Medical anthropology, activists and intellectuals: an interview with Nancy Scheper-Hughes.¹

Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1944, New York City) is a Professor of Anthropology at UC Berkeley, Head of the UCB/UCSF Doctoral Program in Medical Anthropology and a contributor to the Critical Studies in Medicine, Science and the Body, at the same institution. As an anthropologist, she is mainly known for her richly ethnographically detailed work on various forms of human suffering, structural, symbolic and ‘everyday’ violence, theoretical concepts that are often confused or conflated (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004). Nancy’s engaged attitude toward fieldwork does not go unnoticed in her books. When I first thought of this interview, my intent was to explore this very same topic of engagement. But as soon as our conversation started, I knew that that was not even a question to be made. Nancy’s commitment to ethnography as engaged witnessing was inherent to her practice, so we did not speak about medical anthropologists that are public intellectuals as opposed to the ones that are not. For one hour and a half, our conversation covered the failures and successes of Medical anthropology as an interdisciplinary project, the mediating role of the anthropologist, and the ethical challenges that many times run from it. For Nancy, understanding human difference may be the cornerstone of all anthropological work; however, despite the “suspension of disbelief” and of “bracketing” that the traditional stance of cultural relativism demands at the beginning of all new fieldwork ventures, this task does not exclude the application of ethical judgment and critical analysis, which should follow it. This is something Nancy has put into practice throughout her extensively discussed, praised, awarded and also challenged and critiqued work on Ireland, Brazil, and South Africa. Since 1997 Nancy has been involved in a multi-sited and hybrid research, documentation and medical human rights project on the global traffic

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