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Teaching Anthropology: Remarks from a German Perspective

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Abstract

The Bologna Process opened a new chapter in the German higher education system, starting in 1999. Many new degree programmes have been implemented since then. It is nearly impossible to obtain an overview of the content of the more than 20,000 individual programmes thus far. Twenty-five years ago, this diverse offer of degree programmes would have been unthinkable. At that time, students specialized in Archaeology, German Studies, or Musicology; today, universities offer these subjects within such hybrid degree programmes as ‘Comparative Studies in Culture and Religion’, ‘Health and Society in South Asia’, or ‘Literary and Cultural Theory’. However, not only degree programmes diversify increasingly. The groups of students attending the courses have also continuously become more heterogeneous. Future archaeologists sit next to students of Transcultural Studies, and students of the teaching degree programme sit next to students of Global History. This raises such questions as ‘What does anthropology stand for?’, ‘How is anthropology conceptualized today?’, and ‘What does “teaching anthropology” mean?’.

The paper will touch on these questions and give an idea of my understanding of ‘teaching anthropology’, which is closely linked to my own academic biography. Consequently, this contribution is more of an essay-like attempt to prompt a discussion on today’s teaching of anthropology.

Keywords: anthropology, cultural anthropology, teaching, universities

Zusammenfassung

Seit sich die europäischen Bildungsminister im Juni 1999 in Bologna darüber verständigten, europaweit vergleichbare Studienabschlüsse einzuführen, hat sich in Deutschland nicht nur die Art des Studierens geändert. Seitdem wurden auch zahlreiche neue Studiengänge geschaffen. Einen Überblick über die Inhalte der heute mehr als 20 000 Studiengänge zu bekommen, ist aber kaum noch möglich. Vor 25 Jahren wäre dieses vielfältige Angebot an Studiengängen undenkbar gewesen. Damals studierte man Archäologie, Germanistik oder Musikwissenschaft, heute heißen die Studiengänge ‘Vergleichende Kultur- und Religionswissenschaft’, ‘Health and Society in South Asia’ oder ‘Literatur- und Kulturtheorie’. Doch nicht nur die Studiengänge werden immer vielfältiger. Auch die Gruppe der Studierenden, die in den Kursen sitzen, wird immer heterogener. Künftige Archäologen sitzen neben Studentinnen der Transkulturellen Studien und Lehramtsstudierende neben Studentinnen der Globalgeschichte/Global History. Die Vielfalt der Studienfächer nimmt also zu und zugleich die der Studierenden und damit auch die Herausforderungen. Dies wirft Fragen auf: Wofür steht die Anthropologie und wie wird sie heute konzeptualisiert? Was bedeutet in diesem Kontext heute überhaupt noch ‘teaching anthropology’?

Meine Ausführungen werden sich mit diesen Fragen befassen und einen Einblick in mein Verständnis von ‘teaching anthropology’ geben, das eng mit meiner eigenen akademischen Biographie verbunden ist. Der Beitrag ist daher mehr Essay als wissenschaftlicher Artikel und möchte eine Diskussion zu ‘teaching anthropology’ anstoßen.

Schlüsselwörter: Anthropologie, Kulturanthropologie, Lehre, Universitäten

Introduction

The statistics on today's programmes of study in German higher education show that more than 20,000 degree programmes were offered in the 2021–22 autumn semester (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz 2021, 9). Their large number and increasing diversification can be explained by the Bologna Process in 1999, whose main objective was to ensure comparability in the standards of university degrees. Many new degree programmes have been implemented since then. The statistics are easy to read, but it is nearly impossible to obtain an overview of the content of the individual programmes. Undoubtedly, degree programmes such as 'Comparative Studies in Culture and Religion' (Bachelor's programme, Marburg), 'Global History' (Master's programme, Heidelberg), 'Health and Society in South Asia' (Master's programme, Heidelberg), 'Archaeology of the Ancient World' (Bachelor's programme, Leipzig), 'Literary and Cultural Theory' (Master's programme, Tübingen) and many, many others sound modern and fashionable. Twenty-five years ago, such a range of study programmes would have been unthinkable. At that time, students specialized in Archaeology, German Studies, or Musicology. These degree programmes still exist, but they are coming under pressure.

However, it is not only the degree programmes that are becoming more and more diverse. The student body is also becoming increasingly heterogeneous, as students are encouraged to collect credit points by gaining so-called 'overarching skills' or 'key skills' by taking elective modules. In such classes, future archaeologists sit next to students of Transcultural Studies, and students of the teaching degree programme next to global historians. In short, the diversity of degree programmes is increasing, as is the diversity of students, posing further challenges to lecturers. This raises such questions as 'What does anthropology stand for?', 'How is it conceptualized today?', 'What does "teaching anthropology" mean?', and 'How can or should this teaching be managed?'

In this essayistic paper, I will not only touch on these questions, but also give a general idea of my understanding of 'teaching anthropology', which is closely linked to my own academic biography. Therefore, first, I will clarify what anthropology usually stands for. Second, I will discuss, from my point of view, what 'teaching anthropology' means and how it should be understood. The main objective of this self-reflection is to encourage an overdue dis-

ussion on teaching anthropology in Germany's increasingly heterogeneous study system.

What does anthropology usually stand for? The status quo

The number of degree programmes in Germany has been continuously increasing since the implementation of the Bologna Process. Many subjects, especially the so-called 'small subjects' ('Kleine Fächer'), have created joint degree programmes. In the Bachelor programme 'Comparative Studies in Culture and Religion' at the University of Marburg, for example, the three constituent subjects — European Ethnology (formerly Folklore), Religious Studies, and Cultural and Social Anthropology — cooperate in one programme with three focal points.

It is important to stress that the aim of this paper is not to critically examine the degree programmes but, rather, to point out the significant changes that have occurred since the Bologna Process: There are new forms of cooperation and collaboration, new degree programmes, and often new departmental structures.

Surprisingly, in this *omnium-gatherum* of more than 20,000 programmes currently offered at German universities,¹ the equivalent of the American four fields of anthropology (Physical or Biological Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology, Archaeology, and Linguistics) is not represented.² Although the Bologna Process has opened the door to new degree programmes, and although the programme choices are currently manifold, still a certain disinterest in collaborative teaching between the lines of physical anthropology, ethnology/cultural anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics is recognizable. Rather, an atmosphere of more or less disciplinary siloization still prevails. In 2009, the German cultural anthropologist Volker Gottowik even noted an attitude characterized by 'mutual hostility' (Gottowik 2009, 125) between the four subjects.

¹ In this regard, the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* carried the headline in 2017 'Is that necessary?', see <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/beruf-chance/campus/wildwuchs-der-studiengaengemuessen-19-000-sein-15265123.html> (accessed: 29 January 2023).

² On the origins of the four-field model, which have always been linked to Franz Boas, see Hicks (2013). One exception to the general rule about Germany is the Master's programme in Interdisciplinary Anthropology at the University of Freiburg, which goes beyond the four-field approach to include not only cultural anthropology and physical anthropology, but also historical studies, sociology, philosophy, cognitive science, and science and technology studies. Linguistics, however, is lacking.

By and large, the German situation is unusual. Why? Let us go back in time. Physical anthropology, cultural anthropology, and archaeology – or, in this case, prehistoric archaeology – have been quite strongly connected in German research in the 19th century. One need only think back to the numerous ‘anthropological societies’, for example, the Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte. However, this entanglement should not be understood in the sense of today’s interdisciplinarity, as these fields of research were not academically established at German universities until the end of the 19th century.³ Rather, the entanglement took place at the level of individual scholars. Many researchers of the time – most of whom were trained in medicine – were also interested in archaeological, ethnological, or linguistic matters and tried to link these fields as amateurs, or *dilettanti*. Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902), for example, was a physician all his life, but he was particularly interested in prehistory and became one of the most famous pioneering protagonists of prehistoric archaeology in Germany. The cultural anthropologist Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) also earned his doctorate in medicine; however, he ultimately found his way into ethnology. Franz Boas (1858–1942) obtained his doctorate in marine physics and his *Habilitation* in physical geography. In 1883–84, he participated in an expedition to the Canadian Arctic, where he became acquainted with the culture of the Inuit and ‘discovered his passion for linguistics and ethnology’ (Peregrine 2018). But while the four-field model of anthropology was being established in the USA – with Boas playing a decisive role in this⁴ – developments in Germany proceeded in an entirely different direction. No similar kind of anthropology that would pursue a holistic concept (Müller 1999, 27) and consider the ‘totality of human life practice’ from a global perspective (Harris 1989, 18) – both synchronously and diachronically – was established in the German-speaking world: Anthropology in the Boasian sense could not prevail, it was not even considered.

³ Eggert (2011) takes a different view and identifies no unity of physical anthropology, ethnology or cultural anthropology, and prehistory, but, rather, a parallelism.

⁴ In his well-known *Science* article, Boas speaks, on the one hand, of the ‘spirit of anthropological research, which consists of the necessity of studying all forms of human culture’ (Boas 1904, 522), including the ‘biological history of mankind in all its varieties; linguistics applied to people without written languages; the ethnology of people without historic records, and prehistoric archaeology’ (ibid. 523). On the other hand, he is aware of the problem that this field of research is ‘almost too wide’ and that there are ‘indications of its breaking up’; physical anthropology and linguistics, he was convinced, were tending towards separation (ibid.).

It is not my objective here to get deeper into debates concerning the disciplinary self-conception of anthropology in the United States. There are quite controversial discussions about the configuration of the discipline, the four-field unity, and its holistic approach. Critics such as Daniel A. Segal and Sylvia J. Yanagisako (Segal/Yanag-isako 2005) speak of a ‘dominant paradigm’ (ibid., 13) and ‘social-evolutionary burden’ (ibid., 8–11) and argue for more independence. Moreover, they actively call for change. In their opinion, cultural anthropology should detach itself from the more materialist and positivist sub-fields of archaeology and physical anthropology (see also Harkin 2010, 26) and be conceptualized instead as a ‘queer science’, creating alliances within the humanities (Segal/Yanagisako 2005, 13). On the other hand, some scholars conceive of anthropology as a ‘meta-science, with new patterns of connection among theories, ideas, data sets, methods, undreamt of in other disciplines, arising with stunning regularity’ (Harkin 2010, 37). But apart from arguments that ‘anthropology can be a dynamic field without the tetralogy’ (ibid., 39), anthropology means something entirely different in Germany than it does in the USA.

At German universities, such closely related subjects as archaeology and cultural anthropology are still structurally and institutionally separated from each other.⁵ Naturally, this has consequences for the teaching of anthropology, which is, to a large extent, undertaken within stubbornly upheld disciplinary boundaries; academics are engaged in ‘teaching physical anthropology’, ‘teaching cultural anthropology’, and so on. I must confess: I find this somewhat frustrating, because to me, anthropology means something different. Anthropology is a research field that must not be delimited (let alone fixed for all time) but kept open. Such an open understanding is consistent with the approach of the British social anthropologist Tim Ingold (2018, 74–76), who coined the term ‘anti-disciplinary interdisciplinarity’. According to him, we are still trying to overcome disciplinary boundaries that interdisciplinary cooperation has, in fact, reinforced for decades (e.g., by speaking of disciplinaries, multi-, inter- and transdisciplinaries all day long). Instead, Ingold argues, we should propagate and practice an ‘openness of knowing from the inside’ or, if you like, an openness within the research field (ibid., 76). This approach is not really new or revolution-

⁵ For instance, at the Freie Universität Berlin, the two subjects are assigned to completely different departments, with Cultural Anthropology not being part of the Department of History and Cultural Studies, even though it incorporates the word *cultural* in its name.

ary; indeed, it is quite often lived reality. Unfortunately, however, this approach is too rarely reflected upon and made explicit, because we still think – and usually position ourselves – in disciplinary terms.

A brief autobiographical excursion

It is now time for some autobiographical notes. First, I must admit that I have never taken an anthropology course in the proper sense of the word, and second, I would not characterize myself as an anthropologist. My academic background is, in the best sense of the term, a kind of ‘in-between’: I am trained in prehistoric archaeology; completed a PhD in Media Studies; and, finally, did my *Habilitation* in Popular Culture Studies (formerly Folklore). By the way: Franz Boas, when mentioning studies of folklore in his famous paper *The History of Anthropology*, pointed out that folklore has become the ‘science of all the manifestations of popular life’ and ‘must be considered a branch of anthropological research’ (Boas 1904, 519). So, you can call me an anthropologist if you want. Anyway, from 2015 until 2019, I worked in the field of teacher education, and although I am not trained in anthropology, I have taught many courses in different contexts and degree programmes at German universities that I would classify as being ‘anthropological’.

In my personal experience, I have found that, while interdisciplinarity is praised everywhere today, on a practical level it often leads to problems, especially if this kind of ‘interdisciplinarity’ is embodied in a single individual.⁶ The German academic system is very strongly discipline oriented, and scholars who move between well-established disciplinary worlds are still the exception.

What does ‘teaching anthropology’ mean (to me)?

This brings us to the second part of this paper – teaching. I would like to refer to Ingold again, whom I agree with. In an interview that focused on the central issues covered in his book *Anthropology and/as Education* (Ingold 2018), he was asked about the real purpose of anthropology. One of his central arguments was: ‘Anthropology

is a practice of education’ (Ergül 2017, 8).⁷ This phrase is not only intriguing; it is also in contrast to the conventional understanding of anthropology as ethnography. Indeed, Ingold places the term ‘education’ in the foreground, but not in the common sense of ‘to instil’, which ‘starts from the assumption that the novice is ignorant, therefore weak and vulnerable’ (ibid.). He prefers, in fact, a definition according to which ‘education is a process of becoming wise to things, and to the world. It teaches us to attend and to learn from what we observe’ (ibid.). In this view, education is not a matter of producing and imparting anthropological knowledge and thus turning students into consumers; rather, the concept of anthropology as education turns ‘every certainty into a question; every solution into a problem’ (ibid.). Anthropology, Ingold argues, exists to expand the scope of dialogue, or ‘to make a conversation of human life itself’ (Ingold 2017, 22).

Ingold’s approach reminds me of German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt’s concept of *Bildung*, which he conceptualizes as a reciprocal relationship between the ‘I’, or the human being, and the world – an everlasting process. *Bildung* in this sense is an open and creative process of self-reflection and self-questioning; it is more than the acquisition of a particular skill or piece of knowledge and therefore should not be reduced to the idea of professional training.⁸ Ingold’s concept is also reminiscent of Humboldt’s conception of science, which can be understood as ‘something not quite found yet and never quite to be found’ (cited by Nünning 2013, 32) and thus representing a never-ending process.

Conclusion

To summarize my central arguments, I note that, first, we can observe more and more undergraduate and graduate degree programmes at German universities where anthropological issues and skills are only part of the programme, and that, second, this leads to the question of whether we should not aim to overcome the well-established and long-practised understanding of anthropology, of both the four-field approach in the USA and of disciplinary thinking in Germany. In the context of the increasing diversification of both the student body and the higher

⁷This is ‘a generous, open-ended, comparative, and yet critical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the one world we all inhabit’ (Ingold 2017, 22). To practice anthropology, then, means not to make a study of people but ‘to study with people’ (ibid., 23).

⁸For a brief introduction of the concept *Bildung* see, e.g., Samida/Wienand (2019, 10–13).

⁶On ‘one-person-interdisciplinarity’, see Vollmer (2010, 53f.).

education landscape, a more open concept of ‘teaching anthropology’ should be considered. ‘Teaching anthropology’ has to be more than imparting knowledge – be it archaeological or cultural anthropological. New programmes, such as ‘Comparative Studies in Culture and Religion’, ‘Global History’, and ‘Transcultural Studies’, offer the opportunity to establish what Ingold (Ergül 2017, 8) has already called for: ‘Anthropology is a practice of education’.

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