

Why anthropology matters

Prague, October 15, 2015

This statement was written by the Executive Committee of the European Association of Social Anthropologists following the Association's meeting and conference in Prague on October 14–15, 2015. The conference, which brought together more than 50 anthropologists from 17 different countries, focused on discussing the ways in which the discipline of cultural and social anthropology can make a difference in Europe today. The meeting, which took place in the shadows of the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe, was co-organized by the Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the Czech Association for Social Anthropology. It received financial support from the Czech Academy of Sciences' grant programme Strategy AV21, designed to support public sharing of scientific knowledge.

Anthropology is frequently described as the art of 'making the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar'. It has also been described as 'the most humanistic of the sciences and the most scientific of the humanities' (Eric Wolf). Anthropology can be defined as the comparative study of humans, their societies and their cultural worlds. It simultaneously explores human diversity and what it is that all human beings have in common.

For many years, social and cultural anthropology was associated with the study of 'remote places' and small-scale societies, many of them unfamiliar with literacy and not incorporated into the institutions of the state. Although the study of human diversity concerns all societies, from the smallest to the largest and from the simplest to the most complex, most anthropologists today recognize that all societies in the contemporary world are involved in processes of enormous complexity, such as migration, climate change, global economic crises and the transnational circulation of ideas. Just as European and American anthropologists of the early 20th century struggled to understand and describe 'the native's point of view' when they travelled to such then-remote parts of the world as Melanesia or Africa, contemporary anthropologists try to grasp their areas of inquiry as fully as possible wherever they conduct research, be it in their own backyard or in faraway locations. They then report on how the people they are studying perceive the world and acted upon it, still striving to understand 'the native's point of view', although the focus of their inquiry may now be consumption in a European city or ethnic politics in the Pacific.

Some of the questions that the first generations of anthropologists asked continue to concern today's generation, albeit in new ways. On a general level, anthropologists ask what it is to be a human being, how a society is put

together, and what the word ‘we’ means. Just as they did in the past, anthropologists explore the importance of kinship in contemporary societies and raise questions about power and politics, religion and world-views, and gender and social class, but today, they also study the impact of capitalism on small-scale societies and the quest for cultural survival among indigenous groups, just to mention a few areas of inquiry.

Although there are different theoretical schools, as well as many special interests both regionally and thematically, the craft of social and cultural anthropology consists in a toolbox which is shared by all who are trained in the discipline. Anthropology does not in itself profess to solve the problems facing humanity, but it gives its practitioners skills and knowledge that enable them to tackle complex questions in very competent and relevant ways. The key terms are *cultural relativism*, *ethnography*, *comparison* and *context*.

Cultural relativism

Anthropology does not entail judgement of other people’s values, nor do its practitioners rank societies on a scale from ‘underdeveloped’ to ‘developed’. This does not mean that anthropologists suspend all judgements about what people do; for example, few would condone violence or inequality, although it may well be perpetrated in the name of ‘culture’. Rather, a professional, or scientific, perspective represented in anthropology emphasizes the need to understand what humans do and how they interpret their own actions and world-views.

This approach, known as cultural relativism, is an essential methodological tool for studying local life-worlds on their own terms. This is the view that societies are qualitatively different from one another and have their own unique inner logic, and that it is therefore misleading to rank them on a scale. For example, one society may find itself at the bottom of a ladder with respect to literacy and annual income, but this ladder may turn out to be completely irrelevant if it turns out that members of this society have no interest in books and money. Within a cultural relativist framework, one cannot argue that a society with many cars is ‘better’ than one with fewer, or that the ratio of smartphones to the population is a useful indicator of quality of life.

Cultural relativism is indispensable in anthropological attempts to understand societies in neutral terms. It is not an ethical principle, but a methodological tool. It is perfectly possible to understand other people on their own terms without sharing their outlook and condoning what they do. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz stated, ‘you don’t have to be one to know one’.

The power of ethnography

A second important tool in anthropological research is ethnography, or fieldwork, as the main form of data collection. Ethnographic fieldwork is neither

capital-intensive nor labour-intensive – it is inexpensive and, in the field, anthropologists spend much of their time apparently doing nothing – but instead, it is very *time-intensive*. Anthropologists typically spend a year or more in the field. This is necessary because the aim of the ethnographic method is to develop sound knowledge and a proper understanding of a sociocultural world, and for this to be possible, they must learn the local language and take part in as many local activities as they can.

Unlike qualitative sociology, which is typically based on intensive interviews, anthropologists do not see interviewing as a main method, although it forms part of their toolbox. Rather, they collect data through *participant observation*, during which the anthropologist simply spends time with people, talks with them, sometimes asks questions, and learns the local ways of doing things as thoroughly as possible. Anthropologists use people to study other people. The method demands that the researcher gets to know people on a personal level, meets them repeatedly and, if possible, lives with them during fieldwork. For this reason, ethnographic data are of very high quality, although they often need to be supplemented by other kinds of data, such as quantitative or historical data, as the number of people whose lives anthropologists study through participant observation is necessarily limited.

The ethnographic method enables anthropologists to discover aspects of local worlds that are inaccessible to researchers who use other methods. For example, anthropologists have studied the world-views of European neo-Nazis, the functioning of the informal economy in African markets, and the reasons why people in Norway throw away more food than they are willing to admit. By combining direct observation, participation and conversation in their in-depth ethnographic methods, anthropologists are able to provide more detailed and nuanced descriptions of such (and other) phenomena than other researchers. This is one of the reasons why ethnographic research is so time-consuming: Anthropologists need to build trust with the people they try to understand, who will then, consciously or not, reveal aspects of their lives that they would not speak about to a journalist or a social scientist with a questionnaire, for example.

The challenge of comparison

New insights into the human condition and new theoretical developments in anthropology often grow out of comparison, that is the systematic search for differences and similarities between social and cultural worlds. Although comparison is demanding, difficult and sometimes theoretically problematic, anthropologists always compare, whether explicitly or implicitly. By using general terms such as kinship, gender, inequality, household, ethnicity and religion, anthropologists tacitly assume that these categories have comparable meanings in different societies, yet they rarely mean exactly the same thing.

Looking for similarities and differences between social and cultural worlds, anthropologists can develop general insights into the nature of society and human existence.

Comparison has the additional quality of stimulating the intellectual and moral imagination. A detailed, compelling study of a society where there is gender equality, ecological sustainability and little or no violence is interesting in its own right, but it can also serve as an inspiration for policy and reform in other societies. By raising fundamental questions in a neutral, detached way, basic research can sometimes prove to be more useful in tackling the problems that the world faces than applied research. When anthropologists study peaceful, ethnically complex societies, they offer models for coexistence which can be made relevant for policy and practice elsewhere. They often come up with unexpected insights such as, for example, the fact that the Internet can strengthen family ties (rather than isolate people), that religious participation helps immigrants to integrate into European societies (rather than divide them), and that peasants are more economically rational than plantation owners (rather than being hopelessly traditional).

The main objective of comparison is not to rank societies on a ladder of development, human rights or environmental sustainability. This does not mean that anthropological knowledge is irrelevant for attempts to solve problems of this kind – on the contrary, the neutral, cool-headed method of anthropological comparison produces knowledge that can be used as a reliable foundation on which to build policy.

That which cannot be measured

Anthropologists carry out fieldwork, make comparisons and do so in a spirit of cultural relativism, but all along they are concerned with context, relationships and connections. The smallest unit that anthropologists study is not the isolated individual, but the relationship between two people. Culture is what makes communication possible; it is thus activated between minds, not inside them, and society is a web of relationships. To a great extent, we are constituted by our relationships with others, which produce us and give us sustenance and which confirm or challenge our values and opinions. This is why we have to study and engage with human beings in their full social context. In order to understand people, anthropologists follow them around in a variety of situations and, as they often point out, it is not sufficient to listen to what people say. We also have to observe what they do, and to analyse the wider implications of their actions.

Because of the fine-grained methodology they employ, anthropologists are also capable of making the invisible visible – be it voices which are otherwise not heard or informal networks between high-status people. In fact, one writer who predicted the financial crisis long before it took place was Gillian Tett,

a journalist who, thanks to her training in anthropology, understood what the financial elite were actually doing, not just what they told the public.

There is often a strong temptation to simplify complex issues, not least in an information society. In knowledge production and dissemination, clarity and lucidity are virtues, but as Einstein once said, 'Make it as simple as possible. But not simpler.' Accordingly, anthropologists resist simplistic accounts of human nature and accept that complex realities tend to have complex causes. For anthropologists, some of the most important things in life, culture and society are those that cannot be measured. This does not mean that they do not exist. Few would doubt the existential value of love, the social importance of trust, or the power of Dostoyevsky's novels; yet, none of this can be counted and measured. To understand human worlds, qualitative research and interpretation are necessary.

The need for anthropology

The kind of knowledge anthropology teaches is invaluable, not least in our turbulent, globalized age, in which people of different backgrounds come into contact with each other in unprecedented ways and in a multitude of settings, from tourism and trade to migration and organizational work.

Unlike training in engineering or psychology, an education in anthropology is not vocational. There are few readymade niches for anthropologists in the labour market other than in teaching and research in universities and research centres. As a result most anthropologists in Europe work in a multitude of professions in the public and private sectors, where they implement that specific skills and knowledge that anthropology has taught them, which are much sought after by employers: the ability to understand complexity, an awareness of diversity, intellectual flexibility, and so on. Anthropologists work as journalists, development workers, civil servants, consultants, information officers; they are employed in museums, advertising agencies, corporations and NGOs.

There are several reasons why anthropological knowledge can help to make sense of the contemporary world.

First, contact between culturally different groups has increased enormously in our time. For the global middle classes, long-distance travelling has become more common, safer and cheaper than it was in earlier times. In the 19th century, only a small proportion of the Western populations travelled to other countries (when they did, it was usually on a one-way ticket), and as late as the 1950s, even fairly affluent Westerners rarely went on overseas holidays. In recent decades, these patterns have changed. The flows of people who move temporarily between countries have expanded dramatically and have led to intensified contact: Businesspeople, development workers and tourists travel from rich to poor countries. Many more Westerners visit 'exotic' places today than a generation or two ago.

At the same time as people from affluent countries visit other parts of the world in growing numbers and under new circumstances, the opposite movement is also taking place, though often not for the same reasons. Largely because of the substantial differences in standards of living and life opportunities between rich and poor countries, millions of people from non-Western countries have settled in Europe, North America and other wealthy parts of the world. These movements have introduced new ways of acting, being and thinking into Western lives. A generation ago, it might have been necessary for an inhabitant in a Western city to travel to the Indian subcontinent in order to savour the fragrances and sounds of South Asian cuisine and music. Pieces and fragments of the world's cultural variation can now be found in virtually any sizeable city on any continent. As a result, curiosity about others has been stimulated, and it has also become necessary, for political reasons, to understand what cultural variation entails. Contemporary Europe is today rocked by controversies over multiculturalism, such as religious minority rights, headscarves, language instruction in schools and calls for affirmative action to counter alleged ethnic discrimination in the labour market. These and many other topical issues testify to an urgent need to deal sensibly with cultural differences. The current refugee situation in Europe is also a reminder, if at times cruel and dramatic, of the increased connectedness of people and peoples, as well as being a reminder of the growing importance of anthropological knowledge.

The world is shrinking in other ways as well. For better and for worse, satellite television, cellphone networks and the internet have created conditions for instantaneous and friction-free communication. Distance is no longer a decisive hindrance for close contact and new, deterritorialized social networks or even 'virtual communities' have developed. At the same time, individuals have a larger palette of information to choose from than they previously did. The economy is also increasingly globally integrated. In the last decades, transnational companies have grown exponentially in number, size and economic importance. The capitalist mode of production and monetary economies in general, which were globally dominant throughout the 20th century, have become nearly universal in the 21st century. In politics as well, global issues increasingly dominate the agenda. Issues of war and peace, the environment and poverty are all of such a scope, and involve so many transnational linkages that they cannot be handled satisfactorily by single states alone. Pandemics and international terrorism are also transnational problems which can only be understood and addressed through international coordination. This ever tighter interweaving of formerly relatively separate sociocultural environments can lead to a growing recognition of the fact that we are all in the same boat: that humanity, divided as it is by class, culture, geography and opportunities, is fundamentally one.

Culture changes at a more rapid pace than ever before in our era, and this can be noticed nearly everywhere. In the West, the typical ways of life are certainly

being transformed. The stable nuclear family is no longer the only socially acceptable way of life. Youth culture and trends in fashion and music change so fast that older people have difficulties following their twists and turns; food habits are changing before our eyes, leading to greater diversity within many countries; secularism is rapidly changing the role of religion in society and vice versa; and media consumption is thoroughly transnational. These and other changes make it necessary to ask questions such as: ‘Who are we really?’, ‘What is our culture – and is it at all meaningful to speak of a “we” that “have” a “culture”?’, ‘What do we have in common with the people who used to live here 50 years ago, and what do we have in common with people who live in an entirely different place today?’, and ‘Is it still defensible to speak as if we primarily belong to nations, or are other forms of belonging equally valid or more important?’

Finally, recent decades have seen the rise of an unprecedented interest in cultural identity, which is increasingly seen as an asset. Many feel that the local uniqueness that they used to count on is being threatened by globalization, indirect colonialism and other forces from the outside. They often react by attempting to strengthen or at least preserve what they see as their unique culture. In many cases, minority organizations demand cultural rights on behalf of their constituency; in other cases, the state tries to slow down or prevent processes of change or outside influence through legislation. In yet other cases, as witnessed in many places today, dominant majorities try to assimilate or exclude nondominant minorities.

European cultural and intellectual identity is indebted to a long and deep history of European philosophy. In our day and age, the perspectives from anthropology are just as indispensable as those from philosophy. Anthropology can teach important lessons about the world and the global whirl of cultural mixing, contact and contestation – but it can also teach us about ourselves. Goethe once said that ‘he who speaks no foreign language knows nothing about his own’. And although anthropology is about ‘the other’, it is ultimately also about ‘the self’. For it can tell us that almost unimaginably different lives from our own are meaningful and valuable, that everything could have been different, that a different world is possible, and that even people who seem very different from you and me are, ultimately, like ourselves. Anthropology takes part in the long conversation about what it is to be human, and gives flesh and blood to these fundamental questions. It is a genuinely cosmopolitan discipline in that it does not privilege certain ways of life above others, but charts and compares the full range of solutions to the perennial human challenges. In this respect, anthropology is uniquely a knowledge for the 21st century, crucial in our attempts to come to terms with a globalized world, essential for building understanding and respect across real or imagined cultural divides, and it is not only the ‘most scientific of the humanities and the most humanistic of the sciences’, but also the most useful of the basic sciences.

