

On 9th November 2016, with BBC Radio 4 switched on for breakfast, Donald Trump's voice filled the room. It was a brief speech and it sounded civil. This struck people by surprise after all the indecencies of the previous months and weeks, although some of us had to turn off the radio: 'It was too hypocritical.' Indeed, one could but query the democratic process which limited the US voters' choice to two candidates who both were lacking in stature and decorum. Watching the campaigns on TV had been worrying, to say the least, and in large part distasteful.

At eleven o'clock that Wednesday morning, on their way to the traditional coffee morning offered by the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, Paola and Elisabeth bumped into Tang Yun, an academic visitor from the PR China. The Trump election was the theme of the day. Unlike the Brexit vote, it was not an outright surprise (it had been predicted, for instance, by observers like Michael Moore, known to us through his film 'Sicko'). However, the Trump victory was somewhat unbelievable, now that it was a reality. We were trying to make sense of how, after all, this outcome was possible. In this context it was the visitor from China who brought up the most convincing explanation based on an article by Frederick Damon published thirteen years earlier in the *Journal of Taiwanese Anthropology*, on the margins of the Anglophone academy.

According to Damon's (2003) illuminating social anthropological analysis, 'What good are elections?' (reproduced in abbreviated form below), Trump's speech could be read not as that of a hypocritical president-elect, but of an American citizen closely following a cultural script. As presidential candidate, Trump had managed to present himself as bestial and brutish, as coming from below, from Nature. By contrast, Hilary Clinton was seen as being stationed at America's cultural and political centre, in D.C., an exponent of Culture. She had already effectively worked in central government, and the statistics suggested that the electorate in Washington who worked in her vicinity had voted overwhelmingly for her (e.g. *The New York Times* 2017).

Damon (2003) provides historical materials, starting with the legendary figures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, to show that they had all won the presidential elections by foregrounding their close ties to Nature – one had been employed as a surveyor in Virginia's Wild West, the other was illegitimate. They had managed to style themselves as standing in opposition to Culture, the genteel culture in London and the metropolises of its

former colonies. ‘Mud-slinging’ was part of the electoral process, which Damon likened to so-called ‘joking relations’ in African cultures, which in his analysis have a tension-releasing, cathartic effect. According to Damon’s structuralist analysis, once the presidential candidates became presidents, they would switch from beast to human, from Nature to Culture.

Damon’s analysis ultimately aims to explain how the US educational system that Damon sees as producing social difference and inequality stands in relation to democratic governance. This is an ingenious aspect of his study that will be dealt with only tangentially here. Damon (2003: 51-2) furthermore says in passing that the media do not matter. This may or may not have been the case in 2003. In the recent presidential election, however, the media did matter. It has been pointed out that Facebook and Google have helped spread misinformation, with a definite impact on public opinion (Isaac 2016). The distortion of facts, the manufacturing of fake news and hoaxes with the potential for them to spread virally online, has been seen as a primary factor explaining the electoral outcome (Manjoo 2016; Penny 2017).

In the UK, the Brexit shock and the Trump victory have been seen by some as symptomatic of the growing divide between the working and middle classes. Some intellectuals have accused the middle classes of being completely out of touch with those who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Others blame the working classes, now on welfare benefits due to unemployment. However, as the polls have shown, the outcome was less a matter of class than of orientations to the future (with young people voting against Brexit and against Trump) and memories of the past, of solidarity during ‘the war’ and at work (with rural populations voting for Brexit and the rust belt voting for Trump) (YouGov UK 2016; The Electoral Commission; Huang et al. 2016). Finally, it would appear that (hyper-)mobility rather than social inequality, (excessive) fluidity rather than a consistently reproduced but static social difference, were the main threats that determined the outcome of the elections in both the USA and the UK (Kaufmann 2016).

This *Special Issue* of the *Journal of the Anthropological Society at Oxford* argues that anthropology matters, even as taught in a perceived ivory tower, the University of Oxford, and that it does so especially in times of crisis. Rather than aiming to add yet another publication to the avalanche of social-scientific comments on the Trump election, this *JASO Special Issue*, ‘Anthropology matters, especially in times of crisis’, presents graduate students’ reflections on why they are enrolled in a graduate course to learn about anthropology, which in their case is a master’s course in medical anthropology. They were

asked to address the questions why are you reading anthropology, why might anthropology matter, and why does it matter, especially in times of crisis?

In the afternoon on that day the graduate students' educational programme progressed as usual. At five o'clock we held a seminar central to their overall training, as it discussed the notion of 'assemblages'. It critically engaged with processes of globalization and stressed that transnational knowledge regimes do not operate in disembodied fields of power and that re-assembled chunks of their material culture ultimately contribute to their medical efficaciousness. The case study in focus was *sowa rigpa* and the 'Tibetan medical' industrial complex (see Kloos et al. forthcoming). However, attendance at the seminar had plummeted by more than half compared to previous weeks. And in the following days, undergraduate tutorials, as well as supervision meetings with doctoral students, had to be postponed due to underperformance.

Clearly, the body politic, i.e. the Trump election, had affected the individual bodies of the students studying medical anthropology at Oxford. When asked, students would reply that they could not focus and concentrate, and hence could not write the essay of 2500 words they are assigned weekly; that they had to catch up with sleep, having stayed awake through the night(s) of the election; that they had been in bed crying out their eyes in despair; that they had been on Skype and on the phone, trying to overcome their shock by talking to their loved ones overseas. Many students enrolled at Oxford in medical anthropology are North Americans, but not all who underperformed in the week following the Trump election were US citizens. Evidently, US politics had reverberations beyond the USA alone, and even the supposed ivory tower, Oxford, was affected too.

In what follows we present personal statements reflecting on peoples' decisions to read anthropology and what they find they have learnt by thinking through the anthropological lens. Does academic learning have anything to offer 'real' life, particularly in moments when disillusionment, discontinuity and misapprehensions are rife? The personal testimonials are written by way of introduction to already existing essays that the authors themselves had written or a colleague of theirs. These essays were written as part of the training in medical anthropology before the Trump election but discussed in tutorials (consisting of two or three students in discussion with the lecturer) on the day after.

So, in response to the political scientist who claims that the 'broader public' with 'firmly held beliefs' tends to be 'incredibly resilient in the face of conflicting ... "evidence"' (Flinders 2016: 15), this *JASO Special Issue* makes no difference between 'the broader public' and 'the academics and experts' who produce 'evidence', 'data' and 'facts'. Rather, it

aims to show that education is an ongoing process, and regardless of whether or not the readers of this volume are enrolled in a programme that is awarded with a university degree, we aim to reach them. Like our potential readership, we conceive of our existence as marginal to world events, yet nevertheless as relevant, as we appeal in everyone not merely to their capacity of intervening, acting and doing, if the necessity arises, but also to their ability to learn, reflect on and refine their ways of analysing events and making sense of the world.

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