

2006

The Promise and Peril of Public Anthropology

Ben Feinberg
Warren Wilson College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



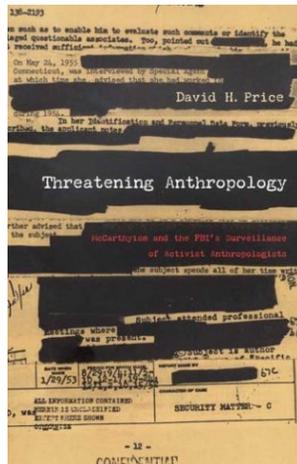
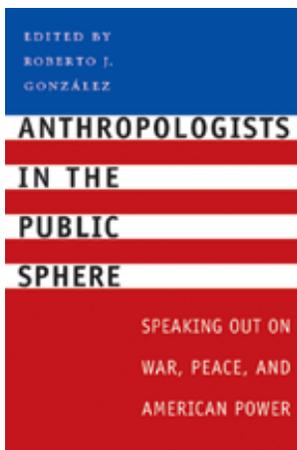
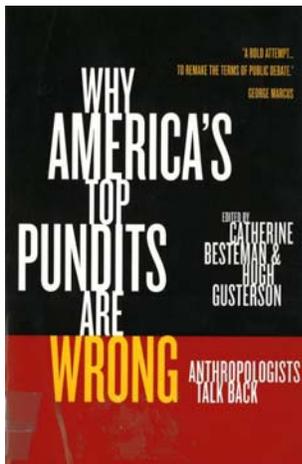
Part of the [International Relations Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Feinberg, Ben (2006) "The Promise and Peril of Public Anthropology," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 26.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol6/iss1/26>

This Review Essays is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, dig-commons@du.edu.



The Promise and Peril of Public Anthropology

By Ben Feinberg

Why America's Top Pundits Are Wrong: Anthropologists Talk Back edited by Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2005. 282 pp.

Anthropologists in the Public Sphere: Speaking Out on War, Peace, and American Power edited by Roberto J. González. University of Texas Press: Austin, 2004. 288 pp.

Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists by David H. Price. Duke University Press: Durham, 2004. 426 pp.

In recent years, as we accelerate our planetary experiment into increasing violence and social inequality, cultural anthropologists have increasingly expressed their befuddlement about why, amid all the clamor and reckless talk about the state of the world that characterizes public discourse, our voice has been notably absent. We have moved from the introspection of the 80s, when the big debates within the discipline involved tearing at our own flesh and flaunting the sackcloth of self-doubt: how do we know what we know about other people? Are we not projecting our colonialist narratives onto the weak? Who the Hell do *we* think we are to talk so pompously and authoritatively about *them*? Emerging from this doubt, we remembered that, at the same time that we sparred with each other and devoured our elders in the hidden corners and footnotes of obscure journals, our discipline has actually reached a near-unanimous consensus—as strong as the consensus for evolution among physical anthropologists or for global warming among climate scientists—on a number of vitally important issues that are relevant to the masses outside our club, and could, if applied by the right people, actually benefit society and serve in defense of human rights.

But, while biological evolution and global warming may have earned some widespread acceptance, at least among educated Americans, the discoveries of cultural anthropologists remain largely ignored. I know that when, in casual conversation with non-anthropologists, I politely raise

some of them—that there are limits to biological explanations of human behavior (even gendered behavior); that linear models of history that place the peoples of the world on a single scale from uncivilized and superstitious to advanced and reasonable do not explain anything; that the members of marginalized groups that we have defined as “problems” or enemies (even Arabs) are actually people just like us—with otherwise sensible friends, family members, and colleagues who gaze back at me with bemused concern. Even the one mid-20th century anthropological finding that has made some headway into popular culture—that biological “races” do not exist outside of propaganda, which is probably the discipline’s most important finding to date—is alien to most people’s understanding of the world.

The anthropological consensus, it seems, violates “common sense.” Of course, anthropologists view common sense not as a given, but as something that must be created through effort. If it is made, it can be contested and, hopefully, remade. Two recent anthologies of writings by anthropologists, edited by Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson and by Roberto J. González, respectively, represent an effort to challenge the pundits who use their access to money and wide distribution of their work to frame domestic and international issues in a way that, as Besteman and Gusterson write, “hobble[s] our ability to think critically or to empathize with different kinds of people, and... [has] the effect of legitimizing the status quo” (4).

Collectively, these two books—González’ [Anthropology in the Public Sphere: Speaking Out on War, Peace, and American Power](#) and Besteman and Gusterson’s [Why America’s Top Pundits are Wrong: Anthropologists Talk Back](#), represent an effort to demonstrate how the peculiar methodology and insights of cultural anthropology are in fact relevant to understanding global political events, from ethnic conflict in Somalia to the so-called War on Terrorism. In this essay, I will examine the major points of consensus that anthropologists bring to the public sphere, and then, discussing another recent book, David H. Price’s [Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI’s Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists](#), I will briefly explore why the perspective of anthropologists has had such a difficult time influencing public discourse.

Besteman and Gusterson’s [Why America’s Top Pundits are Wrong: Anthropologists Talk Back](#) is the more thorough of these volumes. The book is an aggressive clarion call “for anthropologists to reclaim Margaret Mead’s legacy and find our voice as public intellectuals once more” (Besteman and Gusterson: 6) and it seethes with righteous outrage on almost every page. The villains of the book’s title are pundits, whom the editors define as “modern-day mythmakers... people who provide a comforting explanation of why things are the way they are,” just as mythmakers in “primitive” societies might explain why children died, crops failed, and why some were chiefs and not others (Besteman and Gusterson: 3). The authors do not go after the easiest targets—the angry ranters of right wing media like Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly, and Ann Coulter. Instead, they focus on authors whose works are not always immediately labeled as partisan. On domestic issues, they interrogate the pseudo-scientific tomes [The Bell Curve](#) and [A Natural History of Rape](#), and Dinesh D’Souza’s [Virtue of Prosperity](#). More space is devoted to a trio of pundits who have demonstrably influenced thought and action about international issues—Samuel Huntington, Robert Kaplan, and especially Thomas Friedman, who merits three debunking articles.

González’ book, on the other hand, includes 52 brief intrusions by anthropologists into the public arena, mostly through newspaper op-ed articles. González reaches back to Franz Boas and Margaret Mead in order to establish a historical tradition of anthropological engagement, but the

majority of the articles were written in the last fifteen years in response to U.S. military involvement in Somalia, Bosnia, Colombia, and Afghanistan, and to the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. While the positions of these writers are not always identical, collectively they present a powerful message: that American leaders act in places whose histories they do not understand, and that the reflexive militarism of American political discourse is not a valid response to events in the world, but owes more to the dynamics of power within our own society.

Why anthropology?

The level of vitriol in Why America's Top Pundits are Wrong may strike some as a little over the top. Virtually every article directly opposes some wrongheaded statement or undefended assumption by a pundit with an assertion that “[i]n contrast, anthropologists reject the idea that cultures deteriorate like organisms” (Besteman and Gusterson: 92) or “Friedman’s hype, however, is at variance with decades of anthropological research about the processes he describes” (Besteman and Gusterson: 103), and “he does the exact opposite of what anthropologists are supposed to do” (Besteman and Gusterson: 122). Many of the articles are structured in a similar manner—a list of “flaws,” (Besteman and Gusterson: 109) “blunders,” (Besteman and Gusterson: 88) or “sins” (Besteman and Gusterson: 29) are attached to a particular pundit, and then alternate explanations and counterexamples are presented that highlight the superficial nature of the “common sense” view.

One of the main arguments in both books is that you cannot understand social and cultural problems without understanding, in Malinowski’s famous phrase, “the native’s point of view.” Since the time of Malinowski, anthropologists have sought to discover and recognize this point of view through a particular methodology—learning the native language and devoting years to long term, intensive fieldwork. Unfortunately, we live in a world where actual knowledge of the objects of our inquiry is not particularly valued. Just as Huntington authoritatively describes seven distinct global “civilizations,” without citing any foreign language sources or anthropologists, “experts” who rarely possess a passing understanding of local languages and cultures drive American foreign policy.

In the popular discourse of expertise, travel conveys authority, but in a way that is very removed from the anthropological expectation of long-term dwelling. Pundits claim authority by projecting the confidence of the world traveler, but they conflate frequent flyer miles with actual understanding. Ellen Hertz and Laura Nader make this point in their sarcastic discussion of the authority conveyed by Thomas Friedman. Friedman (TLF), they write,

...is not writing about globalization; he’s writing ad copy—for himself and the people he associates with. He lives in a Lexus and drives in a dream world, surrounded by friends living in Lexuses driving around in dream worlds. TLF has talked to people all over the world who drive Lexuses like himself and live in their own particular dream worlds... In short, TLF has not talked to very many different kinds of people on his jaunts across the four-star-hotel-dotted globe (Besteman and Gusterson: 124).

Globe-trotting journalism does not expose one to alternate realities—as does actually living with and interacting with people for extended periods, instead of mining conversations with taxi drivers and waiters for stereotypical conversations—but tends to confirm the stereotyped views that the pundits start with. The long-term fieldwork of anthropologists has led to three general points of

agreement, all of which are generally absent from popular discourse: that culture is heterogeneous and fluid, and cannot be invoked as an ultimate explanation for conflict; that history cannot be represented on a single global scale; and that inequality and conflict are not inevitable.

Culture is Heterogeneous and Fluid, not an Ultimate Explanation

What many anthropologists find particularly infuriating about contemporary public discourse is that it is full of concepts that sound anthropological, yet ignores the contributions of actual anthropologists. For example, we tend to claim the concept of “culture” as our particular bailiwick, and most of the pundits addressed by Besteman and Gusterson’s volume make liberal use of this term. Samuel Huntington, the Harvard political scientist who wrote *The Clash of Civilizations*, uses culture as a central organizing principle—the world, he argues, is divided into seven distinct “civilizational zones” characterized by different cultural attributes. He even organized a conference around the indisputable theme that “culture matters.” The problem is that, while anthropologists have spent a century rigorously debating what culture means, Huntington ignores (or is ignorant of) the last 60 years of this discussion, relying on early 20th century figures like Alfred Kroeber as the source of his “model of cultures as internally coherent units, different and irreconcilable with one another” (Besteman and Gusterson: 44).

As Besteman points out, this model, which is rooted in the Spenser’s 19th century organic analogy, “has been thoroughly dismantled over the past several decades” (Besteman and Gusterson: 89). Cultures do not exist as things in the same way that billiard balls or penguins do. We cannot define their borders in geographical terms as we can with nations. Culture develops through constant interconnection rather than in spite of it, and some form of multiculturalism, hybridity, and change is the normal state of human beings, rather than some recent aberration. While anthropologists hold different views on whether or not the concept of culture still provides useful insights,¹ there is near-unanimous agreement that, as Besteman states bluntly: “...discrete cultures do not exist and cultural differences do not produce naturally produce competition or violent conflict” (Besteman and Gusterson: 90), or, as Gusterson suggests “culturally speaking, we are all mongrels” (Besteman and Gusterson: 36).

While early anthropologists tended to depict the communities they studied as self-contained, autonomous cultures, by the 1980s they realized that wherever they went—from New Guinea to Amazonia—what they encountered was a complex articulation of connection, especially the unequal connections involved in colonialism. As Eric Wolf (1982: 3, 4) wrote, the human world is “a totality of interconnected processes,” rather than “each society with its characteristic culture, conceived as an integrated and bounded system, set off against equally bounded systems.”

Pundits, however, continuously imply that cultures are timeless, rooted in biology, and doomed to conflict when they come into contact with each other. They define these timeless cultures as the source of the world’s problems. The Balkans, for Kaplan, are home to irrational rural people whose culture makes them the antithesis of modern Europeans and traps them in a landscape of “savage hatreds” (Besteman and Gusterson: 70). Africa fares even worse, as Kaplan posits an “intractable

¹ See for example Abu-Lughod’s (1991).

culture” characterized by “ancient clan hatreds that simmered just under the cause of the surface” to explain the Somalian violence of the 1990s (Besteman and Gusterson: 97, 95). In the *Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington—against ethnographic and historical evidence—represents the Muslim world from Indonesia to Morocco as a single, monolithic entity characterized by constant warfare against its neighbors—“an essential antipathy... between Islam and Christianity” (Besteman and Gusterson: 37). Just as remarkably, he lumps together all of the disparate elements of American society into a single “Christian” civilization, ignoring the problem that “Christianity” might present a different model for Jerry Falwell, Jesse Jackson, and Madonna.

If ethnic and regional conflicts are not caused by “ancient tribal hatreds,” then where do they come from and why do so many perpetrators of the violence invoke this language? Long-term studies by anthropologists in Bosnia, Rwanda, and elsewhere provides clear answers to this question. Tone Bringa, who saw the multiethnic Bosnian village she studied transform from a scene of interethnic cooperation and acceptance to one of fear and violence, writes that “the point about Bosnian society, as with all other societies in the Balkans and beyond, is that it contains both the potential for peaceful coexistence and the potential for conflict among its ethnic communities; there are plenty of examples of both” (Besteman and Gusterson: 71). In particular historical situations—the stereotyped images and grievances that exist everywhere can be activated by elites who “found it opportune to promote ideas of irreconcilable differences and conflict” (Besteman and Gusterson: 73). In the Balkans, ethnic nationalism provided a useful strategy for elites to maintain power at a time when, because of the breakup of Yugoslavia, they were threatened by a democratic pull.

Keith Brown provides a creative critique of the notion of ancient tribal pulls in the work of Samuel Huntington. Huntington uses the notion of “kinship” to explain global alliances—nations will always ally with their “uncles” within the same civilization. Brown points out that anthropologists have discovered that kinship, like other forms of identity, is extremely mutable and subject to redefinition. In many societies, forms of fictive kinship like godparenthood that incorporate outsiders are as strong as blood ties (and this was how, in fact, many Kosovar Albanians saw their relationship with NATO). Huntington takes a particular western notion of kinship, naturalizes it, and applies it to the global stage while never realizing that it is only an analogy.

The lessons of cultural anthropology are both hopeful and pessimistic. On the one hand, we cannot dismiss conflict in other places, from Lebanon to Rwanda, as an inevitable outcome of some intractable hostility, and thus we can act to prevent it and save people from pointless deaths. Erroneous ideas that root conflict in a mysterious truth about “culture” influenced President Clinton in his decision not to act forcefully during the Balkan genocide. Today, they are being invoked in the media to justify the Israeli bombing of Lebanon, as a necessary defense against a timeless, Islamic “culture of death” (actual crawler on MSNBC). The hopeful message is that these conflicts are not inevitable, but manufactured, and that peaceful coexistence between peoples is just as normal and natural as conflict. The pessimistic warning is that there is no special inherited weakness in the cultures of others that leads them into violence—“we” are just as likely to be led by our elites into fascism, ethnic cleansing, and genocide as “they” are.

We Are Not More Civilized than They Are

In the early days of anthropology in the 19th century, a theory called Social Evolutionism dominated the field. This theory, as articulated by Herbert Spencer, Edward Tylor, and Lewis Henry Morgan, held that all cultures progress along a single pathway from savagery to civilization, a condition characterized by the colonial nations of Western Europe and North America but that could eventually be reached by everyone. This approach justified colonial relations on the grounds that they simply represented a natural hierarchy between cultures. In the 20th century, American anthropologists led by Franz Boas launched an attack on Social Evolutionism, arguing that different cultures must be understood on their own merits. But, while social evolutionism may have lost much of its credibility within anthropology (despite various comebacks in new guises), it continues to inform public discourse to an astonishing degree.

For example, the Bush Administration continues to represent Iraq as a nascent democracy, a child undergoing the tutelage of a benevolent uncle. They will eventually mature and become independent, just as a child learns to operate his own bicycle (an analogy used by a general in describing the training of Iraqi troops). Like a good uncle squirming when the little league coach tells him that his nephew is not good enough to start, he bristles when a rival mocks his charge's development, as Russia's President Putin recently did at a joint press conference. "Just you wait," Bush muttered.

The contemporary theory of social evolutionism divides the world into two camps—those who "get it" (as Thomas Friedman puts it) and those who do not (the "Party of Nah" for Dinesh D'Souza). The implication is that there are only two choices in any situation; one that is generally aligned with the ultimate direction of history, and one that responds to it out of cowardliness or reactionary envy—the reaction of Rumsfeld's "dead enders." The first President Bush once described the world this way in a State of the Union address—on one side a prosperous group enjoys a sumptuous feast, while outsiders, rather than attempt to join them, simply hate them for their good fortune. This simple opposition allows all forms of resistance to be dismissed as a fear or hatred of progress—timid peasants clinging to outmoded customs, naïve environmentalists romanticizing the past, and angry Bin Ladens, glowering with hatred for democracy from their damp cave.

The pundits roasted in [Why America's Top Pundits are Wrong](#) repeatedly invoke this simplistic, bifurcated world. They assume that the future is represented by a particular vision of globalized capitalism called neoliberalism, which is characterized by free markets with weak government protections for labor and the environment, and that societies are divided between those that embrace a uniform "modernity," and those who wallow in the shade of what Friedman calls the "olive tree" of "tradition."

Here, just as Huntington misinterprets "culture" and "kinship" (as innate causes of alliance) and Kaplan mistakes the meaning of "cultural difference" (as an innate trigger to violence), Friedman and others ignore the copious anthropological research on "tradition," which sees it not as a static survival from the past, but as "a dynamic, adaptable, complex set of meanings and symbols manipulated to serve present interests and needs" (Besteman and Gusterson: 110). In fact, anthropologists have documented many cases where traditions are invoked or "invented" as part and parcel of engagement with the modern world. This special understanding allows anthropologists

a particular insight into the different ways tradition might signify—not just as passive attachment to locality or resistance to “modernity,” but as situationally contingent forms of resistance to specific forms of social injustice.

Modern discourses of social evolutionism not only gloss over the social injustice and economic inequality that accompany neoliberalism (Besteman and Gusterson: 110), they are extraordinarily narcissistic in their outlook. The world becomes reduced to “us” and “not us,” “with U.S. or against us,” “Yeah and Nah,” and so on—“you either love it and you want to move forward, or you hate it and you want to go back” (Besteman and Gusterson: 156). Even many of our television commercials depict a sea of exotic others consumed by their fascination with our commodities (Feinberg 2002). We are too obsessed with whether others like U.S. or hate U.S. to understand that the world is too complex to be reduced to *we* and *they*. Anthropology can help to show that the “backwardness” or stubborn resistance of others is not a root cause of their poverty or of conflict; what appears as backwardness is produced by global systems of inequality.

You Do not Have to Grin and Bear It

The third crucial point raised by the anthropological critiques of popular political discourse is that inequality and conflict are not inevitable or rooted in a natural hierarchy. Popular common sense, as represented by the punditocracy, is an ideology of “realism,” which Besteman and Gusterson prefer to call “reactionary determinism,” the notion that “what is must be, and that arguments to the contrary are naïve and dangerous” (Besteman and Gusterson: 22). This ideology attaches both to international relations and to inequality within the United States.

In international affairs, this version of “realism” allows U.S. to avoid trying to prevent violence among others who fight because “they always have” or because conflicts in places like Africa are the inevitable expression of a common violent human nature allowed to express itself fully “in areas where the Western Enlightenment has not penetrated” (Kaplan cited in Besteman and Gusterson: 86). It also enables U.S. to avoid examining the direct role that United States has played in fomenting international conflicts since World War II. Carolyn Nordstrom’s article on the “Extrastate Globalization of the Illicit” shows how African political violence is not a result of the absence of neoliberal connections, but because of the way African nations are forced to play this global game—from a position of unequal access, lopsided trade agreements, and a lack of political power. Resource-rich nations in developing countries, it turns out, suffer far more political violence than other countries: “Angola’s war is good for world business” (Besteman and Gusterson: 151).

“Realists” like Thomas Friedman tend to be optimistic—like Karl Marx, they assume that the natural progression of the global economy will lead to a better future for all. But when that does not happen, destiny trumps optimism. As Ellen Hertz and Laura Nader write in their critique of Friedman, “this is the “inevitability syndrome: ‘hey!’, nobody’s in charge, and there’s nothing we can do about it! We thought it was the Hindus, the Bantus, or the Whathaveyous who were fatalists. But this is fatalism American style” (Besteman and Gusterson: 129).

González has a harsher term for this perspective. He calls it “crackpot realism” and argues that “those who think that the only realistic way of resolving political problems can be found in total war, mass murder, and the use of brute force (even if in violation of international laws)—are in

command of our country” (González: 263). It is naïve to examine the historical bases or cultural details of the places where we do intervene. Realistically, there are just “bad” people out there—drawn from Huntington’s enemy civilization, or motivated by Kaplan’s ancient intractable hatreds, or confused into resistance to the inevitable wonders of Friedman’s Lexus. If conflict is inevitable, the only thing that matters is winning.

In domestic affairs, this “crackpot realism” takes the shape of the resurgence of 19th century Social Evolutionism’s twin—Social Darwinism, the idea that class, gender, and racial inequalities are rooted in biology, and thus social programs aimed at combating them are counterproductive at best. Why America’s Top Pundits are Wrong includes rebuttals of three forms of modern social Darwinism—Dinesh D’Souza’s The Virtue of Prosperity, which defends the inevitability of class inequality (the poor are “losers’ who lack entrepreneurial talent and have only themselves to blame” (Besteman and Gusterson: 154), Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer’s A Natural History of Rape, which defends the inevitability of gendered violence, and Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s The Bell Curve, which revives old eugenicist arguments to defend the inevitability of racial hierarchy, since members of some races are simply less intelligent than others.

Each of these very popular books is filled with numerous factual, methodological, and logical errors. But the one thing that permeates all of them, and dominant American social discourses in general, is the total bracketing out of history from the analysis of social conditions. Terms like “rape,” “race,” and “intelligence” are historical constructions, and cannot be generalized into real transhistorical things and then used as justifications or explanations for social inequalities. Herrnstein and Murray, convinced that innate racial differences, rather than racism, explain why American blacks perform poorly on certain tests, can not explain why the same tests proved that Jews were less intelligent than other whites in the early 20th century, or why Koreans in the United States perform well on tests, while Koreans in Japan, where they face greater discrimination, score well below average (Besteman and Gusterson: 220).

Similarly, Stefan Helmreich and Heather Paxson question why Thornhill and Palmer chose to write a “natural history” of rape, based on speculative fantasies about deep impulses imprinted by evolution, rather than a social history, which could get at the very different meanings associated with sexual violence in different contexts. By examining rape in the context of war, rape under plantation slavery, and fraternity gang rape, they are able to pierce Thornhill and Palmer’s assumption that rape is always an expression of a male urge to reproduce. Viewed historically, rape “cannot be explained through one underlying theory” (Besteman and Gusterson: 198).

The elimination of actual history appears to be a common feature of all the pundits’ stories. Some ultimate explanation—Social Darwinism, the triumph of Neoliberalism behind the vanguard of Friedman’s “electronic herd,” the failure of “backward” regions to adapt to modernity, deep evolutionary impulses—replaces study of the recent past, and then is adorned with a sacred mantle of destiny. The authors of Why America’s Top Pundits are Wrong effectively point out that these writings are based not on reasoned scientific analysis, but on faith in a transcendent, unverifiable truth. The writers of the op-ed articles reprinted in Anthropologists in the Public Sphere gamely attempt to replace these faith-based discourses with introductions to the specific histories in the places where American power manifests itself—from the Middle East to Central America. Yet these analyses have little effect on popular opinion, while the voices of the pundits wield extraordinary power. Why is that?

Why not anthropology?

As I write this essay, cable news programs bombard me with all the discourses of the punditocracy, marshaled in defense of the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon and other political causes. I hear about intractable ancient conflicts that will never end, and thus—to be realistic—require that we demonstrate the “resolve” to continually embrace the use of deadly force. I see scrolling shouts about an Islamic “culture of death” that breeds fanaticism and war, and feel good stories about American Jews who have joined the Israeli army to “defend Judeo-Christian civilization.” Experts remind me of a global “clash of civilizations,” not only in the Middle East, but in the United States, where Representative Tom Tancredo cites Huntington’s argument, about a fundamental incompatibility between different peoples, to demand that illegal aliens be locked up in a network of concentration camps along the U.S.-Mexico border. Even my liberal college president mentioned Huntington approvingly in an offhand comment while addressing the faculty, as if he were referencing an accepted, uncontroversial fact.

While the authors of *Anthropologists in the Public Sphere* attempt to counter the dominance of these prevailing orthodoxies, by inserting anthropological perspectives into both mainstream and niche media, the analyses presented in *Why America’s Top Pundits are Wrong* suggest three reasons why points of view that ignore the insights of 20th century anthropology still prevail to such a great extent.

First of all, the different authors of the collection emphasize, in distinct ways, what Stephen Colbert might call the “truthiness” of the pundits’ positions—they “feel like” true positions. This manifests itself in “science-y” texts like *The Bell Curve* and *A Natural History of Rape*—books that look like science, full of charts and statistics with confident authors from prestigious institutions, but that work around the requirements of actual science by concealing conflicting data (Besteman and Gusterson: 202). This also comes out through the breezy, confident style of Thomas Friedman and Dinesh D’Souza, and the ability of Robert Kaplan to “reduce complex issues to sound bites” (Besteman and Gusterson: 2). The pundits’ writings, in the words of Ellen Hertz and Laura Nader, “use colorful images geared to arouse emotions of fear and self-satisfaction” (Besteman and Gusterson: 123). Readers are invited, and persuaded, to adopt the worldview of a happy, seemingly sophisticated member of the elite. The self-satisfaction of the pundit provides a powerful tool for persuading readers to “look down from the bottom” (Besteman and Gusterson: 177) and adopt the viewpoints of elites.

Truthiness feels true because it is familiar and easy to accept. Besteman and Gusterson compare the makers of contemporary punditry to mythmakers in other societies—their role is to “provide a comforting explanation of why things are the way they are” in a way that caters to, rather than challenges, their audience’s prejudices (Besteman and Gusterson: 3). While anthropology, and science in general, aims to discomfort their audience by forcing them to see from an other’s perspective, making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, popular myths retain their popularity because they give U.S. excuses to disqualify any other point of view. Who wants to see things like a “loser” or a member of an antiquated or enemy civilization?

But, the perspectives of the powerful do not dominate simply because they “feel right” or because they use sophisticated rhetorical strategies. Neither *Why America’s Top Pundits are Wrong* or *Anthropologists in the Public Sphere* pay much attention to structural reasons—such as media

consolidation—for the marginalization of alternative analyses. Big media actively and intentionally promotes certain kinds of experts—and draws them from “think tanks” funded by conservative activists. Points of view get validated then, less on the basis of the accuracy than by their allegiance to a particular ideology. *The Bell Curve* is a good example of this—its authors, along with other hereditarian scholars like Arthur Jensen and J. Philippe Rushton, have received millions of dollars in support from the Pioneer Fund, a foundation set up in 1937 to promote the racist and eugenicist views of its founder, Harry Laughlin (Besteman and Gusterson: 213).

Threatening Anthropology, by David H. Price, provides a fourth, more sinister, structural explanation for the failure of anthropologists to use their discipline to project dissenting voices with much success. Price’s book is an exhaustively researched, extraordinarily detailed account of the persecution of activist anthropologists during the Cold War, based primarily on FBI materials released under the Freedom of Information Act. Price shows how much government time and energy were devoted to monitoring the activities and writings of anthropologists, including well known scholars like Gene Weltfish and Oscar Lewis, on the grounds that they might be threats to national security.

While a few anthropologists were subjected to the inquisition of the House Committee on Un-American Activities or fired from their jobs, many others faced more subtle harassment, ranging from FBI letters to University Presidents that influenced tenure decisions, to intimidating home interviews by field agents, to interference with requests for visas. The quantity of information collected by the FBI is astounding—and includes such details as the subjects of conversations at dinner parties, and the leftist literature transported by Oscar Lewis on a car trip to Mexico. In fact, some readers might grow weary, and perhaps suspect Price of overhyping his case as they slog through page after page of this data—after all, very few of the targets of this surveillance actually had their careers ruined.

But, while few anthropologists lost their jobs (and, as Price points out, we can never know how many were not hired or did not receive tenure because of FBI intervention), state involvement in academics had a chilling effect on both academic and political speech and involvement. Overtly Marxist theory became taboo, and anti-communist professors scoured textbooks for evidence that their authors might be subtly shaping their analysis in Marxist ways.

The strongest, and perhaps most surprising point that Price makes involves the reasons for the FBI’s particular concern with anthropologists. Certainly, J. Edgar Hoover was not particularly interested in Kwakiutl ethnography or competing explanations for the invention of agriculture.

He was, however, obsessed with race. Price shows how the FBI conflated anti-racism with communism, and targeted or made note of anyone who advocated racial equality—even those who, for example, wished to hire a black secretary in a government office. His accounts of how concern with race permeated FBI reports resonated with me, as I recalled a tale from my family history. My father, as a graduate student at the University of Michigan in the early 50s, attended a party at the house of a self-professed communist. My father’s companion at the party, a housemate in an Ann Arbor Co-op, later received his FBI file through the Freedom of Information Act. It turned out that the communist’s suspiciously attractive girlfriend was an informant, and her report appeared in the file. She did not report about any plans to seize the means of production, but she was obsessed with subversions of race and gender norms. “Whites were dancing freely with coloreds,” she wrote. And,

“many of the women were wearing very, very, very lowcut dresses.” She then reported that my father made a remark about a scheme to “destroy capitalist parking meters.” This statement was probably a joke, as my father, who was a liberal rather than a communist, clumsily attempted to ingratiate himself with his hosts while describing an incident that had led to a traffic ticket.

For Hoover, the “American way of life in the 1940s and 1950s was predicated on a fundamental stratification of race, gender, class, and wealth” (Price: 25). Anyone who threatened the basis of racial stratification was considered a threat, and all threats were considered “communists.” Price points out that, in an era when both mainstream Democrats and Republicans accepted racial orthodoxies, Communists and Anthropologists who had adopted the Boasian, scientific view on racial equality and cultural relativism were among the few to speak out openly against them.

Hoover’s spies were not limited to graduate student parties. The most surprising document in Threatening Anthropology is a long letter written by George Peter Murdock, one of the most renowned anthropologists of his generation, to Hoover in 1949. In this letter, Murdock despairs that Communists were taking over the profession, with the goal of “the conversion of our scientific organization into a propaganda tool subserving [*sic*] their interests” (Price: 72). He suggests that a small cabal of hardcore members were able to “dupe” the “much larger number of genuine liberals who were quite innocent of how they were being maneuvered and used” (Price: 72). Murdock is not afraid to name names, including Oscar Lewis and Melville Jacobs, and to offer odd psychological and culturally stereotyping character sketches. Lewis, he writes, “is certainly not an under-cover leader, for he is essentially timid.” Richard Morgan, who was fired from the Ohio State Museum because his wife was a Communist, “seems to have been primarily a pig-headed and uncooperative Welshman, who has never had any real friends. Craving love, he has found it only from his wife and has thus become putty in her hands” (Price: 72). Murdock’s letter and attitude set the stage for a period of official acquiescence by the American Anthropological Association to FBI persecution of individual members.

These days, of course, there has been a resurgence in interest in monitoring the speech of professors in the name of national security. Just as Hoover’s spies considered the promotion of racial equality as disloyalty, groups like the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), founded by Senator Joseph Lieberman and Lynne Cheney, condemn those “who have attempted to give context to September 11, encourage critical thinking, or share knowledge about other cultures” as being a “weak link” who “give comfort to [America’s] adversaries” (González: 241). ACTA, by deriding critical intellectuals as opponents of “Civilization,” betrays its loyalty to the values of Social Evolutionism: American racial and cultural supremacy, imperialism, and a dismissal of other cultures as either inferior or a threat.

Radical conservatives like David Horowitz and Daniel Pipes have privatized many of the techniques of the 1950s in their war against “Anti-American” professors. Both encourage students to “turn in” their professors for voicing opinions and harass campus organizations that bring in critical speakers. Horowitz published a book called The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America, and Pipes’ Campus Watch organization maintains a blacklist of professors who attempt to contextualize American policy in the Middle East in ways that criticize U.S. and Israeli policies. In this era of government-produced fake news stories with phony reporters, increased surveillance, and close links between private sector neo-conservatives like Horowitz and

government agencies, it is not unlikely that similar lists of “potentially dangerous” academics will once again be maintained in secret, as they were in the 1950s.

Horowitz has a particular animus for anthropology. Echoing Murdock, he claims that the field has been completely “taken over” and “destroyed” by a cabal of Marxists: “You can tell from my book that you do not want your student going into any cultural anthropology course or department” (Steigerwald 2006). Horowitz also repeats Murdock’s claim that radical anthropologists have replaced “objective science” with activism and “opinion.” As Murdock wrote to Hoover in 1949, “anthropology has hitherto been one of the most objective and least politically tainted” of the social sciences” (Price: 72). This distinction effectively silences anthropologists. The major points of scientific consensus in the field—that race is not a biological category, that conflict and inequality are not inevitable, that culture is dynamic and complex—imply a perspective on world events, just as findings in Climatology impel scientists to speak out against misstatements of fact by public officials. But, as soon as anthropologists apply our scientific findings to the actual world—that is, as soon as we do our job—we may find ourselves blacklisted as “activists” who have betrayed the neutrality of objective science.

It is clear that conservatives like Horowitz and Lieberman are only concerned with certain scientific findings. In Hoover’s day, the anthropological position on race trumped all others. Today, race is joined by the other issues described in the books discussed in this essay, as well as issues like sexuality and marriage. Thus, the American Anthropological Association recently released a “Statement on Marriage and the Family” asserting that:

The results of more than a century of anthropological research on households, kinship relationships, and families, across cultures and through time, provide no support whatsoever for the view that either civilization or viable social orders depend upon marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution. Rather, anthropological research supports the conclusion that a vast array of family types, including families built upon same-sex partnerships, can contribute to stable and humane societies (American Anthropological Association 2004).

Statements like these imply a certain position on political issues such as the proposed constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, but they do not, as conservatives assert, necessarily imply that the political position motivated the scientific findings. Yet, making this connection can immediately cause the speaker to become labeled as a partisan “activist” rather than a neutral scientist. Hoover did not care about anthropologists and other scientists who quietly published disconcerting, even Marxist, analyses in obscure journals. It was only when the obvious connections between these analyses and the real world are pointed out to a wider audience that the apparatus of repression was activated.

The authors of [Why America’s Top Pundits are Wrong](#) and [Anthropologists in the Public Sphere](#) make an excellent start towards challenging these assumptions that validate the unsupported stereotypes and hype of the pundits, while disqualifying the fruit of 100 years of research and debate as “opinion.” Rather than being cowed by the label of “dangerous,” they have embraced it, and tried to show how their research can be dangerous to the glib defenders of social inequality and militarism. However, their effectiveness may be limited by the structural factors that they ignore but Price stresses in [Threatening Anthropology](#)—the unequal playing field of the mass media, and the willingness of government to intervene to promote certain perspectives and silence others.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1991. "Writing Against Culture," in Richard Fox (ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology: Writing in the Present*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- American Anthropological Association. 2004. "Statement on Marriage and the Family from the American Anthropological Association." Website: <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/marriage.htm>
- Feinberg, Ben. 2002. "What Students Do not Learn Abroad." *Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Horowitz, David. 2006. *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing.
- Steigerwald, Bill. 2006. "Taking on the Campus Left." *FrontPageMagazine*. Website: <http://frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=21709>
- Wolf, Eric R. 1982. *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

*Ben Feinberg is a professor of cultural anthropology and Latin American studies at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina. He is the author of The Devil's Book of Culture: History, Mushrooms, and Caves in Southern Mexico and other writings on the construction of indigenous identity in Mexico, most recently "I Was There: Competing Indigenous Imaginaries of the Past and the Future in Oaxaca's Sierra Mazateca" in the *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*.*

© 2006, Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver.