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WORLD ANTHROPOLOGIES

Anthropologists Answer Four Questions about the Pandemic

Rosita Henry

James Cook University, Australia

Rosita Henry teaches cultural anthropology at James Cook University. She currently chairs the Ethics Taskforce of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA). Her publications include *Performing Place, Practicing Memory: Indigenous Australians, Hippies and the State* (Berghahn Books, 2012) and the collective ethnographic biography *A True Child of Papua New Guinea: Memoir of a Life in Two Worlds* (McFarland, 2019).

Question #1: Where are you located and how bad is, or was, the pandemic in your location, region, or country?

Comparatively speaking, I feel I am living in paradise. The city of Cairns in the tropical north of Australia, where I live and work, to date has had no deaths at all from Covid-19. We have had 48 recorded cases in our region; all recovered. Yet, in spite of these low numbers, the pandemic has been at the forefront of our lives, impacting work conditions, employment prospects, and social relations. As we increasingly went online, social media began to dominate our lives. On the one hand, social media is a truly wonderful way to keep in touch with family and friends, on the other hand it has torn people apart. Conspiracy theories have spread faster than the virus and friendships have disintegrated due to conflicts about who to blame for the pandemic and what to do about it, based on research individuals conduct via their social media bubbles. Anyone and no-one can lay claim to expertise.

Question #2: How has the pandemic affected you, your family, the institution where you work, and your work as an anthropologist?

Since March 2020, when my institution ordered all staff to work from home, my colleagues and I have been on a steep learning curve, making ourselves proficient in the use of technologies to assist the delivery of our online lectures, tutorials, workshops and seminars. Initially we rose to the challenge and worked collaboratively in good faith, but after a while some began to suspect that the virus was being used as an excuse to implement permanent changes to our working conditions that would not be acceptable outside of pandemic conditions. At the same time as staff were working above and beyond the call of duty, and making personal sacrifices to ensure obligations to our students were met during this crisis situation, a new workload model was developed and pushed forward – a model that is suspected to result in the reduction of teaching positions (and therefore job opportunities for graduate students and early career academics). One of the first casualties of the pandemic has been “the precariat” – staff who rely for their survival on casual teaching or research work. Such staff are easily terminated because they do not have the safety net of continuing contracts, but staff in continuing positions are also vulnerable. A culture of fear is pervasive among academics across the country that there will be further redundancies in our sector in 2021.

My work as an academic (teaching and research) anthropologist has been impacted in that I am not able to teach face to face in a way that I consider essential to turn out a future generation of anthropologists. In terms of my research, I am currently unable to do any field work. Additionally, I cannot take my students to Papua New Guinea for the ethnographic field school that I used to run there. Travel restrictions and the risk of virus transmission have made the field school impossible. At the same time, I worry for our current crop of doctoral

students who are not able to do the fieldwork projects they had originally planned. Some of them were precipitously recalled from the field last year and have had to adapt their projects.

Question #3: Do you blame anyone for the pandemic and, if so, who or what and why?

I do not “blame” any particular person, group, country, institution, or agency for the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic is an effect of a globally connected, economically and environmentally “overheated” world that humanity as a whole has created. Leaders and governments with the power and authority to have instituted effective measures to prevent the spread of a virus that has killed so many, must be held accountable, if they deliberately failed to act. However, there is no point in attributing blame to the place where it first mutated, as the virus could potentially have developed anywhere. From an inter-species perspective, the virus is us and we are it, which also means that we are not helpless against it.

Question #4: Are there aspects of the pandemic that anthropology helps you see?

An anthropological lens helps me to critically observe and understand the different ways that states across the world and their citizens have responded to the pandemic. Anthropology allows me to see beyond the virus, as something affecting the individual body, to the pandemic, as something affecting the social body and as an effect of the body politic. Anthropology leads me to see the virus not only as a problem for medical science but also a problem for the humanities and social sciences. Ironically, at the very time in human history that the humanities and social sciences appear to be most needed, they are under attack, with legislation in Australia passed to increase student fees for majors in our disciplines, in tandem with reduced government funding to universities.