

## Marginality, trauma, democratization (and ambivalence): Rethinking graduate education

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I want to start by saying a few words about how this event has come into being. In Chicago where I'm in the graduate program, the first course you take when you go to grad school is an intense, pure theory seminar, locally known as "Systems." When I took it a couple of years ago, I found it a quite troubling course -- which doesn't mean that I thought it was *bad*, but that it raised all kinds of ethical, sociological and existential questions. So I thought I would write an essay expressing my concerns, but a professor suggested to me that it would be better if I got other people to write essays along with me, analytical essays about graduate school, anthropological analyses of anthropology, so to speak. It would seem too subjective if it was just my own theorization of my personal experience, he worried. And so, after fumbling for a while, and eventually finding some amazing people to join as co-organizers (like Amy), there are now about twenty essays slated to come out this spring under the general rubric of graduate student socialization in anthropology. This panel is our attempt to try to present a portion of this project in a more public setting. The aim is to give a more analytical edge to our understandings of ourselves. The aim is to sharpen our sense of the ethical and political contradictions and problems of our practices. The aim is to stir up discussion on how anthropology, and in particular graduate education, could be improved and reformed.

### Social reproduction on the margins of the discipline

We can gain some initial analytical leverage by first thinking of ourselves – by which I mean graduate students – as participants in what Bourdieu called the academic field. In other words, we're social actors who are constantly renegotiating our relations to other actors, and we do so in terms of social strategies oriented towards the stakes and dominant values of the academic game. For a moment, it sounds simple: all we should have to do is to learn how to play the game and then "win" it. But the story gets more complicated when we consider two important facts. First, the game's stakes and values are murky and constantly swirling, twisting, and changing, as actors stumble and quarrel over them. Second, our position, as graduate students, is not one of full membership in academia; rather it's what Jean Lave (Lave and Wenger 1991) called "legitimate peripheral participation," a position where we learn by doing academic work and by watching other people doing it and imitating them. We're on the margins of the academic world, in a liminal position. And we are objectively vulnerable by virtue of our social position, our relative lack of intellectual or academic power.

There are social processes at work here extending beyond anyone's particular situation. First of all, it strikes me that these moments of professional marginality are often ones of social exclusion and stratification, in which the "better" members of the community are blessed with professional success and the "worse" members are screened out. This starts with the applications process but continues with course grades, evaluations from faculty, grant applications, and eventually job applications. And I want to emphasize that these competitive selection processes are generally substantially *irrational*, since the selection criteria are inevitably partial and arbitrary, information about people is indirect and insufficient, and the selection process itself tends to happen in bad conditions such as overwhelming time constraints on the faculty (Brenneis 1994, 1999; Plutzer 1991). In other words, professional selection is a partly arbitrary and unreasonable affair — necessary though it may be given the

economic constraints that limit the size of the profession.

This selection is only a piece of two broader social processes that happen in graduate schools: first, the social reproduction of anthropology as a discipline; second, the reproduction of social class in America. Admittedly, not all anthropology professors have identical class membership — some are affluent members of elite institutions, while others are ill-paid adjuncts — but in getting graduate degrees, anthropologists acquire a professional status and tend to accrue a lot of cultural capital, even if not equivalent economic capital. The point, anyway, is that anthropological socialization is linked to social processes that extend across generations and throughout American society, ones that may not be immediately apparent in our daily life because they move too slowly.

### Trauma and reflexivity

Of course, we don't experience large-scale social processes directly. From an experiential point of view, our socialization as graduate students can be seen as a process of transformative trauma. I call it transformative, because crossing the margins of the academic field is not a smooth or linear process, not one where we're passively transmuted into academic professionals, but rather a process that has structural boundaries, points of conflict and divergence and reversal. And it's trauma for two reasons. First, because it's full of negative psychological potential, the potential to feel awful, to be overwhelmed by anxiety, hesitation, ambivalence, sometimes anger or sadness. These emotional states, I would argue, are social products too: we could use a structural analysis of our emotional lives. But it's also trauma because something is inevitably *lost* in the socializing process as well as gained. Our academic jargon can cut us off from those who don't speak it, our professional commitments can threaten our social relationships, we have to give up many other things in the world we might have wanted to do, debts can mount up, we can become invested in our profession in a way that alienates us from others, as if our discipline were a suit of armor. Call it an objective, social trauma: like other rites of passage, graduate education involves separation and not just integration. And it may be that vulnerable actors like graduate students are able to analyze the wounds of socialization better than the faculty can, like the canary in the coal mine. Not to mention that disciplinary norms are never as apparent as when we transgress them through unfamiliarity.

### Ethics and democratizing reforms

Finally, it seems to me that if we're going to make it our business to analyze and critique the social practices of others — in terms of human rights, for instance — then first we ought to make sure that we live up to our own standards. Moreover, we ought to ask whether our standards and values are coherent in the first place. For instance, we believe in democratic equality, and yet we also believe in allotting money and prestige according to naturalized hierarchies of merit, smartness, rigor, novelty, and so on. In short, our desires for social distinction and recognition are often in conflict with our egalitarian impulses.

And even if we wanted to democratize graduate education, that could mean many different things. It could mean a democracy of *ends*, where we would more collectively choose the *outcomes* of graduate education, on what ways of being and doing and knowing we should walk away with. Some clamor for greater employability as consultants, others long for better skills as teachers. Or it could mean a democracy of *means*: where we got more input into pedagogy, into the structure of our programs, into our relations with our professors, into how to make socialization an instrumentally effective process. Or it could mean a democracy of intellectual production, where students were treated as potentially equal intellectual workers: instead of seeing students as would-be professors, we could see professors as students who

just happen to have a lot more experience.

I think for me personally, the project is an attempt to find a metalanguage in which students can speak authoritatively about institutional life, and thus a way of refusing our subordinate institutional role or even effecting a momentary inversion of hierarchy. In part, the aim is to make vulnerability into a source of power and a source of critical reform. But I should tell you about a colleague in the UK, Ingie Hovland, who edits a journal called *Anthropology Matters* that has published many articles on graduate education. She says:

"Anthropology Matters gives people a space to raise critical questions about the discipline, but precisely in doing so, it seems that at least some of them more firmly establish themselves within this discipline, and move closer toward "becoming" anthropologists" (n.d.)

In another recently article, Steve Sangren (2007) has suggested that anthropology of anthropology is impossible because it violates professional norms of etiquette. I think it's the opposite: reflexive analysis is all too possible; we can talk reflexively to our heart's content, but the question we face today is, what can we do with it? So I hope that in our discussions today we can explore the contours of graduate education in anthropology, articulate some of its contradictions, and think together about how things might be improved.

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