By presenting the state of anthropology today in France, I hope not to be to pessimistic and negative. But for a few years now, the two French institutions which welcome anthropologists, the CNRS (the National Research Center) and universities, have been undergoing a succession of changes, specially the latter, but more recently the CNRS, without people really knowing when it started and when it will finish.

Some of the following reflections found their first expression within the framework of the national assessment exercise (Assises) for the discipline, organised last December in Paris by the two main associations of the discipline, the AFA (1979) and the APRAS (1989); I am president of the second and I was a co-organiser of this event.

**Introduction: some features of French anthropology**

The main feature of anthropology in France - and it is not new - is that the discipline’s institutional position within the French academy has been remarkably weak, especially in comparison to its international standing. Compared to other social sciences, anthropology has relatively little presence in the French university system and is disproportionately dependent on research institutions for employment. It chronically suffers both from a felt shortage of positions and other resources, and from difficulties in sufficiently surmounting internal rivalries to effectively lobby for a larger share of the pie.

By most accounts, there are about 400 professional anthropologists employed in France, with about half holding full-time research positions (especially in the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique [CNRS], some in the IRD) and the other half in university posts (or EHESS). The latter are roughly evenly divided between anthropology appointments and positions in other departments.

By consequence, the fight for the discipline focused very often on research conditions and forgot to mention that if we don’t train anthropologists any more, we won’t have to worry about the number of research positions.
Also, by contrast, for example with Britain, historically, institutionally and demographically, anthropology is not as strong as sociology nor as well organised to defend our collective interests. Anthropologists don’t have a national association to defend their interests, especially when it comes to safeguarding the position of anthropology in the universities. For example, sociologists have a national association, plus a specific association of teachers. One of the result of our December’s national assessment is that now we try to build up a national association.

1. Teaching anthropology in France

Firstly, we can say that the stages of the complex recruitment process in French universities, which is closed more or less to the national labour market: with no ad in international journals, etc.

The first stage is called “qualification”: everybody with a PhD who is willing to apply for academic jobs has to go through this first stage. He/she has to apply to the commission for anthropologists. Qualification is the key to opening up the job market for young post-docs. Then, the second stage is to apply at the local level based on a central list of positions open published by the Official Journal of the French State. Positions are not advertised in other ways, for example in newspapers. Usually, there is between two or for positions for anthropologists every year. Local committees, whose members are elected by the staff of the relevant department, receive about 100 applications for one job. This system is under a lot of criticism, for its clientelism and localism, and so on. Unfortunately the recent reforms of the universities imposed by the government don’t seem to improve the system of recruitment.

Anthropologists are teaching in a huge variety of academic contexts: this situation is related to the shortage of positions in anthropology departments and to the demand for anthropological skills – especially for methodological competences, but not only that.

So today, probably more anthropologists teach outside anthropology departments than in them. This means that teaching anthropology cannot any more be – at least only - training students to become professional
anthropologists. The demand for anthropological teaching is great and at the same time, the discipline is in a relatively weak institutional position within the universities.

The application in France of the EU Bologna reform, “LMD” (Licence/Masters/Doctorat the simplification to three levels of degree) aiming to restructure university degrees in order to harmonize them across Europe, was not very good for social anthropology. It is widely understood to risk further squeezing anthropology out of university training. In effect, the Licence has become a necessary feeder to Masters programs. But relatively little Licence-level anthropology training is available within French universities and the hitherto common pattern of students coming to the discipline later in their cursus appears more difficult to sustain under the new reform. Instead, Masters-level anthropology training is increasingly limited to multidisciplinary programs where it is frequently positioned as a marginalized partner within a bureaucratically-mandated “forced marriage”.

II. Doing research in anthropology

Research is done in universities – but has to be combined with teaching and administrative tasks – and in CNRS where people don’t have to teach (they can do it, and usually they do, but it is not compulsory). In CNRS, researchers are organised into research centres based on geographical interests or topical. Academic teachers could be associated to one of this centre if their university doesn’t have a appropriate research group.

Until now, people were quite free to choose their research topics because they have to share the money available in their centre (internal redistribution). But now, the ministry has reduced the amount of money distributed to research centres and asked researchers to apply for specific projects listed by the same ministry and run by a new agency called Agence National pour la Recherche. Social sciences are not among the top priorities, even there are special fundings for young researchers. Evaluations also are becoming more strict and based on some common scale
But more reforms are ahead: publicly-funded research institutions seem to be phasing out the social sciences more aggressively than ever. Research groups will be amalgamated into large multidisciplinary entities (Institutes) and some may be melded into university departments (again with anthropologists usually in a structurally weak position), while new recruitments in the social sciences are hitting all-time lows. Insofar as our discipline is more dependent on these research institutions for employment than are most others, the resultant prospects for its future seem particularly bleak.

This dependency on public institutions is linked to the weakness of applied anthropology in France: we are still trained our students in the idea that they will have a job in CNRS or in universities. Under pressures, coming from the administration but also from our post-docs who cannot find jobs into the “traditional institutions”, some curriculum are build up at the master level to propose a “professional masters’ in social anthropology\(^1\). I would say that the most succesful are on medical anthropology.

Some anthropologists from outside the mainstream profession – working in private companies or as consultant - have started to put together their experience and competences by organising meetings and discussion groups. But it is quite new, during a long time, they were dismissed by the main stream discipline.

### III. The “Assises” and what’s next?

These 2007 Assises were an almost unprecedented gathering of French anthropologists – the last one took place in 1977 - for the purposes of discussing the discipline’s present and future and of exploring possibilities for creating an institutionally united front.

Joining these two generalist associations which co-organised this event, APRAS and AFA, twere a number of smaller and more specialized groups,

\(^1\) Lyon 2 (“the anthropology of art and culture”) and the University of Provence (“the anthropology of development”) (also taught at Strasbourg and Paris 7, but not run by anthropologists).
many concerned with the practice or dissemination of anthropology outside of university or basic-research institutions, and most based outside of Paris. It was held at Paris’ two premier anthropology museums, themselves the focus over the past several years of considerable polemics around competing visions of the discipline: the Musée de l’Homme and the Musée du Quai Branly. Much of the discussion focused on the current institutional difficulties of French anthropology, particularly the problems posed by an almost-exclusive focus on academic/research training and very large numbers of doctoral students, combined with tiny numbers of university or basic-research positions. For some participants, the development of training tracks geared to non-academic careers would offer an effective way to respond to student and general societal interest in anthropology, while also shoring up the discipline’s future in France. Some attention was also paid to new challenges to maintaining international standing as created for example by the increasing dominance of English as a scholarly language, a development of particular significance for a discipline which (unlike other social sciences or some other national traditions of anthropology) is largely organized around international geographic specialties shared by multinational networks of peers. Of course, this dominance of English is also very strong in European programmes.

There were some disappointment that relatively few senior colleagues attended the Assises, but the turn-out was impressive in terms of both numbers and enthusiasm. Over-representation of students and junior colleagues arguably bodes well for the future, and quite a few senior anthropologists publicly indicated their support, even if they were not physically present. The substantial presence of colleagues from the provinces was a reminder that anthropology in France is not an exclusively Parisian—or strictly academic—profession. Most striking was the active desire of attendees to get beyond old quarrels in order to defend and promote the discipline, not only in response to current institutional difficulties, but also out of a larger sense that anthropological thinking carries an inherent value that merits more effective communication, both within the profession and with a general public.
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