

How Borofsky and Eriksen might respond to the DFG Network “Public Anthropology” position paper: *Public Anthropology – Challenges, Competencies, and Structural Requirements.*¹

A letter to colleagues in the departments of anthropology in Germany

Michael Schönhuth, Trier

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Dear colleagues,

Let us imagine Robert Borofsky—who coined the term *public anthropology*—and Thomas Hylland Eriksen—one of the most visible proponents of an engaged public anthropology—picking up this position paper. What might they welcome, and what might they caution against?

What they would likely appreciate

- **Its orientation toward the public good.** Climate change, social fragmentation, and threats to democracy are named clearly. Borofsky has argued for decades that anthropology should serve the public good—and that commitment is unmistakable here.
- **Its reflexivity.** The paper stresses that public engagement is never neutral and that power relations must be critically examined. This resonates strongly with both Borofsky’s and Eriksen’s long-standing warnings.
- **Its recognition of multimodal formats and diverse publics.** Eriksen has often emphasized that anthropology must develop new ways of communicating if it is to reach different social groups.
- **Its call for structural support.** Resources, protection, and institutional recognition align with Borofsky’s insistence that public anthropology can only be sustainable if it does not rest solely on individual enthusiasm.

What they would likely criticize

- **Too few concrete examples of practice.** Both have repeatedly noted that position papers often invoke potential, but rarely demonstrate when and how anthropologists have actually shaped public debates or helped to address conflicts.

¹ You may find the position paper here: <https://anthro-publics.de/de/position-paper/>: “As part of the closing workshop of the DFG network „Public Anthropology,” held in Berlin from 30 June to 1 July 2025, a position paper was developed to provide guidance for the stronger integration of public anthropological work – both within the two ethnological disciplines in Germany and beyond. The position paper is therefore addressed to colleagues at all career stages within the ethnological disciplines, as well as to universities, funding bodies, and policymakers interested in the sustainable establishment of publicly engaged research and teaching in the social sciences and humanities.” (from the homepage).

- **An inward-facing academic perspective.** Borofsky might ask whether a paper addressed primarily to universities and funding institutions really points a path “out of the comfort zone.”
- **A one-sided political framing.** Eriksen might remark that while right-wing populism is indeed a real danger, public anthropology remains analytically credible only if it is also willing to name other forms of polarization or abuses of power.
- **Missing “studying up” and institutional fields.** Both have emphasized that anthropologists must also work with powerful institutions and elites, and in arenas such as development cooperation or organizational consulting—domains that appear only marginally here.
- **An abstract rhetoric of potential.** Eriksen, who publicly commented in 2016 on the Cologne New Year’s Eve assaults², lamented at the time that many anthropologists remain silent when issues become uncomfortable. He might ask why this paper offers no examples of courageous public interventions.

In short: recognition for ethical depth and structural foresight—paired with a push for praxis, breadth, and courage: less self-affirmation, more publicly legible action.

Notes on relevance and self-perception

- In several places the paper suggests that disciplinary and societal relevance is already established (e.g., “Public Anthropology is moving increasingly to the center of disciplinary work”; “anthropologists have evidence-based knowledge ... that allows them to anticipate possible consequences of societal developments”). In reality, approaches to public anthropology (engaged, applied, media-facing) have scarcely been institutionalized in the discipline since the 1990s. In public discourse, our field is often largely invisible; even the renaming of the DGSKA has not strengthened our “brand.” A public anthropology in Germany should acknowledge this weakness rather than cover it with wishful thinking.
- It could actively seek critical dialogue with colleagues who are already publicly visible—even when they challenge disciplinary consensus. Simply ignoring them harms both the ambition of the project and the visibility it seeks.
- It should include the experience of colleagues who move beyond academia with an “anthropological signature” (Kriings)—and who, even if on a small scale so far, have already become visible and effective outside the discipline.
- Anthropologists can enter the “public arena” almost only by playing the “culture card”—even as we simultaneously deconstruct the concept of culture. Eriksen’s comment on Cologne (“It’s the culture, stupid”) showed how one can engage this tension empirically and with nuance, without hiding behind theoretical detours.
- Many of the “competencies” named in the paper (evidence-based knowledge on norms, conflicts, dynamics) are often performed more convincingly in public by prominent sociologists and political scientists. Our distinctive strengths lie elsewhere—especially in:
 1. **Serendipity:** discovering the unexpected through open-ended fieldwork.

²² <https://www.hyllanderiksen.net/blog/2018/12/13/its-the-culture-stupid-or-is-it>

2. **The competence of not-knowing** (*Kompetenzlosigkeitskompetenz*): the capacity to begin without prejudice and to let oneself be unsettled and corrected.
3. **Time and complexity**: presenting interconnections with such differentiation that they sometimes appear even more complex than clients or media outlets would prefer.

We need to engage these tensions proactively—and to represent the specific competencies they contain with confidence in extra-disciplinary publics and in funding institutions (it *can* be done) if public anthropology is to become relevant in Germany. Only then can it deliver what Borofsky and Eriksen envision: courageous, concrete, differentiated public interventions.

Final remark: this “position paper” is precisely that—an entirely welcome act of positioning by twenty colleagues. Before it circulates beyond the discipline—possibly in the name of the broader scholarly community—it could, in my view, benefit from one or two further rounds of reflection, bringing in additional experienced voices from outside this exclusive circle.

With collegial regards,
Michael Schönhuth, Trier