



## Being Irrelevant in a Relevant Way: Anthropology and Public Wisdom

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In three decades as a teacher of anthropology at the university level, I have yet to come across an anthropology student beyond the first semester who had never thought about the possibilities of using his/her knowledge to make the world a slightly better place in which to live. Indeed, the wish to understand the world in order to change it for the better may be a major source of motivation for many student beginners.

Then the weeks, months and years go by. Coursework, reading, exams, fieldwork training, more reading, burgeoning academic ambitions perhaps, and increased knowledge about the pleasures and challenges of the academic life gradually transform initial idealism into a competitive professionalism. Some end up being trapped in the cocoon of academic life; and a stimulating cocoon it is, where new knowledge is being produced, theories confronted, methods refined – and new cohorts of students taught. However, the academic cocoon may take on the characteristics of the closed circuit, and many highly professional and skilled academic researchers continuously find themselves on the brink of forgetting why they started to do anthropology in the first place.

A public anthropology which makes a difference to the human condition does not have to be activist in character, or to advocate certain policies, or to embed itself in some social movement, (although these options are certainly interesting), but also present their own dilemmas. Indeed, knowledge and ideas may themselves contribute to changing the world through shifts in perspective and participation in the collective endeavour of lifting ourselves by the bootstraps in order to see the human world as a whole. In order to do this, we need to reflect seriously on *what* we are saying, to *whom* and *how* we are saying it. Alas, academic anthropologists far too rarely take this opportunity; instead concentrating largely on problems internal to the discipline, academically defined. As a result, neoliberal, xenophobic and reductionist views perspectives on humanity have gained currency in the public sphere as ‘real science’, thanks to the vigorous and skilful popularisers of such views. Anthropologists, who ought to be the foremost scientific interpreters of the human condition in all its diversity and unity, have been busy doing other things.

Anthropological perspectives on minorities, human nature, morality, multiculturalism and development, to mention just a handful of topics, could in fact make a difference. It is in our power to make the world slightly wiser and more humane. In these and other areas, popularisers outside of anthropology are hugely successful, while a public anthropology proper might have been just as successful, given the appropriate toolbox and a collective memory mindful of why anthropology mattered in the first place.

### Puritanism and withdrawal

Allow me an anecdote from my home department, the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo. Back in the 1970s, the young and brilliant anthropologist Jorun Solheim wrote a rather knotty and theoretical article with the lengthy title, if memory serves me correctly, ‘Er det riktig å si at moderne antropologiske forskere som Barth og Bailey står på skuldrene til Raymond Firth?’ Translated into plain English, it read ‘Is it correct to assume that modern anthropological scholars such as Barth and Bailey are ‘standing on the shoulders’ of Raymond Firth?’. For more than a decade, every anthropology undergraduate in town had the mimeographed typescript on their reading list. Originally an exam paper, the article concluded that there was a strong continuity from Firth’s reworking of functionalism and his methodological individualism to the transactional and strategic-action models devised by people like Barth and Bailey.

In 1989, for reasons which still elude me, the department decided to organise a grand celebration of its 25th anniversary. A quarter-century is not exactly an impressive time span and besides, the foundation of the department was plainly a technical and even terminological affair: before 1964, social anthropology had been taught in the same dilapidated building, aptly named Barracks B, by roughly the same staff, in the Section of Ethnography. Be this as it may, in connection with the celebration, Raymond Firth was invited over. Firth (1901–2002), then pushing ninety, gave two lectures during his visit, one of which was entitled ‘The future of social anthropology’, where he spoke of biotechnology, computers and other recent phenomena that demanded the attention of anthropologists. It was during Q&A after this lecture that a colleague, known for his quirky sense of humour, rose in the packed auditorium and asked the venerable old man: Is it true, Professor Firth, that Fredrik Barth and other contemporary anthropological scholars are standing on your shoulders?

Firth, vaguely sensing that he was party to an in-joke, answered roundly and graciously that “well, if they do, at least that suggests that they can see further than me.” (Not a word was said explicitly about dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants.)

The question remains. Do we see further than the people on whose shoulders we are perched, or has a nasty fog descended on the scenery? Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) seemed to have moved towards the latter position towards the end of his life, although he was frequently perceived, by self-professed scientific anthropologists, as one who had paved the way for the horrors of postmodern obscurantism. In a book essay comparing James Clifford and Pierre Clastres – an unlikely pair, but offering a thought-provoking contrast – Geertz (1998) concluded: “Whatever the flaws of his approach, Clastres knew where he was going, and he got there.” Clastres, in *Society Against the State* (1977) describes a South American tribe struggling to retain its old way of life. Twenty years later, Clifford, in his *Routes* (1997), a book about travel, movement and ethnography, on the contrary ‘seems stalled, unsteady, fumbling for direction’, and his text has “a hesitant, stuttering quality (what can I say? how can I say it? with what right do I do so?)” (Geertz 1998: 72). Postmodernism taught a generation of anthropologists to dissect the menu without bothering to look at the banalities of the food; it concentrates on the wallpaper patterns instead of the quality of the woodwork, just as scholars with a neo-Darwinian bent – adherents of selfish-gene biology – appear to mistake the recipe for the food. The most fervent evangelical expressions of Neo-Darwinism, blatantly looking for simple answers to complex questions, could be interpreted as a reaction to the despair resulting from the preceding postmodern fragmentation, but ironically, it deals in abstractions of a comparable kind to those of a Derrida or Lyotard.

Is the party over? Anthropologists of my generation were somehow given the distinct impression that early-to mid-20th century anthropology was sparkling with magic. It held a confident belief in its huge intellectual task and, quite evidently if usually muttered under one's breath or even denied up front, its moral mission consisting in improving the world, but especially improving the Western middle classes. Disdainful of the competition, be it quantitative social research, a-theoretical historiography or reductionist sociobiology, social anthropology held the banner high, but not so high as to make itself vulnerable to criticism for vulgarity and sensationalism. The era of anthropological identity politics proper began just after the Second World War, by which time the number of professionals and teachers in the discipline was sufficient for anthropological scholars not to have to worry about making their writings accessible or interesting to outsiders.

Haven't we all sat in social anthropology seminar rooms, listening to presenters taking liberties with certain conventions of the discipline, only to be met with reactions of the generic kind "Hmm... very interesting, fascinating even, but is it anthropology?" In sum, and I do not want to go into details at this stage, there is a lack of openness in social anthropology which is at best puzzling, at worst embarrassing. Some years ago, there was widespread professional concern with the ways in which our battered old concept of culture had been hijacked by academic non-anthropologists while we were simultaneously busy dismantling it. Although anthropologists are nowadays everywhere outside the academy, the internal identity politics of our discipline is still militantly obsessed with boundary maintenance and gatekeeping. I can think of several departments which wouldn't dream of appointing a PhD student with a background in another subject than anthropology. Collaborating with academics in other disciplines is considered respectable as long as one doesn't lose one's professional identity as an anthropologist. But isn't this somewhat out of character for a discipline to which one of the truly foundational texts is Marcel Mauss's *The Gift?* (Mauss 1954/1924) Mauss begins his essay by distinguishing between the three phases of gift exchange: giving, receiving and returning the gift. Anthropologists, almost like Scandinavian aid donors in Africa, are perfectly happy to give their concepts and theories to outsiders, but are less enthusiastic about the offered return gifts in the form of analyses inspired by anthropological thought but not part of it. There is a fear of impurity in anthropology, a fear which makes sense, perhaps, in the context of Mary Douglas' (1966) theory, but not in intellectual life.

This fear of impurity, or of intellectual contamination, is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the realm of popular anthropology, or public anthropology if you like. Some years ago, I devoted a book to this topic (Eriksen 2006) and will not reiterate the arguments about popularisation here. Attitudes to light-hearted 'popular anthropology', typically represented in the UK by Kate Fox and her very entertaining and enlightening book *Watching the English* (Fox 2004) vary and, I think, rightly so. However, there are different kinds of popular anthropology. One or two are plainly populist, commercial literature aiming to entertain but not to make substantial new contributions to knowledge about the human condition. These books, whatever their merits and shortcomings, fall outside the scope of the present concerns, which are about the ability of anthropology to contribute intellectually to the long conversation about humanity, not just the one about anthropology. It is disconcerting to note that on a widely noticed list of the 100 most important intellectuals in the UK and the world published around 2005, a grand total of one anthropologist was represented, namely Clifford Geertz on the global list. Now that he is gone, the number would be nil.

### Knowledge interests and social criticism

Although there seems to be broad agreement within the discipline about the desirability of a public anthropology, there is less certainty, or agreement, not only about how to achieve it in a respectable way, but also about its very *raison-d'être*. What should an anthropology which engages closely with non-academic publics seek to achieve? There are several possible approaches to this question.

A position enunciated at the time of the radical student movement of the 1960s saw anthropology as an inherently critical discipline in a vaguely left-wing sense (e.g. Berreman 1968). To the extent that anthropologists are closer to 'ordinary people' than other researchers, including other social scientists, advocacy on behalf of local communities facing potential conflict with corporations or states may seem to follow logically from the experiences and social obligations resulting from fieldwork. It is doubtless true that when anthropologists act or write on behalf of the people they do research on, they are more often than not defenders of the particular and local against various forms of standardisation, state power and global neoliberalism. While this is an often laudable and even necessary task, the critical role of public anthropology can be taken further than advocacy for various kinds of local or indigenous movements. This is especially, but not exclusively, evident when anthropologists engage with issues in their own society.

Doing anthropological research at home has its rewards and pitfalls, mostly resulting from the close relationship of the researcher to the researched. This has been more thoroughly theorised by sociologists than by anthropologists, some of whom still tend to think of 'anthropology at home' as an exception. Just as poststructuralism was replacing neo-Marxism as the dominant non-orthodox theoretical orientation in the social sciences, Giddens (1984) pointed out that the social scientist enters into a 'double hermeneutic' relationship in his or her society, since the concepts and analyses of the social sciences are both informed by lay concepts and in turn influence them. There is, in other words, a two-way hermeneutic process taking place. For instance, the anthropological concept of ethnicity has entered everyday discourse, while the political concept of integration (regarding minorities) has, conversely, influenced social research on the issue. Years before Giddens, the philosopher Hans Skjervheim (1957) described a related duality in a seminal essay marking the beginning of the Norwegian critique of positivism. He showed that far from being an aloof and objective observer, the social scientist is both participant and observer (an epistemological position not to be confused with the methodological device of participant-observation). There can, accordingly, be no neutral ground from which to view society.

Social scientists are, in other words, entwined with broader public discourse and societal concerns whether or not they like it; indeed, critics of positivism have long pointed out that this is true of all scientific enquiry. Writing in the context of the burgeoning radical student movements in the late 1960s, thus, Jürgen Habermas distinguished between three knowledge interests (*Erkenntnisinteressen*, Habermas 1971/1968), which he associated with the three main branches of academic inquiry. The natural sciences, he said, were driven by a *technical* interest, and found their justification in explaining natural relationships and processes in ways enabling control and technological progress. The inherent knowledge interest of the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) was *practical* (in the Aristotelian and Kantian sense) and aimed to deepen and maintain the communicative community on which both society and individuality depended. Finally, the knowledge interest of the social sciences was *liberating*,

aiming to expose and account for the power relations of society, thereby contributing to the critical self-understanding of its inhabitants. Already then, Habermas was worried that the technical knowledge interest was becoming overly dominant across the academic disciplines. It is easy to see evidence supporting this view today, when most social science research is commissioned directly or indirectly by state institutions, humanities are judged on their instrumental usefulness, and New Public Management provides the yardsticks for assessing academic achievement.

### Being irrelevant in a relevant way

Seen against the backdrop of Habermas, Giddens, the critique of positivism and the perceived need for public engagement, it is fairly obvious that not all social science satisfies the criteria for representing a liberating knowledge interest. Some – perhaps most – social science is closely aligned with social engineering, planning and the formal structuring of society, and in state budgets, social research is justified by referring to its usefulness. It belongs to the domain of the technical knowledge interest. Its dialectical negation, and the broad family of approaches and persuasions falling under the umbrella of critical social science, either aims to improve a flawed socioeconomic system by addressing racism, inequality, misogyny etc., or to replace it with a better one. It can be liberating, but it depends conceptually on that from which it seeks liberation.

Anthropology is in a privileged position to develop a third way beyond system maintenance and social criticism, one which is arguably more in accordance with the young Habermas' (and his more radical predecessors in the Frankfurt school) notion of liberating knowledge. Being an inherently subversive and unpredictable partner in the long conversation about who we are and where we are going, I'd like to argue that anthropology can, and should, take on the part of Anansi, the trickster, in the sprawling fauna of the social and human sciences. In West African and Caribbean folklore, Anansi the spider always gets the upper hand in confrontations with larger and stronger adversaries, because of his imaginative and bold ways of turning his apparent weakness into a virtue. Since nobody fears him, he is capable of surprising them and makes the rhino, the lion and the python fall victim to their own vanity.

Similarly, the typical anthropological approach does not take home truths for granted, refuses to be co-opted by polarising discourses and insists on the right to view society simultaneously as 'observer and participant'. I now move to a consideration of the situation in Norway, a country where public anthropologists are fairly thick on the ground (Eriksen 2006 is already dated in this regard; many new anthropological voices have since then entered the fray). In this country, anthropologists often give public talks in forums ranging from Rotary clubs to Oslo's popular House of Literature, and they comment on public events in the media, and several write regular columns, op-eds and the occasional book for a general readership.

True to a prevailing instrumentalist view of knowledge, representatives of the different academic disciplines in Norway sometimes speak of their 'societal assignment' (*samfunnsoppdrag*). As far as the social sciences are concerned, the economists run the country (through powerful institutions such as the Ministry of Finance, Statistics Norway and the Central Bank); the political scientists look after the nuts and bolts of government at all levels, from foreign policy to municipal councils; and the sociologists defend the welfare state and gender equality. What about the social anthropologists? There are many of

them in Norway, which possibly has the largest proportion of anthropologists in the world. With no clearly defined professional niches, they work in many areas, from development NGOs and local government to communication agencies, libraries and the media, apart from having a wide-ranging academic presence well beyond the universities, in research institutions of different kinds. A previous President of the Sámi Parliament was trained as an anthropologist, as was a former Minister of Development. Yet anthropology remains more of a vocation than a profession. It is unclear why the country – or any country – needs anthropologists, and there is an ongoing struggle to show why anthropology matters. To this end, Norwegian anthropologists have for many years made themselves visible in the public sphere. Moreover, a subject called ‘sociology and social anthropology’ is the most popular optional subject in secondary school, and many Norwegians have some ideas about what it is that anthropologists are and do. It is commonly assumed that anthropologists are politically radical; they are expected to defend immigrants and indigenous peoples, to criticise New Public Management and predatory capitalism, to take a distanced, sometimes ironic position on the usually deadly serious Norwegian nationalism, and to be favourable to green and leftist politics. While this is empirically simplistic – for example, the most famous Norwegian anthropologist, Fredrik Barth (1928–2016), was largely apolitical – it is not altogether wrong. Economic anthropology is very different from economic science in that it has been just as preoccupied with gift exchange as with markets, at least as concerned with human economy as with profitability, and when economic anthropologists study central banks or the financial crisis (Holmes 2013, Appadurai 2015), they see them as cultural systems. Political anthropology, likewise, has a long-standing interest in symbols, kinship and ritual, with power struggles often added almost as an afterthought. Typically, when economists and politicians speak about ‘the black economy’, anthropologists speak of ‘the informal sector’.

In the public eye, anthropologists represent a kind of intellectual habitus which renders them susceptible to favouring egalitarian small-scale societies and cultural diversity. Yet, lacking a well-defined *samfunnsoppdrag*, it may seem as if it is their main task in the public sphere to make unexpected comparisons, to ask unusual questions and to interrogate the received wisdom. It is not our job to be worried. As a result, Norwegian anthropologists have often played the part of the trickster, like the Ash Lad (*Askeladden*) in Norwegian fairytales (Witoszek 1998), or Anansi the spider in West African and Caribbean lore.

Yet, precisely because society has not provided anthropology with a set of social issues to deal with, an area of responsibility or a problem-solving mandate, there is a real risk of withdrawal. Like elsewhere, Norwegian anthropologists are rather fond of talking amongst themselves, and often forget to include the outside world in their conversations. During a private conversation, the science fiction author Tor Åge Bringsværd once likened the relationship of society to science with the act of sending a shuttle into outer space. Society has invested money and effort into this endeavour, with the obligation on the part of the space shuttle that it should return and explain what it has seen. Too often, Bringsværd said, the space shuttle just stays out there without returning, which is a source of great disappointment for the greater public.

It is easy to sympathise with this sentiment. For what is the use of knowledge if it only circulates among the initiates? This is not to say that every anthropologist should popularise, engage in the increasingly messy meshwork that is public debate and go out and preach the

gospel of anthropology to the unwashed heathens. In fact, those who do depend on those who don't; without the often arcane and difficult original research which never travels beyond seminar rooms and online university libraries, public anthropologists would have nothing to be public about. Some of the best-loved and admired Norwegian anthropologists rarely made public appearances outside the academy. One example is the late Reidar Grønhaug (1938–2005, see Vike 2010). Intellectually agile and original, generous and engaged in other people's work, Grønhaug was so reticent and shy that he scarcely even published his own work, allowing unfinished writings to languish in his drawer, but at least ensuring that some of his finest texts circulated among students and colleagues as mimeos. A good example is the strikingly original 'Transaction and signification' (Grønhaug 1975), a spirited synthesis of Barth and Lévi-Strauss where the centrepiece was a reanalysis of the beer hall scene in Clyde Mitchell's *The Kalela Dance* (Mitchell 1956). Many others could have been mentioned.

### Openness and closure

The tension between the internal and the external, between openness and closure, between building knowledge and sharing it, represents a fundamental dilemma in all group dynamics. A version of the tension is wonderfully described by Sahlins in his old, memorable if contested article 'Poor man, rich man, big man, chief' (Sahlins 1963),<sup>1</sup> in which he outlines the structural dilemma of the Melanesian big man. In order to ensure his power base, he must spend considerable amounts of time with his relatives and supporters in the village and offer gifts to them. However, he also has to build alliances with outsiders, mainly to prevent war and feuding, but also to extend his sphere of influence. Yet if the big man spends too much time and resources on outsiders, his kinfolk and supporters will begin to grumble, and may eventually depose him. He thus has to strike a fine balance between the internal cohesion of the group and the creation of alliances, or between consolidation and expansion.

Anthropologists who have gone out of their way to communicate with a non-anthropological audience have often been reminded of the broader significance of Sahlins's perspective. If you go out, you may flourish, and it may enrich your own people by making them more famous and attractive to others; but it may also be your own undoing since you start doing business with outsiders before paying your debts at home.

Norwegian anthropologists have for a long time taken their chances. What sets Norwegian anthropology apart, is that not only are anthropologists pretty thick on the ground in this country, but also that they are a familiar sight, individually and collectively, in the public sphere. Regular as clockwork, Norwegian anthropologists go on radio and in the newspapers every year before Christmas explaining the logic of gift exchange, often with a sideways glance to the potlatch and Melanesia; when spring comes, they comment on the rituals and symbols of football supporters; around Easter, they may write or talk about the peculiar Norwegian habit of spending Easter skiing in the mountains; and in autumn, they may take part in more serious discussions about the significance of the Muslim headscarf in Norway's growing Muslim minority. They risk becoming academic court jesters, but they may equally well be those who can speak truth to power because they have no vested interests.

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, this is also the title of a song performed by a group of students and junior staff at parties since the early 1990s. The lyrics were written by Bjarne Træen, and in its most eclectic incarnation, the band was called Pigs for the Ancestors. On a number of occasions over the years, I have played a bit of sax on it.

To use Milan Kundera's contrast from his *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), there is both lightness and gravity in the work of the public anthropologist. I will now consider, with the help of a few examples, the relationship between lightness and weight in Norwegian public anthropology, and so will argue that it has changed since the turn of the millennium.

### The light and the heavy in public anthropology

An anthropologist specialising in food and consumption, Runar Døving wrote his PhD about change and continuity in the food habits of a small hamlet in south-eastern Norway. Active in the public sphere, at the time of his dissertation work, he wrote an op-ed in the Oslo newspaper *Dagbladet*, where he defended the hot dog against its detractors. Without mentioning Bourdieu once, Døving (2002) passionately attacked food snobbery and the new culinary distinctions resulting from forms of individualisation and differentiation that he associated with neoliberal deregulation. The article was written with verve and passion; it was light-hearted and fun to read, yet at the same time, it was serious and heavy. While tracing the development of food processing from pre-modern to industrial times, Døving points out that the mass-produced food of today, jeered at by the culinary elites, is tastier and more wholesome than the unique and painstakingly hand-made food romanticised by the food snobs. In fact, he says, the contemporary abundance of industrially produced food ought to be celebrated, considering the food scarcities and hard work implied in food production just a couple of generations ago. He then goes on to describe how children had to contribute to food production, how that expensive luxury called butter was distributed in open, unhygienic containers (and went stale quickly), and how Dad had to work fifty hours a week while Mum and the oldest children spent the afternoons rinsing and salting herring. Døving's seemingly light-hearted defence of the hot dog 'with that exciting tomato sauce, the ketchup' thus turned out to be a bitter critique of new class distinctions and a defence of the achievements of modern food production. Among the best of his many op-eds, the article summarised a small library of recent food anthropology debate, parading as a defence of hot dogs, fish pudding and tinned mackerel in tomato sauce.

Some years earlier, the anthropologist Hans Christian (Tian) Sørhaug carried out an applied research project on drug addicts in Oslo. One of his findings was that they could meaningfully be compared to hunters and gatherers: Their storage capacity was low, they relied on immediate returns from investments, they were itinerant, their group size was flexible but small, and there was a continuous, accepted tension between egotism and solidarity. Theirs was a 'harvesting economy'. This discovery was genuine and original, and contributed to a deepened understanding of the plight of the heroin addicts of the city. Yet the comparison could easily be perceived as light-hearted, almost facetious. After all, the society in which drug addicts live, and the forces that have created their situation, is very different from the world of hunters and gatherers, and in order to appreciate the comparison, you had to bracket prior assumptions about cultural differences. You had to be able to switch between a playful mode exploring options and life-worlds, and a serious concern with the plight of the homeless heroin addicts.

Similarly, the late Eduardo Archetti was interviewed by the Oslo newspaper *Aftenposten* sometime in the late 1990s about the prolonged graduation partying that took place among Norwegian teenagers after leaving school. A unique tradition, these celebrations known locally as *russefeiring* are characterised by alcohol and frivolous partying in parks and other

public spaces, and endure for more than two weeks, from May Day to Constitution Day, 17 May, when the celebrations reach a climax of sorts. Asked about this ritual, Archetti, himself the father of two teenage children at the time, responded that this was a powerful and meaningful experience to those young people, not least since it was the first time that many of them participated in rituals that involved sex and intoxicating substances. It may safely be assumed that more than a few anxious parents did not find his comments reassuring. The point is nevertheless that Archetti did not see it as his assigned task to act the part of the worried social scientist, to tell the parents, say, that it was important that they stayed awake and have a good chat with their children when they returned home from the day's partying, or that girls should never walk home alone in a drunken state. His job was to view the graduation celebrations as a ritual, not as a social problem.

I have briefly introduced three anthropological interventions in the public sphere, which – unlike most public anthropology – represent complex rhetorical position, where the intended *logos* risks being drowned out by the perceived *pathos*. Although serious in intent, they all reveal a light, playful dimension as well, even involving a perceptible jocularity. They have all embarked on a risky journey, but one which is arguably more common among social anthropologists than in any other academic profession in the country. The risk consists in not being taken seriously because people only remember the jokes and not their context. This is a familiar problem for political satire (if it is too funny, people forget that it is serious) and for science fiction (superficial readers remember the technology, but not the philosophical or political insights), and similarly, anthropologists who expose their comparative imagination in public risk being written off as irresponsible dilettantes. Yet it is an open question whether this somewhat indeterminate aspect of public anthropology is ultimately a problem or an advantage.

### **Anarchists of Western Academia**

The times have changed since the turn of the millennium. The anarchists of academia, Norwegian anthropologists could occasionally find themselves being co-opted by the entertainment industry in the recent past. More than once has more than one of us been accused of having become 'a song and dance man'. Although the spirit of the times has changed in this century, and there is less room for irresponsible play with ideas than at the height of postmodernist optimism in the 1990s, anthropologists can still, on a good day, be counted on to say weird or unexpected things. Yet today, at a time of rising Islamophobia (in Norway currently represented in the midst of the government), complicated refugee issues, rampant marketisation and an instrumentalist view of knowledge working in tandem with New Public Management in threatening the freedom of the universities, the lightness of the recent past, of which I have given a few examples, has almost faded from sight. Although there was a serious underlying concern below the lightness I have depicted – Døving was concerned with class, Archetti with the pains and excitement of transitioning to adulthood, Sørhaug with the double-binds and illusions of absolute freedom among drug addicts – it seemed harmless and indeed legitimate to play the part of Anansi the spider.

A dreadful reminder of the fact that lightness can become unbearable came to me in a rather personal way a few years ago. Ideological polarisation had already developed for some time, fanned by the Islamic terrorist attacks on New York, London and Madrid, and social anthropologists were increasingly being associated with a naïve multiculturalism gone awry.

For many years, some of us had criticised essentialist social boundaries, raising questions with a bearing on the ethnic dimension of Norwegian nationalism. Then, at the height of summer 2011, a bomb exploded, and Norway had fallen victim to right-wing terrorism on a large scale. The majority that anthropologists had been busy deconstructed should now be reconstructed, and violent means were deemed necessary to this end.

As a matter of fact, ‘deconstructing the majority’ has become something of a catchword in Norway after the terrorist attack in 2011, when an unemployed right-wing extremist killed 77 people. In his manifesto and YouTube video, posted online immediately before the attack, he had quoted me in several places, the most notorious quotation (which has subsequently appeared on right-wing websites worldwide) being my view, taken from an interview on an obscure University of Oslo website ([www.uio.no/culcom](http://www.uio.no/culcom)), that it was about time that we deconstructed the majority, since we had devoted so much attention to the minorities. Before and after the terrorist attack, this statement (from 2009) has often been denounced as hate-speech against the Norwegian people, its originator labelled a traitor. In a word, when I spoke about deconstructing the majority, I misjudged the readership. The notion questioned the self–other boundary and pointed to the internal diversity among ethnic Norwegians as a possible means to build an abstract community not based on race and kinship. Since deconstruction refers to taking something apart, ethnic nationalists worried about their boundaries felt threatened. However, even in the cheerful 1990s, when Norwegian anthropologists made fun of earnest, flag-waving nationalism, there was always an underlying, serious intention. Behind the jokes, we intended to raise questions about inclusion and exclusion in ethnically complex societies, asking whether ethnic nationalism was a helpful vehicle of identity in a world which was on the move, and ultimately, asking what a meaningful delineation of the word ‘we’ might be. The message, normative but founded in anthropological knowledge about cultural diversity, was that all human lives have value, that solidarity with others does not necessarily follow ethnic lines, that imagined communities are less homogeneous than often assumed, and that a collective identity not based on cultural similarity was perfectly imaginable and could be feasible. Following the terrorist attack and its aftermath, which has seen an increasing ideological polarisation around questions of identity and inclusion in Norwegian society, the playful lightness typical of an anthropology of the recent past may have been one of the first casualties.

This is a shame because anthropology can be at its heaviest when it is at its lightest.

### **New forms of irrelevance**

Universities have always been irrelevant, but today, they must find new ways of being irrelevant. At their best, they function according to the formula ‘the more irrelevant, the more relevant’. As Fredrik Barth once said: ‘The difference between basic research and applied research is that basic research is so much more applicable’ (Barth, personal communication).

Put differently: When applied research is good, it may be used to solve a given set of problems. Let us assume that the government wants an overview of fish consumption in different groups in the population, and pays a research group to find out. When answers are duly delivered some time later – people from north eat more fish than people from south, women more than men, those over forty more than the young (for example) – the government body in charge may begin to develop campaigns to change the behaviour of the least fish-eating segments.

A basic research project might instead ask questions connected to the role of fish in culture more generally, and might give tentative answers about masculinity (fish is feminine), notions about grossness (fish are slimy and stink), health (fish is not fattening) or virility (fish is an aphrodisiac). From here, one might develop an argument related to the place of fish in cultural history, notions about food in general, theories of classification (fish, meat, plant food, religious prohibitions and warnings etc.) and about social differentiation (upper-class people eat raw fish and call it sushi or poké, while the working class wants it beer-battered and deep-fried). These hypothetical examples are just meant to illustrate the possibilities of basic research.

In order to carry out a good applied research project, it is necessary to have a background in basic research. It is true that most university students will go on to jobs with no research component, but it is equally true that their studies should provide them with knowledge they can draw on, for pleasure and utility, for the rest of their lives. In this area, the above formula remains valid: The more experience-distant and arcane the knowledge, the more are the fields where it can be transformed into something experience-near and relevant. In order to understand the concrete, one needs abstract concepts. This is why Plato does not come with a use-by date.

In anthropology, many students find it difficult to understand why they need to learn about topics on which they are never going to work anyway. If, say, you want to become a Latin Americanist, you may not read more than the absolute minimum about Polynesian kinship. If your great passion consists in understanding gender differences cross-culturally, you do not waste your time delving into the cultural grammar of Swedish municipal politics.

Given time, the best of these students begin to understand why it may be necessary to read about Melanesian garden magic in order to understand popular religiosity in Sicily, how studies of clan feuds in southern Sudan in the 1930s may shed light on the civil wars in the Balkans in the 1990s, and why it is relevant to understand why people in New Guinea do not classify the cassowary as a bird although what one is really interested in, are West European understandings of the whale.

A properly educated person knows something about what unites and what separates people, and will often be capable of discovering similarities in pattern, similarities in content and fundamental cultural differences following some empirical exploration.

A properly educated person also knows that simple answers to complex questions are rarely satisfactory. Since she can draw on diverse sources, she sees any issue from several perspectives. Before concluding, she has approached the problem from many sides. She is also aware that several kinds of knowledge exist. Only a barbarian is capable of believing that a single kind of theory and a single kind of scientific method is capable of generating all the answers one wants or needs.

Education, in the full sense of the word (as in the German *Bildung*), should strengthen and shape the ability to think several thoughts simultaneously, without mixing them up. This presupposes that one simultaneously has something to think *with* and something to think *about*. The forces militating against this kind of intellectual freedom, I have argued, have gained strength in the last decade or two: an instrumentalist view of knowledge, New Public Management as a steering tool for universities, an ideological polarisation where any defence of cultural diversity is seen as treason to the national identity, and a shift towards a view of knowledge where only that which can be counted counts. In this environment,

needless to say, the subversive, engaged, open, imaginative and knowledgeable perspectives represented by anthropology when it is at its best, are needed more than ever.

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