

In Remembrance of Our Colleague Paul Rabinow

Aihwa Ong, April 9, 2021

Over the course of a highly productive and wide-ranging career, Paul Rabinow left a permanent mark of distinction on our department. To anthropologists the world over, his name was synonymous with Berkeley Anthropology. Although he never held office beyond a brief stint as department chair, Rabinow was well respected across campus. He made anthropological inquiry critically relevant to disciplines such as French Studies, Philosophy, English, Urban Studies, History and the Biological Sciences. His writings on the formation of modern subjectivity and its ethical quandaries, the predicament of contemporary times and re-engineering of life make a distinctive contribution to the human sciences.

Paul attended the University of Chicago and was mentored by Clifford Geertz. But in the midst of the intensification of the Vietnam War, Paul blazed his own trail. What can Anthropology contribute besides the study of diverse cultures? Shouldn't anthropology pose philosophical questions about what it means to be human, in these exceptional times? Viewing himself as a rooted cosmopolitan, Rabinow brought a new sophistication and energy to anthropological inquiry that participates in broad conversations about contemporary modes of living and life forms.

Reflections on Fieldwork

Paul's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* -- published in 1977, the year he was hired by Berkeley -- triggered a minor earthquake in Anthropology. As an unprecedented enactment of the distinct vicissitudes of field research, the book raised uncomfortable questions about the making of ethnographic knowledge. Rabinow argues that our observations emerge from the dialogic interaction between informant and anthropologist. Reflexivity therefore requires us to focus on the anthropologist's self-conduct in fieldwork, as well as the ethics of dealing with informants as equals in data making.

By decentering/troubling the Western gaze, the book identifies research as a problematizing inquiry forged within the tensions that arise amidst the encounters of a field situation. Furthermore, the book contributed to the emerging interrogation of power and representation in the human sciences, as exemplified by the journal *Representation*. Later, Paul famously noted that "representations are social facts."

Foucault in Anthropology & Beyond

From the early 1980s onwards, Rabinow was the main interlocutor in introducing Michel Foucault to American Anthropology and the human sciences more broadly. Paul interacted with Foucault during his frequent visits in the Bay Area. With Berkeley professor of philosophy Hubert Dreyfus, Rabinow gave the first sustained analysis of Foucault's oeuvre in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (1982). Rabinow went on to assemble key Foucault essays and interviews in *The Foucault*

Reader (1984). The book is a valuable introduction to Foucault's analysis of totalizing and individualizing power as it manifests itself in homes, schools, hospitals, factories, and other organized realms of society. Paul took up and explored some of these themes in his *French Modernity: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (1989). This innovative take on urban planning as a laboratory of modern government is widely read in Urban Studies to this day. He also published (with W.M. Sullivan), *Interpretive Social Science: a Second Look* in 1987.

For Rabinow, Foucault's analytics of power, ethics, and truth ("the conduct of conduct") illuminates how schemes of modern knowledge/power variously normalize, regulate, and shape subjectivity as well as what it means to be human today. *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment* (2003) traces the new thinking and practices through which "the human is put at stake" in contemporary times of radical uncertainty. An anthropology that pays attention to the situated play of strategies, Rabinow suggests, uncovers shifting possibilities for the exercise of human agency and problem-solving. Taken together, Paul's works on affect, ethics, politics, and assemblages of science contribute to the transformation of socio-cultural anthropology.

Revitalizing Socio-Cultural Anthropology

In 1984, Foucault died from complications of HIV/AIDS. Berkeley anthropologists were among the first scholars to study the devastating human costs of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Bay Area and other regions of the world. Paul, together with Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Lawrence Cohen, integrated the study of affliction, epidemics, biosociality, and bioavailability into our program. The revitalization of socio-cultural anthropology included conferences on Foucault, workshops with Giorgio Agamben, debates about Cuba's treatment of HIV-compromised patients, as well as visits by luminaries from other Anthropology departments. These events helped us rework and expand the Berkeley anthropology curriculum (by adding Donna Haraway, Niklas Luhmann, Ulrich Beck, French social theorists, etc.)

It was a time of intense excitement at Berkeley Anthropology. This Camelot-like moment was captured in a Prague workshop and the subsequent volume, *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics and Ethics as Anthropological Problems* (2005) edited by me and Stephen Collier. Berkeley faculty and students, among others, led the way in charting emerging areas of anthropological inquiry: bioscience and biological life, values, social technologies, calculating practices, managing uncertainty, governmentality and politics, security and justice, and citizenship and ethics.

This disciplinary ferment molded an exceptional cohort of anthropology graduate students who have since become leading scholars at top institutions across the country: James Faubion, Teresa Caldera, Joao Biele, Adriana Petryna, Andrew Lakoff, Nathasha Schull, Stephen Collier, Caitlin Zaloom, Nicolas Langlitz, Peter Redfield, Tobias Rees, Lisa Hoffman, and Duana Fulwille; the list goes on (see Gabriel Coren's statement).

In his later years, Rabinow set up the ARC Lab (Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory) that brought graduate students together to create new forms of inquiry in the human sciences. PR (his code name among students) could be a formidable advisor, but also a generous mentor. He even co-authored books with former students: *Demands of the Day: On the logic of anthropological inquiry* (2013) with Anthony Stavrianakis, and *A Machine to Make the Future: Biotech Chronicles* (2004) with Talia Dan-Cohen (then a Berkeley undergraduate). Besides training generations of excellent students, Paul inspired students and visitors who never took a class or met with him to engage with his work from an adjacent position.

An Anthropology of Science

From the 1990s onwards, Rabinow's most consequential contribution was as a trailblazer for an Anthropology of Science. His approach put the human —as well as a critical European rationalistic traditional of philosophical anthropology— at the center of the emerging field of Science, Technology & Society (STS). His new works illuminate how science innovations and global conditions are giving rise to new figures of the modern anthropos. *French DNA: Trouble in Purgatory* (1999) roots genetic research in France in the wider symbols of French patrimonial and nationalism. *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason* (1996) introduced a concept, biosociality for the social bonds and identity emerging from shared biological experiences of illness and suffering. *Making PCR: a Story of Biotechnology* (1996) is the first ever ethnography of the cultural formation in a biotech company. In *Designing Human Practices: an Experiment with Synthetic Biology* (2012) Rabinow and Gaymon Bennett argue for an integration of bioethics and bioscience in life science experiments.

These are difficult and searching ethnographies about scientists and science-making which have momentous implications for a world morphing at warp speed. One of his later volumes (co-editor Limor S. Darash) was entitled *Modes of Uncertainty: Anthropological Cases* (2015). Taken together, Paul's works are beacons for intrepid anthropologists venturing into the near future.

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It is early April in the Bay Area where nature is in a frenzy of blooming. I remember a rare throwaway remark Paul made many springs ago. He said that he loved going to Paris, of course, but then he would find himself missing the fragrant jasmine draping his Berkeley backyard. The university was the center of his work and his life.

Paul Rabinow's passing is a great loss to our department, the campus, and the discipline. His main objective was to connect emerging situations to big questions of how the human is being transformed and imperiled today. He brought high ambition and purpose to our endeavors of social inquiry. His remains a vital voice calling on us all to meet the demands of the day.