

Still naughty after all these years? Some thoughts on the value of bluntness

For the past six years, I have had the enormous privilege of welcoming 250 undergraduate students to anthropology. A staple of this first lecture is three interrelated points on how to become a good anthropologist: Seek to be curious rather than clever; question everything; and pursue the art of reflective insolence. A side effect of these guidelines is an inclination to stepping on toes. I try to live as I teach. So when I give my view on what is the best path forward for anthropology as a discipline and for future practitioners of anthropology, it will be tough love. Some might even see it as turf watching, as I am the middle-aged, white, European, cis-gender male that doubles as the run-of-the-mill academic. In a few sentences from now, some will add privilege-blind to that roster. That might be justified. Still, after having spent most of my meandering career as an entrepreneur, freelance anthropologist and newspaper columnist, and gained a permanent academic position at the not-so-tender age of 46, I have learnt a few lessons that might have wider validity. Two decades of accommodating both the reward structures of the academic world and the knowledge that is sought after, is required, [and has an effect](#) (three not necessarily related things) in the world beyond, has convinced me of one thing: The fate of anthropologists working within academia is not just closely related to that of those working outside of it; the two are one and the same. So if the attitudes surrounding applied anthropology and non-academic jobs uncovered [in a recent inquiry](#) are widely held, the future of our discipline is bleak. I believe we are better off – because we have one particular skill that sets anthropologists apart from all others. In order to ensure the effective passing on of this skill and secure anthropology's [vital indiscipline](#), three measures are required.

What we do best

The first point of any anthropology-derived analysis would be a search for underlying presumptions. If we ask what the future of anthropology is, the premise is that anthropology has a future. Consequently, the question must be, “What would an anthropology-free world miss?” The answer is simple: Exactly the trick we just pulled. Our counterfactual urge is the reason for anthropology's continued existence. Not because all of us take pleasure in being contrarians, but because we have been exposed to so many other ways of thinking of, being in, and living out the state of humanness that we habitually probe the default settings, doxas and premises upon which social systems, of all kinds, levels and sizes, rest. This is the main transferable skill that I pass on to my students. And it makes them exceedingly hireable. Because this compulsion to challenge that which is taken for granted is a remarkably constructive device, which opens up for creativity and for imagination that is free-ranging, rather than just a procedural box that has to be checked before moving on to the next. Tabloidly put, it is of little use to think outside the box as long as the box remains within a bubble. Anthropologists know that not only are other ways and other worlds *possible*, they are *actual*.

But surely, this emphasis on employability is way too instrumental? Absolutely! Anthropology's value to society is of course different from its individual use value. The curiosity of the lives of others contributes to “make the world safer for human diversity”, following Ruth Benedict's apocryphal mission statement for anthropology. Reminding people that there are thousands of alternatives also fans political hope, by radically expanding the options available to those engaged in this art of the possible. In these globally uncertain times for democracy and for tolerance, fanning hope is an intellectual vocation.

What we must do better

So, if every sound employer realizes the need for anthropologists, which in turn bolsters the demand for anthropology in academia, while our ethnography provides living proofs of other lives worth living, what else must be done for anthropology to become *the* social science discipline of the 21st century?

1 Secure a multi-centric anthropology

Historically, a number of anthropology's key contributions have an origin outside the Anglo-American sphere. But the growing hegemony of English and the might in numbers have given general anthropology a stronger Anglo-American bias. This is not particular to anthropology. However, a number of anthropological theories belong to what Robert Merton labelled middle-range theory, conceived to address a more particular empirical reality. This means that they are also cultural products and should be treated as such whenever transposed. Since the most prestigious publishing channels are in the US, those of us who work in areas where for instance the highly culture-specific American notions, and consequent theorizing, of "race" are not easily applicable are nonetheless expected to address them. The critique against Sherry Ortner for [reading the "N-word"](#) as part of an empirical material is as baffling to most Europeans as the [French response against Trevor Noah's](#) comments after the soccer World Cup is to many Americans. In practical terms, this analytic bias makes our work less relevant to funding authorities, prospective employers and the general public, since our analyses do not accurately resonate with local concerns.

2 Insist that ideas surpass identities

Where we stand is affected by where we sit, but it is not determined by it. If it were, anthropology's audacious methods, which rest on the possibility of resonance between individuals and across worldviews, would be impossible. Reading scholarly contributions through a prism of identity markers is a form of essentialism that we rarely fail to point out when it surfaces in old ethnographies. Attributing scholarly perspectives to the author's background rather than engage it (challenge, refute, tear apart!) is nothing but laziness. On a practical-political level, it unwittingly provides academic legitimacy to the anti-immigrant European Identitarian movement and mystifies biological traits in ways that would receive nods of approval from white supremacists. Failure to appreciate such connections [is a failure to spot long-term consequences](#) of shorter-term gains.

3 Release the power of comparisons

Cross-cultural comparison is our most creative device and part and parcel of our counterfactual urge. Without it, there is little vigor in our attempts to identify power structures, including the decolonization of academia. However, the range of "valid" comparisons has been drastically reduced during the past fifty years, after what Joel Robbins has called "the [anthropology of the suffering subject](#)" and Sherry Ortner refers to as "[dark anthropology](#)" projected a hierarchized dyad oppressor/oppressed upon the world's societies. This asymmetry negated the as-if equality that playfully destabilizing comparisons require, thus leaving sociological megatropes like Complexity and Modernity unchallenged and consequently taking the edge off anthropology's radical message of shared humanity.

So, it all boils down to this: Anthropology must be naughty or it will come to naught. Future anthropology should be recognizably unpredictable. It is a safe space for seedling thoughts that colleagues might consider weeds. Everyone who engages with anthropology will at times find themselves offended. This is what destabilizing worldviews entails. The future of anthropology does definitely not have my face on it. My hope is that it does not have yours either.