

## BOOK REVIEW

**CONTRARIAN ANTHROPOLOGY: THE UNWRITTEN RULES OF ACADEMIA**

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REVIEW BY MARION LOUGHEED

Spanning decades of anthropological inquiry, this book collects twenty-eight of Laura Nader's articles and lectures beginning with her famous piece on studying up. The book opens with her call to broaden the purview of anthropology and ends with a critique of 'comparative law' from 'a global perspective,' demonstrating implicitly the effects of her early work on the discipline's trajectory. Topics in between vary from academia to energy to gender to childrearing, all of which she argues are caught up in mindsets and normativities that push in complex and often problematic directions.

The book traces Nader's distinguished career, highlighting how she built upon her earlier work and brought it to bear on the shifting legal and political landscapes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She shows how the energy sector avoided renewables because those working in that field considered them intellectually unstimulating. She examines the interplay between women's rights in the United States and in the Middle East, positing that the so-called East and West use one another as negative examples in order to subjugate women at home. She considers legal

systems, comparing systems of dispute resolution, ideas about crime, and the effects of differentiating between victims and plaintiffs, among other things. In a particularly chilling section, she explores how the silencing of dissenting researchers, specifically leftist or left-leaning anthropologists, during the Cold War has contributed to the current professional layout of the discipline – who was hired, which topics were given courses and money, and which methodologies are deemed credible. Some repetition occurs across chapters, since she draws on her previous work, as well as some of the same references. Nonetheless, reading her writing gathered in a single volume allows us to engage with these issues unfolding over time, to follow the development of her thoughts and arguments, and the collection of new evidence based on changing world circumstances.

Naturally, some of the perspectives championed by Nader in her earliest writing are outdated (or maybe simply outmoded). The pros and cons of single-sited fieldwork, such as the graduate project she undertook among the Zapotec of Mexico, have been discussed and dissected vigorously since the 1960s. Indeed, Nader was at the forefront of this dissection, with her calls to study 'at home' (i.e., in the urban, mainstream United States) and to carry out research that connects historical and geographical dots and lines. She recommended also turning our gaze on those with power, rather than

restricting our work to small-scale communities and those on the receiving end of policies and decision-making. Despite its age, even the first chapters of this book feel fresh and urgent, in particular when it comes to countering the 'unwritten rules of academia' mentioned in the book's subtitle.

That being said, the book's title and subtitle may be an overstatement of its contents. While some chapters do focus on the academic world, many use the tools of anthropology to analyze and explore beyond the university's walls. Perhaps in the midst of anthropology's current identity crisis, this external emphasis serves as a suggestion of what the discipline can achieve or how we might challenge disciplinary expectations by branching out into topical areas and fieldsites that remain understudied (and often underfunded).

From a topical perspective, the book will be useful to scholars at any level who wish to gain an overview of the US energy sector, the rise of harmony ideology in dealing with injustices, or the theoretical and practical moves within anthropology over the past few decades. Taken individually, some of the chapters might provide engaging fodder for courses on gender, law, the state, or STS. Those same chapters (and others) delve to the core of anthropological concerns beyond specific topics, touching on how we should engage with our work, with other fields of

human endeavour, with human rights, and with injustices both large and small.

The selections for this book, carefully chosen from among Nader's hundreds of publications, revolve around these themes. What connects the pieces that appear in the book is a concern with central dogmas and their local, national, and international effects. They also point to the benefits of interdisciplinary work in general, bringing anthropology to bear on engineering, for example, as well as learning from legal scholars, for instance, to improve our own discipline.

The book works as a reminder of how the discipline has travelled over the past decades. It also reminds us of anthropology's traditional strength as a generalist discipline, a tradition that Nader fears is losing its force. In her introduction, she writes that this book is an attempt to counter what she sees as 'the increased specialization and narrow demarcation of knowledge production' (p.10) within anthropology, as well as a refusal to follow scholarly trends. She shows us how to talk about the things we care about while maintaining the integrity and rigour of our research. This book acts as a model for opening up anthropology, without flinching at the generalist stance that might be required.