

ASCONA CHARTER RESPONSE— TOWARDS A JUST ACADEMIA

Proposing a Personalization Approach

Estella Carpi

Abstract

This contribution proposes a primary focus on academia as a relational economy that subtends academics as individuals, rather than on relationships running between academics and the outside world—such as research participants. In this regard, while we academics hide behind fatalistic determination that underlies the abstract idea of a “neoliberal academia”—as though “neoliberal academia” could ever be a given formula, a given reality—the “neoliberal academia” that also the Ascona Charter refers to is empirically about people’s attitudes, personal decisions and deeds. In order to liberate anthropologists from the discursive abstractivism of transformation, the contribution invites us to acknowledge the relational economy we are all part of and our own deontology of research and teaching as individual-centred and entirely individual-dependent.

Keywords: *personalization, relational economy, behavioural dissonance, radical pedagogy, discursive abstractivism*

I am based in a multidisciplinary department, which includes anthropologists as well as earth scientists and engineers etc. This provides me with the perspective of understanding the academic potential to transform life and the human approach mainly through physical interventions. This encounter between different fantasies around transformative disciplines such as anthropology is a continuously regenerative experience for me, as I end up approaching the meaning and developing my personal imagination around the potential to transform in daily conversation with such different voices.

In this short commentary, I would like to focus on how I primarily envision intellectual and practical transformation within the academic and the material world. With this endeavour, I will focus on the internally oriented values of the Charter (e.g., care, respect and collaboration), proposing a larger focus on academia as a relational economy that subtends academics as individuals, rather than on relationships running between academics and the outside world—such as research participants—which has already been tackled widely in contemporary debates. In the effort to address major issues such as today’s social inequalities and ecological devastation, the Ascona Charter explicitly encourages us to “revisit the relevance and positionality of anthropology as a discipline and a societal project”. In line with this collective effort, I foreground the importance of personalization as a catalyser for transformation. In this regard, over the last few years, I have reflected on how the role of “re-per-

sonalizing” academic work as well as of co-feeling and putting in practice the values we write on within the political and moral economy of academia (Carpi 2020; Carpi 2021; Carpi 2023).

While we academics hide behind fatalistic determination that underlies the abstract idea of a “neoliberal academia”—as though “neoliberal academia” could ever be a given formula, a given reality—the “neoliberal academia” that also the Ascona Charter refers to is empirically about people’s attitudes, personal decisions and deeds. In such a fatalistic determination, the possibility for change is never truly contemplated, but, importantly, it is continuously championed in academic environments through decolonial, feminist and radical writing, as evidenced by the extremely large number of publications focused on such themes in the present times. The act of parading a radical approach to research and to academic politics while acting inconsistently (e.g., speaking about empowering research subjects while doing power games with subordinates, or advocating against plagiarism while plagiarizing others) is a key component of academics’ behavioural dissonance, and it is successful in working against what Brazilian pedagogist Paulo Freire calls a “radical pedagogy” in his *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004). Indeed, when too many people benefit from the status quo, radical changes become challenging, or even impossible.

Personalizing bad and positive human practices—something that UK academia particularly struggles with, due to a traditionally impersonal politics of communication (Carpi 2023)—means identifying the people who adopt conservative and unjust behaviours and undertake power abuse, rather than blaming an abstract system of power and control—which published academic work already extensively challenges. It means opening up some space for a radical pedagogy that is able to undermine such abstractness of injustice and enslavement. Freire’s radical pedagogy is, to me, the only possible, real pedagogy able to drive us towards a transformative anthropology.

Building upon Freire, finding “existential consistency” means reflecting indignation into the intimate dimension of living, in the way we denounce the politics around us, and in the relational economy that we actively build on a daily basis. In this vein, we pave the way to a transformative anthropology by teaching and researching *with* indignation towards diversely defined inequalities, injustice and extractivism, rather than merely teaching and research such forms of indignation (Carpi 2023), which is what we anthropologists have already engaged with over the last decades.

While, through the act of teaching indignation, students are taught that the future is a possibility they can work on, we as anthropological researchers and teachers often give up the dichotomy between the politically active and the pedagogical. However, as Freire warned us all, there is no system which has forced us to experience it as a dichotomy, but it is rather us, researchers and educators, who have abdicated change through behavioural dissonance.

With the purpose of re-personalizing what is paraded as a self-critical academic discourse (e.g., Clark-Kazak 2019), we need to begin with re-individualizing the enunciative effort per se of being transformative. Also, in order for these efforts to be effective, we should reframe ethical responsibility in academic research as individual-focused and interrogating ourselves about the sort of anthropologists we currently are (also see Dunn 2018). In fact, the researcher’s sensitivity and respectfulness—which also underpin the Ascona Charter—towards

research participants as well as our colleagues are not commonly associated with the accepted definitions of research excellence or scientific rigour.

In ultimate analysis, for anthropology to be truly transformative and based on principles such as care, critical reflexivity, respect and non-extractivism (as advocated for in the Charter), we need to speak about anthropologists rather than anthropology. The problematic de-personalization I have focused on, indeed, thrives on the terminological politics underlying it. In this vein, to liberate anthropologists from the discursive abstractivism of transformation, we need to acknowledge the relational economy we are all part of and our own deontology of research and teaching as individual-centred and entirely individual-dependent. No matter how painful that can be.

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Author

Estella Carpi is an Associate Professor in Humanitarian Studies at University College London. With a social anthropology background, most of her work has revolved around the identity politics of humanitarian aid and welfare, as well as urban and faith-inspired forms of aid provision. After studying Arabic in Damascus (2005 and 2007), she worked for several research and academic institutions in Lebanon, Egypt, the UAE, and Turkey. She is author of several academic articles in English, Italian, French, Portuguese and Arabic. She published one book in Italian *Specchi Scomodi. Etnografia delle Migrazioni Forzate nel Libano Contemporaneo* (Mimesis, 2019) and *The Politics of Crisis-Making. Forced Displacement and Cultures of Assistance in Lebanon* (Indiana University Press, 2025).
e.carpi@ucl.ac.uk
 University College of London