

# Go Tell It on the Mountain: Gerald Berreman and the Politics of Truth

Donna Brasset

## A People's Anthropologist

In his Forward to Gerald Berreman's book *The Politics of Truth* (1981), the anthropologist and folklorist Ved Prakash Vatuk gave Berreman one of the highest compliments that can be paid to an academic: "Gerald Berreman chose the path of the Gita's *jnana yogi*—knowledge to serve humanity" (v). Beyond having earned a reputation as a distinguished anthropologist, Berreman's penchant for socially relevant research won him two honorary doctorates: the first, from the University of Stockholm in 1978, and the second from Garwhal University in India the following year. Both awards lauded the humanism imbued in his scholarship on social inequality, but the Stockholm award additionally singled him out for being among "the most prominent spokesmen advocating an independent and critical stance regarding the political and military interests of superpowers," and named him "one of the leading figures of our times where social anthropological research is concerned" (vi).

Declaring Berreman "a selfless activist in the purest sense" (v), Vatuk added in his forward that Berreman's humanity prevented him from seeing the people he studied as mere means to an eviscerated, theoretical end. In Vatuk's view, Berreman

has not used people simply as raw data with which to cook up some gourmet theories, but has carefully observed people in order to understand what it is about the human experience which makes one group turn against another, and in order to try to find ways by which the world might become a place without inhumanity, without war, and without injustice. [1981:vii]

Besides eschewing "gourmet theories," as Vatuk put it, Berreman also steered clear of gourmet *writing*. Anyone familiar with his work is aware that he has always written in clear, incisive, and eloquent prose that is readily available to virtually anyone in the world literate in English. He has assiduously avoided anthropological trends toward an increasingly specialized insiders' jargon: toward what Robert Borofsky referred to as the attempt to keep the intellectually "impure" outside of anthropological discourse by ratcheting up the levels of theoretical abstraction (Borofsky 2000:10).

It would not have occurred to me 35 years ago when I first read Gerald Berreman's work, and long before I was privileged to become one of his students, to think of him as I do now, as a veritable "people's anthropologist." At that time I believed that anthropology was, in the end, all about a genuine search to find ways of reducing what was commonly referred to in those years as "man's inhumanity to man." But anthropology has undergone many changes since then, and I now believe that Berreman's refusal to see human beings as mere grist for the theoretical mills of philosopher kings, his willingness to stand up for those who are denied a voice in their own fates, the accessibility of his ideas, and the lack of affectation in his writing, readily warrants his characterization as an anthropologist of the people.

### **Moral Courage and the Politics of Truth**

Perhaps the definitive test of Berreman's personal integrity and moral courage as an academic was in his active stance against the Vietnam War, and against the complicity of social scientists—particularly anthropologists—who had conducted research projects sponsored by the Department of Defense for counterinsurgency purposes. In the academic world, political dissent against government policy requires moral courage for the very reason that one is so rarely supported by colleagues and other intellectuals sharing similar sympathies.

As Edward Said points out, the political habits of many academics have become undermined by the tacit assumption that their faculty positions are partially contingent on not seeming too political or controversial (1996:100). The fundraising concerns of university administrators become internalized by their faculties and lead to politically cautious norms of behavior. Presenting an appearance of balance, objectivity, and neutrality is understood to smooth the path to job security, to consultantships, to board appointments, to prestigious committees, to international recognition, and other symptoms of academic stature.

Russell Jacoby (1987) notes additionally that the absorption of intellectuals by universities breeds a single-minded focus on career paths; on the numerous monographs, journals, books, and conferences that form the criteria for promotion and tenure, and which leave little time for political engagement outside of departmental boundaries. But faculty concentration on career paths has other side effects. In the last three decades, many New Left intellectuals have had their public advocacy roles undercut when they became swept away by the postmodern critique of 20<sup>th</sup> century social science. On the one hand, according to Jacoby, many of the (usually younger) Neo-Marxist professors writing in the French post-structuralist mode, have developed a credible scholarship assailing the invidious sexist, racist, or elitist world views permeating much of Western literature and social science. But a great deal of what they produce is so highly specialized, so riddled with what Jacoby refers to as "self-devouring" metatheory, inviting "endless spirals of commentary" as to make their

work virtually unreadable, if not unread, except by the specialists themselves (1987:173).

In the end, their exclusive, highly abstract, and unapologetically esoteric scholarship renders much of their work so highly inaccessible as to become irrelevant. Moreover, as Jacoby points out, their language and body of theory have come to look increasingly like the work it sought to subvert (1987:141). Due to the obscure “curlicues and filigrees” of their prose (Harris 1999:156), many (by no means all) proponents of the postmodern critique of Western thought, who might otherwise be capable of a potent challenge to power, have, in effect, rendered themselves politically impotent.

Even more important than the political passivity of many academics who at least tacitly share a condemnatory view of the abuses of power, is the predilection of so many to be co-opted by power. Of these, some can trace their social legitimacy as far back as the Greek city-states when intellectuals colluded with the whims of political leaders in crafting state myths and propaganda designed to gain the loyalty of their citizens. Convinced that consensus is critical to state functioning, these modern Machiavellians have no difficulty aiding power elites in forging a role for themselves as defenders of state interests, whatever the social cost. In the academic world, particularly in the more prestigious universities, those with this cast of mind tend to congregate in the international relations branch of political science, where a disproportionate number of the faculty act as consultants to the world’s various departments of defense. As such, they act as agents, rather than critics, of state power.

For others, their co-option by power has occurred largely through a kind of socio-cultural default; their supportive stance toward state interests can be traced to the pervasive and compelling influence of national culture.<sup>1</sup> In his incisive analysis of the evolution of power over the millennia, John Kenneth Galbraith (1985) reiterates the observations of numerous political theorists who believe that state power is at its highest level when governed populations submit to state authority without knowing they are being controlled. State power that works by conditioning populations toward consensus, according to Galbraith, is so highly effective precisely “because we are so extensively innocent of its exercise” (1985:188). Galbraith cites the military as the most forceful expression of state conditioned power because of the military establishment’s monopoly on state resources. The ideological power of the military has become so potent a force in modern states that few institutions—political, economic, religious, educational, and cultural—have been left untouched by its effects. “In its management and control of information,” Galbraith says, military power is “by a wide margin, the most comprehensive and successful exponent of conditioned power” (1985:166).

It follows rather naturally that those challenging military policy are quickly met with the approbation of political leaders and their citizenries. This ready reflex to

marginalize critics of state power is the modern-day legacy of centuries-old devices used by political leaders who saw the benefit in espousing nationalism and patriotism as among the most venerable of state values.

Those academics drawn in by state political and military conditioning tend to be the *inadvertent* exponents of state power. These include liberals as well as conservatives in society, and they frequently fill roles as official state historians, as political commentators in the media, or as area experts representing national interests. Such people are not immune to the abuses of power, and many voice their criticisms of state policy; but like those holding university positions, their custom is to avoid been seen as overly controversial, because therein lies the potential for stigma, marginalization, and loss of job security.

In the short-term, conditioning populations for consensus has to do with maintaining social hierarchy, with normalizing social and economic inequalities, and with legitimizing the coercive power of the state. But, because of the critical role militaries play in the maintenance of their states, it is the long term goal, integral to military organization, that requires the greatest conditioning effort: preparing their citizenries for war with other states. It goes without saying that a genuine critique of the abuses of power thus requires an unusual degree of conviction, courage, and determination on the part of those who do so.

Despite the obstacles, however, there has always been a small cadre of individuals who have stood up against the misuse of power, regardless of the silence of their peers, or of the condemnation of their state leaders and fellow citizens. Some in this mode have been among the most celebrated intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Jean-Paul Sartre, Bertrand Russell, Antonio Gramsci, Hannah Arendt, Chinua Achebe, C.Wright Mills, Karl Popper, Noam Chomsky, Jose Marti, and Frantz Fanon, to name a few. What unites each of them—and which is undoubtedly the critical factor in their celebratory status—is the conviction they share that the truly thoughtful intellect is one who reacts against the abuses of power. Reacts, as Said has remarked, by speaking out when governments manifestly oppress people, when injustices continue to occur, and when fellow academics and intellectuals become co-opted by governments and turn a blind eye to the abuses of power (1996:18).

But Said has been careful to make the important distinction between those intellectuals who engage their group or national loyalties in an effort to safeguard the survival of their communities during times of extreme national urgency, and those whose community or national loyalties supercede their critical judgment regarding the abuse of power. In his words,

loyalty to the group's fight for survival cannot draw in the intellectual so far as to narcotize the critical sense, or reduce its imperatives, which are always to go beyond survival to questions of political

liberation, to critiques of the leadership, to presenting alternatives that are too often marginalized or pushed aside as irrelevant to the main battle at hand. [1996:41]

Gerald Berreman has long maintained that those who are informed about the mechanisms and consequences of exploitative social policies have an obligation to speak out against them; social scientists, especially, have a responsibility to exercise “the politics of truth” when they have the relevant facts and informed opinions about social problems. In his words:

I believe that social scientists have much to offer toward the intelligent and humane solution of those problems, and that they have a positive responsibility to offer it forthrightly and publicly, wherever it may be heard, regardless of national or other affiliations. [1981:x]

This is essentially what James Baldwin had in mind when he said that those who are armed with an understanding of the social consequences of racial discrimination need to bear witness to them and “Go tell it on the mountain,” as he put it in the title of one of his books (1995).

### **Vietnam Redux**

During the late 1960s through the early 1970s, the period that saw the massive escalation of U.S. forces in Vietnam, Berreman declared both in writing and in public that the U.S. was conducting a racist war, both externally, towards our Southeast Asian’s enemies, and internally, when African-American, Latinos, and other minorities were disproportionately sent to the front lines to die. He referred to our war planners—people like then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger—as war criminals.

Twenty-six years after the end of the war in Vietnam, Christopher Hitchens, took up this topic in his book *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (2001). Hitchens’ claim is that Kissinger’s uniquely callous indifference to the toll his decisions have taken on human life and human rights throughout the world qualify him as war criminal by standard international criteria. Hitchens makes a distinction between what he termed the usual sort of “depraved realpolitik” frequently practiced by state leaders in war and other circumstances, from what he calls “identifiable crimes” committed by Kissinger that should be placed on a proper bill of indictment for war crimes (2001:ix). Hitchens’ documentation of Kissinger’s collusion in the massacre of hundreds of thousands of East Timorese in the middle 1970s by Indonesia—a political ally of the United States—and Kissinger’s involvement in the assassinations of heads of state in Chile and Cyprus, among others, are cases in point.

For the American citizenry, the most powerful disclosures by Hitchens may be his evidence that Kissinger, prior to his having joined the Nixon administration, led the effort to undermine the U.S.-Vietnamese 1968 Paris Peace Accords with a view to influencing U.S. elections in favor of a Nixon presidency. Hitchens's data demonstrates that South Vietnamese leaders were prepared at the time to join the North Vietnamese in negotiating the terms for the termination of the war. Through behind-the-scenes intrigue, Kissinger acted as Nixon's informant by privately assuring South Vietnamese military officials that an in-coming Republican administration would offer them better terms than would a Democratic one.

"In this way," according to Hitchens, "they undercut the talks themselves and the electoral strategy of Hubert Humphrey [Nixon's campaign rival]" (2001:6). The South Vietnamese subsequently withdrew from the Paris talks on the eve of the U.S. presidential elections, precipitating a move that terminated the peace plank on which the Democrats had based their electoral bid; this smoothed the path to the Nixon presidency. Four years later, the war ended on terms identical to those proposed by Hanoi for the Paris peace negotiations in 1968. In the interim, approximately 20,000 U.S. servicemen, and an unknown number of Vietnamese servicemen died in battle.

As for Berreman's charge of racism on the part of U.S. war planners, Roger Morris, a former National Security Council staff member during the Johnson and Nixon administrations, described one of his roles at the NSC as "cleaning up Kissinger's documents" (Morris 2001). Concurring with many of Hitchens' findings, Morris claimed that Kissinger, along with his circle of peers and protégés, were indeed racist in their attitudes toward Southeast Asians, and as such held no qualms about instigating many of the government's lethal and tortuous machinations in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Gerald Berreman and others like him who had summoned the courage to challenge U.S. policy on Vietnam can derive further vindication in former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's public acknowledgment of his culpability in the personal and national tragedy of that war. In his book, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995), McNamara enumerated a veritable litany of mistaken assumptions and misguided moral judgments that pervaded the day-to-day political and strategic planning for the war. The highest ranking U.S. government official to ever admit such grave mistakes in public, McNamara now holds views that are in line with the early opponents of the war; opponents whose criticism and dissent were roundly denounced at the time by numerous government officials, including McNamara himself.

As for the Vietnam War as a whole, the vast majority of those in top U.S. political, military, and academic circles today are fundamentally united in dubbing the whole undertaking a political, strategic, and foreign policy mistake: a "blunder," in the words of some, "wrongheaded" according to others.<sup>2</sup> A "wrongheaded blunder" in

effect, that resulted in the deaths of close to 3 million American and Vietnamese servicemen, as well as in countless other human and environmental devastations. Few thoughtful people today doubt that among the critical factors leading to the termination of the war in Vietnam were the voices of dissent of those who opposed the war on moral grounds.

### **Spies, Prophets, and the Control of Power**

Perhaps the most difficult position Gerald Berreman was to take in his career—because it was closer to home—was when he challenged those social scientists, some of whom were colleagues in anthropology, who gathered political and cultural data in the mid-1960s on Thai villagers for Department of Defense counterinsurgency operations. Berreman's public condemnation of those conducting such research led to heated debate within the American Anthropological Association regarding the obligation and responsibilities of anthropologists towards the people they study. The debate culminated in the majority of members taking sides with Berreman by endorsing the adoption of a code of Professional Responsibility for the Association, which Berreman helped draft.

The sentiment of those agreeing with the new code of ethics was echoed earlier in a point made by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins in his response to the public disclosure of Project Camelot, another government-sponsored program conceived in the 1960s and designed to identify revolutionary "elements" in Latin America. Sahlins asserted that every citizen has the right to engage in counterinsurgency work, but no one—scholar or citizen—"has leave...to so delude himself and others about the scientific legitimacy and disinterested objectivity of this work" (1967:78).

Overall, some of the best efforts directed towards undermining the misuse of power in the world—slavery, child labor, civil rights, or environmental protections—have come from a relatively small cadre of intellectuals and disaffected citizens who have succeeded in pricking the conscience of the majority to act against them. Nonetheless, the impediments to achieving genuine democratic institutions in society appear to be expanding. Planetary problems associated with globalization, industrial pollution, the growing inequities between rich and poor, and an intensification of the use of military and other forms of violence against other countries require more than the struggles of a determined few.

In his seminal work, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Karl Popper (1971) implicated the passivity of so many of the world's intellectuals as among the more important obstacles to achieving genuine democratic institutions in society. Popper enjoined fellow academics to "cease posing as prophets," in order to begin the work of crafting our own fates. As he put it, "when we have given up worrying whether or not

history will justify us, then one day perhaps we may succeed in getting power under control" (1971:280).

### **Studying Power: A Note of Encouragement**

Since the study of humanity is the purview of anthropology, most projects undertaken by anthropologists contain the opportunity to engage in socially responsible scholarship. Research projects that might illumine the worldview, social networks, normative behavior, and policy motivations of the world's political, economic, or military elites are among these. Based on my own experience in interviewing military and corporate elites, I can attest that the field is rich in possibilities for the anthropologist interested in the study of power. To date, the only obstacle to such research is the mystique, expressed both in the anthropological literature on power (and informally, as expressed by students and colleagues) conveying the notion that access to elites is a difficult, if not impossible undertaking. In the view of one anthropologist, for example, "the Pentagon, large corporations, and nuclear weapons laboratories...do not readily welcome strangers with notebooks," suggesting that such organizations contain people with security clearances "who...are nervous that ethnographers may disrupt their relationships with superiors or jeopardize the secrets...they are supposed to guard from outsiders" (Gusterson 1992:63).

I found no such nervousness on the part of my interview respondents at the Pentagon. (Military, political and corporate elites are simply not afraid of anthropologists.) The goal of my research was to describe the values, attitudes, and cultural assumptions of military elites regarding U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union in the context of the Cold War. To that end, I interviewed former and then-current, chairmen and members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, former members of the National Security Council, high-ranking officers in the intelligence branches of their services, senior officials in administrative and faculty positions at prominent military colleges and universities, a couple of retired CIA directors, and CEOs within top-level defense industries, among others.

I believe that conjectures about the difficulty of access to such people derives largely from a misguided notion of the unusual complexity and ambiguity of life within the confines of the Pentagon, as well as of the organizational features of large corporations. The Pentagon, for example, is primarily a physical structure that houses a multitude of groups separated by an enormous diversity of roles, mandates, functions, missions, and sub-cultures. There is, in addition, a complex web of competing military and civilian departments, each of which has its own floors, wings, branches, divisions, units, and sub-units.

Contrary to the widespread belief that the Pentagon is a monolithic entity that is constitutionally unfriendly to "strangers with notebooks" (Gusterson 1992:63), each

wing, story, department, unit, group, or individual in the Pentagon has developed independent systems of control of information. All of these entities make their own decisions regarding access to outsiders, and none of them is subsumed under a particular authority with the ability to exercise absolute control over the entire organization. In short, beyond the security personnel who check the purses and briefcases of visitors for concealed weapons—a practice replicated in many of the public buildings in Washington—there is no overarching body that monitors the comings and goings of all manner of civilians with business and other interests at the Pentagon. Access to individuals for interview purposes is, therefore, primarily a matter of discretion on the part of the individual with whom one requests an interview. That this state of affairs chagrins those whose designated function is to oversee visits to the Pentagon (e.g. The Office of Public Relations) is another matter. In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the Pentagon, some of this may change. But there is a plethora of other routes to access, such as interviewing senior Pentagon officials in their own homes or restaurants, as I have done on several occasions.

There is also no mystery about the particular techniques involved in gaining access to powerful milieu, about conducting interviews with high-status individuals, or about the analysis of interview data. Along with an abundance of sound methodological material in anthropology pertaining to qualitative analyses, there is already a rich literature in sociology and political science describing the variety of means one can use to gain access to all matter of elite communities (see Hunter 1959; Ostrander 1993; Herz and Imber 1995; Domhoff 1998; Stasz 1995; Blondel and Muller-Rommel 1993). A perusal of some of this material would prevent future scholars in the anthropology of power from having to entirely reinvent the wheel on the subject.

My purpose in bringing this up is to provide encouragement to would-be students of power by making the point that gaining access to elite communities is no more difficult than gaining access to the kinds of groups more typically studied by anthropologists. As Laura Nader (1969) pointed out decades ago, colleagues and students conducting research that would illumine the structural arrangements, normative values, and social networks of communities of power (among other topics) could greatly enrich the public discourse on the democratic application of power across the globe.

At a minimum, anthropological insights can refine the theoretical contributions of specialists in international relations, many of whose members interpret military and political policy to be the result of rational and realistic appraisals of state interests. Based on my own observations, I can assert that normative values, competition for promotions, the pursuit of symbolic quantifiers of status and prestige (which includes economic gain), the internalization of state values, the pragmatic requirements of military organization, ethnocentrism, distrust of civilian values,

among many other influences, have at least as profound an effect on military and political decision-making as adherence to rational appraisals of state interests.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, the hope would be that Jacoby (1987) is wrong in his view that the intellectuals who care about where society is going, are disappearing, or that most of them are mired in an academic culture of commitment to neutrality, or drawn into ever-expanding Defense and corporate realms. "Getting power under control," as Popper (1971) put it, seems crucial, as corporate and state interests (worldwide) continue to destroy communities, perpetuate wars, and otherwise undermine the quality of life on the planet.

The quote by Robert Redfield that was taped to the outside of Gerald Berreman's office door for many years is as good as any for cutting to the heart of the engaged anthropologist's role in society: "I have placed myself squarely on the side of mankind and have not shamed to wish mankind well" (1957:141).

## **Works Cited**

Baldwin, James

1995(1953) *Go Tell It On The Mountain*. New York: The Modern Library.

Berreman, Gerald

1981 *The Politics of Truth: Essays in Critical Anthropology*. New Delhi: South Asia Publishers PVT LTD.

Blondel, Jean and Ferdinand Muller-Rommel, eds.

1993 *Governing Together: The Extent and Limits of Joint Decision-Making in Western European Cabinets*. London: Macmillan.

Borofsky, Robert

2000 *To Laugh or Cry?* *Anthropology News* 41(2):9-10.

Domhoff, William G.

1998 *Who Rules America? Power and Politics in the year 2000*. 3rd ed., Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing.

Galbraith, John Kenneth

1985 *The Anatomy of Power*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Gusterson, Hugh

1992 *Exploding Anthropology's Canon in the World of the Bomb: Ethnographic Writing on Militarism*. *Journal of Contemporary Ehnography* 22(1):59-79.

**Harris, Marvin**

- 1999 *Theory of Culture in Postmodern Times*. Walnut Creek, CA, London, and New Delhi: AltaMira Press.

**Herz, Rosanna and Jonathan B. Imber, eds.**

- 1995 *Studying Elites Using Qualitative Methods*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

**Hitchens, Christopher**

- 2001 *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*. New York: Verso.

**Hunter, Floyd**

- 1959 *Top Leadership, U.S.A.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

**Jacoby, Russell**

- 1987 *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. New York: The Noonday Press.

**McNamara, Robert**

- 1995 *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. New York: Times Books.

**Morris, Roger**

- 2001 From a C-SPAN transmission of a Harper's magazine forum held at the National Press Club, Washington, D.C. on February 22, 2001.

**Nader, Laura**

- 1969 *Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up*. In *Reinventing Anthropology*. Dell Hymes, ed. Pp. 284-311. New York: Random House.

**Ostrander, Susan**

- 1993 *Fieldwork in Elite Settings*. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22(1):7-27.

**Popper, Karl**

- 1971(1943) *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Vol. II, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

**Redfield, Robert**

- 1957 *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*. New York: Cornell University Press.

**Sahlins, Marshall**

- 1967 *The Established Order: Do Not Fold, Spindle or Mutilate*. In *The Rise and Fall of Project Camelot*. Irving L. Horowitz, ed. Pp. 71-79. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

**Said, Edward W.**

- 1996 *Representations of the Intellectual*. New York: Vintage Books.

Stasz, Clarice

1995 *The Rockefeller Women: Dynasty of Piety, Privacy and Service*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Thompson, Leonard

1985 *The Political Mythology of Apartheid*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Vatuk, Ved Prakash

1981 Forward. *In The Politics of Truth: Essays in Critical Anthropology*. Gerald Berreman, ed. Pp. v-vii. New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, Ltd.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a comparative, capsule treatment of the political mythologies and methods of populace persuasion used by state leaders in ancient and modern states, see Thompson (1985).

<sup>2</sup> In the interviews I conducted with senior officers and other defense officials for my research on military elites in Washington, D.C., the words "blunder" and "wrongheaded" were the most commonly used by respondents in reference to the U.S. incursion in Vietnam.