FACT OR FICTION? A SOCIAL SCIENCES DISSERTATION'

'...a great painter forces the world to see nature as he sees it; but in the next generation another painter sees the world in another way, and then the public judges him not by himself but by his predecessor. So the Barbizon people taught our fathers to look at trees in a certain manner, and when Monet came along and painted differently, people said: But trees aren’t like that. It never struck them that trees are exactly how a painter chooses to see them.'

Past history

From the time shortly after the Second World War – I had just started primary school – I remember fragments of conversations with classmates over what we would become someday. Those conversations are fixed in my memory better than the boys and girls they go with. Only a few faces and names have stayed with me over the years. I do know that my friends all had very different ambitions. For example, a job as fireman was held in high regard. Others kept to bus driver or police-officer or dreamt of the almost unreachable ideal of once being able to take place on a steam train as engine driver (there were hardly any electric trains back then). I cannot recall that any of these professions particularly interested me. I sometimes thought of becoming a greengrocer. That sounded good. When ours came by with his horse and carriage – that’s how things were in the Netherlands in the first half of the twentieth century – I was sometimes allowed to ride along for a bit. When we stopped at a customer’s house, I would hold the reins and, depending on how much my mother had bought, I was allowed to drive it a short way. My interest for this profession had more to do with horses that with vegetables. At

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1 My thanks go out to Ms Rebecca Spijker for her translation of this article from the Dutch original.
any rate, my life turned out differently. After many trades and enough mistakes to go with them, I have become a cultural anthropologist, specialised in anthropology of Judaism.

When I look back on those days, I see that a different profession was never a possibility. Anthropology has been my destination ever since I was a child. Before my twelfth birthday, I had already devoured most of Karl May’s adventure novels from front to back. During the day I went to school where I was indescribably bored. My real life began in the quiet hours of the night, when I was supposed to go to sleep, but instead drove the dark away with my flashlight. When my parents came to check on me, I quickly switched the light off, scrambled to put my book under the blankets and pretended to sleep. No one ever imagined that the chief of the Appaches honoured me with a visit during the night. It did not stop at Winnetou, Old Firehand and Old Shatterhand or the characters from Karl Mays adventures in Asia. Others also came to dark Rotterdam. That was the case for many an adventurer and pioneer. The books of Amundsen, Thor Heyerdahl, Sven Hedin, Peter Freuchen and Martin Johnson formed a welcome source for the most fantastic dreams. My interest in exotic cultures also resulted in much attention for the classical antiquity, the Germanic, Roman and Greek mythology, and in a particular preference for novels that took place in bygone societies.

Anthropology: art or science?

It is probably a consequence of these earlier interests that for me anthropology has always remained linked to understanding the otherwise incomprehensible world of others. That world is preferably described in a readable manner. After reading a text that is as dry as dust, you can not feel why the others act, think, and feel as they do. Only an author that is able to project his insights and enthusiasm on the reader is able to take someone with him to that other reality. This 'language side' of anthropology put special demands on its practice. Thus Peter Kloos is certainly right in posing the question: 'Is anthropology a science or is it an art?'