

From the Door of My Tent I Could See Latour: Remarks on Anthropology, Universities and Jobs

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Abstract: This short essay briefly reflects on the international 'jobs market' for anthropology graduates before turning to consider the role of anthropology in liberal university education. In doing so, I consider Donnan and Wilson's (2006) call for a reinvention of anthropology on the island of Ireland, and I look back to the vision of education proposed by Franz Boas. This essay marks out some interesting anthropological careers and indicates some future areas of growth. Overall, however, it is an argument for the importance of anthropology as critical inquiry in the contemporary moment.

Key words: Anthropology in Ireland; reinvention; Boas; universities; graduates.

In 2012 Forbes Magazine reported on a Georgetown University survey indicating that the 'worst' majors in US universities are anthropology and archaeology. But anthropologists and archaeologists should pause for contemplation before opening their desk drawers and deciding between the whiskey and the revolver. According to the survey, anthropology and archaeology graduates stand a better chance of gaining initial employment than, say, architecture or photography graduates but tend to enter low-paid employment initially. But what constitutes 'employment' in the 'initial' period after graduation in a world where a postgraduate-level qualification and experience is generally required? A benchmark suitable for professional nursing studies may not be suitable for architects or budding archaeologists. Moreover, by graduating from any arts, humanities or social science degree one adds a rather vulgar \$1.2 million to one's earnings over an average career.

Forbes Magazine does not do analysis very well but that does not stop the flow of advice. If you wish to land a job in the US straight after graduation (and immediately start chipping away at your enormous student loan) then take a numbers-based professional degree. If, however, you wish to read books and think about the contents—perhaps focusing on those books in which the only numbers are the page numbers—then you will be punished. Indeed, reading and thinking types might wonder about the implicit suggestion that if you plan on going to university to luxuriate in knowledge then you are probably a communist or a Democrat. Picking up on the Forbes article, financial journalist Rick Newman recently argued that consumers should be more ruthless in their university course

choices. Avoid psychology, biology and economics, says Newman, and especially history. Remember, 'We are not a contemplative society'.

I would like to live in a contemplative society. I share with most students a strong sense that contemplation is vital and the lack thereof has discernible and generally unfavourable consequences. As Ireland continues to reel from one of the worst financial crises in modern European history, universities are increasingly under pressure, and the kind of liberal education represented by disciplines such as anthropology needs to be better understood by a variety of audiences. We may be living through an era of indebtedness, poverty and emigration, but the prevailing style of reasoning is certainly not in crisis. The state may be howling like Polyphemus blinded by Nobody, yet a certain form of economic rationality is stronger than ever. Today, truth-like common sense comes from somewhere else but is spoken in an Irish accent. Inefficiency and duplication are sources of shame; efficiency is a form of purity achievable only through the 'taking' or sharing of pain. All of these extraordinary factors are shaping the higher education system. But rather than react we must contemplate: what do we imagine as the future of our discipline on the island of Ireland, and what do we envisage for graduates of our programmes? Here, for the most part, I confine myself to discussing Maynooth Anthropology.

Anthropology grew successfully in Maynooth since the establishment of the department in the early 1980s (the exact origins of the department are obscure, even in terms of the requisite paperwork, which is rumoured to be in a basement somewhere; heroic figures and their mythical deeds loom large in folk memory). As the sector and the university expanded so too did the department, especially during the so-called Celtic Tiger period from 1995 to 2008 when nothing was too small to fail. Today, our graduates generally leave the discipline behind for a bewildering variety of work and postgraduate options, from attempting to establish an NGO to working in forensic computing and cybercrime detection (to nod at just two recent graduates). From the early 2000s onwards, surveyed MA graduates went on to take up positions in the private sector and in the so-called third sector, which, we must remind ourselves, is one of the largest employers in the world. The majority, however, entered doctoral programmes in Ireland or overseas.

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Our postgraduate programmes continue to thrive. Our MA in Anthropology and Development is in the second year of operating an internship programme with Trocaire. This year the Departments of Anthropology and Design Innovation in NUI Maynooth will launch a new MSc in human-centred design and innovation. Anthropologists in Maynooth have long noted the exciting potential of research happening under new interdisciplinary umbrellas such as user experience (UX). We foresee important collaborations with intellectually exciting colleagues in and outside of the academy. We also look forward to seeing our graduates informing design and innovation, broadening and critically evaluating those concepts, and hopefully also challenging the discipline of anthropology. Some cohorts of future postgraduates, then, will pitch their tents in new interdisciplinary domains and their ideas to non-academic audiences; they may draw their **conceptual influences more from Bruno Latour than Conrad Arensberg**. Yet, the concept work and research practices that so excites colleagues and potential employers rests on a powerful image of anthropology. Oddly, today, anthropologists' self-perceptions are rather humble and post-Writing Culture. Elsewhere **the anthropologist is still here: he or she really finds things out, they go beyond numerical representations of human life to the very core of meaning in everyday lived experiences. We are recognized for being there, partly because few disciplines go there.**

Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan's (2006) *The Anthropology of Ireland* called for the reinvention of anthropology in Ireland in terms of scholarship and professional practice. Reinvention denotes **contemplation followed by careful efforts to understand, respect, defend and expand anthropology in Ireland. The reinvention of anthropology in Ireland** is a process that needs to be mindful of but not obsessed by context: the pressured institutions bowing their heads in the court of the 'smart economy' or even in the service of 'economic recovery'. Anthropology is not training for jobs. Some of our graduates will be working in 2060. One educates now so that those individuals may use anthropology's conceptual tools and insights to **the betterment of society in future decades. The onus is on anthropology departments as homes of scholarship and professional practice to defend what is good in traditions while reinventing continually to meet new problems and challenges. The onus is on us to avoid educating students so that they can get a job tomorrow and maintain a focus on the education of students such that they can meet the unknown challenges of the future.**

Many of anthropology's ancestors understood these deep truths well. As an Irish anthropologist I occasionally feel the presence of ancestors such as Haddon and Browne or Scheper-Hughes. Today, their expeditions seem weird – the craniometers and Rorschach tests are gone but 'unethical' remains like a tattoo. When I look for insights and opportunities

for reinvention in the history of anthropology I think of those individuals who exceeded their time, place and discipline. Franz Boas, for example, is well worth turning to for a clear-sighted sense of what anthropology is and can be, especially in the context of pressured universities and graduates in search of meaningful jobs. **Boas understood the difference between disciplines such as anthropology and the natural sciences, pushing for the rigorous study of the particular. In folk memory he is associated with 'four-field anthropology'. In reality, however, his sense of the emerging discipline was more fluid and creative. He understood that anthropology had an enormous contribution to make in producing fully rounded education experiences. His annual letter to the President of Columbia University in 1902, quoted in an essay by Nicholas Dirks, reads like a contemporary prospectus. Anthropology is '... perhaps the best means of opening the eyes of students to what is valuable in foreign cultures, and thus to develop a juster appreciation of foreign nations and to bring out those elements in our own civilization which are common to all mankind.'** He fought tirelessly for academic freedom and supported the establishment of new departments to amplify the global dimensions of undergraduate education. But his vision of the university was no **ivory tower walled off from the world. Nicholas Dirks finds that Boas was worried about disciplines that existed more for administrative reasons than scholarly ones. Universities, Boas wrote, 'cannot be the home of the universitas litterarum, of the world of knowledge, if their faculties are closed corporations, and if university research and instruction are a monopoly of those who have secured recognition by appointment'. What we have in Boas's ancestral presence is a kindly reminder to think seriously about the role anthropology can play in providing a liberal education, one that listens to students and responds in mature ways (which is not the same as 'feedback'), one that provokes us to constantly reassert and even reinvent anthropology's conceptual contributions and increasingly fashionable research practices.**

In the contemporary moment we need to reassert and even reinvent what we mean by university education in Ireland. If anthropology can contribute to providing a rigorous, liberal and globally aware education then it will leave its mark on workers in 2060. But we also have responsibilities now to provide more opportunities for engagement, to reach out more in the university community and well beyond, to look to ways to create meaningful partnerships with civil society and **commercial entities. There is nothing incompatible in these goals; rather they are complementary. In fact, when one closely examines the nature of the employment market and the articulated needs of major employers – as opposed to the needs attributed to them – one sees that the pressure on universities is often internal to the public sector. The criticisms levelled at universities and their degree programmes by major multinationals are often about insufficient core skills, too much**

specialization at the expense of breadth and depth, and not enough 'blue skies' research. Multinationals are not disinterested champions of traditional universities; they simply form views on what works. Today, apparently, **one needs to be a 'job shaper' not a job seeker.** This does not sound like a stable future, but it does sound like a future in which an education that focuses on core skills, depth, breadth and opportunities for research and critical thinking will be required.

It is my hope that anthropology in Ireland will grow appropriately as time goes by, hopefully contributing to the diverse and successful careers followed by its graduates for a long time. In the future graduates may well be job shapers, and their critical skills may result in unintended shapes. It is neither incompatible nor naive to hope that anthropology in Ireland will also contribute in some ways to creating a more contemplative society.