Book Review/ Compte rendu

Fassin, Didier (Ed.). *If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017. $27.95, 358 pp., paper (9780822369776).

In this edited collection, ethnographers discuss their experiences of seeking to serve and/or influence non-academic audiences. In his Introduction, Didier Fassin identifies two components of this process of publicization: popularization and politicization. The first is the requirement to tailor what is offered to the needs of distinctive audiences. The second concerns the political interfaces between academic work and the activities of journalists, interest groups, and governmental or other organizations. Most contributors are anthropologists, and the range of contexts discussed extends across the globe. All are committed to some notion of 'public ethnography', analogous in key respects with 'public sociology'. However, their orientations vary somewhat, and their experiences even more so. The central focus of the book is not the *justification* for public ethnography – that is largely taken for granted – but rather the difficulties and dilemmas its practice involves; though one author (Hamdy) does raise the question of whether public engagement is always a 'laudable aim'. Many of the problems discussed echo those prompted in the past by 'applied', 'action', or 'militant' anthropology, as well as by anthropological advocacy.

The papers come from workshops organized by Fassin, and he provides an Introduction, and an Epilogue in which he discusses his research on French police and prisons; Gabriella Coleman, studying a digital activist movement, outlines strategies and problems in her dealings with journalists; Ghassan Hage reflects on giving a presentation in Palestine about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; Kelly Gillespie explores the political complexities of testifying before a commission in South Africa; Manuela Ivone Cuhna discusses her experience of addressing policy-oriented audiences in Portugal; Federico Neiburg provides an account of his simultaneous involvement in ethnography and peacemaking in Haiti; Lucas Bessire advocates 'indigenizing public ethnography' in the context of the Grand Chaco region of Bolivia and Paraguay; Jonathan Benthall writes about his experiences in testifying about Palestinian charity organizations in trials in the US; Vincent Dubois examines how policy ethnography turned into public ethnography when studying a welfare or-

ganization in France; Nadia Abu El-Haj discusses attempts by pro-Israeli activists to prevent her obtaining tenure in a US university; Unni Wikan considers the difficulties and dangers of public ethnography in relation to migration and 'honour' killings; *João* Biehl examines a failed collaboration with medical researchers and government officials in Brazil; and Sherine Hamdy looks at the difficulties involved in countering the contrasting prejudices of secular Western and East Asian Muslim audiences.

There are some fascinating papers here, illustrating many of the issues raised by public ethnography. There is attention to *both* components of that phrase: to what 'going public' can involve, as well as to what is the distinctive contribution of ethnography. In his opening discussion, Fassin acknowledges variation in what it means for ethnographic work to be public. In a broad sense, almost all ethnographies could be so described, since findings are usually 'published' and thereby become publicly available. Moreover, ethnographies sometimes attract wide attention without ethnographers seeking publicity; and, in many societies, there are pressures to widely disseminate and publicize research to increase its 'impact'. However, while the title of this book conceptualizes the public role of the ethnographer as 'telling truth', 'public ethnography' generally goes beyond this, involving a 'critical' orientation whose aim is to shape public opinion or policy, usually in the service of broadly Leftist ideals.

The issue of politicization is clearly an important one. In the Introduction, Fassin suggests that it "should be understood […] in the sense of the Greek polis, a public space where individuals exercise their rights as citizens for the realization of the common good" (6). Fassin sees it as involving two operations. First, 'debate', in which the ethnographer translates and disseminates knowledge, while the public appropriates and contests it. And, second, 'action', which is the transformation of the knowledge into practical decisions. However, questions arise about this conceptualization, in light of subsequent chapters.

First, ancient Athenian democracy does not provide a satisfactory model for the encounters with lay people the contributors describe, either in its actual form or in the idealized picture of it sometimes presented (e.g., in Hannah Arendt's work). Many of the contexts discussed in this book involve fundamental inter-communal conflicts, and social relations are adversarial, rather than deliberative in pursuit of some common good. Furthermore, this model does not allow for a specialized intellectual role of the kind claimed by the public ethnographer.

Second, the proposal that social science knowledge can be 'transformed' (albeit after appropriation and contestation) into 'practical orientations and decisions' implies that the latter flow directly from factual knowledge about what happened and why. But practical conclusions ne-

cessarily also depend upon other types of assumption than factual ones, relating to: what are desirable goals (and for whom); what are and are not ethical means; and what are acceptable costs of action, in terms of side-effects and unintended consequences. Social science, even ethnography, cannot validate these value assumptions, so the question arises: how are the limits to its expertise to be respected – especially given pressures from all sides to breach them? When are we acting as ethnographers, and when are we playing the role of citizens, policy advisors, or political activists? And how should these different roles shape our behaviour? What counts as misuse of ethnographic authority, and what is to be done when this occurs? While, in his introduction, Fassin suggests that public ethnographers are 'modest' and respect the limits of their expertise, there is little clarification of what this involves, and his claim is by no means obviously true.

The problematic character of public ethnography in this respect can be brought out through a comparison with the stance adopted by Matthew Levitt, a political scientist and counter-terrorism expert. He is a 'public intellectual,' putting forward political diagnoses and recommendations, like many of this book's contributors. He has been very influential, through his publications and through other activities, such as acting as an expert witness in trials. He is mentioned in the chapter by Benthall, who rightly questions the evidential base on which he operates, and his failure to engage with critics of his work. Levitt's arguments about the conflicts in West Asia directly contradict Benthall's, and those of several other contributors to this book. The question is, though: what is the key difference between public ethnography and his approach? Does it lie, as Benthall suggests, in the capacity of ethnography to provide accurate information and contextual understanding? This may be true to some degree, but the most striking difference is the contrasting value judgments Levitt makes about the parties to these conflicts. So, more attention could have usefully been given in the book to the role of values in public ethnography. In particular, we might ask: does this approach lead to ethnography becoming politicized in a way that threatens the distinctive contribution it can make via provision of value-relevant factual knowledge? Interestingly, El-Haj refers to 'overpoliticization', but gives this concept little attention.

A final point: despite what Fassin recommends in the Introduction, neither his own contributions nor those of the other authors seem to be based on systematic empirical investigation of the dissemination and use of ethnographic research findings. Instead, the discussions consist largely of these researchers' reflections on their experiences in taking on the role of public ethnographer. These are certainly of interest and value,

but there is a blurring of the distinction between research findings and practical or political inference here, as elsewhere.

This is, then, a stimulating collection of articles that illustrates, examines, and generates important questions about the project of public ethnography, and about public social science more generally. It deserves to be widely read.

The Open University Martyn Hammersley

Martyn Hammersley is Emeritus Professor of Educational and Social Research at The Open University, UK. He has carried out research in the sociology of education and the sociology of the media. However, much of his work has been concerned with the methodological issues surrounding social enquiry. He has written several books, including (with Paul Atkinson) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (Third edition, Routledge 2007), *What's Wrong with Ethnography* (Routledge, 1992), *Reading Ethnographic Research* (Second edition, Longman 1997), and most recently *The Limits of Social Science* (Sage, 2014).