

## Teaching in crisis: Anthropology under structural adjustment

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I want to address the pressure of structural adjustment policies on teaching and learning anthropology. I will base my thoughts on the Spanish case but the reflexion is applicable to many other countries in Europe. The decline in public funding and the increase in fees have transformed the meaning of higher education. Increasingly, productivity criteria and ranking measures become the guides to university investments and social valorisation of competing disciplines in the public eye.

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### *A Short story*

For several of the Southern European countries that are now subject to structural adjustment policies (Portugal, Greece, Spain) the 1980s and 1990s appeared as the promise of democracy and increased entitlement and access to basic rights such as education and health after long spells of autocratic and dictatorial regimes<sup>1</sup>. In Spain, while compulsory education was extended to 14 and then 16 years old (allegedly also to keep young people away from the labour market and unemployment rates under control), access to higher education became the real symbolic marker of change. The number of students enrolled in higher education increased by 240% from 1979 to 1999. Access to education in general and to higher education in particular (that had been the preserve of political and economic elites) symbolized social mobility. It was also a sign of democratization expressing the political enfranchisement of the masses. Education paved the way to freedom and prevented political manipulation: it was the mark of the fully able and responsible citizen, the political citizen. Therefore public education, as necessary to democracy, was a political project and the responsibility of a democratic state.

In Spain, the rise of anthropology as a discipline investigating social relations and cultural practices in the contemporary world (as different from folklore studies, philosophical anthropology and theology, and the colonial history of America) was strongly tied to this political moment of the fight for and the transition to democracy.

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1. A first version of this paper was presented as a keynote lecture at the "Teaching Amidst Change" Conference, 5-6 September 2013, Department of Education, University of Oxford, UK. I want to thank the organizers Jakob Krause-Jensen, David Mills and Didi Spencer for their invitation, and all the participants for their comments and presentations.

### *Teaching in crisis*

The neo-liberal restructuring of higher education, under way since the 1980s in the UK, has resulted in a series of measures that have changed the meaning of the university. Rather than a place of learning it is now an enterprise producing a commodity, namely a degree with value in the labour market. The idea that the university is an environment where knowledge is collectively being created for the common good is sidelined. In its place, the accumulation of objectified knowledge assets prevails.

Technocratic arguments have supported the restructuring of the university system underscoring financial sustainability to the detriment of any other argument. Neoliberal objectives lurk under a seemingly neutral, non-ideological and a-political technocratic rationale. Indeed, restructuring in higher education (as in other structural adjustment projects) was couched in the “crisis argument”: in financial terms the public higher education enterprise was in permanent deficit. Costs were high and benefits low. Benefits, however, were difficult to measure because they included not only strictly financial returns to the enterprise itself, but also returns accrued to the bearers of the resulting human capital, measured in terms of employability and wage differential. In a new era of universities’ financial autonomy and rolling back of public subsidies to higher education, an increase in productivity meant lower costs and higher profits: staff reorganization and high student fees. But in university, as in other paid care services such as health care, it is almost impossible to increase staff productivity without negatively affecting quality: productivity gains through staff cuts and precarization result in lower-quality input in a creative process that requires intensive interaction between teachers and students and the building of a *caring* relationship.

The transformation of university from a public good into a market oriented service producing tradable commodities has had another important effect. University degrees are valued as credential assets, in terms of employment security and the future income expectations they provide for their holders. This perspective on higher education is not new. It is linked to the concept of “human capital” and the self-entrepreneurial individual, rendered directly responsible for his or her own success in life. The “human capital” idea transforms knowledge into an individual asset instead of a collaborative process, and transforms education into an investment. As an investment, then, it should secure and maintain its value into the future and it should also increase it. But investments are risky and the future is unknown in a truly secular culture. Therefore students speculate over the future marketability of the degrees often choosing a discipline not because they are interested in it but because they think it will be in demand in the future labor market. Hence an increasingly instrumental understanding of knowledge and learning albeit in a extremely volatile environment that renders investments highly risky.

Higher education used to be a collective process of knowledge production and transmission, where research and teaching nurtured each other. Now the university has been transformed into a provider of commodified degrees, hence at a price and under

market conditions of supply and demand. Significantly, the attitude towards university education is being transformed. Instead of an entitlement and part of a persons' transformation into a responsible citizen, it becomes a consumption item, an investment, an asset of human capital. From being a political good, it becomes an economic asset. Final objectives, then, are entirely different and operate in a different cultural environment.

This transformation has had two consequences. On the one hand, fees have increased out of pace with ordinary incomes in most places, arguably in relation to demand (better universities or degrees can charge more because they deliver better prospects of employability and future income). In countries such as Spain, the sudden raise in university fees in the last couple of years has resulted in a high number of dropouts related to economic reasons<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the Bologna restructuring of the university has reorganized curricula in such a way that it is very difficult to be a part-time student and work on the side. At the same time fellowships are being cut. Consequently, university will again become a privilege instead of an entitlement.

On the other hand, certain degrees have been defined as overvalued or non-marketable because they do not increase employment and income prospects. Courses, degrees, disciplines, with low demand are disappearing in a market driven environment. In Spain, university bylaws are being modified so that degrees with an enrollment under 40 new students a year are considered unviable and forced to disappear. An alternative proposition is that they become extremely expensive. As a councilor of the Catalan government said recently: "Those who want to study Latin... let them pay for it".

### *Teaching anthropology*

Within this general "crisis" argument that serves to justify deep transformations in higher education all over Europe: What is happening in Anthropology? I will speak of social anthropology and of the situation in Spain. As a Social Science and Humanities discipline social anthropology is at risk and is pushed to demonstrate its relevance for "society" (often used as a substitute for "the market"). Mostly it is required to define its professional niche: what is it that anthropologists really do? What are their abilities and capacities? How do they contribute to economic growth? While it seems to most of us pretty obvious that research based in the ethnographic and comparative methods can offer important knowledge for policy, it is also clear that its critical edge is potentially disturbing. Knowledge about how society works or doesn't work, about power fields and social relations, about the multiple strategies and practices that defy or uphold institutions, about expectation and frustration, about forms of violence and forms of care, and about producing meaningful difference... is a potentially dangerous knowledge for the establishment. Anthropology teaches and learns from crises.

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2. In the 2012-2013 academic period some 30,000 students have been unable to pay their full fees and have been threatened with expulsion (*El País*, 27-08-2013).

Because ideas and practices on how to produce and enhance wellbeing are not homogeneously shared across society, knowledge about society can support many kinds of action and forms of engagement, but also, this knowledge is produced from a situated position that informs observation and theory. It is never neutral and is at pains to present a “technocratic” appearance. It is always engaged, always a continuation of our political positioning by other means. Thus, against the neo-liberal trend in higher education that stresses neutral forms of vocational training responding to labor market demand, anthropology is always political (although not always in the same way). Anthropology is at risk of disappearing as a proper discipline because the knowledge it provides can only become co-opted into mainstream economic objectives by being fragmented, disembedded and often distorted. Different sub-fields within anthropology used to be thought of as a mere analytical tool within a holistic arena that explored real life complexity. Now, instead, these analytical fields (increasingly fragmented) are competing against each other as commodities in a market trying to seduce individual customers. And this is a real danger to what makes anthropology’s specificity.

The crisis, or the argument of the crisis as an instrument for the privatization of higher education, has made an important impact in anthropology. The changes it has brought about are an obstacle to the collective enterprise of learning through teaching and research that are vital for anthropology. Anthropological knowledge is unique because it is produced through the ongoing debate of hypotheses during the fieldwork experience, the tension of diverse forms of knowledge, of different manners of distancing and categorizing in order to “make sense” of experienced reality. Anthropology is about learning from others and learning with others through engaged reflexivity. This is the only way Anthropology can exist as a science and be taught.

So the question is can we keep building this collective knowledge in the new environment of induced crisis in higher education?