

Breaking the silence-politics and professional
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Laura Nader

Introduction

Sometimes it's useful to look back in order to move forward. The response of anthropologists to the Gulf War raised questions about violence and professional autonomy, about whether anthropology was unencumbered enough to contribute to the reduction of violence by breaking the silence about the Arab World, much as we did for Vietnam. My question then had to do with professional responsibility. Does anthropology only reflect dominant hegemonies, or is it possible to have an anthropology free of central dogmas originating outside the discipline?

The Islamic World, in general, and the Arab world, in particular, are a part of the world still among the least known ethnographically. It is also a part of the world about which disinformation and misinformation are rampant. In spite of the good work of numbers of anthropologists, since 1951 there has not been a general book about the area that has enjoyed the circulation of Carleton Coon's *Caravan*. Indeed, since World War II our discipline seems predisposed to feed silence and starve informed opinion about the area. While this became crystal clear during the Gulf War, it may be even clearer after September 11, 2001.

For example, if we examine the major hiring practices of elite universities we might notice that when hiring ethnographers of the Arab world, major departments [End Page 161] select people who work at a distance from "troubled areas" such as the Levant, Iraq, Sudan, or the West Bank. Harvard University hires specialists in Turkey or Yemen. Columbia University hires a specialist in Morocco. At the University of Michigan, an anthropologist who works in Yemen (although more recently a hire who works in Jordan). At Stanford University in Turkey. At the University of California, Berkeley and at Princeton University, Moroccan specialists, etc. Such hiring choices reflect a nervousness in major anthropology departments that, whether conscious or not, diminishes the possibility of breaking the silence about zones of serious violence.

Some anthropologists try to explain the silence, the absence of activism. But what little there is suggests that Anglo-American anthropologists are not learning fast, in spite of the fact that over the past twenty years we have been pounding the table with relentless critiques of the British structural functionalist anthropologists working in colonial Africa who ignored colonizers, power, imperialism. Such was true for the Gulf War and, as we see, history may be repeating itself since September 11, but with a new twist; few Anglo-American anthropologists are speaking or writing to inform citizens in our country who may not only be uninformed but grossly misinformed about other peoples, but foreign-born anthropologists may be stepping into the breach.

Silence and Dominant Hegemonies

Again it might be useful to look back to the Gulf War. Commenting on the massive disinformation campaign launched by the 1990s Bush White House, Susan Pollock and Catherine Lutz (1994) wrote about "Archaeology Deployed for the Gulf War." They discovered shameless uses being made of Iraq's archaeological past: the focus of White House discourse was on commoditized items (archaeological relics), not the lives of the creators of this past. The media made points about Iraq's ancestral ties to "our" civilization, suggesting that Iraq's heritage belongs to all of us. The archaeological sites were given great respect and Iraq's past humanized. It's ironic that the first Bush administration, while killing innocent Iraqi civilians, was making use of Iraq's ancestral ties by paying lip service to Arab allies while simultaneously bombing that heritage. More recently, when the Taliban were destroying archaeological monuments, they

were rightly labeled barbaric acts.

In a paper about internally generated state violence, William Young (1999) suggests that the sympathies of anthropologists are more easily mobilized if human rights issues involve tribal peoples in conflict with a state. But, he says, when it comes to the Middle East where the victims are commonly identified in the media and in scholarly writings as ethnicities or nations, few anthropologists [End Page...





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