

A Parting Reflection

Thomas Reuter, former Chair, WCAA

27 April 2012

The purpose of the WCAA has been to create a more ethical world; a world wherein people come together to give and take council, with the aim of seeking a fair exchange for the wellbeing of all. It is a world wherein leading individuals from many countries meet in mutual trust and with a growing sense of shared purpose, ready to work together for a better future.

This is now a reality. By putting principles of equality and mutual appreciation into our political practice as professional anthropologists, we have taken a decisive step forward and are setting a clear example. Such a concrete example may one day inspire the world at large to make an attempt to turn the possibility of free and mutually supportive interaction among the diverse peoples of this world into a reality. We are demonstrating that this kind of world can most definitely be accomplished, if you want it.

There are a few simple but important prerequisites for maintaining commitment to peaceful worldwide collaboration, across all boundaries of cultural or racial identity. Most of all, genuine empathy and affection would seem indispensable as a foundation. Is this prerequisite difficult to meet?

As anthropologists we are likely to think that a person ought to be able to feel some basic affection toward people from all other countries (and surely that would include their colleagues in those countries). In order to make something of this base-line affection, to put it into practice and build on it, however, we need to imbue it with proper and detailed mutual understanding of our different ways of doing things. That takes time, and a degree of resilience to the inevitable experience of small setbacks. Commitment to change thus must rely on a basic faith in the feasibility of change at the beginning, on a conviction that much is possible in human relations.

The WCAA has reached a stage now where the good faith with which we began in 2004 has been fully confirmed by the evidence of experience. My repeated observation over the last eight years has been that the many individuals who have passed through WCAA and have attended some of our gatherings have found it remarkably easy to meet their colleagues from abroad with genuine affection, courtesy and goodwill. We all have pleasantly surprised ourselves by discovering just how easy it really is. It turns out we share a tremendous amount of common ground, perhaps because we all have invested so much of our time and our dreams into a discipline that seeks to approach other peoples and their ways of living with curiosity and an open mind.

Is it then really very easy to live in a more ethical world? I believe it is. Indeed, where there is a commitment to working together, and where there is growing evidence of real benefits, and much enjoyment to be had in the process of achieving them, the common good almost takes care of itself. Almost! It is still a lot of work to realize the aspirations of a community. And it is more work still to share our insights with a wider world community that is now faced with unprecedented political and environmental challenges. Our struggles and insights as anthropologists could not be more relevant to this wider world than they are now, in this anthropocene era, because meeting today's challenges will require cooperation on a global scale, as well as a deep appreciation for the survival value of diversity and localised action.

And if participation in an open and fair-minded world community and the setting of a positive example for the world community at large is still not enough, there are also significant intellectual benefits in forming a global community in anthropology. I am convinced it will lead to a deep transformation of the discipline as a whole.

The rise of a global community of 'world anthropologies' is about nothing less than the dawn of a new kind of consciousness. This new consciousness arises out of dynamic multilateral interaction between anthropologists situated along the entire spectrum of cultural perspectives worldwide, under conditions of fair and equal exchange. This has not happened until now because the dominant discourses of the discipline have been shaped by anthropologists from a rather small number of closely related countries, many of whom have had no exposure to the many other national or regional anthropological communities whose representatives are now sitting with them at the round table of the WCAA. This mutual encounter takes us far beyond a historical period wherein we were just studying other peoples as objects. The mutual mirroring that is now becoming possible and indeed expected -- within the 'world anthropologies' paradigm -- is helping us understand our human condition in radically new ways. Directing our attention to the insights that can be gained from this new meta-subjective reflexivity will show that our human susceptibility to cultural conditioning empowers, but also restricts us in many unique and complex ways. A meta-subjective turn in anthropology may encourage us to relinquish identification with the entire lopsided idea of a separate and privileged subject, immersed in a sea of objects. Indeed, developing a more decentred awareness and self-understanding is essential if we are to conduct with genuine maturity our international relations, as well as our relations with the great diversity of other life forms with whom we share this planet.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues from around the world. Your spirit of openness, courage, affection and respect has made it all possible, your commitment has made it real, and your experience to date instils great confidence in what can be accomplished in future.