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Reflections on the Field:

Imagining the Future of the Anthropology of Education if We Take Laura Nader Seriously

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Abstract: The large corpus of scholarship of cultural anthropologist Laura Nader is relevant to the contemporary practice of the anthropology of education. In particular, her work is relevant to contemporary debates about methodology and what constitutes "scientifically based" education research; to the prospect and need for more cross-fertilization within the discipline of anthropology; and for the proud assertion of anthropology's distinctive suitability for understanding and responding to many contemporary educational challenges, including how to have anthropologically derived insights more favorably compete in the "marketplace of ideas" against less empirically grounded claims and strategies.

Laura Nader has been publishing important anthropological studies for almost 40 years. The comments here build on three of her works. Her classic but still relevant essay, "Up the Anthropologist" (Nader 1969), her edited volume Naked Science (Nader, ed. 1996), and her 2000 address to the American Anthropological Association reprinted in *American Anthropologist* (Nader 2001) more than suffice as sources to revitalize and guide the anthropology of education.[1]

In her 1969 article, "Up the Anthropologist," Nader identifies three rationales for why the tools of anthropology should be used to study groups who wield power in our own North American society.[2] One involves the adequacy of science. Another concerns the ways in which these topics may engage students. And the third involves democratic relevance. Those three themes—science, engagement, and democracy—organize the discussion that follows.

I conclude this article with a proposal that builds on Nader's insistence that anthropology's key assets include the breadth and multi-method eclecticism of our four fields and multiple subfields. Nader asserts that the breadth of anthropology positions us better than other disciplines to use multiple means, methods, and perspectives to guide our attempts to answer complex problems such as how equity-oriented educational policies translate into inequitable practices and how such cycles can be interrupted. It behooves us to consider how to leverage our

discipline's key assets as we attempt to diagnose and respond to such challenges. It makes sense for us to listen to and learn from Laura Nader, one of the most insistent voices for the larger transformative prospect of anthropology.

Scientific Adequacy/The Anthropology Of Science

An important theme of Nader's 1969 piece was the consideration of how "studying up" made anthropological science more adequate, how it ensured that our attempts at theoretical generalizations—our ethnologies—were not disproportionately based only on the study of those not part of Western societies or only in disadvantaged positions within Western societies. Our purposes as members of the Council on Anthropology and Education (CAE), our section's journal, and our sessions at annual meetings seem to have succeeded at maintaining a balance between Western and non-Western perspectives, but we have had less success balancing our study of those educationally discriminated against with our attention "up" at those with power, who are often the perpetrators of discrimination. Within our subdiscipline, Rosen's (2001) study of the contestation of math policy in California, and Beck's and Allexsaht-Snider's (2001) analysis of the Georgia Department of Education, both stand as important exceptions to this trend. There are others, but the preponderance of our inquiry still has a decidedly downward tilt. Perhaps as one consequence of this ongoing bias, our talk about policymakers and others with power in the educational arena frequently places such people as under-investigated perpetrators rather than as subjects for whom we should endeavor toward emic understandings. Nader's point still applies to the anthropology of education, and the adequacy of our science likely suffers.

Important as this implication may be, it is to Nader's more recent, more developed considerations of anthropology and science to which we should direct greater attention. Since 1969, Nader has continued to focus on anthropology and science, editing in 1996 an entire volume on that topic called *Naked Science: Anthropological Inquiries into Boundaries, Power, and Knowledge.* She broaches four themes in that volume that are particularly apt for the work of educational anthropology:

(1) the biggest social questions are too messy, too complex, to be studied with the so-called "scientific rigor" that smaller questions can;
(2) science is inherently interested and political, not autonomous and non-ideological as some would like to pretend;
(3) science is dominated by the quest for the universal rather than the particular; science is practiced according to the logic of physics and its attempts to understand what is always so, as opposed to an ecological model that inquires about what is temporarily so, here in this place, at this time; and
(4) "Big Science," or official science, is a social vehicle for silencing or subordinating other kinds of knowledge. [Nader 1996b]

As an example of the hazards of overvaluing the science of neat small questions in comparison to the messy important ones, for which "science" and "definitive" are not synonyms, and as an example of the power of Big Science, let us consider the definitive finding of the recent National Reading Panel (2000) that direct phonics instruction helps with decoding text and that fact's subsequent use/misuse in the Bush II administration's Reading First program.

As Dick Allington (2002), Gerald Coles (2001), and other critics (see Larson 2001) have pointed out, it is no doubt true that an understanding of phonics is required for decoding. But this sheds little light on the development of literacy—the capacity to comprehend, make meaning from, and critique text. The link between phonics and decoding is a small fact masquerading as a big one. Unfortunately, the modesty of this insight has not lessened its over-interpretation and over-application, which hints at the hazards of Big Science's subordinating power.

Consider the predominance of Open Court reading instruction, a heavily phonics-oriented, nearly fully scripted reading program that has a proven track record of helping students decode phonemes, but a less certain record promoting literacy, critical reasoning, and related higher order skills. Consider also the reflective words of Joanne Yatvin, a member of the National Reading Panel, who defends the report: "I believe that its findings, reported accurately, do provide some valuable guidance for schools and teachers" (Yatvin 2003:56). But she then laments:

> In the process of applying for federal funds through Reading First, states that have designed successful models of teacher training and school districts that have developed effective reading programs have been told that their plans are not sufficiently "scientific," or "systematic," and that they will have to change them. University professors of reading have been criticized for not having evidence of "knowledge of research-based methods" in their vitae. In short, any program or any educator that does not fit with today's fashionable orthodoxy is considered unfit for the teaching of reading. [Yatvin 2003:56]

In my own work with a demographically fast-changing (increasingly Latino) school district in Georgia, Direct Instruction, a fully scripted phonics curriculum that ignores students' "funds of knowledge" (González et al. 1995), displaced a much more holistic attempt to be responsive to Latino newcomers by training Georgia teachers in Mexico and bringing in teachers from Mexico to work with Mexican newcomer students and Anglo teachers (Hamann 2001, 2003). The small fact, the evidence linking phonics and decoding, displaced larger and more significant ones that our empirical studies have long substantiated—the importance of aligning instruction with students' experience, identity, and sense of self (Osborne 1996).

In this Georgia example, as with the National Reading Panel report, the anthropology of education can reveal that helping real students in real classrooms

is messier and more complicated than simply supplying a curriculum that emphasizes phoneme decoding. In addition, an anthropology that invokes the label "science" directs us to identify why the arguments for "silver bullet" phonics programs often prevail and under what conditions our messier, ethnographically derived findings need to compete.

My Georgia example also highlights Nader's second concern: that science, particularly social science, cannot be disinterested. Using "science" to justify scripted direct instruction blocked and displaced mechanisms that respected the value of the knowledge related to heritage and experience that students bring with them to the classroom. This blocking aligns with a powerful conservative political agenda, while simultaneously marginalizing the findings from myriad studies that, in a necessarily messy but still empirical way, have long shown the value of having instruction be responsive to students' knowledge base and background.

One of the core recommendations of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the new and massive reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that is steering billions of federal dollars to particular programs and program types, is that the education practices supported must have a demonstrable scientific base. Indeed, the words "scientifically based" appear more than one hundred times in the text of that policy (Traub 2002).

Recently, James Traub, a *New York Times* columnist who is linked with the conservative Thomas Fordham Foundation, wrote, "Though No Child Left Behind is perhaps best known for requiring every state to test annually in English and math, its passage may ultimately be recalled as the moment when education came to be treated more like medicine—a science that advances according to the findings of *impartial* research—than moral philosophy or folk wisdom" (2002:24; emphasis added). I emphasize the word *impartial* in Traub's description because it is the first of many assumptions he makes that are embedded in No Child Left Behind, and that Nader would challenge. I also emphasize Traub's disparaging phrase *folk wisdom.* In *Naked Science,* Nader writes, "The important questions about science ideology, practice, and consequence encounter walls of resistance to reasoned thinking when issues are phrased in binary modes—science and antiscience" (1996b:xii).

Traub's praise of No Child Left Behind should also be scrutinized for its unremarked-on embedding of what Nader calls the "physics view of science," in which "best" practices exist irrespective of context. Although I hardly want to argue for what works with fewer students against what works with more, the very framing of such comparisons privileges a universal view over an ecological one where context is salient. Nader compels us to ask what knowledges are being silenced or subordinated in this quest for "educational science" of a particular stripe. We should ask, for example, if this current federal posture privileges the claims of a distant model developer regarding what all students need, over a vet-

eran teacher's diagnosis of what this child needs. We find ourselves back at the tension between universal explanations and particular ones; back in a world that dismisses teachers' professional knowledge—knowledge that so many of our ethnographies have empirically documented. Big Science wins against craft knowledge, even though the latter offers the prospect of the trusting, engaging relationship between instructor and students that Erickson (1987) and many others have repeatedly noted is key for viable guided learning.

Educational anthropologist Margaret Eisenhart helped assure that the National Research Council's (2003) recent report, *Scientific Research in Education*, did not exclude ethnography from its definition of science, but we should neither rest on our laurels nor assume that our frequent reliance on the natural laboratory of humans acting in the complex real world is not under threat. In precisely the ways of privileging "Big Science" that Nader identifies, No Child Left Behind formally embraces randomized trials as the gold standard of research, a posture that Grover J. (Russ) Whitehurst, director of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, emphasized in his remarks at the 2003 American Educational Research Association conference. Indeed, as Eisenhart (2002) points out, there is a discrepancy between what the NRC report says and how it is being used, particularly regarding the policies on scientifically based education research. Given the emphasis on science-based research, it behooves us to insistently contribute to defining what "scientifically based" means, ask how the current charge to conduct such research is being interpreted and enacted, and, when it excludes our repertoire of inquiry, to contest the policy's implementation.

Let me clarify that Nader is not making an argument against science. Instead, she is asking that, in our appraisal of science, we remove the facade, or presumption, of superiority, infallibility, and disinterest. She is not suggesting that we assume a defensive posture protecting what we do and why. Rather, in both *Naked Science* and her 1969 essay, Nader asks us to take on big questions and to use the methodological diversity built into our discipline to do so. Diversity includes not only the four-fields approach, but also our willingness to gather data of various types, through various means, as long as such data help generate answers to our research questions.

Nader urges us to ask big and sweeping questions if they are pertinent, reminding us that our discipline is particularly well suited to do so. By way of illustration, consider the very different appraisal of the comprehensive school reform movement that we might offer than that of the meta-analysis of Borman et al. (2003). For purposes of methodological adherence for comparability, Borman et al. *a priori* exclude studies on comprehensive school reform that do not involve "regular" education students. Although Borman et al. purported to want to study how effective the comprehensive school reform movement has been, their adherence to the tenets of meta-analysis led them to answer an interesting, but

smaller and less-sweeping question—how effective comprehensive school reform has been for "regular" education students.[3]

In contrast, our ethnographies and ethnologies do not require the exclusion of studies of English language learners, special education students, and other "don't fit" types (Deschenes et al. 2001). Although the ethnology of comprehensive school reforms impact has yet to be written, as Osborne (1996), citing Erickson (1986), explains in a well-crafted and important ethnology about "marginalized" and "normalized" students published in *AEQ*, in our ethnologies we build cases that start with a basic statement followed by a list of studies that contribute to the evidentiary warrant for it, followed by a similar list of disconfirming evidence. This way is perhaps messier, but when we ask big and sweeping questions—such as how effective comprehensive school reform is (and how is it so?)—we do not find ourselves reducing and departing from the original question. Nor are we pressed to exclude sound, empirically derived information. Thus, we reduce the risk that a finding based on a subset of students is misgeneralized to apply to all, because we have not categorically excluded a subset of students. Moreover, if we take seriously the premise that no child should be left behind, our inclusive sweep and our ability to be faithful to our original questions should both be vigorously emphasized to our broader publics.

Engaging To Students

Embedded in Nader's insistence that we must make anthropology engaging to students, I see a particular opportunity for the anthropology of education to help quell critics who worry that the topics of anthropologists can be too esoteric, too distant, too exotic. Our topic of inquiry—education—is a central concern of most societies (Levinson and Holland 1996). In the United States, schooling employs millions, enrolls millions more, and is the vehicle for spending hundreds of billions of dollars. As we share with and involve our students in education work, we position them to be engaged, and the prospects of what they will do once engaged are as wide and exciting as the horizon.

But I believe Nader's emphasis on engagement can be interpreted more holistically and profoundly by expanding our understanding of who constitutes a student to encompass all those whom we hope might learn from what we learn. If we accept this quest to broaden the publics who engage with our work, then the task of engagement becomes yet more important and more viable—more important in that we can rapidly expand the types of "students" with whom we work to include key educational stakeholders, and more viable in that many of these stakeholders are disposed to consider information and insights that are pertinent to their work (that is, we engage them in what already matters to them).

In this vision, teachers, school reform developers, state department of education personnel, parents, congressional aides, colleagues in advocacy organiza-

tions, and others might all be our students, even as they often also remain, in the best Freirian tradition, our teachers and our informants. In her 2000 distinguished lecture to the American Anthropological Association, citing Auge (1998), Nader stated, "If we are ignorant of debates outside academia, we increasingly find ourselves talking mainly to each other, trapped in a diminished space, working in cramped quarters" (2001:617). I draw two lessons from this point. First, we need to get off our campuses and engage with multiple education stakeholder publics. In engaging with them, we need to learn their discourses. We need to learn what they find salient (in many cases "studying up"). To the extent that our insights are germane to them, we need to identify their zones of proximal development so that our input is both credible and intelligible.

Second, to free up the time to respond to this first lesson, we need to resist the restrictive publish-or-perish parameters in which we work. The point is not to stop publishing, nor to stop engaging in careful, rigorous research. To the contrary, both of these efforts ground what we do. But to the extent we publish for publishing's sake, for job security, we perpetuate in small but real ways the press on our time that keeps us from learning how to engage our most important publics, and this keeps us from being of much real use to them. We allow ourselves to talk to each other in diminished spaces, in cramped quarters. Nader beseeches us to do work that matters. We do, and it can and should engage others as well as ourselves.

Democratic Relevance

In 1969, Nader pointed to a third theme, one clearly present in her later works as well, that of the democratic relevance of our work. Clearly our field of inquiry—education—lends itself to issues of democratic relevance. To borrow from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren's sonorous and still highly relevant language from the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* (347 U.S. 483 [1954]) decision:[4]

> Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities.... It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is the principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available on equal terms.

To the extent that educational anthropologists can shed light on the enactment or failed enactment of this public charge, we are positioned to do democratically relevant work.

In her 2000 distinguished lecture to the American Anthropological Association, Nader (2001) asked us to consider who is advantaged by what we do. She asks us who our publics are and how the knowledge we develop or identify is made accessible to those publics. As Ray McDermott (2001) recently reminded us, Margaret Mead used to write a regular column in *Redbook*. Who among us begins to offer such a publicly accessible vehicle to share the insights of the anthropology of education? We lament and protest the subtractive assumptions that pervade the schooling of students of color and the failure of schools to respect and build from the funds of knowledge that all students bring to school. Yet our actions to challenge such assumptions and their consequences rarely seem directed either at the larger polity or at key decision-makers such as school district curriculum coordinators or school principals.

Finally, like Earl Warren's expectations for schools, Nader asks how what we do can inform and support the functioning of a democratic citizenry. Current CAE president Catherine Emihovich recently wrote, "Information is now accessible through multiple channels that are less and less subject to critical scrutiny and empirical investigation" (1999:31). I believe Emihovich and Nader both would like to see an anthropology of education that produces information that is empirical and that has been scrutinized. I believe they would also agree with two of Sol Tax's long-ago charges for us:

- To serve one's fellows, contribute as you can knowledge of the choices available to them; to learn about one's fellows, observe the choices they make.
- Have the respect not to decide for others what is in their best interests; assume you will never understand them that well. [Hinshaw 1979]

Being empirical, being thorough, and being topical are all important to how we need to work, but none of these is likely to substantially change what occurs in schools absent an articulated and enacted theory of engagement, grounded in an insistence on the democratic relevance of what we do. Nader draws us back to these points, but it is up to us to act.

A Final Proposal

This brings me to a final, more modest and also more tangible point that Nader raises. In her 2000 Distinguished Lecture (Nader 2001), she stated that our discipline needs to get past reifying our subdivisions and instead take advantage of the holistic responses to human problems that anthropology's heterogeneous collection of methodologies and subfields avails. In other words, Nader believes the educational anthropologists should talk to archaeologists, psychological anthropologists, primatologists, and so on. I want to end with an example and a proposal.

In the June 2002 *American Anthropologist,* Lawrence Hirschfield published an article titled, "Don't Anthropologists like Children?" The article lamented how little attention anthropology has paid to childhood, to the cultural acquisition processes that occur during this life-stage, and to how children's culture and adult-child interactions shape the larger society and culture. In many ways Hirschfield's article is an excellent one, but it is also either ignorant or an indicator of the Council on Anthropology and Education's marginality within AAA. Demonstrating Nader's points about the hazards of too little intradisciplinary sharing, Hirschfield never cites an *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* article, never mentions the CAE; indeed he seems unaware of our existence and work.

This brings me to my proposal, based on the session "Imagining the Future of the Anthropology of Education if We Take Laura Nader Seriously," organized for the 2002 AAA Annual Meeting. The session brought together Nader and six educational anthropologists. This promising, exciting session also was atypical. Very rarely in my ten years of involvement with the CAE have we invited an exemplary scholar from another subdiscipline to help us think about our work; very rarely has the remainder of our association asked one of us to join them.[5] I suspect there are a number of reasons why this is so, but one particular structural limitation embedded in AAA favors isolation and subspecialization over synthesis and reconciliation. The one-paper policy for our annual meetings means we usually present a paper only to like-minded colleagues. A two-paper policy that required the two papers to be sponsored by different sections would allow us to build the infrastructure for the holistic approach to large human problems that Nader recommends (and would make selection of papers for a finite number of meeting spots more selective), without dramatically taxing our association's capabilities.

It may seem anticlimactic to end on such a modest point, but this illustration is indicative of the more complex issues to which Nader urges us to attend. Whether the task is school reform or trying to provoke change in the habits of our subdiscipline, it is wise to build awareness and momentum by going for the "low-hanging fruit." If we cannot identify the way or the will to work with our parent organization for a modest structural change, the more crucial and grandiose tasks, such as challenging the mischaracterization of educational science and finding ways to bring our insights to bear on broader publics, will be difficult indeed to accomplish. With the stakes so high, remaining silent or estranged, be it from our anthropology colleagues or our broader publics, would be reckless.

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Notes

1. However, these are not the only pieces in Nader's corpus that are relevant to the anthropology of education.
2. Though, like Nader in her 1969 piece, my focus in this article is on North America and more particularly the United States, readers should note that Nader's corpus readily lends itself to supporting the anthropology of education in non-U.S. locales. Comparative education scholars such as Rival (2000), who has written about the Huaorani's loss of traditional forms of education because of the penetration of Ecuadorian schooling into the Amazon where they live, could, for example, find support from Nader's complaint in Naked Science (1996) about the common Western bias of overlooking and dismissing systematic, empirical practices from non-Western societies.
3. To clarify, I believe that Borman et al.'s (2002) meta-analysis is quite well done. It is the limitations of meta-analysis methodology in comparison to ethnology that I wish to highlight here.
4. *AEQ* has not altered the gendered language of this historical quotation.[—Ed.]
5. As an important and promising exception to this trend, see the AAA's K-12 education initiative (available at: http://www.aaanet.org/committees/commissions/aec/index.htm).

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