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Interview

THE FUTURE OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY FOR THE FUTURE A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR TIM INGOLD

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THE FUTURE OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY FOR THE FUTURE A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR TIM INGOLD

RENNY THOMAS*

‘For what drives anthropologists, in the final resort, is not the demand for knowledge but an ethic of care. We don’t care for others by treating them as objects of investigation, by assigning them to categories and contexts or by explaining them away. We care by bringing them into presence, so that they can converse with us, and we can learn from them. That’s the way to build a world with room for everyone. We can only build it together.’

– Tim Ingold (2018)

Introduction: Professor Tim Ingold is currently Professor Emeritus of Social Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK. He is one of the most significant social anthropologists of our time, and has made path breaking contributions to our understanding of human-environmental relations. His new book *Correspondences*¹ will be released in November 2020.

An initial conversation between Professor Ingold and Dr. Thomas took place at the Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, on 24 May 2018, and the detailed email conversation happened during August–September 2020. A version of this conversation has also appeared in *The Wire*, on 27 September 2020, titled ‘*Conversation: Tim Ingold on Environmental Destruction, Injustice and the Future*’.

Renny Thomas (RT): Prof. Ingold, can we start by talking about your current work, and how the pandemic has affected/ changed your work life, especially writing and travelling?

Tim Ingold (TI): I am extremely fortunate, being one of those for whom the pandemic made little difference in day-to-day life. Being retired for over a year now, I had no students to teach or other responsibilities towards the university, and I had already grown accustomed to working from home. Indeed, the situation even had its advantages, since with all travels and other engagements cancelled, I could at last begin to catch up on a massive backlog of writing and other work. I simply carried on as before, maintaining a rather strict regime, seven days a week, which would normally find me in my study from after breakfast until suppertime. Overall, the last six months have been quite productive, and I have managed to get a lot done. For once in my life, I am no longer significantly behind schedule with existing commitments, and have just about reached the point at

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which I can embark on new work. I have a book of short essays, *Correspondences*, coming out in November, but I have a new book of longer essays to put together, *Imagining for Real*, as well as a volume to edit, *Knowing from the Inside*. After that, who knows? I have a dream of returning to Finnish Lapland, to carry on fieldwork from where I left it in 1980. I will become an ethnographer again!

During the first months of lockdown, I was helped in my work by an unusual degree of quiet in the surroundings. Though we live close to the centre of our small city, it was as if we were out in the countryside. The birds were singing as never before! These blessings, however, were mixed with feelings of guilt and anxiety. It is difficult, on the one hand, to come to terms with the inequality of suffering, or to rejoice in the beauty of something like birdsong, when so many others are plunged into the depths of grief. On the other hand, I have lived with chronic anxiety for as long as I can remember, so it is hard to tell whether the pandemic has made it any worse. The fact is that so much in the world, from the rise of neo-fascism to the climate emergency, was already giving cause for despair that the pandemic, far from coming as a surprise, seemed to slot into place as part of a relentlessly unfolding disaster.

At the start I was one of those—and there were many of us—who even saw in the pandemic a reason for hope. Only a virus, we thought, has the power to stop global capitalism in its tracks, and save us all from accelerating over a cliff edge. Might it have come to the rescue just in time? Could we all come out from it chastened? Parallels have been drawn with the Second World War, and the extraordinary achievements in welfare, public health and housing, as well as the rules-based international order, that followed in its wake. Might these achievements be repeated? Could it turn around our stewardship of the planet for the better? Over the months, initial hopes have been tempered, I think, by realism. Not only has our belief in the inevitability of progress been shattered, so too has been the sense of human invincibility on which it rests. There is no end in sight. The best we can hope for is a new beginning.

RT: What do you think the future of anthropology is going to be, especially social anthropology, in times like ours where universities have become entrepreneurial and completely neoliberal in nature?

TI: Anthropology is a child of Enlightenment humanism. Undoubtedly, humanism has contributed massively to the common good. What began, however, as an agenda for progressive emancipation has latterly morphed into a vicious spiral of environmental destruction and social injustice. On the one hand, in driving a wedge between humanity and nature, it has legitimised a programme of resource extraction—on a mega-industrial scale—that has ravaged the earth and jeopardised its capacity for renewal. On the other hand, while the appeal to universal entitlement serves the interests of those empowered to lay claim to it, for others it has brought enslavement, along with loss of land, livelihood, and even life. In the history of colonialism, the flag of humanity has always been flown by the victorious, treating as less than human those who have come under its yoke.

To break the spiral demands no less than a radical alternative to the humanist settlement. The question is whether anthropology can be part of it. Can it survive the necessary transition into a post-humanist, postcolonial era? Is humanism so inextricably bound with the history and constitution of the discipline, that when it falls, anthropology falls with it? Or can anthropology

actually take the lead in reimagining a *different* humanism, one that rises to the challenges of our times?

For me, the issue turns around the concept of anthropocentrism. Clearly, any discipline that goes by the name of anthropology must have the human, the *Anthropos*, at its core. But this does not mean, as many ecologically-minded critics claim, focusing on humanity at the expense of nature. Indeed quite to the contrary, it is to restore the human being to where it belongs, at the centre of a living world. It is to recognise that this world, which surrounds and envelops us, is much greater than we are; that our very existence depends on our relations towards its inhabitants, and that these relations entail responsibilities and commitments on our part. A new humanism would take this as its starting point. It would begin not with humanity, as a universal, nature-transcending condition, but with humans as living beings, tasked with forging an existence for themselves and others within the matrix of a common earth. This is the task of *humaning*. Human is not what we are but what we do, what we make of ourselves. ‘To human’, as I have argued elsewhere, is a verb. Anthropology, then, is an inquiry into the past and present conditions of *humaning*, and its future possibilities.

Whether the university of the future will provide a home in which this kind of anthropology can take root and prosper is another matter. If universities continue on their current course, as engines of the global knowledge economy, then anthropology has no future in them. It will rather find a natural home in the many alternative institutions that are popping up all around the world, albeit on a very small scale and with shoestring budgets, often inspired by movements of indigenous or environmental activism. It could well be, indeed, that these institutions – weak and vulnerable though they are at present – hold the key to a long-term and sustainable future, following what will be the inevitable collapse of neoliberalism. However I hold out more hope for our existing universities to transform themselves from within. They have done so in the past, and I don’t see why, with sufficient will, they cannot do so again. Our task now is to reshape universities in the service of learning and scholarship for the common good. And in this, I believe anthropology and anthropologists can and should take the lead.

RT: In your book *Anthropology: Why It Matters*², you talk about the absence of anthropology and anthropologists in public debates. In your words, ‘The public reasonably looks to academic scholarship to provide answers to their questions. But the likely response of anthropologists is to take their questioners to task, to expose their implicit assumptions, to observe that other people—who do not make these assumptions—would pose the questions differently. There are no easy answers. Anthropology doesn’t tell you what you want to know; it unsettles the foundations of what you thought you knew already.’ Do you think there is a need for anthropologists to engage with the public as writers and activists especially because of the peculiar political climate that we all are in globally?

TI: Absolutely! But not just because of the peculiar politics of the present. It is not as though anthropologists can afford to retreat into an ivory tower once things settle down. We need to write accessibly and engage actively because that is the right and responsible thing for us to do, regardless of the political climate. But in recent decades, at least, we have not been very good at it. There are many reasons for this. An obvious one is the corporate and managerial professionalisation that has overtaken academia over the last thirty years or so. Most

anthropologists are, by temperament, amateurs. They study for the love of it, in a spirit of humility and a willingness to learn from others. They do not place themselves on a higher intellectual plane than everyone else. Yet they are expected by their institutions to pose as professionals armed with specialist expertise. This accounts for the current obsession with ‘anthropological knowledge production’, although no one can say what it is, or what it means to produce it.

One consequence of the new professionalism is deterioration in academic writing. Much of it is soulless, turgid, laden with theoretical hyperbole, and so stuffed with bibliographic references that it is virtually unreadable for all but a coterie of fellow specialists. When academics do write for the wider public, they do so from an assumed position of knowing things of which their readers are ignorant—things that then have to be explained in a non-technical language which readers can understand. Have you noticed how many popular books these days have titles that start with the word ‘How’? The author here adopts the position of an expert, explaining to readers how this or that aspect of the world works. But anthropologists cannot and should not write like this. Popular writing is one thing, accessible writing is another. Anthropologists should always write accessibly, but not in a way that talks down to readers or that appeals to their own preconceptions. Indeed, all good writing is like that, and anthropologists should aspire to be good writers.

RT: Could you talk about the changes that you have witnessed in the field of social anthropology during your extensive career as an anthropologist? What are the various challenges that the new faculty members face compared to earlier times in the UK universities, especially in the field of social anthropology? Do you think they are able to work without worrying about the bureaucratic responsibilities in the universities?

TI: These changes are so immense that it is hard to know where to begin. I was trained in Cambridge during the late 1960s while structural functionalism was still in its prime. Our bible was Radcliffe-Brown’s *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, a work that is almost forgotten today. Edmund Leach, however, was introducing us to Lévi-Straussian structuralism. I myself was most taken with Fredrik Barth’s transactional approach, so I began my postgraduate career by going to study with Barth at the University of Bergen. But by the time I returned from fieldwork in Lapland, transactionalism was dead. The new thing which, as ever, had arrived from France, was structural Marxism. But that didn’t last long either and, by a decade later, it had vanished without trace. Meanwhile, in 1974, I had taken up my first post at the University of Manchester. It was in the dying days of the so-called ‘Manchester School’ of social anthropology; in fact its founder, Max Gluckman, passed away the year after I arrived.

The wave of post-modernism was to follow, during the 1980s, mixed up with the whole ‘writing culture’ debate. It was at this time that everyone started to obsess about ‘ethnography’, as if it was the be-all and end-all of anthropology. Reflexivity was in vogue. But I always felt rather remote from these debates, since at the time I was preoccupied with trying, and largely failing, to reconcile the teachings of social anthropology with those of ecology and evolutionary biology. So what was most important for me, in the 1990s, was the deconstruction of the classical dichotomy between nature and society, and the new ecological anthropology it opened up. Much of this anticipated the currents of post-humanism, and anthropological conceits like the ‘ontological turn’, that are so prominent today. In some ways, I feel these conceits are merely reinventing the wheel. But in other

ways, if figures like Meyer Fortes, Edmund Leach and Max Gluckman were to come back to life today, they would find a social anthropology unrecognisable to them.

Looking back, I was extremely lucky to secure my first academic appointment when I did. A year later, the Thatcher government imposed a moratorium on new posts, and a whole generation was lost. It was a decade before things began to pick up again. So I was one of the last to enjoy the luxury of secure academic employment for life. Nowadays, of course, the situation for the vast majority of younger scholars is increasingly precarious. It is a matter of going from one short-term research or teaching position to another, all the while being prevented from undertaking the sustained research on which future career progression depends. The few lucky enough to secure permanent academic positions find themselves placed under constant surveillance, with their performance micromanaged at every turn. I don't think there has ever been a time when young scholars have faced a more hostile environment. My generation has much to answer for.

RT: Do you think the social sciences are actually in crisis in our times, as right-wing regimes globally oppose all forms of criticisms and dissent? Let's talk about the crisis in social anthropology especially, because as a discipline it has the power of challenging a singular truth that the right-wing regimes try to establish, be it the claim of a superior race/caste, or a superior religion/ nation.

TI: The social sciences in general, and social anthropology in particular, have always been in crisis. It is in their lifeblood. Without this enduring sense of crisis, I doubt whether they could keep going. What is different today is that the existential crisis in our discipline nests, in a way that it has never done before, within an existential crisis for the world as a whole. That crisis is much, much bigger than we are. And to meet it we have to face outwards, towards the world, rather than inwards on ourselves. We should not however imagine crisis only in negative terms. Crisis can also be a moment of creative renewal, of rebirth. That's why crisis is by itself a condition for hope. And I see anthropology, above all, as a hopeful discipline. It is hopeful because it is not locked—as are so many of the mega-disciplines around it like economics, psychology, biology, even sociology—into fixed habits of thought. Unlike these other disciplines, anthropology doesn't just think *about* the world. It does its thinking *in* the world. And this gives it a certain flexibility and suppleness, as well as humility, which others lack.

RT: Anthropology as a discipline has undergone various phases: from a colonial discipline to a critique of colonialism, from studying the so-called primitive people to scientists and modern laboratories, from human to non-human. What, according to you, are the future challenges and questions that we will have to deal with in the field?

TI: I have no crystal ball. But two existential challenges undoubtedly lie ahead for us all—indeed we know about them because they are not just ahead but already here. The first is the collapse of neoliberalism and the global markets that were built on it, and the second is the climate emergency. To these we might now add a third, of chronic pandemic disease. Given that people have not been put upon this earth in order that anthropologists may study them, but rather that anthropology be continually shaped by the human experience it encounters, I suppose the future challenges that anthropology will confront in the field will be closely aligned to the challenges that people confront in their daily lives. They will be the challenges of how to make a living when global supply chains

have collapsed, how to cope with large-scale population displacements occasioned by drought and flooding, and how to maintain the dignity of life in the midst of disease.

I don't want to sound too apocalyptic, but these challenges will be huge. Nevertheless, it is good to retain a sense of proportion. The idea of the inevitability of human progress has been around for no more than three centuries—a mere blip in the greater scheme of things. But as we are now learning at great personal cost, the idea of progress is incompatible with the imperative of sustainability. For most of history, the majority of people have had to grow their own food and make their own things; they have had to cope with recurrent environmental disaster, and live with the ever-present threat of lethal disease. Human existence has always hung by a thread; the idea that it can be taken for granted is a delusion of modern times. Yet just look at the richness of history, and the wonders it has brought forth, of a beauty and sophistication beyond anything of which we are capable today! With our dreams of progress at an end, it might be no bad thing were history to be realigned once again with the continuity of life.

Chroniclers of a thousand years from now, if there are such, will likely look back on an 'event', roughly spanning the four centuries 1700–2100, marked by a seemingly unstoppable surge, followed by an equally calamitous crash, after which it was back to business as usual for the human species. In some regions, of course, the event will have left its mark in lands rendered uninhabitable for tens of thousands of years, due to toxic residues of heavy metals or radioactivity. But as we have glimpsed in this pandemic year, nature can bounce back with extraordinary rapidity, perhaps in forms never seen before. Indeed the much-vaunted Anthropocene may turn out in retrospect to be short-lived, scarcely worthy of the status of an epoch. Either that, or all life on earth is headed for extinction!

RT: Could you talk about the future possibilities of anthropology as a discipline in dealing with the political and religious right-wing across the globe? Can anthropology as a field and idea play a major role in dealing with the everyday Islamophobia and racism?

TI: Yes it can. But only if we see the mission of anthropology as primarily *educational* rather than *ethnographic*. By education I don't mean the transmission of an authorised body of knowledge. I mean an opening up to others and to the world, a way of bringing them into presence so we can learn from them. That's the opposite of prejudice, which is a way of closing off from the world, of abjuring presence, assuming that one already knows. And prejudice, of course, lies at the root of such pathologies as racism and Islamophobia. Learning from others, however, doesn't mean having to accept that they are always right! These others may, after all, be racists or Islamophobes themselves. Are we bound by a kind of moral relativism to the sympathetic ethnographic portrayal of racism or Islamophobia as a belief system which is intrinsically worthy on its own terms? That, as I'm sure you will agree, would amount to a complete abdication of scholarly responsibility.

I don't doubt that many people 'out there' hold attitudes we would find abhorrent, yet to engage with them in critical dialogue is still worth the effort, if only to firm up the grounds of our abhorrence and lend it a persuasive power it might otherwise lack. How can we otherwise argue against racism or Islamophobia without assuming our own moral rectitude from the outset? That's always been the trouble with the political left. Convinced from the start that it has justice on its

side, it shouts at the right, but rarely bothers to listen, or to understand, why people on the right might hold the views they do. This shouting match will get us nowhere. After all, it just happens that at this historical moment, most corrupt, despotic regimes are on the right of the political spectrum. In other periods, they have been on the left, but no less abominable. Neither side can claim the high ground, and nor can we. But this does not mean surrendering to an ‘anything goes’ relativism. It means learning from opponents and persuading by force of argument. And that’s just what anthropology can do.

RT: Social anthropology is not taught in schools in most countries. Especially given its significance in making sense of diverse cultures, and religions, do you think it is important to teach anthropology to students in schools, so that they can learn to better understand fellow human beings from different locations?

TI: In principle, I am of course in favour of teaching anthropology in schools. In practice, however, this is easier said than done. There is a temptation, I think, to reproduce at the school level a rather conservative vision of anthropology that is mired in the very humanist and colonial conceits that we need to dislodge. One example is the rightly renowned International Baccalaureate (IB) programme, which has been offering a diploma in social and cultural anthropology for some years now. The stated aim of the subject syllabus is ‘to develop internationally minded people who recognise their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet’.³ This is admirably well-intentioned. But it rather gives the impression that guardianship of the planet, and recognition of common humanity, are reserved for a cosmopolitan elite of internationally minded people who have been fortunate enough to enrol for the IB! Yet to my mind, the whole point of teaching in anthropology is to encourage students to be critical of this kind of liberal elitism, and to recognise that guardianship is a task for all of us, as fellow inhabitants of our *one* world. The aim should surely be to develop an awareness of the contributions that people everywhere, and from all walks of life, can make in bringing about a world that is habitable for coming generations. Anthropology is about studying *with* people, not making studies *of* them.

By the same token, anthropology is about human *difference*, not human *diversity*. The distinction is absolutely critical. Once again, the IB syllabus offers a humanist vision. ‘Anthropologists’, it declares, ‘seek an understanding of humankind in all its diversity’.⁴ But diversity implies a world already divided, into innumerable ‘cultures’ or ‘societies’, which can be collected and compared like seashells on a beach. The idea belongs to an earlier era of anthropology, strongly inflected by a colonial mentality. For it places anthropologists as an enlightened, western-educated elite, above everyone else. They are like spectators in the gallery of human variation, while everyone else is framed in the portraits. This will not do in a thoroughly mixed-up world in which people, given the resources and the freedom to do so, are perfectly well able to speak for themselves. A recent document compiled by the Aberdeen University Students’ Association BME Students’ Forum cites a statement from Kavita Bhanot, of the University of Leicester, sums this up in a nutshell: ‘The concept of diversity only exists if there is an assumed neutral point from which “others” are “diverse”. Putting aside for now the straight, male, middle-classness of that “neutral” space, its dominant aspect is whiteness.’

In short, the idea of diversity is not as innocent as we might think! If we are to introduce anthropology into schools in a way that answers to the postcolonial and post-humanist challenges

of our times, it must be about living together in difference: about how being different makes it possible to go along together and how going along together in turn generates difference. Anthropology shows us that belonging, whether to kin-group, nation or land, does not depend on an overriding sense of *us* against *them*. Difference does not mean division. But nor does it repudiate belonging, as in the liberal or cosmopolitan appeal to cultural diversity.

RT: In your book *Anthropology and /as Education*⁵, you call for a productive conversation between Anthropology and Education, and you talk about the transformative power of these disciplines. Could you discuss the possibilities and the increasing need of conversations and dialogue between anthropologists and educationalists?

TI: The first thing is to turn this into a real conversation. It is not simply a matter of calling for more anthropological studies *of* education. These are important, of course, and have been unjustly marginalised by the disciplinary mainstream. What we need, however, is for anthropologists and educationalists to acknowledge their common purpose. Anthropologists need to realise that their practice, whether in the field or in the classroom, is nothing if not educational in intent. And they need to realise, too, that what they do in the classroom is as integral to their anthropological vocation as what they do in the field. In the field, it is they who stand to be transformed; in the classroom it is their students. But you cannot have one without the other. Fieldwork that is not followed by teaching, that remains bereft of any pedagogic purpose, is pure indulgence. Just as we owe our own formation to the generations with which we have studied, whether in the field or in the academy, we surely owe something in return, to generations to come, so that they in turn can begin afresh as we once did.

This must be matched, however, on the side of educationalists, by a fundamental rethinking of the nature and purpose of education itself. They need to move away from standard models of teaching and learning, according to which the aim of education is to transfer a body of authorised knowledge, as efficiently and rigorously as possible, from one generation to the next. That is a formula for the reproduction of ignorance. Rather, we have to see education as a collective endeavour, in which students and teachers work together in forging a common future. In the philosophy of education, this view is already well established. But we have a long way to go before it makes its way into educational practice. Perhaps that's the way to bring anthropology into schools: not as a new subject to be taught alongside existing ones, but as a new approach to the very undertaking of education.

RT: Lastly, what are the new *methodological* challenges that you think anthropology as a discipline will have to deal with in our time and in future? And, what are the new challenges do you think the discipline of social anthropology will have to face in this unpredictable pandemic situation? Do you think there will be a rethinking about the way we imagine and conduct fieldwork?

TI: I prefer 'method' to 'methodology'. Method is simply a way of working. Anthropology is a bit like detective work, and like detectives, we all have our methods, influenced in part by our own personality and temperament, and in part by the situations in which we find ourselves. Methodology, by contrast, implies an impersonal set of operational principles, to be formulated independently and in advance of their contexts of application. Mostly, in the sciences,

methodology is a way of immunising researchers from the effects of personal contact with whatever they study. But in anthropology we work in the opposite way, through forms of participant observation that depend on close personal involvement. Now there's no doubt in my mind that the more people are dependent on digital technologies in their day-to-day lives, the more isolated they become. The fragmentation of social life leads, in turn, to the dissolution of the fields of relationships in which anthropologists would traditionally have participated. It seems that very few anthropologists are still conducting fieldwork in the way it was conventionally understood, when I started out. Anthropologists are already having to rethink how they imagine and conduct fieldwork, and they are doing this in all kinds of creative ways. I cannot predict what the outcomes will be.

But to come back to the pandemic, I have only two things to add. First, what it has revealed to me, most starkly, is how much our modern societies segregate young children from the elderly. The middle generation, thrusting themselves in between, call all the shots. The enforced separation of grandparents from grandchildren has been one of the most distressing aspects of lockdown. But it has merely exacerbated, or perhaps highlighted, an already existing rupture. In the long run of human history, however, this rupture is the exception rather than the rule. In most non-modern societies, relations between alternate generations were crucial for passing on life skills and for the continuity of tradition. If there is one lesson to be drawn from the experience of the pandemic, it is that these relations are more important than ever. We break them at our peril.

The second thing, however, is that we should avoid jumping to conclusions. In the next few years we can expect a spate of publications in which academics of just about every discipline will claim that they have the specialist knowledge to pronounce authoritatively on the causes and effects of the pandemic. But really, no one has much of a clue, least of all anthropologists. I think we would do well to resist the temptation to offer instant commentary and analysis, as if we knew something that others don't. The wise thing to do, I think, is to hold our counsel, listen and learn. Perhaps then, when we are ready, we could help everyone situate their experience on a rather broader geographical and historical canvas. We have been here before, many times.

RT: Thank you so much, Prof. Ingold.

Notes

¹ Tim Ingold. 2020. *Correspondences*. Cambridge: Polity.

² Tim Ingold. 2018. *Anthropology: Why It Matters*. Cambridge: Polity.

³ International Baccalaureate. 2017. *Social and Cultural Anthropology Guide*. The Hague: International Baccalaureate Organization, page 5.

⁴ *ibid.*, page 9.

⁵ Tim Ingold. 2018. *Anthropology and /as Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.