Interview with Jeffrey Schonberg

Tomáš Ryška

Jeff Schonberg is a medical and visual anthropologist. He received his doctorate in Medical Anthropology from the Joint University of California, San Francisco and Berkeley program. Currently Jeff Schonberg lectures in the Joint Medical Program at UC Berkeley and in the Department of Anthropology at San Francisco State University. As the co-author, (with Philippe Bourgois), of the book Righteous Dopefiend, is Jeff Schonberg winner of the 2010 Leeds Prize from the Society for Urban / National / Transnational and Global Anthropology. He has worked on projects in the U.S. on homelessness, addiction, gangs and inner-city violence, the drug economy and HIV; in Latin America on social upheaval and street youth. He is currently working on a manuscript on violence and homicide in his Oakland, California community and will soon be starting a project on the effects of housing on homeless young adults in San Francisco, California.

The Czech anthropological community knows your name through the work you have done with Philippe Bourgois that has materialized in the book Righteous Dopefiend. How did the project start?

The project was originally started by Philippe and a needle exchange volunteer who was actually a student at San Francisco State in 1994. I was just leaving my job in a homeless non-profit, where I had worked for many years as an advocate, consultant and community organizer. At that time, I also organized a union. Because I was excited about the organizing effort and the success of it, while I was researching graduate programs I discussed my union organizing effort with a professor, and he put it into his head - unions equals urban. I think he was just trying to get rid of me. And he said there is a guy, Philippe Bourgois, who is involved in something called the Urban Institute. So why don’t you go talk to him. And so, I made an appointment and went to see Philippe and he asked me about what I did and I told him. And he then told me about this project he has just been working on for the last few months. He asked if I could help and if I had any information. And I said, sure. And so one night I went down with him and the needle exchange volunteer and I hung out with Hogan, one of the guys in the book. Hogan was in his tent and he spoke about his life, much of which is detailed in the book. I brought my camera with me and took a couple of portraits of Hogan.
Philippe had no idea I was a photographer. Then I made these very nice prints. It was still the time of darkrooms. They were fine prints on expensive paper actually and I brought them to Hogan and gave them to him. And you know, he was totally touched by the photos and I decided that maybe I would hang out with him on my own and continue to photograph. Eventually Philippe offered to pay my photo fees and soon I decided to pursue my masters degree at San Francisco State, creating my own program of study by combining anthropology, education and photojournalism. After Phillippe saw my thesis, he asked me if I would co-author a book. My masters’ thesis on homeless heroin users grew and further developed into the project for Righteous Dopefiend. And so that is actually how my engagement started..

What were the roles you both played in the relationship? It is not too common for two anthropologists to work on a project together.

Yeah, and we talk about the importance of doing collaborative ethnography. You know, that is something I will always take with me. To me, collaborative ethnography needs to be promoted. You have opportunities to triangulate, discuss experiences, you have different relationships with different people and this allows you to broaden your community. It provides you with different opportunities than being the single anthropologist - the paradigm of the discipline - the lone anthropologist who has to be lost in this world. And that still is the paradigm. As I work on my own project, I really miss the collaborative effort. I think what you see in the book is a fair representation of the fieldwork experience.

What you have just described is one part of the work behind this book. There is also the part of the ethnographic analysis. How did that work in your team project?

Philippe was already very embedded in a certain theoretical perspective. He established himself as a bourdieuian, in In Search of Respect, and I of too had been introduced to this work as a graduate student and found it productive, as well as the work of other theorists, such as Foucault and Marx and the violence literature. But our working environment allowed us to debate and discuss —“that’s not working here..., no no no but that’s what Foucault’s doing there,” blah blah blah. “That is not what Tina (one of the main protagonists of the book) means or that is not what I am seeing.” It would get intense, but never tense. This is another benefit of doing a collaborative ethnography. We had the priviledge of discussing both different ethnographic experiences, and the same fieldwork moments and analyzing them together. And I, of course, brought a completely new theoretical lens to his work, that of the visual - something he was entirely ignorant of. The fact that we each had our unique expertise helped temper the typical hierarchy intrinsic in such a relationship and open up the collaboration from me to him and from him to me. We had a very functional and healthy working relationship, and the fact that
we are still quite close after the years we spent locked in rooms together is pretty remarkable.

Is there any connection between your previous life experiences, your dispositions and your decision to work with poor people, street people?

I come from a middle class background. There is wealth in my family going back through three generations. Then it sort of comes down from there [laughing] - a scenario unfortunately not atypical in the United States today.

It reminds me of these middle-class European kids that travel to third world countries with the idea they will get involved in some humanitarian aid or something. These very romantic dreams that they live because their middle-class background allows them the experience. Is it something like that?

Similar to that but the power dynamic is pretty different, a nuance I won’t get into now. I graduated from an elite liberal arts college. I was interested in making documentary films and a friend of a friend was running a non-profit organization and asked if I wanted to be involved and I accepted her offer. I was already doing some volunteering and worked on a film about a Salvadorian guerilla. I do come from a middle-class bourgeois, suburban American background. Che Guevara, his father was a doctor, right? He was going to go into medicine too. That’s the weirdness. Philippe too comes from an upper east side New York family. My parents are classic Democrats—Jewish, social liberals but believers in a capitalist, economic model. They weren’t critiquing capitalism by any means. In Europe, I could imagine their politics moving towards more of a social democratic model, but in this country that option does not really exist. The next step is to be politically progressive and to be able to critique. That’s why I really appreciate anthropology, it is our role to be critical in the moment, no matter where you may stand ideologically, if that is possible. Or at least to make a good-faith effort. If you’re not critical of yourself and your ideology then you’re not, in my opinion, doing anthropology as it should be done. Or at least the kind of critical anthropology as Nancy Schep-er-Hughes would describe it. Growing up in Florida, growing up in the South - it was incredibly racist.

Could you be more specific?

I will never forget the first, and only time - outside of an academic and critical analytic context – that I used the “N” word, nigger. I was in second grade and had just moved to Florida from New Jersey. I was seven years old. I was talking about an African-American schoolmate of mine and used the “N” word. My mother looked at me and scolded me, “don’t you ever use that word again”. I thought, “What do you mean? What did I say? White people are honkeys and black people are “N’s”, niggers.” Those were the words being thrown around the classroom and
the playground in the most common sense way. There was nothing mean or insulting about it, or so I thought. And I was able to be critical of that growing up, and see that as I got older and to question such experiences, and then I started anthropology as a way of developing an understanding of how such stances are formed. I had acquaintances from middle school through high school who were using these words as common language. When I was in sixth grade, I saw a van load of Ku Klux clan members. Because I am Jew I would be called Kike on the soccer field all the time. Especially if I was succeeding. This is just a part of being in the United States. As I started to grow older, I started to look back on it and to really understand and question why this was the case. And I also questioned the privileges that we had. We had someone who cleaned our house and she was an African American. When I was young, I didn’t question that relationship. I remember my mother talking about being raised by a nanny, an African American woman. We were discussing prejudice and the imbalance of servitude and she said, “I never thought of it that way. She never seemed unhappy.” She might not have been unhappy, even on the contrary, she was possibly grateful to be employed, and by a family that treated her well. This is how symbolic violence works. I don’t blame my mother: rather, I appreciate the fact that she really cared for the people who cared for her. These are the reflections of growing up and seeing white people on one side of the tracks and African Americans on the other. Florida is the segregated South. I think through the whole process you become conscious, in the terms that the radical educator Paulo Freire uses to talk about conscientization: one becomes conscious of the conditions surrounding their predicament, their lives. So, yeah, I came from a bourgeois background and this is part and parcel of my engagement in the work that I do. But, eventually, this becomes an agentive, ethical stance. I know plenty of people who go the other way.

Before I came here, my image of Berkeley anthropology was closely linked to an activist or engaged approach. What I found here was quite the opposite. Many people standing against any kind of engagement or activism. They think about it as either silly or that it brings negative values into the field. These are the people who actually, to a greater or lesser extent, influenced your anthropological education.

You know, I have been lucky enough in that, to a certain degree, they haven’t altered too many of my beliefs. The concern of some is that to have an engaged or activist approach compromises the theoretical or intellectual process. Maybe being an anthropologist forefronts being an engaged citizen. For me, anthropology provides me with the tools to enact that engagement. Anthropology is a tool, whether as analysis, writing or photography: anthropology is about an exploration of what it can do to make me be a better citizen. And if that being a better citizen means being engaged, being critical, then it serves that. If it no longer serves that, if anthropology, photography, ethnography, or anything else, no longer serves that role...
then I am going to go do something else. Which is why I never did go into journalism - especially as a photographer, since I found the institution to be pretty constraining. Anthropology provides me with the reflective tools to form a deep and erudite critique, and opens a space to learn from those who I find to be somewhat theoretically distant from my own perspective. In some places, this causes rancor and can be polarizing, but it does not have to be so. Maybe that, as its own sort of telos, describes a large part of the process. I have been lucky because the people who influenced me the most are not necessarily those who are pushing anthropology solely for the sake of anthropology, but those who engage it in an effort to effect public and popular discourse.

We discussed the issue of conflating an ethnographic character with Stanley [Brandes] at the dissertation writing seminar. In this regard, Leah [Lowthorp] mentioned Charles Briggs, who told her that conflating is fine for an anthropologist with tenure, but definitely not for a thesis. As you have told me before, you have conflated some characters in Righteous Dopefiend. How do you defend this methodologically and ethically?

This is something, I have to say, I followed Philippe on. Because coming from my background of documentary, within a journalistic framework, I was very much inculcated in the notion of the reality of the moment, the truth of the moment. In no way could it be tampered with. It happened initially with my photographs. Philippe would take a picture and create an analysis separate to the time and space of the moment in which I tripped the shutter of my camera. But the time and space of the moment of a picture has a lengthy history within a Western discourse. Pinney does an excellent job articulating this history. Anyhow, when it first happened, I was resistant. But then eventually I started to warm to the idea, or as I like to believe, my thinking on the topic became more nuanced, because I started to deconstruct it within an analysis of structural dynamics. First of all, it’s got to be tempered. What I mean is, nothing happened to someone like Carter or Tina or to certain main protagonists in the book that we conflated. We didn’t do that. We actually kept them pure - whatever that means. But, once in a while, there would be a moment and we would contribute that to a certain character. There were two people who had a very similar background, a very similar history, who grew up together and were of the same ethnicity and same age. So we were trying to figure out a way to incorporate certain events, certain occurrences and certain moments without necessarily confusing the reader by bringing in a bunch of different characters; and these incidents could be relocated specifically within ideas of certain conditions of possibility, within a particular milieu, as Foucault discusses them. That there are these particular brackets of social structural power, and that what we were doing was recognizing that within the social structural dynamics something like this occurs and it’s not uncommon. Especially if we saw things that very
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much reverberated with other themes that were happening to different people. Again, we did it in order not to confuse our readers. But the points are there, and it is important to recognize that the points have a place within the brackets of a certain social structural milieu which we are describing. When I was taking a class, an introduction to medical anthropology during my first year at the grad program of UC SF and UC Berkeley, I noticed in one of the articles we read that the author revealed that she had done this. And I brought it up in class and my professor said, “Yes, it happens all the time in anthropology.” I said, “I know, but don’t we need to discuss it,” but no one seemed to want to pursue it. My professor who is well published said, “Yeah, you know, it happens.” This discussion really harkens back to how Clifford, in Writing Culture, likens ethnography to fiction in that they are both “partial—omitted and incomplete.”

Your recent project is again related to social issues of social suffering, urban marginalization, drugs and poverty. Why did you choose to study violence?

My current project is very personal. It’s about where I live, about my home, it’s about where I have put down roots. The idea of home ownership in the United States is the American dream par excellence. The normative structure is: we work, we hope to move up the ladder of success so that we can have a home, our own property and raise our kids in a safe environment. But I don’t buy it as a road to happiness. [laughing] I actually bought my house, because at that time it was cheaper for me to buy my house and to pay the mortgage than it was for me to rent an apartment in Berkeley. So, I raise my children and put down “roots” in Oakland, California, which is, in much of the public imaginary, at least here in the US, associated with violence. In fact, the FBI says it is the fourth most dangerous city in the United States. My neighborhood in Oakland is one of the places responsible for this reputation. There is a lot of violence, both historical as well as current. So the project is my way basically to understand what was going on around me. Really, fundamentally, it was about locating my ethnographic project from home. The violence I am discussing is a murder to which I was privy. It happened across the street from me while I was putting my, at the time, two year old son down for a nap. I am trying to compare that to another murder that happened to a young man who I knew growing up on my block and who was eighteen when he was shot around the corner. The one who was killed across the street from me was a twenty-six year old white guy and the other one was an African American. I am white, my wife is Mexican American and we live in a very racially charged neighborhood, with a rich and important African American history, not just in terms of California, but in that of the whole United States. My block and those that surround my house says a lot about African American subjectivity formation, particularly in the West, but also in the wider United States. I am trying to see these murders through the phenomena of gentrification occurring in my neighborhood, of which I can-
not but be a part given my skin color. The murder that happened across the street from me had a very profound effect on my family life and therefore I am just trying to turn a negative, very difficult experience into something productive. It is my coping mechanism.

There is an interesting methodological moment in your research. In Mallinowski’s diaries we can read that he actually did not like his informants, and after he finished his fieldwork he simply returned to Europe and that was it. There was no contact with his informants any more. In my case, I often have really nice relationships with my Akha informants from which, because of new communication technologies, I am not able to escape even in the moments I wish I could. So sometimes I am overwhelmed by their emails and text messages that create a pressure on me to be involved in the problems they face. To overstate the case a bit, I was actually quite sorry for myself until the moment I met you. You actually never leave your field, because it is where you live. How does this work in fact?

I find it very difficult and find myself looking for ways to contain the ethnography, both in terms of fieldwork and in writing. Much of the time doing the fieldwork for Righteous Dopefiend I was bored. You know, sitting against a wall in a corner talking about nothing. Like the conversation between Felix, Max, Spider-bite, and possibly Frank, about how many peanuts were in their Snickers bar and who got more peanuts. And of course, they’re talking about hunger, but still it is an hour plus conversation about the peanuts in a Snickers bar and other Snickers bars they’d had in the past. One thing I learned from photography is that the banal is extremely difficult to represent. This fact is rightfully critiqued. It seems as though the oppressed are often victims of this problem and that it promotes the reification process. The spectacular violence I am talking about doesn’t happen all the time. But when it does happen it takes over everything: it is a definition of trauma. The murders and violence that happen overwhelm. But, on the whole, we are all just neighbors. Then there are the experiences where things happen and you see your neighbors, and you think they are going to form a joint reaction, who talk about, “Yeah, we are all here together, we are neighbours...”, blah, blah, blah. But when this experience of violence comes on, some of those people shut their doors. The situation is complicated. What the fuck are you doing?! Why aren’t you engaging? Why? Because their experiences have pushed them to protect themselves, since the experiences they have had with the institutions that are supposed to protect them, prove that these institutions do not protect them. These systems hurt them. They don’t want to get hurt, and they know that if you see something then you might become infected with deadly, poisonous knowledge (to borrow Das’ term). These things happen. Living it and analysing it is exhausting. When I first moved to my house, my wife and I photographed a friend’s family wedding and he happens to own a nursery. So for photographing his wedding, which we did as a wed-
During present, he gave us some trees that we could plant at our house. And some guy fucking stole our trees. Literally, dug them out of the ground and then went and sold them. I know where he sold them and I know who he sold them to. But eventually this thief and I became friends. That incident became just water under the bridge. And the reasons why we became friends are 1. because his daughter was murdered and we helped him and his family out, and 2. we engage in the community - we don’t hide. We go to neighbors’ parties and funerals. But now we are no longer friends. He and his brother violently beat-up one of my other neighbors with a metal pipe in front of my kids. My 9 year-old son even tried to intervene. Now, I may be forced to testify against him.

Was it different when you were working on Righteous Dopefiend?

Yeah, I left the field all the time. There was a moment, you know, when Carter was sitting in my car, saying, “Man, it’s warm in here,” and then me letting Carter literally go out and sleep in the street in the rain and I get to drive home. I had a place to be warm. This is the privilege to do anthropology. And it’s an absolute privilege. You talk about the fact that you really like your informants. You know, I love the guys in Righteous Dopefiend and the girls, and I miss them dearly. At the same time, I love my neighbors. The main crack dealer who the eighteen year old used to deal with has done some fucked up things. He’s been arrested for violence against women, but we have become friends. Those are the weird dichotomies in life and another difficult part of doing this type of work. He has told me of his violence and I have told him of my disdain.

Nancy in one of her books, it was the one on her research in Ireland, writes about what happened after the book was published and how she was chased out of her field when she returned. Did you ever think about what is going to happen after you publish your work?

Everyday. I thought about it everyday. These people who are so generous to me. Specifically in Righteous Dopefiend, Carter often saw our relationship as that of a mentor and protege - he was very conscious of teaching me “the streets.” I’d say less so now because I already have a role prior to “doing research”. Hank, at times, saw himself as my protector in that world. In that respect, I absolutely worry that revealing the cold truth was compromising the trust that they gave to me. Absolutely. Tina’s story about her abuse? What it means for that story then to be revealed further? I’ve lost Tina. I am not able to discuss this with her. I don’t know where she is. I have given the book to Hank. Talking about Hank not being a Vietnam Vet? We analyze this in a way that clearly locates him as a true victim within the social and political sphere in which he has lived, but I’ve never confronted him on that. Why would I confront him on that? What good would that do? It’s important to him, to his identity, to who he is. And we have a friendship that’s real. I don’t
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know how to say it. The truth discourse is a difficult one to crack. Betrayal is not black and white, but that does not mean that I’m not leery.

Aihwa Ong is critical towards the concept of social suffering during her lectures. As she says, she was raised by Catholic nuns in Malaysia and because of this, she argues that this concept comes from Catholicism. What is your understanding of this?

I must say that I’d never been one of her students and so have not heard this directly. As I said earlier, anthropology provides us with excellent tools to critique mechanisms of power such as the legacy you say she proposes. But that doesn’t mean that people still aren’t suffering and that there aren’t social structural dynamics that are perpetuating, that are creating, that are reproducing that suffering. And so whether it comes from this legacy, or another, I believe morally that this must be confronted. So we can say that maybe sometimes the discourse might move in the direction of a generalized or hierarchical Catholic discourse. That it is an effort to use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house. That’s fine. That needs to be critiqued. But outside of that doesn’t mean that social suffering doesn’t exist. And the word social itself. We can go back to Durkheim, but we are not going to do a specific close reading of Durkheim. These social practices that lead to oppressive hierarchies - racism, gender, issues of ageism, homophobia, these are all politics, all that is a part of a social. And that’s what I take the term social to be about. It’s about all these different institutions, these different organizations, these different practices, different ways of being that are outside of the individual agent. The milieu.

My understanding of Ong’s critique of the concept is related to a critique of the Western middle class way of thinking.

In a perfect world there would be no anthropology, no “other”; or at least one created without the colonial ghost. We would leave people the fuck alone. I think that the critique of the Western middle class, that paternalism, that condescension is spot on. But what is one supposed to do? Is it more ethical to ignore it? I believe that is what the people who look at “social suffering” are trying not to do.
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