REAFFIRMING THE ROLE OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Responses, Resonance, and Seizing Opportunities

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Abstract

This brief response to reviews of the Ascona Charter asks how it resonates with and connects diverse realities, concerns, and experiences of transformation. The Charter responds to a collective call from students and engaged scholars for adopting collective action that prioritizes transformation and positive change in the world, rather than remaining caught in neoliberal metrics and individualized trajectories. By operationalizing the Charter's values, anthropology can reclaim its relevance and contribute meaningfully to addressing the triple planetary crisis. Through embracing multimodal approaches, fostering ethical partnerships, and advocating for systemic change, anthropologists can play a pivotal role in addressing the pressing challenges of our time.

Keywords: *engaged anthropology*, *transformation*, *ethics*, *planetary crisis*, *reflexivity*

Working collectively on the Ascona Charter was a critical opportunity to bridge a growing call within anthropology to address global challenges through transformative practice with the grounded experience of members of the SEG Interface Commission for Engaged Anthropologists and EASA networks[1]. The Charter, foremost, responds to a collective call from students and engaged scholars for adopting collective action that prioritizes transformation and positive change in the world, rather than remaining caught in neoliberal metrics and individualized trajectories.

How then does a document like the Ascona Charter resonate with and connect diverse realities, concerns, and experiences of transformation? Can it inspire new questions,

[1] The SEG Interface Commission for Engaged Anthropologists is dedicated to transformative spaces, knowledge, and action for advancing a different kind of engaged academia and informed practice.This includes collective publications that advocate for new discourses around non-binary engagement practices (that does aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice), as well as summer schools where mentors and core faculty are selected from practitioner anthropologists. Most interface members are actively engaged as committed anthropologists and function within, outside, and beyond academia. This approach has fostered an expansive network that now attracts individuals and anthropology enthusiasts from diverse sectors, disciplines, and countries.

DOI 10.36950/sjsca.2025.31.11747

thoughts, and practices? Can collective action be considered despite ever-individualized forms of knowledge production and career paths? We are now in the process of stimulating further conversations to move the Charter forward in addressing specific challenges and seizing opportunities for collective action. The Charter has been presented at meetings in Switzerland as well as the EASA general Assembly in Barcelona. More is needed.

There are clear parallels with other calls for addressing precarity, coloniality, and global inequalities, yet bridging separate threads, pathways, and silos remains challenging. If the Charter aims to connect discussions on the pluriversal planetary crisis with a re-evaluation of our academic spaces, then we must consider its role and impact beyond our "own" conversations and spheres. Anthropology, we insist, far too often remains pigeonholed as localized knowledge without fully mobilizing its global scope and transformative potential. There are no easy answers, but the commentaries to the Charter in different ways highlight the importance of deepening the dialogue and drawing further attention to the interconnections involved.

Danny Pinedo, Professor at the San Marcos University, Peru draws attention to the relevance of the Charter for the complexities experienced in Peru, where an "anthropologist must perform ... in an environment of job insecurity, characterized by low wages, lack of job stability and exhausting workdays". Subscribing to the values and principles of the Charter, he offers a lucid account of precarity and discrimination in the academic sphere in situations of structural insecurity and crisis. If the Charter values resonate, they also prompt the need for a far more decentered perspective of academic experience and what constitutes relevant forms of action.

Laurent Fournier, President of the French Association of Anthropology notes how the Charter reconnects with "the posture of the committed intellectual" identifying both problems and proposing effective solutions. Yet, he challenges us all to think about standardized best practices and the risk of reducing diversity of anthropological approaches. Interrogating the list of commitments, he asks what room it leaves for symbolic imagination and sensorial experience. In what could be read as a relativist posture, he concludes how desires are "changing, localized and inherently diverse".

Raminder Kaur, Professor at Sussex University, highlights that one of the Charter's most forward-thinking aspects is its recognition of diverse methodologies, particularly those that extend beyond textual narratives. Incorporating film, art, and digital media—the Charter offers powerful tools for engaging broader publics and fostering empathy and understanding. Calling for a transformation "from within" to "ruminate about other pathways, visible or not, in terms of going beyond the immediacy of the material, spatial, temporal, conceptual, and/or ontological".

Estella Carpi, Associate Professor at the University of London, draws parallels to her work on "re-personalizing" academic work and "putting in practice the values we write". Connecting the Charter's call for care, respect, and collaboration she sees "personalization as a catalyzer for transformation" in a Paolo Freirian call for "existential consistency". Carpi encourages us to "teach[ing] and research[ing] *with* indignation towards diversely defined inequalities, injustice, and extractivism".

The ease at which commentators connect transformative pathways to deep reflexivity and theoretical complexity is noteworthy. Epistemological critique and reflexivity are the

very basis for numerous calls for engaged anthropology (Low and Merry 2010; Kirsch 2018; Larsen et al 2022), yet how can it all connect in the broader quest for transformative change?

Seizing Opportunities

"Nice values, but what do they mean in practice?", the question from a colleague struggling with precarity was clear and refreshingly down to earth. Another colleague wondered how the Charter differed from positive value statements found across HR departments and university agendas. While the Ascona Charter sets a visionary path, its implementation presents collective challenges, but also a clear opportunity to distinguish its actions from neoliberal solutionism. Take the Better Science initiative underlining how "Research culture should be defined by fairness, appreciation, diversity and holistic assessment". While on paper an institutional ally for transformative change, the nature of several of the 10 actions do come across as highly individualized. Encouraging precarious academics to "take your time to think" considering that "time-outs and breaks stimulate your creativity", to quote one action commitment, seems to be a neoliberal distraction without much relevance or support for collective action.[2] Engaged anthropology requires long-term collective commitments, substantial funding, and institutional support that move beyond individual nudging.

On the 22nd November, 2024 the Ascona Charter was presented at a roundtable during the SAA Annual Meeting in Luzern revealing particularly Swiss concerns, with global resonance.

Nina Khamsy, from the Graduate Institute, addressed the structural challenges facing anthropologists, noting that in 2017 in Switzerland, "only 13% of academic staff have permanent positions, while 85% are in temporary roles". She suggested that the charter could build upon existing initiatives aimed at addressing precarity in academia, such as discussions at the SAA conference (2018), EASA (2019), and the DocPostDoc commission workshop (2023). Emphasizing the reality that the majority of anthropologists will pursue careers beyond academia, she argued that this shift does not lessen anthropology's significance but rather highlights its broader societal impact. To support this transition, Khamsy advocated for a blend of policy-driven efforts and practical approaches, proposing that the Charter be used to encourage multi-modal teaching and better equip students for diverse professional pathways.

Tobias Haller from the University of Bern stressed the need for anthropology to retain its critical stance, particularly when engaging with dominant global frameworks such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Describing the SDGs as a "new ecological Bible," he criticized their tendency to marginalize local perspectives. He underscored anthropology's role in amplifying these voices and ensuring that local communities are actively included in discussions on development and sustainability.

Filipe Calvao from the Graduate Institute questioned whether anthropology, as a discipline, is truly prepared for collective responsibility, noting that increasing individualiza-

[2] https://betterscience.ch/en/calls-to-action/#/, accessed November 30, 2024.

tion—partly driven by precarious working conditions—has shaped academic practice. While he recognized the value of collaboration in theory, he was uncertain about its practical viability, expressing doubts about how effectively collective engagement could be implemented. Despite these concerns, he saw potential in the Charter as a means to address vulnerabilities within the field and foster greater structural support.

The meeting emphasized the continuous need for reflexivity in balancing and combining action and academic rigor. The Ascona Charter's vision aligns with a broader movement in anthropology that is not just about understanding the world but committed to changing it for the better. There is much weariness with catchy commitments and concepts in the current climate of neoliberal agendas and an individualized "rat race". So how can the Charter be any different from the on-going push to claim "better science" in a framework governed by flawed notions of individualized knowledge production and excellence? The Ascona Charter was an attempt to recuperate language so easily hollowed out or rendered irrelevant by generalities. Yet, what hinders it from being conflated with the latter? The Ascona Charter represents a bold vision for anthropology, yet its success depends on bridging the gap between its ideals and the practical realities of precarity and embracing collective responsibility to maintain the discipline's critical voice in confronting global crises. By operationalizing the Charter's values, anthropology can reclaim its relevance and contribute meaningfully to addressing the triple planetary crisis. Through embracing multimodal approaches, fostering ethical partnerships, and advocating for systemic change, anthropologists can play a pivotal role in addressing the pressing challenges of our time. We identify one need and two areas of action to put the Ascona Charter into practice:

1. We need Institutional Support: Universities and funding bodies must prioritize and incentivize engaged, collaborative approaches and readiness to address structural inequalities.
2. We can offer Training and Mentorship: Programs like those of the Interface commission could be models for training future anthropologists in multimodal, critical approaches and engaged methods.
3. We could create Networking Platforms: Strengthening platforms for exchange among engaged anthropologists can foster best practices and collaborative opportunities.

This Charter is not just a call to action—it is an open platform for a more engaged, ethical, and impactful anthropology.

References

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Interface Commission