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


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 Anschauung. 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 tabusiert....Typologische Rassenkonzepte sind zwar in der Anthropologie weitgehend obsolet, aber bis heute nicht völlig überhunden...” (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 Ratslosigkeit 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, “Nature” published in 1993 a paper of A. Kuper (editor of Current Anthropology) titled “Race