about the university”:

“One pictures it [the university] as a radical institution, when in fact it is most conservative in its institutional conduct. The other pictures it as autonomous, a cloister, when the historical fact is that it has always responded, but seldom so quickly as today, to the desires and demands of external groups....The external view is that the university is radical; the internal reality is that it is conservative. The internal illusion is that it is a law unto itself; the external reality is that it is governed by history”.⁷

What is particularly useful about Kerr’s insight is that it takes our discussion into two distinct yet intertwined directions. One involves questioning what we mean by “public anthropology”. The second involves the conservative nature of academia and silencing as a routine part of its functioning. The problem with many discussions of “public anthropology,” as well as public intellectuals in other disciplines, is the neglect of issues of “silencing” in formulating whatever constitutes a public version of an academic discipline—but the reverse might also be true in some unexpected ways.

Public Anthropology

Whereas understandings of “silencing” might have the problem of covering too much, “public anthropology” poses the problem of containing too little. Most discussions of “public anthropology” seem to assume that standard academic practices, such as teaching, research, writing grant applications, and so forth, somehow do not fit within what is considered *public* anthropology. Yet, almost by definition, these activities only occur within the public arena—our immediate audience consists of students, not members of our

⁷ Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (5th ed.), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 71.

respective households;⁸ we *publish* for professionals many of whom are complete strangers; and, anonymous reviewers judge our *publications* and grant applications (which in Canada are submitted to state-run bodies). Anthropology was always public to begin with, and can only be public by definition. Even if one wants to take a narrow approach, the history of anthropology teaches us that before anthropology became a university discipline it was a public activity that profited from the sale of admission tickets at various world fairs, exhibitions, and so on. It was a public sales pitch, over an extended period of time, that won anthropology a place in the modern university.

It would therefore seem reasonable to suggest that what is usually called “public anthropology” is about *publicity*, and might more accurately and less elegantly be called *public relations anthropology* or a *media relations anthropology*, which essentially involves making a sales pitch. Public anthropology is basically a form of marketing—what is marketed is the discipline itself, and the messenger. This inevitably takes us to the question of creating *value*. What is often called public anthropology boils down, if we want to be candid, to an exercise in acquiring capital—capital of all kinds, but actual monetary capital is not the least of the goals, and even if it is not an explicit, consciously held aim to accumulate capital, the fact is that monetary capital is vital to making “public anthropology” happen.

That *publicity* is a central value in work promoting public anthropology should be obvious. It comes out clearly in McKenna’s complaint: “And where is anthropology’s Juan Cole? Its Stanley Aronowitz? Its Noam Chomsky? ... All are academicians. All are well known public writers”.⁹ University classrooms are not good enough: they cannot contain such ambitions. What matters here is *renown*, which can only be achieved on a mass scale. *Being political* is then tied to “public” advocacy, and we are told that: (a) we must be political, but in any case, (b) none of us can help being political, always, in everything.¹⁰ The problem with the latter point is that politics then loses meaning: if everything is political, then nothing is political. The default argument—that we are all always political, no matter what we do or say—would thus appear to defeat the very point of *calling for* advocacy, by rendering the latter redundant. If we are all political advocates to begin with, then true non-conformism would require immersing ourselves in scholarship and resisting the urge of political advocacy. The problem is with the terms of debate that have been handed to us, and they are not particularly useful.

More problematic is the conflation of *public* with *political*, as if the only way to be a good public anthropologist is to be a political advocate. There is a reason for such an argument to exist: it is to get the experts to assume the mantle of governance, as an unelected class of politicians. “The public” can thus only serve as recipients of our expert knowledge; but, they can have no role in electing or appointing us, even when they pay our salaries. This is typically the kind of asymmetry that exists in situations of wealth transfer, and it inevitably rests on anti-democratic foundations. It also provokes the kind of anti-intellectualism that academics dread—more on that point further on.

Lastly, what this essay proposes is that it would be a key mistake to think that silencing only impacts those defined as public anthropologists. Some form of silencing can and

⁸ The contrary view that holds university classrooms as “the coffin-boxes” of anthropology, was put forth by Brian McKenna, “How Anthropology Disparages Journalism,” *CounterPunch*, March 10, 2009, and was apparently seconded by Laura Nader in “Unraveling the Politics of Silencing,” 2017.

⁹ Brian McKenna, “How Anthropology Disparages Journalism,” 2009.

¹⁰ Nader (2017) argues: “It is hard to believe that in 2017 some scholars still believe that some people are political advocates while others are not. What one doesn’t say is as political as what one says—it’s a matter of speech categories. All culture is full of politics. There is no such thing as apolitical”.

usually does touch almost all academics, sometimes including those who are a discipline's very best conformists—and most if not all engage in silencing practices themselves. If public anthropologists seem to be more concerned with silencing, it is because silencing has a greater impact on either diminishing or enhancing the value of their so-called public practice, and its ties to capital accumulation are most pronounced in this case.

Silencing

We still do not have a succinct and efficient definition of what “silencing” means, though one would think that its meaning is obvious. When one begins to scratch the surface of numerous accounts of unfair treatment designed to punish academics for holding or expressing unpopular or controversial views, what quickly takes shape is a mountainous catalogue of all the different ways in which academics are silenced, silence each other, and silence themselves, as part of the established routine of academic careers. Forms of silencing might include everything that ranges from:

- a) declining papers for publication;
- b) keeping quiet at departmental meetings and rubber-stamping decisions made by seniors;
- c) selecting certain persons to invite as guest speakers while not considering others;
- d) choosing which students to admit to a graduate program;
- e) deciding on who gets research funding, if any, and how much;
- f) hiring individuals who are “the right fit for the department”;
- g) designing conferences with selective and thus exclusive themes;
- h) the formation of research networks uniting like-minded scholars;
- i) bestowing awards and honorary degrees;
- j) being shamed by the media or government officials;
- k) getting death threats for expressing views deemed to be controversial;
- l) negative tenure and promotion decisions; and,
- m) outright firing.

That is just a preliminary and incomplete list.

Typically however, a narrower and almost intuitive conception of “silencing” seems to prevail, and it tends toward dramatic cases: the denial of tenure or the firing of certain individuals for their political views, or the effective blacklisting of scholars who dare to be conveyors of what at a given moment is deemed the unpopular opinion (sometimes it is an opinion that is unpopular with ruling elites, and may actually be quite popular in the wider society—or vice versa). The list of meanings has expanded slightly with the recent re-encounter with “decolonization,” which focuses attention on the ethnic, racial, or national profile of those not hired and/or not promoted in academia. Rarely mentioned however, because it so pervasive, is the entrenched class bias of universities which routinely exclude or diminish participation by working class students thus preventing the formation of a large body of professors of working class backgrounds.¹¹ While professors in Canada and

¹¹ There are no “affirmative action” programs for the working class, no special scholarships that cater to those who are working class—making class a priority would call into question the very foundations, the structure of our society itself. On top of that, tuition levels, plus the demand that one reach a certain grade point, exclude those who may be interested in attending university but come from backgrounds that made academic achievement difficult, and in any case difficult to afford. Disinterest in higher education is also instilled in working class students, many of whom may not even complete secondary education, as is the case in many

the US end up joining the top 10% of income earners, it would be interesting to learn how many of them come from families in the top 10% if not the top 1%.¹² Ultimately underlying the chief complaint of “precarious” academics is that they are locked out of the ranks of the top 10%, but instead they experience the proletarianization of academic work. “Class solidarity” is not exactly a priority in such a context; it’s about getting as far as possible away from the ranks of the working class. If one can cement the case that one’s precarity is the product of racial and/or sexual discrimination—rather than class discrimination, which is off limits—then one might develop the perfect recipe for promotion to the 10%.

My aim is not to propose even as little as a working definition of silencing, only to point out that we do not have one, and that most discussion proceeds with an understanding of silencing that is not usually questioned. Only in extreme cases is there an immediate and incontrovertible grasp of the meaning of silencing, as when rectors, professors or students speak out against an authoritarian government and as a result are imprisoned, tortured, exiled, or executed. In the latter case—death—the silence is permanent and absolute. In such cases the silenced are not available to write about silencing. Otherwise, silencing can involve pressure that results in altering one’s writing or speech, or not expressing particular views or using specific words, plus a wide range of possible penalties for speech, or being deliberately ignored and sidelined.

What might be normally called silencing (ranging from censorship to ostracism), is more likely something that involves acts of penalization, displacement, marginalization, a restriction of rewards, or what is discussed below as “anti-recognition”. Rarely, however, is actual *silence* the result. The closest thing to silence is virtual silence, the enforcement of assumed conformity, faking total unanimity, creating a pretence of hegemony. Otherwise the irony is that those presumably silenced can become even louder, and be heard by greater numbers of people—precisely because someone tried to “silence” them. In other words, when it comes to silencing we have an unwieldy term that includes too much, requires too much labour to explain (as we see here), and does little to facilitate analysis.

As considerable as the definitional problems surrounding “silencing” may be, there are certain propositions that we might entertain as hypotheses. One of the hypotheses here is that silencing, whatever we may understand it to mean, is a normal part of the academic routine. As with secrecy, silences are imposed by specialists in the development and maintenance of paradigms that become established within the context of large, bureaucratic institutions in a highly stratified society that contains numerous latent and

parts of Canada. The author of this essay had the special privilege of teaching at a rare working-class university, in the Canadian Maritime periphery, and discovered an institution that in many ways departed from the “norm” of what is considered a university. Woefully under-funded, and ignored by elite donors, it continues to struggle to merely exist.

¹² The top 10% is a significant phenomenon, according to Thomas Frank. Rather than focus on “the One Percent,” Frank asks that we look critically at “the Ten Percent,” which includes “the people at the apex of the country’s hierarchy of professional status,” those who believe themselves “qualified” to govern. Professionals value credentialed expertise, and tend to listen mostly just to each other. They monopolize the power to prescribe and diagnose, and thus routinely “silence” perspectives that challenge their own. Such professionals usually show high contempt for those of lesser rank, including precarious professionals (such as part-time professors). In “prioritizing the views of experts over those of the public,” as Frank argues professionals do, silencing is part of their standard operating procedure. See Thomas Frank, *Listen, Liberal: Or, What Ever Happened to the Party of the People?* New York: Metropolitan Books, 2016, pp. 23, 24. Also see an in-depth analysis of the top 9.9% in Matthew Stewart, “The 9.9 Percent Is the New American Aristocracy,” *The Atlantic*, June 2018.

explicit conflicts. It would have been a surprise if academic institutions were alone able to somehow defy this reality.

Thus far we are faced with four distinct problems:

1. not always knowing what silencing means and thus what it may involve;
2. not being clear as to whether silencing is in fact *normal* academic practice;
3. determining if we are, or should be, really concerned about silencing or whether we should instead be concerned about the factors and forces which make silencing not only possible, but so widespread and multifaceted as to appear normal, even inescapable; and,
4. clarifying our terminology: is it silencing if it fails to produce actual silence, or is it something else?

On the last point, silencing is indisputable in the cases of academics that have been detained, or disappeared/executed. In most other cases however, the targets of organized outrage may continue speaking out, sometimes becoming even louder and developing bigger followings, resulting in an accumulation of academic capital. The recent case of Jordan Peterson, a psychologist at the University of Toronto, comes readily to mind—after being targeted by protesters who either interrupted or blocked his speaking engagements on different university campuses, rather than being silenced he became a *cause célèbre*, leveraging his experience and capitalizing on it, becoming a bestselling author, amassing a huge public following like no anthropologist has ever achieved, and in the process even raking in a fortune. Peterson's case, it is contended here, is not rare in linking silencing with capital accumulation—rather, it is the norm that silencing is tied to the value-making process (one way or another).

The Routine Normality of Silencing

If we want to be frank, we would have to admit that academics can practice silencing as often (if not more often) as they are the victims of silencing. Exclusions that aim to approximate a silencing of competing perspectives are part of the normal practice of “inclusion,” as when we decide what to include as assigned readings in our course syllabi or as sources listed in works we cite for articles and books. University statements about “inclusivity,” “diversity,” and “equity” almost always *exclude* social class and intellectual diversity. In each of these cases we make decisions about what to exclude, and the exclusions can be as simple as “not relevant to this course,” or they can be personal or politically charged decisions.

In the author's experience what really stands out is not actual “silencing” understood in a literal or absolute sense, but something that can be called *anti-recognition*. Anti-recognition is practiced as much by “precarious” academics in part-time positions, as it is by junior and senior scholars—only the latter truly excel at it. Anti-recognition involves the active denial of another person's authorship or influence, by those seeking to either dismiss or appropriate that person's work in order to control it, if not to transform it into something else so that it becomes effectively neutralized. This appropriation can range from acts as simple as copying the symbols and names of the person's websites, to claiming a vested interest in the same topics at the centre of that person's research and writing (but without the track record to warrant the claim). Anti-recognition that results in effectively erasing another's presence is practiced both by academics, and by administrators at academic institutions, and even publishers outside of the university's walls. When practiced by academics, anti-recognition can range from outright plagiarism, to lack of attribution (“as

someone once said,” that “someone” being *you* specifically, left unnamed), to claiming a false history of ownership (“as I have been saying for quite some time now” only they said nothing at all on the topic until you came along), to wrongly claiming primacy and/or exclusivity (“I was the first” or “I am the only one”).

Otherwise, acts that either aim to suppress competing or opposed perspectives, or that result in their sidelining, are a built-in part of the academic routine. It need not be the case that the silencing is done consciously and deliberately, since much is taken for granted about what constitutes “acceptable” or “respectable” work. Likewise, academics routinely sort out others according to those whose approaches they reject versus those whose work they judge to be “excellent” or “brilliant”. American anthropologists in their published journal articles routinely mention “the excellent work” of whichever scholar they favour—the work is in no way “excellent,” the term meaning either too much or too little, but it is a way to first and foremost *create value* and build academic capital. While most academics will profess support for diversity of opinions and freedom of expression, the everyday reality is something quite different.

Spheres of Silence

If academics alone held a monopoly on acts that served to suppress competing and opposed views, that would be something to celebrate, because it would suggest that the problem had been socially contained. The reality, as usual, is more complicated. When it comes to relationships between public anthropologists and people outside of their disciplines, or outside of the university, what we find are at least three competing forces that seek to silence opponents: one involves fear of “the masses”; another consists of popular anti-intellectualism; and, the third involves the regulated blurring of lines between universities and the media that works to subordinate scholarship.

The Fear of the Masses

Today we can witness an important phenomenon, where the public intellectual effectively seeks to silence the masses by expressing contempt for the masses, or fear of the masses. This was as significant in the 19th-century as much as it is today.¹³ Readers of *The Conversation (UK)* or the *Times Higher Education* will have no difficulty discovering articles that bemoan the “post-truth” and “post-knowledge” attitudes of what by default are rude, ignorant, and dangerous masses, like those that voted for Brexit or elected Donald Trump.¹⁴ In the US, the Association for Legal and Political Anthropology recently organized a session to confront “media trolls,” those unruly dark forces that threaten the integrity and legitimacy of the media.¹⁵ Heaven help those academics (if they exist) who might somehow favour Trump, Brexit, or populist and nationalist causes. The mainstream media increasingly reveal growing distrust if not contempt for democracy, preferring consultations in place of referenda, and governance by the managerial class which holds

¹³ See Angela Nagle, “Enemies of the People: How hatred of the masses bridges our partisan divide,” *The Baffler*, (34) March 2017.

¹⁴ Lists of articles on the topic of Brexit and “post-truth” can be found in the *Times Higher Education* at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/search?search=Brexit%20post-truth> and at *The Conversation (UK)* at https://theconversation.com/uk/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=Brexit+post-truth&sort=relevancy&language=en&date=all&date_from=&date_to= .

¹⁵ The 2018 APLA session titled, “Anthropology Confronts the Trolls: Technology, New Media, and Cyber Activism in the Age of Disinformation” is described at: <https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/2018/10/11/apla-at-aaa-2018-anthropology-confronts-the-trolls/> .

the right educational qualifications.¹⁶ As Tom DeLuca put it succinctly: “the history of American democracy and political thought is, in part, a history of the fear of democracy”.¹⁷ This is also a well-established phenomenon known as “democratic elitism”.¹⁸

The idea of having a “public anthropology” is in part premised on the notion that without what we have to offer, the masses are going to be worse off somehow. Subtle evidence of this belief is offered when we proclaim the value of “our contribution” to public debate and policy-making—if it were of no value to the public, then it would not be a contribution. Public anthropology is thus framed as if it were an intended improvement of society, a way of raising discourse or deepening consciousness. It’s a peculiar position for anthropologists to hold, since our knowledge presumably came from the masses to begin with (or did it?). Besides assuming that the masses will be worse off without our expert inputs, we also assume that the masses actually want to hear us—both of which are highly questionable assumptions.

Anti-Intellectualism

“The masses” are not all that innocent either. In North America, anti-intellectualism is quite popular, and it can work to effectively silence academics. Anything written by an academic for a wide public audience of non-specialists is often treated with suspicion, jealousy, or is dismissed outright as the ranting of a radical Marxist freak or a whimpering, muddled liberal (in some cases even when the author is neither a Marxist nor a liberal).

However, anti-intellectualism can also point to something that is very serious and should not be dismissed lightly. It can point to popular resentment against professional academics, members of an elite class,¹⁹ that in becoming activists thus function as *an unelected class of politicians*, acting as lobbyists who are endowed with more resources than the average citizen. This raises an interesting problem for public anthropologists, where the very fact of their public practice is rooted in inequality, privilege, and elitism, regardless of the academics’ partisan hues and their professed “good intentions”.

The fact of academic authorship apparently leads some (desperate?) journalists and columnists to simply pilfer our work, reword it, and offer it as their own—as if collectively academics were a sort of Wikipedia that can be mined without credit. Where academics really go against the grain, or the current mood prevailing in their society, they can find themselves on the receiving end of petitions, lawsuits, and some may be reprimanded, suspended, or even be fired by the universities that employ them. Indeed, “pitchfork parades” are designed with that latter outcome in mind. The common working principle seems to be, “if you don’t agree with me, then maybe you shouldn’t earn a living”. Everyone from academics to journalists to sportscasters to cashiers in pizza joints have been fired for saying something that met with public outrage—how this differs from life in an “authoritarian” system is quite perplexing.

¹⁶ See Thomas Frank, *Listen, Liberal: Or, What Ever Happened to the Party of the People?* New York: Picador, 2016, pp. 23, 24, 25, 26, 32.

¹⁷ Tom DeLuca, *The Two Faces of Political Apathy*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995, p. 2.

¹⁸ See Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980; Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class (Elementi di Scienza Politica)* (Trans. Hannah D. Khan), New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1939 (1896).

¹⁹ While coming from a working class background, as a full professor the author belongs to the top 6% of income earners in Canada. One can imagine that our US counterparts at the most elite institutions are even higher up the scale, possibly approaching the top 3%.

Among the masses, so called, another current of silencing is at work. This is what we might call self-silencing, better known as alienation or political apathy.²⁰ This can sometimes be marked by a refusal to speak on issues which the given person feels completely powerless to change. One may also be simply unwilling to antagonize neighbours, relatives, or friends, hence the endless “tips” and “guides” on how to have a “Happy Thanksgiving” free of political animosity.

Regulated Fame

Mediating between the elites and the wider mass of citizens, university administrations and media corporations have also engaged in sweeping censorship campaigns, and this introduces the question of what are some of the major pitfalls of “public outreach”.

First, let us remember that what is often described as “public anthropology” is in fact some sort of engagement between the anthropologist and the media,²¹ or between an anthropologist and a movement or organization that utilizes communication media. Public anthropologists, so called, are thus typically columnists and/or activists with a high media profile.²² The question one might ask here is: If one’s goal is to have a “public voice,” then why should the route travel through anthropology, or any academic discipline? Would not candidacy for an elected office be the more obvious and possibly most productive choice?

Second, in building a public practice that depends on the media, anthropologists necessarily submit themselves to either the media’s editorial ideologies or their increasingly restrictive and noticeably partisan regulations of speech—regardless of whether these are mass media or social media. This is possibly one of the more disturbing aspects of public anthropology: the extent to which it creates dependency on powerful media corporations that usually have partisan interests and agendas.

Third, if we look at the Canadian example of neoliberal corporatization, universities and the lead granting agency (the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, or SSHRC) have combined to promote “community outreach” and “knowledge mobilization,” placing special emphasis on every project having an “open access” component and/or a media relations thrust. This compels all academics, whether they herald themselves as “public” or not, to develop a media practice that will then lead them to some of the problems above.

In addition, Canada’s universities, which are nominally public, are increasingly driven to source ever greater amounts of funding from private donors—this creates pressures to achieve higher public visibility, with an emphasis on branding and the production of

²⁰ See DeLuca’s *Two Faces of Political Apathy*, chapters 9 and 10.

²¹ Robert Borofsky’s definition of public anthropology involves, in part, “conversations with broad audiences about broad concerns,” which implies use of the mass media or “social media”. For more, see Maximilian Forte, “What is Public Anthropology?” *Zero Anthropology*, November 6, 2007.

²² This is an assumption on my part, and it would need to be tested. The drawback is that in Canada and the US we first need consensus on a definition of what makes someone a “public anthropologist”. Secondly, we need a database of Canadian and US public anthropologists that would reveal the primary form of their public engagements, and the extent to which such engagements (do not) rely on the media. One of the possible flaws with my assumption is that it is based on the fact that the first way the author came to know of specific public anthropologists was through media exposure. Are there public anthropologists who communicate with publics and do not involve the media? If such anthropologists are speaking only face-to-face, with small groups of people, then the assumption of media-dependence would be invalidated—on the other hand, Borofsky’s definition of public anthropology underlines “conversations with broad audiences,” which only mass media and social media can permit, while McKenna clearly emphasizes public anthropology as journalism.

messages that will attract elite donors. In return, this creates pressure on university administrations to contain and pacify the messages produced by the public intellectuals they have bred, or encouraged. One method involves the simple act of promoting the visibility of those with “suitable” views that have received coverage in “prestigious” outlets, while ignoring all the rest (anti-recognition). Not content to entrust the university’s visibility to professors’ public practices, university administrations have developed their own “media relations” departments, and increasingly university websites begin to resemble those of news organizations.²³ The consequence of this in turn is a blurring of the lines between academia and journalism which reduces the autonomy of universities, makes them answerable to market audiences, and introduces journalistic standards of renown into a field previously dominated by standards of scholarship.²⁴ *The Conversation*, backed by banks, private philanthropies, and universities, is one of the clearest examples of an intentional blurring of these lines. This blurring has released a cascade of pressures on the nature and content of academics’ public speech, with multiple layers of vested interests at work. In this context, both “silencing” and “voicing” are constructs of capital accumulation.

Universities’ sensitivity and responsiveness to the media can also make them prey to moral panics and fad movements, with the result being increased pressure to support activists in specific causes. As a colleague at the University of British Columbia explained,

“campus politics are not riven by ultra left students and their faculty mentors stifling free thinkers. Truth be told the lines of adhesion are between student activist[s] and student politicians and university administrators. Typically it’s front line faculty (of all political stripes) who are the targets of this neo-liberal university alliance”.²⁵

Academics and Activists

Arguably, what also threatens academic autonomy are demands by activists that academics work in support of their causes.²⁶ The problem is that such relationships can introduce another form of silencing, especially when academics become little more than hood ornaments for activist causes.

Writing to support activism can be deeply problematic. Of course, this author’s experiences are most likely not representative ones, and even then they relate only to activists who were relatively young, North American, and with a significant part of the campaigning done on the Internet for movements outside of the bounds of mainstream political parties and trade unions. Why academic service in support of activism is problematic goes beyond the usual issues of objectivity, scientific credibility, and duty to one’s discipline (not that we should dismiss any of these). In the author’s experience, activists have not generally been interested in reading and learning as such; instead, they are usually keener about recruiting particular allies, especially high-status allies that can bestow greater legitimacy, respectability, and heightened visibility to their campaigns. Intellectually, activists often search for confirmation of what they already believe and think they know—their minds are generally made up already. There is a certainty to their

²³ For more on these matters and how they are related, see Maximilian C. Forte, “This Does Not Represent the Views of the University,” *Zero Anthropology*, January 20, 2018.

²⁴ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, pp. 112, 119, 120, 267, 268, 297.

²⁵ Charles Menzies, “Moving Beyond Campus Politics These Days,” *Charles Menzies*, August 14, 2018.

²⁶ See Torkil Lauesen & Gabriel Kuhn, “Radical Theory and Academia: a Thorny Relationship,” *CounterPunch*, February 23, 2018.

conviction that will not budge. At most, what they can take from an academic is the odd turn of phrase, the rich quote, the odd statistic that everyone else has overlooked.

After a period of incessant recruitment, policing follows, such that every public comment made by the academic is subject to intensely forensic, quasi-legalistic scrutiny, for any hint of a possible violation of the party line. One is denounced for departing from “true Marxism,” but without ever having professed any commitment to Marxism in the first place. In some cases activists skip recruitment, and inform an academic of their demands for conformity to their message. The public intellectual is reduced to the role of providing aid and comfort to prejudice. It is easy to then be lambasted when one disrespects activists’ demands—no hyperbole is ever excessive enough, and the person whose work was celebrated as “anti-racist” one day, is tossed out as “blatantly racist” the next day. Disagreement is replaced by denunciation; questions are replaced by condemnation.

There are at least five paradoxes embedded in the academic-activist relationship. One is that the academic-activist relationship can involve *privilege supporting privilege*. Economically and socially privileged students and faculty are usually the ones to produce the economically and socially privileged activists.²⁷ We assert certain demands, in the name of, or in place of, large majorities that are too busy working and raising families to have any time for painting placards or demonstrating in the street. The irony is that political change achieved through activism is usually not a democratic affair, no matter the degree of consensus-based decision-making occurring within activist groups. Holding aloft banners proclaiming “this is what democracy looks like” thus becomes acutely ironic.

A second paradox takes the form of scholars in the metropolitan centres of the world-system, surrounded by a fan base of groupies that promote their messages and defend them from any insults or criticisms, and who claim to be “victims” of a past or current silencing. Had they not been scholars at prestigious institutions of the metropolitan centre, speaking of their silencing, they would probably remain either unknown or ignored.

The third paradox involves the suggestion that one has been silenced because one has a powerful message to share, one that the authorities would like to suppress because it is so dangerously “special”. This drives attention to the supposedly silenced messenger—who is never actually silent. This also heightens the value of the message once it is classed as prohibited knowledge, like the secret of the high priest. Sometimes it’s the very act of attempted silencing that is necessary to create value where there might have been little or none. Going back to the second paradox: where all the controversy, the scandal, the large followings, the headlines, and the impeccable pedigrees of the main players collectively work to drive attention to the centre, or to keep it there, and thus away from the periphery—what we have is thus another form of silencing. We should rethink silencing/value-creation along a familiar centre-periphery axis, refocusing attention on academic hegemony and the current pattern of concentration of academic capital, a concentration that is located in a short list of universities in the US and north-western Europe.

The fourth paradox involves not just the appeal to authority but the very construction of authority, and how this works to silence the voices of non-authorities. One way this happens is where followings develop around designated thinkers of a movement: those iconic, celebrity intellectuals whose every ordinary utterance is elevated to the expression of

²⁷ Sidney Verba & Gary R. Orren, *Equality in America: The View from the Top*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 17; Frances Fox Piven & Richard A. Cloward, *Why Americans Don’t Vote*, New York: Pantheon, 1989, p. 119.

pure genius. Merely invoking the name of the authority, or popularizing select quotes in poster-like visual representations, works to create value just as it works to silence the opposition.

The fifth paradox relates to anthropology specifically. Anthropology has its own long-standing paradox of “speechful” silence: claiming to give voice to others, but by speaking on their behalf as their self-appointed interpreters, translators, and analytical specialists.

Publicity as Value-Creation

As explained above, anthropology has always been public. To the extent that anthropology has accumulated any academic capital, it is thanks to the public work that was done to establish its value in the eyes of the powerful moneyed elites that founded and bankrolled universities, with US and British anthropology having especially intimate ties with the Rockefellers.²⁸ Silencing, like voicing, is inextricably tied up with value-creation and value-destruction, both processes being essential to capital accumulation. Silencing is most commonly associated with value-destruction (firing, blacklisting, banned publications, to name a few examples), but it can also be a vehicle of value-creation (heightened visibility, a claim to fame, a badge of honour, advertising a powerful message that “the authorities don’t want you to hear,” and so forth). If some views “sell” well, it’s because they are made to sell, especially when we say what the powerful or the activist arbiters of power want to hear.

What we call silencing is really about power making *value*: power increasing the academic capital of particular paradigms and their upholders, while diminishing if not denying academic capital to competing perspectives and their proponents. The real aim here is not the production of silence, strictly speaking, but something that is more like *obscurity*, which is the flip side of *publicity*. Promotion in the political sphere can then be “cashed in” by using it for promotion within the academic sphere. It’s not a few celebrity academics that either are now or were first celebrity activists or had high profiles in the media.

If what many call “public anthropology” is about “speaking truth to power” then it could rightly be argued that there can be no such thing as public anthropology until it can begin to speak some truths to itself. This is not about the politics of anthropology so much as the politics of all academia. The university is an institution of power—it may not be an especially powerful institution, but since its inception it has been devised to serve the interests of power. Speaking truth to power would then have to mean routinely speaking truth to ourselves, about ourselves as academics.

Perhaps this author is not alone in observing the tone of American anthropology conferences, that so clearly establishes anthropology as a field of power: the senatorial airs of speakers; the debates that take on the tone of legislative processes; pronouncements on the (de)merits of arguments and concepts that sound like they had been delivered by judges, or disputed by prosecutors. Academics are an unelected elite political class, and this needs to be taken into account when cheering on public anthropology as if it were a means of “speaking truth to power”.

How Do You Solve a Problem Like Silence?

Since much about silencing ultimately has to do with inequality (at least in terms of power), one would think that anything moving us toward greater equality would be the ultimate solution. The problem will then become: how to reward initiative? The equality

²⁸ Thomas C. Patterson, *A Social History of Anthropology in the United States*, New York: Berg, 2001, p. 73.

problem is, short of a rapid social transformation that would be the result of nearly cataclysmic violence, a long-term problem. Thus for now the focus is on some short-term solutions.

While we may not have total equality, we can work towards greater democracy in academia, especially of the kind that prevents the encrustation of privilege and the concentration of capital. Part of this effort involves challenging the hegemony of imperial centres in academia, which in the Anglophone world are the US and the UK. Other efforts are more common, involving team membership and network formation that create more opportunities for junior and/or peripheral academics. Decentralizing academic funding in the Canadian case, and distributing research funding equally and automatically, without the need for lengthy application processes, would also be a major step forward (i.e., what some call the “basic annual research grant,” or BARG).

Another strategy is that of media self-reliance, which is now more feasible than ever. Self-reliance means one simply cannot be silenced in the normal, non-violent sense, because one does not depend on others to make one’s work known or available (which is the basic prerequisite for it to be known). Some young academics have used the Internet to first cultivate if not create constituencies, building a momentum of approval for their research that then translates into publication opportunities, which can then translate into job offers. Those who have developed this practice often realize that they do not depend on others to make their opportunities for them, and that their work can always be published somewhere. There is thus a reduced sense of dependency on those that work to maintain or promote the value of older, established initiatives. Some will logically counter this by reminding us that to get tenure one must publish in top-tier journals—but that is not true everywhere, and it need not be one’s exclusive focus. Also, an American lens is not adequate: not all universities outside of the US are “publish or perish”; not all of those that value research emphasize publication in journals; and, not all of those that value journal publications specifically demand top-tier journals. Plus, with the onset of “knowledge mobilization” and “open access,” even self-publication has become more acceptable, and is certainly an option for the already-tenured.

The conclusion this author has reached is that the highest and best calling one can answer as an academic is not to seek a shortcut to (limited) political power through fame, but to be available as specialists dedicated to asking the kinds of questions that few or none even consider asking, to produce critique of what is accepted as routine, and to think through, to analyze to a degree not normally done in the media and popular discourse. The special privilege of being an academic is not to achieve power over others through prestige and publicity, but to be afforded the time and space to continually learn new things, to acknowledge the limits of one’s own understanding, and to be constantly asking questions.

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