

Teaching the Controversy: Lessons from a Student Debate About the Referendum to Rescind the AAA El Dorado Task Force Report

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I come to the El Dorado Controversy as an innocent bystander with no experience in Amazon anthropology. I have only passing knowledge of the key players in the controversy. I have no agendas to push, nor axes to grind. My scholarship is in North American prehistoric and historical archaeology. I currently teach courses in archaeology, evolutionary anthropology, and urban studies. I fully acknowledge humankind's status as a species of evolved primate, so I'm more inclined to be sympathetic to Darwinian theories of human behavior than I am to be critical of them. In fact one of my favorite courses to teach at the moment is something I call "The Cultured Ape", an aggressively transdisciplinary course that looks to integrate scientific and human understandings of the human condition on a model of E.O. Wilson's (1998) "consilience."

In spring quarter 2005 I was charged with teaching an "Ethics of Professional Practice" course in our graduate masters degree program. At the time responsibility for this course rotated among our faculty. Colleagues with previous experience teaching the course reported that once they finished presenting the rather colorful ethics history of the discipline they had to struggle mightily to keep student attention, even over a short 10 week quarter. Student evaluators of the course reported that the subject matter got pretty redundant pretty quick. This is probably related to the relative thinness of the anthropological literature on ethics, although students also have issues with the quality of the available teaching texts (often describing them as disjointed and dated). Happily, my turn to teach the Ethics course came around at exactly the time that the AAA was debating the Referendum to rescind the El Dorado Task Force's Final Report. This fortuitous convergence of circumstances amounted to a pedagogical gift from the gods.

One expression of that pedagogical gift—Robert Borofsky's marvelous book *Yanomami: The Fierce Controversy and What we Can Learn From It* (2005)—noted that the controversy made for an excellent "teaching moment." Borofsky also noted the extraordinary role that students had played in shaping discussion of the controversy via their many comments on the Task Force preliminary report posted to the AAA website between March and April 2002 (Borofsky 2005:283). Student comments amounted to 77% of the total. They took the Association to task for not directly addressing the allegations made against Professor Chagnon and others. Continuing public discussion of the controversy on AAA and Public Anthropology websites in the spring of 2005 also meant that my students could contribute to the debate as we learned about the bigger ethical issues at stake.

The El Dorado debate formed the central case study of the course. Students organized themselves into three teams: 5 students argued on the “For Rescission” side, 5 on the “Against Rescission” side, and 7 sat on a panel of jurors. Background debate materials included the AAA Task Force Final Report, the Referendum to Rescind the Report, the AAA Code of Ethics, Patrick Tierney’s *New Yorker* essay, *Current Anthropology* commentary on Tierney’s book, the Gregor and Gross “Guilt by Association” article in *American Anthropologist*, the many Public Anthropology website commentaries, and other articles and reviews generated by the controversy. Douglas Hume’s remarkable web archive was an enormous help in providing context and background material. Teams took responsibility to collect other material as they saw fit. One enterprising student reached Professor Chagnon by phone at his home in northern Michigan. Somewhat flustered because he wasn’t really expecting to get through, all he remembered of that conversation was Professor Chagnon commenting that Rob Borofsky was a person whose framing of the controversy we could trust.

After hearing concise and well-researched arguments from both sides over the course of two weeks the student jury voted 5-2 in favor of the Referendum to rescind the Task Force Report. This 71% majority exactly predicted the results of the official AAA vote on the Referendum that was held two months later (846 members voting for the Referendum, 338 voting against). The central, overriding concern of the majority was for fairness and due process. The AAA was seen to be in violation of its own Code of Ethics, especially the principle prohibiting adjudication. The five person majority deemed it paramount that existing process be adhered to—whatever that process happened to be. It worried about the message that a failure to rescind would send to future anthropology students; namely, that rules don’t matter and that ethical codes can be ignored or manipulated at will. If practicing anthropologists are to be judged by existing ethical standards governing professional behavior, then so should their professional Association.

The jury’s minority dissent focused on the anthropologist’s responsibility for the integrity and reputation of their discipline and—most importantly—the profession’s moral obligation to the human community writ large. These commitments are embedded in the existing AAA Code of Ethics. To the extent that the Task Force report is informed by these commitments, the greater public good served by the report trumped the negatives associated with the (arguably) flawed process that generated it. The minority believed that the Association is not well-served by an ethical code that lacks provisions for ensuring individual accountability. It argued that if acceptance of the Report moves us closer to an ethics code with some “teeth”, then so much the better for the profession’s long-term health.

The jury majority expressed great sympathy for some aspects of the minority position, especially the belief that the ethical issues at stake in the controversy should not be allowed to fall through the cracks. Rather, they should be the focus of continued discussion and debate.

A vote of the entire class was taken at the close of debate proceedings. With 100% of students voting the results were 10 in favor of the Referendum, 6 against, and 1 abstention. Whatever their vote on the Referendum, none of the student debate participants were impressed with our discipline’s history of engagement with questions of ethical practice. This negative

impression was dramatically reinforced when only 1184 AAA members—barely 10% of the entire AAA membership—turned out to formally vote on the Referendum in June 2005.

Student opinion was subsequently written up and posted to AAA and Public Anthropology websites, where it got the attention of Les Sponsel and Terry Turner. Each of these colleagues emailed me with comments on our class debate, something for which I was very grateful because their input greatly enriched the student educational experience. For example, Terry abstracted his argument that AAA task forces can quite reasonably and effectively function as “truth commissions” rather than “para-judicial bodies”, and in so doing not violate the legalistic terms of the AAA’s stated policy against ethics adjudications. This argument really resonated with students, including some who had voted in favor of the Referendum. One of these students subsequently wrote to me that:

“Turner’s comments [are compelling]. If the task force didn’t break “due process” then I see no reason why [the report] shouldn’t stand. I don’t buy the “culture of accusation” stuff; we have to be able to call unethical practices to account in some way. Why can’t the task force report be a place to go in terms of how we scrutinize our ethical concerns in the discipline? Is this really an issue of Chagnon’s “guilt” of breaking ethical codes and whether you personally believe he acted in the best interests of the Yanomami? Gregor and Gross certainly make it about Chagnon’s “innocence”... Hopefully other universities will take notice of our in-class debate and perhaps provide some tools (i.e., relevant documents, suggested methods for proceeding, etc.) to do something similar in their own ethics classes. Potentially, students that act out the debate today will sit on a task force in the future.”

I was proud of the way my students engaged with the “fierce controversy.” I completely understood the majority opinion that the Final Task Force Report should be rescinded. However, my own conscience directed me to vote against the Referendum and to post a separate opinion to the relevant websites. My vote was based, in large part, on the kind of pragmatist philosophical commitment that Rob Borofsky, in his *Yanomami* book, champions as “another way” to engage the profession’s ethical dilemmas (Borofsky 2005:98). These commitments include judging truth-claims on the basis of their social effects in the world, enlarging the public conversation about compelling human problems, and recognizing the important role that novelists and journalists (even bad ones) can play in building human community and in expanding the scope of who counts as a member.

These arguments resonated with me because of the work I’ve done to actively promote a pragmatist practice for archaeology (Saitta 2003, 2008). But mostly my “against” vote was based on a deep concern about three trivializations evident in the many commentaries by referendum supporters that were published or posted in 2005. These included (1) **trivialization of anthropological ethics**, evident in arguments that any ethical breach less than genocide is equivalent to a “parking violation” (as well as in appeals to the biblical principle “let s/he who is without sin cast the first stone”); (2) **trivialization of anthropological representation**, evident in rather cynical suggestions that the Yanomami would have been demonized by politicians and the press regardless of the “fierce people” appellation, and that the alternative concept of “noble savage” has never saved tribal folk from exploitation anyway; and (3) **trivialization of advocacy**

anthropology, evident in claims that it suffers from a lack of “objectivity” and other legitimate intellectual content, and that Chagnon critics are motivated by some perverse combination of political correctness, postmodern self-loathing, biophobia, and personal envy of colleagues who’ve sold more books or achieved greater fame. These trivializations don’t help a discipline always at risk of intellectual and cultural marginalization in those periods when there’s nothing salacious to report about how our “tribe” functions. Echoing the DU student debate minority position, I believed that there was much more to be gained by rejecting the Referendum (and the epistemology that informed it) and moving forward. At the time it was not clear that meaningful follow-up on the important ethical issues at stake would happen if the Task Force report was rescinded, especially given the AAA’s uneven history of progress on matters relating to professional conduct. It struck me as worth taking a chance that the report would move us into a different, and better, ethical space.

In 2010 it seems to still be an open question as to whether we’re occupying that better ethical space. As Les Sponsel notes in his roundtable presentation, since 2000 there has been a significant increase in the number of published articles in anthropology dealing with some aspect of ethics. The AAA continues to debate suggested revisions of our Ethics Code, albeit perhaps not with the speed or comprehensiveness that some would like. On the other hand, removal of the now-rescinded Final Task Force Report from the AAA website, as noted by Turner and Sponsel in their contributions to this roundtable, is certainly troubling and does indeed raise the specter of censorship by our tribal leadership. Equally troubling is evidence that some of our academic clans have also been looking to censor rather than engage, especially around the fraught topic of biology’s role in human affairs. When I was interviewing for administrative positions in early 2008 I encountered an entire anthropology faculty that was actively lobbying for the removal of a course in evolutionary psychology from their institution’s undergraduate curriculum because its subject matter and central text were perceived to violate the apparently unquestionable anthropological truth that only culture, and not biology, shapes human behavior. Such efforts—exemplary of the ideological polarization that has characterized anthropological debate in recent years—are astonishing to me. What happened to the academic and democratic commitment to counter bad speech with *better* speech or, in this instance, bad courses with better courses? It seems to me that anthropology, as a discipline, should be traveling a higher road than this.

Since 2005 our faculty at DU have made some changes in the way that we teach anthropological ethics, although not in the direction favored by key commentators on the El Dorado controversy (Borofsky 2005:283-289). Believing that a separate course on ethics reinforces a divide between ethical and other forms of anthropological inquiry we’ve eliminated our Ethics of Professional Practice course in favor of weaving ethical education into *every* course in our curriculum. In 2005 student narrative evaluations were unanimous in identifying the El Dorado debate as the highlight of course, describing it as “educational”, “exciting”, “challenging”, and nicely integrative of ethical theory and practice. In other regards the course evaluations were deeply contradictory. Students seemed to favor having a separate ethics course, but they also expressed extreme impatience with ethical theory and were much keener to tackle concrete, on-the-ground ethical dilemmas. It struck our faculty that, given the nature of our graduate program (a two year program distinguished by its focus on integrating the academic and applied dimensions of anthropology) and our students’ educational goals (often narrowly career-

enabling), more is to be gained by teaching ethics *across the curriculum* rather than by combining ethical history, theory, and cases into a single stand-alone course.

Finally, our faculty's collective commitment to public anthropology of various sorts has intensified our exploration of Borofsky's "pragmatic" way of engaging with ethical issues in the discipline. For example, when I teach our graduate Anthropological Theory course today I like to counterpoise *pragmatist* epistemologies to the already well-developed *realist* and *interpretivist* epistemologies that typically compete for attention within the discipline. Of particular note in this comparison is the pragmatist's view that objectivity doesn't lie in the assertion of authorities but rather in the open, public analysis of divergent perspectives (Borofsky 2005:18). This view implies that scientific and ethical progress are *both* best measured by our ability to respond to the needs of ever more inclusive groups of people (Rorty 1994). Given these developing intellectual and pedagogical commitments I can't be sure how my students would vote on the El Dorado Referendum if we had the same debate today. However, the prevailing student sensibility is such that I'm pretty sure that the Referendum would lose, so that free and unfettered debate might win.

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