

*Anthropologia Incognita: Teaching and Learning Anthropology in Europe Today*¹

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During the last thirty years both the social sciences and humanities in many countries have experienced a huge increase in student numbers, often directly related to national policies aimed at enlarging access to higher education for the majority of a generation. Although this evolution seems globally positive, it has also caused some specific problems within those disciplines, such as anthropology, which until recently led only to academic careers. In most European countries anthropological teaching has been predominantly research-oriented, that is rather than 'knowledge-oriented' like disciplines taught in secondary education. In this paper, after having recalled some aspects of the teaching of anthropology since the 1950s, I would like to propose certain arguments for a discussion about the aims and means of teaching social sciences in general and anthropology in particular in the coming decades. Given the actual 'dis-ease' about this topic, this debate seems to be becoming more and more inevitable.

When one looks into the history of anthropology and especially the biographies of some of its (outstanding) personalities, the historians and bibliographers of this discipline generally mention the places and periods of fieldwork and those of teaching appointments. Both of these activities are considered as the normal occupations of a professional anthropologist and have therefore remained generally unquestioned. It was only in the 1960s, especially after the posthumous publication of Malinowski's personal diary (Malinowska, 1967), that quite suddenly 'the anthropologists in the field' (Jongmans, Gutkind, 1967) have entered the arena of debate and discussion.² Since then, the different forms of relations or partnership between anthropologists and the people they study have become an important item in anthropological literature, generally related to the questioning of the anthropologist as an author of ethnographic 'fictions' (Geertz, 1973).

But if, as a consequence of this, over the last twenty years some of the veils of mystery surrounding their fieldwork have been lifted by more and more anthropologists – although at the beginning with some reluctance and the use of pen names or, later, with humour and ribaldry (like Nigel Barley's 1983 best-seller, *Notes from a Mud Hut*) – the teaching activities of anthropologists still seem to belong to the dark side of the moon of professional practice. Apparently very few anthropologists have written about their own teaching activities, while it is more common in (auto)biographic texts or interviews to recall the lectures of one's – generally admired – teachers and masters rather than one's own teaching practices. In some cases, students have edited their notes, such as *Le manuel d'ethnographie* by Marcel Mauss (1974/1967), edited by Denise Paulme, while in others anthropologists have published abstracts of their lectures, like the *Paroles données* by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1984). But the teacher-student relation as such hardly seem

explicitly present in these types of documents.³ More generally of course, lectures often serve as draft versions of later publications and are therefore considered as texts 'in progress', doomed to vanish in successive updates.⁴

'Small was beautiful'

One of the main reasons why 'talking anthropology' has been so little discussed, at least in Europe, appears related to the fact that *it has for a long time concerned only very few individuals*. In many countries until the 1960s only a few chairs of anthropology existed, generally located within more global faculty departments of social sciences or humanities, with only very few graduate students specialising each year in anthropology.⁵ Here the teaching of anthropology was done in front of groups of hardly more than five to ten interested students meeting in small rooms (often situated directly within ethnographic collections gathered by staff-members). Until the late 1960s close personal relations between the teaching anthropologist and 'his or her' students seem to have been the rule in most European countries and, as former student biographies often recall, informal 'prolongation' of classes in café's or even at the teacher's home was quite common. Nor was it even rare for anthropologists to take some of their students with them during their stays in the field in order to do research on neighbouring peoples or related topics. In some cases the close relations between teachers and students have in this way been extended to members of the studied groups, for example with Marcel Griaule, his students and the Dogon of West Africa, or with Fredrik Barth's student research teams working together during intensive fieldwork periods in various regions around the world. Here teaching, learning and researching developed in an atmosphere of close interpersonal relationship made possible by the small numbers of individuals involved in the pursuit of a common goal: *to contribute to the increase of anthropological knowledge both by collecting (new) data and theorising about their meaning*. These historic aspects are of course well known to those who have been trained in 'the good old days' and even to later generations of students as they are generally part of the 'oral history' (or folklore) of local or national anthropological communities. One may summarise this period as the era of 'pre-industrial', craftsman-like anthropological teaching and learning based on personal, informal relations between teachers and students.

Democratisation and social critique

However, since the end of the 1960s anthropology, as well as neighbouring social sciences and humanities, have been caught up by the ever growing swell of more democratic access to academic studies for each new generation of university students: a characteristic true to most countries of (continental) Europe. As in those times social sciences and humanities played a central role in the critique of consumer oriented capitalism, university departments of sociology, philosophy, psychology and anthropology rapidly became 'fashionable places' for a new generation of students (often without any academic background, but from ascending social *milieux*) to express their generational revolt. While (Marxist-inspired) sociology criticised capitalist society from within, anthropology as the

'discipline of other places and other cultures' was often considered as allowing one to 'de-centre' one's Eurocentric viewpoints and to pay attention to those groups or societies oppressed elsewhere by (neo)colonial capitalism. Studying these disciplines was perceived as a symbolic way to contribute to the fall of Western bourgeois consumer society which was at the same time paradoxically permitting, by the wealth it generated, a much broader access to university.

At first this increase in the numbers of students resulted, as long as the Western economic situation was flourishing, in the enlargement of teaching staffs and the construction of new facilities. But when the economic crises of the mid-1970s hit, academic budgets started to tighten. Although the numbers of students continued everywhere to increase annually, staff numbers were rarely increased, classrooms became more and more overcrowded, while money for student projects as well as for staff-members' research became harder and harder to find.

The rise of unemployment also gradually changed student motivations and goals when choosing to study anthropology. After a 'critique-of-bourgeois-society' period, the anthropology students of the 'no-future' generation of the 1980s – disenchanted and more individualistic – often started to learn anthropology out of personal interest for cultural differences but without either professional ambitions or political ideals. For many of them the study of anthropology simply seemed a not unpleasant 'parking place'⁶ in a society apparently not waiting to welcome them with any 'real' jobs⁷. Many of the students of this period seem to have used their academic years to gain some social autonomy rather than to become anthropologists. In France, for example, between 1985 and 1995 around sixty per cent of first-year students left university without a diploma after two or three years attendance. At the same time teaching anthropologists were often getting more and more frustrated by bureaucratic assessment and the management of large populations of hardly motivated young people. In many parts of continental Europe individual monitoring of student research, as in the earlier periods of anthropology, became gradually a less and less feasible practice.

Between elitism and student industry

In the 1980s national or local administrations more or less inspired by British (Thatcher) and American (Reagan) economic views, started in most European countries to investigate more and more keenly the spending of public money, which often resulted in an additional difficulties for the funding of both anthropological teaching and research. This was often something quite new to academics who, as civil servants, had rarely before been directly confronted with demands for 'efficient management'. Many have found themselves faced with student per staff-member ratio's (pushing departments to develop undergraduate courses), quantitative statistics about the 'employability rates' of their graduates, etc.

But not withstanding all these indicators and statistics showing very little professional career-perspectives in anthropology, thousands of students every year kept entering anthropology departments in most European countries. In this situation, *the classroom was becoming a crucial place of encounter of various ambitions present in our contemporary societies and as such, often an (involuntary) sites of 'participant observation' of Western*

urban *rites de passage*. It is still a little early to see how these new 'classroom situations' will affect not only the teaching of anthropology in Europe but also its practice as an academic discipline, but they are surely introducing profound and durable changes.

Globally, several ways of dealing with this unprecedented situation in the history of European anthropology can be distinguished, which are not necessarily exclusive one from another. According to local academic traditions, but also following sometimes personal initiatives of staff-members, anthropology departments have sought to adapt and to adjust their programmes of teaching and research to the 'industrialization' of academic studies. Some departments, which may here be qualified as 'conservative', have tried to preserve a small-scale dimension by restricting access with the help (when possible) of bureaucratic regulations such as *numerus clausus*, or by shifting anthropology courses to the graduate or even the doctoral level.⁸ Very selective assessment criteria combined with the necessity of personal financial resources to undertake fieldwork are also sometimes used to keep the successful pursuit of anthropology studies limited to only a small number of candidates.

This kind of academic elitism has encountered in many countries growing pressure from university management, forcing in various ways the anthropology departments to accept more students, generally without much compensation in terms of staff increase or material improvements. This has led to the development of a dichotomy in many curricula, with on the one hand secondary school-like programmes teaching basic anthropological concepts illustrated with ethnographic documents in front of large, non-specialist audiences of undergraduates, and on the other hand specialized, research orientated, fieldwork-based training in anthropological theory and practice. By developing these types of courses for non-specialists, anthropology departments have generally been able to maintain or even increase their staff during the last two decades, while at the same time classical training was perpetuated at graduate and doctoral level without much change or innovation, which often meant an exclusively extra-European conception of research interests. But as university management has also started to assess graduate and even sometimes doctoral studies on quantitative criteria, the qualitative debasement is affecting these in very similar ways.⁹

Between ivory tower pleasures and real world jobs

But in other cases, anthropology departments or some of their staff-members have elaborated more 'client-orientated' (that is to say, student-orientated) policies, and tried to develop new contents of teaching and learning in order to improve the 'employability' of their students outside academic circles. Generally this meant for many European anthropologists – and especially for those trained in the 1960s – quite a mental revolution. In contrast to American anthropologists who have been involved, with ups and downs, in non-academic projects since the 1930s, most European anthropologists until recently have associated any form of applied anthropology with their country's colonial past, and as such have considered it as a rather blameworthy activity, even as a heresy quite simply unacceptable to academic standards of independence.

One of the central topics in these debates to adapt and reform (or not . . .) the ways in which anthropology should be taught and learnt in an era of industrial student

processing, seems to be related to different conceptions of the *ethics of responsibility*. Some consider it as a student's fundamental right (in our wealthy societies) to be free in their choice to study 'classical' anthropology even if there are very few possibilities to get a job afterwards (at least as an anthropologist). Others defend the point of view that (public) money 'invested' in teaching students should enable them to find jobs according to their qualifications outside the university in what is sometimes even called the 'real world'. According to this second opinion, it is part of the teaching anthropologists' responsibility to offer programs which would enable students to find jobs, even if this implies taking some liberties with the classical canon.

This second standpoint necessitates of course the exploration of new fields of application of anthropological expertise, such as intercultural communication, development studies, cultural heritage preservation, ethno-management of human resources, etc. As these kinds of innovative exploration generally demand an important personal investment, not all teaching anthropologists seem able or willing to engage themselves and their students in the rethinking of curricula. One observes that this topic has often become a source of conflict among staff-members, especially in those contexts where anthropologists are mainly assessed on research and publication criteria. Inventing new content for teaching programs frequently turns out to be, if not an act of faith, at least one of little recognised abnegation.

Redefining the disciplinary expertise

Once off the secure tracks of classical anthropology topics defined generations ago by the founding fathers, or in more recent professional (theoretical) discussions, one of the first problems encountered by the 'innovative' anthropology teacher concerns their specificity or identity in a professional landscape already invested by practitioners of cultural studies, communication sciences, (social) psychology, ethnomethodology, social geography, human resource management, museum curators, development specialists, social workers, etc.

Before even starting the development of new orientations in teaching, a serious updating of anthropology's self-definitions seems inevitable, especially after more than a decade of (postmodern) deconstruction of anthropological knowledge. 'What is or could be anthropology's specificity or identity as a corpus of knowledge and skills able to be used in order to earn a living outside the university?' seems the primordial question to answer before any employment-orientated curriculum development.

Here teaching anthropologists also find themselves more and more forced into some '*grand écart*' posture between the discussions going on in scientific journals and congresses on one hand, and the grassroot concerns about the future 'employability' of the majority of the students they daily meet on the other.

In contrast to the 1960s and even 1970s, today a huge majority of students seems (very) little interested in the theoretical discussions which continue to dominate professional journals and books, while in contrast to American cultural anthropology, European (social) anthropology seems to have little 'practice grounded' credibility to offer in regard to contemporary public questioning about cultural diversity, immigration, integration, national or regional specificity, racism, etc. in our own societies. This frequently leads to

mutual misunderstanding and frustration for both students and teachers as the terms of their 'mutual agreement' remain unclear or imprecise. Sometimes this misunderstanding can lead to open conflicts between a teacher and students who find 'Western' anthropological knowledge as unacceptable for them as students of non-Western descent¹⁰. Many teachers still prefer to act *as if* their audiences were to become academic anthropologists, while the majority of students are simply looking for a higher educational certificate to avoid entering the labour market at the bottom. It seems hard for many academics to admit they have become simple cogs in an educational machinery striving to prolong the learning period of younger generations.¹¹

The squaring of the circle

Of course the diversification of student audiences (and their often contradictory expectations) makes the innovation of the curricula in one direction or the other more complex, especially in small departments. For example, one of the characteristics of most contemporary anthropology classes is the mingling of 'young' students coming directly out of secondary education with mature students already engaged in some professional career who are looking for some complementary knowledge, as well as 'senior' students studying anthropology (or something else . . .) out of strictly personal interest. Trying to respond to everyone's expectations is, beyond the classical canon, like trying to square the circle.

Sometimes some anthropologists, while teaching anthropology in our post-industrial society, even consider themselves simply as the more or less consenting entertainers of people who, for one reason or another, have time to learn something about other peoples generally less (materially) favoured than themselves. This is not entirely new as, for example, in the 1920s and 1930s the lectures by Marcel Mauss and other anthropologists attracted mixed audiences of artists and intellectuals (Fournier, 1994: 590–619). Today, if learning anthropology is rarely the shortest way to a well paid job, it still seems for many students to provide a suitable status which allows them to be at the university and so to enjoy at least some social consideration in contrast with those forced to stay home or to accept 'Mc-jobs'.

The art of compromising

Teaching anthropologists¹² today find themselves torn between various, often contradictory, contingencies which they are only partially able to control. If apparently their task is to do research and to lecture, their 'unofficial' position is much more ambiguous and therefore hazardous. For those very few students who really want to become professional anthropologists, they are still an initiator into theoretical questioning and a guide into the methods and skills of ethnography. As a publicly or even privately funded social scientist he or she is asked to have a regular scientific activity of research and publication. As a university teacher they are urged to contribute to the rise of the general educational level of the new generations in their country. As an individual anthropologist they have specific centers of scientific interest, generally related with particular areas or (ethnic) groups.

And finally as a simple person an anthropologist has a private life made up of every day relations and necessities, hobbies, political opinions, etc.

In contrast to many other jobs which allow more or less clear separation between the professional and private spheres, one of the characteristics of the teaching anthropologist seems the inextricable *mélange* of all the above mentioned aspects. The necessity to constantly elaborate personally acceptable compromises between them, combined with the professional skills of observing and questioning every day life, seem to influence directly the choices concerning one's lecturing. Some prefer to invest most of their time in personal research and publishing, and accept only to teach the classical canon or topics directly related to their own research. Others, on the contrary, consider the teaching of anthropological knowledge and methodology to be an important aspect of their professional activity as researcher, and are therefore willing to spend much more time in the elaboration of student-orientated programs and tutoring student research. These personal options may vary of course during everyone's career.

Although all of these aspects are more-or-less known among teaching anthropologists, it seems important, in a discussion about the possible future of teaching and learning anthropology, to take them more seriously than before into account as an integral part of the debate about the place and role of anthropology in the academic landscape and beyond. The era of small-scale diffusion of an anthropological canon seems to belong to a 'disappearing world', which, especially as an ethnographer, one may regret. If anthropology as a scientific discipline (among others . . .) is to survive, its practitioners' reproductive aptitudes are seriously challenged by an academic evolution towards more democratic accessibility, as well as by newly formed (and therefore perhaps better adapted) 'species' (disciplines) in the contemporary world of higher education. General teaching of undergraduates has emerged more and more as the main criterion for evaluation (and funding) by the bureaucrats managing modern universities, while labour-market orientated capacities are increasingly requested by graduates.¹³ The teaching anthropologist is more and more in the position of one of the guiding participants of a newly established *rites de passage* allowing some youngsters in our society to enter the world of adults. The initiation into some of anthropology's 'secrets' about living in socially and culturally structured groups during a liminal period spend at the university, has become apparently accepted as such: a transitional state. After having discovered and described samples of Van Genep's famous concept all over the world, teaching anthropologists find themselves metamorphosed by it as a consequence of some mysterious contamination or bewitchment. But being a 'liminal' person generally fits well with the professional anthropologist's character.

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Notes

1. This paper has been written out of personal experience (in the Netherlands and in France) as a student in the 1970s and as an anthropology teacher since the mid-1980s. It is not only based on personal observation and practice but also on more systematic research as part of a survey of the situation of European anthropology in various countries, undertaken at the request of the French Ministry of Culture in 1990–1993. Meant as a *papier d'humeur*, the bibliographic apparatus has intentionally been kept light.

2. Earlier autobiographic accounts, such as, among others, Bateson's *Naven* (1936) or Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes tropiques* (1956) seem only to have encountered curiosity or even an embarrassed silence by other anthropologists, as James Clifford recalls (1986: 13–14).
3. An exception may be the beginning of Lévi-Strauss's text 'Structuralism and Ecology' (originally published in *Barnard Alumnae*, Spring 1972: 6–14, and republished in Lévi-Strauss, 1983: 143–167), where he recalls his first lecture at Barnard College (N.Y.) in front of an audience of female students who were knitting in stead of taking notes.
4. Most of the introductory readers or manuals in anthropology seem to be the offspring of undergraduate teaching, although this is generally not explicitly mentioned.
5. This small scale aspects clearly appear when institutes publish volumes at the occasion of the anniversary of their founding decades earlier, as for example in Leiden in the Netherlands (Claessen, Vermeulen, 1997).
6. Sometimes cynically labelled as 'Studentengarten', in reference to 'Kindergarten'.
7. Instead of so-called 'Mcjobs', defined by Douglas Coupland in his emblematic best-seller *Generation X* (1991: 5) as 'A low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one'.
8. For example in France at the École des Hautes Études in Paris, Marseille or Toulouse.
9. Teaching anthropologists perceive this student increase metaphorically in terms of 'waves' or 'tides' while examination standards are perceived as 'locks' or 'barriers' they are more and more often too tired to maintain.
10. As Nadia Lovell (1999: 12) writes in her very interesting classroom account: 'Among other causes, conflicts and antagonisms [between her and some students of non-British origin] can be attributed to the fact that students often perceive academics as inherently embroiled in the wider political context which has aroused their frustration, and view universities as an extension of essentially racist social institutions.'
11. Students as well as the pre-retired are not included in unemployment statistics.
12. A status which concerns almost every anthropologist in Europe except for a privileged and rare few who are exclusively doing research.
13. Only doctoral students still seem to accept the strictly individual pleasures of doing anthropology just for the fun of it.

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Thomas K. Schippers, born in the Netherlands in 1954, has actually a senior teaching position in anthropology at the Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis, France. He studied in Aix en Provence

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Some publications:

- 1986 *Temps vécus, temps perçus. Etude ethnologique des cycles agropastoraux en Provence intérieure*, Editions du C.N.R.S., Paris.
- 1991 Regards ethnologiques sur l'Europe, *Terrain*, 17, pp. 146–152.
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