

PAULINE VON HELLERMANN, TOBIAS MÜLLER
AND PETER SUTORIS

Towards a Regenerative Anthropology

Our Discipline's Role in Navigating Intersecting Crises and Transformation

Abstract: In a time of escalating environmental, political and social crises, Anthropology has transformative potential yet faces existential threats. This article argues for a regenerative Anthropology – one that not only critiques the colonial-capitalist systems driving breakdown, but also actively contributes to alternative, life-affirming futures. Drawing on insights from regenerative agriculture, activism and multispecies ethnography, we explore how Anthropology can support transformations towards more sustainable futures by reviving diverse knowledges, practices and ways of being. At the same time, Anthropology itself must evolve. As universities undergo neoliberal restructuring and departments shrink, we propose a fuller shift towards engagement and accessibility, and a pedagogy that balances critique with practice, and imagination with action. In an era of upheaval, Anthropology can – and must – become a force for regeneration, both within and beyond the academy.

Keywords: climate emergency, engaged Anthropology, pedagogy, polycrisis, regenerative, transition

The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born:
now is the time of monsters. (Gramsci in Žižek 2010)¹

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.
On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing. (Roy 2003)²

Now is indeed a time of monsters. The devastating fallout of the colonial-capitalist, military-industrial behemoth, 'the system' – accelerating ecological and climate breakdown, spiralling inequality and a turn towards fascism – is apparent across the globe. But now is also a time of reconfiguration and search for different modes of living, organising, and thinking. From Indigenous resistance organisations, ecofeminist collectives and climate activists to transition movements, renewable energy workers, and permaculturalists, a whole plethora of individuals, groups and networks operating at levels from the body to the planetary are helping new worlds to be born. They are on their way.

In these times, the responsibilities of academia are paramount, given its influence on values, policies and technologies. Indeed, numerous initiatives by universities are addressing the environmental multicrisis in their research, teaching and institutional practices.³ But with Higher Education itself so deeply entangled in 'the system', such initiatives tend to stick to 'small tweaks' and otherwise 'business as usual' (Thierry et al



2023). This is in part because, after four decades or so of marketisation, Higher Education itself is in profound crisis. In the UK, over 40 percent of universities are in deficit and several on the brink of collapse, with mounting redundancies and department closures across the sector (Adams 2025).

Anthropology, along with other social science and humanities disciplines, is badly affected by this wider crisis in Higher Education, particularly in the UK. Outside the ‘elite’ Russell Group of universities, Anthropology departments are shrinking, merging into wider social science schools or closing altogether as their student numbers plummet. There are several factors combining here, from the tendency of a few elite universities to accept ever more students (Rowse 2024), to a growing perception of university degrees as career investments rather than education to broaden minds. Anthropology programmes are among those berated as producing ‘rip-off’ degrees – as then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak put it in 2023⁴ – or as elite ‘orchid disciplines’.⁵ At the same time, Anthropology’s legacies of white privilege and colonialism continue to raise important questions about the justification and role of anthropological research altogether.

In this context, a profound rethink of the purpose and effects of what we do as academics is required (e.g. J Green 2020; Ramasar and Cote 2024; Thierry et al 2023). This article intervenes in the conversation about what such a rethink might look like within Anthropology, a discipline that, we believe, has much to offer at this time – even as it needs to change to be able to play this transformative role and, indeed, to survive. We see this as part of a collective effort to move towards an Anthropology that is regenerative for the planet, for ourselves and our students, and for the discipline itself.

In arguing for a regenerative Anthropology, we are inspired – aside from the creative and values-driven work on the ‘margins’ of the discipline, particularly by public, critical and ‘applied’ anthropologists – by growing movements towards regeneration in design and culture (Wahl 2016, Wepfer 2024; Westwell and Bunting 2020), and especially by developments in the fields of agriculture and climate activism. Emerging in the 1980s, regenerative agriculture is perhaps the most established and widely recognised domain of regenerative thought and practice, having gained significant momentum over the past two decades. It incorporates elements of permaculture and organic farming, emphasising soil health (no-tillage), flexibility and diversity (Loring 2022; Schreefel et al 2020). While critics point out a lack of clarity of what regenerative farming really means – there is no certification scheme and the term is already beginning to be co-opted (Kloehn 2021) – at its heart lie decolonial values, including reciprocity, respect, collective (human and non-human) well-being, knowledge co-creation and (re)localisation (Sands et al 2023). Indeed, our thinking here is fundamentally shaped by the creators of the forests, farms and forest gardens of Nigeria and Tanzania, whose symbiotic, flexible, pluralistic and holistic understanding of agriculture and life have been a profound inspiration (von Hellermann 2013, 2017). We argue that these values, along with the multispecies relationality inherent in regenerative farming, are important impulses towards meaningful and constructive reorientation for our discipline. Regeneration – reviving life, relations and diversity – eminently suits Anthropology as a guiding principle, given the discipline’s fascination with the plurality of practices and possibilities that humans have created throughout space and time.

The attempt to foster ‘Regenerative Culture’ by the environmental social movement Extinction Rebellion’s (XR) – another source of inspiration behind this paper – was a complex ensemble of personal and political practices that extended far beyond merely helping activists ‘recharge’ after exhausting periods of protesting (Fitchett 2024; Rowe and Ormond 2023; Stuart 2020). Instead, XR activists combined embodied introspection with multispecies empathy, ritual and prefigurative politics to ‘open up (utopian) spaces for caring differently’ (Harms 2022: 518). Indeed, one of XR’s stated values centres relational care in five dimensions: self, action, interpersonal, community, and People and Planet (Extinction Rebellion 2018). More broadly, the embodied, relational, imaginative and care-centred practices of regenerative cultures and their critical decolonial transformation by activists working on ‘Co-Liberation’, emphasising the need to collectively heal racialised trauma (Müller and Cochrane 2024: 120), are important inspirations for what a regenerative Anthropology might look like.

Regeneration, as we understand it, is not only about helping to regenerate the world ‘out there’; it is simultaneously an inward-facing process. Anthropology’s scholarship and practice can and should be approached in new, regenerative ways to help it play a more significant role in ‘just transition’ – a term, we acknowledge, that is increasingly coopted (see Marcus and Pissarro 2008).⁶ ‘Regeneration’ itself is, of course, just as prone to co-option, though we believe for now it remains a malleable term; it is this malleability we are writing into. Overall, in proposing Anthropology’s realignment with a regenerative ethos, we seek to encourage a positive, healing and constructive approach that builds on but goes beyond critique. All this, we feel, is captured well by embracing the idea of regeneration.

Our own ethnographic and biographical starting point for this undertaking is our immersion in environmental activist, transition and social justice initiatives in recent years, spaces we each inhabited in different ways, eventually connecting in one of these groupings – Extinction Rebellion Social Scientists. It was in the context of our own activist involvement that we each began to think about not just how our anthropological training and insights might inform and support activist initiatives, but also about the contribution the discipline as a whole might make to wider transformative efforts. The activists and active citizens we encountered and worked with – in a UK local Carbon Neutral 2030 project (von Hellermann 2021), South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (Sutoris 2025), the Co-Liberation Project and the XR Being the Change Affinity Network (Müller 2024) – made us realise that Anthropology, with its deep-rooted interest in alternatives to modernity (and alternative modernities), its insights into power, culture, systems, social relations and its methodological and political commitments to ‘lived experience’ and social justice, is in a unique position to offer what is needed at this point. In developing this argument, we draw also on our longer-term research and teaching experiences, including the political and historical ecology of multi-dimensional environmental change in Nigeria, Tanzania and Sumatra (von Hellermann 2013, 2017, in progress), Extinction Rebellion activism in Kenya, Mexico, South Africa, Uganda, the UK and the USA (Müller 2024), and environmental education and activism in India and South Africa (Sutoris 2022).

At the same time, our recognition of the need for Anthropology itself to change is equally rooted in our personal teaching and research trajectories. Peter is trying to

apply anthropological insights to the field of sustainability research, where few are interested in critical scholarship given the dominance of neoliberal thinking and top-down blueprints like ‘net zero’ (Sutoris 2024). Tobias uses ethnographies of strategic thinking and action in the climate movement as political and social theory while being criticised by potential research funding bodies for taking activists seriously as theorists in their own right (Müller and Cochrane 2024). Pauline, after many years as an Anthropology lecturer, was made redundant by her University in 2024 and is now having to reinvent herself as a ‘more than academic’ anthropologist.

We acknowledge that as Slovak, German, and British UK-based scholar-activists, we are shaped, too, by the provincialism and the many silences and blind spots of Euro-American Anthropology; our perspective remains partial and in need of pluriversal complementation and critique. Nevertheless, we feel it is our responsibility not to remain silent but to add our voices to those – including fellow anthropologists – seeking to bring new worlds into being (see de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; L Green 2020); that is, new worlds that are not merely carbon-neutral versions of the current system but truly break away from it.

In the following, we begin with briefly mapping out what Anthropology already offers to Euro-American climate movements, policy makers and publics: possibilities, alternative ways of thinking and acting, but also distinctive ways of understanding the behemoth, ‘the system’ itself. We then explore how Anthropology needs to change to get closer to reaching its full regenerative potential.

Possibilities

‘You cannot create what you cannot imagine.’ This idea, attributed to the poet Lucille Clifton,⁷ has become a bit of a mantra in the Transition movement, especially through Rob Hopkins’ (2019) *From What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want*.⁸ It encapsulates the moment Transition activists and others believe humanity to be in, when our shared crises stimulate a collective reimagination of the future. The surge in ‘futurism’ – for example Afrofuturism (Anderson and Jones 2016) and Solarpunk (BrightFlame 2021), exploring inventive eco-socialist futures – can be a source of hope. But the quote also raises the question of *whose* imagination of the future becomes a basis for a society’s collective world-making, given that all too often glossy, tech-based visions (mostly) by white men dominate futurism as a genre (Tsing et al 2019).

In fact, the most radical world-building projects have not been devised at brainstorming sessions in Silicon Valley or academic offices but by people seeking to change their circumstances, sometimes turning a prophecy into a political project, or resisting the destruction of the flora and fauna their lives depend on. This is something we know as anthropologists; it is at the core of what Anthropology is about. As David Graeber wrote in the introduction to *Possibilities*:

I was drawn to the discipline because it opens windows on other possible forms of human social existence; because it served as a constant reminder that most of what we assume to be immutable has been, in other times and places, arranged quite differently,

and therefore, that human possibilities are in almost every way greater than we ordinarily imagine. (2007: 1)

Anthropology's recognition of and openness to 'possibilities' is hugely important in this moment of transformation, as it allows us to unlearn and learn from the pluriverse of human possibilities and from history's silenced pasts (Trouillot 1995). Remembering, reactivating and recontextualising for our troubled present existing and/or past knowledges and practices that have already proven themselves to work, often over millennia, and that we already have connections to in different ways, may be easier than imagining altogether new practices and persuading others of them. If nothing more, it offers a useful additional, complementary pathway to transformation. Here, we would like to suggest two avenues through which Anthropology can help us understand, translate, share and reactivate alternative knowledges and practices from across space and time.

Libraries of Possibilities

The 'alternative' knowledges and practices needed now – agroecology, low-carbon crafts and technology, local disaster resilience, survival skills, feminist politics of care, community organisation and so much more – are not only kept alive but also translated, amplified and documented primarily by Indigenous, migrant and rural communities surviving and thriving across countries of former colonisers and colonised. However, anthropologists have long contributed to these efforts. Forms of ethnographic knowledge that are now more relevant than ever include descriptions of ethnobotanical knowledge across the world, from Harold Conklin (1954) to Elisabeth Hsu and Stephen Harris (2010);⁹ of different farming, foraging, fishing systems (e.g. Fairhead and Leach 1996; Thornton and Moss 2021); of irrigation schemes, (e.g. Geertz 1972; Oguz and Goodale 2024) and other forms low-carbon technology (Degani et al 2020); of cosmologies on which different relationships to other animals and ecosystems can be based (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 1998); of a whole myriad of different ways of thinking about and organising communities, families, households, law, politics, trade, money.

As much as Anthropology offers rich libraries of human possibilities for shared and autonomous ways of living, these libraries themselves testify to the discipline's complicity in various forms of imperial, ecological and epistemic violence (Mafeje 1998; Smith 1999). This means we need to be transparent, self-reflective and critical not only of the mode in which these texts were produced, but also about how we presently use and disseminate them. Only then can these libraries facilitate learning in constructive ways, while simultaneously opening up spaces for recognising Indigenous and variously marginalised activists and scholars who have been pursuing and theorising 'possibilities' for centuries. This line of thinking leads to our second suggestion.

Grassroots Knowledge Politics

It is Indigenous rights and local community activists who lead in calling out extractive, appropriating (mis)uses of Indigenous knowledge in the wider movement for eco-

social transformation. Anthropology, however, can support these critiques by offering tools for tracing the power and intellectual genealogies at the heart of what today are considered ‘innovations’. Such collaborations, as Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte suggests, require, at a minimum, ‘consent, trust, accountability and reciprocity’ (2020: 2). Anthropology’s own painful history – marked by failed, yet ongoing attempts to establish ethical practices of consent and trust with marginalised communities – speaks directly to these present concerns. Its past entanglements offer critical lessons for the epistemic and political work required to act as genuine partners in supporting the territorial, material and epistemic sovereignty of Indigenous peoples.

At the same time, anthropologists can explore how ‘old’ knowledges and practices continue to shape collective ways of life not only in the ‘South’ but also in the ‘North’, even amid seemingly totalising consumerist modernity and all-encompassing capitalist realism (Fisher 2009). Sewing, knitting, weaving, basketry, carpentry, sailing, cooking, repairing, herbal knowledge and gardening: all these low-carbon and resilience-enhancing skills are relevant in our age of collapse and reconfiguration. Much recent anthropological research recognises this, including the work of Manuel Pardo-de-Santayana, Andrea Pieroni and Rajindra Puri (2010) on ethnobotany in Europe, Rachel Kennedy (2024) on weeds and herbal knowledge in London, Magdalena Buchczyk (2023) on basketry in Sardinia and Alessandra Fasoli (2023) on ‘making as culture’. Such work can play an important part in helping revive and reconnect to knowledges that we all possess, even if only in small, half-forgotten fragments. Similarly, reckoning with large-scale wildfires and floods is no longer an exceptional experience – the Australian bushfires in 2020 and the burning of affluent neighbourhoods of Los Angeles in 2024–25 demonstrate that different forms of community preparedness, mutual aid and collapse response are key in an age of climate turbulence no matter the location, even if disasters impact unevenly. Such skills, knowledges and values can be found in myriad places, including among older people, rural people, people who are purposefully setting out to rediscovering these skills, and in communities affected by austerity (Knight 2021) and war (Khayyat 2022).

Understanding ‘the System’

Anthropology, of course, does not solely concern itself with alternatives to modernity; it has always asked fundamental questions about culture, social relations, religion and power in *all* human societies. It has, indeed, long grappled with colonial/capitalist modernity, with ‘the system’ itself: from the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute established in then Northern Rhodesia in 1938 to study urban Africa and rapid social change under colonialism, over the ‘political economy turn’ of the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Gupta and Ferguson 1997) to recent ethnographic works on labour, development, social movements, policy, consumption, corporations, elites, globalisation and environmental change. Anthropology provides a multitude of distinctive perspectives valuable at a time when so many call for ‘system change not climate change’.¹⁰ It is necessary to understand ‘the system’ and what makes it so incredibly powerful – its soft and hard powers, narratives, relations, strategies, laws, militaries and moneys – to be able to

transform it. While this clearly is a collective effort in the social sciences and humanities,¹¹ Anthropology, we suggest, contributes in at least two specific ways: through its ‘holism from within’ and through its perspectives on culture and power.

Holism from Within

Earlier generations of structural-functionalist anthropologists set out to explain ‘everything’ in the communities they studied, writing classic ‘village ethnographies’ with a chapter each on kinship, politics, religions, economy, rituals, and so on. The impossibility and imperial hubris of this ambition is long recognised; as James Clifford and George Marcus put it in *Writing Cultures* (1986), we can only ever write ‘partial stories’, or, indeed, plural ‘jointly told tales’ (van Maanen 2011). However, even the partial, polyphonic stories of contemporary Anthropology are still rooted in the recognition that everything is connected. This ‘everything’ is only growing, with multispecies, more-than-human approaches significantly expanding the remit of anthropological theorising (see Povinelli 2021) and animals, plants, waterways, and weather patterns becoming central concerns for anthropologists, (see, e.g. Aisher and Damodaran 2016; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Mathews 2018; Price and Chao 2023).

Ethnography as a method, with its ability to capture multi-sensorial experiences and phenomenological dimensions of human existence, is uniquely positioned among the empirical social sciences for studying more-than-human ecologies (Tsing et al 2019). Anthropology is also key to the field of political ecology, where, together with human geographers, anthropologists such as Marisol de la Cadena, Arturo Escobar, Lesley Green, Elizabeth Povinelli, Laura Rival and Anna Tsing have been important bridge builders between natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities. While other disciplines too engage in bridge-building, they often remain constrained by rigid boundaries. In political science, for instance, ‘environmental policy’ is treated as a subfield, where multiscalar and spatio-temporal analyses frequently fall through the cracks of artificial separations between international relations, comparative politics and political theory. Anthropology, by contrast, embraces these complexities, engaging ‘ecumenically’ (Rival 2021: 9) with other fields of knowledge.

It’s not just holism itself, but also Anthropology’s particular approach to it that is valuable. ‘System thinking’ in both natural and social sciences tends towards abstraction and towards understanding systems externally, from the outside.¹² While anthropologists, too, have contributed to systems theory (e.g. Bateson 2002), on the whole, as Thomas Eriksen (2001) aptly put it, Anthropology is about ‘small places, large issues’. It is ‘small’ entities – a life, a product, a tree, a virus, a story – that we take as our central starting point for thinking through larger systems. Anthropology is about lived experience, about trying to understand complex systems from within, and often from the vantage point of disenfranchised individuals or communities. Crucially, we also have different regional entry points to most system theory scholars and, indeed, most Western climate activists. Many anthropologists have strong intellectual, emotional, political and familial connections across different parts of the world and these are now – in times of extreme climate, social and economic injustice – more important than ever.

Culture and Power

As anthropologists working with and studying climate protest groups, policy makers and local governments tasked with delivering change on the ground, we have been struck by how limited understandings of culture can be in these circles, especially in government bodies. Among activists, we have encountered quite a lot of thought and reflection, especially in Extinction Rebellion's ideas around regenerative culture that have inspired us, too; but – most activists not being anthropologists – these discussions tend to lack the historical depth and comparative nuance of anthropological insights. In government bodies seeking to develop and deliver climate mitigation and adaptation strategies, culture is hardly mentioned; when it is, it tends to be in essentialised terms or equated with the cultural sector (e.g. Dinenage 2021). Instead, government approaches to changing societal practices are now dominated by the positivist logics of 'nudging', rooted in behaviour sciences and psychology (e.g. Whitmarsh et al 2021).

Contemporary Anthropology can contribute to and complement existing approaches here. Today, we understand culture as the multitude of shared practices and values of communities and societies, as fluid and changing, deeply shaped by political economy, in contrast to essentialist popular uses of culture as well as its misuses in earlier anthropological scholarship (Abu-Lughod 1991; Wright 1998). Car ownership and meat eating, for example, are both embedded in and often talked about as cultural practices, yet the astronomical expansion of both phenomena in recent decades in many parts of the world has clearly been driven by industrial and political interests as well as wider socioeconomic changes, as Mindi Schneider (2019) showed in the case of China's pork industry. Drawing on and ethnographically developing Antonio Gramsci's ideas on hegemony, Kate Crehan (2002) explored how culture and power are always intricately linked, yet in different, changing ways. Such fluid, nuanced understandings of culture are crucial for discovering avenues for collectively surviving, alleviating or at least redistributing capitalist liberalism's toxicity (Povinelli 2021).

When it comes to power more broadly, Anthropology, in conversation with other disciplines and theorists, can offer insights informed by ethnography and the specific concerns of the discipline. This includes studies of elites and the powerful (e.g. Archer and Souleles 2021; Marcus 1983) as well as the myriad ways in which power manifests and shapes everyday lives, as Savannah Shange illustrates in *Progressive Dystopia* (2019); but also important insights on resistance, from James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1986) to Shange's call for Abolitionist Anthropology in *Progressive Dystopia*.

There is much in all this literature, and in the overall insights gained from a vantage point at the intersection of culture and power, that anthropologists and others can draw on at this moment of polycrisis: for understanding the different ways we are all entangled in 'the system' as consumers, workers, citizens and social beings and how institutional, cultural, political, psychological factors intersect to keep 'business as usual' and delay climate action; but also for identifying pockets of resistance, leverage points and pathways for change.

How Anthropology Can Become More Regenerative

Anthropology, as we hope to have shown, clearly has much to offer for finding transformative pathways out of our destructive age. But to unleash its regenerative potential, and indeed to survive and flourish, our discipline needs to confront its own shortcomings, regenerating itself from within in order to help regenerate worlds without. In the following, we briefly sketch out two ways in which Anthropology can, and we believe should, change: ‘Get Out There and Be The Change’ and ‘Regenerative Pedagogy’. Building on previous, similar calls, these are not intended to be definitive pathways to regeneration but rather provocations, stimuli that others, we hope, can develop further and add to.

Get Out There and Be The Change

Let’s face the inconvenient truth: Anthropology is a brilliant subject that nobody knows. Who has not found themselves countless times having to explain – at parties, on trains, in virtually every new social encounter beyond the University – what Anthropology is, or that it is not all about Neanderthals? We need to get Anthropology out into the public consciousness. It is not good enough to be content with being part of a special, abstruse tribe. Let’s go to schools and talk about Anthropology; provide online access courses and evening classes; write in fora far beyond academic journals – newspapers, blogs, social media. It’s not just that we don’t want our discipline, departments and jobs to disappear; not even just that we firmly believe that the world (and a world where many worlds fit) needs Anthropology. It is also because, in our myriad everyday engagements with fellow activists, friends, and neighbours, we sense that there is a real thirst for what our discipline offers, with so many people increasingly realising that we need to rethink . . . everything.

We must learn to write in simple, accessible ways that reach people of all ages and educational backgrounds. We have a long tradition of writing for each other: we may impress ourselves, forever celebrating clever neologisms, but this is nothing to be proud of. A discipline that is all about ‘the people’ needs to be able to write for the people. It is no coincidence that David Graeber and Jason Hickel – both authors who have embraced accessible language – are among the best-known anthropologists.

We also need to get ourselves out there. This involves being engaged not (just) as researchers but as citizens and activists, actively contributing to the weaving of a ‘Tapestry of Alternatives’.¹³ Of course, there are already many anthropologists working with social movements, but really all of us, including those working on different topics, have a lot to contribute and could practice active citizen participation where we live – one of the best ways of learning, after all (von Hellermann 2021). At the same time, we should get more anthropologists into the corridors of power. There is a growing recognition of the need for social sciences in environmental policy making and governance,¹⁴ but these initiatives tend to be dominated by social psychology and other quantitative social sciences. We have a lot more groundwork to do to raise awareness of the contributions anthropologists can make, complementing existing approaches, not only because policy makers, government bodies and NGOs *need*

Anthropology, but also because the growing number of departments shedding staff or closing altogether means many of us are having to find other jobs. Also, indeed, because greater ‘employability’ – as much as we may hate the term and all its ‘serving the behemoth’ connotations – will help our students. A lot of excellent work, including important reflection on the ethical and wider implications of the discipline, is already being done by bodies like Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA), the ASA Applied Anthropology Network and the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology; but really this needs to be a discipline-wide, concerted effort, which must include acknowledging elitism and dismantling unhelpful hierarchies separating ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ Anthropology.

Regenerative Anthropology is not just about finding better ways to get our research, ourselves and our students out there – applying, engaging, being accessible – but also about ‘activating’ our research and writing itself. Analysis, interpretation, description, critique and understanding are all vital in themselves. But we also need to start to think, research and write about how to actually change things. With all our decades of thinking and writing about culture, social norms and practices, we shouldn’t leave attempts to *change* these to social psychology and nudging. It is not enough to produce critiques of nudging (though we need those, too); we need to develop our own recommendations for changing habits, norms and practices but also enter dialogue and work together with psychologists and other social sciences. When it comes to car dependency and meat eating, for example, let’s use our ethnographic understanding of the expansion of both as recent phenomena driven by industrial interests – combined with our knowledge of long histories of largely vegan diets in many parts of the world as well as carless mobility and sociality (as recently as the 1950s hardly anyone owned a car in the UK, for example) – to develop practical recommendations for changing current practices. Even if these recommendations turn out ultimately to be about infrastructure changes or advertising regulation (measures that we may perceive to be beyond our remit, with ‘culture’ itself melting away, as it so often does), we need to go out there and contribute to these conversations.

Regenerative Pedagogy

Finally, all of the above needs to be reflected in how we teach Anthropology, in and out of the classroom. Teaching is a prime site for practising and thinking through what truly regenerative Anthropology could look like. This encompasses a real, deep interrogation of the role of university teaching and what we give our students in the three years or so they spend with us. While our thinking on this is work in progress, we would like to briefly articulate what we see as the core of regenerative pedagogy: that it must be about the *whole person*, combining critique, practice and wisdom.

This tripartite framework emerges from our own experiences of teaching Anthropology, as well as from our reflection on insights shared by colleagues from around the world who participated in a panel we held at the June 2024 RAI Anthropology and Education conference. While variants of holistic education appear across pedagogical traditions – from Indigenous knowledge systems to educational philosophers like Pestalozzi – our formulation specifically responds to Anthropology’s unique position

Implementing regenerative pedagogy raises important questions about academic labour and self-care, but regeneration is fundamentally about creating conditions for flourishing rather than simply adding more demands. A 'less is more' approach to teaching Anthropology means subtracting unsustainable practices to create space for deeper work – perhaps teaching fewer courses with greater depth, eliminating redundant assessments in favour of meaningful reflection and reducing the pressure for constant publication. Universities must support this by restructuring workloads rather than expanding them, recognising that regenerative pedagogy requires time and space for relationships to develop – with students, communities and the land itself. This subtraction of academic busywork creates the conditions necessary for wisdom to take

root. Teaching Anthropology in this way can also contribute to our own well-being and help us stop internalising the destructive pressures and values of neoliberal higher education.

A Time of Monsters and Regeneration

When we first discussed the idea of regenerative Anthropology in 2022, we were motivated by the need to identify pathways to just socio-ecological transformation and believed that this might indeed be a time of ‘transition’ when significant change becomes inevitable. Three and a half years on, this feels naïve. With our own lives altered by the crisis of Higher Education in the UK, techno-fascism running rampant, climate and eco-systems unravelling faster even than anticipated and unconscionable destruction of civilian life in West Asia and beyond, political leaders and billionaire tech-bros seem more monstrous and powerful than ever, while the ‘new worlds’, if they ever were on their way, seem to have retreated again. Right now, it feels as though all we can do is knuckle down and try to survive.

However, rather than the actual ‘Right Now’, Gramsci’s ‘Now’ – which he wrote about a 100 years ago – can also be interpreted as the more long-lasting ‘Now’ of extractive capitalist modernity, ‘the system’ that makes this a time of monsters. In the same vein, possibilities, transformation and regeneration are also always there with us – in 2026 just as much as when Gramsci was writing about counter-hegemony in the 1920s, when Roy spoke at the World Social Forum in 2003, or when Slavoj Žižek and David Graeber wrote about possibilities in the late 2000s; when throughout this time communities all over the world have been quietly practising regenerative agriculture or forging new forms of solidarity and mutual aid. Which means that *right now*, amid collapse, remains, after all, the best time to start.

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PAULINE VON HELLERMANN is a Research Associate in Anthropology at Sussex University and Associate Lecturer in Geography at UCL. After obtaining a PhD on forest governance in Nigeria in 2005, she held British Academy and Marie Curie postdoctoral fellowships before teaching Anthropology at Goldsmiths until 2024. She was a Leverhulme Major Research Fellow with *Red Gold: A Global Environmental Anthro-*

pology of Palm Oil. She is engaged in local environmental action and does consultancy work. Pauline is author of *Things Fall Apart? The Political Ecology of Forest Governance in Nigeria* and co-editor, with Simon Coleman, of *Multi-Sited Ethnography. Environmental Anthropology: The Basics* is due to be published by Routledge in 2028. Email: pfv21@sussex.ac.uk; ORCID: 0000-0003-2550-2958.

TOBIAS MÜLLER is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) and Bye-Fellow at Queens' College, University of Cambridge. Using mostly ethnographic methods, his research interests include the politics of climate change, secularism and Islam in Europe, and decolonial and feminist theory. He is Principal Investigator of the project 'Democratic Futures: Climate Change, Coloniality and the State', which explores the epistemic, spiritual, intersectional, decolonial and reparationist dimensions of the global climate movement with a specific focus on Mexico, South Africa, the UK and the USA. Email: tm498@cam.ac.uk; ORCID: 0000-0002-1999-4370.

PETER SUTORIS is Associate Professor in Climate and Development at the Sustainability Research Institute, School of Earth and Environment and Sustainability, University of Leeds. His research focuses on imagination of the future and environmental social movements, as well as pedagogies of change and participatory futures methods. He is the author of the books *Reimagining Development* (with U. Pradhan), *Educating for the Anthropocene* and *Visions of Development*. Email: P.Sutoris@leeds.ac.uk; ORCID: 0000-0003-3801-7951.

Notes

1. This famous translation of Gramsci's statement in fact stems from Slavoj Žižek (2010). The original, in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, is 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass' (Gramsci 1971: 276).
2. This is the last sentence of a speech given by Arundhati Roy at the World Social Forum (WSF), Porto Alegre, Brazil, on 25 January 2003. See <https://www.gale.com/intl/databases-explored/literature/arundhati-roy>, accessed 9 February 2025.
3. See, for example, the Indian collective Teachers against Climate Crisis (<https://teachersagainstclimatecrisis.wordpress.com>, accessed 6 August 2025), Exeter University's Climate Change, Adaptation and Sustainability programme (<https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/centres/cws/research/climate-change/>, accessed 24 February 2025), the Leeds Sustainability Research Initiative (<https://environment.leeds.ac.uk/sustainability-research-institute>, accessed 24 February 2025) and the University of Cape Town's African Climate and Development Initiative (<https://acdi.uct.ac.za/>, accessed 25 February 2025).
4. 'Crackdown on Rip-Off University Degrees', Government press release 17 July 2023 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/crackdown-on-rip-off-university-degrees>, accessed 24 February 2025).
5. See <https://www.gw.uni-jena.de/en/3770/rare-disciplines>, accessed 24 February 2025.
6. We are aware that 'just transition' is, like 'sustainability' before it, a polysemic and problematic term, in particular as it is increasingly co-opted by policy and corporate circles to signify technocratic efforts to move towards carbon neutral energy production, along with some tokenistic

- measures to ensure equity – without challenging the logics of capitalism itself. We hope there is still some space for ‘just transition’ to signify radical changes towards planetary health and social justice, but given these problems, we use the term as little as possible in this article.
7. The Clifton House nd. About, <https://www.thecliftonhouse.org/about>, accessed 25 February 2025.
 8. For example, it was a point of discussion at a June 2023 ‘Climate Hackathon’ at the Leeds Conservatoire that two of us participated in. See <https://jacobthompsonbell.com/projects>, accessed 24 February 2025.
 9. It is impossible to provide comprehensive references here; instead, we are citing just a few key examples from both earliest and recent anthropology.
 10. This is a popular slogan in the climate movement, often seen on placards at marches 2019–2022.
 11. The Climate Social Science Network (CSSN) set up by Timm Roberts at Brown University, focused on climate denial mechanisms, is an excellent example of this (<https://cssn.org/>, accessed 24 February 2025).
 12. For natural and social science overviews of system theory, see, for example, Cabrera and Cabrera (2023).
 13. The ‘Tapestry of Alternatives’ is a global network of networks identifying and connecting eco-social grassroots initiatives. See <https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/>, accessed 12 August 2025.
 14. See, for example, the ACCESS project at Exeter University (<https://accessnetwork.uk/>, accessed March 2026).

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Vers une anthropologie régénérative

Le rôle de notre discipline en naviguant l'intersection des crises et la transformation

Pauline von Hellermann, Peter Sutoris, and Müller Tobias

Résumé : Dans une période de crises environnementales, politiques et sociales grandissantes, l'anthropologie a un potentiel transformatif mais la discipline se trouve face à des menaces existentielles. Cet article plaide pour une anthropologie régénérative — une discipline qui ne se contente pas de critiquer les systèmes colonial-capitalistes conduisant à la dégradation, mais plutôt une discipline qui contribue activement à la construction des futurs alternatifs et respectueux du vivant. En s'appuyant sur des aperçus de l'agriculture régénérative, l'activisme et l'ethnographie multi-espèces, nous explorons comment l'anthropologie peut soutenir des transformations vers des futurs plus durables en resuscitant divers savoirs, pratiques et modes de vie. Au même temps, l'anthropologie elle-même doit évoluer. Tandis que les universités subissent la restructuration néo-libérale et les facultés s'amenuisent, nous proposons un changement plus conséquent vers l'engagement et l'accessibilité, ainsi qu'une pédagogie capable d'équilibrer la critique et la pratique, l'imagination et l'action. Dans une période de bouleversement, l'anthropologie peut — et doit — devenir une force pour la régénération, dans le monde académique comme dans la société.

Mots-clés : anthropologie engagée, pédagogie, poly-crisis, régénérative, transition, urgence climatique