

## **The End of the World (as we know it): Offensive Anthropology at the Imperial Center**

by

David Crawford

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I am going to try and engage your conference theme, to “*inspire* and *encourage* students to become more *active* across the sub-fields of anthropology,” though I will focus on cultural anthropology. I am a big fan of being inspired and encouraged and active, if only because I am ever more plagued with physical and mental decomposition, with parts of me drooping and becoming uninspired, discouraged and inactive. I resent these bits of myself and as a form of therapy I will strive to deliver what you have asked for: a “positive approach to [your] role as the next generation of anthropology.” I do have to say that am not by nature a positive person (some of you know that) and as I’m from the Midwest, I not by *culture* a positive person either. In fact my grandfather’s standard response to “it’s a nice day” is “it will probably rain later.” To the comment, “you look good today, grandpa,” he’s likely say “I feel like I’m going to die.” So, you’ll excuse me if I start with bad news, move to a depressing contextualization of the bad news, and then finally and somewhat reluctantly launch a discussion of what we might be able to do about it, particularly what you fresh-faced and energetic anthro-aspires might do about it. I will try to speedily move through my monologue on gloom and leave as much time as possible for us to talk together about contingency plans for the wretched and depressing world my generation is leaving to yours.

### The End of the World (As We Know It): The Gloom

Let me start my Review of the Gloom with the first part of my title: I have always loved “the end of the world / as we know it,” partially because it was the only REM lyric I could confidently understand, and partially because statements that are both stupidly obvious and mildly profound make me giddy. It’s *always* the end of the world *as we know it*, both because the world is always changing and because our knowledge of this change is so dismally and inevitably incomplete. It is the *as we know it* that intrigues me, the idea that our knowledge is continuously left behind by the inexorable flux and flow of reality. I noticed in a recent article on string theory in physics that there are supposed to be nine dimensions of space (that’s at least six dimensions that I have yet to explore while sober), but still only one dimension of time. Now, granted, I thought quantum mechanics was supposed to unify all these spaces with time, and so I don’t really know what difference it makes, but it is still comforting to have very smart physicists tell me that time, at least, remains something like what I think it is: a seamless, indistinguishable slipping from will be to is to was.

This brings up the question of what we mean by “being,” of course, both in terms of our own biological bodies and the cultural frameworks through which we understand things. It seems to me that bodies and ideas change at different rates, and that regeneration and reproduction is the key to the illusion of stability that sustains us. The novelist Lawrence Durrell has one of his characters contemplate this, a man obsessed with the memory of his One Great Love. This man sits on an island. He is old, thinking back, and writes, “what if, as biology tells us, every single cell in our bodies is replaced every seven years by another? At the most I hold

in my arms something like a fountain of flesh, continuously playing, and in my mind a rainbow of dust.” What does Durrell’s character love? If the physical matter is in transition, is it some sort of Platonic essence of a woman that he really loves, something that outlasts the body? Who am I standing here today if I am physically built of new materials, if my saggy skin and drooping gut are newly acquired (as I assure you they are), if the me that I live in now is not the fresh, warm me I lived in when I was your age?

These are weighty questions, and for our prosaic purposes I mean only to suggest that you not take what-seems-to-be so terribly seriously. Reality, after all, is always on its way out.

What is our reality? Well, we are anthropologists, a discipline in the Foucauldian sense, by which I mean a way to keep you from thinking haphazardly. Academic disciplines, like military discipline and simple puppy training, are meant to canalize, meant to keep you from contemplating too many disparate things in too many different ways. Nobody wants you peeing on the intellectual carpet, so to speak, so we spank your noses with rarefied discourse until you get the point that you must wait until *we* take *you* for your walk to relieve your bursting intellectual bladder. You have to earn the right to write. This specialized discipline includes a language, which is why anthropologists can talk to one another –and why they so often can’t talk to anyone else. We all agree to submit to a grueling indoctrination process, one that opens up particular avenues of thought, certain frameworks of perception and sentiment. We are able to make sense precisely because we are brutally conditioned to ignore the vast majority of possibilities and focus on a slice of reality that suits us in very specific ways. Your life is finite, and so you must choose some ways of thinking even though this means truncating others.

Of course, anthropology and anthropological discourse has not always been so cohesive, if I can use that word in this context without irony. Our discipline was born in what now seems a bizarre social and historical moment, as you all know by now. Our beloved Study of Humankind emerged from questions of what precisely counted as human, from 19<sup>th</sup> century debates over whether all us folks came from the garden of Eden, or whether only white people came from the garden, whether all peoples are clamoring up the same logical evolutionary ladder, or brown peoples have somehow been slipping backwards. Ignoble and racist disciplinary beginnings to be sure! and we’re much berated because of it by academic moralists of vague but supposedly purer origins. But I don’t think we’re so tainted by our original sin that we cannot make something good and decent and useful in the here and now, and, I hope, in the future. We had our Boasian epiphany, we learned to love our Others even more than Jesus did (or does, I’m not sure of the verb tense here), and the world desperately needs some serious and determined Otherlovers these days. I am hoping you’ll be the Otherloving future. But I’m talking gloom now, so I will save this tawdry hopefulness for later.

The gloom is that today anthropology is trouble. You know this or my letter of introduction to this conference would not have so stridently encouraged me to be cheerful. We’re in trouble for the same reason all of the social sciences and humanities are in trouble: we have nothing terribly valuable to sell and we live in an aggressively mercantile society. The discipline of economics is the one exception to the nothing-to-sell model, of course, as selling is a solid growth industry. These magicians (economists) have managed to convince the Empire that they can augur the future. Roman priests read goat entrails, today’s professional apologists invoke a surreal combination of suspect numerology and the occult detection of Alan Greenspan’s choice of adverbs in order to say whether “the economy” is happy or sad, angry or content, growing or in need of thyroid medicine. Even the president of the World Bank has written that “at the level of people the system is not working.” I assume he means the economic

system, which to me says very clearly that the gamboling of global capital happens on Mt. Olympus, if anywhere. All this is just to say that you are not alone. Sociologists, historians, professors of literature: everyone is depressed. It is indeed the end of the world as we know it, but that alone should not suffice to keep you from feeling fine, as I will show in a moment.

What should worry you, however, is that your graduate programs are doing a woeful job preparing you to deal with this vile, materialistic, ever-ending world. It's not their fault, really, since as Bourdieu showed us, the participants in any social system must necessarily misrecognize that system in order to function. Think of professional sports. If we stopped to acknowledge the absurdity of chasing balls around a court, if Venus Williams stopped to ask, "why?" before a thunderous serve, sport would lose something of its magical attraction, not to mention its coherence. The people who run graduate training camps are terrifically bright, but blind to the fact that it is all a game; they are more disciplined than anyone precisely because they are the ones concocting the rules and strategies, the one playing for the big stakes. Moreover, Big Name Professors are not themselves faced with the challenges you graduates face today. Time flows on. The tenured Brahmins who preside over your inculcation not only came to the profession in a very different economy, they are presently operating in a unique and perhaps dying market segment. They are professional producers of knowledge of a very specific kind. They sell to each other. The value of their ideas depends upon the opinions of very specific friends and enemies, friends and enemies from tiny islands in an intellectual ocean. Or, to abuse another metaphor, the insular world in which you are being trained to do battle is not the place you are likely to end up fighting. Many of you will discover that you have been rigorously drilled to play a kind of hallucinatory seven dimensional cricket (in several languages and with a ferocious shot clock) yet you end up standing in a sumo wrestling ring. It is very easy to get squashed in such a world, not least because you stand open-mouthed and stunned after all your training, baffled as to how you ended up in the ring with this fat guy stomping about.

I'm losing control of my metaphors again. What am I trying to say? Simply, that the excruciatingly clever professors who will train you to be professors have several strikes against them. Foremost is that they are training you to become professors, in particular professors like them. Since each of them will be on the job for something like a lifetime, you can expect to get their job exactly once, upon their death. On the chance that they have trained someone else too, well, you are back to sumo wrestling. The choices made by your professors have inescapably narrowed their vision, or at least calibrated their instincts, such that they are very good at training to you to one unlikely thing: anthropological research at a research institution. Everyone is trained as a jockey in a world with very few horses.

### The Imperial Center

This brings me to the second part of the title that I want to explore: the Imperial Center. You live in the most powerful country in the world, a country that seems to see little wrong with using its power whenever and wherever it wants, for whatever it wants, no matter who doesn't want it. On the foreign front you will find that because of this most people hate you, and if you're like me you'll discover that you are coming to hate yourself too. This is to be expected, and in any case probably can't be helped. On the domestic front you will find today a certain public celebratory zeal in the exercise of raw power, a fascist aesthetic where manliness involves insouciant violence, where contemplation (never mind peace) is for weak-kneed liberals, perverts and worse. It is in fact a very dangerous time to be a pervert, and likewise it is a dangerous time to do anything so idle, so humane, so beautifully gentle, so economically illogical as

anthropology. We are, after all, famously reluctant to make a buck off of the natives (though we are happy enough to make a career.) We mostly just want to be their friends. It was better in the 1930s or the 1950s, when ethnographies were occasionally bestsellers, or at least ethnographies about native sex were bestsellers, but, again, those times are gone. Today if you want to sell ethnography you are better off focusing on war. Our society is now rabidly anxious about sex, at least the sweaty, odiferous, tactile kind, though we remain fascinated with the airbrushed televised version. Today's zeitgeist has the sensuality and pizzazz of a Prussian army drill routine, in the winter, with no socks.

Today the political economy of knowledge production has shifted to the utilitarian and, I would say, the crass. Professors of introductory anthropology courses sell themselves by promising that inter-cultural understanding will help you survive in a global economy, which I suppose ambitious students read as training in how to talk to the servants. This is absurd, I hope, and our suggestion that money can and ought to be made from our humble tracking of big questions in small places is precisely where we fail: anthropology is best on the gut-wrenchingly important issues, stuff that rocks your soul: Who are we as a species? What makes us the same? How are we different? What is equality? What is justice? How can we make sense of our *shared* species-being as culturally and individually *different* animals, and how can we act collectively as responsible stewards to our one and only and all too rapidly dying planet? Such questions are not amenable to Fox News shouting matches, to military bravado, to reality TV. They really don't turn much corporate profit. I am not suggesting that anthropology is not useful, only that its uses have no value in the terms by which value is coming to be constructed. Anthropology's prime use may in fact be the provision of standpoints for reconstructing America's terminally narrow, even suicidal, framework of values.

This will be difficult. Today people with undergraduate degrees are amongst the most hard-pressed to find jobs, never mind jobs that won't strangle your sense of humor, and I know you know that this is not how it used to be. My now-retired uncle, for instance, with a mediocre performance in a less-than-prestigious BA in history from SDSU, still had several job offers right out of college—none of which were in fast food. One of my current colleagues had four people *call him* and offer jobs in the mid-1970s when he finished graduate school in sociology. By contrast last year when I attempted to write my way into an academic position there were 300 applicants at some schools—schools I'd never heard of in rural Pennsylvania!

This is supposed to be the "contextualization" part of the gloom speech, and was meant to cheer you up, but the context is that our society is abandoning the values of liberal education. My students at Fairfield University, a small Jesuit school in Connecticut, are overwhelmingly concerned with getting a job, and since they are paying us \$37,000 a year to get educated you can understand why. You can also understand why they spend most of their time drunk. They study subjects that don't interest them in order to prepare for jobs they don't want so that they can pay back money they don't have. It's an economy of lack, of despair, of survival, a venal fear of not having something they want desperately but can't clearly define. My students are scrapping to stay out of the working class. They are aspiring to float, to breathe, to keep from falling off their chairs, to keep from puking. They talk not about how much they party, but about how much they do not remember when they party. I understand. Who would want to remember such lives?

This audience before me is probably not afflicted by such paranoia, and some of you may even be having a bit *too* much fun. After all, you are brave enough to study something you love and hopeful enough to come here looking for ways to stay in this game. I am telling you about

my despairing undergraduates only because this is your future; this is the student body you are likely to teach once you become a professional propagator of anthropological knowledge.

You should know, too, that the fearful students have more power than they know. They vote with their feet, so to speak, or more accurately with their dollars. They do not have to take anthropology, so in order to teach it I also have to convince students that it is worth learning. I am lucky because in a Jesuit school most of the customers have nestled somewhere near their brainstem an easily manipulated organ that controls issues of guilt and social justice. My reluctant acolytes are amendable to the suggestion that the world is not as it should be—indeed, they feel it in their bones—and I use this to open their eyes to other ways of seeing and being. I should be clear, however: the only reason there is an anthropology position at my university is because the institution is legally required to have someone to teach the International Studies students something about the wretched of the earth. The good state of Connecticut has passed some odd law that the person specializing in wretchedness must be an anthropologist. So: there I am. Housed in sociology, teaching mostly anything I want so long as it involves the wretched, responsible for one course per semester aimed at International Studies majors, I have a career exposing rich and mostly white kids to people they would prefer to ignore. I am not even sure what International Studies is, but there are hundreds of majors. There are no anthropology majors.

My job pays relatively well, I have to say, offers great benefits to my own children in terms of free college and other whatnot, I get a good retirement, good health benefits, reasonable ability to pursue my own research and predilections, cool colleagues, my own hours, no alarm, no real boss, and time to write talks like this one *just because I want to*. That's the practicality of it. It's a sweet deal but you have to stomach the fact that most of what we do in academia is allocate credentials to middle and upper class students so they can remain in the middle and upper classes. We are a giant sorting machine, with a price tag so large that it filters out the poor, and since they are more likely to be poor, the brown. I know your well-educated heads are spinning: is it structural-functionalist to say that higher education serves the larger goals of society? Is it Marxist? Is it a teleological argument based on hegemonic assumption that needs to be deconstructed? My heart warms knowing that you are working on the problem, and working on it in a way that I recognize.

### Offensive / Offensive Anthropology

What to do about all this mess? I've been a real ass here today so far. Having promised to come and be upbeat, I have instead sent you into a sweating and tremulous anxiety attack over the state of Everything and the sorry fact that you have to deal with it. This is explicitly against the rules and so I'm going to rescue this talk, as much as I can, by moving on to the final term of my title: "offensive anthropology." I can't figure out if this is *offensive* or *offensive*, that is, if my topic is how to offend anthropologists, how to do anthropology offensive to others, or how to plan some sort of proactive, offensive move for yourselves in this dismal world that anthropology is trying to grasp. You are interested in this last point, but I am aiming for all of the above, as I like to argue all sides of a point simultaneously to see if the linearity of prose can be tweaked into the nine dimensions that string theory promises. I can't get over that. But let's talk practicalities, beginning with skills, moving to research and ending with issues of gainful employment and existential compartmentment.

