Reaching a Global Readership from the Margin

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The idea of world anthropologies assumes that different kinds of anthropologies are practiced by scholars with different backgrounds in different parts of the world. It therefore acknowledges the diversity and relativity of knowledge about human culture. As such, it goes against the position that anthropology, or for that matter any other discipline, should form a single system of knowledge followed by all scholars, regardless of their national or regional intellectual traditions. A hypothetical proposal of world anthropology, with the last word in the singular, would have such allusions. For most anthropologists, the concept of cultural diversity and relativity has long been a valuable, if not indisputable, part of their scholarship, so it would seem there is nothing new about the ongoing world anthropologies projects.

Yet much remains to be done. A major difficulty that must be overcome is the power imbalance in the academic world system. As I wrote in Native Anthropology: The Japanese Challenge to Western Academic Hegemony (2004), today’s anthropology constitutes a world system in which the US, Great Britain and France occupy the center. These three countries are powerful enough to relegate other countries to the periphery. Under this system, esteemed knowledge about human culture is produced in the central countries, which is then distributed through publishers with global networks to peripheral countries where people eagerly study and absorb that knowledge to catch up. Peripheral scholars are therefore placed in the position of consumers or interpreters at best of ideas coming from the center. They seem seldom expected to contribute as knowledge producers. When they occasionally attempt to do so, the referee system will effectively block their participation because peripheral scholars’ writings frequently produce a strong sense of difference. Thus local scholarship is, however valuable, doomed to be unpublished unless it meets the standards set at the center of the academic world system.

As a partial solution to this problem, I propose rethinking publication strategies in peripheral countries. The language barrier is not the only factor in the power imbalance. Take, for example, Japan’s National Museum of Ethnology occasional papers series called Senri Ethnological Studies, which is published in English. Today this series comprises 76 volumes, many of which have been highly received among specialists both inside and outside Japan. Despite this, SES’s global influence is limited. There is, however, an exception. One volume was later re-issued by the University of California Press. The content was almost the same, but it reached a global readership and was highly praised. Distribution then is the key to a successful dissemination of ideas.

The question is how to get publishers in the central countries involved. For lack of space, I make a few suggestions to anthropologists working outside the core. First, participate as an editor for a book series. For instance, Japan Anthropology Workshop, a European-based international association of Japanese studies, has published with Routledge a series of technical books on Japan, and the editorial board includes one Japanese anthropologist and his Israel counterpart. Second, negotiate with a publisher to start a new book series. A prominent Japanese anthropologist has recently launched, together with his British colleague, a new series called “Asian Anthropologies” from Berghahn Books. Third, start a publisher of one’s own. This is difficult, but not without precedent. Trans Pacific Press, for example, was founded in 1999 by a Japanese sociologist residing in Australia. It features English translations of books written by leading Japanese scholars.

In the age of the Internet, printed books are not the only means of getting one’s voices heard, but they are still the most prestigious form of scholarly communication. Publication projects like those described above have already helped reduce the distance between the center and the periphery in the academic world system. If we persist in such efforts, and if they are reciprocated by central scholars, the potential of world anthropologies will be fully realized.

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