



Anthropology Beyond the Walls of the Discipline: A Critical Reading of “Why the World Needs Anthropologists”

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers a critical review of the second edition of *Why the World Needs Anthropologists*, edited by Dan Podjed and Carla Guerrón Montero (Routledge, 2026), a thirteen-chapter collective volume that revisits, in new terms, the long-standing question of anthropology's relevance to the contemporary world. The review argues that the book's central contribution lies in repositioning anthropology from a detached observer of social life into an interventionist form of knowledge capable of understanding, mediating, and translating between disparate institutional and epistemic worlds. Drawing on chapters devoted to environmental anthropology, energy transitions, professional collaboration, and career preparation, the review traces how the volume grounds its theoretical claims in concrete applied experience. It also raises three critical points: the book's tendency to soften the political tensions inherent in applied engagement, its persistent grounding in North Atlantic institutional contexts, and the latent risk of disciplinary self-centeredness embedded in its very title. The review concludes that, despite these limitations, the volume stands as one of the most successful recent collective attempts to reintroduce anthropology as a living form of knowledge, capable of combining theoretical depth with sustained practical relevance across a wide range of institutional and professional settings.

KEYWORDS: Applied Anthropology; Interventionist Knowledge; Multiperspectivity; Environmental Anthropology; Book Review

Why the World Needs Anthropologists, edited by Dan Podjed* and Carla Guerrón Montero*, appears in its second edition from Routledge as a collective work bringing together thirteen chapters across some 231 pages. The volume seeks to reformulate, in new terms, an old question: why does the world today need anthropologists? The book does not treat this question as a purely defensive exercise on behalf of a discipline seeking a foothold within the university; rather, it uses the question as an entry point for redefining the meaning of anthropology itself, its public function, and its relationship to professional fields, technology, the environment, health, public policy, and the wider social world at a moment when crises are intensifying and layers of complexity are multiplying^[1]. The table of contents makes this ambition clear: the volume opens with an introductory chapter titled “The Beginning of a New Era for Anthropology” and closes with a concluding chapter on “The Future Paths of Anthropology,” passing through chapters on ethnography, digital anthropology, professional practice, energy, training, and work in non-academic settings.

The book's central thesis is that anthropology can no longer afford the luxury of remaining a detached observer describing the world from the outside; it is now called upon to become an interventionist form of knowledge, capable of understanding, participating in, mediating, and translating between disparate social, institutional, and epistemic worlds^[2]. This position is evident from the opening chapter, where the editors link the need for anthropology to the transformations set in motion by the COVID-19 pandemic, wars, climate crises, the rise of artificial intelligence, and the widening gap between the complexity of reality and the reductionist tools used to grasp it^[3]. The book therefore does not present anthropology as a science of the distant “Other,” but as a science of human complexity in all its forms, from industrial labor to energy, from hospitals to digital platforms, and from local communities to multinational corporations.



Epistemologically, the book rests on a twofold argument. On one hand, it defends the specificity of the anthropological gaze, not merely as a body of concepts but as a skill for perceiving relationships, contexts, and entanglements that escape reductionist approaches. On the other hand, it seeks to demonstrate that this specificity is not simply a contemplative value but a practical resource that can be mobilized to solve public problems^[4]. Hence the recurrence, across its chapters, of terms such as “complexity,” “multiperspectivity,” “suspension of judgment,” “interdisciplinarity,” “bridging,” “mediation,” and “translation.”

To its credit, the book does not confine itself to theoretical advocacy but grounds its argument in a series of concrete applied experiences. In Lenora Bohren's chapter, “Living in and Researching a Diverse World,” for instance, environmental and cross-cultural anthropology emerge as tools for understanding the relationship between culture, environment, and climate change^[5]. The author does not treat climate change as a purely natural phenomenon but as a domain in which agricultural practices, decision-making patterns, local perceptions of risk, and the demands of public policy intersect. Through examples drawn from pastoralism, agriculture, air quality, and pollution, she shows that environmental policies fail whenever technical solutions are separated from the social and cultural contexts in which they are applied.

This perspective is reinforced in Tanja Winther's chapter on “Searching for Variation and Complexity,” where anthropology is reconstructed as a discipline that seeks not ready-made answers but multiplicity, variation, and the hidden links between local and global levels^[6]. The chapter discusses what the author calls the “energy dilemma,” demonstrating, through examples from India, Kenya, and Norway, that energy transition cannot be reduced to technical or economic alternatives, since what appears to be an effective solution from an engineering or market standpoint may prove socially or culturally unviable^[7].

Steffen Jöhncke's chapter, “Making Anthropology Relevant to Other People's Problems,” stands out as one of the volume's most forceful contributions in articulating the practical meaning of anthropology. Rather than starting from the question of what anthropologists can add, it poses a more delicate one: how can an anthropologist work with institutions and actors who already define the problem in their own terms, and who need that problem translated or reassembled? Here anthropology is presented as a collaborative practice that does not abandon critical distance but is not sustained by any illusion of epistemic superiority either^[8]. The value of this framing is evident in the author's example of maritime navigation technology, where the fault lay not in the technology alone but in the web of professional and organizational relationships and assumptions within which that technology had been designed^[9].

The professional dimension of the book reaches its high point in Riall W. Nolan's chapter, “Do We Really Need More Anthropologists?” Its value lies in the way it destabilizes the very question it poses: Nolan argues that the world does not need more anthropologists in a narrow numerical sense, but more “anthropological thinking”^[10].

Elizabeth K. Briody's chapter, “Preparing for Anthropology Careers,” is no less important, presenting core skills such as critical thinking, systems thinking, ethnographic methods, and rapport building^[11], while exposing a persistent gap between academic training and the demands of the labor market^[12].

In terms of overall architecture, the book displays a clear editorial intelligence. Its chapters are not arranged by theme alone but follow a gradual movement from theoretical grounding to applied illustration and, finally, to reflection on the future. This ordering performs a double function: it demonstrates, first, that anthropology still possesses a living theoretical core, one that works not against application but for it; and it shows, second, that the applied turn intended here is not a surrender to the instrumental logic of the market or management, but a way of expanding the public presence of anthropology. This idea becomes even clearer in the closing chapter, “The Future Paths of Anthropology,” where the editors insist that the discipline's future depends on its flexibility, its perspectival plurality, its ethnographic rootedness, and its capacity to engage with technology without forfeiting its human sensitivity. Read from this angle, the book is less a defense of anthropology's “survival” than an argument for its transformation.

Notwithstanding these considerable strengths, the volume is not without points that call for critical discussion. The first concerns the book's tendency, in its eagerness to showcase the efficacy of applied anthropology, to soften the epistemic and political tensions that accompany this kind of engagement. Collaboration with corporations, government agencies, market institutions, and public policy bodies always raises questions about the limits of critique, and about the possibility that anthropology may end up adapting individuals to unjust institutional conditions rather than interrogating those conditions at their roots. Some chapters do gesture toward these tensions, but the celebratory tone underpinning the book's overall project leaves them less visible than they should be. Readers come away with a strong impression of applied anthropology's effectiveness, but without an equally thorough treatment of the ethical and political risks bound up with such engagement.



The second point is that the book, despite its universalist title, remains saturated in its examples and professional horizon with North Atlantic contexts, or with research and professional institutions belonging to settings that already possess the infrastructure allowing anthropology to expand beyond the university. This does not diminish its value, but it does make it necessary to pose the same question from other locations, particularly from within the countries of the Global South, where the need for anthropology takes on different meanings amid a fragile university system, weak research funding, a narrow professional market, and social knowledge entangled with the demands of the state, power, and international development. Seen from this angle, the book remains highly significant, not because it offers ready-made answers to be replicated elsewhere, but because it opens a horizon that calls for critical localization.

The third point concerns the title itself: "Why the World Needs Anthropologists." The title is rhetorically effective, but it carries a hidden risk, namely re-centering the discipline on itself even as it calls for openness to the world. In fact, some of the book's strongest moments are precisely those in which this self-centering recedes, and the question becomes instead: why does the world need anthropological thinking, or ethnographic sensitivity, or the capacity to suspend judgment and understand context? It is in these moments that the book moves beyond a merely identitarian defense of the discipline and becomes a contribution to the broader debate on the fate of the social sciences and humanities in an age of technology, commodification, and uncertainty.

These critical observations, however, do not diminish the book's considerable value. On the whole, it stands as one of the most successful recent collective efforts to reintroduce anthropology as a living form of knowledge, capable of combining theoretical depth with practical effectiveness. Its principal strength lies not only in the diversity of its subjects but in its success in threading a common line through them: that the contemporary world does not suffer from a shortage of data and information so much as from a deficit of contextual understanding, of listening, and of the capacity to perceive the complex relationships among people, institutions, technologies, and environments. It is precisely here that anthropology recovers its necessity.

The book's implications extend well beyond the confines of the discipline itself. It reminds readers that the question of anthropology's usefulness should not be confined to the university but extended to its connection with society's concerns, with planning, health, the environment, technological change, and the labor market as well. It also invites a rethinking of prevailing training models within departments of anthropology and the social sciences more broadly, wherever they separate knowledge from practice, analysis from skill, and theory from professional engagement.

Even as it offers an optimistic portrait of anthropology's future, the book poses, not always by design, a broader challenge to the social sciences and humanities: how can anthropology's considerable critical capital be converted into a practical capacity for understanding and intervention, without that knowledge losing its independence and its ethical sensitivity? For these reasons, it can be said that *Why the World Needs Anthropologists* is not merely a book in defense of a discipline, but a text that redefines the place of anthropological knowledge in the twenty-first century. It is a book worth reading, not only for students of anthropology, but for everyone working on questions of the human, the social, policy, and technology, since it offers an eloquent lesson in the idea that deep understanding is not a theoretical luxury but a condition for responsible action in a world where quick fixes multiply as fast as its complex problems.

* **Dan Podjed** is a Slovenian anthropologist born in 1975. He is a Senior Research Fellow at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts and an Associate Professor at the University of Ljubljana. His work centers on applied anthropology, particularly the relationship between humans, technology, and everyday life in contexts of crisis. He is also one of the leading contributors to the development of this field, having launched the *Why the World Needs Anthropologists* initiative and co-edited the volume that bears the same title.

* **Carla María Guerrón Montero** is a cultural anthropologist and Professor at the University of Delaware, United States. Her research focuses on tourism, heritage, and identity in Latin America and the Caribbean, and she has published widely in peer-reviewed journals. She co-edited *Why the World Needs Anthropologists*, and her work is distinguished by a critical perspective linking anthropology to questions of development and social justice.

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