Transcript

Elizabeth Ferry: Greetings, listeners of *Recall this Book*. This is Elizabeth Ferry, and I’m continuing our conversation with Dan Souleles, this time on how to study people with power. Let me shift us and ask you about studying up Dan. You’ve written about this. You exemplify it in your ethnography. And you’ve also written very thoughtfully about it. And I think you have a special issue with Matthew Archer too, right, on this?

Daniel Souleles: Yeah yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: So, what is studying up and how is it different from business as usual in anthropology?

Daniel Souleles: Yeah, so increasingly, I look at anthropology, so, anthropology writ large is this sort of naturalistic inductive study of humans. And so, you go wherever humans are doing their thing, and you proceed inductively to try and understand how their world works. And to get more specific though, you have to understand that anthropology has been animated by a bunch of different normative projects, a bunch of different senses of why that type of study would be important. And there have been a series of crackups in these normative projects over the course of the history of anthropology. You know, early ones had to do with evolution and race science, and in the 60s, 70s and 80s there was a big crackup about the fact that a huge amount of anthropological work happened in colonial contexts in a kind of unexamined way. And out of that grew a bunch of different normative projects.
Elizabeth Ferry: Or let's say an unevenly examined way. Yeah, because some people were fairly reflective on it.

Daniel Souleles: Yeah yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right?

Daniel Souleles: And more precisely, it's like, what is the object of anthropological study? And so, you couldn't say that “oh, we're studying primitive people,” or “we're studying stateless people,” if they're under colonial domination, because that's also part of the context that would constitute their lives. And so out of that crackup one of the directions that anthropology went was studying up. And so, the normative project there was to say, OK, anthropology does this kind of naturalistic inductive stuff, it does field work, it hangs out with people, it gets very close descriptions of their lives. Let’s turn that inward and try and understand the powers in the anthropologist’s own society, and specifically, let's try and understand the people who, due to the nature of states or corporate capitalism, are able to control the conditions of many other people's lives right? And so, don't just study the bottom of the pyramid. Try and get to the top of the pyramid and understand how the actions that go on there affect other people. So, my project like, writ large, all the anthropological work that I do, I feel, fits into that kind of normative agenda where you're trying to understand how relatively small groups of people structure the lives of many other people.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right?

Daniel Souleles: And so, that's how I understand studying up, and that's increasingly what I've been trying to write about and try to understand: how anthropology changes when that happens. When that is your normative project as opposed to activist work or, you know, work that is meant to unearth forms of life that don't get much representation writ large.
or recuperative work or whatever, and so it's a different kind of normative project.

Elizabeth Ferry: And I think it's, I mean, 'cause I've also started doing, I mean, I kind of have done both and continue to do both. 'Cause I studied both gold and silver miners and people who extract mineral specimens at a quite low level, you know. Further down on the kind of economic pyramid, and (although with lots of expertise, so I'm saying low level but I don't mean that it's simpler by any means) but it's less well paid.

Daniel Souleles: Yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: And then also, you know financiers and fancy mineral collectors who pay like $1,000,000 per specimen and stuff. And you know, I mean, there's sort of different—tell me what you think of this Dan and John—there's sort of different views of like, what anthropology should be doing, what its normative project is, and one is sort of saying like, there's so much suffering and there's so much violence. And there's so much inequality that if we're not kind of constantly drawing attention to that, then we're really missing the boat and were failing, right? This is what somebody like Nancy Scheper Hughes, for instance, would argue. And then there is another perspective, which is one that I tend to be closer to, which is to say, well, if you don't sort of engage in an anthropological inquiry of higher, you know, echelons then basically, you're letting the way that these higher echelons, who already have a lot of capacity to tell their own story, you're just leaving the field open for the story to be the one that they tell, right?

Daniel Souleles: Yeah for sure.

Elizabeth Ferry: And you are, you know, sort of, in a sense, taking for granted that their view of the world is being (and this is a, you know, word that we often use in anthropology) of is the sort of unmarked one, right? It's the one that sort of doesn't
need description, because we always already know what it is and everything else is to be compared to it, right? It's the sort of unspoken “us” whoever.

Elizabeth Ferry: You know and “us” being understood to be white euro-descended. You know, middle class or above etc. So, you know, that I think is the, to me that's part of the terrain, right?

Daniel Souleles: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Elizabeth Ferry: So, I don't know if you have thoughts about that or is that....?

Daniel Souleles: Yeah, I mean for me too, there's another normative commitment which is very much in eclipse right now within anthropology, which is anthropology as a generalizing science and like, anthropology is something that builds theory. Anthropology that like there is value to its inquiry, even if it doesn't do the recuperative work of exposing suffering. And you know the –

Elizabeth Ferry: Right?

Daniel Souleles: The politically aggressive work of exposing elites that, for me at least, is also a big part of what I do and how I think about kind of the anthropological archive and comparative theory building.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, and for me too. I think it's like not only that it's, I mean, to some extent it's in decline. But I also think it's like there but not acknowledged which is worse.

Daniel Souleles: Yeah, absolutely. Which is so hard to work with, yeah, and that's why it's, so much anthropological work is like just rediscovering itself like, it's all, it's a constant Big Bang. But like, I think one of the things that goes on with anthropology is that there's this idea that it's supposed to be one normative project, and that's kind of how the politics of the
discipline plays out and so if you don't fit with what the one normative project is supposed to be, all the assumptions about how professional practice works, all the assumption about methods, all the assumption about ethics, all the assumptions about, you know, what counts as good research and how you get jobs and all that kind of stuff it, like, it's very difficult to engage with and that, to my mind, is kind of unhealthy.

Elizabeth Ferry: Although not new, I would say that's a, that's been a problem from the very beginning of the discipline, yeah?

Daniel Souleles: I think there's another edge of it to where it's like even if you screw up the rapport with like, one person or one set of people for whatever reason you know, I don't know, we could imagine all sorts of things, you're not going to be spending the next two years with them. And so, you can try again with someone else.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, right, you're not going to have one of those stories like you read in ethnographies where, like, you offend the village person.

Daniel Souleles: Yeah, and you spend seven months trying to figure out what your kinship term means, and then you finally –

Elizabeth Ferry: Like what –

Daniel Souleles: Figure it out.

Elizabeth Ferry: What did I do in that first week? Right?

Daniel Souleles: Oh, I sneezed in the ritual hut!

Elizabeth Ferry: So Recall this Book is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. It's affiliated with Public Books and is recorded with the help of the Media Lab of the Brandeis Library. Our music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy called Fly Away. Sound editing is by Naomi
Cohen and production assistance, including website design and social media is done by Miranda Peery. We appreciate the support of the Mandel Center for the Humanities at Brandeis, University Librarian Matthew Sheehy and Dean Dorothy Hobson. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms and suggestions for future episodes and you can email us directly or contact us via social media and our website. Finally, if you enjoy today's show, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. You may be interested in checking out past episodes, especially Christine de Sands on making money, Peter Brown on wealth and charity in early Christianity (another monastery connection) and our series on the so-called Brahmin Left. And please stay tuned in our next season for episodes produced in partnership with the podcast Novel Dialogue and more. So, thank you all for listening and we'll see you next time.