Has anthropology any future?

Anthropology has a future and a very pertinent role to play, if we are sensitive to and aware of the new developments in the fields of medicine, biology and ecology which are undergoing dramatic changes. Most definitely these fields will need an anthropological dimension to be added.

The natural history and diversity of Man remains the basis of anthropology, but it is time to reassess the training available to students today, in order to keep the discipline alive, growing and significant. Undoubtedly we must offer our students a broad, general basis of knowledge in the first years. Thereafter we must include biomedical disciplines such as anatomy, molecular biology, genetics, epidemiology, and other pertinent subjects, such as statistics, ecology, prehistory, etc.

With these "tools" the future student would be well equipped to introduce anthropological aspects into many fields. As European universities cannot provide all these disciplines at a single institution at a level equivalent to PhD studies, we must work towards a tradition of exchange, co-operation and joint projects and universally acknowledged academic degrees such as a Masters and Ph.D. The Erasmus Biology Programme has already achieved some results in this respect and is ready with a proposal of a European Masters Degree in anthropology.

The "tools" of modern science together with the more traditional training will enrich the discipline, but more importantly enable the anthropologist to address controversial and often frightening prospects left in the wake of for example gene technology and gene manipulation, in a competent and scientific manner.

Many societies have allowed anthropologists to study their populations in detail. We, on the other hand, have an obligation to ensure that the data we have acquired and accumulated are not misused by those who practise racist, eugenic or nationalistic ideals.

The ability to carry out these obligations lies to a great extent in a strong, dynamic and diverse organisation, such as an EAA which is open to renewal and willing to address future social and political issues. A fragmented EAA cannot cope with these. There must be room for all in our organisation, ranging from the traditional to the very specialised anthropologist.

If we achieve the necessary unity, we will be able to participate in the challenges that the technology of the 20th and 21st centuries imposes on the daily lives of all of us.

To err is characteristic of everyone but only idiots persevere in it (Cicero).

Introduction

What is anthropology? What is anthropology? Which definition to give to anthropology? I will not ask you to give an answer, in fact each of us knows what it means. Although, we would be perhaps surprised of the variability of answers.
In fact, the problem is not the definition of anthropology (1). This question is not significant:
given the broad interdisciplinary nature of physical anthropology, anthropologists have research
and teaching areas related to many facets of the discipline.

But ask the question “what is anthropology?” to people in the street. Most of the time, they
will ask you to repeat the word, because they do not understand it. Sometimes you will receive as
an answer “the study of societies of primitive people”, and even more seldom “the study of
skeletons”. Other topics are almost never cited. This is not really in favour of a science, which
would like to be the Science of Man, the synthesis of biological and human sciences.

Information is sometimes getting through in the press about fossil humans, about societies of
apes, but the history of human populations, the who is who of human variability, the way to define
a human being are questions which seem not of great public interest.

The science of human races

Too often we are still situated in the catalogue of the “old classical” science of races.

We cannot neglect our history and the message of some anthropologists to Hitler. “Die in der
Gesellschaft für Physische Anthropologie zusammengefassten deutschen Rassenforscher danken
anlässlich ihrer in Dresden stattfindenen 8. Tagung dem Führer, dass er dem Deutschen Volke
den Rassegedanken gegeben hat und damit eine der wichtigsten Grundlagen der deutschen Zukunft.
Stets wird sich die deutsche Rassenforschung ihrer Aufgabe bewusst sein, ihrem Führer zu folgen
und der deutschen Volksgemeinschaft zu dienen” (In: Verhandl. d. Ges. f. Phys. Anthropologie 8,
1937, S. 2 und 3)

Of course, we know this is the past and that it involved only very few anthropologists. But,
somewhere it is still present. “Weder das Eingehen auf die Ethologie und Soziobiologie, noch die
Entfaltung der Primatologie, noch das Entwickeln neuer Beweisführungen und Methoden in der
Paläanthropologie und Prähistorischen Anthropologie, noch die Entwicklung neuer Sichtweisen
in der Populationsgenetik haben das Fach hinreichend geprägt und die Öffentlichkeit in dem
Masse erreicht, um das Vorurteil vom “Knochenmessen” oder vom Betreiben einer almodischen
 “Rassenkunde” zu verdrängen. Nicht nur manche Kollegen aus der Biologie oder der Medizin
halten daran fest, sondern auch grosse und angesehene Nachschlagewerke konservieren unentwegt
die vermeintlichen Ergebnisse einer überholten und vielfach widerlegten Anschnauung. Dadurch
wird nicht nur das Ansehen des Faches “Anthropologie” und die Arbeit der in ganz anderen
Fragestellungen arbeitenden Anthropologinnen und Anthropologen geschädigt” (Preuschoft et
al., 1992)

“Das Gebrauch und Missbrauch anthropologischen Wissens im Nationalsozialismus wurde
nach 1945 im Wissenschaftsbereich tabuisiert.....Typologische Rassenkonzepte sind zwar in der
Anthropologie weitgehend obsolet, aber bis heute nicht völlig überwunden...” (Kattmann 1992)

We know also that this past has been unanimously rejected, in the first place by the German
anthropologists. But, it is still influencing some spirit. “Signale verweisen auf ein ausgeprägtes
Krisengefühl, ein Gefühl der Gefährdetheit und Rasslosigkeit in der damaligen Anthropologie... “
(Spiegel-Rössing et al., 1982). Preuschoft in 1972 was even more pessimistic, at least for German
anthropologists”... persons classified here as anthropologists are those who personally feel so
concerned that they cannot sleep at night if asked whether physical anthropology still has the right
to exist as an independent discipline.” It is probably not only by chance that in Sept. 1989 the
meeting of German anthropologists in Bremen was cancelled.

But, this spirit of hypersensitivity is still present outside of Germany too. For instance,