



ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Anthropology and Immigration in the Classroom

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If there is one major gap in the public debates on immigration, it is surely the limited attention to migration as a profoundly human experience that affects people as individuals and as members of families and communities. In that gap, of course, lies the anthropological advantage. Who else would understand as instinctively and as completely that migration policy is family policy as well as labor, social, cultural and economic policy. This recognition makes visible that migration policy, as human policy, must be anthropologically-informed.

Others in this special AN issue have commented on how the anthropological insights on this very human process of migration can enhance current policy debates. But it is also important to remember that one of the most important “publics” with which we deal involves students. How students are learning to think about migration today will set the tone for the public debate about migration through much of the remainder of this century. And the classroom may well be the best, broadest and most intellectually sophisticated forum that students will ever have for considering this subject.

So how can we approach immigration in the classroom? One option is certainly to utilize the rich ethnographic accounts we have in our own discipline for demonstrating the complex human dynamics of migration. Another option, however, is to use anthropology not for its ethnographic richness but for its integrative breadth. Anthropology thus provides not simply an explication of the immigration process on the human level but an overall multidisciplinary framework for understanding it.

In teaching immigration at the undergraduate level, my own experience is that this integrative role for anthropology is quite easily achieved. My undergraduate immigration course has, in fact, just become the core course for a new interdisciplinary minor in immigration studies. The course moves through a series of texts that present the perspectives of economics, literature, anthropology, sociology and history. These are illuminated by the students’ own experiences in a region (northern Virginia) that includes a wide range of immigrants, foreign students and refugees. Class discussion is lively and undergraduates enjoy debunking stereotypes.

Having read the preparatory texts, when the time comes to consider public policy on immigration, students are well prepared. They understand how rigid and narrow the formal public debates on immigration truly are and easily

generate more fluid notions of what public policy can and should be. They recognize that it should be future- not present-oriented and, above all, should involve carefully considered

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action. They understand that the US future that is being shaped by current decisions will be their future. Of course, I also hope they will remember that they learned this holistic approach to immigration and to immigration policy in an anthropology class.

This integrative role of anthropology emerges in my undergraduate and graduate courses on refugees as well. These courses also move through a series of texts from different disciplines in considering both situations that create refugees (eg, forced migration) and issues of resettlement in third countries (eg, refugees as a kind of immigrant). Here, the integrative task is especially complex for it must bridge core moral considerations, immense practical problems in managing refugee crises, complex legal

and practical problems in determining refugee status and resettlement situations in which refugees both do and do not resemble other migrants.

In the US case, this classroom focus on refugees provides some useful historical and cultural perspective on the overall relationship of immigrants to the US. Compare, for example, refugees with undocumented labor migrants. The large numbers of undocumented workers in the US today represent a clear tacit choice—or, as some argue, a necessity—for low cost, expendable labor. Furthermore, undocumented migration tends to select for the relatively young and those who are single or traveling without their families. That, of course, makes this labor all the more easily expendable. The classic refugee case, by contrast, has tended to

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produce more balanced age distributions and, when possible, family groups—sometimes very large family groups. Among the factors binding the US public to refugees, such as common political views or shared belief in religious liberty, is a sense that both US hosts and refugee newcomers are “family people.”

From a historical perspective it is clear that at certain moments the US prefers settled families for whom this country is both a refuge and a land of opportunity. At other times—and increasingly in recent years—the US seems to prefer workers alone. Here, then, lies a fundamental unanswered question in current immigration debates: What kind of social lives and families do we want immigrants to have now and in the future? What are we building with immigration: an economy or a society? It is perhaps only in the classroom, with time to read broadly and to discuss carefully, that an adequate consideration of these alternative futures is possible.

Although ethnographic depth is a valuable asset to anthropological research, anthropology’s breadth of vision can be just as important for answering these difficult questions. To anthropologists’ well-recognized role as cultural brokers we should add a new role as intellectual brokers, and perhaps one as policy brokers as well. Such new roles will be important in public debates, but they may be even more important in the classroom. There, we can facilitate a better intellectual grounding in migration issues for a new generation that, like us, may come to understand that migration policy is human policy.

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