



DEBATE

## Two or three things I love about ethnography

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I argue that anthropology and ethnography are two sides of the same coin. Anthropology is nothing without ethnography and ethnography is just an empty practice without a concern for the disciplinary debates in anthropology departments. A number of other disciplines have taken to use “ethnographic” or “ethnographic fieldwork” as their method. Most social anthropologists would be very skeptical to the kind of methodology that is proposed under that rubric. This challenges anthropologists to make clear what we mean by fieldwork and why. We will not survive as an academic discipline unless we continue to undertake long-term fieldwork in faraway places, go out to confront the radically unknown and render it understandable, indeed probable. When all is said and done, cultural relativism is our trade mark.

Keywords: armchair anthropologists, comparison, cultural relativism, ethnography in other disciplines, human incommensurably, human potentiality, radical alterity, serendipity

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I am a social anthropologist and I undertake ethnographic fieldwork. The key word here is *fieldwork*. Anthropology is an academic discipline that constructs its intellectual imaginings from a wide range of knowledge about human worlds—about human notions of self and others. Ethnography is the practice developed in order to bring about that knowledge according to certain methodological principles. Neither anthropology nor ethnography is innocent. Both are the result of years of debate and practice. Anthropology has nothing to offer the world without ethnography. Ethnography is just an empty practice without a concern for the disciplinary debates in anthropology departments. It is therefore wrong to separate them. They derive their existence (*raison d'être*) only through endlessly interacting.

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This text was prepared for the panel debate “Two or three things I love/hate about ethnography.” As such, it was written in a more combative style than I otherwise would have employed. Apart from a few minor changes, it is published here as I presented it.



Anthropology and ethnography are so intertwined that together they have become a basic premise for the anthropological epistemology. This is how we understand the world. This is the basis for our writings.

Recently there are a number of other disciplines that have taken to using “ethnographic” or “ethnographic fieldwork” in the methods section of their books, papers, and research applications. Most anthropologists would be very skeptical to the kind of methodology that is proposed under that rubric. This challenges anthropologists to make clear what we do and what kind of ethnographic fieldwork we—as opposed to the nonanthropologists—undertake as social anthropologists. What is so special about it? Why do we not accept that what *they* propose to do is ethnographic fieldwork? I think the distinction between what we do and what non-anthropologists do is important to clarify for the future of the discipline. If anyone may “do” anthropology, or ethnography, then what is so special about our contribution? The main point I wish to make is that whereas others separate ethnography from anthropology, we insist that they are inseparable. Others do not realize the epistemological consequences that arise from such a separation.

I state my view on other disciplines with some confidence, for it is based on knowledge obtained during several short but intensive periods of observation. During three sessions as a member of the evaluation committee for handing out European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grants, and one session on the committee that gave Consolidation Grants, I read several hundred applications. The applicants and the committee members came from a range of social sciences and humanities. As usually the only anthropologist on the committee, I scrutinized the methods section of the applications from nonanthropologists, and I began to observe that applicants increasingly stated that that they intended to employ ethnographic fieldwork, or that ethnography was one on their proposed methods. Usually it was included under a broader rubric of “qualitative research methods” and, if this was elaborated upon, it meant something like open-ended interviews, guided conversations, focus groups, some degree of being present, or interaction in selected forums, but never participant observation as a total immersion in search of a holistic understanding. Sometimes the applicant would state that they would combine methods from several disciplines that included anthropology. I began to see it as one of my duties to not let such statements pass unchallenged.

Two important findings emerged from my work on the committees. First, my nonanthropological colleagues on the committee never questioned the applicants’ methods when the words “ethnography” or “fieldwork” appeared. It was up to me to draw their attention to the problematic usage of the terms. It became a bit of a joke, but I managed to alert my colleagues to the difference between ethnography as some kind of limited qualitative method of collecting data, and the kind of ethnography that is part and parcel of anthropological research. Second, when short-listed candidates came for interview, I similarly grilled them on what they meant by statements that ethnographic fieldwork was going to form a part of their research, or how was a claimed “anthropological approach” going to be put into practice. It quickly transpired that most had little or no understanding of its central role in the acquisition of knowledge of other peoples’ lives. At the end of the period, one member of the committee exclaimed jokingly, “Well, what I have learned during this work together is to gain some insight into social anthropology and to



appreciate what fieldwork implies.” Until then, he and the others on the committee had taken the claims at face value. In a recent article Tim Ingold wrote, “our protest will be of no avail unless we can explain what we mean by ethnography in terms of what is cogent and intellectually defensible” (Ingold 2016: 384). I agree that this is exactly the point. This is precisely what I tried to do during my time on the ERC committees.

So, why has it become so popular to claim ethnography as a method in other disciplines? I don’t really know. Many social scientists are dissatisfied with their traditional disciplinary methods and feel a need to “humanize” their studies. Others want to break away from the library. They have had courses on qualitative methodology and come across “ethnography” mentioned as an option to go beyond pre-prepared interviews and large-scale surveys. It also seems to have a slightly trendy aspect to it, something like “ontology” in current anthropological research applications. I bet many of those in the audience today have talked to researchers from other disciplines who, when they hear that you are an anthropologist, tell you “oh yes, my research is really anthropological. I do ethnographic studies,” only to discover when you probe them that they have undertaken a few focused open-ended interviews or have returned to the same individuals several times, or whatever. None of this qualifies as ethnographic fieldwork or falls within the discipline of social anthropology—not least because it separates ethnography from anthropology.

Well. Enough of that. Why do I get worked up? And what do I mean by ethnographic fieldwork? And in what ways is it different from what so many others say that they do? What would I say to a student planning to do fieldwork in, for example, eastern Indonesia where she wanted to study changes in marriage practices? First I would say: “You must spend a long time in the field, at least 15–18 months. You must live in a community in a household, converse in the local language, participate in daily chores and on special occasions and, in order to understand the marriage practices—old and new—you need to understand their values more generally; those that are expressed in seemingly unrelated domains, such as in their economic transactions, their political and religious practices and, of course, their gender values. Moreover, you need to prepare yourself for the fieldwork by reading published ethnographic studies about the chosen region, and familiarize yourself with theoretical debates about kinship. You have to be present to observe and you have to place actions into a wider context and interpret them in the light of other practices and statements.” The fieldwork must be informed throughout by anthropological concerns. The advice would in principle not be different should she chose to study a social domain in Europe.

As we all know, and what those who undertake qualitative research often fail to appreciate, is that what the people we study say they do and why is often very different from what they actually do. This becomes apparent only through long-term fieldwork. The anthropologist’s antennas must be at work all the time in order to pick up the unstated, the taken-for-granted, as well as tensions and conflicts, all of which must be brought to bear on the wider whole. Only then will the magic of serendipity come into play. Serendipity, in contrast to what many believe, is not just a chance event. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, serendipity is the “ability to make discoveries, by accidents and *wisdom* (my emphasis), of things which one was not in quest of.” That is one of the joys of fieldwork.

The writing culture debate a couple of decades ago rendered fieldwork, especially in “exotic” places, politically incorrect. One point that was lost in the debate was that unless fieldwork continues to be undertaken all over the world, there is no anthropological debates and writing to be done.

Ingold states that his aim is to “narrow ethnography down so that to those who ask in good faith what it means, we can respond with precision and conviction.” This sounds good. So I read the rest of his article with anticipation, only, I am sorry to say, my anticipation was not rewarded. In his last paragraph I am left more confused than ever. “Ethnography and theory resemble nothing so much as the two arcs of a hyperbola [I had to look that up: a type of smooth curve lying in a plane], which cast their beams in opposite directions” and “they are back to back and darkness reigns between them.” But what, he asks, “if we reverse the orientation of the two arcs of ethnography and theory, so that each embraces the other in an encompassing brightly illuminated ellipse” (Ingold 2106: 393)? Not, I suspect, a helpful answer to those who ask us “in good faith,” but perhaps not so far from what I am trying to say in simpler terms.

Let us go back to our foundational forefather, Bronislaw Malinowski. His chapter on Methods says most of what we need to know, but I will quote just one short section: “The field ethnographer has seriously and soberly to cover the full extent of the phenomena in each aspect of tribal culture studied, making no difference between what is commonplace, or drab, or ordinary and what strikes him as astonishing and out-of-the way” (Malinowski 1922: 11). I bet this text has not been read by most of those who claim to be doing “ethnographic fieldwork” or “anthropology.” I hope that all anthropology students still read it. Its principles apply today as much as then. They apply not just to those undertaking fieldwork in small communities far away but equally to those studying groups or institutions in their own country. Anthropology is a comparative discipline. Our aim is continuously to expand our knowledge about the way humans organize their lives. I am convinced that anthropology will not survive as an academic discipline unless at least half of our new recruits are driven by a sense of adventure to undertake long-term fieldwork in faraway places; to go out to confront the radically unknown and come to grips with it, rendering it understandable, indeed probable. When all is said and done, cultural relativism is our trademark. This is how we differ from the other social sciences. So I want to argue, we do not need *less* ethnographic fieldwork but *more*. We have no future as armchair anthropologists. Anthropology as an academic discipline without fieldwork would have very little to offer the academic world, or the world at large, about human potentiality and the vast variety in modes of social life. Anthropology as a speculative discipline predicated upon ethnographic fieldwork provides our identity. We can’t have one without the other.

This is why ethnographic texts from two or three generations ago do not become outdated. Cutting edge in our field is not just the most recent theoretical concepts. They soon lose their attraction (who is interested in ANT today?), whereas the old anthropological texts based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork never lose their salience for us. We may disagree with the interpretations and still value their observations. We return to them again and again in our desire to enhance our understanding of our own material.



To return to the title of this seminar: I do not love ethnography, I love anthropology/ethnography. I love ethnographic fieldwork undertaken as an integral part of my anthropological identity—as the continuing expanding source of my knowledge about human sociality and about human potentials: their dreams, longings, and practices. I love the theoretical speculations and debates about methods and interpretations that are carried out with colleagues back home. These are all integral to the developments of the discipline. We can't have one without the other. I do not necessarily love the discomfort integral to doing the sort of fieldwork that I have done. But I love having had the opportunity to live with people whose notions of themselves and others differ dramatically from my own, to take part in their daily lives, and to be accepted into their most intimate spheres (e.g., Howell 1984, 2012). I love the challenge of slowly disentangling the premises for their beliefs and practices. Arguments for radical alterity or human incommensurability are rendered meaningless through these experiences.

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## Deux ou trois choses sur l'ethnographie

Résumé : L'anthropologie n'est rien sans l'ethnographie. L'ethnographie est dénuée de sens sans un engagement avec les débats disciplinaires qui se déroulent dans les départements d'anthropologie. Un certain nombre d'autres disciplines ont parfois recours à des méthodes ou des terrains "ethnographiques". La plupart des anthropologues seraient sceptiques du type de méthodologie proposé sous cette rubrique. Ceci nous invite, en tant qu'anthropologues, à clarifier ce que nous faisons, et le type de terrain ethnographique que nous pratiquons ou ne pratiquons pas. L'anthropologie et l'ethnographie sont les deux faces d'une même pièce. Nous ne survivrons pas en tant que discipline à moins de continuer à entreprendre des terrains longs dans des endroits lointains, à moins de nous confronter à ce qui est radicalement inconnu et de le rendre compréhensible et probable. Après tout, le relativisme culturel est notre marque de fabrique.

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with the Chewong, a small hunting-gathering and shifting cultivating group in Peninsular Malaysia. She subsequently undertook fieldwork with Lio in Eastern Indonesia. She has returned to both communities many times. Her focus has been on modes of thought, social hierarchy, kinship, and personhood. She has also carried out research on values and practices of transnational adoption in Norway. The last project turned out to be the most challenging, ethnographically speaking.

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