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Interview

ON ANTHROPOLOGY, EDUCATION AND UNIVERSITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH TIM INGOLD

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Tim Ingold is a professor of social anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, UK. He is currently working on the intersections of anthropology, education, archeology, art, design and architecture. His recent books include *Lines: A Brief History* (2007), *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood* (2000/2011), *Being Alive: Essays on Movement* (2011), and *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (2013). This interview focuses on three major themes (i.e. anthropology, education/learning and university) covered in Ingold's most recent volume, *Anthropology and/as Education* (forthcoming).

When I was reading your latest manuscript, *Anthropology and/as Education* (forthcoming), an image of a novelist appeared in my mind: a fastidious writer working on the last, not final, volume of his tetralogy, going through his notes and reflections on the previous episodes, carefully selecting the critical parts and weaving them together through a brand-new perspective. The result is a very inspiring, self-reflexive, dialogic segue… The book poses critical questions for readers to ponder the primary purpose of anthropology, which, from your perspective, is education, not ethnography. But you also warn us about the novel sense of education (of teacher, of learner) you use in this particular context. Can you elaborate further on *this* sense of education and its relevance to the anthropological inquiry?

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Education, for me, is about what it means not just to live life but to *lead* it. The word comes from the Latin compound *ex* (out) plus *ducere* (to lead). Thus to educate is literally to 'lead out'. This is the very opposite of what it is commonly taken to mean today, namely to instil, into the minds of novices, the approved knowledge, values and mores of a society. Education in this majoritarian sense starts from the assumption that the novice is ignorant, therefore weak and vulnerable. To make our way in society, it is supposed, we need to be provided with the intellectual armoury to cope with the vagaries of experience, and the combative skills to hold our positions and defend them. Knowledge gives us strength and power. But it does not always make us wise. For the more we think we know, the less inclined we are to attend to what is there, to listen to other people and things around us, and to learn from them. Wisdom lies in *not* pretending that we already know, or that problems already contain their solutions. In the minoritarian sense of leading out, education is a process of becoming wise to things, and to the world. It teaches us to attend, and to learn from what we observe. Far from making us strong and invulnerable, this kind of education disarms us: it leaves us feeling exposed, literally 'out of position'. But it also allows us to open up to the truth of what is there.

And that, precisely, is what anthropology does. It opens us up to the possibilities of life – to possibilities other than what we might have ever imagined had we stuck to what we thought we knew already. It turns every certainty into a question; every solution into a problem. I warn students of anthropology that they will come out knowing less than they did before, but much the wiser for it. They will be more sensitive, more ready to listen to what others are telling us, and to learn. This is why I object to the idea, so often put about by well-intentioned colleagues, that our business is to produce what they call 'anthropological knowledge'. For this is to turn students into mere consumers of the knowledge we have produced for them. It is to capitulate to the majoritarian sense of education which, in elevating the 'academy' over everyone else, actually reproduces the ignorance from which it claims to offer emancipation. To my mind, to the contrary, anthropology is a practice of education precisely because it is *not* in the business of knowledge production, and has no body of knowledge to convey. Whether in the field or in the classroom, it is a practice that students and teachers undertake together. And as with life itself, no-one knows where it will lead.

In your lecture, 'Anthropology is *not* Ethnography' (2007), you argued that the two are different endeavors and have different objectives and ontologies, hence produce

different narratives. Your position about anthropology has remained largely unchanged, while, a decade later and precisely when the ethnographic stream in the field of arts and humanities accelerates, you appear to be much more skeptical (and much less tolerant) vis-à-vis ethnography and what it represents today –as evident in your provocative article *'That's Enough About Ethnography!'* (2014). What is the reason behind the increasing concern? And what is it exactly that anthropology possesses intrinsically (and seems to maintain over time) that ethnography does not (and therefore cannot)?

I am concerned about the contraction of anthropology into ethnography, in part, because it closes down other ways of doing anthropology, such as through the practice of art, design, theatre, dance and music, not to mention architecture, archaeology and comparative history. At the same time, as if to compensate for this closure, the scope of ethnography has expanded to cover just about anything an anthropologist might do. What word, then, can we use for the careful, nuanced and precise accounts of people's lives, at different times and in different places, to which the term 'ethnography' originally and quite properly referred? Good ethnography describes, interprets and analyses: it seeks an understanding of what people do, say or think by giving it a context in which it makes some kind of sense. But the objective of anthropology is different. It is to draw on the experience of our studies with people and things, with materials and documents, indeed with all to which and to whom we attend, to speculate on the conditions and possibilities of life in the inhabited world. This speculative impulse is what anthropology possesses that ethnography does not, and cannot. Speculation and contextualisation pull in opposite directions.

Part of your discussion reminded me several other interventions, such as Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988) or *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture* (1973). Geertz utilized the term ethnography to refer to the defining characteristic of anthropological practice[1], while for you, doing ethnography is "like turning a telescope to look through the wrong end" (forthcoming) because "we take our sights from the Olympian heights of 'theory' to

[1] Geertz argues, "If you want to understand what a science is you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do. In anthropology or anyway social anthropology, what the practitioners do is ethnography. And it is in understanding what ethnography is, or more exactly *what doing ethnography is*, that a start can be made toward grasping what anthropological analysis amounts to as a form of knowledge" (1973, p. 5-6).

scrutinise the thinking of our erstwhile companions, which now figures as 'data' for analysis" (ibid.). Do you see an emergence of a stable, homogeneous ethnographic orthodoxy that doesn't value or refuses categorically other ways of conducting ethnographic research?

No, I could not honestly claim that there is an emergent ethnographic orthodoxy. Quite to the contrary, what goes by the name of ethnography is now so varied, not just within anthropology but beyond its shores, that no-one any longer knows what 'doing ethnography' actually means. The term has lost its moorings. That's part of the problem. How can we say that anthropology is distinguished, as a discipline, by its commitment to ethnography, when we can't say what this is? What I do see, however, is a certain duplicity, epitomised in the way that ethnography has been extended to cover not only the process of rendering an account, but also the practice of participant observation. For this also covers up the switch of perspective from studying *with* other people to making studies *of* them. That's where the real problem lies, not in any alleged contradiction between participation and observation. By the cover-up of using 'ethnography' for both, the problem has been swept under the carpet.

In a similar vein, you define anthropology as "a generous, open-ended, comparative, and yet critical inquiry into the conditions and potentials of human life in the one world we all inhabit" (ibid.) Many ethnographers may argue this is exactly what they intend to do when they do *ethnography*.

Indeed they do. When I present my definition of anthropology, many colleagues insist that this is exactly what they have been doing all along, under the rubric of ethnography. So, why all the fuss? Why should it matter what you call it, anthropology or ethnography? There are three reasons why it matters, in my view. I have already outlined the first: if ethnography becomes synonymous with what I am calling anthropology, then what word are we to use for the accounts to which the term originally referred? Are they to be left nameless and unrecognised? The second reason – a corollary of the first – is that 'ethnography' is simply a misnomer for an anthropological project that is anything but 'writing about the people'. The term is bound to cause confusion: if not among anthropologists themselves, then certainly among their bewildered public. We might know intuitively what a scholar means in speaking of his or her study as 'ethnographic', but how can we expect the reading public to understand that what is presented as such is not really ethnography at all but

something entirely different? We can hardly blame the public for the confusion that persists 'out there' concerning the nature and purpose of anthropological study, when we have been so inept in explaining it ourselves.

But the third reason is perhaps the most important. It is that in presenting what we do as ethnography we effectively deny ourselves voices of our own. We prefer to hide behind the voices of others for whom we pretend to speak, or to whose knowledge and ideas we give expression. I do not mean of course that we should suppress such voices, or drown them out through authoritative grandstanding. What I mean is that we should *answer* to them, as if to enter with them in a kind of correspondence, through which can free ourselves to find our own ways. What other discipline would deny itself such liberty? By presenting anthropological study under the guise of ethnography, we confirm the impression – widespread among practitioners of other disciplines in the human sciences – that we have nothing to say for ourselves, that our job is not to speculate on the human condition but merely to gather up the stuff of human diversity for other disciplines to process in whatever ways they will.

In truth, while we have studied with others, we have learned for ourselves. It is with this learning that we can and must contribute to the great debates of our time: about how we should live, how we should relate to our environment, how we should conduct ourselves politically, and so on. Too often, anthropologists are absent or excluded from these debates, or brought in only to add some illustrative colour from life in the field. At no time in history, however, has their contribution been more needed. Anthropologists are needed not because they have things to say, specifically, about this or that form of life, colourful though these things may be. They are needed because we can speak with a wisdom borne of wider experience than any other area of study can muster, on the potentials of human life itself.

Carveth Read wrote the following remark in 1898: "Even in reasoning upon some subjects, it's a mistake to aim at an unattainable precision. It is better to be vaguely right than exactly wrong . . . [I]t is better to indicate our meaning approximately, or as we feel about it, than to convey a false meaning, or to lose the warmth and color, that are the life of such reflections" (p. 272). I might be exaggerating but I come across this "life of reflections" or imperfect (but more expressive) truth more in researchers' blogs, works-in-progress, online field diaries, literary writing, or even in graffiti art, than in the top-rated journals of humanities. In today's ranking-obsessed university,

though, the former is a leisure activity, while the latter may secure your post and help you "earn" your salary… Do you see an exit from this ordeal in the near future?

You describe the ordeal very well. The gap between what we do, in our everyday lives as teachers and scholars, and what is expected of us by the increasingly managerial and corporatized institutions in which we work has never seemed wider. I do not believe the business model of academic research is sustainable. Indeed I think it has already reached a critical point, as has the global regime of neoliberalism that sustains it. The collapse of the regime will inevitably bring the corporate university down with it. Perhaps this is already happening. Ultimately, something more humane will rise from the ashes, and it is up to all of us, now, to begin to lay the foundations. As we know only too well, however, the immediate effect of the collapse of neoliberalism is not to open up to a new era of wisdom, humility and tolerance but just the opposite. What we are seeing, on all sides, is the rise of rival fundamentalisms, violent bigotry and rabid anti-intellectualism. These are dark times for higher education. We have seen such episodes in history before, and I fear there will be more destruction before something more hopeful emerges from the ruins. Emerge it surely will, but what no-one knows is how long it will take, and how much will be lost in the interim.

The final section of your book converges the previous lines of discussion under the rubric, "Anthropology, Art and the University". I have read this section together with the *Reclaiming Our University* manifesto you crafted as part of a campaign you have been leading in your own university. Can you expand on potential of anthropological learning and its implications on the idea of *multiversity* in a period when the higher education as a whole has been under brutal attack by a violent, authoritarian, neoliberal and populist epidemic?

I have taken the idea of the multiversity from William James's notion of the 'multiverse', which he used to describe the world we inhabit: a singular world of nevertheless infinite difference. As James put it, in the multiverse there is always an overflow of relations, nothing includes everything, or subsumes everything. But it is one world nonetheless. Many of my anthropological colleagues will insist on speaking of 'worlds' in the plural. Maybe they think that by acknowledging that others have their worlds as we have ours, they are being respectful of difference. But difference does not

imply separation or isolation. On the contrary, we are bound together by our differences, in the never-ending task of answering to one another, or in what I have called *correspondence*. My point is that this task of correspondence also lies at the heart of anthropology which, more than any other discipline, takes the whole world as its place of study. Thus for anthropology, I believe, the world we inhabit is a multiversity.

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