For an Operative Definition of Anthropology in the European Universities

For some years the present document on the operative definition of anthropology and its subdisciplines has been circulating and has been discussed among members of the European Anthropological Association. The document is now available for consideration and use of the readers of the International Journal of Anthropology.

Amongst European anthropologists the term “anthropology” covers the entire complex of studies relating to the origin and the physical and socio-cultural evolution of humans as a zoological species. Other disciplines deal with specific aspects of humans and their works but only anthropology specifically studies the position of our species in Nature, its origins, its place among the mammals, the relationship between our species and other life forms and its relation to the environment. In other words, Anthropology is the only science or discipline which deals with our species in a specifically naturalistic way.

Recent Changes in Perspective

In recent years, anthropologists have studied the diverse characteristics of the human species from an evolutionary perspective, and have become particularly interested in the relationship between our species and the environment.

The methodological approaches adopted have been diverse, but the results indicate the possibility of a successful synthetic evolutionary interpretation.

In this new phase, anthropology also has to deal with new interpretations of primate evolution and the origin of Man.

With the advent of Darwinism and the synthetic theory of evolution in this century, the study of human origins acquired a concrete scientific basis by incorporating genetic theory into the traditional paleontological/morphological methodologies.

This new formulation has produced a constantly shifting model of the phylogenetic tree of *Homo sapiens* which is continuously modified as a result of a passionate dialectic among researchers concerning the origins and the evolution of Man. Currently, we are also witnessing a reevaluation of the study of primatology by anthropologists.

Primates constitute an essential reference point for our species. The ascertained biological kinship between humans and the other species of primates is the first indication that the study of the comparative biology of non-human primates can lead to important discoveries in
the field of human biology.

Moreover, the fact that Man is by far the most intellectually advanced product of biological evolution makes it necessary for us to learn how our evolution occurred.

In the evolutionary perspective the individual constitutes the fundamental biological unit. Nevertheless individuals do not have any value outside of their coexistence with other individuals of the same species, with whom they form aggregates or, as we prefer to say, populations. The study of individuals and of populations makes sense for the anthropologist only in an historical-ecological perspective. The relationship between human populations and the environments in which they live has been long neglected by Western culture.

Proposals for a definition of the contents of Anthropology as a University discipline

With this in mind we have attempted to promote a clearer definition of the areas of focus for contemporary anthropology and related disciplines.

The research perspectives of the anthropological sciences can be grouped into the following areas of specialisation:

a) Evolution and phylogeny: a clear understanding of the evolution and phylogeny of Man is a fundamental step towards comprehending the biology and behaviour of modern humans. Therefore the reconstruction of the history of our species is a priority for anthropologists.

b) The structure of modern human populations, including the genetic composition and historical demography.

c) Interaction between Man and environment. This field takes account of interactions with the physical environment (aspects of human ethology and sociobiology).

d) Human genetics. This subject deals with normal variation of hereditary characters (both in regard to individuals and to the variations of distribution in the different populations). Related areas include forensic studies, dermatoglyphics, immunological characters, paternity testing, etc.

c) Human biology. This field concerns the biology of human populations (not at the level of single individuals) and includes auxological, constitutional and geriatric aspects.

f) Human sociology. This subject should include research into the evolutionary foundations of human behaviour.

Starting from this basis, a group of European anthropologists has recently attempted to identify more precisely those disciplines included in anthropological science which should properly be incorporated in up-to-date anthropological curricula at universities. Their proposals form a basis for more detailed comment and discussion.

First of all, an introductory course of anthropology might be defined as follows:

"Anthropology studies Man from a scientific point of view, his origins and his biological variability in time and space including:

- the position of Man in the primate order
- human evolution documented by paleoanthropological and by biomolecular and genetic data
- the environmental, cultural and genetic factors involved in human evolution
- somatic, physiological, and biochemical variability in present human populations and their possible causes
- human adaptation related to environmental conditions
- applied anthropology in clinics, legal medicine, etc."