Best of Times, Worst of Times – Social Anthropology 1975–2025

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Abstract: *In this article the author traces the parallel themes of 'ageing in anthropology' and the 'ageing of anthropology' by reflecting on the experience of being an academic exposed to and working in the academic and institutional contexts of predominantly British social anthropology from the mid-1970s to the present. The author adopts an autoethnographic approach, describing and reflecting on what he discerns as some of the key changes in the discipline over this fifty-year period, as well as some of his responses to them. What have been the enablers and levers – ideological, technological, geopolitical, economic – through which anthropology as a discipline, and his practice of it, has changed? Given the 'decades of crises' (Ringel 2021), the effects of the Anthropocene (including the impact of Covid-19 and other emergent pandemics), the increase in global inequalities, the growth of authoritarianism and the hegemony of corporate capitalism, should one dare to hope for the future of anthropology? What hopes can there be for the future of the discipline both within academia and beyond?*

Keywords: *Autoethnography; ageing in and of anthropology; higher education*

The eventual anthropologist

I retired fully from 32 years' employment in a UK anthropology department on 30 September 2024. I thus feel able to write authoritatively about the twin themes of the 8th Biennial Conference of the Czech Association of Social Anthropologists (CASA) – 'ageing in anthropology' (for I have done just that) and my own experience and reflections on the 'ageing of anthropology' as a discipline – drawing,

inevitably, on my particular academic and institutional contexts and position. Czechia, appropriately enough, has been the site of two conferences that have bookended my career: the 2nd Biennial Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) held in Prague in July 1992, and the aforementioned 8th CASA Biennial in Pardubice in November 2025. In this article, I shall first outline my own trajectory into social anthropology as a discipline, before focusing on three themes in particular that, I shall argue, override – or at least strongly shape – the intellectual developments that might be the expected focus of any account concerning the ageing of our discipline. The first theme is the growth in ethics; the second is what I call the democratisation of anthropology; and the third is the technological developments that shaped how we are able to conduct ourselves as global anthropologists. I hope my experiences provide some degree of wisdom from the past as well as pointers to the future that are of both personal and disciplinary value to current and future generations of social anthropologists.

The title of this article comes from the opening of Charles Dickens' (1859/2007) novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, published in instalments in 1859, but with the French Revolution of the 1770s as its focal point. The paradox of the opening sentence, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times', is repeated in the subsequent statements:

> *It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.*

Dickens carries on, 'In short, the period was so far like the present period that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.'

Like the 1770s (the era in which the novel is set) and 1859 (the year of its writing), so our own period – and indeed discipline – is marked by such dualities, which anthropology aspires to iron out, or at least explain, through a process glibly referred to as 'making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange'. Jorge Luis Borges (2013) rather acerbically notes that 'Dickens lived in London…He really could not write a tale of two cities. He was a resident of just one city: London'. Anthropologists, by contrast, are 'travelers who like to stay and dig in (for a time)' (Clifford 1992: 22). Except that, today, we are as likely to dig in on the global stage as the local one, and often have too little time to stay.

In the autoethnographic, life-history account that follows, I use the approach taken by Grøn and Meinert (2025), in which large- and small-scale histories rub against each other across a range of short- and long-term temporal registers.[1] In the Introduction to this special issue the editors also argue contentiously that the notion of 'time' is 'ontologically groundless', a point I find hard to square with my own lived experience. While I don't have space to pursue it here, I am also inspired by Michael Jackson's (2021) *The Genealogical Imagination: Two Studies of Life Over Time* for its exploration of temporality through the lens of intergenerational trauma, of how large-scale events in one generation can or may reverberate into the next. As current generations work through relationships with their ancestors, in anthropology as in life, it is impossible to escape what Jackson calls 'the gravitational pull of the past'.

Ageing in anthropology – the student years

I didn't learn much about anthropology where I was brought up, a small town on the south coast of England called Bexhill-on-Sea (hereafter 'Bexhill').[2] A seaside resort that had become a popular retirement destination due to its relatively moderate climate, Bexhill had the reputation in the 1960s and 70s when I lived there for being the town with the oldest elderly population on average of any town in Europe. A standing joke at the time (at the expense of confused members of the elderly population who were its major demographic) was that Bexhill was the only place in the world where you had to look both ways before crossing a one-way street.

It was also, however, a town of the unexpected. The De La Warr Pavillion, for example, designed by German émigrés and Bauhaus architects Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff, who won a design competition in 1935, is sometimes described as the first major Modernist public building in Britain.[3]

1 It is also, interestingly, the approach used by Nobel Prize-winning author Annie Ernaux (2008/2017) to telling effect in her book *The Years*.

2 Bexhill is situated west of Hastings, a name famous for the 1066 Battle of Hastings, when the Norman duke William the Conqueror invaded to become King William 1 of England. To the west of Bexhill is Eastbourne – a town where, somewhat paradoxically given its contemporary demographic and political leanings, Karl Marx wrote much of *Das Kapital*.

3 Mendelsohn and Chermayeff worked under Mies van der Rohe, architect of the equally iconic 'Villa Tugendhat' in Brno – an interesting UK–Czechia connection (see Lambek 2022).

Figure 1: *Map showing the location of Bexhill-on-Sea* (Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right, CC BY-SA 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>, via Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 2: *Bexhill-on-Sea – Free entertainment options* (photo by the author)

Figure 3: *Three images of Bexhill-on-Sea, c. 1960* (photo by the author)

I sometimes wonder whether being a young person in such a town shaped a certain individuation, a 'betwixt and between' detachment in me that is the hallmark of what has come to be seen as the classic tradition of 'lone scholar' anthropological fieldwork.

My first introduction to anthropology as a subject of more than 'academic' interest was through 'Project Trust', an organisation headquartered on the Isle of Coll in the Scottish Hebrides, where the director and his retinue ran a selection centre. This educational charity sent school-leaver volunteers to live and work in an overseas community for a year. They had an opening for someone to teach spoken English and run a 'Children's Corner' in Mitraniketan (Kerala State, South India), a Gandhian-style rural community-education-cum-training centre, where I lived from October 1976 to August 1977. This formative experience was something that I would never have had without the support of an organisation like this. It was also what first gave me a sense of anthropology as a fascinating subject with something important to offer, since during that time I got to know a social anthropologist, Nigel Goodall, who was doing PhD fieldwork with a potter caste in a village two bus rides away from Mitraniketan. In his company, I attended various ritual events, such as an all-night outdoor séance in which his landlord

became possessed by the lineage spirit and took part in a series of symbolic and divinatory performances.

By the time I arrived at university, I had therefore begun to have second thoughts about the degree programme to which I'd been accepted. As I rather awkwardly had to explain to the English tutor on the degree course from which I needed to extract myself, I had spent ten months in the company of what in those days was 500 million people, most of whom had never heard of Keats, Shakespeare or Dickens and, as far as I could make out, were none the worse for their lack of knowledge. Fortunately, there was a place available on a more congenial course, the multidisciplinary social and biological sciences degree programme called 'Human Sciences', and I was permitted to transfer into it only a few weeks after the start.

As but one of seven disciplinary areas covered by the Human Sciences degree, the social anthropology I picked up at Oxford was somewhat patchy. The main set of lectures I attended in the subject were given by Edwin Ardener, who gave a memorable potted history of the ageing of anthropological theory. For him, social anthropology had cantered through a set of theoretical eras, summarised by three amusingly shifting statements, viz. 'rationality is a feature of modern societies alone' (the assumption of the 19th-century evolutionists); 'rationality is not a feature of modern societies alone' (the 20th-century structuralist approach); 'rationality is not a feature of modern societies' (the post-structuralist approach). We also touched on how demography is a qualitative state of mind as much as a numerical reality (thinking about the so-called 'lost generation' of young British men as a result of the First World War). There was also the simple statement, 'Whatever happened to the Roman Empire?' However, there was a sense of precious exclusivity about the whole thing, evinced in a statement by one social anthropologist (not Edwin Ardener) gently disparaging the knowledge of others because 'they don't share *our* way of thinking'.

I harboured no aspirations for a career in higher education at that time, but I was keen to continue with the broad-brush, multidisciplinary approach of the Human Sciences if I carried on at postgraduate level at all. As a result of a successful application for a Thouron Award to study at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia for two years from 1982-4, I pursued the MS Biomedical Anthropology degree that was offered there at that time. Here I developed a much stronger sense of anthropology as a discipline, the 'four fields' approach championed in the United States offering a much more coherent structure than the rather piecemeal and divided sense of it I had from Oxford University. One of the articles by a faculty member from that time is Igor Kopytoff's (1971) 'Ancestors as Elders in Africa'. Death, he argues, is not a definitive state; ancestors (as part of 'the broader phenomenon of "eldership"') are always with us – a point echoed with

more contemporary nuance by Susan Reynolds-Whyte in the 'Ageing Time Beings' volume and which makes sense when considering 'the ageing of anthropology'.

The choice of topic for my master's dissertation – 'Depo-Provera, an anthropological analysis' – was my first attempt to do research that was useful to others. Bereft of any obvious topic I wanted to pursue for its own intellectual value, I contacted the Philadelphia-based American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and was introduced to the injectable contraceptive Depo-Provera, at that time a controversial product being evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration for licensing in the United States. What were the rights and wrongs of Depo as a contraceptive, the AFSC asked? My dissertation failed to provide them with the kind of definitive answers they sought. Rather, I ended up showing how different kinds of 'science' and scientific evidence could be used to support the arguments both for and against the contraceptive (Russell 1999), and how difficult it is to know the long-term effects of any pharmaceutical product. These somewhat inconclusive conclusions are often a feature of applied work in anthropology. There are two sides to every story – in this case, the message was that, irrespective of its safety concerns, for some women Depo was the best of contraceptives; for some women the worst.

The Director of Project Trust had offered me a job as a desk officer living on the Isle of Coll before I left for the United States. I returned to Britain in 1984 in the company of Tamara (Tammy) Kohn, an American PhD-track student at the University of Pennsylvania whose original plan was to do fieldwork in Amazonia. The Isle of Coll offered an interesting shift in both research direction and institutional affiliation for her. I introduced her to Edwin Ardener, who had developed research interests in the Scottish Hebrides to supplement his original and more classic fieldwork interests in Cameroon. Tammy was successful in securing a PhD place and scholarship support at Oxford and, with the help of a small furniture van and a friend visiting from Australia, we shifted all our worldly goods, including a baby grand piano, from my mother's house in Bexhill to the Isle of Coll.

Three years living and working on a Hebridean island was indeed a terrific experience at that stage of my life, but, despite Edwin Ardener's (2012) claims that 'remote areas' are largely a state of mind, I felt ready to return to more mainstream, mainland life at the end of it. This was another crossroads moment for me, deciding whether to continue in the non-academic field broadly categorised as 'the voluntary sector', or to return to academia and follow Tammy (who was writing up her PhD at that point) in pursuing a doctorate of my own. The main challenge I faced for further postgraduate study was in securing funding, particularly when based on a Hebridean island in the pre-internet era, but I was fortunate in being able to stay with friends in London for a few nights, which enabled me to make contact with relevant people and develop a proposal.

The main funding body for social science research in the United Kingdom, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), was keen to support applied research and ran a studentship scheme – Collaborative Awards in the Social Sciences – designed to bring academic and non-academic bodies together for the purpose of PhD supervision. As with Depo Provera, I lacked a personal project that motivated me intellectually, so I again approached likely organisations asking if they had current topics or issues which they saw as ripe for anthropological research under this scheme. The most positive and practical response came from Dr Sean Conlin, social development advisor at what was the UK government's aid and development wing, the Overseas Development Administration (ODA). He suggested two areas the ODA was working in that would benefit from some in-depth social anthropological input. One was family planning in Bangladesh, the other was social forestry in Nepal. For various reasons, I chose Nepal.

Nearly two years elapsed between success in securing the ESRC studentship funding and departing for fieldwork in rural Nepal. In that time the ODA had taken the decision to contract the operation of their Koshi Hills Area Rural Development Project (KHARDEP) to a firm of development consultants. This 'privatisation' of KHARDEP made completing the applied dimension of my PhD problematic. The expatriate development consultants in Nepal thought I was a spy sent out from the ODA's headquarters in London to evaluate their performance; an added complication was that staff at the ODA's regional office in Bangkok liked to think they were in charge of what happened in the SE Asia 'region', not staff in London. I had inadvertently stepped into a hornets' nest of suspicion and intrigue and risked becoming a political football between different parties seeking to establish their power and influence over each other.

Fortunately, because my collaborative award funding came directly from the ESRC, I was not beholden to the ODA or its consultants financially. My supervisor, Nick Allen, and I had identified a Tibeto-Burman group called the Yakha (or Yakkha, if one is spelling it correctly) who were based in the middle of the KHARDEP project and who appeared never to have been the subject of anthropological research. On a reconnaissance trek into the area, Tammy and I identified a dispersed village settlement, Tamaphok, which was in many respects the cultural heartland of the Yakkha. We were offered accommodation in the house of the *pradhan panch* (village head) with his wife and his daughter, Kamala, and so decided to make that the base for our fieldwork. Thus we learnt about momentous events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, from a scratchy-sounding radio in a wooden extension to the *pradhan panch*'s house, looking out across the spectacular Maya Khola valley to the Himalayan peak of Mount Makalu beyond.

Figure 5: *Working with informants – Tamaphok 1990* (photo by Tamara Kohn)

Having reached 'the field', I was also aware that forests and forest use in Tamaphok were only one element of Yakkha environmental relations. My eventual PhD thesis, 'The Yakha: Culture, Environment and Development in East Nepal', focused on the meanings of 'environment' for the Yakkha, of which forests were only a small part, and which encompassed the social and spiritual as well as physical environments in both Tamaphok and the world beyond.[4]

As time progressed, I was also struck by how much movement there was through the middle hills of Nepal, migratory and otherwise. The need for such movement posed its own unexpected and largely unwelcome challenges. In the cold winter months of our second year of fieldwork, Tammy developed pneumonia and had to be carried out of Tamaphok by a porter in a basket to seek medical attention and convalesce. A few months later, on my way back from buying provisions in the nearest roadhead town – a four-hour walk up the hill ridge above Tamaphok, a one-hour walk down the other side – I slipped and fell on a muddy path, fracturing my right arm.

4 My respective external and internal DPhil examiners were Lionel Caplan and Wendy James.

The following day, after an agonising night, I had to return up and down the path and take a bus down to the nearest hospital in the lowland Tarai. Here my wrist was successfully reset, but I am right-handed, so my emergent plans to study Yakkha migrants from Tamaphok to other parts of Nepal had to be put on hold.[5] People in Tamaphok put my misfortune down to the operations of Sogek, a spirit of myth and legend that causes mischief to unwary travellers (Russell 2000a).

As well as what I learnt from my direct fieldwork experiences over the course of 21 months – about the pitfalls of attempting to do applied research, for example, or the inherent risks associated with fieldwork in 'remote' locales – some key publications helped shape my PhD thesis and reflected the 'ageing of anthropology' that was happening at that time. One was Alan Macfarlane's (1976) *Resources and Population*, based on his research among the Gurungs in Thak, further to the west of Nepal. Demography, he argues in this book, is a key unacknowledged factor in social life. I could appreciate this point, having grown up amongst a predominantly elderly population in Bexhill and having spent time doing research in a situation where transient migration, primarily of young men in East Nepal, was commonplace. But it was less the impact of population structures on other aspects of life, such as resource provision, and more the phenomenological effects of demography – having to look both ways along a one-way street in Bexhill, or the 'here today gone tomorrow' aspects of migration on those who left and those who remained behind in Tamaphok (Russell 1992) – that interested me. Another was the growing sense of uncertainty about old tropes such as 'subsistence farming in the hills causes flooding in the plains below', reflected in works such as Thompson et al.'s (1986) *Uncertainty on a Himalayan Scale*. It had taken this group five years' work to reach conclusions such as 'it is less the facts, than what would you like the facts to be?' that is significant. Retrospectively, this was a lightbulb point in my intellectual development as an anthropologist, somewhat on a par with the contra-Durkheimian statement 'society explains nothing but is itself to be explained' (Krarup and Blok 2011: 43). But perhaps the hardships endured in much anthropological fieldwork – the broken bones, the respiratory problems – are, like time itself, a challenge to the overly easy dismissal of 'facts' as ontologically groundless?

[5] My research on Yakkha migrants came later, funded by the Leverhulme Trust – see Russell (2000b) and Russell (2007).

Ageing in anthropology – the professional years

I had first visited Durham in November 1975, for an undergraduate interview to read English. My second visit, in 1991, was to attend the ASA conference, which was serendipitously themed 'Environment and Environmentalism'. Here I heard a joke that resonated strongly with my perceptions about the importance (and consequences) of extraneous factors in success and failure:

> Question: '*Why do dolphins have the reputation for helping push swimmers in difficulties towards the shore*?'
> Answer: '*Because you don't hear again from the swimmers they push in the other direction*.'

Employment possibilities in higher education tend to ebb and flow. I was fortunate that the late 1980s was a fairly expansionist period in UK higher education after some pretty fallow years earlier in that decade. Durham was one of several universities seeking part-time, temporary teaching staff that year. However, as a result of a visit by Margaret Thatcher to the region in 1987 and a pledge to higher education-centred urban renewal, Durham University was collaborating with the University of Teesside to open a new campus in Stockton-on-Tees, about 25 kilometres south of Durham (Melhuish 2015). Under the tutelage of Michael Carrithers, the Anthropology Department was actively pursuing distinctive degree programmes to put on there and hence had some longer-term posts to offer. Between us, Tammy and I offered a broad range of educational skills and research interests. We applied, and were accepted, as a job share.

Job sharing remains an unusual arrangement in academic employment but is one I can highly recommend. Working half-time gave me the chance to finish my PhD thesis and have my viva in Oxford within six months. Durham University essentially got 'two for the price of one' in terms of employees. On an everyday level, Tammy and I adopted the approach that if one of us was in the office the other one shouldn't be, although it wasn't always as simple as that, since job sharers face the intractable problem that sometimes there are important institutional events that you both need to be at. We also found strong currents (including financial ones) pulling us towards full-time employment. With my master's level background in medical anthropology, for example, I was asked to do the development work for a second anthropology degree at Stockton, to be named Health and Human Sciences. This required me to work full-time. Tammy also went full-time to accommodate all the teaching demands that were made of her. We separated and divorced five years later.

Durham proved to be an institution which, for all its faults (and what institution doesn't have them?), offered the flexibility to take up initiatives and try out new roles as my eventual career in anthropology developed. Looking back, I can discern three main phases to that career. The first was working with colleagues developing and delivering the Human Sciences and Health and Human Sciences degrees at Stockton Campus, and becoming involved in developing qualitative health-related research opportunities in the northeast of England (initially in contraception, gastro-enterology, and primary health care). The second was becoming part of new developments in medical education, which went through an expansionist phase in the later 1990s. Durham went into partnership with Newcastle University to establish the first two years of a five-year medical degree programme at the Stockton Campus, which commenced in 2001. I was keen to explore the relevance of anthropology beyond its own disciplinary boundaries and so joined the multidisciplinary team assembled to develop, teach and research this 'early years' programme. My own contribution was as lead for the social and behavioural sciences strand of the curriculum – 'Medicine in the Community'. An innovative feature of this strand was a community placement scheme. Based on the medical anthropological principle that between 70% and 90% of all healthcare takes place without reference to any sort of health professional, this required all 100 first- and second-year medical students to spend one session a week over the period of a calendar year working in a volunteer role with a plethora of mainly non-clinical health and social care providers in the Stockton area. This exposure to largely non-clinical lifeworlds, about which they were expected to write a 3000-word ethnographic report at the end, was an eye-opening experience for many medical students (Russell 2011).

The third phase involved the transfer of some of the knowledge, skills and experience gleaned from that community-based programme into a new role, as the university's first Director of Community Outreach and Engagement. This petered out (rather like the Roman Empire) as external funding for community outreach work largely evaporated in the austerity years between 2010 and 2019. However, one of the initiatives from those days that has stood the test of time is a volunteering scheme for university staff. This enables staff to undertake up to a week's paid work each year with voluntary sector organisations operating outside the lifeworld of the university. However, despite the effort and innovation I put into curriculum development for both the Health and Human Sciences degree and the Medicine programme, the textbook for medical students (Russell 2009) I wrote that was awarded the British Medical Journal's student textbook of the year award in 2010, and my extensive outreach work beyond the university, it was not until my monograph *Anthropology of Tobacco* was published (Russell 2019) that I attained a professorship in the department.

The ageing of anthropology

I could wax lyrical about the intellectual developments that have taken place in anthropology as it has aged over the past fifty years – the shift from function to meaning, the diversification of subdisciplines, the growth of applied anthropology, the Foucauldian revolution, the postmodern 'writing culture' critique, the rise of material culture studies, decolonisation and the reflexive focus of 'anthropology at home'. However, the three elements that seem most significant to me in changing the character of the discipline during this period are less theoretical and more practical. I am calling them the ethicisation of anthropology; the democratisation of anthropology; and the technologisation of anthropology.

The ethicisation of anthropology has been a marked feature of the discipline over the past 30 years. When I began, fieldwork like mine in East Nepal was conducted with no formal ethical approvals in place whatsoever! This is not to say research practices at that time were unethical. Social anthropology has always had moral and ethical questions at its heart, and although there are blind spots when it comes to considering the broader issues of power and positionality inherent in the anthropological enterprise, at the level of the individual fieldworker, ethics are almost impossible to ignore. What has been lacking, until recently, are the bureaucratic frameworks of ethical review, fuelled by the pernicious growth of what Strathern (2000) calls 'audit cultures'. It is interesting to note, though, that the two international research symposia that preceded a key article on the formalisation of research ethics were titled 'Have we become too ethical?' and 'How can we become more ethical?', respectively.[6] What is commonly accepted as a medical model of ethical practice, involving information sheets and consent forms, has been raised to a level of authority that risks compromising the goals of most social anthropology, namely to capture the blooming, buzzing confusion of everyday life in all its nuanced complexity. Operating within the confines of research that has been granted ethical approval by a departmental or university ethics committee can have a chilling effect when it comes to taking up unexpected opportunities that may arise during fieldwork, but which fall outside the purview of that approval.[7]

What is less frequently considered in recent critiques of the bureaucratisation of ethics and ethical processes in the social sciences is the continuing extractive nature of much research in social anthropology – where communities are used as a vehicle for the advancement of the individual anthropologist (or the anthropological

6 See Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. (2017).
7 Budilová and Jakoubek (2024) make a similar point.

enterprise more generally) and gain little in return. Participatory Action Research (PAR), by contrast (which I became particularly interested in through working with Durham University's Centre for Social Justice and Community Action), is about working 'with' communities rather than 'on' them. Because a version of the term 'participation' is embedded in what is a hallmark of social anthropological research, namely 'participant observation', I think there is a tendency for anthropologists to assume they are doing participatory work when in fact there may be little that is truly participatory (in the PAR sense) within it. Given that PAR is based on principles of co-production, it can be very difficult to identify how a participatory research project is likely to evolve, making PAR a model that is even more difficult to fit within bureaucratic ethical review structures.

The second topic in which I have observed dramatic developments over the years is the democratisation of anthropology. Social anthropology in many countries has been the domain, some would say the preserve, of an elite group of scholars, a significant minority of whom were from the aristocracy, and amongst whom the rather precious 'our way of thinking' approach held sway. Stockton Campus was deliberately set up in a place where uptake of higher education was traditionally low; its mission statement was to 'serve the needs of the Teesside community'. To make its offer to that community compelling, anthropology had to broaden its relevance and appeal to those who might otherwise never have knowingly come into contact with it as an academic discipline.

There was something of a bottleneck of older adults on Teesside who had lacked the chance to study for an undergraduate degree, and for the first ten years at Stockton a significant proportion of our student body consisted of mature students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. Various innovative features characterised the anthropology degrees that were established there. In 2004, realising how few students had been anywhere outside the Euro-American axis, I organised a study tour to India. During a three-week visit, operating on a shoestring, 24 students spent a week at Mitraniketan as well as experiencing the contrasts between life in the north and life in the south of the country (Russell 2004).

I was also responsible, with my colleague Bob Simpson, for designing a third-year credit-bearing module, 'Knowledge and Practice', intended to help students prepare for the world of work. The trend towards offering students practical as well as intellectual skills transferred to Durham itself with the demise of the Stockton Campus, marked by the development of a distinctive programme of week-long, off-campus field courses that all students were expected to attend at the end of their second year. Another way in which one could say anthropology has democratised, or at least broadened its base in the academic community in research terms, has been the shift from the 'lone researcher' activities that characterised

Figure 6: *Durham University Study Tour to India, July 2004* (photographer unknown)

Figure 7: *Anthropology field course to the Isle of Coll, September 2018* (photo by the author)

my time in Nepal to the more collaborative activities in which the anthropologist is expected to act as a member of a multi- or interdisciplinary team.

The ageing of anthropology has perhaps been most pronounced in the field of technological developments. When I started work at Durham in 1992, all communication was either oral, by landline telephone or by typed (or hand-written) memo. All text-based materials were delivered to individual staff shelves (called 'pigeon-holes') in a part of the building, the 'post room', in which all inward and outward mail was processed. The idea of each staff member having their own PC or MacBook was just coming to be accepted, although I typed and printed my own PhD thesis in 1990 using an Amstrad computer. The ability to transfer or share work with others was far from easy, however, and file names were limited to a maximum of eight digits. Overhead projectors were the norm, and acetate sheets, chalkboards and handouts were the main visual aids used in teaching. Fast forward 35 years and digital technologies reign supreme, supported by mobile technologies such as phones and laptops and software for our Macs and PCs provided by computer giants such as Google and Microsoft. Anthropology has diversified in both its content and subject matter as a result – for example, with visual anthropology and digital anthropology. That is before we address more recent innovations, for example in Artificial Intelligence and online meetings, the latter accelerated by the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am also struck by how the new technologies have revolutionised what it is possible to do in research terms. The research I did for *Anthropology of Tobacco* derived not only from traditional ethnographic methods but also from some of the extraordinary developments that have taken place in the digital humanities. Searches of historical literature for topics such as 'tobacco' and 'smoking', which at the start of my career would have required years of library-based book reading, could be done in minutes. This undoubtedly enabled me to see the 'wood' (of patterns and trends through time) for the 'trees' of individual literary items.

As well as what is in some ways the 'best of times' in research terms, the technologisation of anthropology also raises some 'worst of times' issues concerning the long-term effects of the travel technologies on which the discipline was founded and on which much of its development in the second half of the 20th century has been based.

Hans Baer's (2019) criticism of anthropologists flying halfway around the world to present a 15-minute conference paper should be a wake-up call to all who are concerned about the effects of our environmental footprint on those with whom we work and conduct research. As well as a reminder of the potential for zoonotic diseases to spread because of all this intercontinental travel, the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated how digital communication, while not the same as

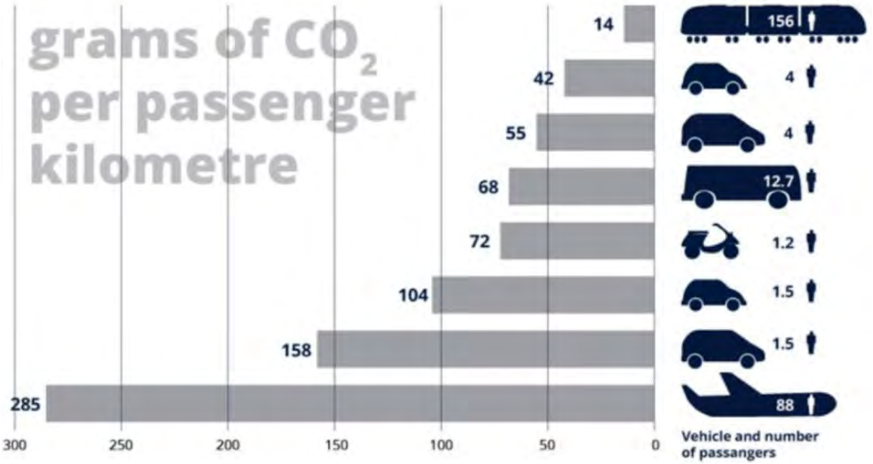

Figure 8: *Grams of CO2 per passenger kilometre. (Source: European Environment Agency Report TERM 2014* (in Baer 2019). https://www.eea.europa.eu/media/infographics/co2-emissions-from-passenger-transport/view.

'in-person', offers ways not only of democratising contact (at least for those with the necessary technologies) but of reducing our carbon footprint.

Sceptical of squandering the value of 'being there' ethnography altogether, and following on from research into the ways international law was developed and (perhaps) implemented through the Conference of the Parties to the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), in 2023 I decided to compare these ways of working with those of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). I was struck by the irony of how the UNFCCC 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) was being held in Dubai, a destination awash with petrodollars that it is almost impossible to reach from other parts of the world except by flying. I resolved to put my 'green credentials' to the test by travelling to COP28 using overland forms of public transport as much as possible. Apart from the shortest possible flight (from Antalya in southern Turkey to Amman in Jordan) to overfly the 'garland of war zones' between Europe and the Gulf States, I managed to do the whole journey by train and bus, a reduction in carbon emissions of 75% over flying. I documented the experience iteratively through four blog posts and what became a 700-image Instagram account for 150 'followers' who coalesced around it (Russell 2023a; 2023b). This was a very different kind of research activity to the early, more extractive empirical research in a development context I had done with the Yakkha in East Nepal.

Figure 9: *Durham to Dubai. Slide used in a presentation to students at Teikyo University, Durham, October 2023* (prepared by the author)

Discussion

This has been a relatively upbeat account of an 'ageing in anthropology' and the 'ageing of anthropology', based as it is on my experience as a white, middle-class British male with leanings towards multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and doing research that is useful to others. I appreciate my own positionality in the narrative I have presented: many of my observations derive from academic and institutional contexts reflected in a narrative arc which, despite 'worst of times' setbacks, has been chiefly one of creation, development and maturity, not endings, decay and death. Rivoal and Salazar (2013) argue serendipity is not only about unplanned good fortune but also the wisdom to recognise it as such, and I appreciate the role it has played in my academic life.

A lot of the elements to this story are no longer present, at least not in the form they once had. However, like ancestors, they remain with us, donning the past with a sense of not only 'best of times' heritage, but also 'worst of times' legacies (cf. Hann 2025). For example, the era of big-jet, mass air travel, which enabled organisations like Project Trust to flourish and anthropology as a discipline to expand and democratise in the ways it did from the 1970s onwards, may be coming to an end. The distant events I had barely been able to hear on a battery-powered radio in Nepal in 1989 opened up individual travel and scholarly exchange possibilities previously denied many of those in the Eastern European

region. This further powered the growth and development of European anthropology, as marked by the milestone 2nd Biennial Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) held in Prague in July 1992, which I was able to attend.

However, the changes to institutions mentioned in this article indicate the 'best of times' (assuming that is what they were) are coming to an end. On 5 October an article appeared in Glasgow-based *The Herald* newspaper stating that for financial reasons Project Trust was going to be leaving the Isle of Coll.[8] On 2 November 2025 I visited the now defunct Stockton Campus, a place I had not been to for a very long time. There wasn't tumbleweed blowing across the forlorn-looking site, but there might as well have been. From a satellite campus of Durham University,[9] to an International Study Centre incubating students, many from East Asia, with the language skills and orientation necessary for them to access Durham undergraduate degree programmes, there seemed very little happening on the day I visited.

The two student colleges created out of halls of residence to give Stockton students an educational experience more akin to that of the main (Durham) campus have been relocated to Durham. One of the Stockton college buildings had been renamed 'Endeavour House'. Two gentlemen, sunning themselves on a bench in front of the Ebsworth Building, were uncertain whether it was being redeveloped for students or a wider constituency. The uncompromising green fencing around its perimeter were reminiscent of the kinds of places where refugees and asylum seekers night be housed.

Ten years earlier, 37% of the UK electorate voted for 'Brexit', and with that the opportunities for many young people in Europe – such as Alžběta Wolfová, who very kindly proposed me as a keynote speaker at the 8th CASA Biennial Conference in Pardubice, and Ema Hrešanová, another Czech Erasmus student to Durham, both of whom are now faculty members themselves – came to an end. The Covid-19 pandemic, wars in Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan, and the ending of any consensus around the postwar neoliberal political and economic agenda, have all indicated that old world orders are changing, and newly formed ones are barely discernible, and can only be anticipated – through a glass, darkly.

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8 See McKay (2025). I am grateful to my brother-in-law Graham Macnaughton for alerting me to this news story.

9 The succession of names used to denote this place during its 25-year history – Joint University College on Teesside, University College Stockton, Durham University Stockton Campus and, finally, Queen's Campus – reflect its uncertain and somewhat precarious identity vis-à-vis Durham University as a whole.

QUEEN'S CAMPUS STOCKTON

Figure 10 (a, b, c): *Stockton Campus, 2 November 2025* (photos by the author)

Where does anthropology, and higher education more generally, sit in the context of crises such as these that have characterised the past fifty years or so (Ringel 2021)? Because of – or at least, alongside – the intellectual, ethical, structural and technological changes I have highlighted, there has been a revisiting of old tropes and traditions as part of a wider 'decolonisation' debate in anthropology. As fast as some countries – or intellectual groups or institutions in our lifeworlds – seek to embrace anthropology, so others, seeing it as a discipline unable to escape its colonial legacies, propose letting 'anthropology burn'. This would be a pity, in my view. Without wanting to 'unsettle the conceptual and methodological preoccupations' of writers such as Ryan Jobson (2020) about anthropology's 'discourse of moral perfectibility founded in histories of settler colonialism and chattel slavery, liberal humanism and its anthropological register of ethnographic sentimentalism', and willing to accept these have 'proved insufficient to confront the existential threats of climate catastrophe and authoritarian retrenchment in 2019', I have reservations about taking the torch to the woodpile at this point in our history. We may feel guilt or regret about colonialism and the gains our nations have made from chattel slavery and other exploitative practices,

but guilt and regret are singularly unproductive emotions, in my experience, unless they lead to changing practice in the future.[10] At the very least, it seems to me, anthropology is one of the few disciplines with the reflexive purchase to raise such issues directly. It is also one of the few disciplines with the ability to offer insights into how best to address them rather than conveniently expunging them from human consciousness. To do better in this regard, it seems to me, should be the goal not of an ageing, decrepit anthropology but of a mature and vibrant discipline that has an enormous amount to offer the future, as well as trenchant criticisms to make of its past.[11]

I suspect Grøn and Meinertwould argue, as they do for 'time' in ageing time beings, that the term 'career' is an 'ontologically groundless' way of categorising the hotchpotch of activities – paths taken, experiences gained, routes not followed, opportunities missed – I have presented here. Yet as I approach the ranks of 'the elderly', from whom I felt such a need to distance myself in the Bexhill of the 1960s and 70s, to call such processes ontologically groundless feels like something of a provocation of the 'What would you like the facts to be?' rather than 'What are the facts?' variety (Thompson et al. 1986). On the other hand, 'career' (rather like 'ageing', and maybe time itself) makes sense ontologically only if we look back and identify what, if any, continuous threads or consistent patterns we can see across the past 50 years. The 'best of times'/'worst of times' dichotomy is reflected in the Chinese character for 'crisis', which, as well as 'danger', includes – if not 'opportunity' – at least 'new directions'.[12]

Reflecting on the joke from the 1991 ASA conference, I am acutely aware that my positionality has enabled me to be a swimmer whom the dolphins have pushed towards the shore rather than in the other direction. In the process, I would say, I eventually became an anthropologist. This account has touched on multiple themes – serendipity, ethics, the democratisation and diversification of anthropology, the importance of material technologies in shaping how and what is studied, the value both of an expansive anthropology and of digging down in one's own backyard from time to time. I wish everyone who takes a trajectory that is in any way similar to mine the best of luck in their endeavours.

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10 I note that, at the 1992 EASA conference in Prague , Luc de Heusch's keynote lecture was titled 'Maintenir l'anthropologie' – i.e. 'Maintain Anthropology', not burn it!

11 Since Jobson's article, moreover, the threat to anthropology from other political directions has become ever more apparent (Santos 2024). The time has come, it seems to me, for anthropologists to stand up and be (ac)counted!

12 I am grateful to my colleague and friend Dr Sui Ting-Kong, co-director of the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, for explaining some of the subtleties of this Chinese character to me.

Figure 12: *The Chinese character for 'crisis'.*

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The ancestors, known and unknown, are part of the broader phenomenon of eldership in anthropology and deserve our profound respect. For me personally these include Iain Edgar (1928–2021); Edwin Ardener (1927–1987); Igor Kopytoff (1930–2013); Nick Allen (1939–2020); Wendy James (1940–2024). Malcolm Smith, another former colleague and friend and a great champion of kin and genetic research, died a few days before I delivered the paper on which this article is based in Pardubice. I dedicate it to his memory.

ChatGPT-5.2 was consulted with the following questions during the preparation of this article:

'What were the dates and programme of the EASA Biennial Conference held in Prague in 1992?'

'Can the Norman conquest of England in 1066 be regarded as an example of colonialism that has persisted to this day?'

'Has Bexhill-on-Sea (UK) ever been the town with the average oldest population of any town in Europe and, if so, when?'

'How many words of text would be in a typical 50-minute lecture?'

'When and why was the decision taken to rename the Czech Republic 'Czechia'?' [The reply was informative but didn't say anything about the pronunciation of 'Czechia' (hard 'k' sound for 'ch', not a soft 'c' sound). I am grateful to Yasar Abu Ghosh for kindly correcting my pronunciation after the lecture.]

'What is a "collective temporal register"?'

'Give a list of all the Association of Social Anthropologists conferences held in the UK, with year.' [This is the one question for which ChatGPT-5.2 could not provide a meaningful answer.]

'With reference to Jobson (2019)'s critique, rehearse the arguments for and against "letting anthropology burn".' [ChatGPT corrected the publication date but proposed explaining the error with 'hereafter "Jobson 2019"'. I have not followed this advice.]

'Where was Semtex manufactured in Pardubice?'

The above acknowledgements notwithstanding, all errors of fact and truths of fiction remain my own.

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