



A Conversation with incoming SUNTA President-Elect, Jeff Maskovsky

Society for Urban, National and Transnational Anthropology

Andrew Newman

Jeff Maskovsky

Jeff Maskovsky is the Society for Urban, National and Transnational Anthropology's (SUNTA) incoming president-elect (2017-2019). Maskovsky is Chair and Associate Professor of Urban Studies at Queens College, CUNY and of Anthropology at the Graduate Center, CUNY.

Andrew Newman is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Wayne State University and Secretary of SUNTA.

Andrew Newman (AN): You have had several leadership roles in the discipline and we are very happy you ran this year and joined us. What do you see as SUNTA's importance to the discipline?

Jeff Maskovsky (JM): SUNTA is at the cutting edge of the discipline. It is a critical mass of scholars who are doing important work on issues of space and place, migration and mobility and national and transnational flows. These are central issues that scholars of today are contending with, but not always with same depth and understanding that SUNTA and its members bring. It is great to come in as president-elect to a society in that position. The important thing is promoting the scholarship that comes out of SUNTA, to make it more known and to help scholars in the discipline get their work acknowledged and legitimated. This is something that the leadership in the society has been doing for some time, so I want to build on that, to continue pushing the society forward and to make the rest of anthropology aware of the great work of SUNTA and its members.

AN: In your work, you have made some major contributions to how anthropologists – and Americanists in particular – conceptualize neoliberalism. Thus, I can't help but bring up this outrageous election cycle. Do you see it as fulfilling what many of us have long said about neoliberalism and moral panic or is something new is going on?

JM: It's become harder ideologically to say the neoliberal project can work for everyone. So, with the collapse of neoliberal hegemony, we've seen a polarization of US politics. There is the emergence of Trump/Alt Right/white nationalism, then neoliberals and neoconservatives trying to shore up the center and then a social democratic option like Bernie Sanders getting more traction on the Left. All of this points to the fact that a really long term crisis of political legitimacy in the United States has become noticeable in new ways. One of the biggest dangers is that whenever you have the collapse of the political center, forces on the Right can gather into racist and xenophobic formations. Perhaps the best thing that happened to neoliberalism was Donald Trump, because Bernie Sanders and those who supported them have no choice but to come into line behind Clinton because the threat of a Trump presidency is real and dire.

AN: Despite all of this, you've said in the past that that the explanatory power of the neoliberalism concept has run its course.

JM: At the level of theory, I would say that we probably have to stop talking about neoliberalism as the prevailing political and governmental logic that underlies what is happening in the United States, and I've been saying that for some time. In terms of cities, Julian Brash and I wrote a piece, [Governance Beyond the Neoliberal City](#), making the point that just saying "neoliberal governance" when talking about cities around the world is really not a sufficient starting point, and it may even impede our understanding what kinds of political and governing projects are actually emerging right now.

AN: It's been about 15 years since you co-edited the influential volume [New Poverty Studies](#). How would such a project need to be re-conceptualized for the current moment?

JM: That's a great question because I am doing it again and I hope to put it out next year! Back in 2000, there really weren't discussions of US policy that were connected to neoliberal government and people were still stuck in older debates. We pointed to political demobilization, income inequality and neoliberal triumphalism. A lot of the things we pointed to in that volume remain salient. However, anthropology has developed in really interesting ways over the last 15 years, so the new volume will look at new scholarship such as sensory politics, settler colonialism, migration and new protest movements. And, I think the key is we are in a moment of significant indecision, volatility and uncertainty. The goal of the volume will be trying to capture the impact that has on the making of poverty, as well as people's ability not just to survive in conditions of impoverishment, but to change them.

AN: You and Ida Susser have recently published about a need to revisit a tradition of critical anthropology. Can you say more about that?

JM: Ida and I suspect this is a moment in which there are a lot of students who are interested in the historically-infused Marxism of the culture and political economy school. However, re-invigoration does not mean ignoring the new kinds of things that have been learned from scholars doing interesting work that may not be affiliated with that same school of thought. There are lots of good examples of critical work on affect, sensory politics, governmentality and biopolitics. It's exciting to see theoretical work of this sort joined with scholarly inquiry into inequality, political economy and unequal power relations. I think we need to have some challenging conversations about how to integrate different ways of knowing that don't easily align, but I certainly think if you look at what many anthropology students today want to do, the critical tradition is something that they are looking to revive. I think we owe it to the next generation of anthropologists to find a way to make that tradition meaningful for them today. In that sense a good critical anthropology has to be forward thinking and engaged with what graduate students are facing today, including contingent labor, the state of the academy, where they might be finding themselves working, and their graduate school experiences; all of that has to part of the conversation about what we want anthropology to be.

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