INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
AS IF COMPASSION AND
COOPERATION MATTERED

By Caroline S. Conzelman

Abstract—We cannot resolve the complex problems of our global system by applying more of the principles and policies that caused them. We need new generations of global citizens who are brave enough to challenge the status quo, and to privilege compassion and cooperation over hierarchy and competition. Cultural anthropology provides the tools for such critical reflection and creative action. I explain here how I teach an international affairs course from an anthropological perspective, and I offer my views on why I believe professionals in business, development, government, the military, and elsewhere stand to gain from adopting anthropological methods and values.

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY WE ARE STUDYING ANTHROPOLOGY in an International Affairs class. This is not what I thought it was going to be about,” some first-year students inevitably tell me a few weeks into the semester. They have been reading about how an anthropological study of globalization demands that we look at not only the travel of information, ideologies, money, power, goods, and people around the world, but also the varied influences of these complex processes, and how people in particular places are adopting, adapting, or resisting them. They have signed up for my introductory International Affairs course (IAFS 1000) at the University of Colorado at Boulder with preconceived notions that they acquired somehow in high school, an expectation that such a course would feature the inner workings of the State Department and the

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Pentagon, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank, or perhaps presidential palaces and embassies around the world. Yes, I tell them, International Affairs does include the study of such powerful institutions, but a proper understanding of these political and economic dynamics stems from an analysis of the historical and cultural dialectics that produced them—and from an honest accounting of both the positive and negative impacts they have had on societies and environments.

It seems to me that university International Affairs programs emphasize courses in mainstream economics and political science so that their graduates will be able to succeed in elite institutions such as those listed above. While instruction in these normative fields is essential, students should also be exposed to the critiques that arise from a more culturally relative stance and ethnographic ground truthing. As an anthropologist, teacher, and international development volunteer, I see the world as a place where there are no universal doctrines but a fantastic diversity of effective livelihood strategies and metaphysical traditions growing out of deep and complex histories. I see a brilliant variety of cultural expression in everything from art, agriculture, and commerce to governance, healing, and spirituality. In the eloquent words of anthropologist and National Geographic explorer-in-residence Wade Davis:

> [A]ll cultures share essentially the same mental acuity, the same raw genius . . . . [T]he myriad cultures of the world are not failed attempts at modernity, let alone failed attempts to be us. They are unique expressions of the human imagination and heart, unique answers to a fundamental question: What does it mean to be human and alive? When asked this question, the cultures of the world respond in 7,000 different voices, and these collectively comprise our human repertoire for dealing with all the challenges that will confront us as a species.²

We must recognize that we cannot resolve the complex problems that our capitalist global system has caused by applying more of the principles and policies that created the problems in the first place, as Immanuel Wallerstein has so clearly shown.³ What we need, rather, are imaginative solutions that transcend ideological “-isms” and reflect both ancient and modern human intelligences. More precisely, we need new generations of global citizens who are brave enough to challenge the status quo, and to privilege compassion and cooperation over hierarchy and competition. Cultural anthropology—the discipline that most first-year college students have never heard of—provides the tools for such critical reflection and creative action.

In this article I offer my views on how higher education could better prepare students to make responsible contributions to international affairs and to go abroad for study, work, and travel. I explain my approach
to teaching an introductory International Affairs course from an anthropological perspective, a pedagogical style that permeates all of my work at home and abroad. I was trained as a cultural anthropologist at the University of Colorado at Boulder (PhD, 2007), and I conducted my dissertation fieldwork in Bolivia on community democracy among coca leaf farmers and their organized resistance to the U.S. “war on drugs.” I have developed and taught undergraduate courses since 2002 at CU-Boulder, the University of Denver, and the University Centers of the San Miguel in Telluride, and last summer I directed a Study Abroad anthropology seminar in Bolivia. I have also been a Volunteer Team Leader with Global Volunteers since 1995, coordinating two- and three-week service learning community development programs around the world. I speak from all of these experiences, but I am not an expert on International Affairs (IA) as a discipline. My educational philosophy and methodologies are works in progress as I continue to learn the painful lessons of a teacher and strive to do better by my students. I firmly believe, however, that the approach I advocate can apply equally to IA practitioners, business leaders, aid workers, policy makers, diplomats, and any scholar or professional concerned to address the multiple systemic crises facing our planet.

When I was hired as the associate director and full-time instructor for the Global Studies Residential Academic Program (G-RAP) at CU-Boulder two years ago, I took over the task of teaching an introductory IA course every semester. I designed it as an interdisciplinary study of globalization with a special focus on cultural anthropology. In my syllabus I frame my approach to teaching this course by using a standard IA introduction, and then explaining the “bias” that anthropology allows:

Since this is an interdisciplinary course, it is taught by faculty from each of the participating departments, and each brings the biases and paradigms of their own backgrounds to the course. This semester the course is taught by a cultural anthropologist, so we will study the interplay between the local and the global, and between individual or collective agency and social structure, always with an historical perspective. Anthropology requires that we evaluate the processes of globalization from diverse perspectives around the world rather than treat it as a general or universal fact experienced by everyone in the same way.

I also explain the meaning of globalization from an anthropological perspective and the topical emphases of the course:
Globalization refers to the complex travel of information, ideologies, money, power, goods, and people around the world, though there is little agreement among scholars on when or how these processes were set into motion, and even less on their influences. Globalization is not something that happens “naturally” on its own; its processes are created by individuals, organizations, corporations, and governments for particular reasons, with costs and benefits constantly shifting. Globalization is a formidable force that has resulted in integration and prosperity for many, but it has also had a range of negative impacts on people and environments around the world. We will explore critical issues that are currently shaping and being shaped by the world’s political, economic, and cultural systems, including free trade agreements, fair trade models, climate change, international development, transnational migration, popular uprisings, the war on drugs, and the global commodities cocaine and coffee.

Just as anthropology is interdisciplinary, so is IA; just as anthropology interrelates history, geography, sociology, ecology, political science, economics, religious studies, ethnic studies, cultural studies, etc., so does IA. But what is unique about anthropology is its unrelenting critique of hegemonic systems, its fearless challenge of power inequities, and its defense of the wide diversity of cultural ways of knowing and being in the world. There are no flawless metanarratives, no universal social truths. There is no “end of history” (much less a beginning). So why does the United States government continue to structure its foreign policies as if there were internationally agreed-upon political, economic, and cultural standards? Why doesn’t the mainstream media more consistently investigate the motivations and negotiations behind these policies and their varied effects?

There is always a diversity of perspectives through which to interpret and act in the world, but the loudest voices in our public sphere tend to be those with power and wealth who are interested in perpetuating their positions of privilege. The viewpoints that are most often ignored in the mainstream media, dominant political circles, corporate boardrooms, and financial institutions are those of the marginalized, the indigenous, the poor, the rural, the oppressed, the incarcerated, the dispossessed. These are the voices that anthropologists tend to listen to first; then we compare them to dominant narratives in an effort to recalibrate discursive and diplomatic power. In other words, as anthropologist and medical doctor Paul Farmer recommends, “Anthropologists should identify who is being shafted by the system, and stand by them.”
The distinction between mainstream political and economic systems and their alternatives is not merely an academic question; it is a question of vital importance if we are to help young people (and adults) develop the capacity to think critically about neoliberal globalization, U.S. foreign policy, and the alarming convergence of the financial, environmental, development, and climate crises. I tell my IAFS 1000 students, “This is not a feel-good class; this is a wake-up class. Ignorance is not bliss—in international affairs it can result in profound suffering and environmental catastrophe.” Most of my students have never considered how extreme inequality is partly to blame for economic recessions, or how free trade agreements can lead to widespread starvation and migration, or how drug prohibition actually increases the production and distribution of illicit substances. They have never been taught about how free market capitalism evolved from European colonialism and retains much of its structure, or how civil society organizations are routinely excluded (sometimes violently so) from international trade negotiations, or how corporations profit from war and covert military operations. Many do not even know that climate change is real or that toxic plastics fill our oceans. These types of analyses that make up my IA curriculum reveal the underbelly of our global political economic system. Students need to understand how policies, business models, or development initiatives that might make sense in the abstract, or from a Western cultural perspective, can have devastating consequences when implemented in the real world.

With this approach, however, I run the risk of depressing students into despondency or infuriating them into mutiny. I know I shake the foundations of what many thought was true or inviolable about the world. Fortunately, anthropology does not just bring to light painful truths about the state of our world; this course of study also helps inspire students by revealing vibrant alternative lifeways and avenues of transformation. I encourage students to consider the “adaptive insights and cultural priorities,” and the “vast archive of knowledge and expertise” of people who have different worldviews from theirs. “[R]ediscovering a new appreciation for the diversity of the human spirit as expressed by culture,” says Wade Davis, “is among the central challenges of our times.”

Cultural anthropologists use the ethnographic method to view the world from the bottom up, usually from the perspective of indigenous peoples or the poor and working classes—those who have less of a say in designing the world system but who must bear the brunt of its negative impacts. We aim to witness and understand how people experience and react to the currents of modernity and globalization, for example among nomadic pastoralists in Kenya, women factory workers in Malaysia, shantytown dwellers in Brazil, or First Nation tribes in the United States. We work to construct a holistic perspective of the history and culture of these societies by conducting long-term fieldwork in locations where many politicians, economists, and academics never go. We learn to speak the local language, we become participant observers, and we build relationships with people and places often far from our homes. We ask people what they think, how they feel, and why they practice the customs and livelihood strategies they do. We collect stories and histories. We figure out who is writing the rules of the game, who is benefiting and who is suffering. We look for patterns and inconsistencies;
we investigate and verify. Armed with these qualitative and quantitative data, we write, speak, and teach.

On a conceptual level, anthropology reminds us that social systems — religions, policies, economies, languages, or any set of rules or norms of behavior — did not arise from predetermined laws of nature. Social systems are always invented, fashioned over time by particular groups of people in particular settings in ways that always reflect geography, culture, history, and power. Social systems are not static but are in a continuous process of transformation, usually subtle but at times dramatic, as in the punctuated equilibrium of biological evolution. They represent human ingenuity and wisdom, and also folly and hubris. Once students understand this fundamental truth, then they can open to the realization that if a social system is not working or is causing harm in some way, people can change it. Indeed they have the right and the responsibility as human beings to do so, and always have. It is only the doctrines of fundamentalist ideologies — most commonly religious and economic — that make us feel as if we must abide by a rigid set of rules even when we know those rules are causing harm to people and environments, or indeed threatening the viability of the planet itself.

With Davis’s mandate to respect the “diversity of the human spirit,” students and professionals in any field can use the ethnographic method to analyze social systems and their cultural and historical contexts, whether at home or abroad. Each of us is also free to claim our individual and collective agency — in the spirit of Frances Moore Lappé’s “living democracy” — to follow our passions and work creatively to “meet common needs and solve common problems.” I make it clear to my students that no major or career path is better than any other, and that they may choose to work with or against any company, government agency, or organization, depending on their skills and interests. The objective is for each of us to figure out (through real-life trial and error) what we are good at and not so good at, and to stay true to our deepest-held values. Ultimately, we need smart, compassionate, enlightened, and dedicated people working in every dimension of our global society to confront violence and injustice and promote peace and well-being.

In order to prepare students for such a future, we need to train the next generations of students to be “solutionaries” (as humane educator Zoe Weil puts it), i.e., people empowered to generate innovative and durable solutions to any issue based on an honest assessment of the “true price” of our industries and institutions, and with an emphasis on the roots of those problems, whether local or global in scale. For example, when my students analyze conventional coffee commodity chains, they see that the cheap prices per pound of beans traded on the New York Stock Exchange mask enormous costs (in health, livelihoods, and sustainability) that coffee farmers are
forced to bear when they must sell their product for less than it cost them to produce it. Then we compare this model of corporate globalization with fair trade coffee markets, and students learn that when farmers are organized democratically into cooperatives, they can better advocate for themselves and demand the price for their beans that they need to cover their costs of production, care for their families, and invest in their communities. Those who are promoting and implementing fair trade practices are good examples of solutionaries. International Affairs instructors need to encourage students to look behind the scenes, think outside the box, question authority, and speak truth to power. In pedagogical terms, we need to help students develop higher order critical thinking—to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information into creative new models or solutions.

The allies of this approach to critical thinking are humility, open-mindedness, empathy, respect for self and others, access to information, cultural relativism, and perseverance. These characteristics explicitly underlie the practice of anthropology. The enemies of critical thinking, against which anthropology expressly advocates, include egocentrism, ethnocentrism, metanarratives, prejudice, propaganda, doctrinal thinking, lack of self-esteem, lack of transparency, and laziness. The potential individual and social benefits of critical thinking include more informed (and possibly happier) citizens, stronger communities, more effective democracy, less inequality and violence, and creative solutions to persistent social, economic, and environmental problems. These characteristics are relevant to many other academic disciplines and to people in any culture, for critical thinking is in fact a subjective process that is fostered through dialogue, social relationships, hard work, and a good deal of trial and error. I make these expectations clear to students with the following statement that I include in every syllabus I create:

You are encouraged to develop your own opinions at all times, and to bring to the discussion your particular disciplinary perspectives and personal experiences. I expect you all to push yourselves intellectually: to engage personally with the readings, challenge your assumptions and prejudices, find your voice to speak and write in a compelling way, and above all to cultivate an open mind and a spirit of respect for others in everything you do.

We are all connected . . . and we need to start acting like it.

In our globalized world, different cultural and social systems are more integrated than ever before. We are all connected—by all those flows of information, ideas, goods, and people, and simply because of our shared humanity—and we need to start acting like it. The way to honor this interconnectedness is to cultivate a sense of humility (that we in the West do not have all the answers and that academics and politicians are not the only experts in international affairs); the practice of solidarity (“standing by the shafted,” as Paul Farmer would say; or working toward universal emancipation, humanization, and an end to oppression, as Paulo Freire would say); and a spirit of compassion and cooperation (to build relationships across cultural and national boundaries and work together to resolve persistent social problems).
While plenty of professionals in many fields are also committed to honoring our common humanity, exposing undergraduate students to the theories and methods of anthropology is an exceptional way to help them build these skills and values. I tell my students that I don’t care whether or not they become “anthropologists” (i.e., go to graduate school and become an academic researcher or professor), just that they incorporate an anthropological sensibility into their lives, and especially into their future career paths. People in any profession—though most significantly those in business, economics, law, political science, engineering, education, journalism, medicine, development, and government—are likely to do less harm, spend resources more wisely, perpetuate fewer oppressive and exploitative systems, and be more effective at serving those they hope to serve by adding an ethnographic perspective into their research and practice.

I am always striving to more effectively foster critical thinking—in students and myself—as I continue to improve my courses and expand my understanding of international affairs, anthropology, and the global crises we face. I am building more service learning into my curricula so that students have the chance to directly apply course concepts to the real world and nurture all those anthropological ethics. Some of my students and colleagues assume that teaching in the manner I have outlined here is in service to a liberal political agenda, but this is a misinterpretation of my entire point. People on the left and the right have committed both atrocities and acts of deliverance. People on the left and the right have demonstrated both hubris and humility. The primary benefit that anthropology contributes to the study of international affairs is not a left vs. right issue; it is a matter of counterbalancing the global with the local, the vertical with the horizontal, the West with the rest.

Even so, not all of my students agree that adopting an anthropological perspective is right for them, and that is okay—but at least they know it exists. For many who engage deeply with the readings and teachings of my course—especially if they have lived abroad, worked with people in another country, or read more widely than the normal high school curriculum—they end the semester with a new (or renewed) commitment to think critically and act creatively in the world, each in their own way. They have told me, “Your class has brought me back to life, and inspired me so much;” and, “Everyone should be required to take this course;” and, “This learning experience changed my life.” This kind of regular feedback inspires me to stay true to my own deepest-held values in my chosen work as a teacher.

The most important thing that I want my students to remember from my classes is that they always have permission to stop, question, and think when they are presented with any piece of information. Whether the standpoint originates from the global political or corporate elite, from poor or indigenous peoples, or from those engaged in the middle class daily grind of privilege and work, each deserves thoughtful consideration free of ideological bias—followed by a critical academic analysis. When my students are someday participating in a company board meeting, an NGO conference, a United Nations summit, a Congressional committee session, a military strategy consultation, a social movement general assembly, or a community gathering, I want them to recall the anthropological imperative to actively cultivate humility, compassion, an open mind,
and a spirit of respect for others in everything they do. I want them to know that they can always decide to do things differently, that they have the right and the responsibility to challenge the status quo, and that they do not have to serve any ideology or policy that causes mass suffering or environmental devastation. Above all, I want them to embrace their full creative potential as individual and collaborative actors at home and abroad. How might our social, political, and economic systems at every scale be transformed if we thought of all peoples as global citizens in a living democracy, and approached problem-solving with anthropological values firmly in place?

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– Mark J. Redmond served as Lead Editor for this article.

NOTES

5 ANTH 4020/5020 “Democracy and Development in Bolivia,” three credit hours through CU-Boulder’s Study Abroad program.
8 I listened to Paul Farmer frame this approach to his professional work for the panel “A Public Anthropology!!!” at the 1999 American Anthropological Association meetings in Chicago, IL.
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