

A philosophy for our times

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In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to ensure harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together. Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace. Thus defined, cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life.

(UNESCO, 2001)

This statement from the UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity, signed in 2001, reads like a strong recommendation for anthropological knowledge and insight in greater society. In this short article, I will confirm that the UNESCO is right on the mark here. Although their conceptualisation of culture is somewhat problematic (Eriksen 2001), the emphasis on coexistence, mutual learning and enrichment is important in today's world, and no other branch of knowledge is better positioned to describe human diversity, to provide tools helping us come to terms with it and to identify problem areas in a globalising world, than anthropology.

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Yet, as a discipline, we are punching below our weight. It sometimes feels as if others stole our clothes while we were out swimming. Subject areas where anthropologists should typically be important voices in the intellectual and political conversation, are dominated by others: sociologists are the recognised experts on racism and social exclusion, cultural studies scholars have cornered the market of hybridity and cultural dynamics, and debates about human nature and world history are dominated by yet others. Although anthropologists contribute to all these areas (and, naturally, many others), we generally fail to make a major impact outside the seminar room. Tellingly, the world's most famous "anthropologist" at the moment is a physiologist and ornithologist, who has never taken a course in anthropology. I am, of course, thinking of Jared Diamond. The conspicuous absence of anthropologists and anthropological perspectives from the worlds of public discourse and policy is partly our own fault, for not being sufficiently skillful communicators, but there are other forces at play as well. First, in the current neoliberal climate, research which does not aim to solve practical problems is generally not prioritised, and with a few exception such as ERC grants, anthropological projects are seriously underrepresented in Horizon 2020. Secondly, the growth, or reinforcement, of divisive identity politics in contemporary Europe is antithetical and inimical to the kind of knowledge typically produced by anthropologists.

We should not content ourselves merely with blaming the outside world and its deficiencies. Anthropologists have far too easily withdrawn into either detailed, knotty and highly localised ethnography, or – the opposite option – abstract theory, making it difficult to take part in the broader intellectual debates. We have also not promoted our discipline efficiently enough in relation to policy-makers, governments and funding agencies. This is why the initiative from the Italian associations of anthropology to focus on the place of anthropology in schools is an important and promising one, and one which EASA wholeheartedly supports.

Yet it must be conceded that the production and dissemination of anthropological knowledge is currently met with strong resistance, indeed hostility, in many quarters. This was not always the case. In my native Norway, anthropology was spectacularly successful in the public sphere in the 1990s. Whereas, a couple of decades earlier, sociology and criminology had offered some keys to an improved understanding of the world through their emphasis on power, class and gender, the 1990s seemed uniquely suited for the anthropological perspective. It was a time of destabilised boundaries, intensified globalisation and a strong optimism concerning the benefits of a more open world. We anthropologists believed that we were in a privileged position to shed light on the intercultural encounters of globalisation, the dilem-

mas of migration and many other issues, frequently by using surprising comparisons, as when we pointed out the parallels between the Balkan wars and conflicts in stateless African societies.

By 2016, there is less generosity and a reduced interest in the anthropological perspective in Norway, as elsewhere. Today, opinion leaders and politicians rarely defend cultural diversity as an asset and a resource. When they speak about «integration», they usually refer to assimilation. It was a telling moment when Merkel, Sarkozy and Cameron almost simultaneously declared that «multiculturalism had failed» (without, incidentally, specifying what they meant).

A more serious, but not unrelated, tendency is the challenges now faced by anthropology in many countries. As President of EASA, I have, in the last year, written many letters of support and solidarity to sister organisations, courts of law and political authorities in different countries to signal concern over worrying tendencies. In Orban's Hungary, it was declared that the MA programme in anthropology was to be closed down – tellingly around the same time that Hungary built a fence along the Croatian border. In Great Britain, the board of education decided to close down anthropology as an «A» Level subject, few years after its introduction. In Japan, anthropology may be about to disappear from several universities.

In other countries, the situation is even more serious. Of course, many academics are affected by the authoritarian turn in Turkey, but anthropologists – who often do research on Kurds, LGBT groups and other minorities – are more vulnerable than most. In Brazil, the national association of anthropology (ABA), which has several thousand members, has been subject of harassment and threats from the current government, which has attained power through a low-intensity *coup-d'état*. Many Brazilian anthropologists work with indigenous peoples and other vulnerable groups, and this makes them potential critics of current plans to achieve economic development through mining, ranching and large-scale plantation agriculture. Finally, just before the summer 2016, news reached EASA that our colleague Homa Hoodfar, who works in Canada and writes about gender and religion in Iran, had been detained by the authorities while she was visiting family in the country.

There is an implicit cultural critique in social anthropology (Marcus and Fischer 1986, Eriksen 2006), and it may easily be perceived as a subversive discipline critically addressing policies of development or national cohesion. Anthropologists give voice to people who would otherwise not have been heard, they question the taken-for-granted in culture; they simultaneously study and contribute to the destabilisation of boundaries. Anthropologists never tire of asking the seductively simple, but incredibly complex question, «What is the meaning of the word *we*?».

However, it is important not to forget that the word *critique* fundamentally refers to a thorough, non-judgmental and multifaceted investigation, as was the case in Kant's three critiques. Nobody would accuse Kant of being against pure reason just because he wrote *Critique of Pure Reason*. The cultural critique immanent in anthropology should therefore not be understood as a political positioning, but rather as a weighty contribution to the long conversation about what it means to be a human being.

Understanding the other, and the self, and the relationship between the other and the self – and, by implication, questioning the boundary between self and other – is never wrong. If we want to contribute to positive change in the world, or in our own community, knowledge and understanding of local life-worlds, ideas and values is actually necessary. As Marx and Engels put it, it is necessary to understand the world in order to change it. Understanding is not synonymous with defending; as Geertz (1983) famously said, you don't have to be one to know one.

As Fredrik Barth (1928–2016) expressed it, every society has to be understood in its own terms (Barth 1972). We humans are simultaneously similar and different, and in this shrinking world, knowledge about both dimensions is necessary. Global capitalism makes both resources and patterns of consumption comparable, while communication technology shrinks the world and creates conditions both for global dialogue and global misunderstandings. At the same time, in recent years we have witnessed an escalating growth of often aggressive forms of boundary-making and withdrawal. Social anthropology can function as a vaccine against intolerant fanaticism and exclusionary identity politics, from Islamism to right-wing nationalism.

If an anthropologist and an economist are asked to give a lecture each at a conference, the audience might respond by concluding that what the economist has to say is really important. The anthropologist, by contrast, is told that what she says is fascinating. Our task consists in showing that what is fascinating can also be important. Perhaps even more important than that which is merely “important” without being fascinating.

As a fundamental branch of knowledge about humanity and the world, social anthropology is crucial, especially in our day and age, when we increasingly experience that respect and humility towards that which is different and “exotic” is increasingly being replaced by hatred, condescension and arrogance. For these reasons, anthropological perspectives should be included in schools at all levels. Young persons must as early as possible be given the opportunity to learn about global inequality, historical differences and cultural variations which ought to be a source of enrichment and not a threat to

dreams of purity and boundaries. This kind of insight is just as important in the 21st century as the rudiments of a philosophical training was in the 20th century. Anthropology is a practical philosophy for our times, and it deserves a place in schools.

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