Received: 1 August 2022 | Accepted: 31 August 2022
DOI: 10.1111/aman.13783

OBITUARY

AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST

Paul Rabinow (1944–2021)

Paul Rabinow during his Blaise Pascal professorship at the Ecole Normale Sup érieure, rue d.Ulm, Paris. (Photograph by Saâd A. Tazi)

"Onward" was how Paul Rabinow signed many of his emails to students and colleagues. When friends reached out to him during the last years of his life, in which he underwent intermittent cancer treatments, to ask how he was doing, he replied that rumors of his impending death were greatly exaggerated. He kept going, wrote a new book almost annually, and continued to reimagine anthropology despite his growing alienation from the actually existing discipline.

As one of the premier anthropologists of his generation, Rabinow practiced anthropology from a pragmatic point of view. He didn't ask what nature makes of human beings but what they make of themselves. The point of Rabinow's anthropology was not just to interpret life differently but to assemble new ethical designs in response to some of its more urgent problems. From his first fieldwork in Morocco to his last books that looked to literature and the arts for ways out of his discipline's stubborn impasses (Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2019), Rabinow's anthropological inquiries always served the ethical project of self-fashioning. He assembled and experimented with different attitudes that humans could adopt in response to the world today.

Rabinow was born in Florida in 1944 and raised in New York City. He attended the University of Chicago, from which he received both his undergraduate degree and later a doctorate degree in anthropology. In 1978, Rabinow joined the anthropology department at the University of California, Berkeley, where he remained for his entire career, aside from a number of visiting appointments.

Early on in his years at Berkeley, Rabinow collaborated with Hubert Dreyfus on the book *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). At the time, Foucault had taken up a visiting position at UC Berkeley. He proved a willing interlocutor (even contributing to the book's afterword) and friend. In the years that followed, Rabinow emerged as one of the foremost interpreters and discussants of Foucault's work, channeling Foucault into US anthropology and beyond. Among the works that reflect Rabinow's deep engagement with Foucault is the book *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Rabinow 1989). *French Modern* is a Foucauldian history of the present. As

 wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/aman © 2022 by the American Anthropological Association.

Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) observe, what characterizes a history of the present is "an unequivocal and unabashed contemporary orientation." History of the present "self-reflectively begins with a diagnosis of the current situation" (119). *French Modern* investigates the formation of French social modernity, focusing on urban planning. The book inaugurated a historically oriented anthropology of modernity.

For much of his career, Rabinow's thought remained committed to a key implication of analyses of the co-constitution of knowledge and power: that no researcher occupied a transcendental position from where they could adjudicate political conflicts. Thus, while many critical scholars took the insight that all knowledge was situated as a reason to accentuate their partiality, allying scholarship to activism, Rabinow read Foucault (1985, 1986) and Max Weber (1958) to find inspiration for a different ethic that could inform the conduct of a scholarly life. In this spirit, Rabinow adopted a phrase from Baudelaire—"You have no right to despise the present"—as a kind of motto, though at a symposium held in his honor on the occasion of his retirement, Rabinow reminded the audience that this held true even when the present is indeed despicable.

Since the 1990s, Rabinow had been conducting inquiry into the biosciences and biotechnology as especially potent sites for observing the contemporary linking of knowledge and power. He found interlocutors in these domains from whom he could learn about new conceptions of *anthropos* and emerging biotechnologies that were on the brink of transforming contemporary human life. Rabinow's work in this area places him among the founders of the anthropology of science. His books on genetics research and biotechnology include *Making PCR: A Story of Biotechnology* (Rabinow 1996b), *French DNA: Trouble in Purgatory* (Rabinow 1999), *A Machine to Make a Future: Biotech Chronicles* (Rabinow and Dan-Cohen 2004), and *Designing Human Practices: An Experiment with Synthetic Biology* (Rabinow and Bennett 2012). The last of these works was written while Rabinow headed the Human Practices division in a synthetic biology research center at UC Berkeley. It reflects on Rabinow and Bennett's attempts to rethink the role of the human sciences in relation to biological research and the resistance, and ultimately rejection, with which their efforts were met by their scientist and engineer collaborators. One notable dimension of Rabinow's anthropology of science, inherited from Max Weber, is its focus on the rationalities, practices, and ethics that animate the scientific life.

Meanwhile, in the late 1990s, Rabinow turned to what he called the anthropology of the contemporary as a way of moving past the focus on modernity. One element that distinguishes the contemporary, Rabinow observed, is that it lacks a grand historical *telos,* and therefore the new ceases to dominate simply by virtue of being new. Building on the notion of "assemblage," the anthropology of the contemporary tracks the often contingent coming together of old and new elements in response to definite problematizations (Rabinow 2003, 2008). In more general terms, the anthropology of the contemporary seeks to provide anthropologists interested in contemporary practices—be they genetics, the market, law, etc.—with tools to replace a residual set of ethnographic concepts and methods that was fitted to a different time and set of problems. Rabinow's anthropology was concerned with moving on (onward indeed!) and with the challenge of inventing and experimenting with concepts, venues, and forms that would permit one to do so. In this vein, in the last decade of his life, Rabinow coauthored a trilogy of books with his student, friend, and collaborator Anthony Stavrianakis on the logic and ethics of anthropological inquiry (Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2013, 2014, 2019).

Among its distinctive dimensions, Rabinow's writings explored the interpersonal tensions that characterized many of the spaces he navigated. For Rabinow, the workings of interpersonal discord and breakdown were intrinsic to the questions that drove him. He did not psychologize interpersonal strife in order to brush it aside. Rather, he approached it as part of the specific milieu he sought to conceptualize and understand. This inclination can already be observed in Rabinow's early work. For his dissertation research, Rabinow set off for the Middle Atlas mountains in 1968, a fieldwork stint that would lay the empirical groundwork for two books, one of which, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Rabinow 1977), remains one of his most widely read works. In *Reflections*, Rabinow refused the polite omissions that bolstered fieldwork's scientific credentials in order to reveal the often-conflictual power relations at the heart of the ethnographic encounter.

Rabinow's relationship with colleagues, mentors, and students were susceptible to some of the same "contestation[s] over meaning and respect, for the self and for others" that arose in his field encounters (Rabinow 2011, 42). Many of those who worked with him had become the recipients of the occasional angry email about one thing or another with which he took issue. Some tolerated these outbursts, while others didn't. In Rabinow's case, there was a method to the madness, or at least concept work to the unpleasantness. From Philip Fisher's (2002) *The Vehement Passions*, he had learned that asserting one's will in anger was not necessarily a form of failure that called for Christian forgiveness, Buddhist equanimity, or anger management therapy. Instead, there was a whole philosophical tradition from Plato and Aristotle onward that conceived of appropriate anger, or *thúmos*, as Rabinow (2008, 90–98) liked to say with the ancients, as a positive state—positive because as a response to perceived injustice anger is of both epistemic and ethical value. A lack of anger means that one fails to feel what is wrong about a situation; it may suggest an insufficient sense of self-worth, or subordination instead of ethical engagement. However, as with any virtue, there can be too much of a good thing: one shouldn't get outraged by trifles. The targets of Rabinow's eruptions will doubtless have their own views as to whether he always struck the right balance, but his spiritedness invariably conveyed a sense of seriousness and concern. He dismissed irony—which he found to be pervasive in US anthropology—in both its modernist and postmodernist guises, as resulting in negligence and indifference.

If anger could be both epistemic and ethical for Rabinow, so too could be *philia*, or friendship. Rabinow characterized friendship as "a primary site of thinking" (Rabinow 1996a, 14). He reminded his readers that friendship was understood to be an essential component of human flourishing among the ancient Greeks and Romans. In the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle holds that the highest form of friendship is the philosopher's *philia*: "Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good and alike in virtue; for those wish well alike to each other qua good, and they are good in themselves" (quoted in Rabinow 1996a, 14). Rabinow elaborated: "The best friendships require time and a long familiarity to develop and solidify. . . . Friendship is mutual, social, and quasi-public. It is ecstatic in that its practice draws one out and toward a friend. *Philia* primes the bond, the among

and the between." Rabinow lamented that friendship had been displaced as a site of thought and care, losing its "philosophic centrality," instead being enveloped in "therapeutic" value (15). Against this backdrop, Rabinow sought to cultivate friendship as a central site in his endeavors, thinking very much *with* others. Maybe it is because of the peculiar mixture of *thúmos* and *philia* that so many of his companions and collaborators let those episodes of irascibility pass, especially in his last days as they rushed to his bedside, returning some of the care that they had experienced from him over the years. Or perhaps it was because Rabinow had modeled (through practice) for many of us an anthropology that is not merely a profession but a way of life.

During his final years, Rabinow sought to cultivate unconsolability as a virtue. He likely did not die satiated with life, as Max Weber had put it in "Science as a Vocation," a text that had shaped Rabinow's attitude toward life in the academy like no other. Weber (1958, 140) had written of modern "man" that "he catches only the most minute part of what the life of the spirit brings forth ever anew, and what he seizes is always something provisional and not definitive" and that "therefore death for him is a meaningless occurrence." Rabinow (1991, 63) mocked the pathos of Weber's account because it suggested a lost age when people had eventually reached the eve of their days, when life had given to them what it had to offer and no puzzles remained that they might have wished to solve. Whether or not there ever was such an age, its way of thinking and feeling was not Rabinow's. Conforming to the norms of an untroubled life would have been avoidance of thought, he believed. Instead, he turned his sadness into an ethical protest and adopted an ethos of recalcitrance and restiveness (Rabinow 2017; Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2019 200–202). When he died on April 6, 2021, at age seventy-six, one must imagine Rabinow unconsoled.

Talia Dan-Cohen[1]
Nicolas Langlitz[2]

[1] *Washington University in St. Louis*
[2] *The New School for Social Research*

Correspondence
Talia Dan-Cohen, Washington University in St. Louis.
Email: TDAN-COHEN@wustl.edu

REFERENCES CITED

Dreyfus, Hubert, and Paul Rabinow. 1983. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Fisher, Philip. 2002. *The Vehement Passions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Foucault, Michel. 1985. *The History of Sexuality Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*. New York: Vintage Books.
Foucault, Michel. 1986. *The History of Sexuality Vol. 3: The Care of the Self*. New York: Vintage Books.
Rabinow, Paul. 1977. *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Rabinow, Paul. 1989. *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Rabinow, Paul. 1991. "For Hire: Resolutely Late Modern." In *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, edited by Richard Gabriel Fox, 59–72. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
Rabinow, Paul. 1996a. *Essays in the Anthropology of Modern Reasons*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Rabinow, Paul. 1996b. *Making PCR: A Story of Biotechnology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Rabinow, Paul. 1999. *French DNA: Troubles in Purgatory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Rabinow, Paul. 2003. *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Rabinow, Paul. 2008. *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Rabinow, Paul. 2011. *The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Rabinow, Paul. 2017. *Unconsolable Contemporary: Observing Gerhard Richter*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Rabinow, Paul, and Anthony Stavrianakis. 2013. *Demands of the Day: On the Logic of Anthropological Inquiry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Rabinow, Paul, and Anthony Stavrianakis. 2014. *Designs on the Contemporary: Anthropological Tests*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Rabinow, Paul, and Anthony Stavrianakis. 2019. *Inquiry After Modernism*. Oakland, CA: Wilsted & Taylor.
Rabinow, Paul, and Gaymon Bennett. 2012. *Designing Human Practices: An Experiment with Synthetic Biology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Rabinow, Paul, and Talia Dan-Cohen. 2004. *A Machine to Make a Future: Biotech Chronicles*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Weber, Max. 1958. "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 323–59. New York: Oxford University Press.