



# From Despair to Where? Anthropology, critique, political practice and the case for radical optimism

written by Ian M. Cook  
November, 2023



[Allegra Lab · From Despair To Where? Anthropology, critique, political practice and the case for radical optimism](#)



## **TRANSCRIPT OF THE AUDIO ESSAY (listen if you can, don't read, this is for reference)**

Ian M. Cook: Yesterday I took a break from my morning doom scrolling through anger, pain, fear, and aggression to check my H-Index.

I checked the number of times my publications had been cited by other authors. I didn't do this to cheer myself up.

It's almost as depressing as doom scrolling. I checked my H-index because I needed to create a metricised, accountable, legible version of myself for a grant application.

I had to demonstrate I have impact. It's sometimes hard to say that we, as anthropologists, create impact. That we impact the world. If you told your mum that, 'I became an anthropologist because I wanted to change the world' she might legitimately ask, 'and how do you do that?' If you told your colleagues at a conference, 'I became an anthropologist because I wanted to change the world' they might snigger in your general direction.

Anthropology is great at critique, at deconstructing, but its ability reconstruct, to meaningfully contribute to political practice, is often less clear. It wasn't always the case. Anthropologists used to quite happily join colonial projects: measuring their political worth by the amount of heads they measured. I think that this legacy has made us, rightly, a little more careful.

There's also less need, than when compared to our cousins in sociology, to frame our research in terms of societal problems that need to be addressed. There's plenty of anthropologists whose research agenda is driven by their curiosity (and there's nothing inherently wrong with that by the way). Anthropology's failure to regularly intervene in the world is also, I suspect, because contemporary academia has made many scholars deeply cynical about both the production of



knowledge and the motivations of those doing the producing.

It's not only the aforementioned metricised knowledge production that creates cynicism. It's also because plenty of the radical scholarship we read is produced by horrible, self-serving individuals who float around academia with the singular mission of recruiting courtiers for the kingdom of their egos. But in spite of all of this, I'm deeply optimistic about anthropology and scholarship in general. And this is what this audio essay is all about I've called it 'From Despair to Where? [i](#) Anthropology, critique, political practice and the case for radical optimism'

So I apologise for the despairing opening, but I think you probably needed it, because if I'd dived in feet first with the optimism you might have called me naive and stopped listening.

My optimism stems from speaking with a group of Europe-based anthropologists who have been working at international or state organisations, within social movements and on distinctly political projects. I spoke with them about the role of critique and anthropology's possibility to move from critique to political practice. I'll return to the question of radical optimism at the end. But it's worth mentioning now that whilst optimism shares many similarities with hope, it is different from it.

If hope refers to wanting or expecting something good to happen in the future – or at least good for those who hope for it – then optimism is a broader disposition: an orientation imbued with hope, a quality of being that believes something good will happen. The optimism I detect is radical, I suggest, because it goes to the roots of anthropology, it suggests structural change in our practices, ones that orientate the discipline so that it pursues social change. What made me make this essay? Apart from a deep desire to escape despair, it was two anthropologists who made me do it, after I went to meet them on the top of a mountain not far from Geneva.



## Chapter One: Critiquing Quote Unquote Good People

[Agathe Mora](#): My name is Agathe Mora. I'm an anthropologist of international law and human rights. And I'm an editor at Allegra lab, also, the co-convenor of the network LAWNET at the European Association of Social Anthropologists, and a lecturer at the University of Sussex where I teach anthropology and international development.

[Julie Billaud](#): So I'm Julie Billaud. I'm a political and legal anthropologist, part of the Allegra lab editorial collective. I'm also one of the conveners of LAWNET, at the European Association of Social Anthropologists, network for law, international governance, rights and politics and many stuff! And I'm also an associate professor of anthropology at the Geneva Graduate Institute.

Ian: Agathe and Julie were thinking a lot about anthropology and whether it can move from critique to political practice because of a workplace experience Julie: And we got sacked basically.

Ian: Yes, because they got sacked. But a bit more context. They weren't sacked from their day jobs as lecturers and professors, but rather by The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights where they were both hired.

Agathe: we were hired as anthropologists to look at diversity issues and the kind of culture, the organisational culture, as they call it, whatever that is. And, and it was, it was really great, because we got access, we got access to all kinds of interesting documents and to people. But we very quickly realised that there were so many hidden skeletons. And people really, really needed a space to kind of open up and talk to us in confidentiality. And so we started listening, and just take notes. And then we wrote a report based on these really kind of difficult interviews that we did. And I think it was, it was not what the management was hoping to find.

Julie: And there's a kind of paradox here. Because on the one hand, these





organisations, they want to be seen, as, you know, transparent, they want to be seen as upholding by the principle of accountability that has become, you know, this kind of buzzword, in institutions everywhere. And yet, they want to be able to control the narrative. Ian: A desire to control the narrative is understandable to some degree, given the rise of unresearched 'hot takes' that cherry pick lines from reports.

[Jane Cowan](#): you know, paradoxically, this idea of accountability, which, you know, is a good thing. We all want accountability. But you know, how has that pursuit of accountability manifested in practice in lots of different areas? And you know, it has had these perverse effects.

Ian: That was Jane Cowan, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sussex. As she went on to point out over a cup of tea in her kitchen in Brighton, England, there has been increasing demands for accountability in lots of areas, including relating to human rights, justice and higher education. But, now we are witnessing a conjuncture between a rise in demand for accountability, audit cultures and datafication.

Jane: The forms in which, you know, things are measured and counted, become very standardised and, and precisely lose all that doubt, that ambiguity. And is being organised by, you know, by those who decide how to organise it beyond us.

Ian: And if we can't imagine why that might be a problem for others, like for those who work in human rights organisations or for activists involved in social justice movements, then we can maybe imagine why it might be a problem for ourselves. When our work is made accountable as part of the standardised measures that have been a central pillar in the neoliberalisation of higher education it loses, I think, its value.

Jane: It's not only the institutions that we study that are being attacked by let's say neoliberalism, to say things very quickly. It's also our own academic institutions, where critique is not necessarily what is the most value out put of research, where the dominant paradigm is the one of positivism once more...



right? Where we need to be able to quantify our output.

Ian: It's the cynic who knows the worth of research and not its value. I can understand critiquing social moments or organisations that some have claimed are the 'last utopias' (Moyn 2012) in a world that feels like it's going to hell in a reusable supermarket bag might seem counter productive or self-defeating. But ethnographic critique of the so called 'good people' has immense value. We need to critique humanitarian actions that frame human life in basic terms: that create a world in which a home is just a shelter, meals are only food, and living is simply surviving.

Julie: And so I think we have every right you know, as citizens of this world to discuss whether this is the forms of life that makes sense on this planet, especially nowadays with you know, increasing displacements of populations. Their encampment on Greek islands, I mean, do we want that? I mean, can't we see something similar to? I mean, a mild version of a concentration camp? I mean, I think we have the right to ask these questions...

Agathe:... and the duty. Yeah, this is what we do. As anthropologists, this is, I think this is our political project. This project of, you know, the deconstructive, iterative critique of everyday life under certain regimes.

Julie: But at the same time, I also think that we, as much as we should critique and discuss and open this conversation and denaturalize, you know, things that are seen as good, inherently good, and show the other side of the coin, I think we need also to be able to reconstruct and make suggestions for improvement, we need to be creative about the way we intervene in the world.

## **Chapter Two: Finding Anthropologists who are Creative about the way they intervene in the world.**

[Noah Walker-Crawford](#): In the past eight years, I've been involved in a lawsuit



brought by a Peruvian farmer against a German energy company. And this case is all about holding major polluters responsible for climate change. Ian: That was Noah Walker-Crawford, legal anthropologist, climate justice advocate, and researcher at University College London. I met him in a busy, noisy pub in England, for an overpriced pint.

Noah: So the plaintiff in this case lives in the Peruvian Andes, where people are affected by glacial retreat, which in the long term causes water scarcity. But in the short term, the problem is that there's too much water and there's actually a risk of flooding caused by climate change. And in this case, the plaintiff is trying to get the company to contribute financially to measures to reduce the risk of flooding in Peru, and the company he is suing is called RWE, which is an energy company. Their main business is coal fired power. They've been around for over 100 years, and in that time, they've made a substantial contribution to climate change.

Ian: A Peruvian farmer can take a German energy company to court because, when we think about the climate, we're all neighbours.

Noah: This lawsuit uses neighbourhood law. The basic argument is to say that in times of climate change, we're all neighbours. And if we're neighbours, that means we have certain rights and responsibilities. And so the Peruvian farmer in this case is saying that the company, arguably should be a good neighbour, and they should take responsibility for the contribution they've made to climate change, and help him deal with the problems that it's causing in the Peruvian Andes.

Ian: A critique of Noah's research and the wider case in which he's involved might be that he has lost control: he's not setting the research agenda, it's being created by climate activists and Peruvian farmers.

A response to this might be 'good', why not have those who are directly affected by something set the agenda, especially those who suffer thanks to vast global inequalities structured by processes dating back to the onset of European



colonialism. I think this is something Matthew C. Canfield, anthropologist of transnational agrarian movements and the right to food, might say. He took time off from being an Assistant Professor at Leiden Law School in the Netherlands to share a locally and democratically controlled waffle with me.

[Matthew C. Canfield](#): I think the calls for decoloniality that we're seeing across the social sciences are really asking us to change the way that we think about our interlocutors. And one of the things that Rita Segato (2022) talks about is a move towards responsive anthropology where actually, we are accountable to the communities that have been the objects of anthropological study.

Ian: I think this is an amazing suggestion: to practice an anthropology that is responsible to, and answerable to, those who for centuries have served as anthropologists' objects of study - to respond to the historical projects of such groups.

Matt: We're going towards a more participatory method of ethnographic research where actually anthropologists have their questions framed by those communities. Oftentimes, we construct the questions based on our own theoretical ideas, and then go and do ethnography. But when we start actually from the needs of communities, and the kinds of questions that they have, that is being more accountable to them and providing them with the resources and answers to questions that they can use themselves for, for their struggles in liberation and bettering their lives.

Ian: One such example of this is Noah's work, another comes from Lieselotte Viaene, legal anthropologist, and Professor at the Department of Social Sciences of the University Carlos III de Madrid. I sat down next to a stream on a windy day with her and she told me all about her collaborations within her research project on rivers.

[Lieselotte Viaene](#): We have been collaborating with Belkis Izquierdo, an indigenous Arhuaco lawyer judge in the special jurisdiction system of Colombia. And in 2019, as part of the whole peace process, and in that special jurisdiction,





she recognised the concept of indigenous territory as a victim of an armed conflict, which sparked a huge debate not only in Colombia, but beyond. Because normally in human rights, it's the humans who are victims of human rights violations, not something which is called a territory, which from an indigenous perspective it is. For example, she explains that she learned from the indigenous authorities that during the war many dead bodies were dropped in many rivers. And rivers received those dead bodies and also suffered because it is a living being. So how do you repair a river who also suffered from the violence created by humans? And that's extremely complex when it comes to a legal system which does not recognise that rivers, water sources, mountains, sacred spaces... that simply does not exist in our legal thinking and beyond our legal thinking, because a river is a river, a mountain is a mountain, it's a natural resource. It's something that has an economic value that gives us it is a resource so we humans can live. But that's it. There's nothing more. It does not have an intrinsic, more deeper value of dignity, of something that should be protected. And having those conversations with her... for example, we are organised in the framework of the International indigenous peoples day, which is the ninth of August a speech circle, bringing together her and then different indigenous lawyers from different parts of Latin America to start discussing about nature, territory as a victim, and also thinking about reparation.

## **Chapter Three: Where's the Line between Activism & Activist Anthropology?**

Ian: I have a small confession. I've always been a bit wary of anthropologists who study activists. The first time I ever met real live anthropologists was when two anthropology students joined a group of us anarcho-leaning lefties who were traveling up from Liverpool to Scotland to protest against the G8 in 2005. They attended our meetings, made friends with us, interviewed us, but, I felt, they never really explained what they were doing. And then afterwards they disappeared to write their dissertations or whatever. I bumped into one of them in town once and they were a little embarrassed to see me. A little later, I was at



another G8, this one in Germany in 2007. We'd formed into affinity groups to block a road and it turned out 2 of the 8 of us were doing their PhDs on 'activism'. And it sort of annoyed me. I think it annoyed me because I didn't believe they really believed in the cause. The stakes were also much lower for them if they got arrested. The dual purpose diluted their purpose for the young overly zealous lefty I was.

I feel a little bit better about them now, because I've come to realise that there is no strict line between activists and anthropologists or academics, nor should there have to be. In fact, especially if you're a scholar who is writing about people who are trying to change the world for the better, you might benefit from being in the thick of something political. And, it turns out, if you're out there being political with the activists, you might meet people who have read scholarship who are not scholars.

I was reminded of this when I met Rafael Carrano Lelis, a PhD student in International law and Anthropology, outside the library at the university of Geneva Institute.

[Rafael Carrano Lelis](#): I don't see this distinction. So watershed between academia and social movement. And it's actually the case that very often those authors that are informing my work, because it's a very specific type of work, right? It's informed by decolonial, feminist and queer theory. And these circulate a lot between the activists.

Ian: He researches how the queer transnational movement mobilises human rights to their benefit. And in his fieldwork he sees the activist/academic boundary collapsing to some degree. But, as he goes on to explain, just because scholarship is used by activists, it does not mean that the way we approach scholarship is the same.

Rafael: They don't want to debate ideas, because they want to use a certain theoretical framework, for instance, to align to their own purpose.



Noah Walker-Crawford also sees similar understandable instrumental logics at play within activist narratives about the topics they care about, but also highlights how anthropology can play a crucial role in furthering activism's critical edge.

Noah: Anthropology and activism can be seen as two different endeavours, separate endeavours in the sense that activism is all about simple answers of saying, 'this is bad. And that's why we need to do something about it', you know, activist narratives, you know, activist storytelling is about good and bad, you know, black and white. While anthropology is focusing on complexity, it tells us how everything is much more complicated than everyone thinks. But at the same time, I think there can be a productive interplay between anthropology and activism. So, you know, activism can involve simplistic answers to, you know, the problems of the world, and anthropology asks critical questions. It asks questions that might be uncomfortable for activist narratives that might question, you know, these simplistic arguments that activists are sometimes making, but the world is full of contradictions. And I think anthropology can help us deal with these contradictions. And my hope is that doing that asking critical questions will ultimately make activism stronger.

Ian: Grassroots community groups, radical activist circles and the like, might welcome the insights of anthropologists who research them. I say might because there's plenty of skepticism towards middle class academics researching within working class political movements. But what about the larger organisations that seek to make an impact in the world? Do these organisations see the benefits to having anthropologists in their midst?

## **Chapter Four: What anthropologists bring to the party**

[Samuel Shapiro](#): I'm Samuel Shapiro from Université Laval in Canada. I work in political anthropology, I research institutions, of the state, forms of governance and related matters. Samuel is conducting an ethnography of everyday life at the National Assembly of Quebec. I met him in an alcove on the 8th floor of the Quebec parliament building. Samuel: What I found what they said to me in a word



was that I was asking questions that they weren't asking, I was thinking about things as an academic, but they couldn't as practitioners because they were doing their jobs and their jobs were to, you know, do the verbatim debates or to prepare the minutes or to, you know, speak on some issue as an elected official in a debate. It was very complementary things, but I was thinking about issues they weren't thinking about, I was asking questions they weren't asking, and they were doing things that I wasn't doing. So I felt that it was less than an issue of agreeing or disagreeing. It was more a question of 'Oh, that's interesting. That's an interesting question. And and I never thought about that I never had the time to'

Ian: Samuel was generally welcomed and appreciated at the parliament, however, especially when anthropologists start publishing their research, their presence, and their insights, aren't always as welcome.

[Pedro Silva Rocha Lima](#): My name is Pedro Silva Rocha Lima and I'm a lecturer in Disaster Management at the University of Manchester.

Ian: Pedro, who I met in an even noisier pub than Noah, started his research because he was puzzled as to why the International Committee of the Red Cross was working in Brazil, when there wasn't a war. He became interested in how humanitarian organisations translated the work they do in war zones into places facing chronic violence, like Rio de Janeiro. He went to the International Committee of the Red Cross knowing that his presence there as a researcher would be sensitive, and he was very careful. He knew the limits of what he was allowed to observe, and took fieldnotes in front of people so they were aware of what he was doing. When he was ready to submit a research article to a journal, he first sent it to his interlocutors. Things were initially fine. Indeed, his interlocutors read his work so carefully that one of them questioned Pedro's theoretical framing and suggested tweaks to the literature. But then headquarters got involved.

Pedro: then it went to headquarters and headquarters had their own say on what they thought about the paper. Things turned a little sour, to say the least. And



there the organisation pushed back on many aspects of the work. In terms of what it could reveal what kind of information that it could include. And basically, I went through an entire very burdensome process and very, very tiring process of trying to negotiate what I could write down and what I could not. And, you know what was guiding me through the entire process, I guess, was just what is essential for the ethnography? What is essential to make the theory that I want to make and to make the arguments that I want to make? And can I make those points, while also making the modifications that they're asked me to make?

Ian: After hearing such accounts, and remembering Julie and Agathe's tale of sacking that started us on this journey, we might despair at our chances to research the big and powerful organisations doing good in the world. But as a radical optimist, I can always detect hope.

Pedro: I think you're never going to be able to fully produce this fine grained detailed ethnographic accounts of the inner workings of powerful organisations when you need their authorisation to get access. But there might be ways we might find of recruiting allies within these organisations that are familiar with, or that are sympathetic to ethnographic accounts, to anthropological accounts. And I think finding these alliances and building these alliances can really help you find ways of chipping in and peering through a small, small gap: a small little hole in the black box of these big powerful institutions.

Ian: Sometimes, especially when talking about the actions or policies of large organisations, it can be hard to remember that they are peopled places and that these people contain multitudes, that such people exceed their role within any given institution. Here's Pedro again...

Pedro: So I think the main takeaway point from this moment, as I'm thinking about it, is the importance of the relationships that we develop during fieldwork and how those relationships that we develop with long term ethnographic fieldwork, can still matter when doing work in a big organisation, in a big powerful organisation.





## **Conclusion: Towards Radical Optimism**

In 2021, the anthropology publishing platform Allegra Lab, where Julie, Agathe and I are all editors, published an editorial in which we proclaimed ourselves to be radically optimistic.

We said, and here I quote, “We know that to move forward, we have to be aware of the structures and inequalities that hold us back, all the stuff that frames our interactions and curtails our dreams. It’s not a naive optimism we’re embracing, but one in which we expect things will have to get messy. We dare to be optimistic to take a stance against individuated competition, and for academia as a collective endeavour, opening up spaces for creativity, intellectual curiosity, and the imagining of alternative futures.” (Allegra Collective 2021).

Optimism – as an orientation imbued with hope – can be both an individual disposition, or something collective. Collective optimism emerges under certain structural conditions, but only for some. Others feel profoundly unoptimistic. One of the conditions holding back the development of optimism is a feeling of being stuck in a rut. Which is to say, optimism needs the possibility to imagine forward momentum in life or a projects you’re involved with (Hage 2009). I think the project of anthropology is something to be optimistic about, at least I think so having spoken to all of the anthropologists you heard above.

But aside from that analysis, I’m also making a case for a radically optimistic anthropology – a political move others have also made, arguing for an anthropology I’d like to see more of in the future. We need to be careful, of course, about overstating what anthropology and anthropologists can do. Especially when working with quote unquote real people who do quote unquote real stuff in the quote unquote real world and we’re mostly writing journal articles that are occasionally read and cited (and sometimes cited without being read).

If I’d found a group of anthropologists who researched less explicitly political



themes and who, like most researchers, were by and large interested in thinking about their own practices in a more narrowly defined scholarly sense, then I would, I imagine, have found different forms of optimism in regards to anthropology's place in the world (if I found any at all).

In this sense, the optimism I'm talking about resonates with a strand of anthropological literature identified by Kleist & Jansen (2016) that not only finds hopeful political alternatives amongst those with whom they research (in the case of this essay, anthropologists), but also want to push anthropology into becoming something more politically relevant. This involves, for many, going beyond critique, because critique is, or has become, part and parcel of the contours contemporary thought and thus fails to radically challenge it. Critique is its own niche within the wider intellectual world: one that can be compartmentalised and ignored.

Moreover, if the critique stops at critique: if it is only deconstruction and not reconstruction, it leads to despair, and despair is not a great basis for political change. In this essay we have met anthropologists who have gone beyond critique for critique's sake. Anthropologists who have creatively intervened in the world in ways that blur the scholar/activist categories and centre anthropology's tentative, non-absolutist mode of knowledge creation. I would suggest that the attempts at political practice by anthropologists, combined with the work of those who critique the international organisations and social movements that actively seek to intervene in the world, so that their their interventions might be more effective in achieving social justice, can help create and structure the conditions for critical radical optimism to emerge. And that gives me plenty of reasons not to despair.

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## **Featuring (in order of a-hear-ance)**

Agathe Mora

Julie Billaud

Jane Cowan

Noah Walker-Crawford

Matthew C. Canfield

Lieselotte Viaene

Rafael Carrano Lelis

Samuel Shapiro

Pedro Silva Rocha Lima



## Thanks

All interviews for this audio essay took place on 12 and 13 May 2023 at University of Sussex at the EASA LАWNET workshop in collaboration with Allegra Lab, 'From Critique to Political Practice'. Thanks to Julie and Agathe for the invitation and for everyone who gave their time to be interviewed.

(i) I stole the title from the Manic Street Preachers. Reading the lyrics it could almost be about being an academic: I write this alone on my bed / I've poisoned every room in my house / The place is quiet and so alone / Pretend there's something worth waiting for / There's nothing nice in my head / The adult world took it all away / I wake up with the same spit in my mouth / I cannot tell if it's real or not / I try to walk in a straight line / An imitation of dignity / [From despair to where](#)