

# Taking sides

A reflection on ‘partisan anthropology’

Cinzia Greco

## Abstract

This think piece argues for a ‘partisan anthropology’. Building on lessons learned through my research about the practices of postmastectomy breast reconstruction in France and Italy, I reflect on the role of the researcher in fieldwork. In my own research, I acted as neither a militant nor an activist in the field, that is, I did not actively participate in the initiatives I observed. However, in the analysis stage, I decided to side with the patients I had met: my aim was to understand their experience of the illness and the therapies available, as well as their sometimes difficult relationship with the medical system. Having decided to take the patients’ side, I conducted a ‘partisan anthropology’. These reflections are intended as an effort to fully recognize the legitimacy and the scientific character of a partisan anthropology, building on previous arguments for militant and activist anthropology.

## Keywords

partisan anthropology, militant anthropology, feminist anthropology, breast cancer research

Some months ago, a manuscript of mine was rejected by an interdisciplinary French journal because it was deemed to be ‘too militant’ and ‘not scientific enough’. Up to that point, I had thought that being militant was a way to contribute to causes that one considers important.

Thus, I was glad that my academic work could be considered ‘militant’ and I almost forgot about the rejection.

However, this banal episode spurred me to interrogate the value of the adjective ‘militant’ in reference to social sciences and, in particular, anthropology. What does it mean to be militant? Is it possible to be an anthropologist and a militant, or to be a militant anthropologist? And can my own work be considered militant? These questions do not only concern the scientific validity of anthropological knowledge when anthropology intertwines with a militant approach. Indeed, this think piece aims to be a reflection on how to legitimize a militant (but also a partisan and engaged) anthropology. In some cases, such legitimacy is necessary in order to safeguard, including legally, anthropologists who follow this approach. Drawing on my work with breast cancer patients and breast cancer patients’ associations, I reflect on the relationship between militancy and anthropology, and consider whether and how my experience could be open toward a militant reflection.

## Can social sciences be militant?

Anthropology is far from new to interrogations of its own impact on social issues. Public anthropology – in the sense of an anthropology directed at the general public – goes back at least to Margaret Mead, one of the first anthropologists committed to transforming the discipline into a tool of social progress. Medical anthropology has been one of the subdisciplines in which interest in the impact on society has been more noticeable, with scholars reflecting on the responsibility of the anthropologist towards people encountered during fieldwork (Singer, Huertas, and Scott 2000), as well as on the possibility to transform society in collaboration with them (Scheper-Hughes 1995). The relationship between such objectives and the concept of public anthropology has been theorized differently, with some authors calling for a more engaged public anthropology (Scheper-Hughes 2009), while others have criticized the term as obfuscating the public nature of all anthropology, particularly applied anthropology (Singer 2000).

Beyond the issue of the terminology used, when anthropology not only participates in public debates but also takes sides and advocates in favor of specific groups it opens itself up to criticism based on the ideals of objectivity and neutrality in science. Social sciences have a complex relationship with the ideas of objectivity and neutrality. Starting in the late 1970s, a number of important epistemological reflections developed within social sciences, especially within anthropology. During the phase defined as the ‘reflexive turn’, anthropology started an analysis of its own role, its epistemological status, and the possibility to produce and transmit through writing ‘objective’ knowledge of the cultures studied. The authors

influenced by the reflexive turn have promoted a contextualized and partial approach to the production of knowledge (see Mauthner and Doucet 2003).

Other reflections from feminist and postcolonial theorists have introduced the notions of 'standpoint theory' (Harding 1992) and 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1991). For Harding, standpoint theory allows for the production of an objective knowledge, as it takes into account the experiences and thoughts of groups marginal in terms of gender, race, and class. This means that it includes in the analysis data and perspectives usually excluded from the sciences. Haraway, however, has criticized Harding, suggesting she has simply moved the claim to objectivity to another position. Haraway does not subscribe to relativism either, as she considers it to be based on an equally abstract claim to a vision from nowhere. Instead, her theory of situated knowledge is based on the idea of the partial, fluid, and contradictory nature of every point of view. In this sense, shifting the point of view is not enough; what is needed is the connection between different visions, each of them being recognized as situated.

While having some traits in common with these feminist theories that defy the idea of neutrality, a militant perspective carries a different meaning. It implies not only assuming a point of view, whether partial or inclusive, but also acting in a given context. The etymology of the term 'militant' goes back to the Latin *militare*, meaning to serve as a soldier. 'Activist' is usually used as a synonym, but carries a different undertone of meaning, as it comes from *agere*, meaning to do or act. While both terms are linked to the advancement of a cause, 'militant' carries a more explicitly political connotation. Both terms refer to an engagement, a position of strong proximity to the phenomena observed, and a will to intervene directly in the events to modify them. This results in the theoretical production of both activists and militants being deemed 'emotional' and unscientific by those who consider neutrality and impartiality to be essential traits of the production of science.

However, militant experiences have often been breeding grounds for theoretical reflections on society, in particular, on the role that class, race, and gender play in it. Only part of this rich theoretical reflection is taken into account in academia. Shukaitis and Graeber (2007) offer, as an example, the May 1968 movements. Most academics are more likely to be interested in the works produced to explain the failure of a revolutionary movement immediately after its end, rather than in the works produced immediately before and announcing a possible revolution. On the other hand, activists continue to be interested in the latter. More generally, academia shows little interest in works that explicitly call their readers to action (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007, 23).

Although reflections on the relationship with the community studied and the general public are not new in anthropology, my specific question here concerns the value of the term ‘militant’ in anthropology. The idea that anthropology cannot be neutral and impartial surfaces in works that argue that neutrality and impartiality are, themselves, interpretative categories, which are specific to a political and cultural horizon. In formulating an anthropological methodology, which could put the interest of the people involved in the research before that of the researcher, Mina Davis Caulfield (1979, 315) writes that ‘to “take sides” is inevitable; we can never . . . pretend to be impartial’. In 1995, Nancy Scheper-Hughes proposed a militant anthropology, informed by her fieldwork experience in Brazil and South Africa. According to Scheper-Hughes, postmodernism fostered a relativistic vision within anthropology, encouraging anthropologists to become detached observers in the field. A militant anthropology, on the contrary, is based on an ethical vision, which should encourage researchers to shine a light on the violence and injustice they witness in their fieldwork. A militant anthropology also legitimates the actions of anthropologists in favor of the people among whom they are conducting observations.

A tentative definition of ‘militant anthropology’, starting with the reflections of Scheper-Hughes, should include political commitment, moral accountability, and direct involvement with the people encountered in the course of fieldwork. My own research experience leads me to think that other forms of involvement and engagement on the part of the researcher are possible, and in particular that in addition to a ‘militant anthropology’ one could speak of a ‘partisan anthropology’.

## Studying the postmastectomy body and taking sides

Between 2012 and 2014, I conducted research on breast cancer-related surgery, with a focus on reconstructive surgery. I compared oncological surgery with cosmetic surgery of the breast in France and Italy, and conducted 119 interviews with patients and medical professionals, participated in meetings between patients and medical professionals, and followed the activities of patients’ associations, especially in France.

I followed the activities of ‘technique-centered’ associations, which promoted specific breast reconstruction techniques, and associations that encouraged the acceptance of postmastectomy female bodies that did not undergo surgical reconstruction. These two kinds of associations differed especially in their relation to the medical system. Technique-centered associations were often characterized by a strategic alliance between doctors and patients in making a technique known and widespread. In particular, the associations offered information to patients and in some cases aimed to facilitate the bureaucratic process through which a technique can be fully recognized and refunded through the French health

care system. Acceptance-centered associations aimed to challenge the taboo that characterizes one-breasted or breastless female bodies. Some used artistic means of action, such as readings, photographic exhibitions, and videos, focusing on the variety of experiences and embodiments of the mastectomized body, which were presented to the general public, rather than only to breast cancer patients and their relatives. Other associations collaborated with medical personnel to develop information strategies for women undergoing a mastectomy. Such strategies included the option of a non-surgical reconstruction and the acceptance of one's asymmetric body (see Greco 2016).

During my research I decided not to take an active role in any of the associations' initiatives, nor did I support one specific vision of the postmastectomy body over another (in common with the patients I met). In regard to the two elements of 'participant observation', I tended towards observation. I used what can be described as 'moderated participation' (see DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 23), that is, I introduced myself as a researcher working on postmastectomy breast reconstruction, but did not play an active role during the meetings, only intervening when explicitly asked to by the organizers. In the beginning, this approach was determined by the fact that I was still becoming acquainted with the institutional and associative panorama of the fieldwork, especially in France (I am a native of Italy). However, it was also shaped by my personal profile: being a woman, I am susceptible to developing breast cancer, but I have never received a cancer diagnosis. The fact that I did not share the experience of the disease with the women I met oriented me towards moderate participation throughout the research.

During my fieldwork, I was an observer and a listener with regard to the experiences of the women and their interaction with the medical system. The interactions between patients and doctors are particularly permeable to the asymmetries of power. Doctors occupy a prestigious position, while patients can occupy a social position with lower prestige and, in any case, are made fragile by their health conditions (compare, for example, Waitzkin 1979). The field of postmastectomy reconstruction is not an exception. In order to analyze the tensions between patients and the medical system, I decided to apply a feminist reading to the practices of postmastectomy reconstruction. During my research, I aimed to explore the multiple pressures – economic, medical, and societal pressure to conform to beauty standards – that public or private medical institutions may put upon breast cancer patients (adding to pressures from their job and family). In this sense, my approach was neither neutral nor impartial, as the research was conducted by siding with the women, such that I gave moral priority to their experiences. I tried to understand the pain and the anxiety that the illness had caused them, as well as how these problems had been mitigated or amplified by medical personnel, and by friends, colleagues, and family. Although some traits relating to the idea of militancy, such as the express will not to be neutral and the political interpretation

of phenomena, are present in my approach, I did not act as a militant in the field. It is in light of these reflections that I find it more appropriate to define my approach as that of a ‘partisan anthropology’. In addition to a more militant approach, one may take sides without necessarily practicing direct action; ‘partisan anthropology’ points out that direct action is not the only way anthropologists can support the people they meet in their fieldwork.

## Partisan anthropology

A partisan is someone who ‘takes sides’; the idea of ‘taking sides’ recurs among some of the main intellectuals in Italian history. The medieval poet Dante Alighieri, in a passage from *The Divine Comedy* (more precisely in the third canto of the *Inferno*), narrates how, before entering Hell, he sees a group of people crying in pain and running at Hell’s doors. The ancient poet Virgil, Dante’s guide, explains to him that they are the *ignavi*, the uncommitted or neutrals. For Dante, who had an active role in the political struggles in the Florence of his time, the idea of not taking sides was intolerable, and he depicted a dire punishment for those who did not choose a side. A second text on this theme is a well-known short article by the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci (1982), called ‘The Indifferent’, which was originally published in 1917. In this article, Gramsci defines indifference as the dead weight of history. More detrimental than evil or oppression, the attitude of those who neither take an interest nor contribute to the facts of history represents the true evil, which impedes the success of those who engage in political struggle. For Gramsci, to live is to be partisan.

Both these texts, from very different historical periods, contexts of production, and literary genres, influenced my reflections on what ‘taking sides’ means. To go back to anthropology, ‘taking sides’ is an expression that can refer to different realities. It is not always possible to take an active role in the phenomena that one studies. In some types of fieldwork, such as fieldwork conducted in a hospital ward, it can be more difficult to act in favor of the people we encounter, unless one is formally legitimized to take a curative role.

In my case, I chose to ‘be on the side of the patients’ in the research, but my partisanship only became explicit at the point of analysis and writing. Although choosing a partisan position can be linked to theories of standpoints and situated knowledge, here I am less interested in epistemological questions concerning the (im)possibility of a neutral knowledge than I am in advocating that anthropologists should be permitted and sometimes encouraged to take a partisan approach towards the asymmetries of power that characterize our societies. The world in which we live is not black and white, and social sciences have often been able to convey both the shades of gray and diverse colors. That said, an emphasis on nuance and diversity can sometimes overshadow what really matters. Consciously taking sides can allow us to draw attention to inequalities that might otherwise be hidden in a muddled continuum.

## Legitimizing the anthropologist's position

Debates focusing on an activist-oriented anthropology are essential to the discipline, as they help to develop theoretical tools relevant to the different ways of doing research. But the importance of these debates goes beyond disciplinary boundaries. Clarifying the position of the researcher in fieldwork becomes vital when anthropology interacts with other disciplines, as well as when it becomes necessary to account for ethnographic methods that may be considered activist or militant when considered from a position outside of academia. In some cases, partisan anthropology may even lead to researchers becoming the targets of legal action, making it all the more vital that the field recognizes such methods as legitimate.

To underline my point, I consider the cases of two Italian anthropologists who recently had to contend with legal investigations (and in one case sentencing) resulting from their research on politically contentious topics, as well as the methodology they used: participant observation (see Peggio 2016; Raimo and Coin 2016). The first case concerns an anthropologist studying possible social responses to an epidemic caused by the *Xylella* bacterium, which has infected olive trees in Southern Italy and has resulted in the contested eradication of many trees. He was put under investigation because he had been present during a protest against the eradications. The second case concerns an anthropology student who received a two-month suspended jail sentence in the summer of 2016. She had conducted her master's degree research on mobilizations linked to the No TAV movement. Since it started in the 1990s, this movement has increasingly opposed the building of high-speed railways (TAV), which they argue have a negative environmental impact. Among the rationales for sentencing the anthropologist that circulated in the Italian press was her use of 'us' – the first-person plural – in the text of the thesis, and the fact that she had been present during some of the movement's actions during her fieldwork.

These cases show that, regardless of their theoretical or activist positioning, the mere presence of the researcher in the field can be enough to be considered as physically and morally participating in complex political situations. Whether it puts her or him in a war zone or a patients' meeting, the position of an anthropologist can, in some cases, suggest which side of the story they are likely to favor in their retelling. It is thus important as a discipline that anthropology recognize the legitimacy of taking sides and of sometimes telling only 'one side of the story'. It is also important to stress the academic (versus emotional/unscientific) nature of these kinds of anthropological accounts, as well as of the writings derived from them that should indeed be subject to academic criticism, but should not be used as evidence of a researcher's 'guilt' in courtrooms.

In a historical moment in which the circulation of research can be facilitated by social media, and social sciences can attract greater attention from the lay public, it is vital to reflect collectively on how to safeguard the position of the anthropologist. I do not mean erasing researchers' responsibility for their actions in the field. Rather, I am calling for an extension of the spaces of disciplinary legitimacy and for a reflection on ways to safeguard those who take a partisan (or militant or activist) stance. We must recognize that such approaches are an integral part of anthropological practice that allow our knowledge to develop.

## About the author

Cinzia Greco obtained her PhD from the École des hautes études en sciences sociales and the CERMES3 laboratory, with a Cancéropôle Île-de-France scholarship, and is currently a Newton International Fellow at the Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine of the University of Manchester. For her dissertation focused on the experience of postmastectomy breast reconstruction, she was awarded the Barbara Rosenblum Dissertation Scholarship for the Study of Women and Cancer.

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