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## WHERE TO BEFORE WE'RE NOT HERE?

Imagining Utopian possibilities, Prefigurative Politics, Applied Activist Anthropology and the Making of Future Geo-socialities in the 21st Century

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**Course code:** AXL5407S  
**Due date:** 10 September 2013

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper arose from the question; what is the role of anthropology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Among many possibilities, I argue for what I would like to call applied activist anthropology; a combination of academia and advocacy, of critical inquiry into geo-social concerns on the edge of catastrophe and of well-intentioned, innovative initiatives to drive positive change. I aim to address this set of questions?

- (1) Considering the geo-social crises we face in our times, should we (and specifically anthropologists) be activists to the cause of 'saving' the ethnosphere and protecting the planet?
- (2) If so, (I say yes) how might anthropology become more applied and activist? Why is this important, and how can we engage toward social betterment?

## Key terms

Utopian imaginaries, prefigurative politics, applied activist anthropology, social betterment.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

We are living in exceptional times. Many scientists predict that sometime within the next quarter to a half century, we will witness the total depletion of natural resources that have been essential for human life since the dawn of our species. The documentary film *Home*<sup>1</sup> (2009), presents this possibility and poses serious questions about the moral legitimacy and sustainability of the current ways in which we act on nature and society. Based on research in over 100 countries, the film reports eye-opening statistics that indicate the extent to which we are destroying the planet.

- 40% of the arctic ice cap has melted, and is predicted to melt completely by around 2050, causing a 6-7 meter rise in sea levels, resulting in global mass flooding and affecting over half the world's population.
- In the last 60 years, the earth's population has almost tripled; this exponential growth (occurring most significantly in a hand-full of Asian nations) threatens to marginalize millions and millions of people from access to basic resources to survive.
- Over half of the world's 7 billion inhabitants live in cities. The population is expected to reach 9 billion by the year 2050, and will continue to increase throughout the century.
- 1 person in 4 of the world's people (1.8 billion, more than combined population of all the wealthy nations) live the way humankind did 6 000 years ago, that is, relying on the energy provided by nature.
- Water and food shortages will drastically affect more than 2 billion people by 2025.
- Fish is the staple diet of 1 in 6 people on the planet, 1.2 billion. 75% of all edible fish have been fished to extinction.

Are we heading for an apocalyptic world within our lifetimes? The research in *Home* suggests that the aforementioned catastrophes will affect people in poverty the hardest, those most immediately dependant on nature, with little modern technology to deal with crisis. Scarcity of resources poses serious challenges to whether we will meet our energy demands in the years to come.

Major improvements in healthcare have allowed people to live longer and healthier lives than ever before. More and more people are being lifted out of poverty, yet the gap between rich and poor is also increasing.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqxENMKaeCU>

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We have the technology, knowledge and capability to eradicate the world's most pressing geo-social malaises and extend the shelf-life of humankind for centuries to come, and at the same time we flirt perilously with nuclear warfare, cultural genocide and the possibility of the extinction of our species. These are some of the most immediate crises we face today. Will our species survive the next century? How much disaster lies ahead? Should we care? Should we do something about it? And if so, what should we do about it? What should contributing toward change constitute and what constrains us from making such contributions? These are big questions to ask, and there are certainly no easy answers. However I think that they are extremely important to consider and work through. I attempt to do this in this essay, with particular focus on how these issues relate to the discipline of anthropology and the potential it has to engage with them.

I argue for an orientation of anthropology that tends toward efforts to effect social betterment on diverse levels and in creative ways; what I propose calling an *applied, activist anthropology*. I contend that ethnography – the cornerstone of the anthropological method – is a powerful tool for social betterment (Mcnally 2002; Menley & Young 2005). Social betterment and the creation of utopian possibilities are not set destinations, but on-going processes, ones in which ethics and social imaginaries of utopia are constantly in flux, influencing the production of future materialities.

My interest in this form of praxis has been in part produced by various humanitarian, outreach initiatives that I have been involved in during my life; teaching, mentoring, coaching sport and distributing food and water in rural areas and townships, building mud huts and clearing alien vegetation, and raising funds to support such initiatives. This year I have working on a study on public sanitation facilities and services in the township of Masiphumelele on the Cape peninsula. Engaging with issues around the development and sustainability of informal settlements and doing fieldwork in conditions characterized by extreme poverty has further pushed me to seriously consider what I want to do with the privileged university education that I have, and continue to build on. Thinking about way of being 'otherwise' in the world, and how to meaningfully apply all that I have learned and am still learning by studying anthropology has become a central concern for me. This essay is an expression of this concern, and I hope that it will stimulate concentrated discussion and contribute to the more practical side of anthropology.

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## 2.ON UTOPIA

### 2.1 What is utopia?

The word *utopia* was first used in English literature by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 work *Utopia*. The word *utopia* resembles the Greek words "*no place*", ("*outopos*"), and "*good place*", ("*eutopos*").

For Bauman (1976:11), utopia is an image of a future and better world which is:

1. Felt as still unfulfilled and requiring additional effort to be brought about.
2. Perceived as desirable; not so much as a world that is bound to come, but one that should come.
3. Critical of existing society; not the embodiment of a system of ideas that is antithetical to existing society, but rather one that offers alternative ways of thinking and being.
4. Involving a measure of risk; for utopian imaginaries to become materialities, deliberate collective action is required.

Utopian thinking here is used not in the sense of abstract imaginings that are haphazardly applied to any given situation. Instead, the role of utopian thinking is considered here by Bauman as imagining alternatives so as to bring them into being. Imagination is of critical importance to the task of social transformation (Shukaitis 2010). As Shukaitis has argued, in order to seriously consider positive social change, one must "move conceptions of how such an alternative arrangement might work out of the realm of inconceivable thought and into the realm of possibility" (2010:304). Shukaitis argues that this is the role of utopian thinking; "to seize the creative latitude and inspiration of existing forms of non-hierarchical organizing to create webs of knowledge, skills, and experience that can be constantly redefined according to the needs of situation and time" (2010:304). This is where anthropology can, and I argue ought to step in. Anthropology is concerned with what it is to be human. But it must also consider what it will be like to be human as the 21<sup>st</sup> century unfolds, and how to attempt to effect changes that we want to see in the world.

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## 2.2 Functions of Utopias

Before we move to considering how to practically engage with how we might bring about utopic imaginaries and contribute toward social betterment, what might some of the functions of utopian thinking be? Here I look at how conceptualizing utopias relates to creating utopian realities.

According to Bauman (1976:13-15) again, utopias have two key functions:

1. Utopias relativize the present. One cannot be critical of something which is believed to be absolute. By exposing the partiality of reality, by scanning the field of the possible in which the real occupies only a tiny plot, utopias pave the way for a critical attitude and a critical activity which has the potential to transform the present predicaments of man. The presence of a utopia, the ability to think of alternative ways of living, may be seen as a necessary ingredient of historical change.
2. Utopias are those aspects of culture which the possible extrapolations of the present are explored. They are realistic in the sense that they draw from peoples' experiences and attempt to navigate issues that are important to people; they are imagined from the ground up.

How is this pertinent to anthropologists? The task of the ethnographer is to look at different forms of existing practice, and to draw from them, rather than imposing upon them (Shukaitis 2010; Stevralia 2011). Shukaitis calls for looking at existing forms of social relations and figuring out what is possible based on these relations. As such he contends that “the task of radical vision is not of the “great thinker” or learned sage, but the ability to listen attentively to the desires and experience of those who struggle for their liberation—and to learn from them” (Shukaitis 2010:308).

His *raison de etre* is extended thus; “Utopian thinking becomes looking at forms of liberatory social relations, extending their logic, and beginning to implement such notions and ideals within the way in which we live our lives now. We create the space for revolutionary thought and action by creating those spaces where community grows, where our lives and political struggles can be sustained in an on-going fashion. It is the task of bringing what Durruti called “the new world we carry within our hearts” into existence as a tangible reality, even if only in a piecemeal fashion. The reformulation of utopian thought is not finding a better way to imagine a future revolution, but drawing from human experience in finding ways to live liberation now” (Shukaitis 2010:311). Here we see echoes of Graeber’s concept of prefigurative politics; “beginning to implement such (utopian) notions and ideals within the way in which we live our lives now”.

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This project is ever in process, in flux, where progress and constraint are contingent on multifarious facets. Knowledge derived from anthropological method has value in the making of the future. Davis writes that anthropology's task is to "use our method and our documentary artistry to pull from the complexities of life useable principles that might be transferrable or deployable elsewhere, knowing that our utopia is in the messiness, and our utopia is always in the working towards it" (Davis 2006: 512-513). Of course in order to contribute toward positive change, it is not necessary to have clearly defined utopian visions, yet we must envision possibilities on small-scales that we can practically engage with. We might not believe in utopian possibilities at all and yet still be determined to make a difference in the world. But I think we must be hopeful that our ideas of change can bring about change, and by imagining we plant seeds of doing.

### 2.3 Dystopia and Constraints on Utopia

As much as I we might develop utopian imaginaries, and hope for better human possibilities, we cannot ignore the dystopian features of the world, such as the catastrophes outlined at the beginning of the essay. They in large part a product of a grand scheme of siphoning off the Earth's resources so as to separate access to them and wealth and privilege derived from them between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. The dystopian visions of Huxley and Orwell (and others) have become, and are becoming realities. Censorship of cyberspace in China, regulation of movement by women in Arabia, and legislation against homosexuality in Africa are just a few examples.

Are aspects of the society imagined in *A Brave New World* and *1984* becoming more and more a reality? We already know that millions upon millions of surveillance cameras peer down on populations in most of the world's major cities, that we our whereabouts and personal details can be traced and 'hacked' by powerful governmental security departments. The apparatuses and structures of power, Althusser's 'hypereal simulacra', and Foucault's biopolitics pervade our everyday lives, they impose themselves on us from the outside, and are reproduced by us at the same time. In a sense, the 'system' constrains us from 'breaking out', subverting or resisting it.

A far more detailed discussion on the effects of power on the individual and society is needed, but I won't address it here. My point here is to consider some of the challenges we face in moving toward a more activist form of anthropology. This modality implores us to take on the responsibility of being crusaders for humanitarianism and advocacy, to somehow rise above our own personal issues and soldier on in the service on mankind and the planet.

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How brilliant it would be if we could do this to the fullest extent, yet, without being too pessimistic, our best efforts and intentions are often marred by the limitations and complexities of being human. We are preoccupied by the '9-5' work model; living for the weekend has become the goal of the work week. Overwhelmed and distracted by a relentless barrage of information and stimuli in all directions, it's very difficult for people to step back from their circumstances and find air to breathe. Yet even if we lived in an idealistic world where all of life's necessities were freely available and in abundance and we didn't have to work, can the responsibilities of activism still be legitimized? Is being involved in activism for the planet and the ethnosphere our responsibility? Who ought to assume this responsibility above others, and why? Who asserts this responsibility, ourselves, others?

At this point one might throw in the towel and forget about this business of trying to justify activist anthropology and its related responsibilities. The trouble is that the attendant questions and issues are so difficult and complex that they may repel us, and leave us confused and unsure how to move forward. Yet this is how we must begin; mulling all of these considerations over in our minds, sharing our scruples and uncertainties, and collaborating toward ways to do what we hope to do, as human beings who decide to dovetail activism with anthropology.

### 3. THE ROLE OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE MAKING OF UTOPIA

*"We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world."*

**Howard Zinn**

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Why should, and how might anthropology become more applied and activist?

How can anthropology be employed to drive the making of utopian possibilities and contribute toward social betterment? Anarchist anthropologists for example have advocated for the centrality of cultural critique's potential to be a force for positive change (Mcnally 2002; Grabacic 2004; MGraeber 2005, 2006; Shukaitis 2010).

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How do we seize this potential and use anthropology as a tool for social betterment? Applied, activist anthropology is but one of many approaches, one that I maintain has immense value in confronting the challenges of our times.

Anthropology is often thought of as the study of 'others' (Fischer 1986). Anthropologists travel – although not always far from home - elsewhere to objectify and “know” people and cultures seemingly 'different' what we know of in the western world (Geertz 1993). Anthropology is about learning from ideas and other ways of knowing to question deeply embedded assumptions within our own societies, experiencing the world in new ways, and opening up to new perspectives, which point to the problematic things that we take for granted in our own culture (Hymes 1972; Clifford & Fischer 1986). Herein lies the potential of ethnography and the production of knowledge derived from it.

Clifford and Fischer define ethnography as “an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon; actively situated *between* powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders” (Clifford & Fischer 1986:2). How can anthropologists harness the power of ethnography to effect positive social change? According to Foucault and Levi-Strauss, anthropology's purpose is to be a repository of knowledge about ways of being 'otherwise' so as to bring about a transformation of 'our culture' and practices (cited in Davis 2006:505). Overing writes that “Humanity comes only through an acquaintance with the epistemologies and ontologies of other cultures, an acquaintance achieved through rich ethnography which is acquired by taking seriously what others say about their social worlds” (cited in Santos-Granero 2006).

In particular here, I argue that activist ethics are critical to our methodologies, including an integration of the notion of prefigurative politics. Prefigurative politics again, is the idea that one's means must be consonant with one's ends, and that “as much as possible one must attempt to embody the society one wishes to create” (Graeber 2005:194).

Cultural critique can assume a disposition that could be said to be both anarchist and activist; it is not just about exposing geo-social malaises and the structures of power that act to produce them, but also about exposing them in a way that embodies and points toward alternative models for society (Graeber & Grubacic 2004). While we endeavour to contribute toward positive change, critique and scholarship goes on and helps us to look back at how we are engaging in change, thus enhancing our ability to mobilize and embody our ethical convictions, prefigurative politics.

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Activist anthropology is about reimagining the world, reimagining different ways of relating. As Graeber writes, “The challenge is for us to think of alternative ways of living that can inspire people” (Graeber<sup>2</sup>).

### 3.1 Activist Anthropology

Rapp asserts that activist anthropology is primarily engaged with making the walls of academia more porous, more transparent<sup>3</sup>. She argues that anthropologists are confronted with the perennial tension between time and translation; that is, how to apply the knowledges of culture that we learn about and produce to relevant, important activist initiatives. She refers to one of the obstacles to such translation by saying that “Social movements need information and knowledge yesterday, whereas academic research takes places over extended periods of time”<sup>4</sup>. Part of our challenge then is according to Rapp to make ethnographic research more accessible to initiatives that aim to bring about social betterment.

I think that anthropology has the potential to act as an intermediary between policy and polity; between the voices and experiences of people and the strategies employed by politicians, judiciaries, councillors, community representatives, managers and administrators (Graeber 2005; Shukaitis 2010). If we are to make a case for an anthropological praxis that tends toward being more engaged, practical, applied and activist, then such a modality must be rooted in dovetailing the production of ethnographic knowledge with efforts to bring about social betterment (Hale 2006; Kahawatte 2011).

The practice of activist anthropology, according to Hale, “asks us to identify our deepest ethical-political convictions and to let them drive the formulation of our research objectives” (Hale 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> A Conversation With Anarchist David Graeber

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVDkkOAotV0&list=PLE5hGOZQTHrfjVg\\_HiKD99-7KrLQrRxNM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVDkkOAotV0&list=PLE5hGOZQTHrfjVg_HiKD99-7KrLQrRxNM)

<sup>3</sup> Rayna Rapp: Activism Meets Academia

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gk1XConyVDQ>

<sup>4</sup> Rayna Rapp: Activism Meets Academia

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Rather than attempting to suppress those convictions, “activist research endorses the contrasting tack of making our politics explicit and up-front, reflecting honestly and systematically on how they have shaped our understanding the problem at hand, and putting them to the service of our analytical endeavour” (Hale 2006). The activist anthropologist also must utilize personal convictions as strengths, incorporating them into their methodology (Graeber 2005). Activist anthropologists advocate working with informants, allowing them to participate in the production of knowledge which will hopefully contribute to understanding the issues they face and how to resolve them (Scheper-Hughes 1995; McNally 2002; Meneley & Young 2005).

Having argued for such a positionality, the question is then how anthropology can practically be more activist; in what ways can anthropologists get involved in contributing to improving our global ecology and the anthropocene that exists on it? There is certainly no paucity of opportunities; the scope within which to generate positive change is seemingly unlimited.

### 3.2 Social Betterment

*“We cannot have a world for everyone if the world’s resources aren’t utilized for everyone.”* **Aldous Huxley**

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If the practical objective of anthropology is to effect social betterment, one must ask; what does ‘social betterment’ constitute? Broadly conceptualized under what might be termed humanitarian or philanthropic enterprise, ‘social betterment’ would in my mind begin by identifying means by which to improve the quality of people’s lives on different levels; improving housing and access to transport, education and employment creation to name a few. Does there need to be consensus on what social betterment ought to constitute in order for it to be engaged with? Of course, universal consensus within anthropology is unrealistic, yet this ought not to be an obstacle to the praxis of an applied, activist anthropology. Areas within which to get involved will vary according different geo-social climates. Initiatives and projects are largely contingent on materialities on the ground, understandings of which anthropologists are uniquely poised to develop and draw from. Stipulations of what social betterment should constitute are however vulnerable to critique; such as, what might the implications of different stipulations be for the environment for example?

Can different modes of activism be valorised, or calibrated above others? What rationalizations would be put forward to legitimize various forms of activism? Can activism be measured?

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What yardsticks do we use to measure the outcomes of activism? Such critique is valuable in and of itself. It pushes us toward more reflexive insight. But it may thwart us from being proactive. It is not enough to simply have good intentions and do what can to contribute toward social betterment? Unfortunately, it is not such a simple matter. Good intentions can often have unintended consequences, and so we are compelled to engage more deeply with how to involve ourselves in the most effective, positive ways possible.

Of course, activist anthropology is not for everyone. In making a case for an applied, activist anthropology, I do not intend to undermine the value of the production of ethnographic knowledge alone. Anthropology takes on the roles that its practitioners take on, and these have been, are and will always be multifarious and diverse. However I maintain that moving toward a more applied, activist anthropological approach and praxis has immense value for the project of social betterment. Equipped with ethnographic methods that serve to produce contextually rich, insightful, complex, nuanced narratives of peoples' lives, anthropologists possess a special set of epistemological and practical apparatuses to engage meaningfully in bettering society (Hymes 1972; Graeber 2006; Shukaitis 2010).

Apart from a humanitarian, philanthropic modality, such an approach would I think serve to foster solidarity and collective purpose within the global anthropology community. What do we want to achieve with our discipline? What contributions can we make? There are scores of anthropological societies, associations and organizations dedicated to various initiatives that aim toward social betterment across a range of fields. We can choose to get involved in any of them, or start our own initiatives.

But "we" are not only anthropologists, or activists, but most simply human beings. Bettering society is always counterpoised with our personal ambitions and desires. This brings us back to prefigurative politics; that we should embody the change that we want to see in the world, echoing the famous quote by Ghandi. Being human, we make mistakes and live duplicitously to certain degrees, living with integrity often constrained by our feebleness. Upholding the principle of prefigurative politics is a tall order to say the least. We condemn littering, but we buy plastic and don't recycle. We 'support' locally made products and condemn exploitative labour, and yet buy Nike or Gucci brands so we can look good and 'elevate' our social status. We are sceptical and critical of western media and advertising, but buy into them every day when we unconsciously switch on the TV and channel hop in a semi-hypnotic state, or rush off to get the latest cell phone on offer. We are co-opted into the global network of neoliberal power structures.

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We attempt to subvert 'the system'; to 'rage against the machine', but in so many ways we are conditioned by the apparatuses of power all around us.

Max Weber famously argued that the modern times within which we live are typified by rationalization, industrial mechanization, technological proliferation, the fragmentation of value spheres, bureaucracy, power and legitimacy (Weber cited in Whimster 2007). Weber writes that "The capitalistic economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live" (Weber cited in Whimster 2007). Modernity, as Latour sees it "is fraught with contradictions and has made our lives more complicated, enmeshing us in these contradictions" (Latour: 1999).

## 4. CONCLUSION

*It is the irony and one of the profound tragedies of our lives that few of us cross the river. We seldom encounter ourselves in the other. We are variously fascinated, repelled, bored, fearful, but ultimately too often dismissive of those who do not embrace our way of life. We rarely comprehend the complexity and integrity of simplicity, of living harmoniously with the world around us, with acknowledging our common biological heritage and nurturing cultural diversity.*<sup>5</sup> **John Ripton**

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But we need not despair. If following Foucauldian analysis, power enacts itself in the lives of individuals, then we also have the potentiality to challenge, subvert and resist power through changing the ways in which we think and act (Rapport 2003; Grubacic 2004; Graeber 2009). Notwithstanding the multifarious ways in which we are implicated and bound up in the structures of power (both inside and outside of us), we can try to keep improving ourselves; doing our best to make our best better. Sincerity, earnestness, good intentions, kindness, compassion and determination are virtues we can cultivate and employ in order to get involved in making positive contributions. Contributing toward utopian imaginaries and projects of social betterment are on-going processes, just as are our individual projects of aligning our actions and thoughts with our ethics. We must be patient, optimistic and proactive.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.adventureactivist.com/about-us/>

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Building on the crown jewels of modernity – democracy, liberalism, human rights and freedom of expression – people across the globe are developing initiatives and setting up organizations (apart from the multitude of ones already in existence) that aim to advance peace, harmony with the environment, critical thinking and creative, dynamic collaboration.

Our challenge then is to find a viable, environmentally-conscious, harmonious, ethical path forward; an endeavour which can be achieved in part by cultivating sincere, good-intentioned, open-minded initiatives. Ultimately, whether we adopt the responsibility of making the world a better place is completely up to us. This undertaking is what Husserliana calls the ethical imperative of being 'custodians of the all-alive-unity', based on mankind's moral relatedness and collective interests (Husserliana 2008).

I have argued that anthropology should take on the role of being more activist, moving toward what I call applied activist anthropology. I have advocated two main points of engagement.

1. To produce ethnographic knowledge that generates awareness and insight into global culture, and in particular into the geo-social crises we face in our times.
2. To get involved in activism, dovetailing it with anthropology to contribute toward positive, sustainable, eco-conscious change in the world.

I have also considered some of the challenges we face in moving toward applied, activist anthropology. How do we navigate the influence of power structures and reconcile our personal desires and ambitions with responsibilities of engaging with geo-social crises?

Such quagmires aside, we cannot get too caught up and trapped in the regresses of critical thinking. We must act as far as possible out of our best intentions and so what we can to make the world less painful, less desperate, happier, freer, more optimistic and hopeful. How we do this, and why we do this, is something we all confront. Where to before we're not here? That is up to each one of us.

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## WHERE TO BEFORE WE'RE NOT HERE?

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### Youtube

A Conversation With Anarchist David Graeber

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVDkkOAOtV0&list=PLE5hGOZQTHrfjVg\\_HiKD99-7KrLQrRxNM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVDkkOAOtV0&list=PLE5hGOZQTHrfjVg_HiKD99-7KrLQrRxNM)

Aldous Huxley

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhHuMNS4tWM>

Francine Coeytaux: The New Biopolitics: Reflections and Next Steps, 2012

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0xx9lv-Xuo>

HOME

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqxENMKaeCU>

Rayna Rapp: Activism Meets Academia

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gk1XConyVDQ>

This Is Anarchism

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_vv6eRj2-k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_vv6eRj2-k)

### Webpages

Activist Anthropology

<http://anthropology.net/2006/07/21/activist-anthropology/>

Christine Stevralia. In a Village on Top of a Mountain: Notes on Development and Aid

<http://imponderabilia.socanth.cam.ac.uk/articles/article.php?articleid=17>

Controversial implications of activist anthropology: an interview with Nick Long

<http://imponderabilia.socanth.cam.ac.uk/articles/article.php?articleid=14>

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