

Research Article

Opportunity and Danger: Why Studies of the Right Are Crucial for U.S. Anthropology and Beyond

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The resurgence of social movement activity worldwide in recent years has seen an attendant rise of anthropological and related scholarship on present-day insurgency. Scholars have engaged a broad range of efforts, from the Zapatista struggle for autonomous communities in Mexico, to Latin America's "pink tide" and indigenous movements across the continent, to massive global justice and antiwar mobilizations, to the Arab Spring and the waves of demonstrations enveloping Turkey and Brazil at the time of this writing. Building on the field's long-standing traditions of public, activist, and militant anthropology, for instance, today's "protest anthropologists" rightly engage the Occupy movement uprisings that swept the globe in 2011, unsettling many of the discipline's knowledge-producing practices along the way (Maskovsky 2013). But the field too often neglects social movements at odds with scholars' own political commitments. Perhaps due in part to their own antipathy toward conservatism and hostility toward the consolidation of various parts of the right in recent decades, "researchers overwhelmingly choose to study 'attractive' movements with which they sympathize" (Edelman 2001:302). Yet anthropology offers a robust foundation for the study of conservative movements, a legacy that illustrates the centrality of these complex formations in establishing the scope and limits of the present political economic order (cf. Edelman 2001; Ginsburg 1989; Harding 2000). It is upon these contributions that a growing scholarship currently draws in renewing anthropological focus on movements with which many researchers may not identify, but are nevertheless key to shaping contemporary political economic and cultural landscapes – a research agenda particularly significant in the midst of growing concerns regarding the discipline's ability to speak to pressing issues of the day.

From studies of the transnational ex-gay movement (Erzen 2006) and the social engagement of evangelical Christians (Elisha 2011) to anti-immigrant Minuteman Corps activity (Molina 2011), ethnographic attention to conservative movements is on the rise. In both 2007 and 2008, students at the CUNY Graduate Center's Department of Anthropology organized a conference series on studying the right. The effort was followed by a day-long workshop on the tea party in 2012, culminating in Sandra Morgen's keynote address on "taxpayer identity politics" mobilized by conservative efforts since the 1980s. Many contributors to these events recently gathered at the 2013 Society for the Anthropology of North America (SANA) Conference session "The Future of the Right," sharing timely research on the genealogy of "entitlement" in opposing redistributive public policies (Morgen 2013a); the tea party's conceptualization of history (Bauer 2013) and the significance of the movement's local formations and political victories (Westermeyer 2013); conservative mobilization of anti-socialist imagery (Henry 2013); ecological catastrophe in evangelical discourse (Bjork-James 2013); and the functions of utopian imaginaries in libertarian organizing (Tretjak 2013a).

Through an overview of this burgeoning scholarship, this essay highlights the significance of anthropological attention to the right. Such contributions hold the potential to uniquely illuminate crucial developments within U.S. cultural and political landscapes, revealing both opportunities and dangers presented by conservative movements. Careful analysis of the dynamic and multifaceted nature of such movements illustrates the myriad, and at times competing, intellectual traditions and motivations they frequently entail. Cracks and fissures in dominant movement trends may lead to profound implications as participants take up movement discourses on their own terms and toward

ends quite different than those advanced by movement elites. Such a research agenda can also help understand the processes through which conservative populist movements garner support by successfully mobilizing legitimate grievances and concerns, particularly in times of economic decline – a trend of profound significance historically both within and well beyond the U.S. context. In turn, scholarship focused on conservative formations can explore potential alliances across ideological boundaries around specific issues; discern the factors shaping the development and evolution of participants’ political identities over time; as well as highlight the voids in and shortcomings of competing mobilization efforts. Of course, in numerous instances studies of conservative movements also reveal their profound negative consequences, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable groups. Such studies can simultaneously offer tools for thorough yet vigorous critique and intervention – a counter to the plethora of well-intentioned but overly generalized, ill-informed, and unpersuasive criticisms pouring forth particularly from left-oriented spaces within and outside the academy alike. Specifically, this essay takes up three interrelated contributions of the emergent field of studies focused on conservative movements: helping to understand these movements’ complexity and heterogeneity; highlighting the importance of taking seriously the grievances of many participants in such mobilization; and facilitating nuanced critique.

“The Koch Brothers Fallacy”: Understanding Movement Complexity and Heterogeneity

In 2011, former Vice President Dick Cheney presented former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld with the Defender of the Constitution Award at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the largest national conservative gathering held annually in Washington, DC. At the event, I stood pressed against a wall of the packed auditorium, surrounded by hundreds of predominantly college-aged attendees shouting “War criminals!” and “Terrorists!” amidst thunderous booing and hissing. While some retaliated with chants of “USA! USA!” the raucous crowd would not be subdued. Event organizers removed several particularly vocal hecklers. A group of Cheney and Rumsfeld detractors rose and walked out en masse. An older gentleman standing nearby muttered, partly to me and partly to himself, “Wow. Cheney and Rumsfeld aren’t even safe at CPAC anymore. What is going on here?” Indeed, the event’s vibe felt much more akin to an antiwar demonstration than the country’s premier conservative congregation. But the voices of dissent were not, as one might readily assume, those of leftist protesters infiltrating the event. They were self-identified libertarians, part of the phenomenon that in the late 2000s erupted in what journalist and historian of libertarianism Brian Doherty describes as “the largest popular movement motivated by distinctly libertarian ideas about war, money, and the role of government we’ve seen in the postwar period” (Doherty 2009).

While libertarian figures and institutions have aimed to mobilize a popular movement for decades, it was only recently that former Texas Representative Ron Paul gained “rockstar status” among young people who routinely pack stadiums by the thousands for his speeches. Simultaneously, youth libertarian organizations have grown dramatically: Students for Liberty’s (SFL) global campus network has expanded to 863 student groups since its inception in 2008, while Young Americans for Liberty, also established in 2008, is today the fastest-growing national organization in the United States and boasts a network of over 125,000 activists. The Auburn, Alabama-based Ludwig von Mises Institute draws hundreds of students from around the globe each summer for Mises University, the intensive, week-long seminar billed as the world’s leading instructional program in the *laissez-faire* Austrian school of economics, which began in 1986 with a handful of attendees. Further, the liberty movement, as it is termed by participants, increasingly transcends borders. For instance, SFL has formed considerable African, European, and Latin American counterparts. African SFL unites students across nine countries

from Egypt to South Africa, while affiliates of European SFL span campuses in 26 countries – in 2012, the latter held five regional conferences across the continent.

From 2010 to 2013, I conducted 32 months of ethnographic fieldwork with the liberty movement. Funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the CUNY Graduate Center, my research centered in Austin, Texas – a university city in Ron Paul’s home state informally known as the libertarian capital of the United States due to its thriving, heterogeneous libertarian community tightly networked with other libertarian hubs both regionally and nationally. Research further encompassed attendance of national and international events, conferences, and numerous intensive, week-long seminars for libertarian students; over 200 unstructured and semistructured interviews as well as 10 life history interviews; and countless hours of informal day-to-day interactions with movement participants.

By 2011, the CPAC “libertarian takeover” was undeniable. The conference overflowed with libertarian-themed panels, the attendees of which stood packed alongside ballroom walls, sat on auditorium floors, and gathered in doorways, straining to hear the presentations. Throughout the three-day affair, the predictable CPAC crowd of pudgy middle-aged men and pearl-clad women in business attire intermingled with a colorful cast of characters less likely to be associated with the country’s largest annual conservative convergence. Sporting dreadlocks, sleeve tattoos, face piercings, and pink hairdos, representatives of groups from the Ladies of Liberty Alliance to various chapters of Students for Sensible Drug Policy joined other young people in, for the second year in a row, bringing Ron Paul victory in the CPAC presidential straw poll, once seen as a key indicator of which presidential hopefuls were favored by movement conservatives.

The conventional view that collapses libertarians with conservatives is dangerously flawed – the “conservative movement” itself is a complex formation composed of disparate and often opposed commitments and philosophies. For example, in her 14-month ethnographic study of evangelical Christian communities in Colorado Springs, Bjork-James (2013) explores why dominant evangelical discourse marginalizes concern for the environment. Despite mass biocide of a significant number of species globally and environmental catastrophes on virtually every scale, it is abortion – not extant and impending ecological disaster – that constitutes the ethical crisis of our day for most evangelicals. Yet these issues are not only championed by segments of the “Christian left,” but also by some, and especially younger, evangelical leaders who urge environmental awareness and action grounded in particular theological understandings and moral convictions. Through exploring how specific conceptions of time structure evangelical ethical life, Bjork-James analyzes the means by which competing ethical understandings of the future shape ideas about and responses to ecological collapse.

Such differentiation forms the cornerstone for understanding crucial contemporary developments. There certainly remains a substantial contingent of liberty movement participants of a distinctly conservative bent – a long-standing political coalition between libertarians and conservatives dominated a significant portion of the twentieth century. While expressing reactions from dissatisfaction to outrage with the Republican Party status quo, such “conservatarians,” in movement parlance, strive for Party reforms on foreign and monetary policy, among others; they simultaneously find common cause with mainstream Republicans on issues from abortion and same-sex marriage to privatization and deregulation. Some aim to benefit by allying with the movement, as exemplified by the public “conversion” to libertarianism by Fox commentator Glenn Beck. But the liberty movement’s recent revitalization has embroiled the long-standing conservative/libertarian political coalition in strife, despite vehement insistence of traditional conservatives to the contrary, at least in public. While the particulars of how this coalition will be reconfigured in the realm of electoral politics remain to be seen, these dynamics are already furthering the consolidation of an “anti-establishment” conservative wing within the Republican Party (Tretjak 2013b). Yet libertarianism’s resurgence has also ushered forth the emer-

gence of new liminal spaces between “right” and “left” political formations as traditionally understood, spaces through which increasing numbers of young people develop their political identities and challenge existing political economic arrangements. A framework that uniformly dismisses such developments as part of a tainted “right-wing” is unable to account for the fluid constituent parts within the once-robust conservative coalition, nor grasp the potential reshaping of the political and cultural milieu in the United States and beyond by various parts of the liberty movement.

In particular, critics of libertarianism ought to be wary of “the Koch brothers fallacy”: the tendency, widespread particularly among various parts of the left, to view any and all liberty movement dynamics as sinister plots devised by the conservative billionaire brothers and imposed upon duped, or bought, participants from above. To be sure, conservative behemoths such as the Koch and Scaife family foundations have played key roles in the movement, and continue to do so today. While historical circumstances converged to fan the fires of the libertarian resurgence and Ron Paul’s presidential runs mobilized the movement in unprecedented ways, these developments could not have occurred on such a scale without the groundwork laid by long-standing libertarian institutions over numerous decades – often funded by mammoth conservative foundations. Yet large parts of the movement’s youth who have taken up this knowledge are presently reimagining and recreating libertarianism on their own terms. Dismissive and ill-informed treatments of the liberty movement’s complex dynamics overlook both the emancipatory potential of ideas and projects stemming from parts of the movement as well as opportunities for alliances around a range of issues.

The liberty movement is anything but monolithic, marked by a vast infrastructure of organizations that span a wide range of ideological commitments as well as rigorous – and frequently competing – intellectual traditions. In turn, perhaps most overlooked by outside observers, is the potential of grassroots efforts stemming from various libertarian spaces: alliances with left-identified efforts in antiwar and police accountability organizing; models of localized, “off-the-grid” alternative economies; promotion of emerging technologies such as 3D printing, secure communication methods, and the decentralized, open-source digital currency Bitcoin; as well as community projects around organic gardening, alternative education for children, and health education programs geared at marginalized communities (Tretjak 2013b). Further, parts of the movement and fellow travelers are extremely critical of both existing economic hierarchies and their apologists, committed to reviving libertarian traditions centered on the experiences of vulnerable groups. Movement participants collaborating under the broad rubric of the libertarian left systematically fuse market analysis with ardent critique of structural poverty and other forms of subordination – urging the integration of antiracism, feminism, mutual aid, and labor solidarity with libertarian thought. A significant target of numerous libertarians in this tradition is “vulgar libertarianism,” the tendency to treat existing business practices as though they are taking place in the context of a genuinely free market, while routinely highlighting how the current system is far from a free market in other contexts: “When prodded, they’ll grudgingly admit that the present system is not a free market, and that it includes a lot of state intervention on behalf of the rich. But as soon as they think they can get away with it, they go right back to defending the wealth of existing corporations on the basis of ‘free market principles’ ” (Carson 2007).

Many of those in the rapidly expanding libertarian anarchist tradition¹ who consciously reject the term “capitalism” and opt instead for the moniker “market anarchist” thus draw a sharp distinction

¹For clarity and consistency I retain the movement’s own term “libertarian anarchism” in referring to support for the complete elimination of state institutions. The term “libertarian” here reflects a particular usage popularized in the United States and referring to a tradition heavily influenced by mainstream classical liberal political thought. It should not be confused with the meaning of “libertarian” in many other contexts, where the term is associated with social anarchist approaches that generally challenge private ownership of the means

between the market form and the economic features of actually existing capitalism. Themselves rife with debate, anticapitalist market anarchist approaches fundamentally reject the notion that the market form “must entail a social order of bosses, landlords, centralized corporations, class exploitation, cut-throat business dealings, immiserated workers, structural poverty, or large-scale economic inequality” (Chartier and Johnson 2011:3). In turn, countless swiftly proliferating online spaces are ablaze with lively exchanges between activists and thinkers identifying or in close conversation with various parts of the liberty movement. For example, a growing arena of inquiry focuses on alternative property rights systems, aiming to resuscitate and build upon a range of nineteenth-century anarchist thought. The revival of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s philosophy of mutualism, for instance, has stirred intense debate both among social anarchists and their Austrian economics-informed libertarian counterparts – emergent collaborations and exchanges are spearheading developments and realignments on both fronts. Granting developments such as these, due consideration is central to any understanding of the contemporary political and cultural milieu.

Taking Participant Grievances Seriously

The implications of various conservative movements notwithstanding, scholarship on these formations illustrates that many participants are drawn to them as a result of legitimately held grievances. The rise in what Morgen (2012) describes as contemporary “taxpayer identity politics” exemplified in the rise of the tea party can thus be understood in part as an expression of legitimate outrage at tax policy that disproportionately advances the interests of an elite at the expense of everyday families – albeit an outrage harnessed by well-organized political efforts and directed toward ends unlikely to in fact help working and low-income people. Analyzing the growing income and wealth inequality in the United States over the past 30 years, Abramovitz and Morgen (2006) trace the significant decrease in downward redistribution of tax policy matters and federal taxes. Reductions in corporate tax rates, for example, have led to severe decreases in the overall tax revenue, while tax rate reductions for individuals have disproportionately impacted higher tax brackets. In turn, federal social spending on programs for low-income groups has decreased dramatically. Further, Morgen (2013b) highlights “hidden” welfare – public subsidies within the tax code available to those taxpayers who can take advantage of them, in contrast to the direct outlays of social spending. Thus, tax expenditures – tax credits, exemptions, and deductions – disproportionately lower the tax liabilities of wealthy households and corporations, reducing available revenues for other programs.

In other words, the problems of economic insecurity and government’s failure to meet the needs of everyday people are excruciatingly real. But how, by whom, and to what ends such grievances are harnessed, as well as the nature of resulting mobilization, in part depends on how adept various movements are at capturing people’s attention and interest. The “Koch brothers fallacy” applies here as well – rather than dismissing participants in conservative movements as dupes, ignoramuses, or bought souls, it behooves scholars and organizers alike to take many of their concerns seriously.

At times, identification with a particular movement stems directly from a lack of organized alternatives. Thus, for instance, a significant part of an entire generation – gravely disenchanting with politics as usual as a tool in transforming a world embroiled in economic crisis and militarized systems of governance – today looks to the libertarian tradition as a compass for envisioning alternative modes

of production. Movement participants also often use “libertarian anarchism” interchangeably with “anarcho-capitalism.” This, too, is a particular usage stemming from the U.S. context, and many social anarchists reject the libertarian claim to the anarchist tradition in light of the strong libertarian commitment to a private property rights framework.

of social organization. Movement participants share, in classic libertarian fashion, a deep-seated suspicion regarding the capability of state action to meet the challenges presented by any number of contemporary dilemmas, seeing state-based solutions as much more likely to exacerbate than resolve problems — not an unreasonable conclusion in light of numerous historical and contemporary political developments. The single set of issues that presently unites the vast majority of liberty movement participants across ideological divides is a critique of state-sponsored violence: vehement opposition to U.S. imperialism and military action abroad coupled with outrage at civil liberties encroachments, systemic police abuse, and intensifying surveillance at home related to the war on terror and war on drugs. Profound esteem for former Representative Paul’s lifelong commitment to noninterventionist foreign policy and outspoken critique of both parties on these fronts is thus nearly universal among participants, many of whom do not recall a time when the United States was not at war. Regardless of their, or Paul’s, other views, movement participants repeatedly tell me, his truly uncompromising antiwar advocacy is far more compelling than what they have seen from nearly any other politician. They are, they say, accustomed to panderers, careerists, and opportunists — in their life experience, the entire political system holds very little credibility. Movement participants in fact come from a broad range of political backgrounds; a substantial number joined the movement after supporting Barack Obama in 2008, feeling intensely betrayed by that administration’s subsequent policies on war and civil liberties. Further, the movement increasingly attracts veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, with groups such as Veterans for Ron Paul playing an important role. Yet increasing numbers of Republican politicians attain office with the aid of electoral politics-oriented libertarian efforts, successfully tapping into the legitimate grievances of movement participants.

Facilitating Nuanced Critique

To be sure, the impact of powerful conservative and related institutions can be profound. Studies of the right can thus offer a counter to oversimplified, sweeping critique of the “Koch brothers fallacy” variety. Perhaps one of the most well-known and frequently criticized libertarian tendencies is the impact of Beltway market-oriented think tanks. This is the case particularly with respect to the application of libertarian principles in the policy arena without regard to context — disproportionately, for instance, to the rollback of social services and safety nets in the name of shrinking government power. In this respect, libertarian bearing on everyday lives is powerful indeed, although not with regard to disrupting state power or dislodging the state-sponsored elite privilege that concerns numerous movement participants. Yet as a result of lack of familiarity with the robust philosophical and economic underpinnings of the movement’s various parts — or of refusing to take these seriously — critics of such tendencies too often mount ineffective, easily shelved critiques, leading to a wealth of missed opportunities. In-depth, rigorous studies of such movements offer sophisticated analysis and tools for meaningful critique and engagement. Underlying the liberty movement, for example, is an intellectualism grounded in a vast network of publications, conferences, online lectures, and trainings. In addition to academic contributions to economics and philosophy, the literature produced through this complex consists of thousands of articles and books where readers can find an array of libertarian takes, and usually fierce debate, on virtually any issue. Understanding the underpinnings and assumptions of distinct libertarian traditions, which serious scholarship on the subject can help provide, is central to mounting effective critique and developing alternatives.

In this vein, Morgen (2013a) provides an astute analysis of the role of various conservative organizations in the shift of political vocabularies about redistributive public policies. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, national poll data, and information about recent well-funded campaigns to “fix the

debt” and curb social spending, she traces the genealogy of the discourse of “entitlement/s” and highlights changes in the meanings of, and popular support for, social provisioning and protection. For example, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, this terminology was commonly used in reference to a wide array of property rights, including the professional licenses of physicians and lawyers, labor union contracts and pensions, executives’ contracts and stock options, subsidies to farmers and businessmen, and individual social security pensions. “Entitlements” were seen as “sources of security,” regarded as “essential and fully deserved.” Furthermore, “war on poverty” legislation and related judicial decisions recognized the “statutory entitlement” of the poor to public assistance. Yet beginning in the 1980s, a number of efforts contributed to popularizing a usage of the concept tied to a “pathological self-absorption” of U.S. culture, presaging a nation “going broke” and facing a moral crisis triggered by an erosion of personal responsibility. This usage is today commonplace in political discourse and mainstream media analysis alike. Morgen identifies key actors underlying this shift: conservative institutions such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute spearheaded key projects to this effect. The latter, for example, was at the forefront of the shift in organizing the 1984 conference “Entitlement Issues in the Domestic Budget.” Likewise, individual authors – many affiliated with these and other conservative organizations – have helped popularize the language of “the entitlement epidemic” and “the entitlement tsunami.”

Similarly, in his study of eight local tea party chapters in central North Carolina grounded in 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork, William Westermeyer (2013) notes that because the tea party movement relies in part upon resources stemming from well-financed conservative sources, scholars commonly overlook the thousands of community activists reproducing the movement in small chapters nationwide. His research demonstrates the significance of local, face-to-face tea party organizations in social mobilization, exploring the challenges involved in representing a movement composed of both elite and grassroots elements linked through diffuse, temporary networks. Local chapters do not simply amplify prepackaged political discourses; these are adapted to and contextualized within local-historical particularities. The tea party movement, Westermeyer shows, entails linkages between local and trans-local actors and processes in which symbols, frameworks, and discourses circulate and are invested with meaning through the everyday practices of participants on the ground – fostering the development of local political dramas that nonetheless hold broader significance for U.S. politics.

A.J. Bauer’s work on the tea party (2013) further illustrates how ethnographically grounded studies of conservative movements can advance understandings of these formations and facilitate nuanced critique and exchange. Drawing on data collected through interviews with tea party participants and attendance of events across the country, he posits that the tea party movement is making not only a political claim, but also a historical argument. Focusing on two 2010 keynote addresses to tea party crowds by Glenn Beck and Andrew Breitbart, Bauer highlights the movement’s insistence that the future of the United States lies in the country’s re-founding based on its original constitutional principles: “Tea Partiers revere history because their political claim depends on it – the movement’s producer nationalist appeal seeks to circumvent the Obama administration’s claim to represent ‘the people,’ staging a countersubversive claim on behalf of the sovereignty of a *particular* people, whose legitimacy is derived from the past, as opposed to the present.” But supporting such a claim “requires some fancy footwork, a two-step of worship and disavowal. Beck’s dichotomy, that Americans can either focus on the nation’s ‘scars’ or on building its future, implies a two-pronged historical approach – ‘good’ history, that is to say the inspirational stories often memorialized in monuments, is eternal, occurring in the past but also transcendent, occupying the present and determining the future as, to use Beck’s term, ‘American scripture’; meanwhile ‘bad’ history, including ‘mistakes’ such as

slavery and discrimination, is rendered static, calcified into discrete ‘scars’ that require no more treatment and, thus, can be forgiven and forgotten.”

In particular, Bauer challenges historian Jill Lepore’s understanding of tea party historicity. Contra Lepore, who sees the tea party movement as both “antihistorical” and “historical fundamentalist,” Bauer argues that the two concepts are in fact two sides of the same historical claim. He thus posits that the movement is marked by what he terms “historical ahistoricism” – the deployment of favorable components of the past to disarm and disavow unfavorable ones. “It is a bait-and-switch whereby true historical antecedents are obscured and romanticized ones extolled, whereby pseudo-historical arguments are made toward ahistorical ends, resulting in an un-due appearance of historical exceptionalism.” But “historical ahistoricism” also gestures toward a particular understanding of historical time embraced by the movement. Lepore’s critique centers on the movement’s ostensible sense of historical simultaneity, particularly as regards the nation’s founding period. Yet in Bauer’s account, the movement’s treatment of history is more complex. While tea partiers do generally see themselves as engaged in the same meta-historical struggle of the nation’s founding fathers, they also acknowledge and embrace the exceptionality of the present moment. Further, Bauer points out that Lepore’s focus on the movement’s connectivity to the eighteenth century causes her to overlook its indebtedness to the historical logic of the Cold War: “The movement is not disavowing the linear logic of chronology, but rather adheres to a hybrid conception of historical time which implicitly values conservative certainty over the uncertainty of progress.”

Bauer’s engagement with Lepore’s work demonstrates well a twofold contribution of ethnographically informed studies of the right: these approaches can both facilitate nuanced, informed exchange as well as contribute to ever-deepening understandings of conservative formations. He is sympathetic to her desire, as a historian, to correct the tea party’s oversimplified version of U.S. history by infusing it with relevant context. But his analysis further builds upon her observations, ultimately revealing a critique of modernity implicit in the tea party conception of history – a conception that in fact incorporates both rectilinear and circular logics and “might be seen as a critique of modern historiography, which reduces historical meaning to causality (and, per Beck, attends to the business of scars).”

In sum, participants in conservative and related movements are remaking both political identities and our contemporary landscape in myriad ways that have yet to be sufficiently understood. Exploring how emerging identities and spaces are presently being constructed and refashioned – and to what ends – is the broader task taken up by growing numbers of anthropologists studying these movements. While not without distinct methodological and theoretical problems (Ginsburg 1993), this research agenda brings with it crucial insights into how the practices of actors involved in such efforts articulate with, shape, and reconfigure our world – why they matter. Anthropology is in a unique position to intervene in current debates on these fronts.

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