

Antrocom Onlus, an opportunity for Anthropology

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Summary - *In the background of Italian anthropology, physical anthropology and cultural anthropology can not easily find a point of fruitful contact, to improve the interdisciplinary prospects provided by the study of mankind. This is an outstanding problem, especially for students, and it obstructs an extensive educational and professional growth. The Antrocom Association is the first Italian institution with the mission of establishing a dialogue between the two branches of the same discipline. Our initiative attempts to find new ways of divulging anthropology and making a anthropological knowledge (and know how) a tangible instrument, applied to our days' demands.*

Keywords - *Interdisciplinary character, Physical Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology, Antrocom, Association.*

Introduction

In Italy a combination of historical and cultural choices have prevented that anthropology developed an identity of its own as a discipline: as a matter of fact the branches of learning which make parts of it are spread in different university courses and are taught with different methodologies (Grottanelli *et al.*, 1977; Meloni, 2006; Simonicca, 2006). Differently from the Anglo Saxon world, where anthropology has been defining itself in the course of years and has assumed a precise disciplinary identity (Shenk, 2006), in Italy we have proof of a neat split between physical and cultural anthropology, not only from the methodological point of view, but also in the organization of the University faculties.

Both branches of anthropology have the same subject of study: *human being*. The first branch is concerned with the "biological species", the second one with the "cultural species". A contradiction was thus generated: physical anthropology and cultural anthropology can hardly establish contacts, while a synergy of intents and methods could

improve the anthropological research (Ainsworth Harrison, 1987; Gillespie *et al.*, 2003).

The search for a contact between biological and cultural anthropology, both in their theoretical and practical parts, is certainly not an Italian problem only. But, while in Italy this problem gives evidence to an idealistic and political failing as also shown by the fact that we miss a register of professional Anthropologists (Meloni, 2006), abroad the situation is less static and passive.

Recently a survey about the motivations leading the anthropology departments of some famous US Universities to choose between subdivision into specific units or integration in order to achieve an interdisciplinary character produced some remarkable results. Some universities such as Harvard, Stanford and Duke chose to create a department of biological anthropology separated from a department of cultural anthropology for economical-administrative reasons rather than on methodological grounds. On the other hand, the Universities of Florida and of Pennsylvania, the Emory and the Arizona State University preferred a unique department in which the

two branches share contacts and provide a particular kind of training to their students. This qualification makes part of a stream of studies well identified by the name of the department in the Arizona State University: "School of Human Evolution and Social Change" (Shenk, 2006).

As a matter of fact the question does not only connote a problem of academic organization, but it has its repercussions on the training and the possibilities of a specific education, without which the ability for information and experience exchange between students and research workers in the anthropological field is affected. Just because the subject of the study is human being, it is important that this ability is allowed to find its space to grow and develop, since the first contact between students and the University. In this way, students would have the chance to establish contacts among themselves and with research workers with more experience, would get to know different study and research realities and could use this mutual exchange to improve concepts and experiences dealing with the difference and as a consequence both with biological and cultural diversity.

The situation of biological and cultural anthropology is part of the background of Italian research, damaged by the scarcity of funds and by a poorly efficient bureaucratic system. Nevertheless, in the specific case of anthropology, what makes the situation worse is exactly the fact that it is divided into different fields which cannot, nor want, to share a dialogue (Wallerstein, 2003). The supporters of these two branches always disagree not only about methodology and objectives of the anthropological research, but also within their own field whenever appears the possibility of a contact with the colleagues working on the other side of the epistemological barricade.

As a matter of fact, there is a stronger and stronger need for a rational integration of the respective methodologies, including also the knowledge of the different jurisdictions and intervention areas, rather than a direct dialogue between physical and cultural anthropologists. It happens too often that the cultural and physical anthropologists know each other only superficially and on the

basis of academic prejudices, underrating the importance of their respective research works.

Facing the complexity of the phenomenon "human being" and the deeper and deeper complexity which exists between society and environment, between "Culture" and "Nature", individual and group, it becomes really difficult to provide instruments of understanding, even reciprocal understanding, making reference to a unique methodology, or at least to the attempt of proposing one.

In some precincts, the two branches of anthropology are in such a symbiosis than one cannot distinguish which one is the basis for the other. The need for a strong and lively dialogue between the two branches is now pressing: the different methodological approaches converge in the same objective, that is to say, to study man and understand his behaviour, his history and his relationship with his fellow men and with the environment.

It is just for the different methods used that the encounter between physical and cultural anthropology must not only come true in the conclusions, but in the very process of data acquisition, to create a synergy enlightening the same anthropological question from different points of view. Moreover, anthropology is necessarily a science in progress, condensing in itself different contributions related to the improvements in methodologies and concepts.

We have been writing about a rational and not holistic integration: without any doubt some given precincts can be dealt with only with one or the other approach of anthropology. Nevertheless, at a wider level the suggested integration is the only method to overcome the conservatism of a discipline which is slowly losing contact with its historical roots, aimed to explain human diversity and to mend the presumed tear with the natural world. At the same time, a split "anthropological reality" is of no use both to the scientific divulgation and to the enthusiasts and experts of the discipline, who try to keep up to date in spite of the impossibility of approaching research works and meetings. These occasions are seen by the collective imagination as intellectual events not likely to mix up with the real world.

So, in this social and cultural context, it is difficult to transmit simple, leading and necessary ideas: physical anthropology and cultural anthropology are not in conflict, on the contrary they are two different methodological approaches combined in the study of human being; the educational fragmentation in which student and research workers have to find their way prevents on the one hand a wide-ranging qualification, and on the other the divulgation of correct information even to mere enthusiasts; the lack of information exchange promotes neither a personal growth nor an increase of social knowledge, which will not be able to face the human and environmental XXI century's challenge if not repeating obsolete methodological approaches.

Antrocom Onlus: a possible answer

The described background has been growing more and more confused and paradoxical, producing some effects which are especially noticed by those who try to make a job out of these two disciplines, and not only a subject of study. Perplexity is widespread in Italy among those who cannot easily cultivate anthropology as a profession, while on foreign reviews and web sites specialized staff is wanted, and not only in the University domain.

In front of an academic training providing a poor amount of working possibilities, both in the academic career and in the position of "free lance anthropologists", we looked for a solution creating a new opportunity: a non-profit-making association proposing a new approach to the complex situation of Italian anthropology. An association which is not aimed to be the expression of existing academic realities, but to be opened to share a dialogue with them. Even if it cannot be considered a definite answer to the lack of professional openings, such an association creates a new prospect entering the "market" in a different way.

In spring 2002 some anthropology students felt the need, rising from the observation of

their Universities, for a sharing net. It is only in April 2003 that this enterprise took form in the Community of *Anthropos*, at first inclined to physical anthropology. In July the same year the first positive responses arrived from experts of cultural anthropology, and *Anthropos* started to distinguish as the only community in the Italian web to join physical and cultural anthropologists.

Later, in March 2005, *Anthropos* felt the need to spread this peculiarity of its own in *Antrocom*, the on-line review of the Community. This was to be an issue able to report about the dialogue between physical and cultural anthropology, and to fill the gap of anthropological diffusion addressed also to non-specialists. While *Anthropos* was consolidating its position as the unique vertical Italian-speaking portal dedicated to anthropology and anthropologies on the basis of voluntary work, it became clearly necessary to constitute an association with the suitable instruments apt to manage more and more enterprises and contacts. So in June 2006 we had to record a part of the volunteers in *Antrocom Onlus*, a legally acknowledged non-profit-making association, while *Antrocom*, the on-line review of the Community was redefined "On-line Journal of Anthropology".

The name we chose for the Association recalls both the web site of the Community of *Anthropos* and the review. The word *Antrocom* comes from *anthropology* and from *community*, but also from *anthropology* and *communication*; *anthropology* is here meant with the broadest of meanings: the study which enables to read the journey of man in time and space, to investigate his past and his future prospects understanding his present time; *community* recalls a group of people willing to share their knowledge and their curiosity about a subject of study, human being, with many facets in it. People looking for dialogue beyond their specialization and experience. The *communication* will be simple, but precise and considered, able to spread new ideas without overlooking the old ones, recognizable for its method and reliability. From the constitution of *Antrocom* comes the possibility for the association to raise public and private board funds, and

from this point of view, the Association is more and more dedicated to the improvement of the anthropologist's role and abilities, and the cultural and civil development of citizens.

In this way, the action of *Antrocom* takes place not only in the scientific research, but also in education, training and in the diffusion of the anthropological sciences by the organization of activities aimed to bring out the human biological and demo-ethno-anthropological heritage; by the organization and promotion of studies and research in the field of physical and cultural anthropology, and of course their diffusion; by grants, prizes, scholarships, contributions for research works and publications; by awakening public opinion to problems related to the biological and cultural study about human being. All these activities make it possible to put in action a synergy of purposes and resources to give a contribution to understand human being, the society he takes part in, and the time he lives in.

Antrocom Onlus: an attempt to integration

The *Anthropos* Community has reached more than 1600 registrations with a monthly average of 80.000 visits; it has given, and is giving students, doctors and *amateurs* a chance for dialogue with other research workers and anthropology experts, who they could hardly have met in other situations, at the same time giving evidence to the possibility of interdisciplinary research works born from information exchange.

Therefore *Antrocom* is reaping the result reached by the Community (fig.1), making use of the experience of its members to increase the relationship not only among people, but also among institutions. Realizing projects and activities, the association collaborates with the traditional means of anthropology education and training, and produces new opportunities for professional growth and scientific research beyond the usual institutional lines. As there had never been such examples in the Italian context, *Antrocom* is a pioneering project entering

the world of the non-profit-making cultural associations aimed to protect the immense biological and cultural human heritage and to bring out its value, and it has found its strength and the base for its activities in the internet potential. The first enterprises started by the group of volunteers which later constituted the Association are a meaningful example of this all.

The Anthropos Community

Anthropos is a vertical portal dedicated, as said before, both to physical and cultural anthropology. It is not only an encyclopaedic site, but a lively community able to connect both experts and mere enthusiasts of anthropology. Its format is based on MDPro, formerly Envolution, a Content Management System (CMS) written in PHP code with open source licence.

The registration in the Community is completely free and provides its members with different facilities, useful to acquire and

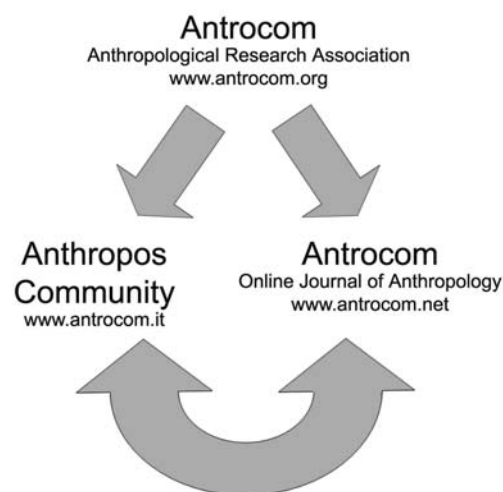


Fig. 1 – The relationship between the three realities that form the network of Antrocom Onlus: the Association manage both Anthropos Community and Antrocom website, On-line Journal of Anthropology. The Community is also centre of debate and information about the initiatives made by the Association and about the content of Antrocom journal.

share notions, but also to interact with the other members of the community. In order to encourage the highest level of interaction, an internal system of mail and a forum for the different themes have been implemented on the web site. The divulgation of anthropology is favoured by the web sections gathering articles, studies and reviews from several media. There are files to download at the subscribers' disposal: materials, documents and programs useful for study, research and spare time.

In this way the Community exploits the whole potential of the technologies which have opened the way to the web 2.0 revolution. The creation of an online community gathering different people for age, schooling and job has permitted to develop interesting approaches to the anthropological disciplines, realized by free interdisciplinary workshops, set in different Italian cities: the absence of a physical seat, allows the volunteers to have a flexibility of coordination which only the internet could offer. As a matter of fact, it is the members and the volunteers from different Italian cities which maintain the updating and the monitoring of events, news and activities issued from time to time and, when possible, followed on place to make a report. So the potential of a virtual community, already studied by cultural anthropology, becomes a mean of scientific divulgation, looking for new approaches, new ways to consider a kind of anthropology beyond the usual limits, without the risk of an excessive simplification in spite of its complexity, and of intellectual and theoretical virtuosities not apt to a public usage.

Antrocom, the "Online Journal of Anthropology"

Antrocom, the name of the online journal of anthropology issued by the *Anthropos* Community, recalls, as said, the web site of the Community and the name of the Association, in order to strengthen the brand of the whole project. *Antrocom* channels the need to focus the resources of the community onto extensive

projects able to make the its members' attitudes to stand out. The Journal is not intended to be one of the "sector reviews". The published articles are characterized by their scientific rigour which does not leave space to the technicalities of the subject, in order to make the divulgation easier.

As for the other contents of the Community, marked by the sharing of knowledge, *Antrocom* does not diverge from this philosophy and joins the Copyleft movement and the Open Access movement, which are asserting themselves with scientists as the real opportunity for the circulation of ideas both in anthropology and, generally speaking, in *Antrocom* scientific divulgation.

Antrocom Onlus in practice

The way to reach a rational integration between physical and cultural anthropology is a communication work aimed to bring out the value of the anthropologist as a professional able to interpret the daily human, environmental and social challenges issued by the newly born millennium. The question about the possibility and the usefulness of a dialogue between physical and cultural anthropology is tinged with another one, regarding the tasks and the abilities of the anthropologist, especially outside the academic field. Answering to this question means to transform anthropology from a purely academic discipline into a discipline opened to the world of work, research, experimentation. It is a fixed course for those who have completed their studies and have to face the professional world, where the role of the research worker offers little retribution and stability.

Antrocom is not bound to existing institutions: if on the one hand this may entail objective difficulties in starting activities and projects, on the other it represents its own strength when it is necessary to create interdisciplinary research groups and put the media in touch with the research workers. The contacts among research workers in *Antrocom* is made easier by a net of members who create a relationship among the institutions. This connection overcomes

the normal bureaucracy to get to the core of the problems in study. The clearest example is the possibility to create a positive interaction between the media and the research workers, which is not always friendly and granted.

The reasons of which are especially to be found in the stereotypes regarding journalists on the one hand and scientists on the other. The first ones are too keen on sensationalism and too little interested in details and precision; the second ones are little communicative and too careful about details not interesting for the public. This problem concerns the communication between these two categories, far from each other, and it may be solved by an intermediation willing to consider the needs of both parties.

The *Anthropos* Community is already experimenting this intermediation, spreading the latest news in the field of both physical and cultural anthropology, often using external consultation. *Antrocom*, the online journal of anthropology, carries articles both by research workers and popularizers, which tone is checked by a scientific team who has to verify the correctness of the information addressed to readers interested to the subject but not always experienced enough to discern any incidental inaccuracy. Therefore there is the opportunity for the Association to provide consultancy services addressed to the media, which in *Antrocom* would find a reliable and fast source of information, but also to the firms dealing with anthropological problems, with poor reference in the field and as a consequence, some difficulty in framing the questions in the right perspective.

The ethnologist Lorenzo Brutti (2002) has pointed out some interesting ideas in the same direction chosen by Antrocom: "*Why do not we tender as expert consultants to public and private firms which have to deal with human multicultural resources or operate in countries of a different culture, where the standard entrepreneurial strategies do not work because of the different image of the partners? Why do not we offer our services to the reviews and television networks where incompetent journalists often affect with dreary stereotypes peoples we know much better than them? Why do not we get*

off our chair and offer to write and speak about our anthropology in a review or in a television programme, in a different language from the one we use in our university courses and in our books, more apt to the media to which we are applying?"

The examples provided by such firms as Vodafone UK and Context Based Research Group make this very clear. The first one committed an anthropological research to set out a telephone service improved on the base of the cultural schemes studied by anthropology (in this case, the circuit of Kula in the people of Papua New Guinea); in order to improve the technological marketing strategies, the Context Based Research Group used ethnography as a mean of investigation out of the anthropological research, using it in a versatile way in the field of firm marketing (Prabhu & Frohlich, 2005). Homometrica Consulting uses the anthropometric knowledge in informatics: its principal activity consists in supplying solutions for the human body scanning. This is a useful application, both to fulfil the recent demand for biometric and rehabilitation solutions, and for the replacement of actors and stuntmen in the movie production.

These applications go much farther than mere didactics, nevertheless an important field, especially when it opens to new multimedia realizations. Moreover, anthropometric gathers supports when applied to the field of ergonomic in architecture, in the safety tests of newly issued cars (Moss *et al.*, 2000), in the field of auxology and biometric, as well as the one of fashion. The context is slightly different for what concerns human ecology, which, in Italy at least, has not found any practical application yet, although it looks necessary in view of the environmental challenges upsetting our future.

Last autumn *Antrocom* presented a project in the background of the X Biennial Exhibition of Architecture in Venice (2006). While the most architectural part of the project was worked out by the MASS Studio group from Milan, the anthropological study was edited by *Antrocom*, focusing on the environmental, territorial, biological and cultural variables which influence, or will do, the realization of

an architectural work, its relationship with the citizens and with the environment, and its fruition. This is a theoretical analysis which took advantage from the methodological experience in ethnology, urban anthropology, physical anthropology and human ecology and will have a practical application next months.

The approach to the anthropological market

What comes out is a general outline in which *Antrocom*, by the conduction of projects and activities, does not only place itself side to side with the traditional means of education and training in anthropology, but also creates new opportunities of professional growth, scientific research and contact with the public. It is evident that the first step leads towards a diffused divulgation, considering the lack of a basic anthropological knowledge in the public itself. It is the first stage in which it is necessary to popularize anthropology in order to let people get acquainted with it.

Taking inspiration from the marketing strategies, we may say that it is difficult to sell the anthropological product if we do not create a demand by the suitable advertising channels, which give rise, on the one hand to curiosity, and on the other to the need for anthropology. Resorting to a language from the marketing background does not happen by chance.

Antrocom pursues its institutional aims in a positive prospect towards the anthropological market. After all, it is market, what we have to deal with. This perception has recently risen a debate aware of the poorly active relationship between anthropologists and the public. It is not by chance that, in the November 2006 issue of *Anthropology News*, Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall reports the work that the American Anthropological Association is conducting in order to supply a brand to the American anthropology. They are not doing that interviewing the main experts, on the contrary they are trying to understand what is the perception people have about anthropology, simply asking them: “*When I say the word ‘Anthropology’ what is your gut reaction?*”.

The proposals

The net of anthropologists that *Antrocom* is about to create, and that is partially already active, offers remarkable advantages. First of all, a flexible management of all the needs both economic and logistic, connected to an anthropological study. This flexibility allows the people taking part in an *Antrocom* project to share a qualified experience out of their academic precinct. With the word ‘experience’ we mean not only the possibility to take part in some anthropological studies, but also the possibility to practice the divulgation as said above, in order to acquire means of communication which are more and more needed in the widened background of the XXI century’s scientific research.

And farther than supporting the divulgation of the discipline, showing its practical aspects, one becomes a point of reference and a partner for the institution one is part of, and acquires visibility. The economical aspect is particularly important if we consider the situation of the Italian scientific research. The lack of funds too often forces the suspension, if not the cancellation of researches in progress and may lead to give up the mere idea of research itself. The possibility to raise funds becomes therefore an urgent need, that the University cannot fulfil because of its own structure. An external institution, such as an association dealing with scientific research, can dispose of several channels of access to the funds and of an important bureaucratic agility.

How to collaborate with Antrocom Onlus

Such enterprises as *Antrocom* may raise both curiosity and preoccupation. As a matter of fact, being the first institution of its kind (since unfortunately, as far as we know, there are not any other similar situations) means to explore new ways, and open new horizons, but it also means to face difficulties and risks, the solutions of which have been experimented in other fields, but not in the one of anthropological divulgation and training. The wide range of age of the participants

may be overawing, hiding the great potential of the project. Cooperating with *Antrocom*, both with economic and intellectual contributions, entering as a member and taking part in the activities represent some of the possible ways of collaboration.

This may be a chance for education and personal improvement for the individuals, while the institutions can find a partner to establish a durable and fruitful collaboration and relationship.

Conclusions

Anthropology needs to change its identity of scientific discipline, not only from the methodological point of view, but also as an organizational structure. In order to face the changes about to come in the new millennium – social and environmental changes – both cultural and physical anthropology must find a new kind of synergy to draw and develop the best part of each one.

In this article we have presented an attempt of integration which considers not only the need for

renewal, but also the relationship of anthropology with the wide public and with the background of the ‘anthropological market’. By the communication with the wide public and the practical research and work possibilities, anthropology can find a way of renewal and achievement in contexts which otherwise would be poorly usable. This way is certainly not exclusive and resolute, although it represents the first experiment of this kind in the Italian background, and it needs support and cooperation from research workers and free lance experts, but especially from all the students who will be tomorrow’s anthropologists.

Acknowledgements

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Info on the web

- <http://www.anthrojob.com/>
Anthrojob - Context-Based Research Group. A company based in the USA which applies the ethnologic method to various firm's situations.
- <http://www.antrocom.it>
Anthropos Community. The web site which gave origin to the Antrocom Association. It is a virtual meeting point for research workers, students and amateurs both for physical and cultural anthropology.
- <http://www.antrocom.org>
Antrocom Onlus. The institutional web site of the Antrocom Association.
- <http://www.dwrc.surrey.ac.uk/>
Digital World Research Centre. A company which uses the ethnographic knowledge in order to study economics.
- <http://www.homometrica.ch>
Homometrica Consulting. They use the anthropometric knowledge in informatics: its main activity consists in providing solutions for the human body scanning.
- <http://www.masstudio.net/socialNet.htm>
VEMA, Antrocom & MASS Studio. The representation of the net diagram presented at the 10th Biennial Exhibition of Architecture in Venice, concernine the subject of the Italian Pavilion, VEMA.

- <http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn6803>
- <http://research.microsoft.com/users/r.harper/Consulting.aspx>
The work by Richard Harper for Vodafone UK. As it is confidential, it is possibile to read only a summary of it.
- <http://www.maxdev.com/>
MDPro CMS site. Antrocom web sites are based on this Content Management System, written in PHP code with open source licence.

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