

David Nugent took office as AES president in November. Nugent believes it is essential that the discipline take a more informed, reflective, and participatory approach toward shaping the trajectory of anthropology in the 21st century. He sees this moment as a unique opportunity – both in terms of pressures and possibilities – to redefine anthropologists' expertise and their relationships within and outside academia. What follows are excerpts from a recent conversation I had with Nugent during which he outlined some of the current challenges he hopes AES will confront in the coming years.

DN: Anthropology in the US is undergoing a series of rapid and profound transformations. These result in large part from the changing interests and concerns of the organizations that underwrite the production of anthropological knowledge—the US government, major foundations and corporations. These entities are far less interested than they once were in sponsoring the kind of knowledge production that long defined the mainstream of anthropology. The discipline's sponsors are now actively cultivating the development of new forms of social science expertise. It is therefore crucial that the discipline recognize what is going on and develop strategies for how best to respond. AES will be opening a series of dialogues and discussions designed to shed light on the transformations in academic expertise that are taking place in the early 21st century. One set of discussions will take place at the 2009 AES meetings in Vancouver, the theme for which will be "World Anthropologies." In addition, we are initiating several ongoing AES Working Projects (on the narrowing of the public sphere, on academic censorship, on anthropology and the security apparatus). AES will be reaching out to as broad a constituency as possible in an effort to make sense of the transformations the discipline is undergoing. It is critical that these discussions not be limited to a small group of elite institutions in the US, but that they be broadly inclusive of the discipline as a whole.

The above-mentioned AES Working Projects emerge out of discussions that many members of our Board have had, with one another and with colleagues, over the last several years. They also reflect concerns that came to a head at last year's AAA meetings—regarding the novel ways in which governments, foundations and corporations are seeking to use anthropological knowledge, to redefine the parameters of that knowledge, and to restructure anthropological research. These are processes that we need to understand far better than we do at present. We need an informed discussion of the pressures we are under, the options we have, what we might do to use them creatively. AES is committed to contributing to these discussions in whatever way it can.

Any historical moment like the present, when there is major possibility for change, is both frightening and exciting. Such moments occur rarely. In fact, only twice in the last century have similar opportunities for disciplinary redefinition presented themselves. The first of these was in

the aftermath of WWI, when the interests of foundations and government came together to underwrite a novel form of anthropological enterprise—one based on the explicit recognition of the destructive impact of global forces of power and inequality, and of the importance of sustained, long-term fieldwork to understand the dynamics of these processes. The second moment came after WW II, when government and foundations became obsessed with problems of order and stability, and helped craft a form of social science knowledge intended to reflect and advance these concerns—one based on carefully delimited and bounded culture areas. Beginning gradually in the 1970s, and gathering in momentum ever since, the sponsors of the discipline have withdrawn their support for the post-WW II organization of knowledge production. It remains unclear, however, what will emerge in its place.

This is why it is so important to seize the present moment. Such an opportunity is not going to come along again for a very long time. Will doing so change what it means to do anthropology? Absolutely. How could it not? The reorganization of infrastructures, training programs, and resource flows is already happening on a global scale. And the new kinds of experts we become, the training we need, the knowledge we draw upon and tool kits we employ, all suggest a rather broad and sweeping reorganization of academic culture, academic value systems, and what it is that matters and counts. AES hopes to be at the forefront of discussion and debate about these vital matters.