

## From Barefoot Anthropologist to Global Watchdog: An Interview with Nancy Scheper-Hughes (Jaroslav Klepal, Edit Szénássy)

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*An avid advocate of public anthropology, Nancy SCHEPER-HUGHES (born 1944) is Professor of Medical Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley where she directs the doctoral program in Critical Studies in Medicine, Science, and the Body. Her first book, Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland (1979), exploring madness, loneliness and socio-economic change in an Irish village setting, won the Margaret Mead Award from the Society for Applied Anthropology in 1980. In Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday life in Brazil (1993) she discusses the difficult choices Brazilian mothers make when refusing to care for their babies: choices driven by hunger, structural violence and poverty. Since the 1980s, Professor Scheper-Hughes has greatly shaped anthropological thinking about the body, violence, suffering, medicine and genocide: she has coined and popularized terms such as „mindful body“ (1987, with Margaret Lock), „political economy of the emotions“ (1993a), „life boat ethics“ (1993b), „neo-cannibalism“ (2001), „sexual citizenship“ (1994b), the „genocidal continuum“, „militant anthropology“ and anthropology „with its feet on the ground“ (1995). Since 1999, she has been engaged in human rights activism and scholarly research on the global trade in human organ trafficking: she is the co-founder and director of the Berkeley-based non-governmental organization Organs Watch. Professor Scheper-Hughes was raised by a mother who was a first generation Czech-American and a father who has a German Lutheran background in Brooklyn, New York City. On the occasion of her Prague visit in April 2016, amidst her busy schedule Professor Scheper-Hughes agreed to be interviewed for Cargo by Edit Szénássy and Jaroslav Klepal, two doctoral students of the Department of General Anthropology at Charles University in Prague.*

**Edit Szénássy:** *Throughout your career you've done everything but remain in the ivory tower: you've been engaged in various high profile cases, helped investigate organ thefts and manipulations, death squads, etc. Together with other UK and US-based anthropologists, you and your colleagues at Berkeley started challenging an-*

*thropologists to become witnesses whose professional testimonies make a difference. Anthropological witnessing has become a relatively widely accepted position since, indeed something of an expectation, a new standard. Do you feel there is still a need to make a point for public anthropology?*

**Nancy Scheper-Hughes:** Public anthropology is definitely still contested, as is the notion of witnessing. Peter Redfield, who introduced the idea, but also Donna Haraway and others who took it up, speak of modest witnessing. I think the form anthropological witnessing takes depends on where you are, what part of the world you are situated in, and who the people are that you are studying. If you're studying, as I did, people who are psychotic or who are hearing voices, other people are not going to listen to their voices. Their voices are not going to be heard except through the anthropologists who study psychosis and try to represent what we have learnt from them. Of course, these people can and do talk for themselves, as for instance through the Hearing Voices Movement,<sup>1</sup> and they have to be absolutely in the middle of the discussion. The Hearing Voices Movement, for example, is made up of people from all walks of life, class, professions and identifications who claim the right to hear and express their voices, defining voice hearing as an existential experience. The Movement is not uniform as some of the people engaged in it take psychotropic medications, while others do not. Some experience voice hearing as intense suffering and others see it as an extraordinary and sometimes mystical experience, an aspect of their 'thrownness' in the world with which they can change the world.

**Jaroslav Klepal:** *So it is a kind of religious experience for them?*

**Nancy Scheper-Hughes:** For some it is a religious experience that they feel has been suppressed by drugs or by years of hospitalization. Some of them have what could be called anthropological experiences and theories of understanding madness as another kind of radical difference! But back to witnessing. If, for example, you are studying infants, infants don't speak. You can, and must, talk to their mothers, but basically sometimes you become a witness for them, the infants, as well as for their parents. And then there are places where people are not free to speak, because they're living in a police state or they're living in a state of terror, hence they need the anthropologist to speak. The form anthropological witnessing takes depends very much on where you are situated as a researcher. In Latin America, for example, it's much easier, since there's a longer tradition of intel-

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1 Editors' note: originating in the 1980s, the Hearing Voices Movement is an international network of organizations and individuals who promote an alternative way of understanding the experience of those people who hear voices, have visions or have other unusual perceptions. Aiming to destigmatize the experiences of voice hearers, the movement spreads positive messages about the experience of hearing voices through support groups and advocacy (see: <http://www.intervoiceline.org/>).

lectuals – and not just anthropologists – of being public. I believe this may also be true for many parts of Europe, but not for the United States where intellectuals have always been marginalized and disrespected. Intellectuals in the US have always been seen as basically useless. Those intellectuals who have had an influence on public life have generally been conservatives involved in right-leaning institutes, such as the Hoover Institute at Stanford University and the Libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, DC., which promotes free enterprise and small government. Within anthropology today there is still an active debate about witnessing: whether you have the right to speak on behalf of the other or not. The debate has taken on new dimensions of political correctness: what gives you, a white woman from the United States, the right to speak on police brutality in South Africa, or to write on the sexual lives of bachelor farmers in East Kerry, Ireland. Or what gives you the right to criticize the rights of kidney buyers when you have two healthy kidneys? Indeed, on many occasions when I did become engaged, it was against my best sense and against my wishes to do so. At the same time, not everything is engaged and anthropological engagement doesn't mean that we throw out our notions of epistemological openness and go into the field without trying to bracket out all the personal baggage one brings into the field (one's theoretical biases and the weight of one's life experiences). We still must try to be neutral and to engage in self-reflexive, critical thinking, interrogating who we are and all the complex relations behind why we ask certain questions and not others. Self-analysis is part of being engaged and I think this is true when you do any kind of ethnographic encounter.

**Jaroslav Klepal:** *Do you feel that anthropologists are in a privileged position to act as witnesses?*

**Nancy Scheper-Hughes:** Certainly, every society has its own witnesses from within, who are not anthropologists and who are involved in various political actions. But yes, I think we are privileged. We are privileged to be able to spend as much time as we do in the field, with people. I've done a lot of work with investigative journalists, because of organs trafficking, and with filmmakers, and I can see the wonderful skills they have. But the one thing they don't have is this kind of deep hanging out that we do. It's the intimacy and the closeness of our relations with people that makes anthropology privileged. I feel it's a privilege for medical anthropologists to be with people who are giving birth, people who are experiencing psychosis, or with women with babies they don't know whether they can keep or not. I think that one of the things that keeps me in anthropology through all of its changes is that it's an enormous privilege.

**Edit Szénássy:** *Which is one of the things you also underline in *Death without Weeping* where you elaborated on the term 'good enough ethnography'? It refers to an abil-*

*ity to listen and observe carefully, emphatically and compassionately. I was wondering how your understanding of the term has evolved since 1993, when Death without Weeping was initially published, with regard both to your own work and to anthropology as a discipline. Is what was good enough twenty years ago still good enough?*

**Nancy Scheper-Hughes:** I still use the term ‘good enough ethnography’. I teach it in dissertation writing and sometimes I use it as a way to let fellow anthropologists know that we can never get the entire picture. That we can’t constantly go back to check. My message is similar to that of Winnicott,<sup>2</sup> who was talking about the good enough mother, to just trust yourself. If you’re critically reflexive enough and keep not only field notes, but also a private journal almost daily and go over what you think you did right, what you didn’t do, what question you didn’t ask, when you talked too much: you self-censor constantly. At the same time, good enough ethnography was also to say that ethnography and anthropology are good enough. Because we were so heavily criticized due to our origins, which we know were rooted in colonialism. First came the military, then came the missionaries and they made it safe for us, anthropologists, to go to the field. There were a lot of things that the early anthropologists later in life recognised: what they had and had not seen, where they were complicit with systems, where they saw themselves as trying to be the good enough brokers. What the needs of the people they studied were, where we put our loyalties. I definitely think our origins were muddied, but I also believe that one evolves as an anthropologist. Some of the things that I would’ve said about being the barefoot anthropologist in the 1990s were a representation of a particular moment in Brazilian and Latin American history. To a large extent, I just borrowed the notion of ‘theology on the ground’, based on liberation theology. What I meant by being a barefoot anthropologist was not that you only spend your time with poor people in shanty towns, but that you engage in a certain way that is intimate. You make yourself bare in terms of your interactions. Lévi-Strauss’s example helps me to think about the notion of being really grounded and present in the field. I’ve always admired his work and the way he was able to reflect on it. I happened to be in Paris for the celebration of his turning 90 years old. What struck me even more than the beautiful exhibition displayed in his honor was his extreme self-criticism. When, for example, in his photographic memoir, *Saudades do Brasil* (1995) he commented on the indigenous people he had first studied, admitting that he had not really recognized that there “tribes” were the remnants of what was once an enormous Amazonian civilization. It would take the work of archaeologists, long after Lévi-Strauss published *Tristes Tropiques*, to excavate the original civilizations that had thrived before Western colonialism along the Brazilian Amazon from Belem to Manaus.

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2 Editor’s note: D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971) was a paediatrician and psychoanalyst who proposed the idea of good enough mothering, referring to ‘real’ mothers who are caring towards their babies. but at the same time are ambivalent about motherhood.

Lévi-Strauss only later realized that what he investigating at the time were essentially the results of mass killings. When he did so, he raised our common responsibility for the situation of these peoples and became politically engaged around race with UNESCO.

**Edit Szénássy:** *How important is it for anthropologists to have politically engaged leadership roles?*

**Nancy Scheper-Hughes:** It depends on the situation: I've certainly taken a leadership role with respect to organs trafficking. That was where I moved from bare-foot anthropology to militant anthropology and then militant in a different sense: detective. Which meant, in each of the moves, changing your modus operandi and how you do fieldwork. It was a shift away from loving long-term research and going back to the relatively small groups I used to work in. My Irish village had four hundred and fifty-five people: I knew everything about that place and they knew everything about me. My Brazilian field site, the Alto do Cruzeiro, is five thousand people who I've known now over a long time.<sup>3</sup> A very different approach is required by multi-sided ethnography, when I'm moving constantly. It also compels me to collaborate with people I would never have thought I would collaborate with. In Brazil, you're a *companheiro*, a term used in liberation theology: so the notion of leadership refers there to accompaniment. It sounds funny though: 'Are you going to accompany us?' Yet what they meant is: 'Are you going to have solidarity with us?' It doesn't mean that you're a leader, but rather a follower. And I think that's the other thing – you have to be a foot soldier, a pedestrian, a bare-foot anthropologist. You're the lowest in the ranks.

When raising the issue of different kinds of ethics, there is the question about the ethics of going undercover: how to work undercover, while still feeling like you're an anthropologist. I can honestly say that the kind of undercover work I did was pretty minimal. It's true that I occasionally have to pose for a few minutes, before I tell the person: 'Look, I'm not looking at buying a kidney, let's stop bartering about it, but are you still willing to talk to me?' My undercover work in South Africa, in the United States, in Turkey, in the Philippines, sometimes meant going to hospitals and just saying, 'I'm Doctor Nancy Scheper-Hughes and I'm interested in transplant.' Sometimes I got access to things without, one would say, full disclosure of what I was looking at. Later I found that even this was not necessary. For me, that's where face-to-face intimate encounters influenced by Levinas' essays on substitution makes one think how in our own fieldwork we honor the others who have provided us with our livelihood. Levinas' notion of face was always a little bit mysterious to me and his notion of ethics is so extreme – I could never

3 Editors' note: Nancy Scheper-Hughes paid her first visit to the Alto about fifty years ago and has been going back ever since on a regular basis. Her next visit was scheduled within a few days after she was to return home from Prague.

live according to it. Nevertheless, the idea of treating every other person as if their existence were more important than yours allows you to actually learn something from that person. This helped me very much in my work on organ trafficking, enabling me to get close to people who were criminals and yet still see them as humans, worthy of care in our portrayals of them, even though I believe that they were doing something evil. Maybe it's a simple case of hating evil acts but not the person, which is considered to be primeval.

**Jaroslav Klepal:** *You mentioned a certain epistemological shift you went through in your work, and currently you're exploring the notion of evil. As of now you have only had a few talks about it and in your previous work, namely in the 'Primacy of the Ethical', there are only certain references in this direction. The whole issue about evil and anthropology seems to have come up during discussion with a fellow anthropologist on your Brazilian work.*

**Nancy Scheper-Hughes:** Yes, well, first it was the response of an American psychological anthropologist (now deceased) who was a discussant at an American Anthropological Association meeting, where I was talking about the madness of hunger and the way in which babies of Alto do Cruzeiro, Brazil, who were starving were being given perverse drugs in the clinic: sleeping pills and appetite suppressants. Imagine giving appetite suppressant to a starving baby! It was just unbelievable, and there was no way to really talk about that except to critique it and to suggest that there was either terrible misrecognition by the doctors or that the opposite of good is not evil, but that it's really indifference. I think that more people have been killed by indifference than by physical violence. The discussant said that what Nancy was writing about is about evil and that is not an anthropological topic, for once you identify evil you want to stop it and then you enter political life and leave ethnography behind. That was the first time my writings were linked to an anthropological engagement with evil. Today, I am re-thinking my writings about the mothers and angel babies of Northeast Brazil. I think there was a suggestion that the shantytown had something of an ethics of the death camp that runs through *Death Without Weeping*, but is never really articulated; although I did refer to "camp rations" and the fact that the dietary intake of the sugar cane cutters was similar to people at Buchenwald. I'm writing a companion book to *Death Without Weeping* that will revisit and bring up to date and critique my original conclusions. I never really left my Brazilian field site and have made several fieldtrips to my ground zero in Brazil. More recently, I have begun to re-think the topic of evil as an anthropological subject through the work of one of my former PhD students and a collaborator with me in my field site in 2014. Sam Dubal, who's an MD/PhD now, has worked in Uganda with Kony's soldiers. His revised dissertation, which will be published by the University of California Press, is entitled: *Against Humanity*. In it, Dubal takes the critique of the human to its

extreme. Many of the people Sam did research with are people who have been reformed, some of them have lost their legs from landmines, and all are working for humanitarian organizations, because that's how they get fed. Nonetheless, they explain that although they were kidnapped, being part of the LRA was the best part of their lives: that there they made families, they had solidarity, they were guerrillas. They say that they turned into animals and became strong. Which resonates with what I'm after: trying to bring together some of the tendencies of moral anthropology with the question of the human and evil. In his article playing on Nietzsche and Foucault *'Beyond Good and Evil'*, Didier Fassin states that the reason why evil is not an anthropological topic is because it's already a moral judgement, a moralized concept. But my answer is that it's an existential concept, as the late Neil Whitehead's work on Dark Shamans in the Amazon well illustrates. Whitehead lived with people who had embraced evil as their way of life. It's absolutely explicit: their practices are quite horrendous, they basically cannibalise the people that they kill. They kill with all kinds of poisons, then they bury their victims and dig them up three days later only to eat their decomposed flesh. It's the original kind of exocannibalism. I think we should study these people as radically evil, as people who embrace evil as a meaning in life.

**Edit Szénássy:** *Can you tell us about what publications you're working on just now?*

**Nancy Scheper-Hughes:** I have a book that's overdue and that I've held back, because I want to make one more trip to the field. I'd like to end this book, *The Ghosts of Montes de Oca: Naked Life and the Medically Disappeared* on a somewhat happy note as the psychiatric camp is slowly being transformed. The site is a national psychiatric colony in Argentina, where I first went in 2000 undercover with an armed detective. This whole project made me think about how sometimes being a good, open, epistemologically careful, neutral person is absolutely where we start our work as good social scientists, but it may not be where we finish it. When are we really bystanders and complicit with what we see? But to begin with, I was investigating a little report in the *British Medical Journal* about a state inquiry into the egregious mistreatment of a colony of 'mentally deficient' people. The report talked about people who'd gone missing, organ trafficking, tissue trafficking, baby trafficking. After the director of the institution, Dr. Florencio Sánchez, was arrested I wanted to visit the place, but I didn't want to go alone. So I invited a medical director of the International Red Cross, an expert in torture, institutions and people in confinement, to accompany me. The first person to explore the place was a psychologist-detective who went undercover and spent three days in the colony, during which time nobody even bothered him. He presented himself as mentally deficient. He then used one of the escape routes to get out: something that looks like a swamp, but which, we believe, is full of dead bod-

ies. After having talked to him, in 2000 we got in with an alibi and saw what I can only describe as a death camp. It was truly unbelievable. People were totally naked, they were lying on the ground, some were emaciated. After talking to hundreds of people, I came up with a pretty strong story which I sent as a report to the government of Argentina. They accepted it, which I thought was amazing, and which also made me think it was probably wrong. I attributed everything to the Dirty War and to the fact that General Videla had appointed that particular director to run the center, the one who was arrested before we even got there. I went back three more times in different positions and in my upcoming book I suggest that what was taking place in the colony was a war within the Dirty War, a war against mental disability in Argentina. The mentally disabled were not seen as acceptable to the new Proceso,<sup>4</sup> which created a new state that was both very modern and very conservative. The method was malignant neglect. Patients/inmates [most were there for life] were treated in a very weird way: they were told they didn't have to do anything. Doctors said: 'We're giving these inmates back their human rights, their freedom. If they don't want to eat, they don't have to eat. If they don't want to wear clothing, they don't have to wear clothing. If they want to have sex, they can have sex.'

**Edit Szénássy:** *A conveniently libertarian argument...*

**Nancy Scheper-Hughes:** Absolutely. And it was also the easiest way to get rid of them. Dr. Sanchez was appointed by General Videla to head the colony during the Dirty War. Videla himself had interned one of his sons in the colony and he died in this horrible place, when he could have interned his sons in private institutions run by nursing sisters. I think Videla and his wife were ashamed of their son, and this experience made Videla appoint a doctor who was willing to let all the deficient inmates "disappear themselves", which was a term used by a protégé of Sanchez at the colony. An article of mine on this topic is accessible online (<<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/579738>>). If I'm right, then the history of this place should be thoroughly investigated and there should be some sort of truth commission about the patients who disappeared, because they are in the thousands. And if I'm wrong, they should probably arrest me. (laughter)

**Jaroslav Klepal:** *Lastly: what does Nancy Scheper-Hughes read?*

**Nancy Scheper-Hughes:** It depends on what I'm writing. I definitely want to mention the Czech philosopher Patočka, about whom I learned from a Czech mental patient. I encountered him in Trieste, Italy, at a mental hospital that was

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4 The National Reorganization Process (or Proceso) was the name used by its leaders for the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from approximately 1976 to 1983. The term Dirty War is mainly used in the US-American context and does not have an Argentinian equivalent.



totally radicalised by Franco Basaglia. This mad man from the Czech Republic told me about the Solidarity of the Shaken.

Right now I also read a lot of things that are not necessarily anthropological, but are radical critiques of the prison, including Didier Fassin's work on policing. Because I have to, I read a lot of the critiques of the human and humanity. I read what my graduate students read and what they're writing about. I think that this is part of 'moral anthropology meets not-moralistic anthropology'. I read a lot of moral anthropology, the stuff that Fassin and his group writes and I often critique it. Much of it is connected to my recent work on evil. He and his group, which is large and includes some of my colleagues in UCLA and elsewhere, take a very Foucauldian view. And of course I read Foucault, too – what Foucault said about evil, with which I would agree completely. He says the problem is that when evil is simply in the realm of traditional continental or theological moral philosophy, then you're dealing mostly with Christianity and maybe with Talmud, but that it's Western. Therefore it often moralises things that were deeply immoral and deeply evil, and it doesn't recognise its own evil. So, in a way, I don't think that Didier Fassin is right. I think that you begin with differentiating theodicies from homodicies, you look into the human, the social and cosmological explanations of what evil is, but you should also talk about when evil is realised as reality. Evil is something you can and should engage with, though not everybody might have the stomach for it. One can approach evil like an anthropologist. First you have to understand the cosmologies, the rationalities, but then you don't have to, in the end, in your interpretation, not grapple with evil. I'm working on a small book in which there are different dimensions of evil, which also makes me go back to some philosophers such as Kierkegaard. The end of this whole project for me is the idea of anthropology perhaps being evil itself, in what it sees and what it doesn't see, in what it acknowledges and what it doesn't. But then I have a twist in the end, which is: can anthropology save the world? (laughter) And that last chapter, I will tell you, is called '*On xenophilia*'. What I mean by this term is curiosity, getting close enough to something to understand it. A willingness to engage with the other.

**Edit Szénássy:** *Since we're in the Czech Republic: do you have any connection to your maternal heritage?*

**Nancy Scheper-Hughes:** If I had a day here, I might go to the town of Znojmo, because my grandfather's name was Charles Znojemsky and my grandmother was also Czech, she always called herself "Bohemian". The only thing I know is that they met in Vienna, where my grandmother was working as a chef and my grandfather was avoiding military service. They ran off together after one meeting and then he left my grandmother in Budapest with a child. It's a strange story; it doesn't make sense to me. He came first to New York, to Brooklyn, then he brought my grandmother and I believe she left the child behind – but then she had nine more

and two of them died of diphtheria during an epidemic in New York. My grandfather died before I was born, my grandmother when I was six or seven. I was born right after World War II in a neighbourhood that was Hasidic and had a small Catholic population. Essentially, everyone was from Eastern Europe. When I was growing up, from 1944 to 1950, there was a sense of trauma: you just didn't ask people about their backgrounds. I remember once in grade school, a best friend of mine coming up to me and saying, 'My parents said I can't talk to you because your people killed my people.' I guess it was because we identified as Catholic, but frankly, I don't know if we weren't Jewish. But I think everyone basically is mixed in Eastern Europe, as in the United States.

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