

# THE ASCONA CHARTER

## A Desire for Transformation or a Moral Argument?

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How can we not adhere to the values proposed by the Ascona Charter? Has transforming anthropology in order to transform the world never been more urgent? The suggestions of the working group meeting in Ascona in June 2024 arouse admiration for a whole series of reasons. In fact, they reconnect with the posture of the committed intellectual, going against a massive neoliberal trend that has for decades valued individual productivity and the race for excellence. They draw a lucid observation about the multiplicity of crisis factors, which unfold from the individual to the global scale. Close to people, feelings of anxiety caused by ambient authoritarianism make it increasingly difficult to carry out personal projects. At a collective level, social inequalities and precariousness seem to increase endlessly. At the global level, the ecological crisis makes long-term projections increasingly difficult. In this seemingly desperate context, the need for collective and collaborative action seems to be both a practical and ethical necessity.

The merit of the Ascona Charter is therefore to identify problems and propose effective solutions to transform a situation that has become so dramatic for humanity. The dynamics of the proposed transformation are based on “internally oriented values” which should be respected in the work of anthropology itself, on “work processual values” which concern our relationships with the societies that we study, and on “societal commitments” regarding our ability to respond to global challenges.

The ethical discourse proposed must, however, not mask the problems linked to the concrete possibilities of its implementation. It should be remembered here that certain anthropological associations have drawn attention to the limits inherent in ethical charters, which can be especially counterproductive when they are transformed into instruments for standardizing “best practices” (Benveniste and Sélim 2014, 21–22). The risk of any ethical discourse is in fact to propose a unified point of view which goes against “indigenous” or “grounded” epistemologies and ends up giving good conscience to the dominant discourse, according to a largely ethnocentric perspective. There is then a risk of reducing the diversity of ways of practicing anthropology, in the name of moral arguments. To put it simply, is the constitutive diversity of anthropologists’ field experiences compatible with the formulation of a unified ethical posture of the profession? Here, we should therefore be wary of easy tendencies towards “ethical exorcism” and the “duty of moralization”, tendencies which are otherwise so widespread in all social, economic, and political fields.

Another discussion that cannot fail to emerge when reading the Ascona Charter concerns the expression of “commitments” in the form of a long series of action verbs. The list of these verbs (prioritize, develop, strengthen, combat, operationalize, prepare, value, nurture, promote, challenge, reinforce, connect, expand, build, create...) is a constructivist desire and

the “to do list” does not leave much room for more discreet dimensions such as symbolic imagination or sensorial experiences.

As a conclusion, if it seems important today to express a global desire for transformation, anthropologists should be able to respect the very forms of desire, which are by nature changing, localized, and inherently diverse.

## Reference

**Benveniste, Annie, and Sélim, Monique.** 2014. “Encadrements éthiques et production globalisée des normes.” *Journal des Anthropologues* 136–137: 21–34. <https://doi.org/10.4000/jda.4456>.

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