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Ecology of vision and economy of citizenship: an anthropological perspective



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Ecology of vision and economy of citizenship:
an anthropological perspective

Inaugural lecture by

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on the acceptance of her position as professor of

Anthropology

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Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus, zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders,

Anthropology is a science of social and cultural relations that speaks to society. Especially in these turbulent times, it is tasked with the duty of unravelling the privilege of culture.

I can only contribute to this task today briefly and partially. I will draw on my own research trajectory, from the study of 'skilled vision' (Grasseni 2007) to my current project on 'food citizenship' funded by the European Research Council.

This is also a tale about the ambivalent *privilege* of culture. I will start from ethnography as a form of cultural apprenticeship, coming full circle to anthropology as an art of understanding ways of seeing - to which one must be apprenticed to.

We think of anthropology as the expert practice of investigating and critiquing social relations, but the ethnographer is first and foremost an apprentice of culture and cultures. Apprenticeship is the main metaphor I wish to use today, to explain what an anthropological perspective amounts to.

I start with my own ethnography among cow breeders during fieldwork in the Alps of northern Italy (Grasseni 2009). I found that their 'cow talk' contained important aesthetic and moral judgements, made from the point of view of being both skilled farmers and convinced 'breed improvers'. These farmers used progeny breeding to make every new generation of heifers produce more milk. The good of their work was visible to them and to their fellow breeders in the 'beauty' of their animals. As for me, I had to learn from scratch even from which side you should eye up a cow in order to appreciate this beauty! (it is from behind, by the way): this was my visual apprenticeship in their way of seeing.

Breed inspectors, working farmers and cattle-fair judges visualized the animal body in terms of its "functional" beauty.

In the case of dairy cows, their functional beauty represents 'traits' that stand for good milking and reproduction potential. Such traits are standardized and disseminated through internationally recognized models, but also incorporated in everyday artefacts such as plastic toys, photos and trophies. These items populate everyday conversation and play, public events and domestic interiors, and thus confirm a certain way of viewing animals as 'good looking'.



Figure 1. Plastic toy cow made in China for Schleich, Germany, 2001.

Further research and conversations with artisans and scientists show, similarly, that specific working practices are visible only to the skilled eye, and are understood as 'beautiful' and 'moral' within a particular group. In other words, skilled practitioners learn to see and appreciate value in the aesthetics of their final product (Hankins 2017).

The farmers' 'skilled vision' is only one example of how *ways of seeing* (Berger 1972) are learned within a material environment that is dotted with significant models and templates, as well as socially performed with peers and mentors who inculcate it in

everyday apprenticeship. It is seeing and knowing through a schooling of the eye. What we recognize as familiar and proper is learned through *enskillment* (Ingold 2000), namely via an apprenticeship of the eye and of the senses in a socialized way. This happens in what we can call an *ecology* of culture, a complex environment within which we have learned to orient ourselves, culturally and socially as well as sensorially (Grasseni and Ronzon 2004).

The *skilled visions* approach relies on the concept of ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991). Belonging to a community means being granted membership but also developing skills. In the case of the farmers’ visual competence, this is embodied and tacit (Polany 1966, Collins 2010), but also shared across the community.

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At a cattle fair, everyone sees how one animal is superior to another. The cattle fair judge literally lines up the animal in order of excellence: the first precedes the second because of certain traits, the second over the third... etcetera. On these public occasions, the shared gaze of the expert is articulated in words - and it can certainly be contested and begrudged.

Skilled visions are not innocent: they always incorporate assumptions and criteria of preference. They may well presume a body of knowledge that defines a derogatory and exploitative gaze on an objectified other. It is this presumed body of knowledge that allows the viewer to interpret a range of cues within a process of *recognition*. This body of presumed knowledge may well consist of cultural stereotypes, racism, sexism, or exploitative views on nature and animals. Thus skilled visions are part and parcel of the ambivalent privilege of culture (Herzfeld 2007).



Figure 2. Cattle fair, Valtaleggio, Italy, 2004. The ‘queen’ of the fair is being paraded.

Skilled visions are ways of looking and as such are per se invisible. In the picture above, the animal stands as evidence of the skills of the breeder, judged against an ideal type that the skilled practitioners describe as functional beauty. But it takes the skilled looks of this farmer’s peers to understand her significance.

A farmer looks for and sees patterns and traits that one recognizes from progeny genealogy, computerized models, photographs of cattle fair winners in professional magazines, the placing of trophies on walls, the use of several generations of breed improvement side by side, continuously reassessed. Skilled vision is the result of a complex relationship between attention, habit, representation, and a broad understanding of history and context. The fellow practitioners at the fair *also* see this animal as beautiful because they recognize this relationship and the decisions made to arrive to this result.

Viceversa a competing practitioner, someone who does not for example accept progeny breeding to intensify milk production, will brand the same animal not as ‘queen of the fair’ but as an ‘anorexic pin-up’.

The language behind these conflicting visions discloses the competing professional cultures of intensive agriculture and sustainable multi-modal farming. Ethics is *seen* – literally – in the beauty of the animal. Viceversa, contesting *this* kind of beauty means proposing an alternative way of ‘good looking’ (see: Stafford 1996), alternative models and templates of where to find evidence of ‘good work’. This is extraordinarily difficult, given that since the agricultural revolution more than two hundred years of animal portraits and cattle exhibitions have disseminated and established a sense of achievement and propriety around the production of bigger, more productive, ‘superior’ animals for industrial food production.

Visual arts and documentary film are attempting precisely to form an alternative imagery around food production – this has been achieved for example by diametrically different styles of films such as the documentaries *Food, Inc.* or *Cowspiracy* (Kenner 2008, Andersen and Kuhn 2014) and the Sensory Ethnography Lab production *Leviathan* (Castaing Taylor and Paravel 2012). While the former articulate the abominations of intensive farming and animal agriculture, the latter offers a wordless, tantalizing exploration of life at sea on a commercial fishing boat.

The first half of my title, ‘ecology of vision’, is thus explained. This is a form of cultural and sensorial apprenticeship that enables the shared understanding and appreciation of (certain types of) ‘beauty’ and ‘propriety’ *within a circle of experts*. Through the enforcement of material and social cues, it sustains and reproduces specific acts of looking and understanding, which are at once aesthetic, moral, functional and normative. These are incorporated in working practices and standards, in metrics and evaluations. The ecology of vision is moral because it informs the social circle of a community of practice, it builds status and confirms identities. Its aesthetics shapes routines of belonging that are as ambivalent and elusive as they are self-evident to its members.

In the second step of my speech I come full circle so to speak, applying the skilled vision approach to understanding citizenship through economic practice. In doing so I limit myself to a very specific practice, that of food procurement. How we procure and share food is central to cultural understandings of how we act and participate in our societies. So I take food as a lens to hone into cultural understandings of what being an ‘active citizen’ means today in Europe.

Food is a mediator of relations within social networks, not only a commodity or nutrient. Eaters are not just consumers but social actors whose meaning-making depends on faith, gender, age, income, or kinship.

Currently, considerable attention goes to food procurement in cities, for example in relation to its (un)sustainability, but with little notice paid to the cultural diversity within Europe. Food studies mostly focus on the ‘macro’ scale (for example the logistics of food systems) or the ‘micro’ scale (for example the individual deliberations and habituated reflexes of consumers in supermarkets). Conceptually, the project I am currently undertaking here at Leiden University, aims to add a ‘meso’ level of sociocultural analysis to these scenarios.

The ERC Consolidator project *Food citizens?* focuses on *collective* food procurement in three European cities, its premises and consequences in a comparative light. What do I mean by ‘collective food procurement’? By that I define people’s participation in the production and distribution of the food they consume, at multiple levels. We can for example categorize three types of networks: those directly active in urban foraging and food production (for example in community gardens), those engaged in setting up short chains, whereby producer and consumer come directly into contact, and those active in local governance (for example in food policy councils). These multiple forms of collective food procurement have not yet been comparatively analyzed in Europe in terms of their broader implications for citizenship.

The challenge is to study if and how these styles of procurement articulate and are in turn co-produced by styles of participation. This is an important challenge if we consider how transitions to sustainable lifestyles are being imagined as a technology fix, with little notice of the relevance of culture to the practice of procurement, and of the diversity of styles of participation *even within* Europe.

For the purposes of this project, I have selected three cities of comparable size that represent distinctive regions and histories, respectively in Western, Southern, and post-socialist Europe. They share a post-industrial condition, which challenges them to rethink what it means to participate in their communities, cities and societies as a whole.

I wish to approach the notion of citizenship empirically, by looking at how people procure food together in many diverse ways, in Rotterdam, Turin and Gdańsk. In each city, my team will observe how differently each type of network develops, and simultaneously, how it interacts with the other types - if at all - within and across each location.

The sociocultural dimensions of solidarity, diversity, skill and scale are at the heart of my inquiry into food citizenship, linking the conceptual with the methodological aspect of the project. Comparison by context will deliver cultural understandings of these dimensions: for example what does solidarity mean in practice, in such diverse contexts and histories as those of Poland, Italy, and the Netherlands?

Instead of giving a definition of solidarity, we will contrast and compare these cultural understandings. Imagine navigating multiple 'thick descriptions' of what being a food citizen is like, in a digital platform. Having multiple narratives of that experience will enrich our very conceptual understanding of citizenship as a process of cultural production and as a situated practice.

Collective food procurement adds the sociocultural dimensions of reflexivity and contestation to the elusively simple act of food provisioning, beyond the minimal goal of food safety and food security. Through food engagements, Europeans use and transform their 'common-sense knowledge of the link between taste, place and quality' (Trubek 2009: 211). Against the 'ontonormal' assumption that 'citizen-consumers' act individually in the market (Mol 2013), collective food procurement can constitute a space of 'transgression' (Goodman and Sage 2014) and of 'counter-epistemologies' (Grasseni 2013). Citizens can re-signify producer-consumer relations, which feed back into innovative social practice. Food procurement networks can be read as 'citizenship laboratories' (Forno et al. 2015), where people educate themselves about sustainability, frugality, or global justice, but also learn to exercise their democratic capacities through situated deliberation and practice. In this sense, it can enable forms of 'lifestyle politics' (De Moor 2016) through participation in emerging 'civic food networks' (Lamine et al. 2012, Renting et al. 2012), relying on consumers' roles to foster active citizenship (Dubuisson-Quellier et al. 2011).

Nine cases of collective food procurement across three European cities will then ask *if* collective food procurement networks indicate emerging forms of citizenship, *or if* they *also* tend to co-produce hegemonic notions of participation and belonging, and either way *how*. This proposition adds a cultural, *ambivalent* dimension to the civil, political and social dimensions of citizenship (Geschiere 2009, Hurenkamp et al. 2012). How we gather and share food is central to cultural understandings of participation and belonging. Thus collective food procurement may enhance understandings of citizenship, but also confirm hegemonic fault lines along sociocultural differences.

The idea behind multi-level comparison in Rotterdam, Turin and Gdańsk is to challenge glossy imaginaries of the European urbanite, to scout a kaleidoscopic and diverse array of ways to procure, share and consume food together, on the ground so to

speak. Sustainability, in particular, takes on different meanings and leads to specific practices tied to local concerns: for example those of ageing, postindustrial poverty, gentrification, immigration and outmigration.

I will investigate three types of collective food procurement networks: urban foraging; short food chains; and local food governance in these three post-industrial cities, considering the sociocultural dimensions of solidarity, diversity, skill and scale of action. In other words, we investigate how networks of people engage with sustainability issues in practical terms and through food: Which skills do they acquire or lack? How do they operate across and within diverse communities? Do they scale 'up' or 'out', and how?

The idea of investigating the practice of 'citizenship' with a research project on collective food procurement emerges from my previous research on solidarity economy networks, considered as a way of expressing active citizenship by contesting economics (Forno et al. 2015).

Livelihoods are necessarily *economic* arrangements, namely ways of organizing life in such a way that it can reproduce itself (Narotzky and Besnier 2014), and food procurement is a form of versatile economic practice that lends itself to social experimentation. As the founding fathers of anthropological scholarship have established, food has fundamental cultural weight (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013): through relations of production, exchange and consumption, symbols are articulated, values are lived out, societal paradigms are performed or challenged, alliances among formal and informal societal actors are forged or negotiated.

Consequently, styles of food procurement embed diverse interpretations and practices of societal participation. It is important to analyze who is enrolled and affected by these processes: who is included and who is excluded, how power relations and stereotypes are transformed, co-opted, or

reinstated through for example *alternative* styles of food procurement.

My interest in what I call here 'the economy of citizenship' stems from ongoing research on grassroots forms of participation, responsible innovation, and societal resilience (Hankins and Grasseni 2014). This research has so far focused on so-called Solidarity Economy Networks in Lombardy and Massachusetts, and on the politics of food heritage in the Italian Alps (Grasseni 2017). Following the cows so to speak, from the aesthetics of dairy farming to the politics of cheese denominations, finally to the reinvention of short food chains, allows one insight in multiple and ambivalent interpretations of principles such as solidarity and participation.

Likewise, various and discordant forms of 'new' and 'sharing' economy' are currently transforming both economic contestation *and* business models, grassroots initiatives *and* policy. Digitalization, access, and the management of renewable and non-renewable resources all emerge as relevant aspects of this process.

Collective food procurement networks do the discursive and practical work of imagining change, producing value, and articulate models of participation and belonging. These ecologies of belonging, old and new, interact and coexist with political and economic infrastructures and may well (re)produce forms of exclusion and hegemony. For example, survey data about Italy's Solidarity Purchase Groups (more than 7000 families in Lombardy alone) tell us that they are networks of mostly highly educated white middle-age women (Forno et al. 2015). Collective food procurement may thus enable new forms of citizenship, but in the same breath confirm degrees of segregation between classes, gender, faiths, ages or ethnic groups. While largely associated with relations of 'care' (Kneafsey et al. 2008), place-based foods may underscore gender-conservative agendas, political localism, or be oblivious of social inclusion. Exclusive solidarity feeds on self-reliance

and can and does support neoliberal styles of governance: in this respect, food procurement and citizenship share important cultural ambivalences.

As the work of my colleagues at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology here in Leiden further shows, new economies lend themselves not only to new forms of solidarity but to new and old ways of self-discipline - a discipline that is at once moral and economic - even *aesthetic*, and this is my point of return to skilled vision. Here I come full circle.

How does an anthropology of vision (something I have called a *skilled vision* approach) help us to understand collective food procurement *comparatively*, as a complex and ambivalent practice of citizenship?

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A *skilled vision* approach studies shared understandings of beauty and propriety. In different contexts, objects and processes are evaluated by different criteria and affected by the resources available, local histories and discourse, so the appreciation of what is proper and adequate cannot be transferred from one context to another. However, moral and economic conclusions are drawn across the board: about solidarity, diversity, skill and scale. In response to this, a skilled visions approach aims to deliver collaborative and immersive 'thick descriptions' of the specific experiences and trajectories of field participants. How do *they* interpret and articulate 'solidarity' or 'diversity'? How are multiple and even contradictory narratives about 'reskilling' or 'scaling up' borrowed and appropriated across contexts?

Comparing *by context*, we will match these participants' narratives with each other, across three locations and three cross-cutting types of action (foraging, short food chains, and local governance), using digital media to navigate multiple types of materials: texts, photographs, maps, audio recordings, edited footage, or audiovisual material produced by research participants.



Figure 3. Comparing network types by context. Diagram and photos courtesy of Federico de Musso, Jaro Stacul, Cinzia Terruzzi, and Orti Urbani.

To give you a concrete example of what I mean, let's start from a picture of a Solidarity Economy Network in Italy. Here, critical consumers organize themselves to create so-called 'short food chains'. In the photo, members of a Solidarity Purchase Group in Northern Italy have bought a truck-full of oranges from a cooperative of farmers in Sicily (about 1300 km away). The growers cultivate lands confiscated from the mafia (which notoriously thrives on agribusiness: Forno 2011). The 'consumers' unloading the truck are performing together a *political* role together through their collective purchase. Is



Figure 4. 'Orange landings' (Sbarchinpiazza) in Bergamo, April 2012. Courtesy of Cinzia Terruzzi.

this an emerging form of 'food citizenship'? or a desperate form of civic self-reliance? Either way, these are not just orange 'consumers'.

Imagine following each of these actors: the orange grower lighting up his cigarette, about to return to Sicily, perhaps making a stop at the collective gardens of an occupied factory in Florence. Or the volunteers unloading the truck reporting back each to their Solidarity Purchase Group. One of whom perhaps participates in the local Town Hall meeting presenting Milan's 2015 EXPO's outcome, the Urban Food Policy pact signed by 152 Mayors across the world - including Rotterdam and Turin... This is the kind of interactive digital environment that we wish to have built by the end of this project, in which diverse appropriations of events and practices by different people can be followed through their trajectories in time and space.

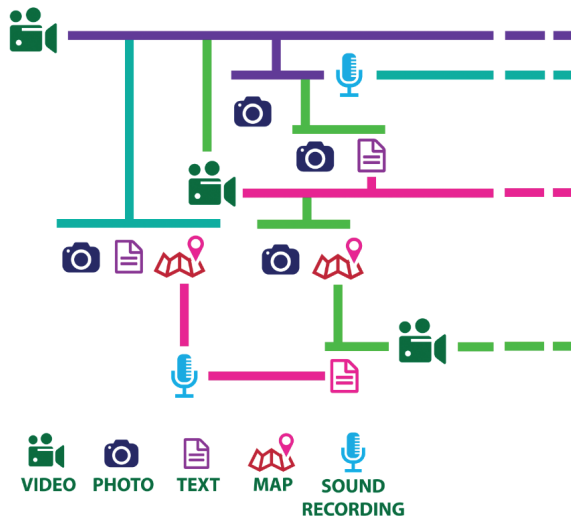


Figure 5. Model of interactive digital platform. Courtesy of Federico De Musso.

While it does not exhaust the scope of the academic outcomes of this project (textual production is also an important part of this project), the contribution of what I have called digital visual engagements (Grasseni and Walter 2014) is to co-produce an immersive participatory space in which we appreciate the actors' positionality within possible (but not infinite) trajectories. The material, cultural and political dimensions of food citizenship are thus revealed as co-constituted.

When both actors and observers invoke co-production, the very meaning of 'participant observation' - anthropologists' flagship method - is placed in generative tension, between the authoriality of expert knowledge and user-generated contents and interpretations. The ambition of this project is to deliver a critical conceptualization of 'food citizenship' based on a comparative analysis of networks of collective food procurement across Europe. There is no such thing as a dispassionate observation of activists networks, because 'adjacency' (Rabinow and Bennett 2007) is a fluid and ambivalent position to maintain: to an extent, mapping networks is making networks (St.Martin 2009).

With the title 'ecology of vision and economy of citizenship' I proposed an approach that moves beyond disciplinary categories, beginning with the appreciation that what we see is literally in-formed, schooled, and disciplined. Similarly, our being active participants in our communities of practice is informed by shared imaginaries of proper conduct and of cultural preferences. This provides an anthropological perspective *beyond* ways of seeing: for example on our ways of eating - but even before that, of coming together to procure our daily bread. In order to understand and intervene in the complex and ambivalent debates on diversity and sustainability in our digitalizing society, we need to unpack the 'wisdom of the ordinary', as professor Kasia Cwiertka aptly called it in her own Inaugural Lecture of 2011 (Cwiertka 2011).

Comparison helps in locating subjectivities and power in new economic practices, investigating how political imaginaries at multiple level and in different locations use economic practice to forge (certain models of) citizenship.

With my research and that of my team I wish to enhance our capacity to envision food procurement beyond individual 'smart' or healthy 'choices' and beneath institutional 'food systems'. By focusing on *collective* food procurement in situated practices, we unpack their diverse economic subjectivities, moral reasoning, and social premises, bringing to the fore how differently they work *within* and *across* European contexts. By investigating their transformative skills, and by mapping the porous borders of their networks at different scales of action, we get to the core of *how* practices and discourses of 'solidarity' are diversely produced, and *how* they at once constrain and enable political imagination.

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I could not be better placed to conduct this research than here, in the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Leiden University.

I opened my talk by suggesting that anthropology matches a broad self-definition of 'a science of social and cultural relations that speaks to society'. As we collectively defined in our recent *heidag* last May, anthropology is essential to social and cultural sciences because 'it critically investigates, engages with and communicates the sociocultural relationships, the conflicts and the cooperations that foster livelihoods and resilience in the face of macro-scale challenges such as climate change and global inequality. The strength of an anthropological approach consists in this capacity to connect different scales of the social, namely to keep an eye for the detail while connecting it to the big picture' (Grasseni et al. 2017: 3).

We emphasize ethnography as methodology. As underlined by my predecessors and colleagues Peter Pels and Gerard Persoon, what makes this methodology key is its temporal dimension: 'fieldwork allows the researcher to investigate a sociocultural, political, or ecological process over time and in exceptional detail. This allows researchers to identify not only how institutions and societies are supposed to function, but also how and why they often diverge from their ideal course' (Grasseni et al. 2017: 3; see also Persoon and Van Est 2000; Pels 2015).

Our research program *Global vulnerabilities and social resilience* addresses 'Diversity', 'Sustainability' and 'Digitalization' as areas of critical investigation. These three thematic subdomains articulate the topical connection between economy, politics and ecology that runs as a red thread through multiple projects in the institute, firmly enplaced in a signature methodology combining qualitative, quantitative and visual methods.

Undoubtedly then my line of research will benefit from, and hopefully contribute to, synergies and conversations across and beyond the current two ERC Consolidator Grants and the three Marie Curie Fellowship projects that are being carried out - amongst others - in the institute today (respectively by Erik Bahre, Marianne Maeckelbergh, Annemarie Samuels, and Tessa Minter).

Let me come to the customarily short words of thanks.

I am indebted to a number of institutions and individuals who granted me access to education and research; ensured selection by merit, and opened up opportunities, in particular: Collegio Ghislieri, Pavia; St. John's College, Cambridge; The Economic and Social Research Council of the UK; The Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology of Manchester University; The

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I would like to thank all those who helped me find my academic path, in particular: my science teacher Eugenia Montanelli, philosophers Franco Alessio and Silvana Borutti, historians of science Simon Schaffer and Marina Frasca Spada, anthropologists Peter Wade, Tim Ingold and Michael Herzfeld, President Piero Bassetti, the Fellowship director of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, Judy Vichniac, my CORES colleagues Francesca Forno and Silvana Signori, co-founders of our research network on consumption and practices of sustainable economies.

In the memory of my father I find a model of relentless and resourceful tenacity. May this day honor his quest for the privilege of culture.

I would like to thank the students and staff of the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology who are my everyday scientific community, my previous students and colleagues at Utrecht University and at Harvard, Boston and Bergamo universities before that. I wish to thank the College van Bestuur for granting me this prestigious Chair, and the Bestuur of the Faculty of Social Sciences for further entrusting me with the honor and responsibility of becoming Scientific Director of the Institute.

Acting in the interests of this community as a whole, and in service to it, is the greatest challenge that I have so far accepted. I could not do it without the help and support of my 'travelling companion', Jan Jansen, Onderwijs Directeur and one of the longest-standing scientific members of staff of our institute.

I could not do this was I not the daily receiver of boundless patience and love from my husband and sons. Angelo and Adelchi, with me and Jonny you changed your homes, countries and languages twice over. I am proud of you. May you grow up as citizens of the world.

Ik heb gezegd.

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- 2006-2011 *Scientific Director*, Bassetti Foundation for Responsible Innovation, Milan
- 2011-2012 David & Roberta Logie Fellow and Radcliffe-Harvard Film Study Center Fellow, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University
- 2012-2014 Visiting Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Harvard University.
- 2014-2017 Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Utrecht University.
- 2017- Professor of Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology

Anthropology is a science of socio-cultural relations that speaks to society and is tasked with the duty of unravelling the privilege of culture. Drawing on the 'skilled vision' approach and applying it to the European Research Council project 'Food citizens?', the lecture presents ethnography as a form of cultural apprenticeship, and anthropology as an art of understanding 'ways of seeing'.

As the expert practice of investigating and critiquing social, political and economic relations, anthropology builds upon ethnography as a form of apprenticeship of cultures.

Seeing and knowing are schooled through socialization into what we can call an ecology of culture, a complex environment within which we learn to participate and belong, not only culturally and socially but also sensorially.



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